Shared Breath in the Tomb of the Earth: Earthly Respiratory Systems as Resistance to Racial Capitalism in Uhuru Portia Phalafala's Epic *Mine Mine Mine* (2023)

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Abstract

In Uhuru Portia Phalafala's epic *Mine Mine Mine* (2023), the lyric subject looks the South African socio-ecological inequalities square in the eye, slices hegemonic ideologies marked by racism and colonialism apart, and regains strength in aesthetic forms of collective resistance through solidarity. Drawing on the work of Magdalena Górska, who offers a politicised understanding of embodiment through the lens of bodily, cultural and natural enactments of breath; Stacy Alaimo, who conceptualises the "proletarian lung" as a corporeal marker of intersectional identity

formation and class struggle; and Phalafala's own epistemic idea of the "matriarchive," which centres on matrilinear patronage and women rights, I argue that the representation of breathing rhythms in Phalafala's epic relate to the semantics of working and living in an inhumane, contaminated and racialised space (i.e., a society dominated by the mine-industry). By focussing specifically on two tropes, the lung and the womb, I show how Phalafala connects the body to the earth in a "poetics of possibility," which intervenes in the dominant production system (i.e., racial capitalism) that continues to foster environmental and social injustices in the current South African political landscape. By simultaneously individualising the collective and collectivising the individual, the lyric subject invites the reader to join the rhythm of a shared 'combat breathing.'

"We revolt simply because, for a variety of reasons, we can no longer breathe."
—Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (1967)

"There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured […]. Under these conditions; the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing."
—Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (1965)

Introduction

"We are not sending help to criminals. We are going to smoke them out," said Khumbudzo Ntshavheni almost laughingly during a recent news conference on 13 Nov. 2024 (GovernmentZA 00:00:00-00:00:33). Ntshavheni's use of "them" and "criminals" refers to illegal miners in South Africa—*Zama Zama*s—who worked in closed and unused mines but remained trapped because the police sieged the gaps to arrest them (Chutel). The police cut off food and water to force them to come out, but this had the opposite effect: they became so weak that they were physically unable to climb the ropes (Chutel; Parakozov). Among hundreds of dead bodies, many barely living men had to survive in inhumane circumstances (Parakozov par. 1-3). These young men (children, in some cases) were driven to the mines by increasing unemployment rates and ongoing poverty, and worked there just to "get bread and meat for [their] kids" (Chutel). Ignoring their plight by calling them "criminals" in this post-apartheid convention is highly controversial. Similarly, the brutal governmental tactics employed to "smoke them out," that is, to ensure the Zama Zamas surrender or die, raised ethical questions that have received international attention—especially because of the six thousand abandoned mines currently under suspicion of illegal mining practices (Chutel). That the criminalisation of the poor in the (illegal) mining industry in South Africa has a colonial heritage is unsurprising, but this ongoing story of colonialism, dehumanisation, human rights violations, and epistemic injustices, is perhaps more difficult to grasp as it relates to institutionalised

racial dynamics. As Ntshavheni's words illustrate, the government does not take responsibility for their own people. Most troublesome in the afterlives of apartheid, is the government's own economic interest in the mining industry, oftentimes resulting in various forms of corruption and mismanagement (Vera). These unequal and violent racial processes are fundamental to the South African poet and literary scholar Uhuru Porta Phalafala, who addresses the layered transhistorical complexities behind the South African mining industry in a heroic story of these miners and their families. Phalafala draws on age-old oral testimonies and intergenerational trauma to understand how racism is part of ongoing ecological and human exploitation.

Reading Phalafala's poetry collection *Mine Mine Mine* (2023) is a painful yet sublime experience; the reader enters the gold mines of Johannesburg and engages with linguistic rhythms of bodily and geographical respiratory systems that function within and outside these spaces. The poetry collection chronicles the journey of the author's grandfather as a migrant labourer in South Africa. In doing so, Phalafala draws a parallel between the environmental effects mining has on the South African landscape and the bodily effects on the health of the miners and their families. She addresses painful topics of extraction, labour migration, and misogyny in the context of South Africa's contemporary racist and capitalist infrastructures that are fostered by the afterlives of apartheid and the continuation of violent forms of colonialism. The continuation of slavery into modern forms of exploitation is what many critical Black scholars call "racial capitalism": a term introduced by the South African historians Martin Legassick and David Hemson to refer to the way in which capitalism flourishes because of the exploitation of Black people (10-13).

