



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERARY STUDIES

Room 103, AC Jordan
University of Cape Town
Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701
South Africa

‘TONGUES OF THEIR MOTHERS’: THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY OF MAKHOSAZANA XABA

**A one-day symposium convened by Dr Barbara Boswell and Dr Athambile Masola
Departments of English Literary Studies and Historical Studies, University of Cape Town**

CALL FOR PAPERS

Date: 1 April 2026

Venue: University of Cape Town

Makhosazana Xaba is a South African creative writer, scholar, and former uMkhonto we Sizwe soldier who has rendered a significant contribution to South African literature. As an award-winning poet, short story writer, essayist, literary historian and literary scholar, her contributions span several decades, providing the perspective of a feminist writer who was embedded in the liberation struggle in exile during apartheid. In the post-apartheid period, she has published several foundational texts, foregrounding queer black feminist lives and experience. She has also facilitated the publication of significant pan-African collections of short stories and poetry collections centering women and members of the LGBTIQA community.

Xaba has produced a significant oeuvre of black feminist literature. Her poetry collections include *These Hands* (2005), *Tongues of Their Mothers* (2008), *The Alkalinity of Bottled Water* (2019) and *The Art of Waiting for Tales: Found Poetry from Grace: A Novel* (2021). Her creative writing includes short stories, most notably collected in *Running and Other Stories* (2013), winner the 2014 Nadine Gordimer SALA Short Story Award.

As an editor and critic, Xaba has championed the work of black women intellectuals whose contributions have been relegated to the margins by hegemonic ideologies of what counts as intellectual and creative work. She conceptualised and edited the anthology, *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000-2018*, which systematically historicizes and analyses Black South African women's poetic outputs. This pathbreaking anthology "seeks a corrective to the image of South African poetry, which was long dominated by white male voices. She examines a total of 84 poetry collections by 59 Black authors writing not only in English but in a variety of languages. Xaba discusses these authors' poetry as both 'act' and 'event'." ([T'Sjoen and Pistorius](#) 2024)

Xaba has produced scholarship on writers Lauretta Ngcobo and Noni Jabavu, foundational South African writers whose works are often overlooked in assessments of literary canons. She co-edited (with Bhekizizwe Peterson and Khwezi Mkhize) *Foundational African Writers* (2022), a book of essays celebrating the centenaries of Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu and Es'kia Mphahlele. With Athambile Masola, Xaba introduced the book *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home* (2023), a collection of Jabavu's *Daily Dispatch* columns. This work restores Jabavu's overlooked writing to a genealogy of foundational African writers.

Xaba's literary activism includes facilitating the publication of emerging artists, as well as amplifying other women's voices. Xaba co-edited the pan-African collections of short stories, *Queer Africa* (2013) and *Queer Africa 2* (2017), significant contributions to the growing body of pan-African queer African literature. She is editor of the anthology *Like the Untouchable Wind: An Anthology of Poems* (2016), about the lives, experiences and visions of African lesbians.

[T'Sjoen and Pistorius](#) (2024) recognise her work as activism which enables others: "In her research, public performances and publications she focuses explicitly on those who have for too long been left out of patriarchal literary historiography. She especially champions women within and beyond the LGBTQI community, who have faced systematic exclusion from a literary canon constructed and policed by male critics and academics."

Her emphasis on black women's poetry includes a series of interviews in the literary journal, the *Johannesburg Review of Books*, in which she interviews black women poets, foregrounding their works, creative processes and literary contributions.

Xaba's work extends to the role of translator. In 2024, she published an isiZulu translation of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), published as *Izimpabanga Zomhlaba* by Inkani Books.

Call for papers for a one-day symposium hosted by the Departments of English Literary Studies and Historical Studies at UCT:

Our symposium seeks literary critical papers, literary historical papers, and creative works on the life and literary legacy of Makhosazana Xaba, for presentation at a one-day symposium. Papers presented will be developed for peer-review publication in an edited collection of scholarship, edited by Barbara Boswell and Athambile Masola. We welcome papers in isiXhosa, isiZulu, English, Afrikaans and Kaaps.

Papers may include, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- The poetry of Makhosazana Xaba
- Xaba's writing as feminist praxis
- Xaba as translator
- Xaba as editor of feminist and queer texts
- The queer worlds envisioned by Xaba's short stories
- Xaba's literary criticism
- Xaba's methodology in writing "found poetry"
- Creative responses to Xaba's work
- Xaba's feminist circles of community
- Xaba's restoration of women's voices as epistemic justice
- Xaba as literary historian
- Analysis of Xaba's use of the genre of literary interview
- Other themes not covered by this CFP
- We welcome proposals for short performance pieces highlighting aspects of Xaba's work.

We aim to organise accepted proposed presentations into three panels.

Please send abstracts for presentation of no longer than 500 words to barbara.boswell@uct.ac.za and athambile.masola@uct.ac.za with the subject line "Xaba symposium abstract" by **30 November 2025**.