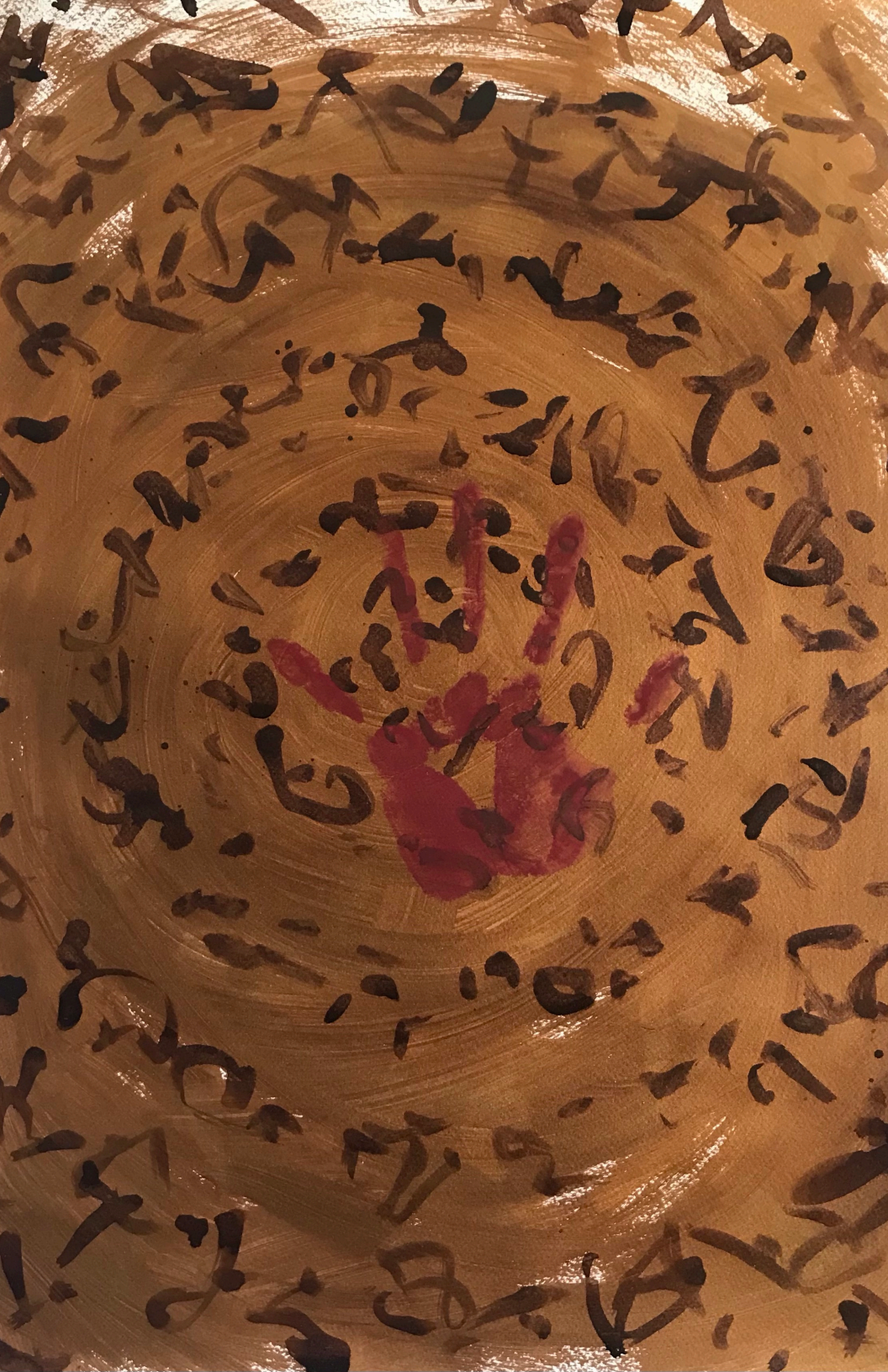


Aba té Home

Journey to Robben Island

Declaration

I, **Sam Seth Fortuin,** hereby declare that the work on which this thesis is based is my original work (except where acknowledged otherwise) and that neither the whole work, nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university.

FRTSAM005

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

Supervisor

Dr. George Tebogo Mahashe

In partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the award of the

Master of Fine Art (MFA)

2022

CONTENT

Preface

The work presented for this MFA artistic research project is inspired by my experience of the Decolonial Winter School held at the University of Cape Town in 2018. This was a pilot 'counter curriculum' school organised by student activists that were part of the 'Fallist' movements that erupted across South African educational institutions in 2015. Since then, the theory of 'de-colonisation' has become repetitive and co-opted (Mahashe, 2021). This co-option threatens to construct the same 'monumental myths' that the movement sought to redefine. However, Thulile Gamedze's assertion, that "words like 'decolonisation' are changeable and temporary tools" (2020:11), allows for the facilitation of its praxis to transcend the institutionalising of its theory.

The introductory school brought people together from various walks of life and provided an alternative pedagogical environment to that of the institutional classrooms and lecture theatres. These spaces have been implicated in the construction of power relations between the 'teacher' and the 'pupil'. Therefore, the school encouraged the dismantling of intellectual hierarchies, as well as an interdisciplinary approach to producing knowledge within the African continent's educational institutions.

The Decolonial School adopted the Freirean[1] tradition of recognising the pupil's capacity for 'knowing' and the teacher's capacity to 'not know'. This subverts the idea that the pupil must submit to the authority of the dominant knowledge system. It contends that archives of knowledge should be open for all to contribute to and interpret (Derrida, 2013). This means that the binary between teacher and pupil can dissolve, becoming interchangeable entities.

The impact of the experience of the school has carried through into this moment as I write. It showed me the value of acknowledging that each person has a unique capacity to contribute their experiences to society as 'knowledge'. By participating in the program, I observed that knowledge is incomplete, without creating the collective environment in which to practice it. The school combined theory with interdisciplinary expressions which allowed for language and 'embodied knowledge' to overlap one another. This expanded its interpretations and increased its capacity to be internalised by participants.

Additionally, I helped to facilitate a visual art workshop encapsulated by the theme 'Coloniality and the Body' as part of the week-long program. This workshop focused on the value of creative visual agency. During the workshop, I asked the participants to create a symbol that represented their

[1] See Paulo Freire 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1968).

‘true nature’. What followed gave me a sense of the necessity of inscribing our authenticity as we see it.

Upon my reflections on the successes and shortcomings of the school, I noted that it had failed to breach the exclusive use of academic language to engage participants, most of whom had come from outside the university space. It seemed that ‘language’ was the greatest barrier to knowledge exchange. However, what had made an exceptional impact was the school’s use of embodied practices, such as gardening, movement, meditation and pubic interventions as forms of knowledge creation.

Since the school’s revelations, I have journeyed deeply into the gift of my true expression. It is an honour to be able to share this moment with you because, it is necessary for this story to be made available to the collective imagination. The knowledge expands with every engaging observation.

Let us listen, here and now. What do you hear? What can you see? Can you detect the essence of ‘All that is’ and ‘All that is not’? Between this space, we lie in wait. Come and find us. So that home may find you.

