

# INDIGENOUS SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY AS CONDUITS OF HISTORY: EPI-POETICS – A PEDAGOGY OF MEMORY

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## ***Abstract***

*This conceptual article argues that a pedagogy of poetic memory, or epi-poetics, can be used to remember and 're-member' the past in the present in the history classroom. Epi-poetics as a theory encapsulates the dynamic interplay of language (including indigenous poetry), the body (both physical and psychological remembering of the past) and the socio-cultural and physical environments in memory construction. As a pedagogy, epi-poetics allows for the indigenisation of the curriculum by tapping into Indigenous Knowledge constructs, specifically indigenous poetry and how it relates to memory, trauma and history. The indigenous poetry is both a source of memory, and, therefore history, and a fount and font of inter-generational experience and trauma.*

**Keywords:** Epi-poetics; Inter-generational memory; Pedagogy; History; Indigenous poetry; Embodiment; Remembrance.

## **Introduction: Indigenous poetry, history and epi-poetics**

Indigenous South African poetry can be incorporated in the history classroom as memory traces and sources or conduits of indigenous history. These poems serve as epi-poetic texts wherein language, the body and the environment interact to create inter-generational meaning that is embodied in poetic language. Epi-poetics marries the fields of epigenetics, which studies the bio-psychological manifestation of inheritance, and the literary criticism of texts with a marked contextualisation of inter-generational memory and trauma. Furthermore, as a pedagogy, epi-poetics emphasises learning as sensory experiencing: the multimodal quintessence of these poems enriches the learning experience in the classroom.

Poetic storytelling is part of South Africa's indigenous poetic fibre. The San were the first exponents of indigenous poetic narratives. Their rock art and folklore were expressed through verbal, gestural, sensual, spatial,

visual and aural modes in altered (or higher) states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams, 2004). They made sense of their world as individuals and as members of small hunting bands through poetic storytelling (Krog, 2004; Lewis-Williams, 2002), which was accompanied by trance dance and rock painting (Lewis-Williams, 2004). Their poetic stories named the rocks, insects, animals and the gods of sky and earth. The poetic narratives were vessels to teach the young how to hunt and transferred medicinal practices inter-generationally. These stories connected the San to their innerworld, to nature, to their community, and to their ancestors and related how the cosmos was created (Van der Post, 1961). Crucially, these narratives also made sense of colonial contact with the African and white settlers by depicting strange other-worldly figures and battle scenes.

The rich oral poetry practice of the African communities of South Africa is closely connected to the San oral literary tradition. These poems were first published in the late 19th century in independent Xhosa and mission publications (Opland, 2004). This genre has both an entertainment and social-political value, and still plays an important role in meaning-making in modern-day South Africa (Opland, 2017; 1998; 1992). Similar to the San storytelling, it speaks of domestic life, politics and colonial oppression. The Afrikaner also share in this oral tradition. Afrikaner poetry gave voice to, for example, the suffering of the concentration camps of the South African War (1899-1902). Herman Charles Bosman's English short stories written in an Afrikaans register encapsulate the sad pathos of Afrikaner culture in the depression years of the 1930s and 1940s (MacKenzie, 2004). It is part of the veranda storytelling tradition of small-town gossip and humour.

The San, African, coloured and Afrikaner communities performed and wrote stories and poetry that are embedded in the history and soil of South Africa. Subsequently, for the purpose of this article, these poetic narratives are considered as indigenous literature. Furthermore, this article conceptualises the ways in which the poetic voices from the past may be used in the South African classroom to engender a more inclusive learning space, by focusing on indigenous poetry of a specific historical event: the sinking of the *SS Mendi* in 1917. This study is not an empirical study but provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for the learning and teaching of indigenous poetry in the History and language classrooms.

The writer identified the educational benefit of indigenous poetry in the History and language classroom through an auto-ethnographic journey of

teaching and learning. He is a researcher in the *South African Poetry Project* (ZAPP)<sup>1</sup> that promotes the inculcation of indigenous poetry in the English school classroom. ZAPP initiatives include the #Jozi4Poetry competition for learners and poetry workshops for teachers and learners at secondary schools in Gauteng. The *Colloquium on Decoloniality and Indigeneity in Poetry and Education* organized by ZAPP was held at the University of the Witwatersrand from 20-21 July 2019. The papers delivered at this colloquium, and the live performances by indigenous poets, including Malika Ndlovu, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Sisonke Papu and Katleho Shoro, as well as the poetry readings by school learners during the #Jozi4Poetry happenings attest to the vibrancy and educational value of indigenous poetry in learning spaces. The many young participants at #Jozi4Poetry readings testify that indigenous poetry is a vibrant genre among many of South Africa's youth. The multimodal experiences of the attendees during the poetry readings mirror what Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected president of South Africa, observed some eight decades ago:

*When he [the Xhosa imbongi or indigenous poet, SEK Mqhayi] spoke this last word [of poetry], he dropped his head to his chest. We rose to our feet, clapping and cheering. I did not want ever to stop applauding. I felt such intense pride at that point, not as an African, but as a Xhosa; I felt like one of the chosen people* (Opland, 2009:9).

The correlation between enhanced self-image among indigenous peoples and the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge constructs in Western education curricula has been made in the literature (Ned, 2019). Ned's (2019) study reveals that indigenous black South African learners who are taught only according to a Western curriculum may suffer from cultural dissonance that may translate into psychological, physical and spiritual ill health. Ned (2019:229) concludes:

*This body, mind and spirit [of the learner] cannot be engaged without the ancestral life which is a representation of a conscious engagement with one's history and identity as anchored in the Indigenous education philosophy. This is important for the success of indigenous learners and for strengthening an understanding of their whole selves and identity.*

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1 The conceptualisation of epi-poetics would not have been possible if it had not been for the ideas raised during the discussions of the South African Poetry Project (ZAPP) research team (Reconceptualising Poetry Education for South African Classrooms through infusing Indigenous Poetry Texts and Practices), of which I am a member and researcher. This Project is funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF 105159) of South Africa. I am especially indebted to Prof. Denise Newfield (Director ZAPP) and Prof. Deirdre Byrne (Senior Investigator ZAPP) for their contributions to the conceptualisation of this article.

