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Maria Paola Guarducci and Francesca Terrenato,
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In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica,¹ by Maria Paola Guarducci and Francesca Terrenato, is a compelling and innovative contribution to contemporary critical discourse. The essay tackles a key topic for scholars in both Postcolonial and Women's Studies: South African women's poetry. Focusing specifically on poetry written in English or Afrikaans, two of South Africa's eleven official languages, the text offers insights into the complex creative expression of poets who, despite their diverse ethnic backgrounds, collectively embrace a South African identity and consciously use these two languages as vehicles for poetic expression.

The choice of the subject matter is closely linked to the authors' academic backgrounds. Maria Paola Guarducci is renowned for her expertise in English Studies, and specifically in South African literary production, while Francesca Terrenato has worked extensively on Dutch literature in a broad context, but also on Afrikaans poetry.

In Verse has several strengths that make it an excellent resource for those wishing to explore the aforementioned genre. First and foremost is its originality within contemporary critical discourse. Unlike other literary forms such as prose and drama, South African poetry – especially when written by women – has received comparatively less scholarly attention. In this sphere, the text stands out as a pioneering work that lays the groundwork for future discussion. At the same time, the essay should be commended for its robust interlinguistic and intercultural nature. This is, of course, linked to the simultaneous exploration of the domains of English and Afrikaans. *In Verse* is structured around three main thematic chapters: “Storie”, “Spazi”, and “Lingue e linguaggi”, in which the scholars analyse poetic production from both languages. In so doing, they demonstrate an impressive scholarly collaboration. Rather than treating English and Afrikaans as dichotomous fields, they aptly integrate them through a comparative thematic analysis. This method is particularly valuable as it deepens our understanding of both fields, revealing potential connections, shared insights, as well as notable differences.

Two other significant aspects of the essay are worth mentioning. The first is the inclusion of Italian translations of the poems analysed, which greatly enhances the accessibility of the texts to Italian readers. This feature is particularly valuable for readers interested in Afrikaans poetry, which is obviously less accessible to an Italian reader-

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¹ The volume will hereafter be referred to simply as *In Verse*.

ship than English poetry. Secondly, the book concludes with a summary section that provides a concise yet thorough overview of the biographies of the poets discussed.

In terms of the specific thematic analysis, the scholars emphasise that poetry in South Africa serves women not only as a means of artistic affirmation, but also as a powerful political and ideological tool. This view is embedded in a broader consideration of the age-old marginalisation of women in the South African context. Their exclusion within the ethnocentric and androcentric apartheid narrative seems to have morphed into new forms of dislocation and isolation in contemporary times. The two scholars explore this later aspect through Meg Samuelson's analysis of women's dismembered bodies within the dominant narrative of the New South Africa, as they navigate between "the rhetoric of being the nation's mothers and the alarming rates of rape and feminicide".² Given the incomplete realisation of women's roles, poetry emerges as a central tool to challenge dominant discourses and contribute to women's emancipation and ongoing liberation.

The three thematic chapters highlight specific themes and characteristics of the literary production being considered.³ The first, entitled "Storie", explores how women poets deal with the paradigms of history. Guarducci begins her investigation by mentioning two poems. The first is Sindiwe Magona's *Statement* and the second is Makhosazana Xaba's *Tongues of Their Mothers*. Together, these works illuminate the entire breadth of the discussion. As such, they underscore the poets' efforts to rethink history from a fresh perspective that uncovers the hidden "herstories" beneath the dominant historiography. Magona writes about the necessity that "the tale of the hunt / May be heard also, from the mouth of / The hunted".⁴ Similarly, Xaba's composition focuses on numerous female figures who have been conspicuously overlooked by mainstream historiography⁵ and emphasises the poet's desire to "write an epic poem" about them.⁶ Guarducci argues that this particular poem by Xaba effectively illuminates the key concerns of South African women poets: namely, to dismantle the conventional colonial and androcentric narrative and "fill in the gaps of history".⁷

Throughout the chapter, Guarducci examines various strategies employed by South African poets to reinterpret official history, particularly as it relates to Anglophone poets. One notable approach is the reclaiming of the pre-colonial era, a temporal dimension often overlooked in apartheid historiography but now central to poets' artistic expression. Of particular interest is Guarducci's examination of Makhosazana

² M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, Milano, Mimesis, 2022, p. 17. Translations from the Italian passages in this book are mine.