Abstract

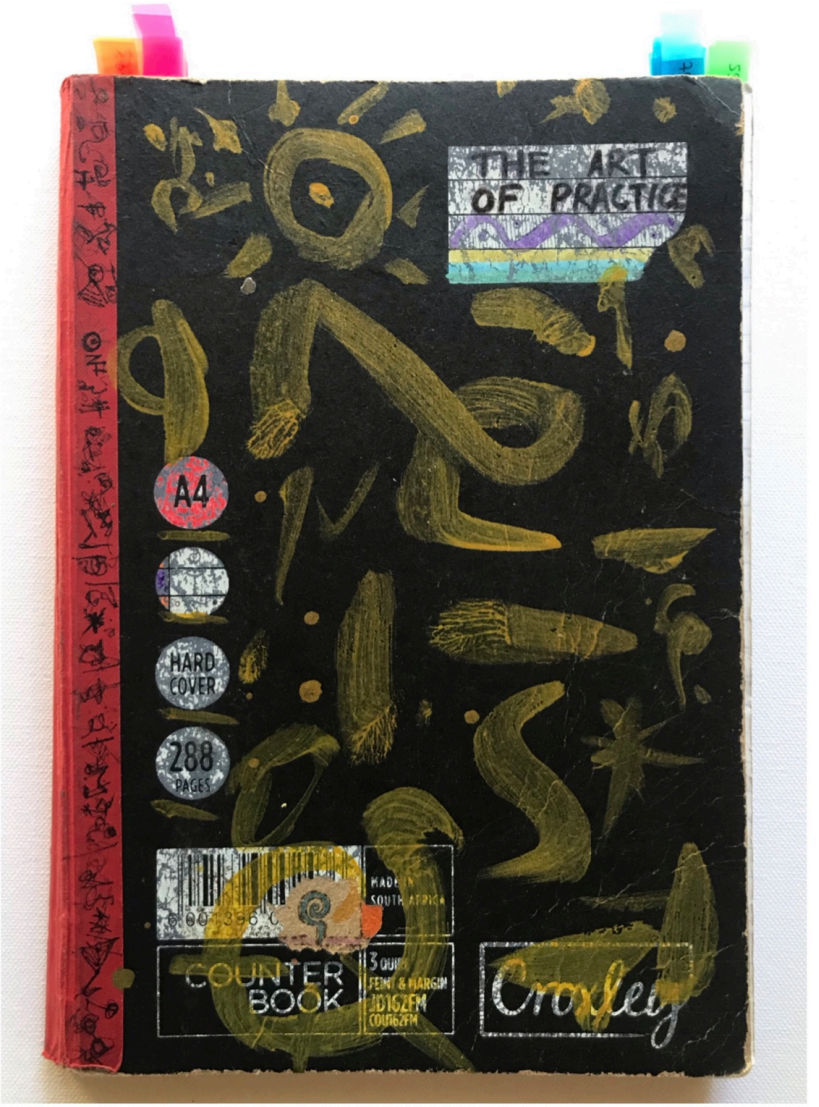
Aba té Home – Journey to Robben Island, is a memoir, reflecting how my creative practise and research leads to a recollection from my childhood. I recalled how the elements of fire, whiskey and the soil came together to create a form of storytelling that rooted my sense of home.

By following the conceptual thread of my recollection, I found myself in my father's former communal prison cell holding on Robben Island. My understanding is that our contemporary social imaginary in Africa is influenced by the remnants of colonial archives. The form of this project is therefore inspired by the need for an alternative perspective, that is rooted in indigenous sensibilities (Harris, 2002:84).

As an artist, stories prompt my encounter with new perspectives. Therefore, this story offers a window into the elements of my community's storytelling practices and how they have come to shape my understandings.

Overall, Aba té Home allows for the convergence of a variety of themes, ranging from the social complexity of archives, indigenous healing modalities, ancestral dreams and the layered meaning of the body through space and time. The telling of this story through written text is accompanied by my creative expressions in the form of visual journal entries, black ink encodings, mixed media paintings, installation and a video which was taken inside the space of the prison cell.

Introduction



The Art of Practice Book (2020 - 2022)

Hard cover notebook, theory, notes and drawings
Size: 29.3cm x 20cm

Aba té Home takes the form of my personal account of a journey to Robben Island. The telling of this story was inspired by my childhood recollection. I recalled how, before telling a story, my father would first pour a tot of whiskey on the ground[2]. In the moments that followed the libation, I encountered a form of storytelling that rooted my sense of home. Back then, I did not fully understand whiskey's kinship with the soil, which was described as a 'gift to the ancestors'. However, reflecting back, I understood this particular gesture as a sacred form of communication (Lawrence and Paige, 2016) which acknowledges connection between the living, the dead and the spaces that both have inhabited over time.

Whilst being immersed in these volatile drunken moments, I would often listen to stories about my father's time on Robben Island. Dawie[3] has never been one to talk much. However, when indulging in alcoholic spirits, he became a masterful Afrikaapse storyteller who eloquently deployed 'die Ronde Taal van suip'.

The film 'Afrikaaps' by Dylan Valley (2010), was introduced to me as part of the Decolonial School's nighttime curriculum. It explores the historical and institutional exclusion of indigenous and formerly enslaved people in the language of Afrikaans. As such, the film offers the alternative concept of 'Afrikaaps' as a way of acknowledging the presence

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[2] See Zoë Fortuin's *Stories Omm'ie Vuur* (2021) for more context to this story.

[3] 'Dawie' is how my father is affectionately referred to in my family

of black and creolised peoples within the historiography of the language. Therefore, the words *aba té* indicate the indigenous locality of my story and draw attention to the ways that language shapes our access to knowledge. Aba té is the linguistic union of Afrikaaps and Khoekhoegwaab meaning 'carry me'. In my search to locate 'home' I found that by incorporating indigenous knowledge into our ways of being, we propagate space for different ways of relating to ideas beyond the limits of what the dominant language constitutes (Siwani, 2015:86). In sharing an indigenous form of ritual with me, my father inscribed 'ancestral acknowledgement' as a potential way of being in the world.

Moreover, my exposure to my father's storytelling in the context of Afrikaaps, allowed me to develop a conceptual framework to describe the circular nature of the drunken stories I heard - 'Ronde Taal', meaning 'Round Language'. This 'taal' would often unfold in ways that would not make sense to those unfamiliar with surviving capture. By 'capture' I refer to the precarious inheritance of slave history.

The significance of Ronde Taal lies in its ability to communicate when one's voice has been censored or compromised by external forces. The process of 'undoing' language may seem counter intuitive. However, if we understand 'language' as a lens which structures our ways of perceiving (Dallow, 2003:49), then we can consider Ronde Taal to be a subversive language that facilitates

communication beyond ‘the word’. Ronde Taal does not rely on one language or discipline to create meaning. Rather, it merges various languages and knowledge systems, like the

expressions of Afrikaaps or the curriculum of the Decolonial School. Like a drunken riddle, the subject of this language can change unpredictably, slurring in a round manner, until the paradoxical teachings are realised. In her PhD thesis, Nadia Kamies (2019) explores how the widely known Afrikaans idiom 'so dronk soos ń kleurling onderwyser' is meant to signal the "impossibility of black intellectual life" (Baderoon, 2014 in Kamies, 2019:80). Therefore, my theory and praxis of Ronde Taal is a strategy of actualising an authentic knowledge expression, to contest the dominant underpinnings of 'intellect' in the academy and society at large.

In writing and process, I have intentionally departed from the use of 'traditional academic reasoning' and instead, have opted for a 'free-flowing' approach to expressing and contending with ideas. Additionally, I have retained the use of simple language and spontaneous imagery which made my father's stories easily accessible to my young mind. However, it must be noted that our storytelling accounts exist within different contexts and therefore, differ in form. My father relayed the oral accounts of his life experience in a family environment. Whereas my account exists as creative expressions and written text within 'the archive'[4]. This means that the framework, structure and delivery for the submission of this story, has been negotiated between myself, my

[4] 'the archive' refers to the general accumulation of curated information housed by institutions such as universities and museums (Mbembe, 2002:1)

supervisor, George Mahashe (2020 - 2022) and the degree module for the MFA program[5].

Therefore, through the act of inscribing what is conventionally known as an 'auto-ethnographic' account, I take on the labour of describing myself in ways that engage questionable external representations of my subjectivity (Pratt, 1991:36). In so doing, I follow the set foundations of contemporary scholars, writers and poets such as, Yvette Abrahams (2004), Zoë Gabrielle Fortuin (2021), Vanessa Ludwig (2022), Sarah Molentane Henkeman (2018), Verne Harris (2002), Linda Smith (1999), Saidiya Hartman (2008), Nadia Kamies (2019) and George Mahashe (2019) who have all contributed a framework that allows for the facilitation of written indigenous knowledge through storytelling. It is because of their work, that I am able to produce this Ronde Taal story.

In practice, it draws on the familial traditions set out by my father, David Johannes Fortuin (2022). Additionally, it is inspired by artists, healers and dreamers such as, //Kabbo[6] Janjtie Tooren (1871), Michélle Festus (2022), Mestre Espirrinho (2022), Contramestre Mordaça (2022), Lionel Davis (2021), Cebolenkosi Zuma (2022), Nkosenathi Ernie

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[5] This 'negotiation' is between the paradigm of 'linear institutional rationality' and 'cyclical indigenous understandings' (Wilson, 2003:161-162).

[6] Punctuation marks like //, / and ! refer to 'click' sounds found in indigenous San and Khoe languages.

Koela (2022), Visule Kabunda (2021), Terry Kurgan (2018), Wengechi Mutu (2018), Joshua Williams (2018), Buhlebezwe Siwani (2015) and Majolandile Dyalvane (2022) who all demonstrate in their own respective ways, how storytelling through practise or 'doing', can be used as a valid form of knowledge creation. Therefore, my work can be further contextualised by using the vocabularies that each of their practices offer.

My theoretical use of storytelling draws more specifically on Henkeman's PhD thesis, 'Disrupting Denial – Analysing narratives of Invisible Violence and Trauma', in which she encourages 'self-determination' as the act of speaking for and defining oneself (2018:10). By providing an academic platform for personal narratives that are usually understood as 'invalid' knowledge, Henkeman asserts the legitimacy of such knowledge in the academic environment and compels the archive to record these histories as knowledge. Therefore, I present the storytelling account of my experience of the journey to Robben Island, as an inscription that can be contextualised as viable and adaptable knowledge.