In this article, epi-poetics is conceptualised as a theory and pedagogy that engages the whole self in the process of learning, which allows for the introduction of Indigenous Knowledge in the South African history classroom. Epi-poetics embed the body and language in a holistic and multimodal pedagogical learning space. By tapping into an epi-poetic approach to learning and teaching, learners are exposed to not only a Rankean “what actually happened”, but also an Owenesque “what was actually experienced” in the past.

## **Epi-poetic research design**

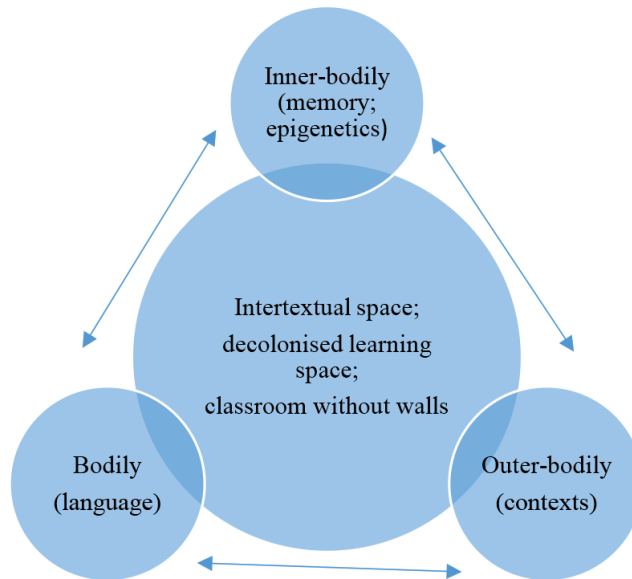
### ***Conceptualisation and methodology***

The term epi-poetics in this article is used to theorise and conceptualise the close connection among indigenous poetry, bodily experience and historical space. The term epi-poetics is based on research in the field of war poetry with a strong historical contextualisation (Genis, 2018), see Image 1 below. The prefix “epi” refers to the subtext of experience: the meaning that lies “above” or “in addition to” the explicitly stated text. Epi-poetics consists of three underlying principles: the *Bodily* refers to being present in the world through language; the *Inner-bodily* encapsulates inter-generational memory and epigenetics; and the *Outer-bodily* embodies the cultural, social and historical contexts in which the “body” finds itself or which the “body” (learner or scholar) studies as part of the history curriculum. These three levels of “being” in the world create an intertextual space of culturally embedded memory that influences individual experience. The intertextual space, which is the weaving together of texts, bodies and contexts, also refers to the “decolonised learning space” (Shava & Manyike, 2018:38) or “classroom without walls” metaphor that is discussed in the article. History and language classrooms become more egalitarian spaces of learning where diverse experiences are shared across cultures.

To indicate how the classroom may become more egalitarian spaces, indigenous poetry in English translation from different historical eras on the sinking of the troop-transport *SS Mendi* (1917) is discussed in this article. This case study indicates the dynamic interplay of word, body and context in remembering and “re-remembering” History as a multimodal experiencing and reliving of the past. Epi-poetic coding, or open-coding with a “consciousness”, is used to identify the cultural-historical word-traces or markers in the sample of indigenous poems. These epi-poetic marks are represented by metaphors, metonyms, symbols, communal

archetypes or primordial images, silences and performances, and reflect an indigenised experience of history: The First World War poetry, of which the Mendi poetry forms part, reveals a collective South African experience of war in Africa and Europe (Genis, 2018). Epi-poetic coding and text analysis draw on close reading, reader-response and multimodal analyses. All these approaches to textual analyses are based on the embodiment, remembering and re-remembering of experience as will be discussed in the following sections.

**Image 1: Epi-poetic research design**



Source: Designed by author.

### ***Theoretical framework: Re-remembering***

The theories that underpin the epi-poetic learning and teaching methodologies are an eclectic amalgam of indigeneity theory (or de-colonial theory), epigenetics, neuroscience, psychoanalysis, posthumanism and bio-cultural studies. Indigenous poetry and songs are conceptualised as epi-poetic narratives: language, body and environment are woven together to create a “hauntology” of remembrance and re-rememberance: traces of the past are found in the present. According to Christie (2007:237), conflict poetry with a strong historical context is a remembering and “re-remembering of body parts” as the poet embodies the physical and psychological body that is missing due to conflict. Similarly, according to Gunner (1995:51),

indigenous poetry, of which many represent the experiencing of war and trauma, is a “poetry of remembering” of the past in the present. Newfield and Bozalek (2018:52) concur that indigenous poetic expression concerns itself with “remembering and re-remembering” of the past in the present. They state that “Writing is ... a bodily and a spiritual action” (50), a post-humanistic process, which represents a cyclical experience of “returning and re-turning” to memory across “human and non-human [e.g. language]” borders (52). Liyong (2018) reflects on this spirituality of indigenous texts by indicating that indigenous literature, including poetry, has animistic traces: it has a soul and memory within a textual body. Hodge (1998:36,38) also conceptualises memory as “remembering” and the repetition of memory in her *A small history of the body*. These scholars concur that memory and history are inscribed on and in the body: it is a function of and for the body. In the above quote, Mandela remembered that he was a proud Xhosa while listening to Mqhayi’s performance poetry, and he also re-remembered his identity as “one of the chosen people”.

Jeff Opland (2017; 2009; 2008; 2007; 2004; 1998; 1992), Abner Nyamende (2011; 2008) and Liz Gunner’s (2004; 2002; 1979) research on indigenous poetry and songs reveals that indigenous poetry, including the oral praise poetry,<sup>2</sup> is an inter-generational literary embodiment within the African context. Epi-poetics provides for a conceptual lens through which to uncover this dynamic interplay among language, the body (physical and psychological) and the environment in shaping inter-generational memory traces within the indigenous poetry.

