

Writing/Performing a South African Counter-Archive: Intersectionality in
Contemporary Women's Poetry - **Maria Paola Guarducci & Francesca
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This paper investigates how the intersection of race, class and gender is embodied in a female poetic I and/or in historical characters featured in the English and Afrikaans poetry of South African women authors. The article will specifically examine how black and coloured women's poetry (by authors such as Makhosazana Xaba, Gcina Mhlophe, Malika Ndlovu, Yvette Christiansë, Khadija Heeger, Toni Stuart, Ronelda Kamfer, Jolyn Phillips, Lynthia Julius and Veronique Jephtas) often focuses on historical female figures, either ignored or marginalized in the official records, as a privileged site of South African historical counter-narratives. Building on Lewis' and Baderoon's *Introduction* to their 2021 collection, in which they state that "Surfacing [...] upends set ways of doing things, sedimented ideas, and tyrannical orthodoxies", it can be said that this surfacing of women's voices and herstories in contemporary women's poetry is clearly functional to the construction of a counter-archive.

Historical figures in the poetry of the last thirty years range from well-established (and often over-exploited) icons such as Sarah Baartman and Krotoa, repeatedly evoked in poems and still generating new readings and approaches, to previously unsung women: activists (e.g. Lydia Williams, Dulcie September), enslaved female ancestors and common people, such as grandmothers and mothers. These women play a central role in forging the personal-political stance of a poem or poetic I, and their voices illuminate the complex experiences of South African black and coloured women standing at the intersection of gender, class and race in different historical periods. The poems often question their role as national (fore)mothers and underline "the messy aspects of their legacies that cannot be neatly enfolded with the nationalist script", as argued by Meg Samuelson (Samuelson 2007, 2).

The analysis will focus in particular on how 'artistic truths' tend to contest the dominant versions of history and aim at creating an alternative and inclusive cultural archive through

spoken and written (and printed) poetical word. The more recent developments in South African women's poetry point in fact to the pivotal role played by spoken word in the reception of poetry. This is in line, again, with what Lewis and Baderoon state: "The tyranny of the written word must, as many decolonial, post-colonial and black feminists have argued, be dislodged as part of the process of freeing knowledge-making" (Lewis and Baderoon 2021, 12).

The two-voice structure of the paper reflects the ongoing path of research shared by the two scholars, whereby Guarducci focuses on South African poetry in English and Terrenato on poetry in Afrikaans, as they have already done in their volume *In-verse. Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica* (In-verse. Women's Poetry from South Africa, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine, 2022).