

WAIRIMŪ MŪRĪITHI

THERE IS A HOUSE IN NEW ORLEANS

TRACK 1: HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

THERE IS A HOUSE in New Orleans; it's called the Rising Sun. Some say it was a coffeehouse, which may mean that it was a hotel, or a brothel, maybe both. Some say it was a women's prison, perhaps a jail for sex workers undergoing (unsuccessful) treatment for syphilis; others still say it likely did not exist outside the lyric. Today, it's a bed and breakfast in honor of the X versions of the song.

Miriam Makeba recorded three verses of the folksong of ambiguous origin for her debut solo album, *Miriam Makeba*, in 1960, the year of the Sharpeville Massacre, the year her daughter joined her in New York City, the year her mother died, the year South Africa canceled her passport. Nina Simone [recorded six verses for her live album, *Nina Simone at the Village Gate*](#), in 1961, the year she was first billed with Miriam Makeba (for a benefit concert at Carnegie Hall), the year her fiancé pulled a gun on her, the year she started to wear a pageboy wig with a bejeweled barrette. Odetta recorded her version in 1962, the year she came under fire for trying to be a blues singer, the year she performed in Atlanta for the first time, the year before she recorded *One Grain of Sand*.

I start this essay with this song because I found myself tracking the journey it has taken through Black women's throats and across Black women's geographies before I heard it for the first time on Somi's album-length tribute to Mama Miriam Makeba; and because I want to map the journey I have been on that started the day I saw Somi perform the tribute at the Apollo. The second track of the album, "House of the Rising Sun," starts out in a rhythm that makes me want to visit it. As in Nina's later renditions of the song, the music of the Rising Sun makes it sound like a raucous place, a building that cannot contain the riotous excess of Black enjoyment, that pours out of its doors and windows and into the street. In fact, it sounds like another place I have encountered in Somi's oeuvre—a music salon in Lagos.

INTERLUDE

I KNEW FROM the beginning that this essay would riff on Nina Simone's "Four Women" (as you will soon see) and then my friend, K, published "four black women laugh" (about Louise, Helen, Florence, and Diane in the pilot episode of *The Jeffersons*) on their Substack, and the following sentences reaffirmed and reinvigorated my will to write:

A frame breaks. The turn from character to actor. To working conditions. To the precarity of a pilot episode. To the relief of finding work. To the anxiety of asking if the work will remain. To the hope that four Black women laughing can be possible. To the flavors and textures of laughter. Pebbles. Yes. And acid.

TRACK 2: FOUR AFRICAN WOMEN

GATSINZI, BEAUTY QUEEN, Mariatou, Asawo

I cannot remember who recommended Somi's "Ginger Me Slowly," but I was a little depressed undergrad living in Makhanda, South Africa. I loved the song instantly, but I was especially taken by "Four African Women," her adaptation of Nina Simone's famous song. I had listened to several covers of the song by then, but Somi's was a reimagination of the four women: Gatsinzi, the unnamed beauty queen, Mariatou, and Asawo invite Aunt Sarah, Saffronia, Sweet Thing, and Peaches into a music salon in Lagos to exchange these and other stories from all their lands, all their rivers. Here they are surrounded by other people recovering from "Ankara Sundays" or a "Two Dollar Day," including Fela Kuti's "Lady Revisited" by Somi and Angeliqe Kidjo, who just might leave her husband soon; the smitten and lusty gingered beloved; the man telling the story of monkey; the latest victims of a 419 scam.

When we talk about her latest project, Somi remembers that her mentor, the late Hugh Masekela, told her that Miriam Makeba was the only person he'd ever known who, at one point in history, had direct contact with almost every African head of state. "And when you trace her journey, she singularly witnessed the birth of the continent in a way that no other artists did. She had a certain vantage point, because she was our celebrity, right? Because she was this pan-Africanist figure and represented the pan-Africanist imaginary. And so the thing that excites me is understanding that to trace her journey leads to a different kind of historical understanding of a cultural and political archive of the

continent that is grossly untold.”