The writer postulates that, metaphorically, the indigenous poetry represents an epigenome. Similar to the epigenome that regulates gene expression, the indigenous poem orders memory within a cultural context. This entails the mutability of experience and plasticity of memory: word particles or word-traces and non-verbal cues are psychological triggers that switch memory of experience on and off (as in the case of Mandela’s experience). The “epi-poem” carries consciousness that reflects communal practices or archetypes and images of loss or gain: inter-generational experiences that are mirrored in the culturally transmitted stock-phrases of the poet. These archetypical practices are expressed in an individualised manner by the *imbongi* through epi-poetic marks or signs, and bodily performances. Indigenous poetry does not only have fixed lines, idioms and stock phrases that are culturally transmitted (similar to the genetic DNA structure) but

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<sup>2</sup> The Zulu and Xhosa refer to praise poetry as *izibongo*, and the Basotho use the terms *lithoko* and *lifela*.

also creatively conceived new lines (changes in gene expression as part of the epigenome) that are added, changed or removed through time and which are dependent on historical context and the personality of the performing poet.

The epi-poetic praise-units or nouns with adjectival attachments in the indigenous poetry serve a similar purpose as the geometric patterns and figures of the rock paintings of the San “boilers” or healers. Both depict a deep spiritual and emotional connection to the ancestors and visions that lie beyond the page and behind the rock. South Africa’s most ancient inhabitants, the San, lived this close communion that exists among language (rock painting and folklore), the body (trance dancing), and the environment (daily survival) in creating memory and history (Lewis Williams, 2004; 2002). The physical struggles for survival of the San – hunting, drought, healing illnesses, and wars – were depicted through their language and in their art to come to terms with the various threatening contexts in which they lived. The *imbongi* and storytellers of southern Africa built on this tradition (Opland, 2017).

Creating and transmitting folklore, the rock-art practice and the oral tradition are subsequently part of South Africa’s “DNA” of memory. Lewis-Williams (2004) postulates that there is a universally held neuropsychological hallucinatory experience: “boiling” or trancing, and painting on rock or “making” poetry rewire the nervous system in altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams, 2004). Historically, poems with a strong hallucinatory content, similar to the rock art of the trancing shaman, were created in states of deep meditation or were conceived during drug-induced episodes (Lewis-Williams, 2004). An “epi-poem”, therefore, reveals an altered state of consciousness or “deep” thinking that mirrors psychological processes in the creator, which are intertwined with a communal consciousness.

Consequently, epi-poetics is part of “biosocial and biocultural studies”, in which the physical and psychological body and cultural experiences are inextricably connected (Bloomfield & Hanson, 2015:407). Crucially, the indigenous poetry embodies historical experience in both a social and cultural milieu and in a psycho-biological context. The indigenous poetry as body of metaphor mirrors social, cultural and psychological experience within a specific historical context. These “poetic bodies”, therefore, echo the epigenetic genome that is present in the chromosomes



and consciousness of indigenous peoples and which are re-membered in the poetry.

### ***Pedagogical framework***

Epi-poetics also provides for a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning poetry with a marked historical context. It is a multimodal approach to studying the indigenous history of memory: the indigenous poems were performed through verbal and non-verbal language. This multimodal experience of the poet as it relates to the collective unconscious of her/his culture is identified and made explicit in word-traces and marks of performance or silences in the poetry. Furthermore, epi-poetics speaks to trauma and epigenetics as the word-traces represent stress marks within the poet's writing consciousness. This approach may also be used to teach poetry that is characterised by a marked contextualisation of loss: word, body and environment all interact and "weave" together to create meanings of loss and healing. Subsequently, an epi-poetic pedagogy has affinities with multiliteracies, and specifically with its focus on social justice, multiculturalism and multilingualism (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Importantly for the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which insists on an inclusive learning community, the indigenous poems name not only great people and historical events, but also family characteristics and everyday events and experiences (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2006; Gunner, 2004). These indigenous poems and songs are cultural identity markers that reveal much of everyday life and experience within specific historical contexts. The words and phrases in the indigenous poetry represent the "word" chromosomes in the cells of the living and the dead, who are marked by the metaphors and metonyms of loss and gain. The images in the poetry portray these traces of manifest loss and gain within various historical contexts.

### **Situating epi-poetics within the literature**

#### ***Epi-poetics as a theory of memory***

Epi-poetics is conceptualised as the implicit collective literary consciousness of a people that is manifested through poetic language traces that represent culturally embodied marks. These marks are metaphorical and metonymic word-traces that find expression in the indigenous poetry. Epi-poetics draws on research in the field of epigenetics. Epigenetics is



closely aligned to genetics and studies inter-generational changes in gene expression and the transfer of epigenetic marks in the progeny. Changes in gene activity and gene activation lead to the dynamic interaction among language, the body and the physical, social and cultural environments (Middleton, 2015; Bloomfield, Garratt, Mackay, Richardson, Spector and Temple, 2015; Bloomfield & Hanson, 2015; Gill, 2015; Osborne, 2015; Hanson, 2015). These authors highlight the relevance of epigenetics in the study of race, gender and identity within social, cultural, literary and historical texts and contexts.

The physical word-traces in epi-poetic texts represent the psychological marks that are embedded in the collective historical and literary unconscious of the poet's cultural context. Epi-poetics, therefore, studies the embodiment of inter-generational experience through language. Hodge (1998:31) indicates that the bio-psychological body is "a system of inscription". This builds on the Freudian and Nietzschean concepts of repetition and the cyclic embodiment of memory (Hodge 1998:36). It also links to the "Writing the body" project of the feminist theorists Irigaray and Cixous (Hodge 1998:32). Indigenous Knowledge systems have been writing the body since the dawn of the age of storytelling, rock art and spoken-word poetry. There was never a Cartesian split between body and reason/spirit/soul in the indigenous cosmology (Ned, 2019). Hodge (1998:38) asserts that memory is "the retrieval of a past into the present, suggesting a cyclical motion to time, from event, to forgetting, to retrieval", i.e. 'remembering'. This is especially true of indigenous South African concepts of time: present space and context is a mirror of the ancestral world; the past lives in the present.

Importantly, epi-poetics resonates with the "history of bodies" or the historiography of bodies, which focuses on the embodiment of experience through, for instance, the study of gendered biological *Bodily* functions within historical contexts (Owusu, 2019). These "bodies" are also psychologically wired (*Inner-bodily*). Tosh (1993:103) refers to the "history of mentalities" which is a history of "the emotional, the instinctive and the implicit". It reveals "the play of the unconscious in collective mentality" (103). Additionally, Firth (2017:156) refers to "reflective nostalgia" (*Inner-bodily*) or individual and personal source generation in history that links the present consciousness (through the researcher – the *Bodily*) to the past (the sources – *Outer-bodily*) in historical narrative construction. The connection between language (the *Bodily*), memory (*Inner-bodily*) and

historical context (*Outer-bodily*) is reminiscent of Jung's (2003) collective unconscious with its shared or communal archetypes: primordial images of monsters, people or processes that mutate in the history, memory, minds and bodies of communities, which also find expression in the literature. These archetypes are represented in the poetry through explicit epi-poetic marks or traces that resonate from the collective historical and literary unconscious of a people. Epi-poetic traces are revealed as cultural metaphors and metonyms in the poetry that has historical relevance.

