



'FEW HAVE EVER HEARD OF NONI JABAVU' —A PIONEER'S RETURN TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE



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Noni Jabavu's life and work raises questions about the ways in which Black women's intellectual labour occupies a precarious position of a constant threat of erasure unless researchers travel to and through the archive in order to prevent that erasure.

We will explore the journey of re-introducing Noni Jabavu's work into cultural production after decades of her erasure in her home country South Africa. While she was born in South Africa in 1919, she spent most of her adult life living across the world where she established herself as a writer and radio broadcaster. In 1960, Noni Jabavu published her first memoir, *Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts*, while she was living in London. In 1961, she was appointed the editor of *The New Strand*, a literary magazine based in London. Her appointment was historic as she was the first woman and Black person to occupy this position and to this extent in 1962 *Ebony* magazine featured her appointment.

In 1963, Noni Jabavu published her second memoir, *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life* while she was based in Jamaica. While living in Kenya in 1976, she attempted to return to South Africa but she was declared a foreigner due to her status as a British citizen because apartheid South Africa was no longer part of the Commonwealth of Nations. While she was negotiating her status as a foreigner in the country where she was born, she wrote 49 columns in a newspaper, *The Daily Dispatch*, in 1977.

Using the publication of the collection of columns as a starting point, this paper will discuss Jabavu's marginalisation from public culture, which has necessitated the need to re-introduce her work and life story into the public sphere she once participated within. Just over 40 years since the publication of her work in South Africa, a collection of the 1977 columns is due to be published as a book, *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home*, to be first launched in South Africa by Tafelberg (NB Publishers).

When Jabavu published her first memoir, *Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts* in 1960 (published by John Murray Publishers) she had been living in England since she was 13 years old and had only taken intermittent trips back to South Africa. In 1963, she published her second book, *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life*, also a memoir and a sequel to *Drawn in Colour*, based on her experiences of returning home to South Africa after many years of estrangement.

The blurbs on her books highlight the international significance of her work as both books were reviewed

in a number of globally acclaimed publications such as *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Scotsman*, to name a few. In 1961, *Drawn in Colour* was translated by Mondadori-Casa Editrice into Italian with the title, *Il colore della pelle* (Xaba, 2006). In 1962, St Martin's Press in New York published an American edition followed by a book tour in the United States of America.

In that same year she was appointed editor of a literary magazine in London, *The New Strand*. Her appointment as the editor was featured in *Ebony* magazine under the title "New Strand Editor: Pick South African woman to revive Britain's 'most popular' magazine". By the time Noni began her work as the editor "her first book *Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts* had been reprinted five times".¹

The journey of re-introducing Noni Jabavu's work after decades of silence suggests that erasure happens because of decisions which are made about whose story is worthy of being told and whose work is worthy of being used and reused.

It was only in 1982 that *The Ochre People* was published in South Africa by Ravan Press while she was living in Zimbabwe (this was followed by a reprint in 1995). Her books have not been available since. This initial success was followed by a lull for many complex reasons. In 1976, she returned to South Africa for a short period and wrote 49 weekly columns in a newspaper *The Daily Dispatch* in 1977 while she conducted research for a biography of her father she intended to write. These columns have been languishing in the newspaper archive. Given the nature of newspapers, once they exist as an archive they become less accessible unlike books which can still be available in libraries and second-hand bookshops, and through republication.

¹ Xaba, Makhosazana. "Jabavu's Journey". (Masters in Creative Writing dissertation). University of the Witwatersrand, 2006. <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/5289>: 40



OUR POSITIONALITY AND RELATIONALITY IN RETRACING NONI JABAVU

This paper is about the journey of the republication of Noni Jabavu's work in order to challenge the silences. In this section we felt it apt to include our positionality in order to show our interest in Noni Jabavu as an intellectual project as well as feminist work. In order to capture the authenticity of our individual voices we have included first-person narratives to distinguish our stories. This is also to challenge academic posturing which requires writers to distance themselves from their work.