³ Before delving into the details of the various sections of the work, it is important to note that, for practical reasons, I will not consider all of the poems analysed by the two scholars. Instead, my discussion will focus on a few selected texts that I believe play a crucial role in Guarducci and Terrenato's analysis.

⁴ S. MAGONA, *Statement*, quoted in M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 21.

⁵ These figures are Sarah Baartman, Mnkabayi Jama Zulu, Daisy Makiwane, Magogo Constance Zulu, Victoria Mxenge, and Nomvula Glenrose Mbatha.

⁶ M. XABA, *Tongues of Their Mothers*, quoted in M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 22.

⁷ M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 22.

Xaba's *Long before Mrs Pless*. This poem, titled after "Mrs Pless", a female hominid discovered by two South African palaeontologists in the Sterkfontein caves in 1947, actually honours the unknown "she" who existed before Mrs Pless's discovery. Through this device, Xaba pays homage to this enigmatic and indefinable figure, whose personal history and intrinsic value transcend the monologic scientific categorisation imposed by early researchers.

The recovery of pre-colonial history is also followed by a confrontation with the colonial period that is carried out in a new light, giving voice to figures erased or misinterpreted by official historiography. One notable example is that of Krotoa-Eva (ca. 1643-1674), a Khoi girl known for her association with the Dutch East India Company and for her collaborative/subordinate position in relation to the company's director, Jan Van Riebeeck. Guarducci meticulously reconstructs her life and enduring fame, tracing her journey from South African colonisation to her contemporary status as a symbol of the New South Africa. This introduction sets the stage for an exploration of the revival of Krotoa by contemporary poets such as Karen Press and Toni Stuart. Guarducci illustrates how their poetry aims to emancipate this figure from two deeply ideological yet opposing narratives: Dutch colonial historiography and South African post-apartheid ideology. The former, rooted in racism and paternalism, presents Krotoa's life as a tragic descent into alcoholism and immorality, ending with her banishment and eventual death on Robben Island. The latter narrative portrays Krotoa in a sentimental, celebratory manner that again obscures the authenticity of her character. In contrast to these ideological representations, the poets seek to present a more authentic portrait of Krotoa, by emphasising both her inner struggles and her resilience. In this context, Krotoa's story "becomes emblematic of abuse, resistance, inequality, gender oppression, but also of creativity and female agency".⁸

Guarducci concludes her discussion in "Storie" with a subchapter entitled "Verità e riconciliazioni". In this section she recalls two of the most significant and dramatic events in South African history and their fictional reinterpretation by poets. These are the Sharpeville Massacre, re-imagined in a highly personal way in Ingrid de Kok's *Our Sharpeville*, and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, re-examined by the same poet in *The Archbishop Chairs the First Session* and by Makhosazana Xaba in *The Speed of Life*.

After this section, Terrenato delves into an analysis of Afrikaans poetry, emphasising the multiple layers that characterise this literary production, particularly in its engagement with history. Indeed, the different ethno-cultural backgrounds of Afrikaans-speaking poets result in different approaches to their subject matter. Coloured⁹ women poets, for example, emphasise the reclaiming of pre-colonial history and the confrontation with the enduring trauma of slavery, as seen in the work of Jolyn Phillips. In her collection, *bientang*, Phillips focuses on the dramatic parable of a Khoi woman

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁹ Coloured people trace their ancestry to an amalgamation of many ethnic groups, including the indigenous Khoi and San communities, as well as various groups that have settled in the Cape since the beginning of colonisation, such as white settlers, Asian and African indentured servants and slaves.

destined to endure the tragedy of slavery, with the lyrical self seeking “through this maternal and indigenous figure, preserved in oral memory, a sense of rootedness that would otherwise be denied her because of her affiliation to a context of slavery”.¹⁰ On the other hand, Afrikaner poets, descendants of the Boers who first settled in South Africa in the 17th century and would contribute to establishing white supremacy over the centuries, offer a distinct perspective in their work. In particular, they tend to forge a deep connection to the South African land while actively challenging and rejecting the paradigms and ideals of their colonial ancestors. This approach is exemplified in the work of acclaimed author Antjie Krog, particularly in her poem *grond*, where the poet’s exploration unfolds in the tension between her role as a dissenting poet and her deep ethnic and historical ties to the Afrikaner community.