Moreover, the chosen methodology of relaying my story in written form draws on Kurgan's book entitled, 'Everyone is Present' (2018). In the book, she follows her 'familial archival'[7] threads in the form of photographs and journal

[7] 'familial archive' refers to the accumulation of material information in relation to home and family (Williams, 2018)

entries. Using these threads as a starting point, Kurgan weaves together her memoir that reflects on her family's dislocation during World War II and narrates the story of her journey 'back' to Poland. Similarly, my artistic memoir uses my early inquiries into my familial archive and builds on a recollection from my childhood, as a 'thread' that leads me on a journey to Robben Island.

Furthermore, I draw on a national arts festival I took part in entitled, 'Vezelani', which saw arts from across disciplines come together to showcase their offerings at the Northern Cape Theatre. This was an event in commemoration of the late iSanusi, artist and scholar, uBaba Credo Mutwa. He is remembered as a renowned visionary who shared his Ronde Taal in dreams, books, oral stories and artworks. On the theatre stage, I worked in collaboration with Nkosenathi Ernie Koela, Cebolenkosi Zuma and Majolandile (Andile) Dyalvane to realise the offering of 'Umsamo' (2021). During my time in the Northern Cape I was influenced by Dyalvane, Koela and Zuma's practices that incorporated ancestral acknowledgment as part of their artistic processes.

Through Dyalvane's description of uYalezo, as the "language of ancestral spirits" (Dyalvane, 2021:48-50), I began to delve into the potential of ancestral acknowledgment as a form of Ronde Taal. In the process of my travels, I observed the act of offering libation as an indigenous form of communicating respect and gratitude to ancestry. Through this experience, I

deepened my appreciation for my childhood recollection of Dawie pouring whiskey on the soil in honour of our ancestors.

Moreover, my interest in the island was spurred by an internal questioning of the function of 'story' in the collective imaginary. I began to understand that stories, in their presence or absence, leave impressions that texture our experience of reality (Sharpe, 2013). Thus, in looking into my familial archive, I was trying to retrieve a fuller sense of my inheritance of the narratives that have shaped my ways of perceiving. I wanted to know how the stories found at home, connected to the stories found in our society's archives, which inform the stories we live by. However, I found that when engaging my familial archive as a method of inquiry, as Kurgan (2018), Kamies (2019) and Williams (2018) had done, I could only see fragments of the story I was looking to tell. My familial archive reaffirmed my sense of dislocation in relation to my 'cosmic heritage'[8].

Therefore, I began gathering found materials around my home environment and started creating artworks that expanded the 'vocabulary' of my familial archive. This led to the creation of the 'ancestral archive' series. The series draws on Hartman's concept of the 'critical fabulation' (Hartman,

[8] 'Cosmic heritage' or what Sisonkepapu terms the 'universal ecosystem' (2021:6) is a collective field of memory and the culmination of all that exists within the infinite lifespan of the universe.

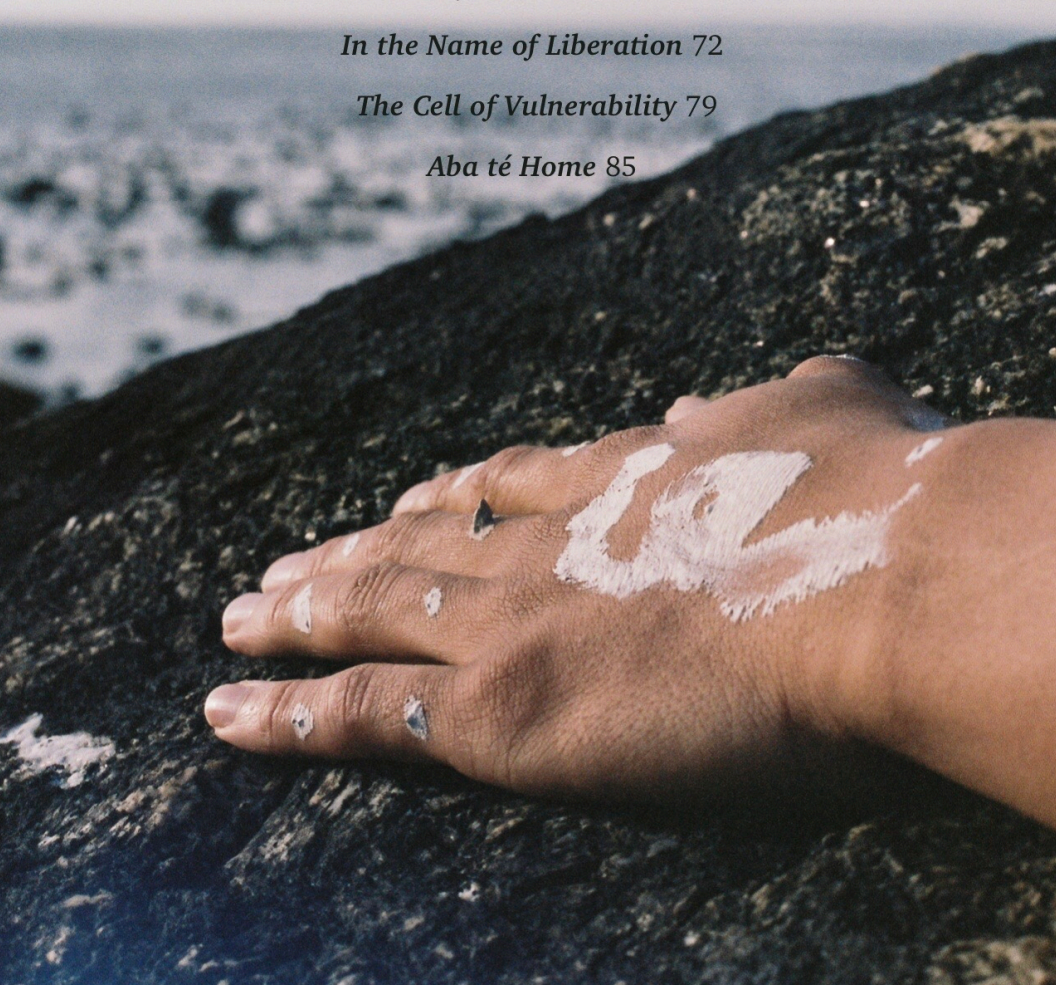
2008:1-15) by physically representing the aesthetics of the 'forgotten story' of my ancestry.

Thus, the 'ancestral archive' series conveys the body beyond the skin. In praxis, it draws on artists like Wengechi Mutu (Ranch, 2018) who deploys collage narrative as a way of challenging issues of representation. Similarly, the 'ancestral archive' series ruptures the politics of absence. It does this by representing my cosmic heritage from the aesthetics of mixed media portraiture.

The childhood setting of an amber-lit front yard, coupled with Ronde Taal, became its own kind of familial classroom. Around the fire, I listened tentatively. It was there, that I was given a foundation on which to nurture my critical mind, through my father's accounts. However, being tutored in 'The Art of Ronde Taal' came with its own price. As a child, I had internalised some of my father's 'post-apartheid trauma'[9]. This trauma could be seen as the result of struggling against systemic violence. The transferral of trauma produced a war within me. Therefore, my journey to Robben Island, was part of my process of cleansing the inter-generational war which had deeply burdened my inner-child.

[9] 'Post-apartheid trauma' is my own description and is not necessarily used by my father.

JOURNEY TO ROBBEN ISLAND



Fire is the Oldest Storyteller

Through the whispers of a flame and the twinkle of the stars, we witnessed stories, as old as time.

We sat gazing into moments that felt like lifetimes, entranced by the cracking of the burning wood.

Suddenly, our trance was interrupted,

“You know klong…(my father pours a tot of whiskey on the ground before he continues)…if there was one lesson I could teach you, it would be ‘respect’.

Without respect, you won’t get very far in this life.

You must learn respect, to defend our dignity.

You children have no clue…hoe fokked op die wêreld is!

You have it so easy.

You know, I grew up in Elsies Rivier. Dié ghetto klong.

The government, they took our plot and put us there on 34 47th Street.

We were 11 children from that house and I was the last.

Your Ouma, Wilhelmina Fortuin, was tired of children by the time she had me.

I don’t blame her though. She had a tough life.

But, she still came to visit me when I got sent to prison!

Your Oupa? Ha! Daai ou was so vond van my.

Samuel Fortuin taught me from a young age, you don't let anyone disrespect you.

If they disrespect you, you moer them! I've moered many things in my life Sam.

So learn respect my klong.

Because fear? Fear is the mind killer!

