**Cosmologies of Breath**

**Uhuru Phalafala**

My grandfather is dead

he was vomiting blood, my mother says

lungs contaminated by history

brimming full with mine dust.

These are the opening lines of the epic poem *Mine Mine Mine* (2023), a personal narration of my family’s experience of the migrant labour system brought on by the gold mining industry in Johannesburg, South Africa. Using geopoetics to map geopolitics, it maps scales of catastrophic environments, or ecologies of crisis, from my grandfather’s lungs to colonial capitalist sites of Black breathlessness. The epic poem reveals how the extraction of natural resources from the body of earth is contingent upon the extraction of the Black body from the *body of humanity*. In this session I think through the process of writing and performing *Mine Mine Mine*, which I view as existing within the black feminist tradition of imagining, ‘making’ and ‘doing’ against the commodification of humans and earth. I work from ‘an elsewhere’ – from Southern African cosmologies which rupture the logics and limits of New Worlding cosmology – from which I refuse the terms of wreckage, detritus, and ruin by experimenting with poetics of aliveness, possibility, communion, and futurity.

This opening stanza draws from a conversation I had with my mother, who cared for my grandfather in his final days. She informed me that he had been wracked by coughing fits, vomiting blood, which was understandably traumatic to witness. It definitely was traumatic to hear, and stayed with me. I sat with the question: why would someone vomit blood? What would cause such devastation in the body that would result in this scene my mother described? This questioning opened the epic with the assertion that his lungs were contaminated by history, setting it up for the multiple geographies and temporalities, the critical sites of black stolen breath and premature death, and the extension of the crisis from the individual body to the body of family, society, continent, and the bodies of land, waters, and the biosphere. “Lungs contaminated by history” also makes possible the location of history in the body, in our collective bodies, whereas History is often associated with the Man, with the scripted (history is recorded by the victors), and with dominator culture. This line allows a foray into other forms of history, away from big H History, but also asserting and affirming that these small h histories are in fact the site of the makings of big H history. The scenes of subjection in and by History happened on, to, through, and by extractive violence, using logics of hierarchy, domination, and thingification (Aime Cesaire).

The epic addresses extraction through the mining industry, presenting ‘extraction’ as a systemic removal of that which is commodified – that is, natural resources – from the *body of the earth*. In the epic and this essay, I demonstrate how this systemic removal of natural resources happened through the simultaneous instrumentalising and mechanising of the Black body as commodity. The aim is to reveal how the extraction of natural resources from the body of earth is contingent upon the extraction of the Black body from the *body of humanity*. To borrow from Frantz Fanon (1967), in the making of the wretched of the earth, the earth itself was made wretched. This destructive, colonial approach is framed and powered by the worldview of extractivism, a noxious New Worlding cosmology undergirded by the expansion of Western domination, commodification, and capital accumulation through the systemic separation of humans from nature via the inauguration of systems of relation governed by a binary ordering of the world.

In approaching history through the lungs, I am invested in the scale of breath, the scale of stolen breath, and the scale of violence perpetuated by Christian colonial racial capitalism. In those opening lines, to state that lungs were contaminated, not by mine dust, but by history, I created space for all other lung- and breath-related sites of anti-Blackness: in the hold of the ships, holds of the mines, holding cells and prisons, mine hostels, and the underground motif as grave and tomb, which will become a critical site for producing a mode of thought geared towards rebirth and possibility.

To be sure, I think with Christiana Sharpe’s crucial notion of the wake in her exceptional book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016). I am invested, in the epic, is broader geography of Blackness, a global Blackness, so I extend the holds that Sharpe argues undergird race-making in the New World: the three holds she centralizes are those of the ship, the plantation, and the prison. I add to these holds the hold of the mining industry, which has always been clear to me as the foundation of South African modernity that marked for Black people the end of the world as they knew it. *Mine Mine Mine* is concerned not only with the histories of gold and diamond mining in Southern Africa, but also with the afterlives of extractive violence. I take up the invitation extended by Sharpe in what she calls “wake work”, which addresses the paradox of living in an uninhabitable anti-black world; “wake work [is] a mode of inhabiting and rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With this analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know now in the wake of slavery” (18). In speaking of the crushing death machine of the mining industrial complex, its theft of the very fundamentals of life – breath – I also speak from a place of the ‘Unburied’, woke work grounded in Southern African cosmologies that enshrine different conceptions of the human, of death, temporality, space, and language. This rezones and reconfigures the lungs and underground tombs of colonial modernity’s interconnected holds as a creatively productive place.

