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Poet Spotlight | An Interview with Thato Magano

Thato Magano, a South African poet and graduate student at Rutgers University in the department of Comparative Literature, sat down to provide additional context to the collection of poems that follow this interview.

What inspires you to write, and what draws you to poetry as a form of communication?

I am inspired by many things, which can be random, like the pleasures of taking a walk or the change in season or a difficult conversation with a friend. Because I write across genres, I've increasingly found poems to be effective in how finite they can tell a story. Unlike long form writing like a short story or essay, I appreciate that a poem can demand its presence and be done with you just as quickly, though I do acknowledge that some poems stay a while longer than you'd want them to, but in the majority, as a medium, with poems, there's an immediate finiteness that I really appreciate.

What inspired this specific collection of poetry?

These poems are part of a collection I started working on over the summer break of 2018. I was in Dakar, Senegal and the experience was such a sensorial delight in many unexpected ways, and I had been struggling to write/journal about it until I visited Gorée Island. The experience of being on the island was fraught, with many intersecting concerns about memory, profit, and questions of triumph and overcoming. So in a lot of ways, the work is trying to think through the complicated lives of islands.

Can you tell us more about the collection, and if there is an overarching title for the greater body of work?

The larger collection attempts to place Robben Island, Gorée, and New York City together in conversation to complicate the connected histories that have largely not been accounted for in scholarship or even popular discourse. Presently, *The Complicated Lives of Islands* is a working title for the larger collection, which addresses the intersecting themes, as in fact the poems, "The End of the World is Pleasure" and "Legacies of Trauma" are attentive to the intersecting histories of the Atlantic, and are trying to stage

a conversation between Southern West Africa and West Africa. The *Visions of Dakar* was a consideration, to serve more so as a visually and syntactically pleasurable “subtitle,” for the series of poems shared with *Ufahamu*. Yet, *The Complicated Lives of Islands* really holds the messiness of the excerpted poems along with others in the collection.

From the poems shared, you seem very conscious of your responsibility to your ancestors—in communicating with them, finding peace for them and as a byproduct yourself (perhaps through a return), and continuing legacies of resistance (questioning the destruction brought about by capitalism and mass labor/production). Can you speak more to this and how or if it is always central in your art?

In part yes, but I think more than a return/resistance, rather, temporality. And I use temporality to signal a refusal to think of a linear boundedness to a sense of past, present and future when Black and Brown bodies live in the many afterlives of slavery and dispossession. So the poems, as with much of my writing, are about all the things you mention and still more. Memory, enduring grief, etc. It just is that this series is so closely tied to the experience of being on Gorée Island.

How does your academic writing intersect with your creative writing? Or, does it?

I think it does in a far more obvious way for long form writing than it does for poetry, but the intersections are there because the themes are always the same given that I’m always largely thinking about gender, sexuality and the body, and how those experiences can live in multiple ways on the page.