Using the epic as a literary genre, Phalafala foregrounds the lives of Black people in South Africa that found themselves underground and unheard within South Africa's hegemonic circles and beyond. Underground, Black mine workers collectively resisted the colonial neoliberal production system by developing a Black Arts Movement (Keorapetse Kgositsile 5-7). Yet these stories have barely been brought to light. In her poetry collection, Phalafala demonstrates how

intergenerational trauma, caused by racial capitalism, is intermingled with traditional Indigenous knowledge production and circulation in Black artistic resistance movements. She reflects on the importance of matrilinear patronage in sharing alternative forms of being and relating to the world: through music, poetry, dancing, and storytelling. In materialising such acts of disobedience—i.e., transforming oral literacies into written texts that are able to circulate across borders—Phalafala's work criticises hegemonic (Western) forms of storytelling by using the epic as a rhythmic rejection of the transhistorical trajectories that continue to structure the violent geosocial strata of contemporary South African society.

As the epigraphs suggest, it is the transhistorical role of breathing that connects individual and collective histories to the resistive act that Fanon calls "combat breathing" (*A Dying Colonialism* 50). By adding the layer of "combat" to breathing mechanisms, Fanon emphasises a particular form of breathing—of existing, if you will—that underscores a mechanism of coping with racial capitalism and resisting it—of moving on, and living, despite the ongoing inequalities and racial forms of violence. It is Fanon's understanding of combat breathing that connects several oppressed cultures all over the world, as different histories (e.g. African, American and Caribbean) are merged into similar resistive trajectories (Gilroy 1-7). Breathing as a coping mechanism has gained importance for the Black Lives Matter movement in the slogan "I can't breathe"—the last outspoken words of several Black men killed by police brutality (e.g., Eric Garner, George Floyd). By connecting the breathing-as-coping-mechanism to the physical function of the lungs, breathing can be seen "an event of bringing the outside in and the inside out" (Górska 29), and it is precisely this enactment that, as a deconstructive method, provides an interesting lens for the parallel Phalafala sketches between the earth and the body. Therefore, this article will engage in a close-reading of Phalafala's poetry collection by using a politicised understanding of breathing as a lens to analyse the way in which the lung metaphorically connects the earth and the body in rhythms of collective resistance through solidarity.

Mine Mine Mine (2023): Poetry of the People

Phalafala's poetry collection tells the story of her own grandfather, who worked as a migrant labourer in the mines of Johannesburg. Phalafala applies a formal style in a verse narrative, allowing it to be read as an epic, which, like a traditional epic, centres on a heroic figure—in this case, her grandfather (Abrams and Harpham 109). Yet, the story does not only unfold around her grandfather, Phalafala explains in an interview: "it is about *our collective* grandfathers and fathers, about *our* grandmothers […] about *our* mothers" (Phalafala qtd. in Strauss 13; emphasis added). Indeed, it is the collective intergenerational trauma that families experienced when young men migrated to work in the South African mines. Many Black people migrated from the hinterlands of Southern Africa to mining and diamond compounds in Johannesburg and Kimberley (Giliomee 329). The South African mine industry is part of a capitalist system that evolved along racial discourses. When in 1886 a reef of gold was found on the Witwatersrand plateau, it caused an international gold rush that destabilised the political situation in South Africa significantly (Wilson 14). Together with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in 1867, it caused the so-called "mineral revolution" in South Africa, resulting in capital accumulation and technical progress in the modern industry in South Africa, which enforced racial segregation (Giliomee 328-329). Phalafala calls the sons of women "offerings of our race / to the shrine of modernity" (46), addressing the way in which contemporary society is built on structural racism.

Problematically, the stories of these families barely became part of the dominant Historical—with a capital 'h,' referring to the written and canonised History—narratives that are socially constructed and, as such, exclude particular histories—lower case 'h,' referring to largely unheard and untold stories—like oral literacies (see for example Stuart Hall's "Thinking the Caribbean," 2017; 61-64). The poetry collection reflects on intergenerational traumas that previously existed only as testimonies in oral and aural cultures, and therefore remained largely hidden from written sources and institutionalised archives (Phalafala qtd. in Dugmore). The form of the epic plays an important role in the

ambiguous enactment of individualising the collective and in collectivising the individual, bringing to light the huge number of individuals that became the victims of the South African mining system.

