A Daughter's Praise Poem
Historicizing Community Activism and

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L'auteure relate les activités de sa mère et de sa grand-mère dans la communauté comme des exemples d'un autre maternage qui confirme la tradition culturelle des femmes noires comme soignantes et personnellement responsables des transformations dans la communauté.

My parents became exiles of the South African apartheid military regime in 1963 (the year I was born). We lived in Botswana, Zambia, (Lusaka, Chipata, Livingston) and various other then-recently independent African countries before migrating to Canada in 1970. My parents' original decision to flee from South Africa was based on their defiance of the Bantu[1] Education Act of 1953, an oppressive law which legitimized and enforced the mass under-education of black people for the purpose of maintaining white military dictatorship (Hartshorne; Troup).

My parents' act of protestation, and their privileged professional locations—one a teacher and the other a medical doctor—mobilized their exile from South Africa. The research I engage with in this article, arises out of the process of coming to terms with my educational biography from the interconnected axes of protestation, privilege, and exile.

Though a privileged educational background aided our departure, for my brother, sisters and myself, migrancy entailed loss in the form of the dispossession of an indigenous language, extended family, and the communities within which South African cultural identities are nurtured and sustained. This sense of loss fuelled my endeavour to study the stories my mother tells me that are based on South African cultural and social matrices of influences. The inquiry into her life history provides a means to remembering, mending, and reconnecting with a South African family history and cultural identity, which would otherwise become lost as an outcome of my parents' protestation to European hegemony and their exertion of agency through exile.

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Challenging the silencing around middle-class South African black women's community activism

Shula Marks' (1986) analysis of the "black intelligentsia" in Durban, South Africa during the early 1900s has assisted me (with some limitations) in locating the economic, religious, and political contexts of my mother's family history as a Msimang. Marks analyzes several key black political figures such as John Dube as well as families such as the Msimangs in the region of Natal and their material transition to the colonial political economy (1986, 46). The Msimangs were a part of a small group of African landowners in Natal.[2]

At heart is the crucial issue of choice. That is, learning how and why black women in my family, specifically my mother, Goodie, and grandmother, Dudu, chose to use their position in the political economy as "middle-class" and "privileged" to become community leaders who worked toward empowering and liberating other black women and their communities from oppression.

Until recently (Ravell-Pinto), the counter hegemonic work of black women across classes had been censored because of the lack of black self-representation within the research. Goldberg refers to this issue in relation to social research when he makes the following statement:

> In short, as in South African society at large at the time, all meaningful forms of black self-representation are stripped away: The black *majority* is never properly represented, never allowed to speak for itself, but always authoritatively spoken for and to. Far from being considered autonomous agents, black South Africans are treated as little more than problematic objects of research. (179)

The problematic "missing" black self-representation is also due to the systematic denial of education to blacks under apartheid. In "Curriculum as a Political Phenomenon: Historical Reflections on Black Education" Jensen (1990a) outlines apartheid governmental political manoeuvres which were imposed in order to restrict black educational advancement. The racially differentiated curricula, lack of basic facilities, inequitable distribution of school equip-

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ment, and deliberate inadequate government expenditure augmented the deterioration of black schools.

As I mentioned before, my parents left South Africa in order to escape the restrictions of the Bantu Education Act on my own educational opportunities as a black South African. Therefore, when I weigh the privileged education I gained through exile against the legislated separate education for the black majority in South Africa under the Bantu Education Act, the disparities has had implications for me in terms of the choices I feel I have to make in my academic work. As a feminist researcher committed to social justice in education I feel directly accountable to other black South African women through my work.

Russell, Lipman, and Goodwin, have each made known the fact that research about black women's social activism and leadership has been marginalized by racial politics in South Africa. Therefore, I feel it is imperative for me to engage in the much-needed task of recording and reinterpreting the activist/leadership traditions and work of black South African women. My focus on the life and work of my mother and grandmother allows for the academic exploration of this history of activism.

Recording our mothers' communities of resistance

Wilentz and hooks identify the woman-centred genre of storytelling as a site within the "homeplace" for the politicalization of "a community of resistance" (hooks 42). Wilentz informs us that it is the black mother-and-daughter dyad relationship, and black women-to-women community supportive relations, which have provided the social context for both telling and hearing these stories. It is these supportive female relations that black women writers in the diaspora have turned to and recorded (Childress; Shange; Walker; Marshall).

Thinking back through our mothers is rooted in the notion of revisiting maternal knowledge and female-centred networks as expressions of African continuities in contemporary society.

