Makhusazana Xaba (ed.).

Makhusazana Xaba’s collection Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000–2018 is a timely contribution to literary and gender studies in South Africa. The book challenges the ever-pervasive patriarchal culture which refuses to take Black women’s writing seriously. In the first essay of the book, Xaba attributes the growth in the publication of poetry by Black women as driven by a “feminist agenda” (15), a reaction to the fact that publishing in South Africa “has historically been predominantly male and white” (15). This collection shifts the conversation and stretches the imagination of what is possible when Black women’s voices are taken seriously.

This collection is in conversation with the past as Xaba dedicates the book to Nontsizi Mgqwetho: a poet from the 1920s who wrote poetry in isiXhosa for the Abantu Batho and Umteteli waBantu newspapers in Johannesburg. Xaba describes Mgqwetho as “the vulandlela for South African black women poets”; “vulandlela” refers to one who paves the way for others. This dedication to the pioneer of Black women’s published poetry immediately highlights the question of the erasure of Black women’s writing as many people have not heard of Mgqwetho and her work in spite of how prolific she was, and even while she was a contemporary of S. E. K. Mqhayi, a more well-known Xhosa poet from the early 20th century. By including a reference to Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Xaba is pointing to a long lineage of Black women writers who resisted the silencing of black women’s voices. Nontsizi Mgqwetho and the women who wrote for publications such as Staffrider, Grace and Speak are all part of the heritage of Black women’s writing, an archive of which Our Words, Our Worlds is now a part.

The collection locates itself through the title which is specific with regards to race, gender and geography. It matters that the collection is dedicated to eighteen years of contributions to poetry by Black women writers. Xaba enumerates this culture by counting 84 titles by 59 poets. She shows that in 2005 and 2018, nine anthologies were published and in 2017, ten anthologies; this is historic. These numbers highlight the need for more research on and teaching of Black women’s writing because this collection provides evidence that not only are Black women publishing poetry, but their work warrants attention which is sorely lacking in many schools and universities.

In her introduction, Gabeba Baderoon poses the question “What can poetry do?” (1) and the rest of the collection can be seen as a response to this question. Divided into three sections—“Perspectives”, “Journeys” and “Conversations”—this collection maps the layered landscape of Black women’s words and worlds. “Perspectives” consists of essays which offer incisive critiques of Black women’s writing in order to demonstrate the ways in which literary scholars
take seriously the poetry of Black women. The
section “Journeys” looks at the life of poetry beyond
publication. The poets share their own personal
journeys of how they came to poetry which often
meant finding a community of other poets who shared
their experiences but also gave them permission to use
their poetry to challenge the silencing of Black women
in public spaces and cultural production. Finally,
“Conversations” is a section where poets think aloud
through interviews.

The multiplicity of this collection brings to the fore
the ways in which Black women have stretched poetry
beyond what exists in anthologies. In the chapter
“Feela Sistah! and the Power of Women’s Spoken
Word”, Myesha Jenkins reflects on her contribution
to spoken word poetry in South Africa. While this is
a growing industry, it has seldom been a place where
literary scholars look for poetic innovation and the
communities forming around poetry. Maganthrie Pillay
offers her reflections as both a filmmaker and poet
in “Poetry, Film and Me” highlighting the inflection
points in the life of women who choose the creative
arts. This reflection is deeply personal as Pillay opens
up to the reader about her early life “of holding poetry
competitions in my backyard in Chatsworth” (195)
which influenced the choices she would make as an
adult “caught between creating platforms and being an
activist and an artist” (201).

While Pillay chooses film and poetry, Lebo
Mashile and Philippa Yaa de Villiers work between
and through poetry and theatre. Their contributions
highlight the ways in which women have challenged
the use of poetry beyond the confines of the page. Mashile
begins her chapter by asserting that she deliberately
revels “in pushing the boundaries of where and how
poetry can be seen and heard. The push and pull
between what is possible versus what is acceptable,
high-brow versus low-brow, the stage versus the page,
insider versus outsider” (219). Mashile’s reflection
echoes Myesha Jenkin’s work in “Feela Sistah!”, which
taught her “about artistic autonomy and ownership”
(222). It is rare for a publication to curate this kind of
synergy where chapters respond to each other directly,
but the fact that this is the case in Our Words, Our Worlds
highlights Xaba’s innovation in painting a picture of
feminist poetry in contemporary South Africa.

Xaba explicitly calls this publication a form of
justice, “restorative justice” because it succeeds in
“providing evidence of the proliferation of poetry
by Black women at the start of the twenty-first
century which has, until now, not been shown” (17).
The contributions in the book will be useful for
researchers working on literature, gender studies and
interdisciplinary explorations of Black women’s work.
In this way, it is also a response to the question of
justice in the academy. This collection participates in
the making of the Black women’s archive as it is a slice
of recent history as well as history unfolding through
to 2018.

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