**Breathing In Death**

The 2023 Liverpool Arts Biennale was curated by the artist and healer Khanyisile Mbongwa, who titled it ‘uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things’. In their discussion[[1]](#footnote-1) of Mbongwa’s conceptual notes on the subject matter and overarching themes of the artworks in relation to space, Nolan Oswald Dennis noted Mbongwa’s concerns with what she termed the ‘wound of the water’ and the ‘wound of the land’. To these woundings, Dennis added the ‘wound of the air’, which he derives from his artistic practice based on the “sky as a zone of air and airlessness”. In his view, the ‘wound of the air’ opens our fields of concern to the zone of air and atmosphere. While Dennis is understandably thinking through air wounds through how the Western, scientific project wants to dominate the sky, I find it important to add the underground or the subterranean as zones of air or airlessness, to the realm of the air/atmospheric wounding. This is of course brought about by my concerns with mining, and the varied holds that interconnect colonial capitalist violence globally. Examples abound in *Mine Mine Mine*:

lungs are filled with silicosis in the mines

we are asphyxiated in the prisons

lungs riddled with tuberculosis

we cannot breathe – drowning

in the blood of tortured comrades (17)

…

They who sailed in the womb of the ship

those whose lungs are filled with saltwater

of the Atlantic and Indian, casualties of the middle passage

residing in the womb-tomb of the ocean, unable to breathe

from the hold of the ship to holding cells.

to mine hostels, the final grave

…

pawns in our breathless and breath-taking civilization

water-logged, dust-clogged lungs (20)

It has always been my wish to write about the connections between the mining and the prison industries in South African throughout the centuries during colonialism and apartheid, and how these are also linked to slavery in both the Cape and Natal. The lungs here become a site for bringing these holds into locution. The lines are preceded by reference to a poem that initiated this thought in my mind, which I sought to explore in an academic paper, unsuccessfully. The poem is ‘Men in Chains’ by Oswald Mtshali (1971), and when I first read it, I could not figure out whether the six titular men were prisoners or miners. They had “wrists handcuffed” and “ankles manacled”, and were “shorn of all human honor”. The practice of shearing men took place in both prisons and mines to prevent infection and contamination. In fact, the word for a labourer such as my grandfather, one who works away from home to return every December, is Lekarapa, whose root word is Afrikaans for ‘scrub’ – ‘kraap’ – the act of shearing the miners’ heads when they arrive at the mines[[2]](#footnote-2). This attempt to control movement of air in the tightness of hostels and the underground points to the affective atmospheres of shared bodily spaces, and the attendant paranoia of contagion, cross-contamination, disease, and infection. I also think of the frictions of sleeping together– as basis for thinking of bodies (corporeal and epistemological bodies of knowledge) and histories rubbing against each other, igniting certain desires while also simultaneously and possibly erasing or transmuting existing desires. Keguro Macharia terms this “frottage” (2019). In Movement 1 of *Mine Mine Mine* I play with this exchange of air in such close proximity, the intimacy of it, and the involuntariness of sharing and exchanging breath: “shuffling one on top of the other / breathing raggedly through pores”. Lean, sweaty bodies packed in hostel dormitories exchanging bodily fluids offer the epic a sexual overtone that intimates queered relations in such spaces, which in later sections of this paper I deploy as modalities to foment queer temporalities and insurgent geographies marshaled by breath.

What is often attributed to the paranoia around air as carriers of disease in the mines are concerns with hygiene in the men’s hostels; but what is in fact central to mine bosses’ paranoia inevitable inhalation by the miners of mine dust containing silica, the highly infectious invisible bacteria that travels rapidly in these enclosed spaces, infecting the miners with silicosis and pulmonary tuberculosis, and thereby threatening the pool of exploited labour. In the epic I aimed to map the geographies of contamination beyond the mines and hostels in the cities, to the rural homes of the miners, who carry these illnesses to their families and wives:

we swelter through pores, steaming abreast

huffing – I can’t breathe – puffing mine dust

feeling her pulsating under death

not breathing, hollowed by duty

mocked by marital bliss-phemy” (7)