For black women writers the idea of thinking back through our mothers is rooted in the notion of revisiting and learning about maternal knowledge and female-centred networks as expressions of African continuities in contemporary society. For Wilentz, rather than an attempt to return to a stagnant glorified past, identification with the matrilineal knowledge basis of storytelling is conceptualized in terms of reconnection and re-memory with a "reusable past" (117). The purpose being to "create an atmosphere of liberation" (117) through the stories which we tell, for our children, which negates inscribed racism and sexism.

African American women writers (Childress, Shange, Walker, Marshall) and many others quoted by McLaughlin have committed their work to celebrating the lives of black women who have resisted oppression. This celebration is reflected in McLaughlin's statement: "The literary upsurge by black women in the second half of the twentieth century unveils a renaissance of the spirit inspired by those who have refused to surrender" (xxxi).

I locate my work recording my family's matrilineage knowledge within this celebratory framework. In a sense, my mother and I are both keepers of a matrilineage knowledge which is expressed through our "praise poems" about our mothers. In our praise poems, we both offer our telling of our mother's life history and honour the merits and achievements of our mothers' work in relation to the community. Praise poems reaffirm an ethic of group connectedness and cultural accountability.

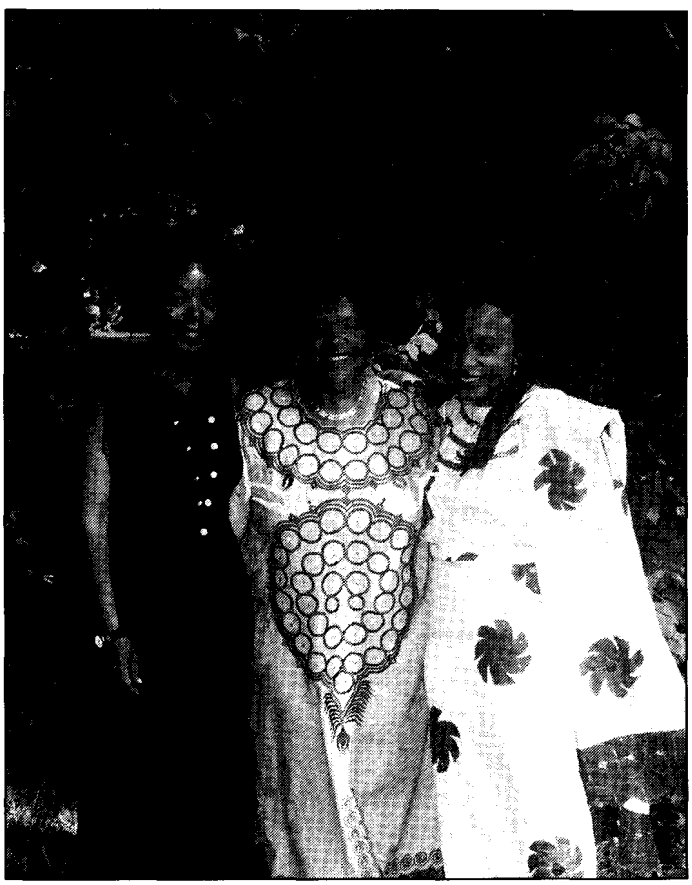
In this context, this article shows how the oral cultural tradition of praise poetry assisted in the development of women who refused to surrender to the effects of racial oppression on their communities. Indeed such counter narratives have been reshaped in the contemporary era and have acted as guide posts for the liberation of South African people.[3]

My grandmother Dudu was educated in domestic science during the 1920s, at Endaleni College, an institution with similar educational aims as those described by Cocks for Lovedale College:

> Their education was aimed largely at socialising the girls into domestic roles both in the girls' own homes and, as servants, in those of other [white] people.

> This education for domesticity fitted in with the ideology of subordination which the colonists saw as appropriate to all blacks, males as well as females. (89)

Far from preparing her for a life of "domesticity" working as a servant for white people, Dudu used her training to resist this prescribed societal division of labour. Her domestic science skills were applied in creative ways to generate an income which eventually financed the building of several local businesses. Her cafe, grocery store, and deli were businesses that contributed toward financially supporting her family as well as people from the community and the church.



A family photo, from left to right, sister Shadi, mother Goodie, and the author, Dolana Mogadime.

The significance of Dudu's businesses and the leadership they represented becomes recognizable in relation to knowledge of how the following pieces of government legislation "closely linked with the removal of Africans' civil rights in South Africa as a whole" influenced the personal lives of black people—The Native Land Act of 1913 (Rogers 11) and legislation under Native Education initiated in 1910 requiring separate education according to race (Jensen 1990a).