Indeed, to invoke a pan-African history is to remember that Mama Miriam was the only artist and one of the only African women present at the inception of the Organization of African Unity, a historical event co-signed by the powerful men that would go on to orchestrate plunder, genocide, and censorship in the name of African governance. As far as pan-Africanism goes, I am not so interested in that history; neither was Warsan Shire when she asked, in her unabridged *Questions for Miriam*, “did you know how to say no to the young boys / who cried outside your hotel rooms / did you listen to the songs they wrote/ mouths bloody with praise for woman like you / miriam?” (Miriam never wrote about the boys outside her hotel room, but she did write about the women that tried to seduce her when she first moved to New York City and lived in a little hotel on 8th Street.) Instead, I am drawn to the spaces that, four Black women at a time, begat a Black diasporic alliance that centered excessive and errant desire, precarity, conflict, protest, laughter, community, and loneliness—the house in New Orleans, the music salon in Lagos, and the shebeens conjured by the marabi in the histo-discographies of Black music.

SOMI. THANDISWA MAZWAI. Msaki. Diane Reeves.

I see the poster on Instagram first. *Somi & Friends*, it announced, *The Reimagination of Miriam Makeba. Saturday March 19.* And there was Somi, in these fantastic white boots, mid-dance and suspended against a yellow background, hair piled high, looking right at me and saying, with her eyes, *yes, babes, you.*



I buy myself a ticket for my birthday.

I am not a music writer, and I am certainly not a theater critic. When I pitched this review to my editor, I had been sitting on it for a while, too pressed for time, too unsure of myself, and honestly, too depressed to rise to the challenge of writing again. But [*the precarity, the relief of finding work*] with this album, and this concert, Somi made sure that I would go into the archives of Mama Miriam's life—two autobiographies, posters and photographs, several concert announcements, blogs, single-paragraph reviews . . . There is no shortage of this material, and if you did not know, let me tell you right now, Mama Miriam *lived*, neh?! Somi intimates as much in an interview with Nombuso Mathibela: "I started by looking at her catalogue and the more I learnt, the more I realised that I didn't know. Surely, then, the majority don't know?" When I ask her about it later, she said the most surprising detail to her was that Mama Miriam had five husbands in her lifetime. For me, it is that she spent her first six months earthside in prison with her mother. The more I learn about her, the more I want everybody to know that she lived.

But, as I tell a friend, an actual music writer, I do not want to write an essay about Miriam. I know that my favorite essay about Mama exists, I tell them, and that I will find it when it wants to come to me. Which is also to say that yes, this is already an essay about Miriam, but what I really want for it is to be an essay about getting to know Miriam in relation to her musical community. I want to write about what it means to listen to Black music in 4/4 time, that is, four [African] women at a time, and so this is now an essay about the deeply personal thrill of discovering old music for the first time. In an interview with PBS, Somi gives me the words for exactly what it is I want to do, because she has done it herself: I want to lean into the freedom.

MIRIAM MAKEBA. Dorothy Masuka. Nina Simone. Odetta.

Odetta and Nina would never visit South Africa in their human lifetimes; like her comrades-in-exile, Mama Miriam, who befriended Mam' Dorothy before she left South Africa, would be the bridging characters between the Black diaspora and continental artists. But just as Miriam grew into the Black artist/activist community in the 1960s United States, I have no doubt that Odetta and Nina would have grown into community with the Black artists of eGoli, of which Dorothy was a member, that David B. Coplan describes in *Last Night at the Bassline*:

“beginning in the 1920s, we can think of them simply as the ‘jazz people’. Adored on stage but disapproved of by their audiences, the jazz people were especially disliked and persecuted by the white authorities. To begin with, they could not be slotted into any of the categories for Africans in the cities with which the government was comfortable. They were neither rural ‘traditional’ labour migrants nor Christian educated and settled city folk. They had no fixed addresses or employment that could be written in their passbooks [...] they dressed in the latest American fashions and followed global popular culture, associated with other unsavoury types such as athletes, high-living gangsters, freewheeling businessmen, black politicians, and liberal ‘English’ whites [...] Sophiatown was their capital, and so it had to be destroyed.”

Of these four women, only Dorothy Masuka lived in Africa her whole life, although like Miriam, she lived in exile from South Africa for thirty-one years. Still, in a 2019 interview, she explained that she preferred to perform overseas, where she was paid enough to do so and where she was still popular. Young people, she said, prefer Western music and have forgotten her contemporaries (here, she names her own four African women—Dolly Radebe, Thandi Klaasen, Abigail Kubeka, and Letta Mbulu), but she is very clear that the music industry, and not the listener, is responsible for this careless and disproportionate compensation/exploitation model. “My kind of performance is not for . . . well it is for the young generation, let me just say, but it’s the promoters who are making money out of the singers . . . they don’t want to pay, they want to pay peanuts, and yet they can pay millions to those youngsters who come from abroad to sing . . .” Here, she samples Shakira’s World Cup jingle, “Waka Waka.”