In depictions of the mining industry throughout the twentieth century, which often represent the mining complex, and lean, sweaty men with hard hats and gumboots, we have been denied the experiences of the rural backgrounds of the miners, with a very few exceptions. We have not had depictions of the families and communities from which they come, and we have not paid attention to the severity of the reach of the mines, beyond the city. In *Mine Mine Mine* we meet the scene in the excerpt above that contrasts the pulsating enlivened body of the wife under the slow violence of death in her husband’s lungs, surely infecting her. The documentary *Dying for Gold* (2019) afforded us for the first time, a sustained look at this rural context where the men return home with their lungs wracked by disease. Here is one of the wives, Swaziland-based Thabsile Dlamini’s testimony:

He would be here for a short time and gone for a long time. Each time he returned as a new person. When he was away I missed him so much that it hurt. Each time he came back he looked worse. I realized something was wrong. At the time, I was breast feeding, I was also taking care of my husband. Then I got ill and found out I had TB too. I took my TB treatment for 8 months.

I have aimed in *Mine Mine Mine* to address this lacuna in cultural and social histories of mining, by focusing on rural-city continuities, on the families the miners left behind, on the bodies of their wives and children. This is a general preoccupation I have in my work, to recuperate continuities that locate the big men of History, the black intellectuals and politicians, in their homes and communities, in the ecologies of relationalities that shape who they are, and that birth their politics. I call this rural-roots-en-route in my book *Keorapetse Kgositsile & the Black Arts Movement: Poetics of Possibility* (2024), in which I utilize the concept of the matriarchive to speak to intergenerational continuities central to Southern African cosmologies, and subsequently central to Black revolt, which are often, given the racialized nature of urban South Africa, practiced in rural South Africa by women. Further, the ferment of black livingness, possibilities, aliveness, and survival for the miners (and other black male figures in the white man’s cities) in the cities, the capacity to create and relate and make life, is grounded in rural social, philosophical, expressive, cosmological, and ecological practices. These become countercultures used as basis to oppose the capitalist culture of exploitation and extraction, of dehumanization and thingification.

Women were relegated to the countryside, as the legislation stated, “for continuity of rural production”, and this informed the choice in *Mine Mine Mine* and my other work, to unpack “rural production” to mean both the production of land and agriculture, as well as the production of boys for capitalist wage labour: the extraction of land through racial capitalism is the extraction of black women’s wombs. I was invested in the poetry epic, to draw a clear line between black maternity and plantation economies such as mining. As such, when we think of the Black lament, ‘I cannot breathe’, we should extend it beyond urbanity and the metropoles. Women in rural South(ern) Africa cannot breathe[[3]](#footnote-3)! They live with the reality of heading households, running them with scarce resources, being in charge of reproductive and agricultural labour, while also being modern subjects. Rupa Marya & Raj Patel’s book *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of injustice* (2022) elucidates political anatomy, giving us insight into the impact of such stresses on black and indigenous women. Therein, we encounter the effects of these stresses on the lungs, on breathing, of life force: “in a range of traditional medicines, the lungs are the seat of grief, of the breath of mourning and lament” (Rupa Marya & Raj Patel 2022, 171, with footnote to East Asian Medicine). In traditional Chinese Medicine, medicine from another cosmology that pays attention to the body differently to western medicine, the lungs relate to the emotion of grief, the sadness and tears that pour from the heart. The lungs are the seat of grief, and Movement 2 of *Mine Mine Mine* is concerned with black women’s grief in rural homelands, with the recurring refrain, “grieving but not crying”. In the second part of my book, there is short poem, “Broken heart / still not / formalized as / cause of death” (80), which bemoans the ineligibility of the black female experience, the misrecognizing of black women’s pain, and the desensitizing of black mourning that renders it routine. This too, should be mentioned in the litany of black women’s variegated pains that doctors dismiss today mostly because they do not believe women, more so black women.