Rogers points out that "the idea of territorial segregation" was the impetus for the Natives Land Act of 1913. This legislation "scheduled certain of the areas already in African occupation, and prohibited Africans from acquiring land in any other parts of the country" (11). The Native Land Act appointed 13 per cent of the land area for the majority black population, leaving the remaining 87 per cent for whites (Nkomo 48). After that point in time, Africans were not able to buy land (or titled deed) in South Africa except in two restricted areas (Edendale and Claremont). This legislation was successful in halting agricultural development and prosperity among black people.

The dwindling possibility of subsistence from farming the land, coupled with the mandated hut tax, had the affect of siphoning the flow of migration to the mines where African men would seek paid labour. With "the discovery of South Africa's enormous mineral wealth," migrant labour for the mines became an "essential item in the white economy" (Rogers 3). With the removal of their husbands, women seeking work for the subsistence of their families migrated to central urban areas set aside for blacks (Edendale and Claremont), and then commuted to the cities to work.

In a manner similar to other small numbers of land owners in Edendale and Claremont, Dudu, my grandmother, built rooming houses on the land she inherited in order to accommodate the exploding population. Although Marks highlights the antagonisms between the tenants and the owners and the "greed" among the mostly male landowners for more profit, my mother, Goodie provides a story that is strikingly different, one that suggests that gender might have influenced how this position of power unfolded differently from men:

> *We lived in one crisis after another, that was typical South African life of a black growing during apartheid time, as far as I can remember, there was always a crisis. You had to develop the courage and determination to survive in those situations. It makes you do that.... So when there was a crisis, my mother wanted to see what she could do. She initiated different projects throughout her life with that passion in mind. So, for instance, when she heard that there were students in Claremont at the University of Durban who couldn't go back to their own homes and that they needed a place to sleep she made a boarding house for them. She built rooms and rooms. And then they would eat in her cafe. She served them meals at a reduced rate—to all these students.*

In 1949 the University of Durban, a government designated university set aside exclusively for those classified as Coloureds and Indians under racial laws, first admitted blacks to its medical school (Marks). Black medical students were admitted from all over the country. Some, whose homes were too far away from the university, were without accommodation or food during school breaks and holidays. In response to their needs, Dudu built a boarding house for the students and provided what my mother referred to as "a subsidized meal plan" where as customers of her cafe, they would pay a minimal amount or according to what they could afford. For most that meant nothing:

So they all came to my home, and they accepted her as their mother.[4] *So even when there was a graduation, she was there. She was invited, because they knew that she had helped them. You know when they came there, they didn't have much money, so she gave them all these things for nothing. That's just the type of woman she was. She just had open hands and she just accepted everybody and she helped everybody. That's why she was never rich. She accumulated all these things, these businesses and properties but she was never rich because she got the money but then she took it out [she gave it back to the community], it never stayed.* (Goodie)

Goodie's story about my grandmother Dudu is about an individual who, in the spirit of a community worker as an "othermother," used her material resources to respond in times of crisis in order to ensure the survival and well-being of the young. Dudu's position is reflected in Collins' (1991) discussion of meaning of community othermother: "Community othermothers work on behalf of the black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability which embrace conceptions of transformative power and mutuality" (Kuykendall qtd. in Collins 132).

> Such power is transformative in that black women's relationships with children and other vulnerable community members is not intended to dominate or control. Rather, its purpose is to bring people along, to—in the words of late-nineteenth-century black feminists—"uplift the race" so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance. (Collins 132)

Dudu's actions empowering the community occurred through her financial support of the community as a businesswoman, her participation in women-centred religious self-help organizations like the *manyanos* (independent Methodist prayer groups led by women), and her leadership as president of the Methodist Church. My mother witnessed her mother's participation and leadership within "black female spheres of influence" (Collins 141). Her activist role in the community therefore served as a role model for Goodie's own gender socialization.

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Collins takes up the notion of "black female spheres of influence" in her conceptualization of black women's traditional activism. She describes this activism through two interdependent dimensions. The first is characterized as "the struggle for group survival" within existing structures of oppression. According to Collins:

> Women in this dimension do not directly challenge oppressive structures because, in many cases, direct confrontation is neither preferred nor possible. Instead, women engaged in creating black female spheres of influence indirectly resist oppressive structures by undermining them. (141)

Dudu's role in sustaining the well being of young aspiring students is an example of this process of undermining oppression.

Collins describes the second dimension as "the struggle for institutional transformation" (142). Here the efforts to actually change existing structures of oppression is fully articulated through group action to challenge black women's subordination.[5] Collins insists that black women's activist traditions and political activity within the first dimension occur in the context of everyday life but that they have been overlooked.