Participatory and Political Epic

Phalafala cherishes the oral traditions that are rooted in African societies, passed on for generations, particularly by matrilineal patronage. Phalafala follows postcolonial scholars who argue that epics do not tell one single story but are forms of relational thinking that connect several origin stories, especially in non-Western contexts (Roy 4-10). Echoing Mikhail Bakhtin's critique on the authoritative role of the epic in relation to the colonial shaping of History (48-50), Fanon addresses the Western tradition of the epic: "[t]he settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 39). A story wherein the white man continues to be glorified. Édouard Glissant emphasises that one needs to differentiate between two specific epic forms: the "excluding epic" i.e., the one that excludes the other (and thus writes only one particular form of History) and the "concluding and participatory epic," i.e., the one that allows for relational thinking and reflects on a rhizomatic "relation identity" that evolved along various intersecting histories (222). The latter rhizomatic form of collective identity allows for the recognition of historical trauma and gives space to "be recognized as [a] self" in various contexts and relations (Glissant 221). Echoing Bakhtin, Fanon, and Glissant, Sneharika Roy discusses how a "participatory epic" decentres the authoritative structures that dominate society by focussing the narrative on relationality and dialogue (3, 13).

Extending from these postcolonial definitions of the epic, it becomes clear that *Mine Mine Mine* can be read as a "participatory epic" (Glissant 221) as it emphasises relational thinking in the tradition of South African oral literacies. Simultaneously it can be read as a "political epic" (Roy 3) as it connects the postcolonial and environmental sensibilities of the poetry collection in relation to transhistorical local South African histories—such as the entanglement of slave trades, plantation economies, mining and prison-industrial complexes—while also reflecting on the transnational connections to the Black Atlantic

and the Black diaspora, e.g., by referring to connected Black Lives Matter movements all over the world.

It is interesting how these notions of the "participatory epic" and the "political epic" both resonate in Phalafala's conceptualisation of the "matriarchive," which refers to a feminist understanding of the way in which oral literacies (including epics) are shaped throughout time and space by matrilineal members. Reflecting on the poetry of South Africa's poet laureate and political activist Keorapetse Kgositsile (known as 'Bra Willie'), and by simultaneously building on Paul Gilroy's interconnections made between African, American, Caribbean, and British transoceanic histories in his influential work *The Black Atlantic* (1993; 1-5), Phalafala sketches how Black geographies, traditions, and forms of resistance are entangled within Black history and the changing natural environment in a relational way. Phalafala defines the "matriarchive" as:

> […] a living repository of sound knowledges transmitted by matrilineal members of the family. These knowledges are rooted/routed in cosmologies and mythologies of the lineages and are at once intergenerational, communal, relational, and ancestral. They enshrine indigenous languages, names, songs, prayers, and rituals practised in the homeplace and actively materialize in their progenies' lives and ongoing becoming. (*Keorapetse* 6)

As a "living repository," the "matriarchive" consists of oral and aural forms of knowledge production and disruption within the homeplace of Indigenous families, connecting environment, cosmology, and rituals to sound, and eventually to an "ongoing becoming," which tells a possible alternative for the current hegemonic written and institutionalised South African History. Phalafala uses meaningful enjambments to illustrate her point on the hegemonic, male-dominated process of writing History:

> At no point in his-

story has white
woman breast-
fed gaping Black
babe mouth
involuntarily (73)

By the enjambments in the words "his-story" and "breast-fed," Phalafala emphasises the way in which history is a social construction of a male-dominated society, wherein white women are never illustrated as a subject of involuntary actions like breastfeeding their oppressors' children. It is a rather painful reference to the violence that Black women were (and continue to be) exposed to, which the lyric subject powerfully calls "colonial sexual warfare" (*Mine Mine Mine* 72). This warfare is also inherently connected to the exploitation of humans in the mining industry.

