Photo by Andile Buka

# Maneo Mohale: On Community, Language, and Ancestors in *Everything is a Deathly Flower*

SELINA BOAN

**Maneo Mohale is a South African editor, feminist writer, and poet. Their work has been published widely, and they've served as a contributing editor for *The New York Times* and *i-D,* among others. Maneo was *Bitch Media's* first Global Feminism Writing Fellow in their inaugural 2016 class, where they wrote on race, media, sexuality, and survivorship. They have been longlisted twice for the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology Award, and their brilliant debut collection of poetry, *Everything is a Deathly Flower,* was shortlisted for the Ingrid Jonker Poetry Prize.**

Since first reading Maneo's poetry, I have been in awe of the way they bend sound and form. *Everything is a Deathly Flower* is immersive and sharp; a "simmering letter" that explores with nuance and care "the experience of—and the reconstruction of a life after—a sexual assault." I have spent a lot of time thinking about how to hold their work with the same care I felt reading this book. Their work vibrates off the page, necessary and profound; a poetics connected and

rooted through Black, queer, decolonial kinship and community. I left my interview with the generous and brilliant Maneo buzzing with energy, inspired by our conversation about the Sesotho language, the messiness of time, the potential of poetic forms, the expansive, complicated landscape of trauma and memory, the humour of learning, and joy.

**ROOM**: *Everything is a Deathly Flower* opens with your acknowledgments page. It felt powerful and moving to begin the journey of your book there. You spoke about the immensity of labour writing a book like this takes, centring community and reciprocity. Could you speak about beginning the book there?

**MANEO MOHALE**: This book is so intertextual and there are so many voices I lean on. I really wanted to acknowledge that, especially with the subject matter of this book, crawling myself out of that space, I didn't do that alone. I did that with community, with help, with chosen family, my loves, and also with the books that were so important to this particular journey that feature in the texts. The acknowledgment was also a way of setting the stage that this is a book of two worlds—that it was born in South Africa but was also crafted and experienced and lived on Musqueam territory. It was so important for me to bridge those worlds and to use my body as a bridge, to use the book as a bridge, to use the work and the acknowledgement section as a bridge. My favourite books had the acknowledgements right there in the front, so I knew I wanted to start with the people who made this book possible because without them, there is no book, there's nothing, there's just me screaming into the void.

**ROOM**: I am intrigued by what you said about bridging worlds; it reminds me of the different languages that you use throughout the book, intertwining Sesotho throughout. I felt an underlying tension in the book between English and Sesotho. *Everything is a Deathly Flower* begins with the stunning poem "Letsatsi," which is the only poem isolated from the three sections of the book. The poem begins with the speaker flipping the word "benoni" in their mouth. Could you talk a bit about bridging worlds and your relationship to translation and language in the book?

**MM**: As someone who speaks but doesn't write in Sesotho, I feel that tension and that silence quite intensely. I am someone who primarily writes in English, and I wanted to wink at that tension inside of the book. Some of the poems are named in English, some in classic scientific nomenclature, some are named in an Indigenous (Sesotho or Setswana) way, but all of those are mitigated by different worlds.

My entry and access point to Sesotho and Setswana words for plants was a book written by white people about South African Indigenous plants. That was the part of the research where I could have, in a different world, sat down with an elder and asked them about their knowledge of plants. That is the romantic, ideal kind of way: let me just call up my gran and ask about these words. That tension of writing in English, of dreaming in English, of learning in English and finding community and reciprocity in English, and especially of being a Black, queer, non-binary writer; the language of that is also so complicated and complex.

One of the books that made my book possible is Leah Horlick's *For Your Own Good*. That book completely changed my whole world. What I love about Leah's collection, and what I tried to search for in writing my own book, is how she links sexual assault, abuse, and violence with something so much larger. It feels like an individual experience, but it also feels like a systemic critique.