An example of Dudu's activism within the first sphere is her participation in women-centred organizations. Dudu belonged to the "Zulu of Natal" *manyano* prayer "union." The *manyano* "union" of prayer groups was a religious self-help network comprised of women who took an active role in supporting each other and their families when there was no support from elsewhere. As Gaitskell (1990) points out, "by 1940, there were at least 45,149 women in the Methodist manyano throughout South Africa" (269). Gaitskell clearly demonstrates the impact of the *manyano* organization:

> Those interested in exploring the history of African women's lives, or indeed social change and religious and political mobilisation of different African communities, cannot afford to ignore what was happening in the supposedly "closed" world of the manyano. (271)

The absence of male migrant workers (which I discussed earlier), resulted in the upheaval of the family structure under apartheid. The *manyano* women's prayer groups were thus fundamental for the emotional and psychological well-being of women in female headed households.

Gaitskell shows how emotional revivalism played a key role in the prayer meetings. "The emotional, participatory expressive culture of the manyano was the choice and creation of the women themselves" (271). She describes the *manyano* as a vehicle for female spiritual leadership across social classes. Gaitskell notes that lit-

eracy was not required among those taking the leadership in prayer and preaching because women memorized hymns and spoke at length about biblical passages introduced by someone else, then led the prayer. This form of worship was particularly appealing in light of

> ... the vitality of indigenous traditions of oral expression in which women shared—oratory, folk tales and praise poems vigorously performed to a convivially responding group. (267)

They not only cried, sang, and read the bible together, the *manyano* was also about women assisting women to solve their problems (often related to the effects of living in poverty). They had the opportunity to tell their stories during testimonials and have the members pray spontaneously about immediate and personal needs. They also addressed these needs by organizing and raising funds for the community and for each other. Goodie recalled her mother's role as president of a *manyano* prayer group and as well as president of the Methodist Church: "My home was just buzzing with activity. We just cooked big pots, because people always just walked in for various things, for various problems."

By organizing themselves into *manyanos*, women were able to play a pivotal role in sustaining their families and the community. Through women-to-women supportive relations, *manyano* women found a way to survive the repressive limitations enforced on the family structure.

What I am suggesting is that as a member of the *manyano* prayer group, as well as through her work in the community, Dudu provided Goodie with the techniques for survival which actually prepared her daughter to be able to affect change through "the struggle for institutional transformation." In the *Canadian Women's Studies* issue on "Women in Education," I look at how the mother and daughter female sphere of influence shaped Goodie's involvement with black women's activism. Goodie's pioneering leadership in spearheading the opening of Pietermaritzberg community college in South Africa during the late 1980s represented black women's struggle for institutional transformation (Mogadime 1998). The opening of Pietermartizberg community college to the local black community, represented the changing winds in "the New South Africa" where the educational "upliftment" of the previously racially excluded has become the prime concern of educational development initiatives during the 1990s.

By socializing and preparing Goodie to conceptualize black women as self-determined and self-reliant, Dudu assisted her daughter in acquiring the inner resources to affect change in the community. That is, Dudu's struggle against oppression and her sense of self-determination, represents the "patterns conscious and self expressions," or the "something within" that shapes the culture of resistance in the life of the daughter (Collins 142).

Dudu's relationship with my mother urged Goodie to define herself not only in relation to her family, but also to community struggles. These teachings converge with what black feminists refer to as the "utility of black women's relationships with one another in providing a community for black women's activism and self-determination" (Collins 4). A notion of self-determination allows us to place both our individual and our collective concern for the community at the centre of our agenda. Within this context, the mother and daughter dyad relationship and black women's connection with each other as community workers, nurtures and sustains the community struggle for social justice and racial upliftment.

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[1]Writing in 1972, Troup explained "Bantu" as the official government term for African.

[2]Although researchers (Marks 1986; Meintjes 1990) emphasize the materialist gains derived by the *kholwa* ("Christian intelligentisia") to explain historical aspects of the polarities between the small material-based middle class and the poor black majority during apartheid (Gaitskell 1984), investigating the lives and subjectivities of black women assists in the process of understanding how middle-class subjectivities might have been used alternatively, as a site for community transformative rather than for merely personal and individualistic ends.

[3]Gunner identifies praise poetry as a fluid indigenous language system which assisted in counter hegemonic teachings. She provides an illustration of the political resistance among the popular praises performed by protesters at trade unions rallies in South Africa.

[4]My father, Dr. Henry Mogadime (1931–1998), became one of the medical students Grandma assisted in her capacity as "othermother."

[5]Collins describes African American women's leadership role in the church, their role as othermother in the community and their participation in community organizations as locations where black women acquire and exert the first sphere of influence known as "the struggle for group survival" (95). Whereas in the second dimension or in the "struggle for institutional transformation," Collins refers to women's participation in unions and political organizations which have worked toward the actual legislation of social change.

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