Crucially, for the South African context, epi-poetics is ensconced within the epistemology of Indigenous Knowledge. Indigenous Knowledge may be conceptualised as the philosophical, religious, traditional, cultural, technological and language "knowledges" that exist within a specific indigenous context or life-world. These knowledge constructs are frequently transmitted orally (including oral poetry, performance and songs) or through dreams and visions (Kgari-Masondo, 2018; Shava & Manyike, 2018; Mvenene, 2017). The United Nations adopted a resolution that declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages. This resolution promotes indigenous languages and encourages their use to guard against their disappearance (United Nations, 2016:5). Within the context of retreating indigenous cosmologies in the face of the dominant Western knowledge constructs, epi-poetics re-emphasises the interconnectedness of language, the body (physical and psychological) and the environment in forming literary and historical meaning. Language, body and environment dynamically interact in reconstructing, remembering and re-membering the collective inter-generational experiences or memories of the past, especially as they are reflected in and through indigenous poetic language that carries memory traces of the past.

Epi-poetics opens a multicultural learning space of being or becoming. Kgari-Masondo (2018:15) argues for the study of indigenous history or memory, which is embedded in Indigenous Knowledge "from within its own [indigenous] context". She indicates the symbiotic relationship that exists between indigenous communities and the natural environment in which the ancestors still play an active role (Kgari-Masondo, 2018:18-21): "Nature is memory of the imagination of being – being that is deeply embedded in the collective unconscious" (21). Importantly, the indigenous language contains the seed of the community's collective memory – or "being" – and history (21). Lewis-Williams (2004) conceptualises this "imagination of being" in terms of neuroscience. He postulates that

“boiling” or “making” poetry or art has rewired the nervous system in altered states of consciousness in southern Africa since the beginnings of rock art some 5000 years ago. Boiling allows for the creation of visionary and dream-like artistic expression. The importance of dreams and visions as mirrors of symbolic meaning, and language as a conduit to transmit these, links to epi-poetics.

This view is supported by Shava and Manyike (2018:36-37,44) who state that Indigenous Knowledge is transmitted inter-generationally (*Inner-bodily*) and that indigenous languages (*Bodily*) act as conduits of these indigenised knowledges within a specific cultural and physical environment (*Outer-bodily*). Shava and Manyike (2018) associate Indigenous Knowledge with place, history and memory and state that Indigenous Knowledge is dynamic and can change over time to respond to environments in flux. Epi-poetics also postulates that memory is in a state of flux as it is dependent on the specific historical context. Crucially, the indigenous praise poem is constantly changing its shape and message depending on the specific historical context, the thematic emphasis of the oral performance and the poet’s persona (Opland, 2009; 1992). Shava and Manyike (2018:38) further argue that “By including indigenous languages and knowledges ... a pluri-epistemological, contextualised and decolonial learning space” is created.

In South Africa, the work of Nyamende (2011; 2008), Gunner (2004; 2002; 1979), and Opland (2007; 2004; 1998) has claimed for indigenous poetry such a decolonised space of remembering and re-remembering: the indigenous praise poem is a uniquely inter-generational literary embodiment of experience within the African context. Poetry, including praise poetry, in South African historiography has also been engaged to remember and re-member specific forgotten South African historical topics, themes and phenomena (Genis, 2018). Importantly, epi-poetics as a conceptual framework draws together language, the physical and psychological body and the environment within an indigenous context to serve as a schema that reveals traces of inter-generational memory and trauma as re-remembered in the indigenous poetry. The three concepts, poetic language, the body and the context, also represent a pedagogy of memory.

### ***Epi-poetics as a pedagogy of memory***

Epi-poetics allows for a multimodal remembering and re-remembering of the past in the present by focusing on the interaction of language, the body

and the environment. The indigenous poetry serves as artifacts<sup>3</sup> or conduits of such a multimodal learning experience - and *experiencing* - within the history classroom. Newfield and Maungedzo's (2006) research findings reveal the potential for linking languages, bodies and environments in reviving an ailing educational space. During their research project, grade ten learners in a Soweto classroom created a multi-semiotic cloth that represents their learning in the English classroom:

*The Thebuwa [to speak] cloth is a collective, multi-semiotic assemblage which was produced by the whole class as an act of self-constitution and communication to an unknown international audience. Measuring 3.0 metres by 2.8 metres, Thebuwa is constructed from 22 smaller cloths made by individuals and groups and then stitched together. On each small cloth, made from a square of scrap fabric found in the family home or from a recycled maize bag, students have inked family or clan praise poems in their indigenous languages, and have embroidered a map of the 'new South Africa', itself a form of post-apartheid recycling and reconfiguration. Poems in English, which have been placed inside used envelopes, traditional doll-like figures and colour photographs of the makers are attached to the cloth. Lines of small brass safety pins crawl decoratively across it (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2006:77).*

Various indigenous and colonial languages, physical and psychological bodies and different cultural and historical contexts are woven together in a multimodal matrix of identity. The poems in the "speaking"-cloth design have a crucial function: "Each poem is thus both an individual item and a thread in the collective tapestry of identity" (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2006:77). This physical design is reminiscent of the double-helix structure of DNA in which biological identity is twisted together and in which inter-generational memory is written in code. In the Thebuwa cloth, the poems serve as epi-poetic or epigenetic markers that reveal individual responses to the cultural and historical context of the learners. The Thebuwa cloth as bio-cultural artifact serves as an example of how poetry can be used in the classroom to enrich the learning experience.