Racial Capitalism in South Africa

In his book *Empire of Cotton* (2015), Sven Beckert explains that colonial exploitation undergirds and feeds the (early) development of capitalism (Beckert iv). Using the cotton industry as the blueprint of colonial exploitation, Beckert argues that modern capitalism is primarily based on slavery and exploitation, and as such has evolved with racial and segregative policies (Beckert iv-v). The lyric subject refers to the "lungs [which] are filled with saltwater / of the Atlantic and Indian" making Black people "unable to breathe" due to the "water-logged, dust-clogged lungs / in the furnace, caked into bricks" (*Mine, Mine, Mine* 20). Referring here specifically to "dust" and "bricks," the lyric subject denotes the continuation of slavery in the form of "mining labor," wherein mine workers simply have become "pawns in our breathless and breath-taking civilization" (20). The continuation of slavery in global capitalism is inherently connected to forceful modern institutions like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):

South African capitalism

did one up on American slavery
Here slavery, factory and railway
conjugated in a threesome
of unholy trinity
to power global capitalism
to build and sustain NATO world power
long after slavery has been abolished
in most of the world (33-34)

Phalafala powerfully sketches the connections that sustain contemporary (unseen) forms of slavery. A political institution like NATO that is involved in fortification, military equipment, and 'security systems' is largely built upon contemporary slavery because of the technology required to sustain and expand their data centres (e.g., metals, copper, steel, lithium etc.) (Hartley 1-3; Parton). The weapon industry is built upon the same segregating policies as described by Beckert. This idea that exploitation, of people and of the environment, works within a mechanism that is based on entangled race and class distinctions, draws on earlier Black activism that addressed the connections between capitalism, colonialism, and racism (e.g., Patrice Lumumba, Aimé Césaire, W.E.B. Dubois, Anton de Kom, Martin Luther King Jr.) (Ndjako 110-113). These transhistorical forms of activism function as a combative enactment of breath because they inhale the violence through the body, the contaminated lungs, and collectively exhale the trauma and violence that have become embodied through intersectional violence.

Breathing (in) the Mine

To understand the "political" and "participatory" dimensions of the epic, the lens of a politicised understanding of breath helps to analyse the destruction of human and environmental respiratory systems, a process that Phalafala calls the "bronchital history that afflicts Black life" (*Mine Mine Mine* 35). This understanding starts with the intricate and racialised history behind the slogan "I can't breathe" in debates amongst and about international and local Black Lives Matter movements. Throughout history, breathing clean air was never guaranteed

for Black people, and today, many people live and work in unhealthy circumstances due to, for example, air pollution and contaminated production methods (c.f. Bullard 50; Kamolane-Kgadima and Kathi 1-3). In an interview, Phalafala calls this process of slow violence the "theft of breath" (Phalafala qtd. in Strauss 13), which caused not only health problems but also intergenerational trauma that continues to be felt and passed on in Black families (13-14). Phalafala asks the question: "how do we breathe through the loss, trauma, waiting, absences, and desires that sit with it?" (Strauss 13). As Magdalena Górska argued, being able to breathe (healthy) air is a highly politicised question that marks trans-historical violence when looking at the Black Atlantic, including South Africa. The slogan "I can't breathe" has become a trope in activist arts movements, and exemplifies how lungs have been a figurative marker of these transhistorical and transnational forms of racial violence, which Phalafala's lyric subject addresses:

> Our lungs are filled with silicosis in the mines
> We are asphyxiated in the prisons
> Lungs riddled with tuberculosis
> We cannot breathe – drowning
> In the blood of tortured comrades (17)

Many mine workers suffered from silicosis and tuberculosis due to the unhealthy air that contaminated their lungs. The lung, i.e., the physical space wherein the inhalation and exhalation of breath takes place, infiltrates the capital system and affects the individual system. This inhuman mechanism is closely related to the idea of the 'proletarian lung.'