The cultural distortion Mama Masuka relates is, of course, rooted in the capitalist channels of knowledge production and distribution instituted by colonial power and sustained by neocolonial interests. In today’s unending proliferation, consumption, engagement with or regurgitation and suppression of information, these women of lesser celebrity show up as fragments scattered across the internet, at the mercy of the algorithm’s geography, or rest in traditional archives surrounded by walls and locked doors that demand that Black people cut and fold themselves into pre-existing archetypes—scholar, researcher, artist—in order to gain limited entry. The irony does not escape me when I am filling in forms to request access to a clip of Miriam’s voice at the Schomburg, where I will sit in a quiet room, empty but for the

librarian, listening, and not especially when I write parts of this essay at The Free Black Women's Library in Brooklyn, where I am slowly (very slowly) trying to find community in what I think is a lonely, lonely city.

INTERLUDE

I FIND THE ESSAY about Mama Miriam. It is by my friend Lindokuhle. I have barely spoken to her since the pandemic began, but one morning I wake up with her on my mind, remembering that she is an arts writer and editor. She would know who wrote the essay I know exists, so I text her. She replies, yes babes, it's me. I wrote the essay you're looking for. I'll email you the link.

Reader, I think you should take a break from my rambling and read "9 Passports and No Pass."

TRACK 4

THE DAY BEFORE the concert, I am at a beauty store on 125th Street, trying to decide which color kanekalon I want my cousin to weave into my hair this time. I walk past the Apollo on the way to her salon on Adam Clayton Powell. I wonder how many times both Mama Miriam walked this route when she lived on the Upper West Side, or Somi, when she lived three doors down from the Apollo. I have recently read a large chunk of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, wandering the geographies of black people in New York City in the early 20th century. At this precise moment, I am thrilled to be here, experiencing the city in this way. I feel, if I could be so daring, powerful.

The next day, I get to the Apollo early enough to read a chapter of the advance copy of *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty*. An image is projected in pink light onto the red curtains as the audience filled the seats: Somi, hugging a portrait of Mama Miriam close. There is nobody in the chair on my left; to my right, an older Black couple whose conversation I tune in and out of.

When the curtains go up and the music begins, Somi appears from the wings in a long blue dress. She has no shoes on. Her choreography is slow and dramatic, flowing with the stark melody of the piano, thrumming with the bass. The deep percussion, when it joins, literally sends a thrill down my spine and directly into the earth. It's a breathless start.



Mama Miriam first recorded “Umhome” a capella for her 1960 debut, on which “House of the Rising Sun” also appears. In her autobiographical conversation with Nomsa Mwamuka, she recalled, “They billed me as ‘South Africa’s No. 1 Jazz Singer.’ Jazz? I knew I didn’t sing jazz. But I did sing.” I’ve heard a similar resistance before, when I learned that Nina Simone came up in music hellbent on being a classical pianist, but systemic racism channelled her into the jazz world, even as several industry heads said that her sound was original, something unlike the genre had ever heard. It’s not so much that they were not jazz singers—they did, after all, do the jazz circuits, and sit at the jazz kids’ table; it’s that they were not *just* jazz singers.

Somi, too, has been presented as a jazz vocalist, despite no jazz background or training, formal or informal. When I ask her how she has experienced this impetus to box Black women musicians in this way, she spoke about the contradictions embodied in accepting the genre on one’s own terms. “I used to struggle when I was thrown into the jazz economy, feeling like I was inspired by a lot of jazz vocalists, but that’s not what I set out to do or be.” But with her band members, she has come to let go a little, especially as she grows into the specific demands of a solo. “And I think what I love about jazz is that kind of explicit request for your own voice to show up in the context of form; it demands

a perpetual surrender to freedom, invites that in very specific moments. That is, in a way, it allows me to show up with all of the things, and I think that's where the jazz label gets sort of tossed around, because it's like, I find that especially in American music spaces or industry, if they can't call it a thing, they're like, it's jazzy. And jazzy is not necessarily a good thing in the world of jazz. So things just get called jazzy because it's about an/other stretching, right? It's this other way of sounding." And Somi's rendition of "Umhome" is attentive to this kind of stretching, as it traces and combines the stylistic choices made in Mama Miriam's different studio and live recordings of the song, first in 1960, and then in 1963 (*The World of Miriam Makeba*), when she added some strings, percussion, and impressive breathwork to the song, and then in 2000 (*Homeland*). It's folksy music, it's bluesy, it's choral in the styles of mbube and isicathamiya—perhaps Hugh Masekela would come closest to naming the genre when he sutured transatlantic Black musical geohistories metropol in "Afrobeat Blues," a song that wasn't published until 2006, even though it was recorded in the sixties by Chisa Records, a recording label started by Masekela, Caiphus Semenya, Letta M'bulu, and Stewart Levine in California.