Epi-poetics as a conceptual framework encourages this weaving of identities. The Thebuwa approach could conceivably have been used in the history classroom as well, where learners could have written themselves into a history project through a multimodal design. Newfield and D'Abdon (2015) illustrate that poetry allows for a multimodal experience in the classroom, as it represents not only the poem on the page, but also the live

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3 The concept 'artifact' as coined by the New Literacy Studies approach is preferred to 'artefact' in this article as it conceptualises the artifact as a pedagogical object of learning in the classroom.

performances and audience participation. Therefore, it facilitates a reader and viewer-response to learning. Indigenous poetry and storytelling also allow learners to share their own stories and those of their communities in the classroom which may lead to an inclusive, multicultural and multi-linguistic classroom space. Traditionally, in indigenous African communities, the characteristics of clans, families and individuals are represented in and shaped by their oral poems and songs that serve as the communities' identity markers (Gunner, 2004).

Epi-poetics is multimodal experiencing with an "attitude" or deep consciousness that allows for a conceptual connection between the theory and practice of history. Since 2016, South African academics and university students have voiced their opposition to a Western-centric South African education system and for the epistemological decolonisation of the curriculum (Naicker, 2016). Within this context, Mvenene (2017) looks specifically at the *izibongo* (praise poetry) as conduits of memory within the ambit of Indigenous Knowledge and history. Mvenene (2017:100) has revealingly emphasised the importance of using "IKS [specifically *izibongo* and songs] as historical sources" which may contribute to the decolonising project.

Importantly, CAPS makes provision for Indigenous Knowledge as content knowledge in history teaching and learning in schools as part of social transformation (Mvenene, 2017:108-109). For instance, the CAPS (2011) for Social Sciences for the Intermediate and Senior Phases (grades 4-9) and for the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase (grades 10-12) provide specific aims that include Indigenous Knowledge phenomena and themes and the use of various indigenous source material that comprises songs, poems, stories, traditions and rituals, community-based interviews and oral history. Additionally, heritage, conservation and the importance of remembrance in history teaching and learning are emphasised in CAPS.

Instilling Indigenous Knowledge systems, including indigenous poetry, into the curriculum will go a long way to address the decolonisation of learning. Indigenous South African learners will be able to bring their own stories and those of their communities, as represented in the indigenous poetry and songs, into the classroom. This socio-cultural embedding of learning resonates with New Literacy Studies (NLS) that view literacy and learning as a social practice that is embedded in culture and identity (Pahl & Rowsell, 2013; Rowsell, Kosnik & Beck, 2008). NLS argue that viewing

learning as a social project gives the marginalised in society a voice (Pahl & Rowsell, 2013; Rowsell, Kosnik & Beck, 2008). Furthermore, Indigenous Knowledge introduces learners to an indigenised way of viewing history: the cyclic nature of memory and remembrance, and the inclusiveness and importance of nature for instance. Therefore, the oral poetry tradition in South Africa provides for a decolonised way in which to study, appreciate and experience history.

The experiencing of history links to a constructivist learning space. Mvenene (2017) views Indigenous Knowledge as a constructivist process of knowledge construction, which aligns to historical enquiry as a process (Godsell, 2017). Learners are actively engaged in making meaning of historical events through the indigenous poetry. Mvenene posits that Indigenous Knowledge and *izibongo* allow for methodological renewal in the history classroom. For instance, *izibongo* and songs provide for a rich source of genealogical history and for the introduction of interactive historical source materials (Mvenene, 2017). Because of the indigenous poetry's performance quality (Opland, 2009; 1992; Gunner, 2004; 1979) it has the potential to enhance multimodal literacies and learning in the classroom through speaking, acting, singing, viewing and experiencing as acts of learning (Pahl & Rowsell, 2013; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Mvenene (2017) hints at the empathic quality in teaching *izibongo*. Incorporating indigenous poetry into the history curriculum could lead to a psychological shift in how history is conceived. It builds on "perspective taking ... which requires empathy and empathic understanding in history, which are part of second-order historical concepts" (Godsell, 2017:69). It also links to one of the aims in the History FET CAPS (2011:9): that there are different perspectives and interpretations of historical events. Mvenene (2017) postulates that *izibongo* would allow the learner to place herself in someone else's shoes. This also speaks to reflective nostalgia, which generates "a plethora of alternatives in terms of thinking about the past" (Firth, 2017:156-159). Crucially, the psychological subtext provided by the indigenous poetry provides for "authentic" historical information. It creates a portal for learners to be immersed in the historical reality of the period which is studied. Godsell (2017:78) perceptively states:

... how close we can get to 'sources' – the closest being an oral source, hearing from a person involved, alive, present, at the time we are examining.



The indigenous poetry is precisely this “oral source” which allows for the past to be performed in the present. Malkin-Page and Wassermann (2019) refer to this linking of the learners’ past with their present practices and the future as historical literacy or historical consciousness. Using indigenous poetry as artifacts through an epi-poetic approach could lead to the enhancement of the above-mentioned historical literacies. The emphasis on inter-generational memory construction in epi-poetics consciously explores this relationship between the past and the present within the ambit of historical literacy.

Epi-poetics encapsulates the interrelated bond among the past or memory, the present body or learner, the past body (either a person, event or source), and the environment, through historical consciousness. The indigenous poetry illustrates the close link between the language of loss and psychological and physical trauma that is so deeply embedded in the South African collective consciousness (Genis, 2018; 2015). Therefore, indigenous poetry can be introduced as primary sources that reveal inter-generational memory and consciousness – the bond between the past and the present. Introducing multiple sources, including indigenous poetry, allows for the creation of multiple narratives or voices from the past (Malkin-Page & Wassermann, 2019). Importantly, the indigenous poetry enhances critical learner engagement with the past which connects to “thinking historically”, to an “enquiry-based model” and to evoking a “sense of empathy” (Malkin-Page and Wassermann, 2019:112-114).

Epi-poetics allows for a pedagogical linkage between Indigenous Knowledge, the CAPS, historical literacy, thinking historically, historical thinking and language. It does this by focusing on historical consciousness and how this is revealed in an Indigenous Knowledge construct, the indigenous poetry. Using the indigenous poetry as a historical source links the home literacies of the indigenous learner (oral poetry, songs and stories) with school literacies as encouraged by CAPS. Some learners could conceivably more readily identify with past role-players and events that are described in the indigenous poetry by linking diverse contexts through their home literacies.