Fok! Kyk klong! Os'e vuur gaan dood! Blaas daar ń bietjie asseblief."

- recollection of David Fortuin's *Ronde Taal van suip*.

First Impressions

I recall my father's words. He would always call on either myself, my sister (Fortuin, 2021) or my mother (Festus, 2022) to come and join him by the fire, while he had a drink and shared some of his life's teachings. This is where the seed for storytelling was planted in us. As a youngster, I would mostly sit, listen and perhaps pour the next drink if asked to do so. In these moments I picked up on how our past informs our present and how 'story' is a medium with which we access the knowledge our ancestry has left behind (Smith, 1999:144-145). My father had many stories to tell. Reflecting back now, I gather that he needed to tell those stories to process and heal some of the more difficult circumstances that his life contained.

Perhaps it is significant that I am writing this story at the same age that my father was when he was released from prison. At the age of 25, he had served four years on Robben Island for being a freedom fighter against the apartheid regime. Naturally, I would hear his personal recollections of the time he spent there. He would tell me about the island's unique ecosystem and how prisoners would catch their own crayfish along the rocky shoreline.

Once, we all took a family trip to the island, courtesy of some free tourist tickets my father receives yearly from the Robben Island Museum. As we walked the prison courtyard, my father proudly pointed out a pot planter he had made during

his time of imprisonment. It was still intact about 30 years later. The pot contained no plant, only dry sand. I thought to myself “When I return, I’ll find a plant for my father’s pot!”

I did return. Although, I didn’t find a plant for my father’s pot, I committed myself to telling a story that could hopefully be shared around a fire with our community.

Luckily for me, I was not on the journey alone. I had invited a collaborator, Visule Kabunda, who I had only just met a few months prior. We had connected with each other’s artistic practices. I immediately noticed that he had a good eye on the camera and a nack for composition.

Eventually, I took my chances and asked whether he would be interested in assisting me with work on Robben Island. To my surprise, he said that it would be an honour.

Fear is the mind-killer

…the ferry intercom sounds,

“Welcome aboard The Kratoa folks! Please sit back and enjoy the ride!”

As the ferry began its departure from mainland, the television screens turn on, playing a video which gave a brief summary of the history of Robben Island. The name 'Kratoa' appeared once more. Before this point I had not known much about Kratoa beyond her status as a historically significant Khoekhoe figure. The tourist video had sparked my curiosity. I looked to Christopher Solomon, and asked whether he knew anything about Kratoa. Chris worked at the museum as an archivist. I had been in communication with him in the months leading up to the trip. Chris then turned to me, with an eagerness to share what he knew. He stated that he only knew the "popular narrative" which said that as a child, Kratoa was taken to live with Jan van Riebeeck and his family at the Castle of Good Hope. She acted as one of their primary translators to help facilitate dialogue between the Khoekhoe and the Dutch.

Chris went on to explain that once her husband, Pieter van Meerhoff had died, she was banished to Robben Island for her unruly behaviour which included an "over-indulgence in alcohol and fornicating with men". Upon hearing this, I immediately felt a sharp resistance in my body. "The heroic narratives of men, who have come into contact with the island compared to the narrative of Kratoa was inconsistent" I thought to myself. Chris, noticed the change in my demeanour and followed with a question on whether I had heard a different version of Kratoa's story. I admitted that I had not, but that I maintain a healthy suspicion for 'popular

narratives'. This suspicion was nurtured through my household environment, where my parents would encourage critical thinking and debate about socio-political issues. Many of the 'popular narratives' that are taught widely in schools, were debunked in these heated household conversations.

After being released from prison in 1991, my father spent the next decade employed as one of Nelson Mandela's bodyguards (Fortuin, 2021:28). The 'national archive'[10] portrays the statesman as a saintly figure with unbreakable values. However, through the recollections narrated by my father, I had access to a more personal account of who Nelson Mandela was. My father still reflects on how "Madiba was born into royalty. Maybe this is what gave him such a great sense of entitlement."

Although the statement by my father is a personal opinion of Madela's character, it reveals that every story walks on a razor's edge. By this I mean that the line between 'right' and 'wrong' is subjective and our opinions are determined by what point of view we have of the story. 'Entitlement' cannot be separated from the lure of power (Brown, 1992). In the context of the 1990's period of political power transferral, it raises questions about the integrity of such transitions and the collective reliance on one person's ability to carry a nation's expectations of justice.

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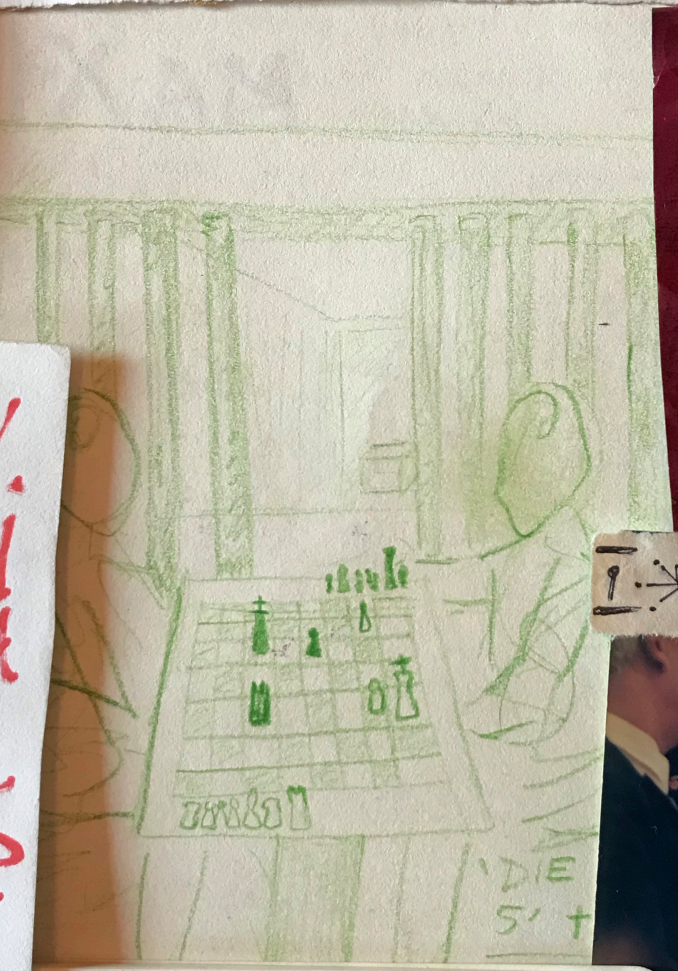
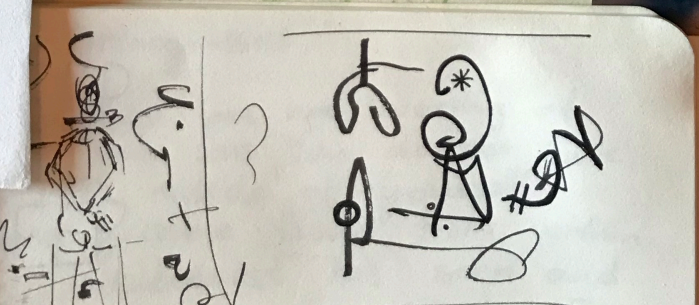
[10] The 'national archive' refers to all the accumulative documentation, in physical or digital form which constructs the heritage of 'South Africa'.





Therefore, my suspicion is that in the context of Robben Island (Mpumlwana & Corsane, 2021), the story of Mandela (Solani, 2021) and the story of Kratoa (Zaayman, 2019), function to serve the purpose of maintaining the pedagogical framework of a disconnected collective identity in South Africa. We have not been allowed, especially through the national archive, to deepen the understanding of the nature of our pain as a collective. We have suffered a great deal of systematic violence (Mellet, 2020) which continues to persist, because of the absence or presence of stories woven into the fabric of our society.

As I looked out the ferry window, I noticed creatures of the deep lurking beneath the lucid-blue waters. The unknown, much like the depths of the ocean, can be a frightening encounter. My father's words surfaced once more, "Fear is the mind-killer!". I had only recently discovered the origin of my father's favourite quote. It was from a novel, 'Dune' by the author Frank Herbert. Ironically, it was something he read whilst serving time on Robben Island. Its philosophy has stuck with me for good. The words in the novel continue, "when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain"(Herbert, 1966:25).

The sentiment found in the novel, underpins a key principle of Dawie se Ronde Taal van suip. It was an instruction of survival in the midsts of being captured by fear. If survival

hinged on the edge of a cliff, panic would result in death. But Ronde Taal is a versatile language that is activated by the instinct to survive.