After her rousing performance of "House of the Rising Sun," Somi slows to a stop to invite her first guest on stage. "I'm so grateful to call her my friend; my younger sis," she tells the audience. Msaki's long braids are a brilliant white under the stage lights. The piano coaxes her forward until she is standing right next to Somi, who is looking at her softly. She raises the mic and eases solo into "Khuluma," an apartheid-era migrant woman complaint by a woman who wants to know where her husband has been, why he is so late, why he wants to wake up the children.

I am not a music writer so I do not have the technical terms to tell you about Msaki's voice, so I will tell you a story about how it feels.

SKIT 1

Zaneliza: How the Water Moves

*breaking a heart is a silent art / you
pull the pieces apart by putting who
you were in a jar*

I was deep within mgowo when I stumbled across Msaki's debut album in 2019 / mourning the end of a relationship that had taught me that my bone-deep disillusionment with my family's chosen religion was really a soul-deep questioning of my ancestry / even

*the pulling, the pouring, the pain,
the what?*

*Sul'inyembezi, ugqubud'ixesha /
Apho siya khona akukhothwa
manxeba*

*the pain is waning / the pang of miss-
ing you / the strength of missing you*

*chasing paper-in-the-wind tiiiill
weeee're deeeead*

if I did not know how to ask those questions yet / desperate to stop crying / I clung to the first thing that promised me passage away from the site of this loss / a free trip to NYC from a kind writer I had just met / *it might just change your life*, he said / it changed mine / three weeks/several museums and galleries/a summer fling in the winter that brought the taste of love back to my tongue / and hours at the Schomburg Library later / I was back at JFK, hyping myself up to return to real life / but the check-in agent slid my passport across the counter back to me / it had one blank page / and I needed two / a fine print stipulation in the terms and conditions in the back room of the airline's website / I pled my case/my whole life was at the other end of this flight / she said no, her supervisor said no / so that afternoon / I ran down First Avenue in the rain to the South African consulate to beg them to let me go home / promising I would get a new passport as soon as I did / and they said no. By the time I have a new passport, two months later, a pandemic is roiling, and the borders close. *Isn't this what you wanted?* the chorus chants when I close my eyes. *You are where you need to be.*

LATER, WHILE I am doing research for this essay, I come across [Msaki's podcast interview](#) that gives me the language, in her own words, to explain the things I felt. Expertly rolling over MacG's weak questions and lewd euphemisms, Msaki speaks clearly and at length about the soil and evolution of her craft.

Would you say your music has got like udlozi it's got like it's very spiritual man very deep . . .

Msaki recalls a clear ancestral influence in the first song she ever emailed to Metro FM. Her grandfather, who she never met, was a choral composer, writing Black church music in four-part harmonies influenced by the missionaries, but of course, in the throats and limbs of singing and dancing Black people, took on their own lives of excess, of freedom beyond colonial constraint. One night, she was woken up in the middle of the night by a song that had come to her complete, in all four of its harmonies—"Iimfana Ziyabona x4." She recorded it on her little Sony Ericsson, went back to sleep, and the next morning, played it to her father. He listened and said, "That's interesting . . . your grandfather used to write like that."

And it's not just the lyrics; she *sounds* prophetic, too—she is shoring up old hurts, and—you won't know this until it happens—telling you about what is coming, and even if you do not understand what she is saying, her voice is convincing. In the same interview, Msaki explains that music runs in her family, that her sister and aunts are much stronger vocalists than she is, and that she still has a long way to go in understanding her place on stage, in front of an audience. "My voice is not an obvious voice to be a solo." Before I listened to the interview, I would have wondered what she meant, for it was certainly her voice that tended to my heart as I went through the fire so that I could come back to love, and back to myself, and it is certainly her voice here at the Apollo that is shoring up all those memories. But now I know that even when she is singing alone, she is singing in chorus, not just with her grandfather, but with her collaborators, her predecessors, and her community.