In the sub-chapter “Archivi e silenzi”, Terrenato skilfully engages with Memory Studies, particularly the theories of Jan Assmann and Marianne Hirsch. Concepts such as “cultural memory” and “archive” are here used to illuminate the process of historical rewriting undertaken by women poets. At the same time, Terrenato incorporates insights from the Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon, particularly her concept of historiographic metafiction. Specifically, Hutcheon’s exploration of “the question of *whose* history survives”¹¹ finds a fitting application in the analysis of Ronelda Kamfer’s *grond/Santekraam* collection. Here, Kamfer ironically imagines a dialogue between Jan Van Riebeeck and the indigenous chief Autshumao, two historical figures defined by very different degrees of influence. This approach highlights how Autshumao’s voice has been traditionally marginalised by a self-referential and dominant counterpart. Notably, in this fictional narrative, the VOC commander who informs Autshumao of his arrival does not read Autshumao’s response, further emphasising the marginalisation and diminished significance of the indigenous chief’s perspective in the broader colonial context.

The possibility of reclaiming an alternative memory from established narratives is also central to the final section, entitled “Corpi, fantasmi e auto/biografie”. Here, Terrenato examines several poems that bring traditionally marginalised or, in other cases, overlooked women to the fore. These include Khadija Heeger’s *Die dood sing*, which centres on the figure of Krotoa, and that of Lydia Williams, a freed slave who became a prominent spiritual figure in District Six in Cape Town; Lynthia Julius’s poem about the murdered anti-apartheid activist Dulcie September, and Antjie Krog’s fictionalisation of the story of the Scottish noblewoman Lady Anne Barnard.

The second chapter, entitled “Spazi”, explores another crucial aspect of the poets’ work: their relationship with space. In the Anglophone poetry section, Guarducci underlines, from the very outset, the challenge of formulating a comprehensive “poetics of space”.¹² Indeed, the complex and multidimensional representation of space in poets’ works makes it impossible to confine this concept to a few precise coordinates.

¹⁰ M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 52.

¹¹ L. HUTCHEON, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1988, p. 120.

¹² M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 83.

Guarducci therefore opts for a series of “selective and subjective”¹³ approaches that, while avoiding broad generalisations, allow a detailed exploration of key paradigmatic elements in the poets’ representation of this domain.

A key point of reference in the scholar’s discussion is J.M. Coetzee’s acclaimed *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988). This seminal text is one of the earliest works of non-fiction to address how South African space has been represented by Anglophone writers, emerging therefore as a crucial book for any worthwhile examination of the subject. However, it is clear that Guarducci’s approach and conclusions differ significantly from Coetzee’s. This divergence mostly stems from differences in their focus, including the gender of the writers, the literary genres and the types of space they examine. While Coetzee focuses primarily on male writers and prose works, Guarducci explores how women conceptualise space through poetic means. At the same time, while Coetzee’s reflections mostly revolve around natural spaces, Guarducci explores spatial representations as they manifest in a complex interplay between nature and culture.

In this context, Guarducci chooses to focus on a specific topography: the home. She observes that, in the South African context, this space is often portrayed not as an idealised place of comfort and refuge, but as an oppressive landscape that confines the subject, especially women, and prevents them from realising their potential. This aspect appears, for example, in Ruth Miller’s poem *The Halt*, where the protagonist’s house in the midst of the veld is described as “prim and old, defaced, malformed, / Too small, too hot in the summer, too cold at night”.¹⁴ By contrast, a more positive phenomenology is evident in poems such as Sindiwe Magona’s *The Village*, in which the mud houses of a rural Eastern Cape village evoke a sense of “Profound serenity”¹⁵ and lend “more serene features”¹⁶ to the whole poem.

