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Poetry as a site of history education and exploration: learning history from and with poetry

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Abstract

Poetry has, historically and currently, been used to express resistance against hegemonic powers and power abuses. Poems have the potential to be both historical sources and personal comments on history, containing historical content and framing this content in a narrative. Poetry can also be useful in teaching difficult and painful histories, bringing emotions to the forefront of historical engagement. This article argues that poetry can be a powerful site of history education and exploration outside formal education spaces, using both published poems and student poetry writing exercises. It argues that poetry can be a site of history education through finding and exploring historical and existing poetry, and that poetry can be a site of history exploration through students writing poetry themselves. Poetry presents a way to explore voices of resistance and marginalised

voices on their own terms, in an emotive expression that nevertheless carries historical argument. Writing poetry can bring students into contact with history in a different way, where they are in touch either with the histories that have affected and shaped them, or with history interpreted from their own viewpoint. This article examines history learning from both angles: it explores two poems that express a historical argument and two poems written by students in response to historical learning. While poetry can be used in formal education spaces, this article explores poetry itself as a site for history education and exploration, suggesting that expansive poetry engagement and writing can enhance history education.

Keywords poetry; history education; marginalised voices; poetry as history; poetry as expression; emotive learning

Introduction

> it is this history which is even in the grave
> It is in the spirit
> And the blood
> It is in the stillness of the wind and the breeze
> It is in the quiet of the oceans
> It resides everywhere
>
> – Mongane Wally Serote, *History Is the Home Address*

There is an element to teaching history that is about human connection, spirit and memory, and knowledge in intangible forms. In disciplinary history, this tends to be boiled down into evidence and perspective – these are crucial aspects of history education. However, people learning history are human (as are people teaching it) and to make sense of these histories we teach within the constellations of their own beings: engaging their emotions as well as their critical faculties. We argue that poetry is a useful tool, both as a source and as a writing exercise, to help students engage historically with aspects of history that may not be easily captured by the disciplinary history process (although we argue that poetry has a place in this as well).

Poetry can be a useful creative element in documenting and understanding history: as a primary or a secondary source, it expresses a poet's lens on a particular moment or theme. It can express historical argument, while infusing an emotive perspective often beyond the scope of historians. We understand poetry as creative: not bound by the evidentiary standards of historians. Yet all sources that historians use have limitations. Often sources offer information within the limits of a particular context and perspective. Poetry can offer an emotive yet historically rooted argument that welcomes, requires, and engages with the emotions which history evokes. These emotions are not singular and will be different for different people – poetry does not argue for a consensus; it argues for a depth of feeling. Yet all the poetry in this article is historically rooted in one way or another. It presents a historical argument (which may be refutable, or problematic: engagement with these aspects can also be an important part of the use of poetry in history education).

Poetry is not, of course, in and of itself radical, or resistant, or historical. Poetry has been part of all oppressive regimes. It has also always been part of marginalised histories and histories of resistance (Césaire, 1982). Because poetry expresses an emotive reality, it also allows those engaging with history to engage with the feelings of a moment or a situation, enabling a proximity that makes history very real. It can also offer students a way to process and make historical and emotive sense of their feelings – bringing these feelings to the surface is useful for deepening history education (Neumann, 2019).

From the disciplinary point of view of history education, poetry has the potential to do several things that can be useful: it can be used to understand marginalised histories (Ferrus, 2011), draw together disparate historical narratives (Smith, 2016), or even shed light on historiographical debates (Xaba, 2008). This relates to disciplinary history in terms of historical perspectives, use of evidence, and ethical thinking – all historical thinking skills as laid out in the historical model by Seixas and Wineburg (Seixas, 2017;

Wineburg, 2001). As poetry is a creative form, it can be a way to explore marginalised voices and voices of resistance on their own terms, written to express the oppression and resistance itself without the involvement of other political actors (Lopez, 2014). However, we argue that poetry has relevance in history beyond the disciplinary model: it offers a way (which could equally be offered by music or art) into emotive aspects of history, and of learning history. It can be used to explore historical connections through emotive as well as evidentiary channels.