Msaki leaves after their beautiful harmony, and Somi launches into "A Piece of Ground," one of my favorite songs on the album, and the live performance did not disappoint—the up-tempo rhythm and the searing recollection of colonial seizure and genocide reminds me of rage, of movement, of the militancy of dancing, before she slows into an operatic interlude and then speeds up again into a warning—*white man don't sleep long, and don't sleep too deep / your lives and possessions how long will you keep . . .*

Miriam recorded the song for her bestselling 1967 album, *Pata Pata*, and would later tell her audience at the Lincoln Center that the song was from *Wait A Minim!*, a musical revue that satirized apartheid and was consequently banned from South Africa. “It was written by a young white South African by the name of Jeremy Taylor. You have to excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, but in the case of my country, South Africa, one has to be specific.” The audience bursts into applause as the song’s tempo becomes more urgent, and it’s clear that they have endorsed the Broadway reference (*did you ever hate them / the arms thrusting out of crowds*, Warsan wants to know) but not the wry weariness in her voice that recognizes the revue’s censure and the white songwriter’s exile from South Africa, and that seems to anticipate the cultural exile that is waiting in the wings, for after her marriage to Stokely Carmichael the following year, these same venues will cancel, these same crowds will turn their backs [*loved on stage but disapproved of by their audiences*]. Miriam’s and Stokely’s intimacy brought the deplorability of South Africa’s apartheid too close to Jim Crow’s doorstep; suddenly, in Miriam’s mouth, *black man demanding his own piece of ground* was no longer a lyric about the bad thing happening over there, in the nebulous and distant geography of Africa; her alliance with Stokely meant, especially for white American audiences, that the call is coming from inside the (master’s) house.

Somi invokes this explicit indictment of colonialism in her own music too. Throughout her tour she has played some of her original music as well, because, “I think the real pursuit for me, and this whole interdisciplinary cultural memory project has been, how to honor her voice, while simultaneously honoring my own.” At first, her intention was to make sure her audience did not forget that she was a songwriter, and that she was not just covering old songs; but then, she continues, “I realized that in some way, presenting our work in conversation with each other, historicizes my work in an interesting way.” On this night, she chooses another favourite of mine, “The Gentry,” from her 2017 album, *Petite Afrique*, which she made when she lived three doors from here, she tells us. “I know some of you know what I’m talking about when I say Harlem’s really . . . changing,” she says before launching into the song. *The gentry came now I might lose my home / and every soul that I’ve ever known . . .* She finishes to a raucous applause from those of us who know what she’s talking about.

And then she invites her next guest. “I first came to know her music many, many years ago, one of my cousins who was living in South Africa

gave me her music. And we met again several years later—we'd never been connected, actually—at Bra' Hugh Masekela's funeral she walked across the room and just held me. We didn't know each other but she held me." In her 2004 autobiography, Mama Miriam remembers Nina Simone's company at Sekou Toure's funeral in 1984; Nina had heard the news and flown straight to Guinea from the United States without stopping to pack a bag, arrived at the mosque, and when she saw Mama, she said "Zenzi, I had to see you. I had to come. That was the way it was with Nina. When I was down, she would help me up. When she was down, I would help her up. She was my sister."

King Tha sings "Oxamu" solo and a capella, the clicks stark and clear in the vast quiet of the theater, invoking [Busi Mhlongo's throaty performance of the folk song at the Market Theatre in 2006](#) and reminding us that she is, in fact, a tribute king. When she is done, and while the audience is recovering from the series of soul-shaking clicks, she and Somi ease into "Milele," one of the songs from Mama Miriam's Guinea years.

In a recent [interview on Kaya FM](#), King Tha makes a comment on how hard it is for an artist to finish any work because of its personal nature. "It doesn't always have to be a particular experience, but your life, your traumas, your whatever comes up in the work . . ." She recalls an instance during her last time in New York City, in the weeks after her appearance at the Apollo, when she could not get into the studio because of a panic attack, especially when everyone around was encouraging her to go ahead. "I was like, I can't. And I didn't!" And over the course of their career, [King Tha has been open about some of the baggage she refers to](#). She was born in 1976, the year of the Soweto youth uprising, which Mama Miriam would memorialize in "Soweto Blues," written for her by Bra Hugh. Her parents were radical journalists and members of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania. When Thandiswa was fourteen years old, she tried to tell her mother about her girlfriend, but her mother would not believe her. She was outed by a school nurse the following year, and her mother wept and wept. Four months later, her mother died. "We never got any closure. I had to navigate acceptance on my own." She was sixteen years old. Making music was, in many ways, her way of coming to terms with this. "In the studio, we write, and on stage, we perform. I write because I am sad. I sing because this is my mode of healing. I write because I am compelled to speak, use my voice. I sing because melody, harmony, speak a universal language. I sing because singing heals and can foster love. Not a physical love, but a love

supreme, the divine love, the kind of love that can change the world.”