In the subchapter “Acqua, materia, memoria”, Guarducci shifts her focus to another element that plays a crucial role in poetic representations of space: water. In its most expansive form, the sea, it becomes a vessel for stories and narratives intimately linked to one of the most dramatic landmarks in the country’s history, that is, slavery. Several poems in the chapter explore this topography and its association with the phenomenon of slavery. Guarducci describes this poetic production as “post-memorial”, emphasising that it does not result from a simple mnemonic process, but from the poets’ engagement with a rich cultural heritage inherited through various channels and creatively reinterpreted through imaginative means.

In the section on the poetics of space in Afrikaans poetry, Terrenato identifies two primary spatial domains: land spaces, including the veld, townships and mountains, and water spaces. As with their approach to historical themes, the representation of space also reveals the poets’ affiliation to either the Afrikaner or Coloured communities, resulting in significant differences in motifs and paradigms.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ R. MILLER, *The Halt*, quoted *ibidem*, p. 86.

¹⁵ S. MAGONA, *The Village*, quoted *ibidem*, p. 93.

¹⁶ M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 92.

Some of the poems selected by Terrenato highlight a dichotomy between natural (terrestrial) and man-made spaces. The former are often idealised, sometimes resembling Edenic landscapes, while the latter take on contrasting characteristics, evoking dysphoria and symbolising the negative effects of certain civilisational frameworks. Within this context, Diana Ferrus's *Vir Sara Baartman* is a vivid tribute to South Africa's natural splendour. The poem celebrates the veld that now surrounds the body of Sarah Baartman, once on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and now finally returned to her homeland. Terrenato illustrates how Ferrus, a Coloured poet, reclaims the veld – a space long depicted by Afrikaner ideology as a wild, virgin land available for colonisation – by restoring it to its pre-colonial meaning. This reclamation redefines the violated land as “an Eden that is home to Sarah Baartman and her people”.¹⁷ In contrast, the Western world is portrayed as a “racist monster crouching in the dark”.¹⁸ A similar dichotomous representation is found in Ingrid Jonker's *Madeliefjes in Namakwaland*. In this poem, the author contrasts the vast, open veld with an oppressive, segregated urban environment marked by walls and fences, in a strong resonance with South Africa's historical experience. Through this device, she creates a “suffering, mutilated and dying self that reflects the wounds of society”.¹⁹

Broad and intriguing, especially because of its direct connection to Guarducci's reflections, is the subchapter “L'acqua: oceani, coste, isole”. Here, Terrenato examines representations of water and of the sea in Afrikaans poetry, identifying two different approaches to the subject matter. On the one hand, a relationship of “identity/overlapping”²⁰ seems to underpin the work of Coloured poets, where the sea is often linked to themes of origin and belonging. As the scholar insightfully notes of Ronelda Kamfer's collection *grond/Santekraam*: “The roots [...] of the Coloured community as a whole find their unstable grounding in the sea, and the stories in the collection are even mirrored in the depths of the sea, where the voices of fish, mermaids and mermen echo human narratives”.²¹ On the other hand, a “relation/opposition”²² approach seems to characterise the literary production of Afrikaner poets. In works such as *Paternoster* and *die see is 'n man* by Antjie Krog, the sea acts as a counterforce to the process of affirmation of the lyrical self. Rather than serving as a symbiotic element with which the woman can connect, it emerges as an obstacle.

The final section, “Lingue e linguaggi”, addresses a crucial issue in this discussion: language itself. Language is, after all, the primary means by which poets convey their expression. However, the choice of English and Afrikaans is not always straightforward. To clarify this aspect, it may be helpful to analyse Guarducci and Terrenato's sections together rather than separately.

Guarducci opens her discussion by reflecting on the role of English in contempo-

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

¹⁸ D. FERRUS, *Vir Sara Baartman*, quoted *ibidem*, p. 109. The expression “racist monster crouching in the dark” is a translation of the original Afrikaans expression “rassistiese monster/wat wegkruip in die donker”.