The nuances of a situation can often be expressed in poetry in a way that is difficult to achieve in other types of media without creative range. Grasping this nuance is crucial for grasping the vagaries and complexities of history. One of the challenges in teaching history is pulling away from the epistemic safety of 'best story' models of history that present history as an unrolling of events, rather than constructed narratives dependent on the choices and readings of historians. Poetry, precisely because it is creative, offers an obvious choice of narrative knowledge construction in a way that can present a clear historical argument. Makhosazana Xaba, for example, in her poem 'Tongues of Their Mothers' offers a strong argument about the patriarchal paradigm of history, where women are seen in relation to their fathers, sons, uncles. In the same breath, she offers an insight into why the women are fully human, fascinating and compelling in their own right, leading productive and powerful lives. Finally, she gestures to the difficulty of writing these histories in the current climate, still imbued with patriarchy, by closing her poem with the line 'I am not yet ready to write these poems'. This argument is historiographical and using it in history education can be an opening for students to think about how histories are constructed. In this way, poems are useful as sources to engage with in history learning and offer a human connection into histories.

The learning potential is meaningful but, of course, not all poems automatically hold this potential. The poetry chosen for history learning and teaching purposes needs to fulfil very specific criteria, such as containing a historical argument and being compelling for students (Godsell, 2019). The choice of poem is crucial. This will depend on the curriculum, the teacher's individual agency, the students, and the relationship between the students and the teacher. The poems used in this article showcase different things: historical argument, historical perspective, and historical connection. However, existing poetry is not the only way that poetry can be engaged with in historical learning. Poetry can also be used as a means of student expression: students can use poetry to make sense of and present historical knowledge and argument, narrative and historical nuance. This offers both potential and challenge: giving students the ability to write history from their own perspective can highlight historical inaccuracies or perspectives that are considered problematic. Even these perspectives, though, show an engagement with history and, like any type of assessment, provide opportunities for critical historical reflection.

In this article, we show that exercises asking history students to write poems can produce thought-provoking results. Allowing students to express their knowledge in a non-traditional format results in poems that show their voice and imagination, as well as their historical knowledge and their historical argument. Poetry is a way to allow history students to connect to history, rather than just construct arguments around it. The creative medium allows the response to be emotive and nuanced, to hear students' voices more clearly. This should not be the end of the engagement: students' positions can be questioned and probed, as can the positions of poems written by poets that are used as sources. Poetry is only a medium, but we argue it is a powerful medium for historical engagement that can speak to disciplinary history, and beyond it.

In this article we explore poetry as a site of learning in two ways: we examine two published poems, and two poems produced by history students. In this analysis, we want to show the potential of poetry as a medium for historical argument and historical connection, allowing an emotive engagement that is widely recognised in history education, but that remains slippery.

A note on the literature

There is little research directly on using poetry in history education, even though poetry is sometimes used in the history classroom as a source, which some of the existing literature discusses (Ribeiro, 2018). There is also some work on the use of poetry for historical understanding, to deepen human engagement and the historical understanding of history students (Lopez, 2014). Agustinah (2022) has written on the potential of poetry for the engagement of the historical imagination. These scholars explore the ability of poetry to stretch historical engagement and point to poetry's emotive realm as potentially both useful and dangerous. This article draws from and moves beyond these attempts in making an argument for

poetry as a site of historical learning in multiple ways, acknowledging it both as a source and as an emotive engagement, something that stretches into and beyond disciplinary history.

Context of the study: history education in South Africa

History education in South Africa remains contested: we are on the brink of a new curriculum, but we still struggle with rote learning practices in many classrooms. In the teacher education space, we try and straddle the need for history education for critical thinking, as well as speaking to the realities of South African schools. The authors are both involved in history education in South Africa, through our involvement, as a lecturer and a postgraduate student, respectively, in a history education programme in a historically white university (HWU) in Johannesburg, South Africa. The HWU status is relevant because, while the university staff and student population are now predominantly Black African, we are still fighting against the residues of coloniality in university spaces and curricula (Fataar, 2018). The push to use poetry in history education is a decolonial impulse, which can be extended through using poetry as a site of history education (Godsell, 2019).

In South Africa, coloniality still pervades most of the education system, with difficulties in service delivery, poorly paid teachers, and a predominance of schools that are poorly resourced. These conditions make history education very difficult. There is a persistent issue of history being taught in a rote-learning manner, whether this is because of a heavily content-laden curriculum, or because there are 50–70 students in a classroom that often lacks textbooks, if not chairs, or because of a lack of educational resources (Wassermann and Bentrovato, 2018). Thus, the search for low-resource and accessible tools to bring into the classroom is paramount, and poetry, which does not require any resources beyond the poem or paper and pen, can be a useful resource within or outside of the history classroom.