What I wanted to do with "Letsatsi" and why I set it apart from the rest of the book was to make that same kind of critique, to say, I am speaking about violence, I am speaking about harm, but I am also speaking about Empire. The particular violence that was visited upon my body was white and queer, and that is very intentionally linked with Empire. My abuser was aided by their passport to travel to my country. It is so fraught. English is such a blanket of comfort but also a weight at the same time. It's suffocating and all-encompassing. I needed to signal that. Letsatsi means sunrise, means the sun itself, but also means the day. I wanted the poem "Letsatsi" to be that poem that signals quite mysteriously, quite ambiguously, what to expect and what I'm grappling with in the book. I am very glad it translates and that this tension comes across.

**ROOM**: You definitely accomplish that. You mentioned Empire, and I noticed that was a word that pops up throughout the collection.

**MM**: I really adore poetry in the sense that it reveals symbols that are very important to you, but much later. You think you know what it is you are doing, and then you write. The writing then shows you something else. I thought, quite rightly, and also quite heavily, that I was going to be writing about my experience, then I started the work, and all this stuff started coming out.

I started thinking about Empire and its relationship to sexual violence. Specifically, as a weapon of war. In "Hell & Peonies," I wanted to play around with the deconstruction of a camera; I thought about the cogs of a particular system that are

still turning, grinding the same bones. In "Little Monarch," I wanted to individualize Empire. My abuser's favourite book is *The Little Prince,* and I wanted to do something kind of cheeky, a small "fuck you." I was also thinking about loyalty and monarchy, to be in Canada where there is still a deep presence of the British Monarchy, even if it is in a symbolic form. It felt creepy to be a former British subject there.

**ROOM**: You can feel the power and force behind your systemic critique of Empire and violence, intertwined and connected to individual experience and trauma. Your book vibrates with energy; it feels alive. In your collection, you use a variety of different poetic forms, including the glosa. The variety of forms signalled to me a deep, careful exploration of how to write about survival alongside the awareness "of the boisterous fizzy market for trauma." Could you talk a bit more about the variety of forms you chose to use and why?

**MM**: About the poems vibrating, I love that because I understand these poems as alive, and they arrived to me as alive things. I think about them in that sense. I started with fifty in this template that I called "The Sleeping." I tried to segment and compartmentalize experiences so I could look at them and write them individually. That didn't really work, and I'm very grateful it didn't because everything bleeds into each other, and everyone talks to each other. Some of them reference each other, and language loops around in the patterns and terms I used in the poems.

In terms of structure and form, I really wanted to experiment and play because I wanted to stretch my abilities as a first-time poet writing my debut. I wanted to look to the people I admire who do exciting things with form, who lend bones and structure to what they are trying to say. After reading Amber Dawn's incredible book, *Where the Words End and My Body Begins*, I was in awe with how intentional Amber Dawn was in selecting who she'd glosa'd on. I was like, ok, this is so cool. This is also a way of not being alone and learning from the best ever.

The first glosa I wrote in Cape Town, I remember sitting on the roof, and it just came after reading *Prelude to a Bruise* by Saeed Jones. His poem "Closet of Red" was double-edged, filled with images: verdant, lush, full of flowers. I picked it, and it felt like a fever dream, confessional. It felt prophetic, the way that it shows up on the page. It is like this big dream that had so much momentum. I think the glosa gives you rhythm. It gives you something to work toward, stanza by stanza. I felt

safe within the rules. It gives you structure, but I also feel like there is this beautiful space for experimentation. I think that Saeed also does this by invoking the blues and jazz; jazz is so integral to the way that I understand rhythm, and I wanted to infect some of the work with that improvisation. The glosa gives you that space.

I also wanted to experiment with quieter forms and shorter forms of poetry. After reading Safia Elhillo's poem "Yasmeen," I was fascinated by the space in the contrapuntal, this call and response and the space in the middle. I call "Night Jasmine" my dissociation poem, and it feels like the contrapuntal gives a visual representation of what it looks like to be apart from yourself, to have two different experiences of a singular event. There is the space in the middle, and dissociation is that space; it is not silence, it is not an emptiness, it is not a void. There is a sort of conversation between "we are here" and "we are leaving."

