

LIFE

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Festival rewrites colonial narrative and plots future of black literature

● *Abantu event is a place of healing, celebration and emancipation*

Kgomotso Moncho-Maripane

The consensus about the second Abantu Book Festival, which took place in Soweto at the weekend, was that it was a space of healing for black people.

There is so much power and delight about a literary event that allows black people to be themselves freely, with all their cultural idiosyncrasies and without compromise. To see this can be emotionally overwhelming.

Doyen of Zimbabwean literature and film-maker Tsitsi Dangarembga, who was a keynote speaker and opened the festival last Thursday, had to hold back tears as the audience broke into a praise song just as she was about to start speaking.

"I've never been to a book festival where the entertainment comes before a keynote address," she said.

The preamble made sense. In most black African cultures, a light prelude always precedes a weighty conversation. But there was nothing light about the poetry and music on the opening night.

The political implications of the festival are stark – it's primarily a black book festival where black writers and readers are the priority. It was the response of founder and director Thando Mngolozana to the whiteness of SA's literary scene, after he had spoken out against it in 2015 at the Franschoek Literary Festival, which he has boycotted since.

With the slogan "Imagining



New chapter: Writer Thando Mngolozana founded the Abantu Book Festival as a response to the whiteness of SA's literary scene, after he had spoken out against it in 2015 at the Franschoek Literary Festival, which he has boycotted since. /Supplied

ourselves into existence", the Abantu Book Festival is about building where there is a void. It is essentially Mngolozana's performance of anger turned into a tangible decolonising act.

Taking its cue from the fallist movement, it is well designed to be a safe and inclusive space for all black people, including feminists and queers.

Staging it in Soweto speaks to its accessibility and its name – that it is for the people.

The free daytime events at the Eyethu Lifestyle Centre in

Mofolo and the R20 tickets for the night sessions at the Soweto Theatre, which included a hot meal, attracted black people who had not been to a book festival before.

The line-up included an intergenerational mix of literary giants and geniuses such as Zakes Mda, Keorapetse Kgositse, Sindiwe Magona, Mandla Langa, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Nadia Davids, Shubnum Khan, Ayobami Adebayo, Mohale Mashigo and more.

The children's programme

was curated by Gcina Mhlophe.

The sessions were complemented by poetry, music and screenings of new documentaries that reveal hidden political truths of our history, such as Sifiso Khanyile's *Uprize!* and Winnie, by French director Pascale Lamche.

Decolonisation was the overarching theme that ran through the 2017 festival and will probably be an issue pre-occupying speakers and audiences for a long time.

Dangarembga's keynote

address, titled "Decolonisation in the context of African literature – an historical approach", examined the links between the strategies and human products of colonisation.

By reflecting on the reality that Africa was not the first continent to be colonised, Dangarembga sought to free Africans of their victim mentality and help them better understand their colonisers.

Highlighting the fact that Africans are dealing with a colonising system that is 2,800

years old, she reiterated Frantz Fanon's sentiments that there is no way Africa can return to a precolonial state.

"The only remedy to the self-perpetuating system of violence that is colonisation is an opposing force that can act peacefully, but is of significant magnitude to counteract the violent force of colonisation," she said.

"Literature and other art forms enable us to negotiate equalising identities and procedures of both the colonised and the coloniser. To the extent that

we celebrate our everyday lives and experiences in literature, we are celebrating ourselves – and celebrating ourselves is definitely a decolonising practice.

"However, we must be mindful of the trap of recreating the colonial project if we are not conscious of the relationship of the contents we write about."

Given the political changes taking place in Zimbabwe and the enduring relevance of her classic 1980 novel, *Nervous Conditions*, which delved deeply into the colonised mind, the pol-

itics of decolonisation and women's rights, Dangarembga's presence at the festival and her topic were apt.

The importance of and, at times, lack of cultural accuracy and the domestication of English came up in a panel discussion on "The art of editing", featuring editor and publisher Phakama Mbonambi and editor, author and senior lecturer in the English department at Stellenbosch University Grace Musila. Their dialogue helped to demystify the practice of editing and highlighted the need for a balance of demographics and dismantling of the colonial mind-set in publishing.

It was a relevant discussion following the public furore earlier in 2017 about the poor editing of Bonang Matheba's biography, which was published by Blackbird Books.

The Kids Zone, a new feature of the Abantu Book Festival, was a fun and heart-warming affair despite the recently released bleak literacy statistics by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which revealed that South African children cannot read at an appropriate level.

Children were read to by greats such as Magona and Mda and enjoyed performances by storytelling practitioners. Each child attending the sessions received a free book in their mother tongue from Magona's collection of children's books.

The nurturing of young black readers is now urgent. This and the establishment of libraries that reflect African communities and their experiences are part of the legacy the Abantu Book Festival is hoping to create.

The festival plans to rotate to other South African cities in the future after they have grown the event in Soweto. Interested cities will be asked to submit proposals to host the event.

TEXTILES

Polyester could slip on banana peel of green fashion

Jackie May

For decades after polyester's invention in the 1940s, there wasn't much exciting innovation in the fibres used in the world's textiles. Until now.

With the increased urgency about humanity's impact on the planet, the race is on to find solutions to reduce the environmental impact of clothing. That's why fabrics will soon be made of pineapple and banana, and silk and leathers will be grown in a laboratory.

The fashion industry is commonly accused of being the second-biggest polluter of the planet, second only to the oil industry. According to the documentary *The True Cost*, humans consume 80-billion pieces of clothing annually.