Poetry as a site of learning

Poetry is a form of expression that has been used orally and in written form for thousands of years. Poems have been used in support of kings and revolutions; to placate power and to disrupt it. Every poem is written in a historical context, a historical moment, and that makes it a unique space for historical learning. However, we argue that poetry is more than just a historical source: we contend that it is a space in which to explore our relation to history, through both engaging with published poems and students writing poems themselves.

Godsell (2019) argues that poetry creates a world that is 'layered and carefully constructed' (14). In a poem, there are multiple meanings, emotions, and ideas integrated through careful creative choice. This provides potential for historical engagement at different levels – from engaging with the poem as a source (and as with any source, questioning bias, authorship, context, and perspective) to interacting with the emotions of the poem, which can heighten historical engagement and allow students to have their own emotional experience with the histories they encounter (Neumann, 2019).

One of the important interlocutors for this article is Matilda Keynes, an Australian history education scholar, who writes particularly about historical justice and historical redress. In this, she comes from a position that looks at history in the present, and at the role of history education in historical justice. We share her concern for historical justice, and South Africa, as a society with a particular colonial and apartheid history (and present), needs history education that takes historical justice seriously.

Keynes (2021) asks us to think about who we are 'by virtue of' our past; not just about what the past is, or even the relation of the past to the present, asking us to learn from, as well as about, history. This questions our connection to history: what does history mean for, in, and with us? Molebatsi (discussed later) writes:

> You are a song
> Singing in the deepest
> Voice of my people
>
> – Natalia Molebatsi, *For Miriam Tlali*

The above quote implies a value and relationality of a person and imagines a recognisable voice of a people. It shows historical connection and belonging. We argue that poetry can foster a connection to history because it can evoke a personal and emotional reflection on historical moments, figures and

narratives. In this way, it can be a similar source to letters or diary entries, although poetry as a genre contains a creative element that can spur imagination and nuanced thought.

According to the South African Department of Basic Education (2007), cited in Bertram (2008), history has the ability to train students to identify and extract relevant information from authentic historical sources. This, Bertram argues, fosters critical thinking skills that allow students to recognise bias through analysing and organising information. Poetry, we argue, provides a different potential as a site of learning. Through learning history with poems, students can explore not just the 'what happened' but the 'how it felt' to live through or relate to historical events. Poetry invites students to engage with history in a more active, imaginative and empathetic way (Blee, 1998; Furman, 2005; Johnson, 2019). This is important because how students relate to history impacts how much they care about history, and that directly impacts both their historical learning and their relation to the world.

Methodology

We use a qualitative research approach to gain an understanding that allows the individual poet's world and pursuit of meaning to be engaged with on their own terms, while the context remains crucial. Sherman and Webb (2005) write:

> qualitative research is an effort to comprehend not only the modes of cultural arrangements but the ways in which those arrangements are experienced by individuals, in order to provoke intelligibility and involve one personally and intersubjectively in conscious pursuits of meaning. (p. 4)

Individual experience and personal involvement are important for our project, as poetry is written as an individual expression, which we argue draws readers into a specific historical experience and narrative. Qualitative research allows us to enter the poet's world and assess the potential for historical learning from the core of their writing.

We use a combination of interpretivist and decolonial research paradigms (Craig, 2022). The interpretivist paradigm allows us to centre the experiences of individuals: 'interpretivism supported scholars in terms of exploring their world by interpreting the understanding of individuals' (Thanh and Thanh, 2015, p. 24). The decolonial paradigm allows us to read poems through a lens that centres coloniality and the implications for the study of history. This helps us to look for marginalised voices and other ways of knowing, pulling away from a Euro-Western focus on 'objectivity' and an understanding of a history that does not centre Indigenous perspectives (Thorp and Persson, 2020). The combination of paradigms allows an analysis of historical power and individual experience and perspective.

We use thematic analysis (a form of analysis of patterns or themes to extract meaning from data) within the framework laid out in Godsell (2019) to understand the selected poems as a site of knowledge themselves, and to argue that they can hold knowledge in ways that can be engaged with as part of history education, inside and outside the classroom.

We worked in tandem during the analysis process to foster trustworthiness and validity (Amankwaa, 2016). Where we differed on understanding, we worked with our theoretical framework to bring to the surface analyses that support thinking about history education.