Makhosazana Xaba²:

*In 2001 I assisted an American friend choose books that would help her 'understand South Africa'. I took her to a second-hand bookstore in Melville, Johannesburg, made a number of suggestions she took...The book *Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts* caught my attention. Noni Jabavu? My mind raced into its files and in no time I pulled out two names of pioneers J.T. and D.D.T. Jabavu. But who is Noni Jabavu? The brief biography at the back of the book revealed another surprise — Noni Jabavu is D.D.T.'s daughter. Why had I not heard of her?... I knew about her father Professor Davidson Don Jabavu (D.D.T.) and grandfather, John Tengo Jabavu (J. T.) who were pioneers in politics and their professions. Their historical presence was so ingrained in my consciousness I did not even recall how and when I had heard of them. As I walked to the till to pay for my find I made two provisional conclusions. Firstly that D.D.T. and J.T.'s popularity overshadowed hers as a woman because women's invisibility prevails through history. I was upset. Secondly with the apartheid government's stance on banning literature that could in any way be considered subversive (I began to imagine Noni was a political writer) and the fact of her absence from South Africa may have contributed to her invisibility...In 2004 I was taking part-time classes towards an MA in Creative Writing at Wits University. One of the assignments in that first semester was a 'biographical fragment'...It was that initial research that started me on a path of muddy patches... That said 2370 words later there was a fragment I called "Noni Jabavu Returns Home". During this research and afterwards I felt it was my feminist duty to write this biography... After writing that first chapter I decided to bid coincidences goodbye and embark on a journey with a self-made map in hand. I took the biography course in the first semester of 2005. I chose to write three more chapters as part of my research report in the second semester of 2005... I have shared here, only how the Noni journey began. It has been long and it continues to meander.*

Athambile Masola:

*In 2008 I began writing columns in the *Daily Dispatch*, the same publication which Noni had written for in 1977. At the time I did not know about Noni. It was through realizing that there were so few Black women contributing to the opinion pages in newspapers across the country that I became curious about Black women as writers in general. In high school I had never encountered neither poetry nor prose by Black women in the classroom. I had read a library copy of Margaret Busby's *Daughters of Africa* which led me to Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker to begin with. Nozipho J. Marare's book *Zenzele* was the first book I read by a woman from Zimbabwe. While in university I had to contend with a white male professor tell me that "Black women aren't really writers" and so I began with a desktop search focusing on South African Black women writers. I came across information about Noni and eventually found Makhosazana Xaba's work. While visiting a monastery for a writing retreat outside a small town in the Eastern Cape, Makhanda, I found a copy of Noni's *Drawn in Colour* at the monastery's library. I read the book and saw a picture of South Africa's history which I had never seen in my school history textbooks. It was years later after moving to Johannesburg in 2016 that I found the copies of both Noni's books at an antique book shop, L'Elephant Terrible Bookshop. Finding both copies felt like a serendipitous moment and I knew that I was ready to pursue my PhD research looking at Noni's memoirs. I asked Pumla Dineo Gqola to introduce me to Makhosazana and after the initial conversation I realized there was a bigger project beyond my own research. I became aware that many people I spoke to about my research did not know about Noni Jabavu nor her work in spite of her pioneering career abroad. While working on the PhD, Makhosazana and I began working on the first project which we felt was 'low hanging fruit' which was to collect the *Daily Dispatch* columns into a book which would reconnect Noni with a South African audience again. Even while I have completed the PhD (*Journeying home, exile and transnationalism in Noni Jabavu and Sisonke Msimang's memoirs*, 2020) it seems the relationship with Noni Jabavu continues.*

These narratives provide the personal nature of this work that cannot be divorced from the larger politics of our own individual choices about the meaning of our intellectual work in relation to the conversations in South Africa's public discourse and academic institutions in South Africa. Finding out about our shared passion, it made sense to work together. Our experiences also highlight the chance discovery of Noni as we both encountered her books in obscure bookstores rather than mainstream shops or even our own education or public discourse.

² Makhosazana Xaba, "Journeying with Noni Jabavu". In Newsletter of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, Vol. 5 no. 1. (Johannesburg: Wits University), 2007: 23.

These experiences further highlight the need to have as many books as possible which reveal Noni's importance given that for so long her memory has laid in obscurity in the form of old newspaper articles as well as books that have not been reprinted.