### **Indigenous poetry: Epi-poetic artifacts of learning**

The indigenous poem is an epi-poetic artifact or source. This artifact symbolises the embodiment of experience within a specific historical and cultural context. It links the *Bodily* (the learner through language) with the



*Inner-bodily* (inter-generational memory as represented in the poetry) and the *Outer-bodily* (the specific historical context).

Additionally, the indigenous poem is an artifact of evidence that enhances research skills (Malkin-Page & Wassermann, 2019:111). Erdmann (2017:140) concludes that historical objects and places make history part of and relevant to the history student's life. Pahl and Rowsell (2013:49-51,74-75,153,165-166) argue that artifacts are used in the classroom to link home or out-of-school literacies with school literacies that create a "third space" or a "new" environment of learning in which learners and teachers construct and share their stories that are represented through these artifacts. The third space is akin to Shava and Manyike's (2018:38) "decolonised learning space". Learners and teachers tell their stories through indigenous poetry and songs in an empathic environment where everyone meets as equals. It also aligns to the CAPS's insistence on the creation of spaces of historical becoming where Africans re-affirm their dignity through, amongst others, poetry performances and readings (Mvenene, 2017).

Introducing epi-poetic artifacts in the classroom encourages "classrooms without walls". The classroom becomes an egalitarian space where cultural and linguistic differences are celebrated through home and traditional literacies. Liyong (2018:27) gives practical advice of how these "democratic pedagogical spaces" (Mvenene, 2017:109) should be populated by artifacts of learning. Although he refers to literature education, the same could apply to the history classroom. Liyong (2018:27) indicates that literary experts in villages should teach traditional literary forms at universities, new poems and stories should be written in the vernacular and a third language taken at university. He concludes:

*We need to give the 'unmortared' experts in the villages two months' fellowships in departments of literature to teach the oral genres and forms to students of [...indigenous languages] and tapes should be made of their renditions. And the students should, of necessity, compose new poems, new stories in their native languages* (Liyong, 2018:27).

Similarly, Ned (2019:229) emphasises the importance of village elders as founts of indigenous knowledge who should be working with teachers and learners within the education system:

*Teachers should consult elders for guidance in providing culturally meaningful learning environments and activities* (Ned, 2019:238).

Indigenous poetry in the classroom would give indigenous learners the opportunity to reflect on their past by writing and performing their traditional oral poems and stories. This may allow them to connect or reconnect with specific historical persons and events and their collective pasts. They could weave themselves into the past, similar to what grade ten Soweto learners did in their *Thebuwa* cloth, which will give them a voice in the classroom.

### **Epi-poetic case study**

Indigenous poems on the sinking of the *SS Mendi* in 1917 form the data set for this study and illustrate the close interplay among experience, language and context in the shaping of historical meaning. The *Mendi* transported members of the South African Native Labour Contingent to Europe when it collided with another ship and sank in the English Channel on 21 February 1917. Hundreds of Africans drowned (Grundlingh, 2011). This event has been in the news since the centenary celebrations that started in 2017. The ship has become a symbol of African pride and the subject matter for conferences (e.g. the *Mendi Centenary Conference* at UCT) and various publications, including Fred Khumalo's novel, *Dancing the death drill* (2017). Historically, *Mendi* celebrations were stifled by the apartheid government during the second half of the 20th century (Grundlingh, 2011). However, in 1994 South Africa's first democratically elected government was established. Subsequently, the *Mendi* dead have been increasingly remembered and re-membered by the new ANC government: various memorial services nationwide and in England bear testimony to this.

In this article, the praise poetry on the sinking of the *SS Mendi* is analysed through epi-poetic coding to reveal the interplay among language, body and historical context in remembering and re-membering the past. Epi-poetic coding is the decoding of figures of speech, symbols, archetypes, silences and performances to reveal the thematic representation of a poet's experiences as embedded in a collective unconscious.

The following *izibongo*, *Bull*, serves as an archetypal poem or primordial image for the later poems on the *Mendi* that deal with African experiences relating to the war and colonial conflict. It is a poem that praises the fighting exploits of the bull.

*Gouger!*  
*Stab-on-sight!*  
*Horn quick to gore.*  
*Crusher with the haft of an axe:*

*It's a sad day for those you stab,  
Like one who gives then takes.  
Bull with many scars.  
One who bellows and the cowards scatter.*  
(‘Bull’, Zulu poem, late 18th, early 19th century; Opland 1992:160)

Cattle have played a crucial role in the economic, political, social and religious lives of Africans in South Africa from the pre-colonial period to the present. The bull more so as it is a symbol and archetype of wealth, and martial prowess, and benevolent sacrifices to the ancestors, as well as a sign of battlefield heroism in the *izibongo* (Chapman, 2002; Opland, 1992): Shaka Zulu’s rise to power in early 19th-century South Africa was facilitated by his devastatingly successful bull-head battlefield encircling technique. The poems on the Mendi build on this bull-ethos of heroism, as the following examples illustrate. In the following data set, the symbols, metaphors and metonyms that form the themes of the bull-calf archetype are underlined and in *italics*. These marked words and phrases are epi-poetic traces. The traces that mirror bodily and psychological loss are underlined and those that refer to self-affirmation are in *italics*. In Table 1, the poems are paired horizontally according to historical context: The First World War; the 1930’s; the middle of the 20th century; and the first decade of the 21st century. These poems were chosen based on their historical relevance as discussed in published sources (Genis, 2018).