All of King Tha’s music is an ode to her mother, but the 2016 jazz album *Belede* is explicitly named after her. In addition to the original numbers, which were a notable departure from the genres of her previous work, it features tributes to Dorothy Masuka and Miriam Makeba in “Nontsokolo” and “Malaika,” which Somi has also just covered on stage, and “West Wind,” which Nina Simone also sang at the Philharmonic Hall for her 1969 live album *Black Gold*, pointedly telling the black patrons in the racially mixed audience, “I was told to sing it by Miriam Makeba, she is my dear friend and it is a prayer. Those of you who are fans of hers will remember this song.” Across their careers, and across the decades, these women engage in a call-and-response exchange of songs. With “Milele” (and with “West Wind,” for she was the songwriter), yet another ancestor is invoked: Bongi.

Mother and daughter recorded “Milele” for their duet album, *Miriam Makeba et Bongi*, which was recorded and produced in Guinea during one of Bongi’s most tumultuous years—she had left her husband, moved to Guinea to live with her mother and two children, and was pregnant by one of the band members. Her mother recalls her volatile mood swings, disappearances, and demands for money. Bongi was still coming into herself as a parent and indeed as an adult, but she was a phenomenal singer and songwriter in her own right; at the age of fifteen, she wrote a tribute to Malcolm X for her mother to sing. Years earlier, when Miriam had tried to hide her cervical cancer from her daughter by sending her away, Bongi had known anyway, and Miriam had wondered if she, like her mother, might have *amadlozi*; now, in Guinea and with Sekou Touré’s help, arranged for her to see *isangoma*, but Bongi did not show up on the day of the trip to the mountains. They never did find out. Eventually returning from her trysts around Europe and North Africa, Bongi began a settled life in Guinea, got pregnant again, lost her child under cruel birthing circumstances while Miriam was with her other grandchildren in Morocco, and then died soon after childbirth.

Did your songs taste different after your daughter died, Warsan wants to know.

Before singing “Hapo Zamani,” Somi introduced it by giving a shout-out to her fellow East Africans in the audience, sharing that the Swahili lyrics were written by Dorothy Masuka, who would record the song after Miriam. The song’s title harks the beginning of an old story in which a woman decries the poverty brought upon her and her community by

colonialism, the violence of which drove her to drink; in fact, the lament presents the female foil to the man whose whereabouts were in question in “Khuluma.” It could easily have come from any of the women that passed through the house in New Orleans or the music salon in Lagos and in fact, she made an appearance in a 2005 performance, when Odetta sang a mashup of “House of the Rising Sun” and “When I Was a Young Girl,” a folk song, also of ambiguous origin, that she brought to black and blues life at Carnegie Hall in 1960:

When I was a young girl, I used to seek pleasure
 When I was a young girl, I used to drink ale,
 Out of an alehouse into this jailhouse,
 My body’s ruined, they left me here to die

Sixteen pretty maidens,
 Sixteen pretty maidens, sing me a song,
 Put bunches of roses over my coffin,
 So I look pretty as I ride along

In this arrangement—that is, “Hapo Zamani” after “Milele,” both on stage and on the album—Miriam’s grief for Bongzi is front and center. Miriam herself was hardly a drinker, but after she lost Bongzi, she turned to beer, palm nut wine, pineapple brew, and cigarettes (*did you ever write drunk elegies for your heart?* Warsan asks), blaming the evils of apartheid and the heaviness of banishment for the alienation that exile engendered. Still, she sang—four days after she buried her daughter virtually on her own, she was on stage in Indonesia, “because singing seemed the only way to keep the pain and the numbness away for a little while. But more than the happiness of performing was involved. My daughter died because she lost her mind in exile, and to avenge her death and the deaths of so many of my family and my people I must continue to speak out against the murder and racism that makes bloody and foul my home.”