PUBLISHERS: RETRACING DECISIONS WHICH ENABLE ERASURE

Noni was very concerned about her legacy as a writer. She made numerous attempts – as seen in the communication with her publishers – to have both her books reissued. In a heart-wrenching letter (to lawyer Mark Hamilton) she wrote in 1980, she mentioned how members of her family had a tendency to not live long; she noted that her mother died at 56 and her grandfather at 62. She wrote: "I wish to put my writing in order before my turn to die arrives"³, a demonstration of her fervent desire to leave a visible legacy of her work. In the same letter she expresses that she was unaware that her books had been out of print as the publisher and agent had not informed her; she blamed her own naiveté rather than a problematic publishing sector that did not care enough about her work. In an interview with Brian Willan⁴ he shared how he was instrumental in getting her book published by Ravan Press. In a letter to Mike Kirkwood he makes a case for publishing her book and explains that:

Noni Jabavu in a way came at just the wrong time (early 1960s) before the Heinemann African Writers Series really got going, before African countries became independent, before there was really much of an interest in African writing generally. So that book – leave aside *Drawn in Colour for the time being* – never really got the exposure it deserved, outside the somewhat rarified world inhabited by John Murray, literary magazines in London, etc. The book was never paperbacked, and has been out of print for years. Its exposure in South Africa was, I imagine, minimal: I don't suppose there's a single copy in Soweto⁵.

This excerpt captures the difficulties of Noni Jabavu's experiences as a writer who had trouble not only with publishing but also finding the right audience to engage with her work. Willan concludes the letter by stating that Kirkwood would be hearing from Noni Jabavu to follow up on the prospects of the book. He characterised Noni Jabavu as writing "long heartfelt letters about the iniquities of publishers" which seems apt given that since her passing, Noni Jabavu continues to be rejected by publishers as we

will be shown below. This history of her experiences with publishers seems to resonate 40 years later.

Using email correspondence, this section will show the ways in which decisions were made determining Noni's relevance for republication. These emails are useful as they provide evidence about how erasure happens through a set of decisions. After agreeing that the book of columns would be the first step towards getting Noni's books back into South Africa's cultural imagination, we approached the *Daily Dispatch* in order to get access to the columns. In 2016, we sent an email to the editor of the newspaper at the time but there was no response to our email. We both already had copies of the columns after having spent time at the Johannesburg Library newspaper archive. We were simply requesting written permission from the newspaper to use the columns for publication. After silence from the editor we approached an administrator at the *Daily Dispatch* who connected us with the Times Media⁶ Syndication department. The syndication department deals with copyright and the usage of the papers for other work. We have reproduced a segment of the email they sent in response to our request:

The procedure is that we would invoice you for each article you require to republish in your book. We charge a fee of R600+VAT⁷ per article for single use only. We would need to list the columns you need to republish on the invoice. Unfortunately the *Daily Dispatch* is not available electronically, as a result I am unable to access the content from our Johannesburg offices. Do you have the actual list of these columns you need to republish or that is still to be established? (email correspondence, 11 May 2016⁸)

This email raises many questions about the nature of newspaper archiving and the extent to which the amount which was put forward was an inhibiting factor to the project. There was no sense from the response that the newspaper saw the social value of participating in the project beyond making money for each column. When we calculated the costs of buying the columns it amounted to R29 400 (excluding VAT), which would increase the costs of the publication once we approached a publisher. The lack of systematic archiving at the newspaper also posed challenges to the project. While we did not expect that they would readily make the columns available to us as we already had them because of our own research, it became evident that there was no systematic approach to collating information which would be relevant to researchers who are interested in using the newspaper archive.

3 23 October 1980, Letter correspondence shared by Brian Willan

4 28 October 2019, interview with Athabile Masola

5 30 August 1980, Letter correspondence shared by Brian Willan

6 Daily Dispatch is part of the newspaper group Times Media which was in the process of being procured by another company AVUSA at the time.

7 R600 would approximately amount to 40 USD. VAT refers to value added tax.

8 We have not included the names of the people we corresponded with to protect their identity.



We provided a list of the columns to the syndication department in order to give them evidence of the columns which included the titles, dates and page numbers.

After getting a sense of the costs involved to acquire the columns we contacted publishers. We were in touch with eight publishers. The ninth was a publisher who approached us and accepted the work in May 2019. The publishers we approached ranged from small independent publishers to well-known university presses. This section will foreground the email correspondences as well as provide a narrative explanation of the meetings we attended. We will refer to these publishers as **Publisher A, B, C** etc. in order to protect their identity.