**Cosmologies of Breath**

In Southern African cosmologies, also known as Bantu cosmology, all matter is pervaded by the force of ‘ntu’, a lifeforce or spirit called MOYA, that connects all that exists, has existed, and will exist. In this cosmology, the human comprises three interlocking ontologies-in-becoming: the living, the living dead, and the yet-to-be-born. That is, the living are “onto-triadic” (Mogobe Ramose 1998, 236), communal, multi-temporal, and polyvocal. In the languages of the land, the word for breath, MOYA, is also the word for spirit, soul, air, wind, temperament, and atmosphere. MOYA is the interconnective and interpenetrative force between all worldly and cosmic phenomena, interconnecting humans, trees, animals, mountains, rivers, air, the skies, and earth, as well as other dimensions seen and unseen, known and unknowable. MOYA is the *internal* structuring logic of all matter. And because MOYA is constantly moving, vibrating, and mattering, it perforates the borders of the internal, performing porosity and permeability as organizing structure of knowing, being, doing, and becoming. All matter is marked by the emergent, itinerant, processual, relational, by potentiality, ongoingness, incompleteness – this informs differentially textured conceptions of the human, earth, animal, temporality, death, life, language, and land. This cosmology is also fundamentally opposed to colonial cosmologies which are fixated with the surface as reality, with the firma, and with representation and completeness. Herein, within these opposing cosmologies, lies potential to unmake and remake, to enact politics of revolt, to assert and affirm poetics of aliveness and possibility.

MOYA challenges any claims to a discreet, stable, and hermetically sealed being. MOYA performs ecologies of the senses and the internetworked bodies (human, animal, land, waters, celestial), all in a state of continuous motion, emergence, and co-constituted becoming. Southern African practices of naming humans entangle those bodies and worlds: in what I have elsewhere coined the name-place-song matrix, the name encompasses a totem that marks relations with the animal kingdom, and the clan names are praxes of placemaking in their tracing of where the lineage has been, while the praise song is understood as a poetic enshrining rhythms, languages, symbolisms, and frequencies as mnemonic devise for the living/named, with song as call to the ancestral realm and the land under which the named’s afterbirth is buried. This call initiates or returns to a call-and-response, an antiphonic relationship between all internetworked bodies permeated by MOYA. We are woven into kinship by MOYA. Alexis Pauline Gumbs inadvertently writes about MOYA in her *Undrowned* (2020):

What is the scale of breathing? … Is the scale of breathing within one species? All animals participate in this exchange of release for continued life. But not without the plants. The plants in their inverse process, release what we need, take what we give without being asked. And the planet, wrapped in ocean breathing, breathing into sky. … *the scale of our breathing is planetary*… (1-2).

MOYA, breath, interweaves various planetary scales – circulation from the lungs of humans/animals to those of those of the land and its waters interconnected to celestial bodies. Southern African cosmologies center MOYA to expand into being as a wholeful, timeful, incomplete (Francis B. Nyamnjoh 2015), relational, and spacious experience, redirecting the collective desires of the people to return always to that whole in the construction of their languages, rituals, ceremonies, and relationalities. In its ongoing movement and porosity, the principle of MOYA instructs the people to fashion a language that moves, a poetic language that is open-ended and refrain from foreclosing meaning and agency through representation as a mode of signification, hence the turn to poetics. In the conducting their life affairs, the principle of MOYA is a field of possibility for choreographing mutual dance and performance that *reaches out* as principle of wholeness; this is why ritual and ceremony is central to the world of (Southern) African cosmologies. This mode of being offers conceptual frames of possibilities for living, thinking, making, and existing.

My grandfather and our ancestors choreographed that mutual dance and performance on the mines, in the mining compounds, towards relation with other miners from different backgrounds, reaching out as opposed to enclosing their bodies that have been marked as extractible units of production. They performed transgressive dances and movements from their cultural and spiritual homes – in a dynamic of rural-roots-en-route – to transgress the boundaries of time. These dances and co-creations saturated their bodies and the mining atmosphere with presence, of the living dead and the not-yet-born. They asserted their power to alter, reconfigure, and rezone spatiality and temporality, making the site of their subjection and obliteration – mining complex – unstable and mutable, and productive of social and spiritual lives (against social and spiritual death, to reference Orlando Patterson). They produced an oppositional geography, an insurgent geography transforming a space of terror and non-being into one that is “more humanly workable” (Katherine McKittrick 2006, xiii) through possessing and being possessed by MOYA. This is not unlike how the train that ferried workers throughout the twentieth century was transformed, through chanting (enchantment) and various spiritual practice and prayers, into locations of resistance through possessing and being possessed by MOYA. See Santu Mofokeng’s series of photographs in his ‘Train Churches’ as examples. The refusal and inability to be ascribed by ontological isolation is enabled by the conception of the body as a communal body in this cosmology. These workers’ reformation of space reveal that geographies are socially produced and reproduced, as argued by Katherine McKittrick. MOYA – wind and air and breath and spirit – preconditions the “alterability of space and place” (McKittrick xii), the production and reproduction of geographies. I sing this insurgence:

He came as one, my grandfather

But stood as millions

A brilliant battalion

That refused death in life

Names that in dying make life surer than death.