The thread of questions that runs through “House of the Rising Sun,” “Khuluma,” “Hapo Zamani,” and “A Piece of Ground” come to a head in “Lakutshon’ilanga,” which reckons with the ghosts of people disappeared by the apartheid regime and those that continue to be disappeared by police violence today, never to turn up again, not even in prisons or hospitals or mortuaries. It’s a sad song, a commitment to keep looking long after all the sunsets left in the world; Somi’s rendi-

tion, however, has swing, a detail I only retrospectively question after I learn what the lyrics mean. If I had the chance to ask her one more question, it would probably be about this song.

Finally, Somi brings out her last friend: “It is my great honor to introduce my next guest—I know you guys know who she is but I won’t say the name just yet because I wanted to speak about the first time that I met Ms. Diane Reeves.” She recalls a night in the early 2000s that Dianne was performing at the Blue Note in downtown New York. A friend had introduced them to each other backstage, and Dianne had signed Somi’s program *Keep your eye on the prize. Love and light*. “Not only is she a point to look to in terms of keeping my eyes on a journey, but also that love and light is something that’s really the heart of who she is. She’s been so generous and full of wisdom.”

Dianne has a backstage celebrity story of her own. When she was in high school, she was working at a two-story club (she sang downstairs, in The Toolshed, and the big stars sang upstairs, The Warehouse) in Denver when she first saw Ella Fitzgerald swing a Beatles song. She describes this act of bringing black musicality to an existing arrangement of lyric and sound as “opening up” the song; “the music that you love is the music you can bring a jazz sensibility to.” The following night, the thin Denver air had forced Fitzgerald to rest, and all of a sudden, Dianne was in Ella’s dressing room, with Ella’s things, getting ready to take Ella’s place on stage. In the quiet before the show, she noticed “these cute little periwinkle blue pumps, just sitting there. They were patent leather and I just stuck my feet in them. They were narrow, but I got my feet in them.” She sang three songs on stage, staring at the shoes the entire time. In this instance, forty years before Dianne’s tribute to Ella at the Library of Congress, in a nightclub in Denver, the tribute was in the shoes as much as it was in the song.

Coming back full circle on my rambling about tribute, my first experience of Dianne Reeves singing in her role of Peaches and performance of Nina’s “Four Women,” with Lisa Simone, Lizz Wright, and Angelique Kidjo, whose part she now sings, at the Apollo, in “Jikele Maweni.” YouTube tells me it was December 2017, so it was a hot day in Johannesburg, where I lived at the time. Much like right now, with Mama Miriam, I had gone down a Lizz Wright-shaped hole on the internet that started at her Tiny Desk Concert, and wound up watching Dianne’s performance at Jazzwoche Burghausen in 2012. The instrumental opening was impressive and “The Twelfth of Never” was another banger, but

it was her scat singing in “Tango” that literally caught my breath. I had never heard anyone scat like that; I didn’t even know that’s what it was called before that day. I think I was cleaning the house with my headphones or something, because those notes reached into my brain and brought everything else in the universe to a scating halt. I scrambled for my phone to play it back. And then the next song (it was “Good Day” and it suddenly was), and then the next concert . . . my ears literally could not believe what they were hearing.

So I am pretty fucking excited to see Ms. Reeves get down to “Jikele Maweni” on stage, even though she would not perform one of her legendary scat solos. Not only does she look and sound and move every bit like your favorite jazz aunty, but she makes me feel like a proud aunty to see Somi perform with one of her iconic influences who, she recounts to me later, also told her, “It’s not about singing, it’s about being clear, about an original voice.”

The concert ended with all four women on stage, a series of Miriam’s photos projected behind them. They held hands. They bowed. They sang “Pata Pata.” They laughed. They encored. Somewhere on the balcony above me, a group of South Africans cheered the loudest; they would only be outdone by the audience at the South African State Theatre in Pretoria a few weeks later, when Somi takes the show home. But here, on this night, a momentous thing had happened—a celebration that gathered decades of wayward lives and beautiful experiments and filled the auditorium to bursting point, lifted its roof off the eaves, recalled all the Black women that had stood on the stage, in the wings, in the audience. By inviting her friends into this performance, at this place, for this tribute, Somi did not just invoke Miriam’s work and spirit, but also the maps drawn by her relationships and their mobility across Black geographies riddled by the apartheid systems of the mid-to-late 1900s four women at a time. The gathering on stage was a homegoing, as if in the style of Yaa Gyasi’s debut novel.