Ma Kratoa !Goa/gõas

In reflecting back on my experience of Robben Island I realised that I was able to persevere through the many difficulties that arose, because I could find support in Visule. This made me wonder about what kind of support Kratoa may have had during her time on the island. As I did more research into Kratoa's story, I was met with the complexities in which it functions in the archive.

Kratoa's Khoekhoe name is !Goa/gõas. She was born around 1642. It's speculated that she was taken from her family at the age of nine. The archive contains many interpretations of what Kratoa !Goa/gõas has come to represent for our contemporary society[11]. Some see her as the first victim of colonial conquest. Whilst others see her as the 'bridge' that brought the indigenous and settler populations together. Perhaps she was both. Kratoa's story holds many ambiguities and contradictions. However, it should be kept in mind that Kratoa !Gao/gõas did not have the agency to write her own story as I am doing now. She may have used alcohol, as my father did, to commune with her ancestry and process her pain. Perhaps on Robben Island, she found comrades whom supported her. Or maybe she found moments to connect with the soil, the mountains and the sea.

[11] Authors that write about varied interpretations of Kratoa's story include Zaayman (2019), Abrahams (1996) and Leibbrandt (1901)

My speculation about Kratoa !Gao/gõas' methods of connecting are motivated by a strange occurrence that took place within my artistic practise. I did not know it then, but the weekend I had traveled to the island, I had left an unfinished artwork in my room. It was on a small canvas and the face of a person had just been drawn out from a 'scribble'.

Scribbling is an artistic method I use often. I begin the artwork by placing a paint brush in my 'non-dominant' hand. I then proceed to observe my breath and focus my concentration inside my body. Lines are then scribbled in flowing motions. There is no thought during this process. It functions as a metaphysical release. The idea is to let go of an expectation of what we 'think' we desire to see on a surface and instead, we 'offload' our subconscious in the form of a scribble. From there, we can start to use the scribble as a kind of map. By following the map of the scribble, forms begin to arise.

The scribble map revealed the form of someone's face. I did not know who. Upon my return from the island, the artwork held my attention for those ensuing weeks. With each added layer of found natural materials, the face became more pronounced. It was only when I painted deep red markings onto the face and lips, that I realised who the scribble map had led me to – it was Ma Kratoa !Goa/gõas. The spirit emanating from the artwork, revealed the truth of her story. She was a warrior, just like the generations of male prisoners

that followed. She knew the pain of her life, but still walked with self-respect and dignity. I suspect that she must have been a great threat to the popular narratives of colonial regime and perhaps she is still a threat to the popular narratives of today.

The artwork became the last addition to the ‘ancestral archive’ series I had made in the process leading up to the work on Robben Island. It seemed fitting for Ma Kratoa !Goa/- gõas to join the series which had begun with my late maternal grandmother, Ma Delma Arendse. The ancestral archive portraits, when seen together, form a family structure. Each one combines a unique language of ‘painting’ that encodes the elements of water, fire, earth, space and time. These elements overlap one another in the body, creating vast combinations of cosmic expressions. Thus, the ancestral archive series, acts as an artistic compass of our indigenous cosmic heritage.

Waters of Intent

The previous day, we had visited the ocean shore which had a view of the island. I had mentioned to Visule that I would be going to set intentions for the journey ahead and that he was welcome to join me if he would like to do the same. He accepted this invitation, although stating he had never done anything of that kind before. His willingness to be fully involved in the process from the start was promising. Carrying our significant offerings, we placed them on the rock. I had prepared a special brew of medicinal tea, which I preferred to my father's choice of whiskey. The tea contained wilde als, ginger, green tea and a basil flower.

Drinking tea mindfully, produces a sense of ease for me. It connects me to the formlessness of water which first takes the shape of the cup and then of the body. In this way, it heightens my awareness and allows me to become present in the moment. Our intention at the waters was to prepare ourselves for the journey through the ritual of 'cleansing'.

Before entering, I threw some tea into the ocean and burnt 'kooigoed'[12] as a Ronde Taal offering to the ancestors. Then I offered a cup to Visule before drinking one myself. Being warmed by the tea from the inside, we jumped into the icy Atlantic Ocean. Whilst submerged in the water, the initial shock of the extreme cold gripped my senses. Then, as

[12] 'kooigoed' is a medicinal indigenous herb also known as 'impepho'

another calm wave rolled in, I felt my mind and body relaxing.

Submerging again, I swam towards the kelp forest and noticed how the sunlight danced between the mysteries of the deep. I held my breath a few seconds longer and took a moment to be alone. I observed myself in the moment. Then, I allowed the gentle waves to sway me back to the surface.

Emerging back onto the rock, I noticed how the island seemed to be anticipating our arrival.

Greeting the soil

We departed from The Kratoa, carrying all our luggage. Chris had arranged for us to get onto the residential bus. Once on the bus, my experience compared to other visits was already vastly different. When the bus driver called out street names and home numbers that the residents would get off at, the island suddenly came alive. People actually lived here. They called the island home. This was starkly different to my experience of the tour which repeated the same 'historically significant facts'.

When we finally arrived at our place of residence, the 'Multi-purpose Learning Centre' we were greeted by security and two bubbly aunties who took us on a brief tour. We were introduced to our room and shown the kitchen area. Chris then pulled us away to show us the 'Khoe Medicine Garden' conceptualised by the artist and ex-prisoner Lionel Davis (Prins-Solani, 2017). The garden had a gravitating feel to it.

Unfortunately, there was no time to explore. Chris only had about 2 hours before the next ferry back to mainland. He said he would like to introduce us to the space of the island before leaving. We followed him to his office and then to the the prison complex. I had never been on foot on the island and this gave me a new perspective of what it had to offer. There were serval different species of tortoises that we encountered on our brief walk. This filled me with a childlike excitement. I realised that the ceramic tortoise artworks I had intuitively

made leading up to the trip had some sort of significance for the work ahead.

By the time we came out the prison block, the next ferry ride had appeared on the harbour. It was time for Chris to head back to mainland. He instructed that we visit the environmental department which we had seen by his office before heading back to our room. The environmental manager, Sabelo Madlala, was tall and had a lot of personality. He questioned us on what our intentions were. I explained that I wanted to explore how the natural materials

of the island could enrich my work. Finally, he agreed to help us on condition that all materials be returned once we were done. He then instructed a young student, Andile, to drive us around the island to see if there was anything we could collect.

Andile picked us up with a white bakkie and we began our drive around the island. We stopped at four points. Each time we stopped, we collected natural materials. This included a whale bone, abalone shells, rocks and plants. When we stopped at the 'bluestone quarry' Andile explained its significance as the site where the majority of the prisoners would mine the raw bluestone mineral. He said it was a site that was undervalued by the museum which tended to focus more on the 'limestone quarry' where the elite political leaders would work.

Our final stop was the limestone quarry. Andile waited in the car whilst Visule and I walked into the space. As we walked up to the cave, we saw a dead bird at the centre. The bird had white feathers, and a long black beak, which I suspect to have been from the sacred ibis species. It was neatly positioned, as if someone had placed it that way. As I looked down I saw a large white egg which lay intact at the mouth of the entrance. "Strange." I thought. "Had the island just orchestrated a mysterious greeting?" Whatever was going on needed to be acknowledged to communicate that 'uYalezo' had been received. Visule and I gathered some dry grass and

walked back to Andile's bakkie. We placed the last of our items in the box and returned to our place of residence.

Becoming /Xam

"…my eyes opened with a blur, taking a moment to adjust to the scene. As I gained my sight, I saw an unfamiliar figure with a patterned red blanket standing in front of me. We stood together along an ocean shoreline. There was a cool morning mist and the mountains reflected the purple haze of a sunrise. As I locked eyes with the figure in front of me, their stare observed me from the inside-out. Then, they began to speak, *"We know that you search for your name…your name is our name."*

/X. Fortuin's //kabbo (2021)

For the rest of that Friday afternoon, we relaxed and did our best to settle in. Visule and I sat outside, next to a block of residential houses with a view of the ocean. Then my phone began to ring. As I answered, the voice on the other end exclaimed, "Camagu /Xam!" It was Majolandile Dyalvane and Nkuthazo Alexis Dyalvane who had called to wish me good luck for the work ahead. '/Xam' is my ancestral San clan name[13]. The word 'camagu' is an isiXhosa expression of gratitude, typically spurred on by 'umoya' or spirit. The two words are closely related. The click of the 'c' and the '/' are the same (upper-frontal). Therefore 'cam-' and '/Xam' are

[13] Authors like Smith (1999:157) and Abrahams (2004:5) elaborate on the significance of 'the name' within indigenous communities.