…

creating in captivity against the limits of the spirit

richer than any gold

refusing death, resisting the social order

undermining it through movement (21)

Undermining death through movement is grounded in the conception of death in these cosmologies, where death is not final, is not the end, where MOYA is in continuous motion, ongoing, itinerant and vibrating. But there is also the power of shared breath, of collective breathing, exchanging life force, and channeling this energy through song, dance, and other embodied practices. The ‘millions’ my grandfather stood with knew each other by song, breath, and embodied solidarity movements/gestures, reframing their communality as congregation, through gathering, assembling, and asserting a different sociality. Ashon Crawley’s (2016) conception of Blackpentecostal breath is here useful, defined as “an intellectual practice grounded in the fact of the flesh, the flesh unbounded and liberative, flesh as vibrational and always on the move” (4). Blackpentecostal breath that is produced communally releases what he terms “black pneuma”. Crawley’s theorization of black pneuma resonates and echoes MOYA:

The aesthetic production of breath in Blackpentecostalism is what I will index as black pneuma, the capacity for the plural movement and displacement of inhalation and exhalation to enunciate life, life that is exorbitant, capacious, and fundamentally social, though it is also life that is structured through and engulfed by brutal violence. This life, life in blackness, otherwise black life, exceeds the very capacities of seemingly gratuitous violence to be totalizing (2016, 38).

I posit MOYA as the unbounded force and energy that keeps denying oppressive dominator culture totalizing power by exploding any forms of hegemonic enclosures through undermining the notion of stability and the hermetically sealed. The aesthetic production of MOYA through the various black performative and expressive traditions of the mines – singing, gumboot dance, isicathamiya, maskandi, fanagalo, fashioning guitars out of tins –defiantly exerted terms and grounds of living and fellowshipping that subverted the insatiable death apparatus of racial capitalism. In *Mine Mine Mine* I offer a sustained meditation on the workings and devastations of that violent machine, while also refusing to overdetermine it as a totalizing and defining experience of my grandfather’s life, our family, lineage, the country and the black experience.

The cosmologies of breath I write about here present *otherwise possibilities* of being, relating and becoming. They open to ecologies of cosmologies beyond New Worlding cosmologies, grounded in the practice of doing *what we have always done* (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson), living who we have always been, remembering that we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by colonial terms of dehumanization and domination. This is crucial, because the colonial capitalist world can present an enclosure that limits our ways of thinking, relating, and being, foreclosing any way out or any grounds to wage our[[4]](#footnote-4) fully realized senses of self and community. To do as we have always done, as Ashon Crawley adds, “is to mark the fact that *otherwise possibility* is not tending toward a future that is to come but is the marking of the practices that we have and do and carry with care and love for one another against the imposition of settler colonial violence, the violence that is coarticulated with anti-Blackness to produce the modern crisis of racialization, *the theft of ground and air*, and the *strangulation of life possibilities***”** (in King, Navarro & Smith 2020, 33, my own emphasis). I uphold doing what we, as black and indigenous people, have always done as method to rupture the enclosures of colonial cosmologies, as a future memory: as queering continuity by ‘reconvening temporality, thereby opening a constellation of possibilities’[[5]](#footnote-5). We reconvene temporality by disrupting the colonial teleology of linear progress with the already-existing, always-already-there elsewhere temporalities of Southern African cosmologies. Ecologies of cosmologies open these constellations.