We sourced two published poems and two poems written by students in history courses, in order to analyse poems both as a site of historical learning for students and as a site of historical expression. The published poems were sourced from the authors' own library of poetry, so were convenience sampled, with the criteria that we were looking for poems written by Black African women (as a group often marginalised in history textbooks and curricula) that contain a historical argument. Beyond the historical argument, we wanted the published poems to show a personal connection to history and demonstrate some relation to colonialism (as the students' poems also showed this). These criteria would still generate a plethora of poems, so we opted to look at work by poets known by the authors, so we understood better the context in which they were writing. The poets' permissions were gained for the use of all four poems.

The poems from students were used with the students' permission (under ethical clearance protocol H22/09/06) and came from two different undergraduate history courses in a Bachelor of Education programme. One was a content course on the history of the USA; the other was a content course on the French and Haitian revolutions. These poems were submitted as the final assignments in each course,

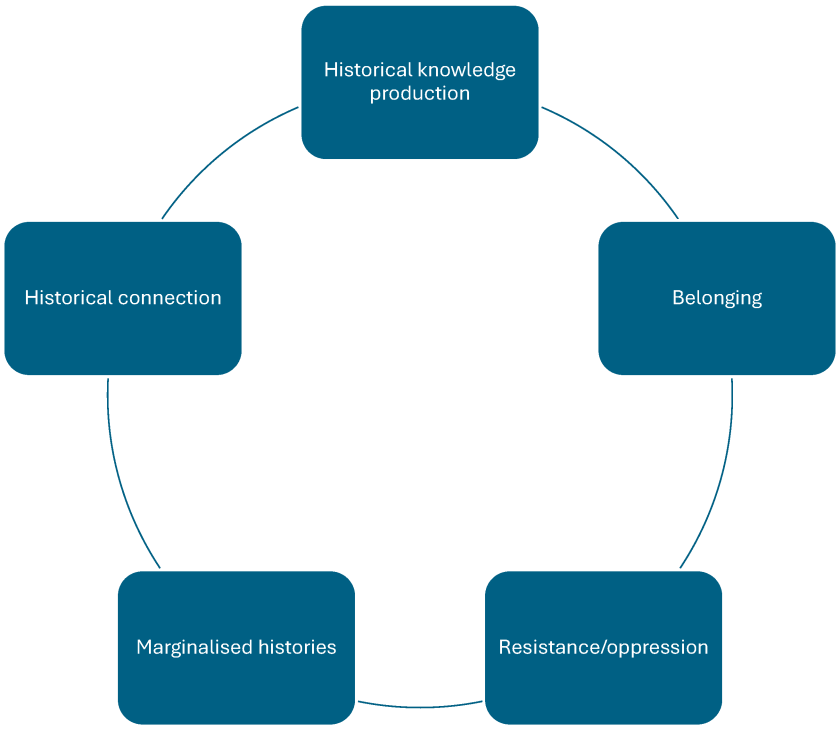
where students had the option to submit a formal essay or to choose from a range of creative submission types.

In choosing these poems, we focused on aspects selected from criteria outlined in Godsell (2019), particularly on connecting with historical arguments, being compelling, and writer positionality. To these, we added our own criterion of the poems engaging with histories that would resonate with young people learning history today. The poems were also chosen due to the choices and preferences of the authors of the article. Because we applied specific criteria as well, and we write about poetry as a site of emotion, we do not feel that this negatively impacted the article.

We performed a thematic analysis on each of the poems, first coding across the poems, and then solidifying these codes into three overall themes for each poem that speak both to the themes of the poem and history education.

The coding was a difficult process, as sometimes one line of poetry implies many different themes, and each line from each poem can be interpreted in different ways. To assist in this, we drew on our research paradigms, as well as reading the poems with a history education lens. We looked at the historical argument and the potential histories portrayed and thought about the historical thinking skills as discussed by Seixas (2017), and the challenges to those made by Cutrara (2018). This focused reading and the coding resulted in the themes shown in Figure 1. In the subsequent section, we present the poems with an analysis tying them into our argument.

Figure 1. Themes resulting from coding



Poetry as a site of historical engagement and learning: inside and beyond disciplinary history

We examine two published poems with different overt or implicit links to historical events and people. We analyse the poems for the potential for historical learning that they offer. We ask what the students can gain from thinking with and around the poem. We do this through thematic analysis (Alhojailan and Ibrahim, 2012), including creating theme tables for the poems that show historical engagement and resonance with the everyday realities of students' lives.