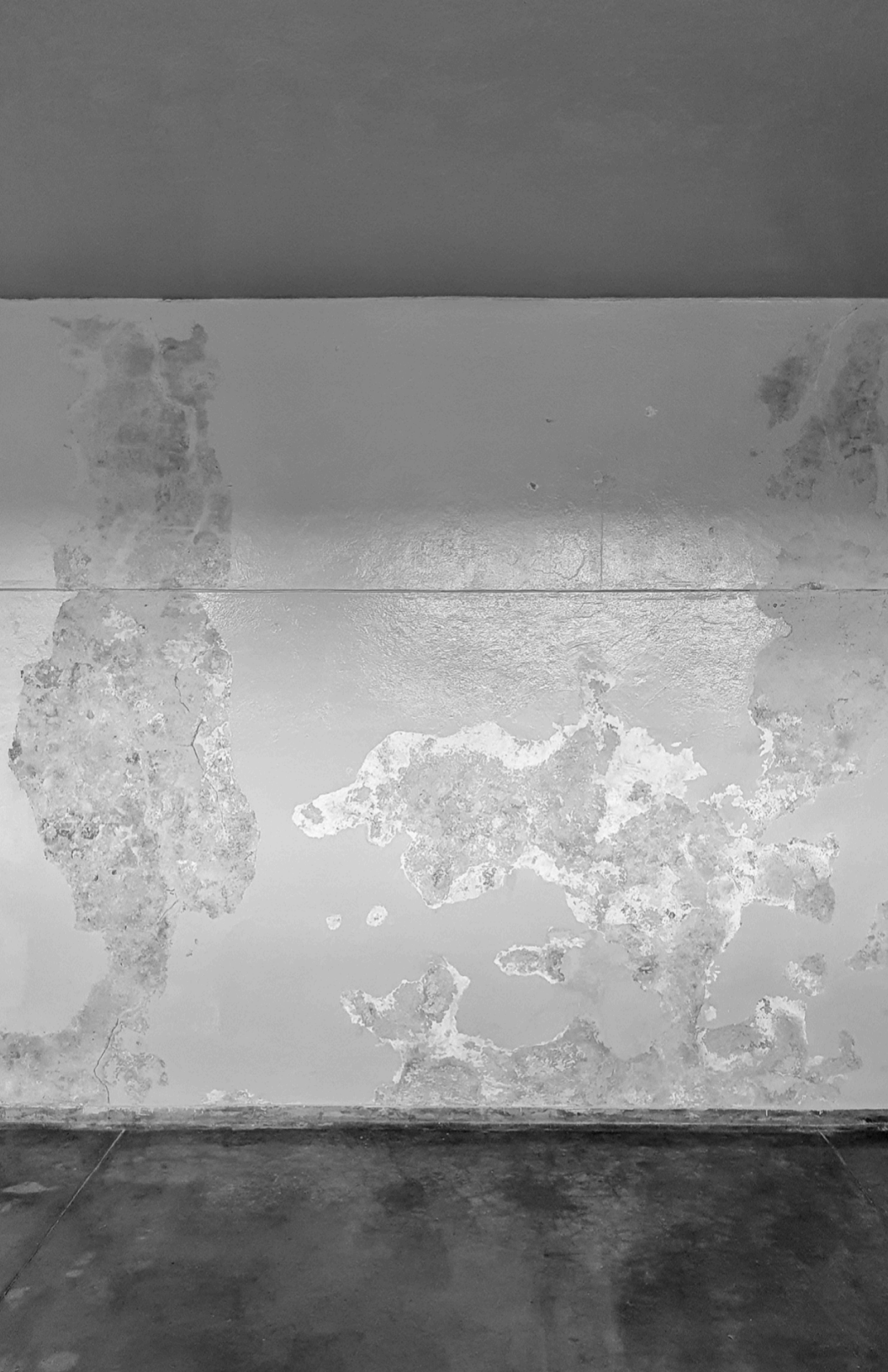
homophonic sounds according to my cultural sensitivities. The typographic (Campbell, 2019) variation between the two characters is an intriguing marker of visual separation. This is further translated into a cultural divide between the Nguni and the San (Du Plessis, 2011:275-302). This linguistic dichotomy stirs my interest in the ways indigenous languages (Kimmerer, 2012) have been recorded and archived in Southern Africa.

Furthermore, the fact that symbols for San clicks are denoted by conventional grammar symbols in English, such as the apostrophe '!' for example, is an intriguing stylistic choice by transcribers of San languages. The imitation of symbols that would normally mark a heightened emotive gesture as a 'click', means that names and titles beginning with clicks have been left undifferentiated from general words, because there is no capital letter indication. Although there are some exceptions, the lower case name '|xam' is widely documented without a visual indicator of its position as the name of a people and linguistic family. Therefore, my use of the diagonal slant '/' along with the capital letter 'X' (Ludwig, 2021) as opposed to the vertical slant '|' with the lower case 'x' undoes the visual queue of absence.

The name /Xam came to me as a consequence of '//kabbo' - meaning 'dream'. The word '//kabbo' became my first introduction into /Xam cosmology through the story of //-Kabbo Jantjie Tooren. His story resonated with me on the

island. Like Kratoa !Goa/gõas and Dawie, he had been incarcerated. As the popular narrative goes, //Kabbo was an elderly /Xam storyteller who had been imprisoned at Breakwater Convict Station in Cape Town in the late 1800's. He was then released into the custody of a pair of researchers who housed him with more /Xam and !Xun speakers at their residence in Mowbray. I have intentionally not mentioned the names of the researchers, to avoid the risk of detracting from the visibility of this indigenous story. Instead, the researchers have been referenced accordingly in the bibliography section. In the poetic extract of 'The sun cuts the moon with a knife' (2021:67) //Kabbo, displays a keen mastery of Ronde Taal:

> "…this is why Moon goes away painfully,
> painfully returns home,
> with pain he goes along.
> This is why Sun desists,
> Sun leaves the backbone for the children,
> yielding to Moon.
> For this reason, Sun desists,
> Moon goes painfully away,
> Painfully returns home.
> He goes to become another Moon, a whole one,
> he lives again,
> he lives, aware that it seemed he had died..."
>
> - //Kabbo Janjtie Tooren



The Cell of Shame

Back on the island, the phone call was deeply appreciated. It was an acknowledgement that the work was of ancestral importance. Visule and I spent that evening talking about our artistic plans and what we needed to keep in mind during the process. That night I was filled with restlessness. I struggled to sleep as my heart beat at an unfamiliar rhythm.

The next morning we arrived at the prison complex. I was not well rested, but excitement filled me with the energy I needed. As we began setting up the installation, I meditated on the precarious relationship between the prison space and the body. The previous day during our initial walk-through of the prison, Chris had mentioned how prisoners were stripped of all their belongings upon arrival, including their clothes. Upon hearing this, the purpose and method of imprisonment felt clearer to me. The space we occupied was designed to strip prisoners of everything that reminded them of home.

Hearing about the 'prison strip' resolved an internal conflict I had about how I should appear in front of the camera. Speaking to Visule, we arrived at the inevitable answer – nakedness. I felt a shiver as I realised what this work required of me. The discomforting feeling was not only towards the exposure of my skin, but also towards feeling vulnerable in the cell which contained the difficult memory of my father's capture. My nakedness in the space would make my inheritance of this memory even more tangible.




Visule recognised my struggle and offered to strip as well, as a gesture to help me breach my comfort zone. Visule's willingness to honour the process, gave me the conviction that I could do the same. Stripping down, I felt the cold of the cell touch my body in an uncomfortable manner. Something about being bare in the space induced an immense feeling of fear and shame. I felt a resentment towards the vulnerable parts of myself.

The prison cell's psychological warfare intensified. I felt the steal bars and thick cement walls enclosing on us with each passing moment. The room was spotless. The floor, so clean it reflected our figures like water. Visule stood at the end of the cell with camera in hand, whilst I kneeled at the centre between the installation. Slowly, I began to blow into the ceramic tortoise burner which contained burning kooigoed, creating a cloud of smoke. I was trembling with fear and unsure of what direction this was about to take. I started blowing more intensely in the silent hope that the smoke would conceal my hesitation.

Visule began moving with the camera towards me. When the camera had arrived to hover over me, the feeling of fear had overcome my senses. I panicked. Desperately, I tried to conceal myself. Taking the hot black ash and applying it to my cold skin. The moment felt horribly wrong. The cell got colder somehow. Visule awaited my next direction. But I needed a moment. Taking a deep breath, I reassured myself

that this was part of the process of understanding the 'inter-generational trauma' that not only emanated from myself and the island, but from the country's collective consciousness as a whole.

By lunchtime, Visule and I were hungry and overwhelmed by the process. We retreated back to our room. The plan was to clean up and go back to the cell after some food and rest. After returning, we spent another two hours of going back and forth in the cell. Exhausted and out of ideas, I realised we had not prepared sufficiently to finalise the work that day. Visule and I resolved to come back the next morning before Chris arrived to pick us up. When we arrived back at our room, I could hardly move. I collapsed on the bed. Visule went out for a short walk with his camera. That evening, we didn't eat. I slept peacefully. Waking up 12 hours later the next morning. A stark contrast to the previous night's restlessness.