**Table 1: Mendi poems in different historical contexts:**

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|--|--|
| <p><b>First World War</b></p> <p>Off with you then, my fellows, off to France!<br/>Remember the <u>hunger</u> you have left at home.<br/>Sent out to face the <u>slaughter</u> there today,<br/>You’re <i>sacrifices</i> for the <i>Black-skinned race</i>.<br/>Go, you <i>bull-calves</i> of the cows with milk-filled udders,<br/>Away, sons of the lean and the long-starved,<br/>And you too, <i>offspring</i> of the <i>death-defiers</i>.<br/>Go, for we have long foreseen all that would come.<br/>Our people’s God decided in advance.<br/>Away, your legs <i>uncramped</i> with stiffness,<br/>No quake or tremor in your hearts.<br/>Go with light bodies, limbs <i>unfrightened</i>,</p> | <p><i>And as our bride down her last flood<br/>The Mendi takes the service of our blood.</i></p> <p>With what <u>victim</u> do we make atonement?<br/>For home and family what <i>offering</i> is sent?<br/>Do we not <i>sacrifice</i> the <i>bull-calves</i> of the kraal,<br/>Single out those most loved of all?<br/>(Mqhayi, ‘Ukutshona kuka Mendi’/’The sinking of the Mendi’, 1917; Cope &amp; Krige 1968:278-279)</p> |
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| <p>And <i>stride on</i>, stride, stride, stride!<br/>Stand, stand firm, stop, sto-o-o-p!<br/>(SEK Mqhayi, ‘Umkosi wemidaka’/’The black army’, 1916; Cope &amp; Krige 1968:278)</p>   |   |
| <p><b>1930s</b><br/>Now then stay calm my <i>countrymen</i>!<br/>Calmly face your <i>death</i>!<br/>This is what you came to do!<br/>This is why you left your homes!<br/>Peace, our own <i>brave warriors</i>!<br/>Peace, you sons of <i>heroes</i>,<br/>This is your final day today,<br/>Prepare for the ultimate ford!<br/>(Mqhayi, ‘The late Rev. Isaac William Wauchope’, 1935; Opland, 2007:106)</p>  | <p>Be quiet and calm my <i>countrymen</i>, for what is taking place now is exactly what you came to do. You are going to <i>die</i>, but that is what you came to do. <i>Brothers</i> we are drilling the drill of death. I, a <i>Xhosa</i>, say you are all my brothers. <i>Zulus, Swazis, Pondos, Basutos</i>, we die like <i>brothers</i>. We are the <i>sons of Africa</i>. Raise your cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our weapons at our homes, <u>our voices are left with our bodies</u>.<br/>(Jacob Bam, ‘The Mendi’, 1936; Nyamende, 2011:14)</p> |
| <p><b>Middle of 20th century:</b><br/>The ship ‘Mendi’ went down at sea<br/>And <u>sank</u> there with the <i>sons of Africa</i>.<br/>Can you picture the sea<br/>Can you picture the ship with people in it?<br/>Down went the ‘Mendi’<br/><u>Down into the sea</u>.<br/>Many were the <u>orphans</u> that were left,<br/>With the sinking of the ‘Mendi’.<br/>We <u>fear</u> you, <u>waters of the sea</u>.<br/>Soften your hearts, you people.<br/>What do you say, <i>Africans</i>?<br/><u>Stay not asleep below!</u><br/>(Zulu song, first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century; Tracey, 1948:9)</p> | <p>We all <u>wept</u> when the news came<br/>From beyond the sea<br/>Announcing the <u>sinking</u> of <i>young men</i><br/>When the Mendi went down<br/><u>O, the sea, the merciless river</u>,<br/>Swallowed them alive<br/>Down went the mighty <i>Bantu offspring</i>:<br/>Down down they went to the <u>Land of the Dead</u>.<br/>(George Tyamshashe, ‘Mendi hymn’, 1952; The Star, 22 February 1952)</p>   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Early 21st century</b></p> <p>SS Mendi, our <i>fallen heroes</i></p> <p>We come here today</p> <p>To commemorate February 21, 1917</p> <p>Celebrate your <i>bravery</i></p> <p>Hails for your <i>courage</i></p><br><p>SS Mendi, our <i>fallen heroes</i></p> <p>We bid you <u>farewell</u></p> <p>In accepting our call</p> <p>To guide the Mendi name</p> <p>Aluta continua [the <u>struggle</u> continues]</p> <p>(Petty Officer Mpho Rakoma, ‘Our fallen heroes’, 2004; <i>Delvile Wood and Mendi poems</i>)</p> | <p>Long</p> <p>Very long decades</p> <p>Our <i>warrior spirits</i></p> <p>Unbound</p> <p>Craved to journey home</p> <p>Yet remained hovering</p> <p>With a massive ache</p> <p>Amongst carefree</p> <p>Seagulls</p> <p>Floating</p> <p>Over this <u>unsteady</u></p> <p><u>Burial site</u></p> <p>Forever fluid</p> <p>In climate most</p> <p><u>Hostile</u></p> <p>In seasons</p> <p>Especially <u>harsh</u></p> <p>To faces of the South</p> <p>To <i>sons of the sun</i></p> <p>[...]</p> <p><u>All aboard</u></p> <p><u>The doomed</u></p> <p><u>SS Mendi</u></p> <p>(Lindiwe Mabuza, ‘SS Mendi’, 2007; <i>Delvile Wood and Mendi poems</i>)</p> |
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The poems reveal how the epi-poetic marks (in *italics* and underlined) that are linked to the “bull calves” and associated Mendi archetype have been appropriated to symbolise African experiences of war and trauma within various South African historical contexts. These traces expose an ambivalent response to gain and loss within the African experience of war and colonialism during the 20th and early 21st-century South Africa.

In the poetry, the “sons of Africa” or “sons of the sun”, the “death-defiers”, “Black-skinned race”, and the “warrior spirits” have kept on shining as

African heroes; they have reclaimed black self-affirmation in the face of colonial oppression. In their veins course the “blood” or genes of heroes, including that of Shaka Zulu and the Xhosa Chief Hintsa. The epitome of this noble sacrifice in the poetry on the Mendi is the mythologised death-dance said to have been initiated by the soldier, Isaac Williams Wauchope (1852-1917) on board the sinking ship and to which the two quoted 1930s poems allude (Genis, 2018).

Conversely, these sacrifices (the underlined epi-poetic marks) have also led to loss; the “bull calves” spirits or souls are still roaming the unknown and cold English Channel – their souls have to be returned to familial graves and tended to by their descendants to secure everlasting life as ancestors in the indigenous South African cosmology. However, the soldiers’ souls are scattered in an alien space. Examples that include “our voices [souls or spirits] are left with our bodies [trapped in an alien sea]” (“The Mendi”, 1936); the reference to “the orphans” in the “Zulu Song”; and the lamentations in the “Mendi Hymn” mirror this loss. “Remember the hunger you have left at home” in “A call to arms”, alludes to the devastating 1913 Natives Land Act which led to widespread economic suffering among the African communities in South Africa (Saunders & Southey, 2001). This act started a process of African dispossession and reaction to white rule that characterises 20th-century South African history. In the classroom, this theme can be linked to teaching African cooperation and resistance during the war, the awakening of African nationalism and ideas on race as included in the CAPS, grades 9-12.