Form is interesting in the way that it shows up in the book. By itself, it is like a different language than the content, which is the flesh, the poems themselves. You can try to understand, but then there is also the cool shit that happens beyond that.

**ROOM**: It is interesting thinking about what work does once it is out of our hands, how it takes on a life of its own. Could you speak a bit more about how it has felt to have the book out in the world?

**MM**: My first experience writing about my sexual assault in a public space was for *Bitch*. In many ways, I felt like I was ready, but I really wasn't. I think that it is so tricky to talk about; it is connected to the fizzy market of trauma as marginalized writers, specifically as survivors. I think a lot of marginalized writers grapple quite intensely with traumatic experiences, and trauma impacts and colours our work. I felt that there was a kind of implicit imperative to write about trauma. I wrote this essay. It felt powerful, and I felt so held by my editors.

I remember the day that it came out. It went everywhere, and I wasn't ready for the ways in which people would respond. I don't think I was ready to hold other people's stories when I was just figuring out how to find the words for my own. I had to do a lot of work in therapy and with community, my chosen family, to understand what happened there and to heal from that. I wanted to be more intentional with the ways that this book would come out. To be ready and to prepare, I spent a lot of time with my therapist rehearsing what it would be like at launches and giving interviews so I could access and talk about my experiences without feeling like it was a secondary traumatization.

In the year that the book has been out, it feels like a baby that can walk, and it's exploring the world, meeting new people, and it's falling down where it does, scrapping an elbow here and there, but I'm confident that it has enough of a strong spine and enough guardians, both inside the work and outside of the work. People have held this book, and have held me, with so much tenderness, understanding, and so much compassion. I hope that when someone picks up the book, they feel held.

**ROOM**: That connection to the body is making me think about something you were talking about on *The Forge* series entitled *Patriarchal Violence*. You spoke about the wisdom inside of thinking somatically and the ways ancestral wisdom is held and transmitted between time. How has your understanding of time and knowledge shaped or impacted the way you write or approach your writing?

**MM**: That is also something I am still working through, as someone on this land and being of both Sotho and Zulu roots. I am deeply concerned with conceptions of, not just time but also ancestry, which I think are enmeshed in each other. One of my best friends was called to be a healer, a ngaka in my language, and a sangoma in hers. The way ancestors speak to her is through dreams. I am deeply impacted by her journey, especially in this time, where we are thinking and moving through so much grief, thinking quite intensely about death.

I think by understanding a circular conception of time and by reading books by African authors that infuse their work with an ancestral knowledge of time like Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* was super important to me. They talk about the veil between worlds and communication. I have people who are with me even though I don't know how to communicate. English feels like it contaminates that space, and I don't know how to talk to my elders. I am embarrassed but also at the same time I know that they are here for me. There are always cycles of growth, and birth, and seeds, and it's all so nascent and prudent. I'm still learning how to communicate across time, and something healers, like my friend, say quite a lot, is that your body is a vessel of communication. You already are in this beautiful vessel; you are your mother, your father, your grandmother, and your grandfather, and your elders. Right now, as you live, and as you breathe, all of your fingers, your eyes, your hair, they are all part of a grammar that reaches across time.

**ROOM**: I think your book does an incredible job of showing the messiness of time. Ancestral knowledge or learning is not always romantic. It can sometimes be super silly or ridiculous. There can be the idea that undoing or decolonizing is this romantic thing, but it's not always; it can be hilarious too.

**MM**: Yeah, it's funny, and it's clumsy, it's awkward, and it's wonderful. I think that I wanted to talk about the ways in which it is stop/start, and the ways that technology has sometimes mitigated those processes. Poems in the book like "Google Translate For Gogo" were a way of exploring that. I went onto Google Translate and wondered, how am I going to come out to my gran? How am I going to do this because not only are there barriers around my own ability and my own tongue, there are barriers of language because her primary language of understanding the world is through theology, she is a Jehovah's Witness. I grew up adjacent to and alongside the faith. It would be arrogant of me to say that my grandmother and I don't speak the same language in that sense because we do, it's just we have different relationships to that language.