Ground of Communication

Waking up in a shock, I looked at the time. It was 5 am. I was feeling rested and up for round two. It was our final day on the island. Chris would arrive with the ferry at 11 am. This was it. We had one more chance to install in the cell. I stepped out to a sunrise greeting the cheeks of the morning clouds, sea birds vibrating in a frenzy and mainland waking up from its slumber.

A realisation then dawned on me. We had not done the basic ground work of communication before entering the cell that day. We rushed in. But, this day, carried a feeling of potential. There was no rush. Before heading out this time, I requested Visule to join me in the medicine garden. I had not explored the kinds of geometries the garden possessed when we had first seen it. Stepping foot in the garden, I encountered how it had been designed for the purposes of healing. It was designed in a circular manner. The path to the centre curved into a spiral shape. It was layered with sea shells and rocks that had engraved names of medicine plants on them.

This was the right place for us to do the ground work of communication. I asked Visule if he would join me in an offering by burning some kooigoed at the bottom of the well, which was located at the end of the spiralling path. He obliged. As the smoke rose from the well, we took a moment to speak some words of gratitude and acknowledge those who had come before. The fact that this garden existed

meant that there had been work done towards healing the wounds on the island.

I then made another request of Visule and asked if he would be willing to join me in training 'Tai chi' before we made our way to the cell. The knowledge of this ancient Eastern martial art was passed down to me by my mother, Michélle Festus, who is a dedicated student and teacher.

If my father made me aware of what fear can do to the mind, then my mother had provided me with a tool to protect myself. Visule and I stood in the medicine garden and practiced some basic Tai chi rooting moves. Tai chi training uses slow repetitive movements which focus on enhancing a practitioners internal strength. The repetition of movement and a focus on breathing translates into a greater awareness of the body from the inside. 'Rooting' is therefore achieved if a practitioner is able to quieten the mind "without force" (Festus, 2021). In this way, Tai chi is a form of meditation.

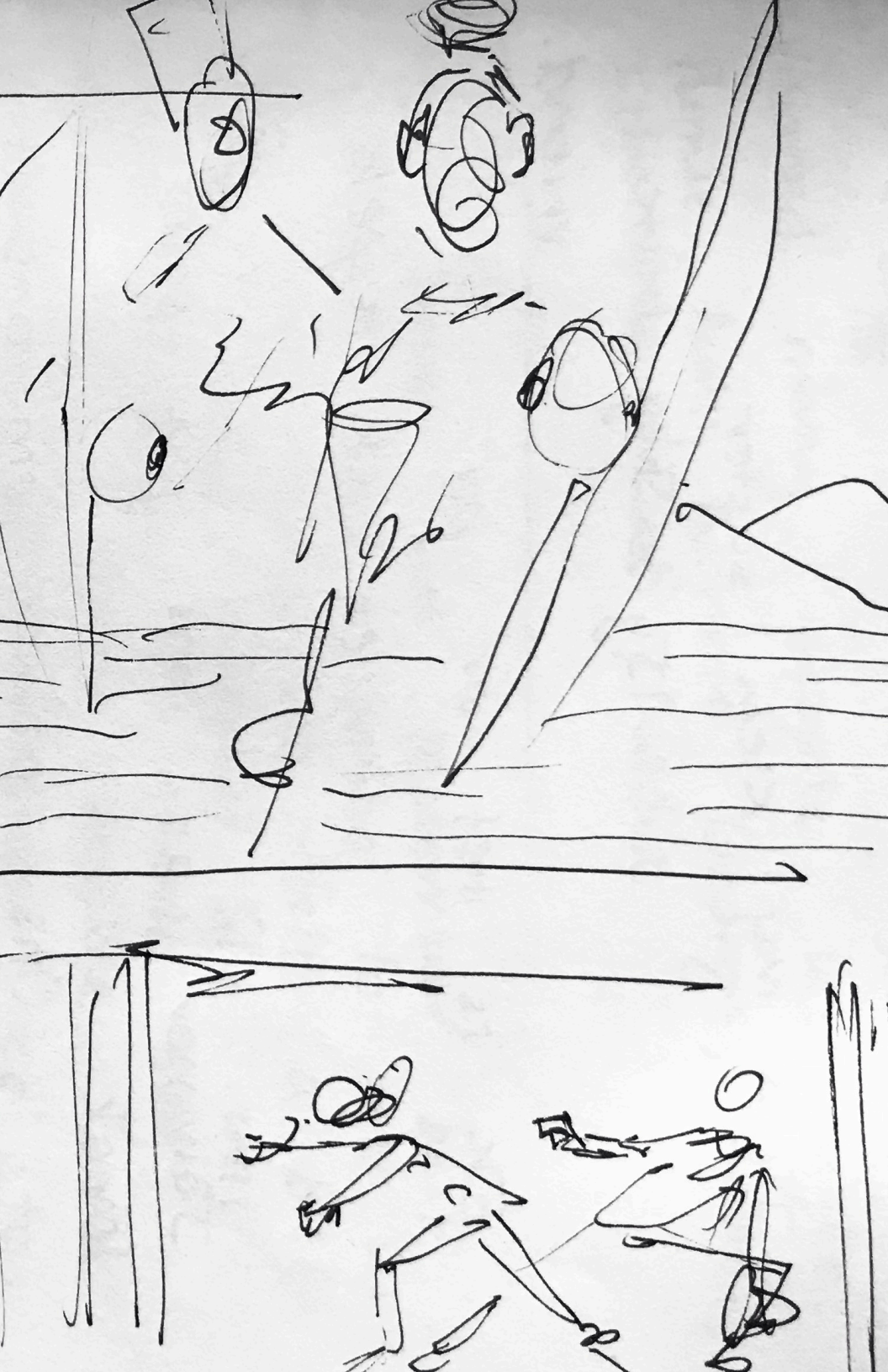
In Tai chi, there is an emphasis on circular movement. This quality is demonstrated in the widely known Tai chi symbol, the 'yin-yang'. It is a circular symbol that has been described as an ancient self-portrait[14], conveying the interchangeable nature of opposing phenomenon, such as 'life' and 'death'. In understanding the symbol as a representation of the self, we see how we are within a constant cycle of life and death

[14] This description of 'yin-yang' is made by the Tai Chi master Lawrence Galante in 'Tai Chi: The Supreme Ultimate' (1981)

giving way to one another. Going back to the symbolism of the dead bird and the egg, it's easy to speculate that the island had given us a foresight of the purpose of our journey.

We had come to the island to 'die', so that we could be born anew. There was no need to fear our own death. The process had already begun. Tai chi helped to put us in touch with our bodies from the inside. Allowing us to empty ourselves of everything, including our fears.

I ended the session as my mother always does, "Arms slowly down…keep your composure… left foot in…Xie-xie" we closed with a bow. As we walked up the road, passing the church, towards the prison complex, I felt at peace with death and welcomed our rebirth.



In the Name of Liberation

Entering the cell for the final time, we began by clearing out the previous day's attempts. The open space gave me a new sense of creative potential. I caught my eagerness before rushing to install something new - "Paciência" , I reminded myself. This word is often said to me by my two Capoeira masters, Mestre Espirrinho and Contramestre Mordaça. It was an important instruction to remember.

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian martial art which incorporates self-defense, dance and music (Capoeira, 1995). Through Capoeira I was named Camafeu. My master once told me that the tradition of 'Capoeira names' exists because in the times of slavery and other eras of political unrest in Brazil, Capoeira was banned (Mordaça, 2021). In those times, it was important to hide one's identity from the authorities.

Capoeira was used as a tool for liberation because it provided a 'familial-support-base' for those who had suffered the pain of having their families broken by slavery. In this way, it is rooted in the mitigation of the harmful effects of capture. Remembering the instruction of my Capoeira masters gave me the belief that liberation from fear was indeed possible.

The 'Roda' in capoeira, is one of the main devices used to encourage community building. This is a circle that players form to establish a game of Capoeira. Visule and I formed a two person roda. We moved in a circle, switching directions

intuitively, following the traces of each other's bodies. "Volta do Mundo!" I called out, signalling for the movements to stop and for us to take a break whilst we walked slowly in a circle. Through a game of Capoeira, two players who were once strangers, can become camarada or comrades. In my father's recollections, the word 'comrade' would often come up. I understood a comrade to be someone who shared a common purpose with political connotations. One could rely on a 'true' comrade with their life. In capoeira, the connotations are similar. Visule had become my comrade. He had persisted through my many forms of Ronde Taal. For this, he had gained my sincere respect.