The South African Proletarian Lung

Drawing on the connection made by Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins between class, race, and embodiment, Stacy Alaimo introduced the concept of the 'proletarian lung' as a "corporeal manifestation of race, class and gender" (22) wherein external economic and social systems—in this case the South African mining industry—have become physiologically embodied (28). Therefore, the lung, crossing the biological and cultural,

can be seen as a material testimony to the effects of racial, class, and gender oppression. In line with this, according to Górska, the lung symbolises a "corpomateriality" wherein raw materials (that pollute the air as a result of mining these materials) become embodied through the act of breathing (168-169): poetically expressed when the lyric subject says that the "coal became our lungs" (35). The inhalation of dust foregrounds the contaminated 'proletarian lung' of the mine workers. They inhale the dust, and therewith literally embody the coal, which is harmful to their ability to breathe. It is a form of inequality that Benjamin Chavis calls "environmental racism," i.e., the idea that environmental injustices are mostly affecting people of colour and low-income communities ("Ben Chavis").

Drawing on critical Black feminist scholars and Martinique poets, Kathryn Yusoff applies in her book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018) a material geophysical approach to understand race in the context of environmental injustices, and in particular in the space of the mine. Yusoff explains how bodies "become gold, emptied of the sign of the human […] Black is made as will-less matter, a commodity object of labor" (83). Indeed, the inhalation of coal is part of this process, and the lung becomes the fundamental permeable membrane through which body and earth intermingle, becoming raw material as the pollution becomes embodied. As such, becoming commodities, the mine workers lose their humane conditions, their ability to breathe. Nowadays, many private companies criminalised (South) Africans using pass laws and penal policies, which allowed private companies to imprison many innocent inhabitants and declare them as "prison labourers" (Baderoon):

> emancipated slaves were arrested en masse
> put in prisons where they were trapped once more
> and posted to go work in those mines – (Phalafala 19)

Here, the lyric subject painfully sketches the continuation of History by using an oxymoron: "emancipated slaves," followed by their imprisonment through private companies who forced them to work in the mines.

The current situation, sketched in the introduction, wherein many mines are closed by the government without ensuring alternative job positions for thousands of men who sustain their families, is a case in point of the same criminalisation of mine workers—it is a trans-historical trajectory of dehumanisation, again. Grâce Ndjako addresses the way in which the South African youth today increasingly criticise the lack of changes in the racial segregation and exploitation of Black people even though apartheid has been over since 1994 (Ndjako 113). This line of thought has been discussed by Martin Legassick and David Hemson: as in Marxist tradition, they predicted that racial segregation and exploitation would not "simply" be over with the removal of the system of apartheid and the introduction of a rainbow nation (i.e., a multiracial democracy) if capitalism would not be dismantled as well (Legassick and Hemson 14-16). With a clear and similar argument, the lyric subject meaningfully ends the epic with a strong political stance:

> Gold and diamond mining
> is the white pot
> at the beginning
> of the rainbow
> nation (83)

As the exploitation of Black people and the environment continues to produce environmental injustices that are marked by racism, it is perhaps not surprising that capitalism and the democracy—euphemistically called 'rainbow nation'—are being blamed by younger South African generations, amongst which Uhuru Portia Phalafala herself belongs. The Marxist notion of the proletariat also foregrounds the collectivity that underlies the resistive acts of (combat) breathing. In order to understand the role of the 'proletarian lung' and its combative enactments in the South African mining industry, including the dialectics of specific classes and its intersectionality and matrilineal patronage, it is crucial to sketch the racial working mechanisms that foster this industry.

Matrilineal patronage

The processes of racialisation become specifically clear when looking, for example, at the trope of the womb. The womb is, in contrast to the lung, a particularly feminine characteristic that is implicated in the violent effects of the mine industry. Looking at the womb adds the layer of gender to the discussion, which is part of the stories that circulated in the matriarchive: Phalafala connects the womb of the ship (slavery), with the womb of the earth (mine), and the womb of the body (woman), to address how "our bodies are vaults / storing trauma that still breathes. / In.our.wombs." (72). The latter punctuation marks denote a staccato rhythm, symbolising the trauma "that still breathes" (72) in the body, but keeps hiccuping and hanging in the air. The womb signifies a relationality and a continuation, and foregrounds the complexity of women being implicated in the reproduction of the system:

> A vicious modernity
> disfigures Black maternity
> turns Black women's wombs
> into factories producing blackness
> wombs of profit and prophets
> birth canal strengthening GDP (9)