We contacted the publishers simultaneously in order to get a sense of the initial interest. We approached **Publisher A** based on their non-fiction output which covered a range of topics. We were also aware that they had an imprint that could be an alternative for a book of columns. **Publisher A** rejected the proposal because of the cost of the columns. In their response the publisher also added that

the market is so slow at the moment, that either a subvention or a pre-publication commitment to buying copies (by an institution say) would be a requirement. Perhaps a university press might be a better option for your? They would have funds, and might be able to have the book adopted for say, journalism or history courses. (email correspondence 23 May 2016)

While the response was a rejection, this response highlights the nature of the publishing environment in South Africa and the limitations of funding. The question of the market is also relevant here. While we could see the historical significance of the columns, publishers wanted to know whether the book would sell. This was the second time **Publisher A** was being approached.

The issue of the market is a question closely related to class. South Africa's book-buying culture has been analysed along class and racial lines and the generalised perception is that "Black South Africans do not read or buy books"⁹. One of the responses to this claim has been the establishment of the Abantu Book Festival which began in 2016. The establishment of this festival is central to locating and contextualising South Africa's book, literary culture and publishing industry. In a panel discussing the alternative platforms writers can use to share their work, publisher of Blackbird Books, Thabiso Mahlape, repeatedly pointed out that "publishing is subjective",¹⁰ highlighting that the decisions on what

gets published and what is rejected are personal decisions left to individuals. Mahlape also pointed out the racialised nature of the publishing industry where she was one of only two Black female publishers at the time in an industry largely owned by White publishers (there has been a slow growth since 2016). So, if the publishing industry is controlled by White people who make subjective publishing decisions, who perpetuates the narrative that Black people do not read and buy books? It is common knowledge that readers are attracted to books they can identify with through the characters and their storylines. Most Black people, therefore, choose not to buy and read books that are not curated for them. The culture of reading among Black people in South Africa has lasted for more than a century but the White-owned publishing industry does not seem to recognise that.

Publisher B was one of the imprints of **Publisher A** and operated independently within the company. While the initial conversation was promising there was no follow-up. After several emails and attempts to reconnect with **Publisher B** we moved on to other publishers.

Publisher C was the first university press we approached. We sent an email to their commissioning editor whose initial email suggested a keen interest in the book. But after sending a sample of Noni Jabavu's columns, we got this response:

We felt that the articles are too old and some of the issues that are addressed in those articles are outdated. Also, the author's comments and tone are outdated because they address the past. Yes we do still need to publish on some of the topics but we would need a fresh voice and approach. I hope you will receive my feedback with an open mind. (email correspondence 25 August 2016)

The theme of marketability lingers in this response. The question of being "too old" is interesting here. Clearly, the question of historical value is not taken into account. This response suggests that certain histories matter more than others. This is curious as there are many publications from the past that have been reproduced for contemporary audiences¹¹ but these are often publications by White authors. Curiously, **Publisher C** had, in fact, published "old" voices. Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*, which is a compilation of his essays, is one of the exceptions here, but given his significance as a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement who was killed by the police his hypervisibility and political activism made him a more desirable writer than Noni. The privileging of his voice as a man is also a contributing factor.

⁹ Carli Coetzee, "Abantu Book Festival is archive of the future", *Africa is a Country*, March 5, 2019, <https://africasacountry.com/2019/03/abantu-book-festival-is-archive-of-the-future>.

¹⁰ Abantu Book Festival, *Creating Platforms*. YouTube video, 55:57, 26 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNshs-68Pc>.

¹¹ A recent example has been the reproduction of Elsa Joubert's book from 1979 which was initially published in Afrikaans and translated into English: *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena/The long journey of Poppie Nongena*. The book has recently been republished alongside a film depiction "Poppie Nongena".

In an informal conversation with the second academic press, **Publisher C**, they dissuaded us because columns do not sell but rather should be compiled alongside essays (email correspondence, 9 September 2016).

Publisher D, E and F highlighted the complexity of maintaining conversations with publishers who are uncertain about the marketability but are willing to take the risk. We had face-to-face meetings with these publishers, followed by email correspondence until the publishers no longer responded to our emails.

Publisher D was an imprint that showed great interest in the Noni project. However, over time, the publisher stopped communicating and responding to our emails and correspondence much like **Publisher B** and **I** who did not respond after acknowledging our email.

Publisher I, a small independent publisher, requested a proposal which we duly submitted. At our own cost, we couriered the complete set of columns to the publisher who acknowledged receipt thereof and thereafter disappeared. They did not even return the columns. We tried in vain to contact them again.