OUTRO

MIRIAM MAKEBA DIED in Italy in November of 2008, immediately after performing her least favorite song, also her biggest hit. About twenty years earlier, she admitted to James Hall, “If I die on stage, I guess I will be the happiest person, because I will be dying like a soldier on the battlefield.” Odetta, who would die three weeks later, expressed

a similar wish in 2007, after she was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis and forbidden from traveling by her doctor: “Michelle, I have to perform. I can’t just lay on the bed and wait to die [. . .] I wanna die on stage.” Odetta pushed herself to perform sixty shows in the last two years of her life. She needed an oxygen tank before and after each show. She had wanted to sing at Obama’s inauguration in January.

Asked about her friend in *Tea with Dorothy Masuka*, Mam’ Dorothy smiles and says, “With Miriam, we were really like twins. We loved each other, we still love each other now. Now and then she comes to visit me, in a dream (she laughs). But I miss her. The fact that she visits me, it means she misses me, too.” Somi also has a dream story. When Mama Miriam died, Somi managed to produce the only memorial to her in New York City; still a very young musician, she drew not just on her nascent music connections but on the relationships that Mama Miriam had formed over the years, so that Harry Belafonte, Amiri Baraka, Bill Salter, and Art D’Lugoff were in attendance. The following year, Somi’s father died, and then she began to have dreams about him having conversations with Miriam. Ten years later, just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, these dreams became *Zenzile: The Reimagination of Miriam Makeba*, the album, and *Dreaming Zenzile*, the musical.

I don’t remember if Somi sang “Kwedini” at the Apollo, but I recall it clear as day, as birdsong, the day she performed it at the New York Theater Workshop a few months later. She tells me that the song about great sacrifice was the hardest for her to learn. “If you listen to the original, the thing about it is it sounds so effortless. But if you really understand what’s happening musically—the range is up and down, and up and down, and up and down—and the breath that’s required to do all of the phrases . . . I didn’t realize until I was committed to recording it, and I was like, Oh, this is rough.” Once she felt confident in the studio recording, she felt it was ready for stage. “But when I was performing it every night in theater, I realized, oh, I didn’t even really put the . . . you know, as they say in Lagos, I just had to add the peppa! I didn’t really put it in the record the way I could have because I was still finding it! And now, there’s freedom that’s showing up in concert that comes from the rigor of theater making that I probably wouldn’t have experienced otherwise, because she stretched me. So it’s just been really a wonderful kind of like unlearning, honestly of discovering how that voice, in some of these songs, sits inside of my own body.”

Acting as the later singer in the musical directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz,

Somi returns to that last night in Italy, the final exit, the hovering above the audience and between the strings and under the thick of the drum skins and in the folds of her green and gold robes and in her life, caught in the stage lights, literally flashing before her eyes. Somi, her choir-cast, and her band re-enact several definitive episodes across Mama Miriam's lifetime, invoking amadlozi that had lived inside her music all her life and who now welcome her to the spirit realm in chorus. It was so good; it was so, so good. The theater critic at the *New York Times* is less convinced. "Is this an auditorium or some astral way station? Is it the afterlife? Lacking the style and thematic force that defines Blain-Cruz's best work, the show feels less like a narrative than a tone poem, which can make time hang heavy in the first half; it takes an hour just to bring young Miriam to her professional debut." Just as I am not a music writer, I am not a theater critic, and as it turns out, I've reached my maximum word count for this review essay. But when I read this review, I thought about how much white America ossified the Miriam of American Repute, the post-'59, pre-'68 African darling, who must not have had a life worth sitting with before or after she lived in the United States. Shem.

But Somi, for whom this is her first play, knows where her center is. In her questions for Miriam, Warsan asks, *miriam did you know of the girls who sang into their fists / mimicking your brilliance / did they know that you were only human*. As if taking on the responsibility of answering it, Somi told me:

"A huge part of my process was about this deep dive into the traditional music, into the language, into her life story, not just as was written in her books but then also what is her memory at home, right? What is Africans' relationship with her, and how can I interrogate and honor that relationship in a way that would please them?"

And while plans to take it home are underway, she is also reimagining the production itself, wanting to make it into "the best thing" before she can show it to the people to whom it will matter the most. It's the least Mama Miriam and her comrades deserve in an industry that has tried to bury them in the unmarked graves that white supremacy assigns to the memory of Black women. "I think, forgetting and unremembering as different things. I don't think people forgot her. I just think that they don't remember her enough."