With the advent of fast fashion – the quick delivery of new clothing trends to retail outlets – the production of clothes has doubled in the past 15 years, and will continue to grow rapidly if business-as-usual continues.

This means continued growth in the production of polyester. The world's most commonly used textile is a plastic-based synthetic fibre made from coal, air, water and petroleum and takes more than 200 years to decompose.

Polyester is also the source of tonnes of plastic microfibrils released into the ocean annually and water systems in the course of washing clothes.

The Plastic Soup Foundation reports that between 600,000 and 177-million microfibrils are released into water with every 5kg of washing.

The US nonprofit organisation Orb Media showed recently that billions of people are drinking water contaminated by plastic particles, with 83% of water samples found to be polluted.

Polyester is not the only problem fabric. Cotton requires huge quantities of water and pesticides to produce. Rayon and viscose, other much-loved natural fabrics, are manufactured from tree fibres and unless sustainably sourced, these fibres can come from wood logged in ancient and endangered forests.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation in Britain argues in a report released in November that "clothes must be designed differently, worn for longer and recycled as much as possible to stop the global fashion industry [from] consuming a quarter of the world's annual carbon budget by 2050".

It sounds daunting, but the strides made in the renewable energy industry making clean energy an affordable and effective alternative to coal, show that cleaning up the clothing and fashion industry with new fibres, technologies and manufacturing techniques, is not a pipe dream. The work has begun.

There have been three areas of innovation during the imagining and creation of a

cleaner textile industry: finding more efficient and cleaner ways to recycle and upcycle clothes; creating better ways of growing and manufacturing natural fibres; and inventing new synthetic fabrics.

Clothing from high-income countries are recycled in SA. In the area around Park Station in Johannesburg's city centre, people sift through large bins of used clothes, selecting items to sell in their microbusinesses.

Planet Aid, a British nonprofit engaged in recycling, says the average American throws away about 30kg of clothing a year. The Guardian has reported that "351-million kilograms of clothes (equivalent to 2.9-billion T-shirts) are traded annually from Britain alone".

Planet Aid takes the view that the trading of these clothes across the world creates jobs and provides a source of affordable clothing. But it has also been argued that selling used clothes from the West to developing countries creates a relationship of dependency and an obstacle to Africa developing a clothing and textile industry.

Compounding these concerns is the problem that the clothes will eventually run out of usability and end up in landfills leaking toxic chemicals into the soil somewhere, out of sight of the West. Or they end up in incinerators, polluting the planet's atmosphere.

But by using new technology, it may be possible to give new life to old clothes

and simultaneously overcome some of the issues related to the second-hand clothing trade.

Some companies – such as H&M, Levi Strauss and Patagonia – are pulping old clothes and returning the recovered fibres to the fabric supply chain rather than dumping them in a landfill.

In 2016, the H&M Foundation teamed up with the Hong Kong Research Institute of Textiles and Apparel to find a sustainable process for separating and recycling polyester and cotton blends.

"This fibre-to-fibre recycling method," it says, "is cost-effective, and there's no secondary pollution to the environment, ensuring the life of the recycled material is prolonged in a sustainable way."

Seattle-based Evrnu worked with Levi Strauss to create jeans from discarded cotton with "98% less water than it takes to make traditional cotton fibre and with 90% reduced CO₂ emissions compared to polyester production".

Also in the recycling category is the well-publicised G-Star Raw collaboration with Pharrell Williams's company, Bionic, producing denim made from plastic waste recovered from the ocean.

Issey Miyake in Japan has been working with recycled polyethylene terephthalate thread for years. His label 132 5, launched in 2010, produces clothes using only recycled polyethylene terephthalate, the clear nontoxic plastic used in

water and cold drink bottles. Big brands such as Adidas, H&M and Nike have also been working with recycled plastic.

Many natural fibres are being explored and promoted. In SA, Tony Budden at Hemporium advocates multiple uses of the strong, versatile and (a bonus) antibacterial hemp. Because growing hemp is still illegal in SA, it is imported – mostly from China – and its use is limited.

Other plants being used to explore new textiles include nettles, bananas and coffee. Some, like lotus plants, have been used for centuries, but the commercial viability of creating fabric for the mass market still needs to be explored.

There are two fabrics created from plant fibre, by Orange Fiber and Piñatex. Orange Fiber is an Italian company that developed a fabric by extracting the cellulose from the citrus fibres discarded during industrial processing. Piñatex is a soft, versatile and vegan alternative for leather made of fibres that are extracted from pineapple leaves.

Other innovative start-ups have been growing materials in labs. US start-up Modern Meadows is growing leather out of yeast that has been engineered to produce a collagen that, with some added enzymes, turns into skin.

A Stella McCartney-designed yellow dress on display in New York's Museum of Modern Art was made using



fabric grown by US start-up Bolt Threads.

After studying spiders' silk, Bolt Threads recreated their thread by mimicking their DNA. On their website, they explain that a "yeast produces silk protein in a liquid form during

fermentation – very much like the beer-making process".

They insisted that no spiders had been harmed in the making of their silk – something that would appeal to McCartney, a lifelong vegetarian.

The designer, who in 2017

Spider silk: This Stella McCartney-designed dress on display at New York's Museum of Modern Art is made of fabric that was grown by US start-up Bolt Threads, which recreated spiders' silk by mimicking DNA. /Google

won the British Fashion Council's Special Recognition Award for Innovation, told *Vogue* magazine: "If you're lucky enough to have a business on this planet, you have to approach it in this [sustainable] way."