¹⁹ M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 110.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 123.

rary South Africa, particularly in relation to women poets. As is well known, English gained prominence during the apartheid era as an important language for opposition movements, but its status as a European language continues to provoke scepticism and criticism among poets. In the section “Le lingue (delle) madri”, Guarducci fittingly explores this aspect. Some of the works discussed denounce the alien and foreign nature of this language which, after all, has been enforced rather than freely appropriated. This theme is, for example, evident in Koleka Putuma’s *Water*, where the poet condemns English as a tool of violence and coercion imposed on South Africa’s black population to the detriment of their native languages: “if you really had to write our stories, / then you ought to have done it in our mothers’ tongues, / the ones you cut off when you fed them a new language”.²³

The use of Afrikaans appears to be even more complex, as highlighted in “Decolonizzare la lingua (poesie in afrikaans)”. Here, Terrenato sheds light on the challenge of using this idiom as a means of artistic expression, given its historical role during the apartheid era. While the approach to Afrikaans is never “neutral”, it “always involves the taking of a precise stand, which also caters for specific ideological needs that can be linked to the ethnic and cultural background of the speaker”.²⁴ The scholar identifies two distinct uses of this language. On the one hand, the widespread adoption of Afrikaans by a younger generation of Coloured women reflects their attempt to re-appropriate a language long considered the exclusive domain of the Afrikaner population. On the other hand, the use of Afrikaans by Afrikaner poets is also critical and subversive, as they approach the language from a perspective that “adheres to an established poetic tradition while constantly questioning it”.²⁵ At the same time, in “Muoversi fra le lingue: multilinguismo e (auto)traduzione”, Terrenato explores other paradigmatic aspects of Afrikaans production, focusing in particular on multilingualism and self-translation – phenomena that address both artistic and practical concerns.

In the remainder of the chapter, “Lingue e linguaggi”, the two scholars explore other aspects of the poets’ work, in particular their approach to performance and multimodal art forms. In the section “La parola performata: immagini, suoni, silenzi”, for example, Guarducci examines two compelling forms of artistic expression: “performance poetry” and “video/audio poetry”. The former is presented as a performative form in which poets directly present their work in a variety of contexts, from extemporaneous to structured festivals and workshops. The latter, somewhat related to the former, is a “transcultural” form of artistic expression in which “predominantly black and coloured female artists create and reshape configurations of identity through various media”.²⁶ In this artistic medium, the communicative act is achieved through a mixture of different artistic modes, whose interplay creates profound and emblematic meanings for the poets.

An intriguing parallel to Guarducci’s reflections emerges in Terrenato’s discussion

²³ K. PUTUMA, *Water*, quoted *ibidem*, p. 129.

²⁴ M.P. GUARDUCCI and F. TERRENATO, *In-Verse: Poesia femminile dal Sudafrica*, p. 143.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

of Afrikaans live poetry, which, although less prominent than its English counterpart, has also enjoyed some success. Among the performances discussed is Tony Stuart's *Ma ek ko huis toe*. This composition combines the lyric self's nostalgia for home and the mother figure with a longing for the mother tongue. Terrenato emphasises how the poet's decision to use Afrikaans instead of English (contrary to her usual practice) could be emblematic in this context. In addition, the scholar underlines the crucial role of translation in this kind of performative poetry. In the performance, the recitation of the Afrikaans text is immediately followed by its translation into English by a man, a practice that "overturns both the male supremacy that characterises the literary world globally, and the relationship between the two languages in terms of prestige".²⁷

Terrenato's examination of live poetry in "Lingue e linguaggi" concludes the last chapter of the volume. Without delving into the biographies of the poets, I would like to offer some final thoughts on the work. As I have tried to show, *In Verse* is a thought-provoking essay, enriched with theoretical insights and in-depth analyses of individual poems. Its structure and approach are well suited to both specialists and newcomers to the subject. However, as the authors themselves acknowledge, this essay does not claim to be a comprehensive anthology. Readers should not expect it to provide a comprehensive overview of all the features of South African women's poetry. Rather, *In Verse* should be seen as an introduction to a multifaceted and relatively unexplored area. The approach of this work inevitably suggests the need for an in-depth study of a field as vast as the oceans that are central to the work of these poets. It will be up to other scholars – or perhaps to Guarducci and Terrenato themselves – to take this exploration further.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 162.