Publisher E, an independent publisher, was interested provided we raised our own money to buy the columns. **Publisher F** was a new publisher in 2016 and, while they were interested in Noni Jabavu's work and story, they were more interested in republishing her memoirs rather than a new book of columns. Unfortunately, they abandoned the books due a lack of agreement with the Jabavu family on the terms of the contract.

The third university press we approached, **Publisher G**, rejected our proposal after an elaborate process of writing and submitting a book proposal, filling in forms and getting anonymous reviews to read through the submission. In their response they said:

We have received three reviews and they can be found below this mail. While all three reviewers find the material of significance and potential interest, they are all concerned with how the subject has been tackled. Some of these concerns are important, now that Publisher G is part of a University Linguistics Department and will have to publish material with a strong focus on African languages, their study, development, use in a variety of settings (including literary production), etc. (email correspondence 3 May 2019)

This was a curious response as they had shown an

interest without making it clear that their focus was on texts with a strong focus on African languages when we initially approached them. The concern "with how the subject has been tackled" is reflected in the responses from the reviewers who felt that the columns alone were not enough for an academic publication. This notion of what constitutes an academic publication also highlights the ways in which certain knowledge is privileged over others because of the discourse used to mark something as academic or non-academic.

After being rejected by these publishers due to the costs of the columns we went back to Avusa's syndication department in 2018¹² asking if they would reduce the price. We were working towards anticipating the centenary year in 2019 where introducing Noni's writing as part of the centennial celebrations would make commercial sense as there would be further context for her relevance as a writer. After negotiating with the syndication department they agreed to grant us permission to use the columns for free. This change from their initial stance was largely due to our persistence and showing evidence of rejections from publishers which jeopardized our project. Since the agreement was made via email, we requested a formal letter which we would use as evidence to the publishers we would approach anew. Eventually, in November 2018, we received a letter granting us permission to use the columns for free. However, we knew that if even we found a publisher to take on the project, the book would not be ready for the centenary events, which included presenting at the African Literature Association in Ohio in May 2019.

While we were anticipating returning to publishers who had expressed an interest, there was a serendipitous turn of events. In May 2019, Dr Masola received a call from **Publisher H**. The conversation was a total surprise as we had never considered them. The call was from a young Black woman who had recently joined the publisher; she was asking Black women she knew if they were working on any writing that could be submitted and considered for publishing. Athabile told her about the columns and she seemed interested. Within a week of the phone call, a decision was made to publish the columns. This was followed up by a face-to-face meeting with the Jabavu family in East London who agreed to the book.

A book compilation of these columns, titled *A Stranger at Home*, will be published by Tafelberg (NB Publishers) once all logistics have been concluded. Xaba wrote the broad introduction and Dr Masola the Afterword. We also have included introductions to each of the monthly columns. The book has been ready to go to print since the end of January 2020.

¹² The lags in time was largely due to other writing deadlines we had such as book publications and PhD research which affected the extent to which we could focus on this project.



Due to the constraints in this publication, further research on the life of the book will explore why **Publisher H** agreed to the publication. This will include an in-depth interview with the commissioning editor who has been an advocate of the book. This will hopefully contribute to renewed scholarship about Noni Jabavu alongside the forthcoming edited book *The Meaning of Foundational Writers Across a Century: Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi, Es'kia Mphahlele* edited by Bhekizizwe Peterson, Khwezi Mkhize and Xaba.

CONCLUSION

The journey of re-introducing Noni Jabavu's work after decades of silence suggests that erasure happens because of decisions which are made about whose story is worthy of being told and whose work is worthy of being used and reused. The publishing industry is at the heart of these decisions together with researchers who have a vested interest in fighting for texts which risk being ignored because they disrupt the narratives which already exist. These decisions are, therefore, about value. Noni Jabavu's story has not been seen as valuable for the reasons stated in Xaba's narrative. Noni's columns offer a more complicated narrative about the Black experience during apartheid and they disrupt the grand narratives of history which tends to be interested in political history rather than the intersection of everyday narratives alongside grand historical narratives. Resisting the erasure of Noni's work and life is about "intergenerational forms of memory"¹³ which is necessary for understanding contemporary South Africa.

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¹³ Coetzee, "Abantu Book Festival..."