**Breathing In Death … Exhaling In Death**

Sitting with the haunting question of how somebody would vomit blood also opened another way into writing the epic: my grandfather visited me with his story as a type of response, in what I understand as a moment of with-nessing – in seeking to witness the events of his life and the trauma to his lungs, he in turn witnessed me, narrating his experience to me from the position of the ancestral realm. MOYA is how my grandfather transmitted his story to me, how we co-created *Mine Mine Mine*, how it was ancestrally co-narrated. Operating within a cosmology in which the human comprises the onto-triad of the living, the living dead, and the not-yet-born recomposes how we understand both the human and their living environment. The human body is a communal body that concatenates multiple temporalities (the past and future simultaneously in the present), memories (encoded in the genetic structure and blood of the living), and voices (the echoing of intergenerational stories of the lineage and land). The environment of the living is also saturated with presence of the other dimensions of being in MOYA, in the atmosphere, moving through the wind, and exchanged through spiritual technologies that focus on enhancing and activating those presences. This constitutes and contributes to sensory ecologies (Matthew Gandy): affective or experienced space which compose the living environments we inhabit and by which we are inhabited. We hack/hex colonial temporality with this *living environment time* through practices of MOYA, through doing as we have always done.

My grandfather spoke to me from the position of the living dead. He spoke from beyond death, after ground (land) and air (breath) were stolen from him – he presented to me his story, my grandmother’s story, our family’s story, that of our country, and of global Blackness. The more it becomes a ‘we’ story, a communal story, a story of the collective, the more it rejected death, pessimism, and enclosure because in our cosmologies, the communal body belongs to multiple times and places, and is inhabited by multiple voices. Storytelling preserves the possibility of healing, or carrying on, through intergenerational transmission that is orientated towards living against systemic Black death. How could I write his story as one of Breathing In Death – breathing mine dust, breathing under water, breathing mine dumps, asphyxiation, strangulation, the inability to breathe in this breathtaking modernity – without attending to his Breathing Out Death, expelling death’s terms as a figure who was silenced and extracted in life, by finally speaking from the grave? The epic opens with death, and closes with extoling the ‘supremacy of spirit’, “blossoming with revelation / of our spirit supreme” (45); refusing death in life, and affirming life, movement, and kinship as everpresent through the principle of MOYA. There was no writing about Breathing In Death, without also writing about evacuating social, spiritual, and psychic death.

Through the praxis of UNBURYING, which I elaborate upon in the next section, I had to engage in rootwork – in the tradition of black feminist labour required abolish systemic oppression in our bodies and those of our communities, lands, and lineages, to harness that by which we know and are known to each other and ourselves, to produce possibilities of living in the brutality of this anti-black world. Root work, inspired by Sharpe’s “wake work”, is method and approach that emerges out of creative practice and lived experience, informing a mode of thought that pertains: 1. Rootwork as excavation, unearthing, surfacing, and exhuming, all of which is never executed without ritual, community, song, and congregating with the living environment. Rootwork as unearthing informs, amongst other things, the archival work I pursue under the banner ‘recovering subterranean archives’ in my academic life. In the subterranean we find our lineage stories and blood song. 2. Rootwork as somatic practice of expanding into the power centre of our embodied lineage archives located in our pelvic bowl at the base of our spines. This somatic practice engages breath, song, herbalism, and fire as passageway to convening with the ancestors in all directions of time. In writing *Mine Mine Mine* I had to engage with altar work and the dreamscape to expand into living environmental time charged with MOYA, in order to listen into my grandfather’s narration of his life story. 3. Rootwork as enchantment, conjure, herbalism and divination to work with and be worked by unseen worlds, to prime oneself to experience the wonder and wisdom of the living environment, to re-enchant and be re-enchanted by the knowledges of the land at large as unified by the principle of MOYA. This opposes the logics of colonial modernity’s investment in the surface of representation as the standard of reality by rupturing its purported stability and material fundamentalism.

What these rootwork methods share in common is the notion of the unknown, which these practices bring closer as spaces and places to submit oneself into, as one is already made of unknown and unknowable parts. Similarly, we live in and with the earth body that comprises unknown and unknowable parts. While Enlightenment philosophies are concerned with bringing things to light, to shed the light of their civilization, with seeing, and with knowing, rootwork invites a dance with the unknown, into queer hospitalities, to affirm familiarity and kinship with unseen and unknown parts, and to move with epistemic humility through that which cannot be comprehended. It is a gesture of submission to the earth body that is way older and wiser than us. Rootwork took me into the mines to listen to my grandfather’s life story, and in so doing rootwork rejects the ocularcentric adage, ‘out of sight, out of heart’. In the ‘out of sight’ pulsates the rich ferment of black life.