Indeed women became implicated in the production system by "producing blackness" (i.e., Black young people) that become capitalism's "profits and prophets" (i.e., Black labour) and as such, are "strengthening GDP," i.e., the economic system on which modernity has been built (Phalafala 9). The children that women bear, are brought "into nonstatus, nonbeing" as they are "forced to deliver sons / into the mine tomb of the state" (Phalafala 9). Again, the children are destined to become commodities, their lungs are destined to inhale pollution, and their bodies to become enslaved in the tomb (womb) of the mine. In other words, the South African government profits significantly from the mine industry and women are implicated in these profits by the fact that they produce sons that continue to work in the mines and daughters that continue to produce mine workers. The womb (of the mines and of the women)

has become a site of commodification—just as the lungs of men are. Both the sons and the women become, in Marxian terms, 'fetishised commodities' that serve South Africa's nation state.

The parallel between the mine and the womb is emblematic of these underlying racist processes, and figures as "site[s] of reproduction" (Yusoff "Mine as Paradigm"), or rather, as sites of "obligatory reproduction" (Phalafala 10), where "the extraction and expansion dynamic of colonialism" becomes embodied by different generations throughout time ("Mine as Paradigm"). This extraction is also made visible through the respiratory systems of the earth, indirectly implicating the role of the lung:

> excavated under tongue […]
> the deep exhale of the earth's belly
> rising and falling, secreting
> convulsions that enrobe Black joy
> in blanket of song (24)

The exhaling of the "earth's belly" that rises and falls produces a sound hidden in a "blanket of song" which is "excavated under tongue" (24). Phalafala plays with language and rhythm to strengthen the oxymoron in the sentence "convulsions that enrobe Black joy," and shows the dual position of mine workers that are subject to racial capitalism but simultaneously resist it: by using the tongue to sing. It is here that the aforementioned idea of 'radical mothering' as part of the matriarchive comes to the surface, as the traditional forms of aural storytelling and singing arise in the familial and collective forms of existence. In a way, shared singing is also shared breathing—throughout time and space.

A Poetics of Shared Breath: A Matter of Unmaking

The mining compounds are what Phalafala calls "reservoirs of labor," responsible for "mechanizing and merchandizing the Black body" into a commodity (19). It is within these reservoirs that collectivity emerges as a meaningful—and resistive—form of existence:

> He came as one, my grandfather
> but stood with millions
> from rural homelands
> Tanzania, Namibia, Zambia, Rhodesia,
> Nyasaland, Swaziland, Basutoland
> Those deemed raw savages, primitive natives
> swallowed by the train, *stimela sa malahla*
> mixed with cattle and coal on freight trains (18)

In the opening lines of this stanza, Phalafala connects the individual "grandfather" to the collective, i.e., the "millions" of mine workers that have been transported (or rather have been "swallowed") by the coal train from "rural homelands" (18). By calling the hinterlands by their names, and by referring to "*stimela sa malahla*" (which can be roughly translated from Zulu to "coal train"), the rhythm of this stanza recalls Hugh Masekela's song "Stimela" which was released in 1974 on his album *I am Not Afraid*. It is a form of Black aesthetics that connects the body, the mind, and the labourers with each other in a resistive rhythm that is strengthened by the enumeration of the different hinterlands. The rhythm and the lyrics intermingle and resist the "deemed raw savages, primitive natives" (Phalafala 71) that dehumanised and objectified Black men. In the continuing lines, Phalafala contrastingly humanises the "millions" by referring specifically to shared human phenomena, such as "language":

> bringing with them languages and praise poets
> spiritual forms, traditional practices
> cultural artefacts and choreographies (18)

In these lines, Phalafala addresses the potential of the mine workers as human beings to resist the dominant systems by using their own words, ontologies, cultures, languages, and dances as resistive phenomena—artistic elements that are driven by rhythm and solidarity. Phalafala calls these aesthetic and resistive phenomena the "poetics of possibility" (*Keorapetse Kgositsile* 14) that is created by specific forms of collectivity:

He came as one, my grandfather
but stood as millions
a brilliant battalion
that refused death in life
names that in dying make life surer than death. (21)

This stanza starts with the same opening lines as the second last stanza I discussed just now. Yet remark the change from "with" to "as" in the second line, emphasising the agency of the people gathering as "battalion" to "resist[ing] the social order […] through movement" (21). Even though the change is minimal, it brings to light the power of the people in a highly productive and symbolic way.