The expression of psychological anxiety that is present in these poems also reflects the more recent politics of uncertainty in South Africa. This feeling of uneasiness on the present and future South Africa is succinctly expressed by the poets Cathal Lagan, Basil Somhlahlo, and Brian Walter in the publication *Mendi: Poems on the sinking of the Mendi* which was published at the dawn of South Africa’s democracy. These indigenous poems reveal a plethora of epi-poetic marks that mirror the psychological trauma that South Africa’s troubled past has engendered. In the poems, water becomes an epi-poetic archetype for an uncanny environment of struggle and death. South Africa is metamorphosed as a ship torn on stormy seas.

Consequently, the poems on the Mendi may be used as supplementary historical texts for CAPS (2011) in the classroom. They support the

sources that indicate the reasons why Africans volunteered for service in the South African Native Labour Contingent for non-combatant service in Europe during the First World War (Grundlingh, 1987; Willan, 1978). These poems support the historical sources (Genis, 2018; Grundlingh, 2011) that indicate that the African elite, of which many of the *imbongi* were members, believed that serving Britain loyally in the war would lead to more political rights in the “white” Union of South Africa. Furthermore, instead of only studying the “great” trench poets that include Owen and Sassoon, who are used as examples in CAPS, learners will be exposed to indigenous war poets and songs that specifically refer to South African experiences of the war. Crucially, the indigenous poems provide additional source material for the CAPS’s content “Sinking of the Mendi 1917”. Including a voice from this era – the *imbongi* SEK Mqhayi’s (1875-1945) – provides learners a glimpse into these volunteers’ experiences, and this links with empathy as a second-order historical concept.

Mqhayi’s poems, which reflect on African oppression and which include examples of African resistance and proto-nationalism, cover the first half of the 20th century (Genis, 2018), which is one of the foci of the Senior Phase CAPS. Notably, poetry on the sinking of the Mendi speaks to the importance of historical memory or consciousness and the relevance of historical interpretation of evidence. Additionally, it illustrates the concepts of continuity and change as poems on the Mendi span the period 1917 to the present (Genis, 2018).

Importantly, African learners may be able to recognise the role that their ancestors played in the war as the emotive poetic traces of the past are evidence that it was not a white man’s war, but that many indigenous communities supported the British war effort. This may contribute to the re-membering and affirmation of African experiences within different historical contexts.

The indigenous poetry exposes the South African learners to a richer depiction of the past as black voices are heard through the poetry. They are introduced to not only the British trench poets Owen and Sassoon but also the young black volunteer who is transformed into a sacrificial bull calf to attain ancestral (the “death-defiers”) sanction. Mqhayi re-affirms that the African volunteer dies for “Our people’s God”, and not for the God of the whites. Mqhayi’s was no lackey of the white authorities. His poems incorporate seditious undertones. In *The Black Army*, Mqhayi mentions



sarcastically that the heroes of the black nation managed to defeat the British and Boers on the battlefield during the 19th century (Cope & Krige, 1968) even though they were not allowed to carry arms during the present conflict. The war *izibongo* depicts the African volunteer as a soldier in his own right who becomes an exalted ancestor.

The language used in the indigenous praise poetry from the 19th century to the present is laced with metonyms and metaphors that refer to African trauma and self-affirmation within the face of colonisation (Genis, 2018). These culturally-specific images, therefore, contain inter-generational or epi-poetic traces of memory and history. Terms that include “bull-calves”, “sacrifices” and “death-defiers” situate the war experiences within a specific indigenous context: particular cultural terms are used to describe traumatic events. Introducing the learners to these emotive artifacts may contribute to a more personal experience of the past. Similar to the Thebuwa cloth, learners may be enabled to weave their ancestors’ stories, and subsequently their own stories, into the tapestry of South African history.

The sensory (verbal, aural, visual and representational) experiences that these poems engender in their oral enactments form part of the data. These oral representations elicited emotional responses in the audience, as Mandela’s and the following quote attest: “With these words the Nation’s Poet boils our blood and enflames our ears so we cannot hear” (Opland, 2009:9,526). This is how *The Bantu World* of 9 March 1940 (Opland, 2009:9,526) reported on Mqhayi’s oral renditions of his poetry. Archival and *YouTube* recordings of these performances provide for the incorporation of multimodal source material in the history classroom. The indigenous praise poem in its written and performed embodiment provides for a multimodal historical data set. These historical artifacts may be included in the history classroom to reveal the multi-sensory remembering and re-membering of the indigenous past.

## **Conclusion**

This conceptual article focuses on the close conceptual bond among poetic language, the physical and psychological body and historical context within a South African indigenous milieu. The indigenous epi-poetic traces represent “artifacts” of historical significance that reveal inter-generational African experiences of sacrifice, self-affirmation and colonial-induced trauma within southern Africa. The multimodal qualities of these “epi-poems” lend themselves to a multi-sensory experience of

history within the learning space.

Crucially, incorporating indigenous poetry in the history classroom connects home or traditional literacies with school literacies. Classrooms become decolonised spaces where the indigenous ontology of cyclic experience and becoming is woven with the Westernised curriculum that focuses on linear history, “progress” and quantitative outcomes. The indigenous poems as sites of remembering and “re-remembering” contribute to the creation of a multicultural and constructivist intertextual space of learning, where the teachers and learners share their stories and historical narratives as equals.

Within epi-poetics, the *Bodily*, the *Inner-bodily* and the *Outer-bodily* interact to create a level of ‘being-in-the-world’ or an intertextual space of culturally embedded memory that shapes collective and individual experience within the history classroom. Introducing epi-poetics in teaching and learning history may allow for the physical and psychological body (the African learner) to be reconnected to the memory of the past through indigenous languages. Specific thematic concepts that include colonialism, oppression, resistance, sacrifice and black self-affirmation may be explored within a specific indigenous context. The indigenous poem becomes an artifact with which the learner may interact. It is not only a primary source that was performed or written at the time of important historical events, but also a psychological document that contains evidence of inter-generational memory and trauma. Studying these sources may lead to the enhancement of empathy as home literacies and traditions are linked with the school CAPs literacies.

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