**Let Us Descend[[6]](#footnote-6)**

The practice of UNBURYING and the methodology of rootwork invites us to descend, to operate elsewhere, to conjure other modes of operating outside the orthodox. Colonialism is fixated with the surface; modernity is about preserving the surface, the singular. It is invested in the differentiating logic of the exterior, the ‘look’, the enclosures of the present as the extent of reality, and the biological body as discrete from history, lineage and intergenerational continuity. Bayo Akomolafe[[7]](#footnote-7) argues in his work, “the surface – for long the political project of white modernity – can no longer sustain the burden of proliferating the dissociated individual self, the lynchpin of its civilizing ethic”. As such, Akomolafe argues, we need to descend, to go underground: this “opens out surprising spaces for stranger alliances within a politics of invisibility”. Further, this “takes us to controversial places; it takes us to deep, dark, terrible thresholds and asks us to listen, to dance, to build, to rest, to bend our bodies”. I resonate with this call to descend as my praxis is concerned with wandering in the unknown, out of sight, towards and in the subterranean, the clandestine mutinous underground, the dark and liminal, the places outside the logics and legibility of colonial frames of intelligibility and propriety. Akomolafe issues a call:

*It’s time to descend. But descend where? Not to a ‘where’, not to a ‘place’. blackness[[8]](#footnote-8) has no destinations, no purpose, no convenient and stable cartographies. blackness is not utopia. Descending is a ‘how’, not a ‘where’. A placeless place, a process, not a remedy.*

This is Rootwork, concerned with insurgent practices of placefulness and timefulness[[9]](#footnote-9), with queer cartographies and temporalities, with inhabiting the uninhabitable, with gaining tutelage from strange kin on how to live otherwise, and with listening into MOYA, “*always in a state of creation*, and of being born: the *legend-creating wind gives new tongues*with which to praise it, and *new languages*with which to *cross the boundaries of time*. Out of it evolves *new patterns of growth*, and new purposes with which to greet the waking day” (Yvonne Vera 1993: 112–113, my own emphasis). So writes Vera in *Nehanda* in which she extols the multidimensionality of being as enshrined in Southern African cosmologies, and as (dis)embodied by Mbuya Nehanda, the svikiro or spirit medium of the people of Zimbabwe, the fuel that combusted anti-colonial revolt through the generations with this legend-creating wind that gives us new language and purpose across boundaries of time. We unsettle the settler’s onto*logical* enclosures with onto*genesis*, with an ongoingness and incompleteness that rejects the full, whole human and embraces the processual “song of constant beginnings” (Keorapetse Kgositsile 1970) – life as creative force, always in a state of creations, and in which the people inscribed by that cosmology use song and ritual to pursue their lives as enfolded in co-creation and emergence. When we descend, we seek to return to this dynamic spaceless place to convene within *living environment time* where we witness and are witnessed, and where we co-create with and within the vibrancy of life.

Unburying as a method of descending – a counter-cartographic move into spaceless places that *feel* congruent with our lived experiences, with the experience of our ancestors’ lives as not past but living in us, their ongoing potentiality for making future vibrating in us, the potential and opportunity for their healing continuously enacted on us, through the narration of their stories, through calling their names (which are our names!) in ritual and ceremony. In the underground, grave, womb-tomb, we encounter the multiple temporalities, we are historic beings, we are here in the future, and all of it is NOW – any structuring of temporality that negates Black life and being is a future that is not ancestral, that is not loyal to our lived experience. So we appropriate that temporality and work from within it to destabilize, explode, reconvene and reconstellate its movement. We descend and engage in “sensuous mutiny”[[10]](#footnote-10): we use mpepho, tend the wounds of the air, listen to bones, read shells, decipher the wind, and engage other ritual technologies (see ‘Sacraments of Unburying’ in *Mine Mine Mine* p55) as insurgent praxes of space-making, as method to reorder geography; we work with breath, wind, air, and atmosphere to hack time, to be in all time, to harness the forms of repair we need for us, our ancestral bodies and our future selves. We are scandalous[[11]](#footnote-11):

The underground

is our aesthetic

our myth

our language

our holey grail (68)