In line with such collective mobilisations, part II of the poetry collection illustrates contemporary resistive (and polyphonic) voices within South African communities. In this part, Phalafala's "communitarian ethos" becomes even more apparent, which she refers to as a "way of speaking from within the chorus" (Phalafala qtd. in Strauss 14), or in other words, a way of speaking which functions as "repertoires of repair" (Phalafala qtd. in Strauss 15). The ending of the poetry collection, with South African daughters singing the resurrection of earlier generations in younger generations, therewith honouring the many historical, and continuing endeavours of Black women and men to collectively resist the determinist fate in which their bodies have been placed in dominant narratives. It is here where breathing becomes "a matter of unmaking" (65):

learning how to breathe
refusing death in life
minute-by-minute
A matter of unmaking
unpattering and rewiring
our minds and spirits
A deliberate and intentional
radical persistent choice
to resist the toxicity
of our inherited disorder (65)

The "inherited disorder" refers to the "collusion of / postapartheid state / and capital" that "corrodes the soul" (66). The processes of commodification, of dehumanisation and of violation are, however, always fought within the "underground," which is the place where the collective "we" merges through the collective "aesthetic / our myth / our language / our holy grail," which is "where we stand our ground" (68). Phalafala sketches how colonialism failed due to the rising collectivism and shared spirit of the people to fight against the imposed monoculture. Songs became a "live force" that made the mine workers breathe and sing again, and made them connected to their ancestors and to each other, thereby enforcing a strong movement of being, knowing, and existing through aesthetics (Phalafala qtd. in Strauss 15). Calling this a "spiritual revolution," Phalafala remarks on the continuation of untold histories that continue to be sung by younger generations. She does so by collectivising the lyric subject, creating in the final pages a "we" that breathes and sings together.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is within Phalafala's intermingled use of the 'poetics of possibility' that collective resistance movements arise. It has been argued that breathing rhythms in this poetry collection relate to the semantic representation of breathing and working in an inhumane space (i.e., the mine) and as such, brings together an aesthetics that intervenes in the dominant production system underlying the entangled environmental and social injustices in the current South African political landscape. Phalafala shows that an understanding of breathing as a collective act, a shared rhythm, is fundamental for (artistic) resistance to develop. This shows that both lungs and wombs play a central role in understanding and rejecting the system; and (contaminated) air is exactly the mechanism that deconstructs the different spaces and formations. Specific attention to oral aspects of a text—like forms of breathing—is essential to understanding the ways in which the "participatory epic" and "political epic" reject traditional ways of storytelling. Focussing on respiratory systems allows us as readers to see how distinctions between environment and human, individual and

collective are deconstructed. Its biggest implication is that breathing mechanisms are difficult to trace within texts and are represented in various ways. But if we want to understand the onto-epistemological foundations of oral literacies, these representations are not to be neglected. However, too often the non-textual forms in a text are not given enough attention in close readings. It is here that we, as literary scholars, always situated in a space of knowledge production and circulation (think of Haraway's idea of 'situated knowledges'), face the problem of understanding the world described; including all its breathing and other wor(l)dly pulsing mechanisms. The risk of interpretation is one of crucial importance here, precisely because of the dominant narratives that continue to determine how we interpret certain stories—which is precisely what Phalafala aims to deconstruct by using the "political" and "participatory epic" as a critique of Western storytelling. Further questions arise when we think about collective forms of (shared) breathing: how can we think of breathing in a relational way? How can rhythms of shared breathing be represented in text-form? And how can we literally read those? What happens within the transformation from outspoken words to written text and vice versa? What is lost and what is gained when we analyse these textual materialisations? Such questions are suggestive for further research. What becomes clear from this breath-focused reading of Phalafala's poetry is that, even when political messages are secretly and aesthetically hidden in the rising and falling of breathing mechanisms of an epic, they are present and continue to be a collective underground for resistive movement. The fluidity between the collective and the individual in the poetry collection showcases the functioning of a bigger, shared 'proletarian lung' that strengthens an accumulating combat-breathing-mechanism, refusing to be reduced and fetishised to, or as, a singular commodity. And it is here that our shared breathing begins.

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Biography

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