The Cell of Vulnerability

Stripping for the last time in the cell, I left on my beaded necklace and earrings. These items did not conceal my body, but they functioned as objects that empowered my experience of being naked in the space. Then I took my paint brush and scribbled black ink 'codes' onto different parts of myself.

I recognised one symbol that emerged. A code painted onto my right thigh symbolised '//aan' or 'home'. I realised then that I was home, inside my body. It is the home I carried everywhere, like the tortoise carries it's shell. My experience of the previous day in the cell was disempowering because, I had been alienated from the vulnerable parts of myself. The truth of this alienation was revealed to me through the overwhelming fear I felt.

Whilst growing up and listening to my father's stories, I noted how he was able to overcome his fear of death by becoming a freedom fighter. His life contained countless instances of danger. From navigating the ganglands of the Cape Flats, to picking up arms against the apartheid regime. But there was one fear I sensed in him - being vulnerable. Perhaps this fear came as a consequence of surviving capture.

To survive, he needed a Ronde Taal that fit the extreme conditions of the prison. I finally understood that the trauma

that comes with surviving these conditions, is ‘transferred’ into indigenous communities once the captured return home.

As I stepped outside the cell, closing the gate and then the door, I knew that it was my vulnerability that was required to tell this story. I realised that the prison’s victims of capture, must have all faced the same paralysing fear. By being stripped down to their naked bodies, they had been made to feel vulnerable. The childhood imprint of my father’s experience had been living through me up until that point. The fear he had warned me against, was the same fear he had felt. This was my opportunity to transform that memory.

Looking through the peep hole of the prison door, my heart began racing uncontrollably. I saw Visule stationed with the camera rolling. My body went cold again. I started to shiver. Gently, I regained control by closing my eyes and concentrating on my breath. I took a few moments to root my senses and ease my fear.

Fear was present, but instead of letting it take hold of me, I could “observe its path” and allow it to pass through me. As I opened the door, I walked calmly towards the end of the room. I kneeled slowly onto the blanket which was setup in front of the tortoise burner. I blew onto the lit ember of kooigoed which was mixed with the grass we had found at the limestone quarry. Smoke began to rise. I continued providing air into the shell of the burner until only ash remained.

This time there was no panic. Every part of my body had been encoded except for my groin. I chose to isolate the groin for the purposes of applying the ash. By focusing the ash around my groin, my bareness was emphasised. Looking into the camera, I acknowledged my bareness as the site of my vulnerability. Through this acknowledgment, I reclaimed my power and released the shame that had been instilled by intergenerational trauma.

As I rubbed, a black translucent 'underwear' began to appear, signalling the restoration of my dignity. After the ash had been used up, I sat kneeling in silence, bringing the concentration back down to the breath. Liberation from fear had arrived. The home of my body, now unchained from collective and self-imposed capture.

Amidst the silence, we noticed a crescendo of buzzing. A large amount of bees had somehow entered the cell. This was mysterious. I wondered why bees had made their way to a prison cell of all places. The island was full of flowers. At that moment, we had no explanation for why bees would enter the cell.

However, I see the incident now as an opportunity to express an appropriate metaphor. Bees had entered the space of the prison cell, because it's meaning had been transformed. The bee is a hard worker. It collects nectar for its hive and in the process, simulates pollination for the next generation of flowers.

The presence of bees signalled that Visule and I had transformed the meaning of the cell from one of trauma, to one of freedom. In that moment, the bees had pollinated the act of our courageous vulnerability, assuring us that the flower of our rebirth would live on.

Ma/xoah

/kwerre /xum

Aba té Home

“The wind’s story guided the tortoise home”

- /Xam Fortuin

Before packing up we took some photographs of the space. Then it was time to move. We packed up as fast as possible, leaving our belongings in a pile at the entrance of the cell. We found Chris waiting for us at our room. He curiously inquired about how everything had gone.

The experience was still very fresh. Visule and I were unable to provide Chris with details, but we assured him that the work we had come to do had been accomplished. The three of us then sat around the kitchen table eating the meal Visule and I had missed the night before. As we spoke, I felt a deep gratitude for Chris and his efforts to accommodate us. He had gone out of his way to help us. In so doing, he had created space for a new story to enter the island.

We told Chris that we needed to pick up the rest of our stuff at the cell on our way out. We made our way back to the prison on foot and then to the ferry. We were finally on our way back to mainland. This time, I sat on the ferry trying not to think too much. My eyes closed by themselves. My body rested in a state between sleep and consciousness. When we arrived at the harbour, Chris told us to follow him through a back door that led us down to the bus stop. Visule and I thanked Chris for everything before making our way back to my car.

Whilst on the island, I had mentioned to Visule that we should close off the process by returning to the ocean. He reminded me of this when we got to my car. Although I was exhausted and ready to get home, I knew that returning to the waters would be the appropriate way to end off our journey. Arriving at the ocean shore, I was filled with a sense of relief. Looking at Robben Island from a distance, I smiled. “It will take time to process” I thought.

Visule and I prepared our offerings before jumping in. It was high tide. The current was stronger compared to our initial visit. Taking off my clothes, I looked at the codes on my body. I had come back from the island anew. Like a celestial snake, I had shed the dead skin of my fear. We made our way into the icy waters for the final time. Whilst the sun beamed down on us, we shouted into the coastal wind in gratitude “Zikomo Visule.” I exclaimed. “Kai gangans Sam” he replied. The water had cleansed us of the process. Stepping out onto the warm rock, we took a moment to reflect…

…We touched
the pain
that came

Ewe,
it came.

it came with them,
Sun and Moon

“Kwaheri” they say
because they leave
they say “kwaheri”

And it is painful

When Sun comes,
Moon goes

because of this,
they live
by dying

so they say
Kwaheri

and when they return
They say “Aba té”

Ewe,
“Aba té Home!”

…fluit fluit, my storie is uit!

/Xam Sam Seth Camafeu Fortuin Festus

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the University of Cape Town, the Siyakhula Fund and the Robben Island Museum for making it institutionally possible to inscribe this story.

To my father, David Fortuin, kai gangans for keeping the fire burning and teaching me how to do the same.

To my mother, Michélle Festus, xie-xie for rooting me in tai chi. It is a practice that continues to teach me how to let go.

To my sister, Zoë Fortuin, kai gangans for being my true friend who is always willing to put me in my place.

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To Nkosenathi Koela, camagu for cleansing the way. Your guidance and friendship has made all the difference.

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To Jasmin Nordien, shukran for the ‘one degree changes’ process. It gave me the clarity and tools to articulate my values.

To Louisa and Malcolm Sampson, thank you for providing a home for me while I studied. I will never forget 2 Cassandra Road, Pinati.

To my grandparents, Wilhelmina Fortuin, Samuel Fortuin, Shirley Festus and David Festus, respect and love always.

Die Voormense\ancestors, kai gangans vi’ di’ voorligting duur die huidige oomblik. Aws behou aan jou stories.

To the Great Grandmother of the Universe, with each breath, we touch your oceans, mountains and galaxies from within. Kai gangans /xamissa //aan, aba té!

Lastly, I would like to take this moment to apologise for any omissions in this story which may have been forgotten. This process continues to be a journey of learning. Blessiet.

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/X. Fortuin, V. Kabunda
photograph, digital edit
dimensions variable

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//aan (2022)
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Page 5.
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ronde taal
/kwerre /xum (2022)

/X.Fortuin, V.Kabunda
helmet, whale bone, ram horns, tortoise burner, ash, washing line, candles
8min 44sec

Page 82.
ronde taal
/xum /kwerre (2022)
illustration, video still
dimensions variable

Page 83.
ronde taal
untitled (2021)
installation photograph of bee on cell floor
dimensions variable

Page 84.
ancestral archive
Ma Delma (2022) and Aba té (2022)
illustration, mixed media painting
petals, beads, gems, ink, oil, metallic marker, gauche
dimensions variable

Page 85.
ronde taal
//Kabbo Compass (2022)
installation, sculpture
wind, ceramic compass, gems, stone, porcupine quill
dimensions variable

Page 86.
ronde taal
Warrior; Helmet; Healer (2021)
collage of installation photographs
ceramic totems, encoded construction helmet
dimensions variable

Page 88.
contribution
Umsamo (2021)
N. Koela, C. Zuma, M. Dyalvane, /X. Fortuin
sound, movement, black ink on canvas
900cm x 200cm

Page 89.
ronde taal
Klong totem (2021)
terra cotta
dimensions variable

Page 90.
encoded
Ronde Taal (2021)
black ink on paper
42cm x 29cm

Page 91.
storyteller
Tortoise Burner (2021)
terra cotta clay
dimensions variable

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