We claim that which has been used to dehumanize us, we return to the site of subjection, we refuse what has been refused to us: the surface of modernity as the only reality. We return to the scene of our obliteration to transform it into scenes of séance; we bring enchantment by convening (with) our ancestors in rituals of deep listening, breathing life and meaning, speaking in tongues, choreographing dances to cross boundaries of time, and making language, modalities of thought and practices of healing. We make sanctuary by honouring our humanity beyond the terms of the oppressor, we chant – root word for enchantment – we sing our sacredness beyond colonial fathers’ secularized worlds, we move into, through, and with spirit:

The underground

is …

where we stand our ground

a familiar territory

of familial terror

where we broke

and resurrected (68)

**There are no conclusions, only movement**

The scale of our breathing is planetary, as has been demonstrated. In my work, I practice rootwork to move into and from subterranean archives and the underground of the mines to work with breath as the lifeforce for humans and animals and plants, making breath also the lifeforce of the planet, interweaving us in a song, in a multitemporal, multispecies, multidimensional enfoldment of kinship. It is an abundant interconnected song of constant beginnings, whose fundamental logic works against the scarcity of colonial capitalism, its insistence of blackness as ontological isolates. MOYA returns us into the folds of the open-ended chorus, where ‘return’, as Bayo Akomolafe posits, is not a matter of distances, is “not about reclaiming originals, restoring lost images, or gaining new territory”. It is about “*queer inversions*”. It is about “troubling locateability”[[12]](#footnote-12). Through the modality of MOYA and UNBURYING I sit with my grandfather’s loss of life, lineage, land, and love. MOYA as modality of thinking through this brutality also functions to trouble the waters of settler geographies and logics of habitability by performing and embodying vibrational force of spirit that permeates and interpenetrates all time in this continuously moving and emergent dance. We continue in the insurgent dance and antiphonic song of the miners, their scandalous audacity to live, to breathe. We are imprinted by this principle through cosmologies of breath, the lifeforce; we are inscribed by their memories and the memories of all that has and will be, and are transformed and reformed by the lifegiving omnipresence of MOYA. We congregate around rituals of rootwork and hack into MOYA to hex this disenchanted and crude colonial modernity.

BREATHE IN…

The future is ancestral.

BREATHE OUT…

We are ancestors.

1. ‘uMoya: The Cosmology of Breath’

   <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3MGaviXqqk> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Please note that ‘lekarapa’ is also what the hard hats worn as safety precautionary measure by miners is also called. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Hugo ka Canham’s book *Riotous Deathscapes* (2023) for elaboration. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I use “we” and “our” from this point to mean those who live by and are born into, socialized or initiated into these indigenous cosmologies. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I owe this idea to Bayo Akomolafe (2023) in his definition of prophecy. In ‘Why I Sang in the Dungeons: A Prophecy to End the Year 2023’

   https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/why-i-sang-in-the-dungeons-a-prophecy-to-end-the-year-2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is a deliberate intertextual reference to Jesmyn Ward whose novel *Sing Unburied Sing* is an example par excellence of rootwork, and deeply impacted me when I read it. It must have influenced my thinking around ‘UNBURIED’, the title of *Mine Mine Mine*’s final movement. Her 2024 novel is titled *Let Us Descend*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Why I Sang in the Dungeons: A Prophecy to End the Year 2023’

   https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/why-i-sang-in-the-dungeons-a-prophecy-to-end-the-year-2023 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Akomolafe makes useful distinctions between ‘Black’ and ‘black’: “I speak and write about *blackness* in the ways that I do, taking pains to distinguish between the identitarian ‘Big B’ Blackness (which is more committed to critique, negotiating inclusion, and seeking capitalization, visibility, and representation) and an animist, anagrammatic, italicized, lowercase blackness that opens out surprising spaces for stranger alliances within a politics of invisibility.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Colonial capitalist modernity insists that we are running out of time, on its logic of one generation shot. The cosmologies I write about are timeful. We are here in the past and in the future; we are in continuity, and we are saturated by presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Inspired by Bayo Akomolafe [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A nod to Tendayi Sithole’s observation that “The animation of thought by those who have their humanity questioned presents an ontological scandal”. The centralizing of spirit as organizing principle and modality of being, relating, doing, making, and resisting, present a “wayward” (Saidiya Hartman 2019) ontology, scandalous in its refusal of humanity’s definitions and terms set by New Worlding cosmologies. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. A great example of this, which invites a sustained study of MOYA, is Kei Miller’s *The Cartographer Tries To Map His Way To Zion* (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)