Poem One

for Miriam Tlali
11.11.33-24.02.17

You are a song
Singing in the deepest
Voice of my people

A lullaby cusping tears
An Amandla song
To every child of the storm

Someone said that you
Are the wind beneath
The broken wing of my people

Another one said
That women like you
Are the mending season of our aching

Women like you give and give and give
Their last breath to ignite fires called revolution
Even when they force fed you the rules of silence

You fought for your story to be told
In the season of your voice and inside your body
Reside the memories of your people

You with an uncontainable wall
That grew louder and larger
Than the tight grip of oppression

With words that force open
The doors of a world that was never
And will never be ready for our kind

It's time now for the moon to night you
With your secret conversations
And moments of endearment

The same moon that will welcome you
On an orbit of black magic
Women wonderments

You will let this world know
That you loved her more
Than she loved you

How do I thank you for your pain?
Your banned and jailed
And unacknowledged dreams?

Your dreams are gifts to my bag of memories
Through which I will craft songs

For tomorrow's healing.

– Natalia Molebatsi, 'a mending season'

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Natalia Molebatsi is a Black South African queer pan-Africanist and feminist poet. She has published two collections, as well as anthologies. Her poetry explores themes of gender, race, intimacy, identity, joy and oppression. Her writing particularly engages Black African women, and historical erasure. This poem, published in *New Daughters of Africa* edited by Margaret Busby (2019), is an intimate communication from the poet to the departed writer. In it, Molebatsi Daymond (2013) traces ribbons of history towards a future, connecting her and Miriam Tlali (2004): a Black South African woman writing and publishing during apartheid (she also contributed to the preamble to the Freedom Charter, an essential document in South Africa's struggle for freedom. Read more about her in South African History Online [2014]) and tying her and Tlali into the country's past, its revolution and eventual healing. The communication is gentle and reverential: 'It's time now for the moon to night you', an invocation for both peace and a place for Tlali in this history of resistance in South Africa. Readers are granted an insight into a deeply personal relationship and an insight into how layered history is, and how social categories that are built to box people in can also become conduits for them to see and support each other, even through time and space.

In terms of historical learning, the poem can be tapped into in several ways: the poem mentions a historical person, one who is almost erased from the current literary and historical landscape. In elevating Tlali, Molebatsi reminds us to remember her work and her life. Through this lens, her work is woven into South African history in very specific ways. Referring to Tlali as a 'song' in the 'deepest voice of my people' is at once tying the poet to the author and venerating the author in an art form outside her own – it is saying that Tlali has deep connections to a 'people' (here probably referring to Black people, Black South Africans more specifically), and that that extends beyond the medium in which Tlali expressed herself. In terms of history learning, this can express several important things, both in the past and the present. One of these is about relationality, suggesting that we are all connected to a people, although how that is defined can shift and the people can also be defined by the oppressions against them. Here, we can think about intersectionality and how we reveal different parts of our identity in response to different, sometimes intersecting, struggles. Molebatsi does this in her poem. She positions Tlali from the 'deep voice of my people' to being 'on an orbit of black/ Women Wonderments'. Here she is acknowledging Tlali not only as a Black freedom fighter, but a Black woman freedom fighter (Boswell, 2016). In acknowledging this intersection, Molebatsi is tying Tlali more closely to herself: 'Your dreams are gifts to my bag of memories'. In this way, Molebatsi draws a direct trajectory from the dreams (both those accomplished and those dashed) of Tlali, as a history, to Molebatsi's dreams and achievements as a Black woman author, born in Tlali's lifetime, living and writing after Tlali's death. So, the poem offers historical learning not only about Miriam Tlali but also about the ways in which histories connect to futures through people. Importantly, in a way that only creative arts can achieve, the learning is abstract and emotional. There is an invitation to students to look up Tlali and her works, rather than offering them fact-filled information about her life and her work. We are given impressions about her resonance and impact, an emotional telling that students may be able to relate to. There is a lesson in finding the histories that speak to and carry you, as an individual and someone in a community, because these histories exist even if they are suppressed. This could awaken a historical awareness, even a historical consciousness (Seixas, 2006) about threads of histories as we weave futures and presents.

