

Teachers Voice

Asinakuthula collective: Re-membering women's histories

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Asinakuthula umhlaba ubolile: we cannot keep quiet while the world is in shambles. Our name and slogan are derived from Nontsizi Mqgwetho's poetry, which was published in the 1920s in the IsiXhosa newspaper *Umteteli waBantu*. Her literary archive is a body of work that confronts the erasure and marginalisation of Black women in history. We as Asinakuthula are a collective of history teachers, researchers, students and creatives, who are deeply rooted in being stewards of Black women's stories, through public events, dialogues, and publications.

Two faces are placed on newsprint to form our logo: the portraits are of Charlotte Maxeke and Nontsizi Mqgwetho. The newspaper print behind their faces is from their 1920s pieces in *Umteteli waBantu*. This logo depicts the rarely seen faces of these women as well as their own words and serves as a record of their work and life. Nontsizi Mqgwetho's image is one of the few, if not the only, available one of her, which was first published in Peter Limb's *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho* (Wits Press, 2012)¹

To reach a broader audience, we utilise the advantages of technology by sharing the micro-biographies of select women we have chosen to highlight on social media, specifically Instagram and Twitter. The significance of building digital archives of South African feminists cannot be overstated, as documented in Gorata Chengeta's article, "Creating and caring for feminist digital archives in Africa".² The internet provides people with access to

1 P Limb (edt.). 2012. *People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho*. Johannesburg. Wits University Press.

2 G Chengeta, "Creating and caring for feminist digital archives in Africa", Genderit.org, June 2021 (available at <https://genderit.org/articles/creating-and-caring-feminist-digital-archives-africa>, as accessed on 12 June 2022).

narratives that make them feel validated right now. Asinakuthula members hope to create a resource hub that can be utilised to teach people about the role African women have played in history by building online platforms such as their website and an Instagram feed. This work builds on previous publications which have anthologised African women's histories and writings, such as the *Women Writing Africa Series* (published by Feminist Press and Wits Press) and Margaret Busby's *Daughters of Africa* and *New Daughters of Africa*. The importance of developing such a digital archive is not just to keep and preserve these women's history and victories but to explore ways in which these narratives can be safeguarded and recreated on different platforms for different publics.

Every year, we host two public events, the Maxeke-Mgqwetho Memorial lecture and the Imbokodo Masterclass. As a collective, we engage in continuous archival work, knowledge production, teaching, and learning in support of these two events. In addition, the aim of these lectures is to recognise the historical significance of these women's political and literary contributions to South Africa.

Given their history and contemporary focus on girls' education, the Collective partnered with St Mary's School, Waverly, Johannesburg to host the lecture at the school. This has been advocated by one of the History teachers who is also a member of the Collective.

In May 2019, the inaugural keynote speaker was Dr Gcina Mhlophe. She recollected the work and legacy of Charlotte Maxeke and Nontsizi Mgqwetho and re-emphasised how crucial the work of these women was. In 2020, COVID-19 restrictions prevented the conduct of the live lecture. Fortunately, with the support of the Kaya FM team we were able to organise a live broadcast on the Kaya FM Facebook page with Makhosazana Xaba as the speaker. Xaba is a poet, essayist, award-winning writer and Associate Professor of Practice at the University of Johannesburg. Her poem, "Tongues of their Mothers" has been the cornerstone of the Collective's work. In 2021 the keynote speaker was Dr Nomathamsanqa Tisani, a historian invested in subverting the ways in which History remembers women. The Maxeke-Mgqwetho Memorial Lecture seeks to recognize the significance of these (and other) women's political and literary contributions to South African history. Maxeke and Mgqwetho serve as a starting point for us to discuss women throughout history. They are the first examples of women who etched their names into history. Both of these women became active participants in the 1920s; they serve as an example to resist being bystanders to public discourse and political resistance.

Charlotte Maxeke holds a complex tapestry of stories that defies the dominant stereotype in historiography's limiting image of women as spouses and mothers. She is a

worldwide figure who spoke Dutch, Afrikaans, SeSetho, and English. Her experiences in England and America in the late 1800s enabled us to examine not only our South African identities but also the numerous identities of women. Nontsizi Mgcwetho, on the other hand, is a lesser-known artist. She was a poet in the 1920s who presented her poetry at public gatherings before turning to the newspaper as another avenue. "Mayibuye iAfrika," was one of the many poems she penned in *Umteteli waBantu* (Come back Africa).

These women's stories help us comprehend historical events like the turn of the century, what the establishment of the Union of South Africa meant for Black women, the emergence of the Black press in the early 20th century, the *Drum* generation, the Black Consciousness Movement, and the role women played in South Africa's democratic transition. By honouring Maxeke and Mgcwetho, their legacies will begin to give significance to the concerns that young women are asking today about the role of feminism and women's empowerment in South Africa. While the country's constitution safeguards women's rights and gender equality, there are defects that highlight the urgency for leadership positions to be occupied by women to contribute to the much-needed public dialogue.

The Imbokodo Masterclass is an interactive, full-day event in which students from various schools in Johannesburg come to learn about Maxeke, Mgcwetho, and other women's work. It would be hard to cover the vast history of these women and their time in a single day. This has created a need for a website that will act as a repository for additional content and resources, that will ensure the project's endurance by allowing fresh themes to be studied in the future. The digital archive that we are building will serve as a resource for History, English, and Art teachers who are looking for methods to incorporate women's voices into their present curriculum. The Collective will be launching a podcast in August 2022 as an extension of its work of storytelling. The pilot season will feature stories about Miriam Makeba, Charlotte Maxeke, Nontsizi Mgcwetho, Tsitsi Dangaremba and Gcina Mhlophe.

We, as a Collective, hope to further the conversation about how we tell stories and perhaps in future no longer talk about the erasure of women's stories but rather the ongoing challenges of writing History. We hope that future generations will have different conversations about the nature of gendered histories, as it is possible to shift the narrative when people collaborate as we have experienced in the Asinakuthula Collective.