**ROOM**: In that poem and others, you capture the feeling, nuance, and complexity around language and identity. It looks different for everybody, and I think you did such a beautiful job of exploring the nuance around healing, surviving, trauma, queerness—it's all there. What advice would you give to folks who are interested in getting started in writing or have started, who have a story to tell and are looking for a way forward?

**MM**: It is significant for me to be interviewed by *Room* because *Room* was one of the first literary spaces to reject my work. It was one of the first spaces that I was brave enough to submit to, and I felt like I was shooting for the moon, because I admired the magazine so much. I sent very young, very undercooked work to *Room,* and I received one of the most generous, tender, loving rejections. It was like, hey thanks for thinking about us, for sending your work, this isn't quite ready but don't stop. It was so encouraging and very formative. My advice would be to put your work out. Write. It doesn't matter at what stage. Write. That sounds so much easier than it is because writing is awful. Don't let anybody tell you that it's wonderful, it's not. It's an awful process. It's not romantic, it's not sexy, but do it anyway. Write. And then find someone that you trust to send it to. And then find someone you admire to send it to. And then find someone you respect and fear to send it to. And do that and do it a lot.

In the process between acceptance and rejection, there are so many things in the middle of those awful binaries that are very helpful. Do it, experience it all, you will become a better writer. And also, this concept of "betterness" is sometimes an enemy for me. Develop your own relationship with improvement, and know it is not always about being better, it's sometimes about getting it out. Listen to what-

ever the motivating factor is for you, it's ok if the motivating factor isn't romantic either. I wrote this book because I wanted to sleep because there were dogs at my door, and they were awful. It's not a particularly sexy reason. I like to sleep. I would like to nap. It's important to remember that your reason is valid. It's ok.

**ROOM**: I love that, thank you. I also wanted to ask you about an interview you did with Nkgopoleng Moloi where you spoke about centring joy. I wanted to ask you about joy in the context of COVID-19, where so much has changed and altered in our lives. Is there anything that has been bringing you joy (or comfort) lately?

**MANEO**: What is giving me a lot of joy every day is being at home with my partner and my puppy. They are just wonderful souls, and I love them so much. Every day is an adventure with those two. In terms of my work, what is giving me joy is reconnecting with people who were integral to how I am starting to understand myself as a writer. One of those people is Otoniya J Okot Bitek, who is just amazing and so important to me. She did this really cute thing on a [Twitter] thread. She posted a version of the poem [that I wrote for her in the book] and sent to her on the day I signed my contract, and I was like, it's happening! The picture [of that poem] hangs on her wall. That is something that just completely flips me out, and I am full of so much love when I think about that kind of friendship and love. I am full of so much joy and gratitude.

# SANDTON SKYE

*for Karabo Mokoena*

MANEO MOHALE

Privileged to be able to do this, a bought safety.
We're running out of bubbles and sushi, still

tender from an afternoon of taste and wet
and moan and reach. I'm used to love

on the edge of a cliff, unsurprised to find
myself in the tempest heart of another

triangle. Both brown and gasping and drunk—
the food's arrived. I find a fig-leaf

and head downstairs. Unknown to me
uBaba has been watching us both. Glint

of a silver star on green felt, I feel my steps
quicken despite myself. *Sisi—*

*is that a girl with you? The one upstairs?*
*What is it? Do you sleep together?*

*Are you alone here? Do you need anything?*
*I get off at six, if you girls need me*

*to come up. I can teach you*. Unbuckling
his belt, so that I'm sure of his meaning.

Back inside the room, I smell smoke.

Originally published in *Everything is a Deathly Flower* (African Books Collective, 2019)