Historical thinking (although a contested concept [Cutrara, 2018; Thorp and Persson, 2020]) is visible in this poem, in both its historical significance and historical perspectives. The poem also engages the ethical dimension. Molebatsi acknowledges both the individual and the group aspects of who Tlali was, and what she gave, in the stanza: 'Women like you give and give and give/ their last breath to ignite fires called revolution/ even when they force fed you the rules of silence.' Here, Molebatsi connects Tlali to the revolutionary work she did in her writing, but also acknowledges both that she was part of a group of women who did this and that they did this despite being silenced in different ways. Tlali was silenced, for example, by being denied entry to Wits University to study and by the delays in publishing her work or the banning of her books in South Africa. This offers a particular historical perspective, as well as speaking to the previous point on intersectionality and relationality, and would hopefully broaden the potentially individualistic focus often taken by history curricula and textbooks, which tend to focus on 'big men' history (Wills, 2016). Even when women are mentioned, they are often exceptionalised and read out of their context. Tlali, in this poem, is made both exceptional and part of a cohort, a 'women like you' group. Her historical significance is at once recognised and excavated.

What is also acknowledged in the above stanza is that Tlali's role in the revolutionary movement was her 'last breath to ignite the fires called revolution'. This links both historical significance and ethical

thinking, as well as historical narrative. The stanza describes the sacrifice and the groundwork that needs to be done for revolution to be possible. These historical realities, and how we understand them historically, are important lessons for students of history: that sacrifices occurred outside the bounds of going to war or imprisonment, and that sacrifice sometimes looked different to the people who stayed at home, especially for women. Furthermore, revolution does not (often) simply spring up. It takes years, decades of groundwork, education and organisation for movements to be able to implement plans of resistance.

The criteria in Table 1 about a poem being 'compelling' are, of course, subjective. However, we would argue that this poem is indeed compelling due to the delicacy and strength of the language used, the way it treats Tlali as powerful and deserving of recognition, and at the same time treats her with a gentleness that is almost reverential. 'It is now time for the moon to night you'. The way in which themes are woven throughout the poem makes a case for historical complexity. There are moments of one theme emerging with strength to later be interwoven with another theme, with themes recurring for emphasis but also being explored individually. This interweaving points to the complexities of cause and consequence in history. The poem holds relevance for South African students because it engages with themes of struggle in, and the contemporary nature of, South Africa. The poem also explores themes of exclusion and marginalisation, as well as power, of (Black) women, which gives it international weight. In terms of writer positionality, the voices brought into the learning, both Molebatsi's and Tlali's, represent a demographic that often remains silenced, specifically when history adopts a Eurocentric lens; however, marginalisation can also occur when a revolutionary history is written in which (Black) women's contribution is ignored.

Table 1. Codes and themes from the thematic analysis process

Authors	Examples	Codes	Themes
NM	'Voice of my people'	Strength of voice	Historical knowledge production
NM	'a mending season'	Belonging	Belonging
NG	'Do I belong to those I gave land to and they made a home out of it?'		
VG	'those who have been swept under Exile's carpet'	Historical narrative	Historical knowledge production
NM	'You fought for your story to be told'	Historical knowledge production	Historical knowledge production
VG	'Tell us what is to be My young lion scribes!'		
NM	'An Amandla song'	Resistance against oppression	Resistance/oppression
NM	'Even when they force fed you the rules of silence'		
SM	'For we could not be tamed any longer'		
VG	'The Lost Boys of Sudan'	Historical agency	Historical knowledge production
NM	'The broken wing of my people'	Historical groups	Belonging
VG	'I want to speak to my children'		
SM	'Oh Son of Breda, how dare you be so free?'	Freedom	Belonging
NM	'Are the mending season of our aching'	Healing	Belonging
VG	'That their homes, though broken, are not beyond repair'		

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NG	'My fellow colonizers'	Colonialism	Resistance/oppression
SM	'Ah wa right to expressions and access to the world as equal to the sons'		
NM	'Voice of my people'	Historical connection	Historical connection
VG	'I want to tell them tales of magnificent battles where their fathers were heroes'	Affirmation of African histories	Marginalised histories
NG	'When you experienced a bloodbath of your brothers and sisters in your own home'	Affirmation of Indigenous histories	Marginalised histories
NG	'How could I not belong to you even when you were brought to me, Uninvited, Unannounced but also Unknowingly'	Affirmation of African American histories	Marginalised histories
NM	'Women like you give and give and give'	Gender	Resistance/oppression
VG	'Those who have been forced out of their homes in the middle of the night'	Oppression	Resistance/oppression
NG	'A battle of your Freedom within that Independent country'		

Notes: Quotations are linked to their author: NM is Natalia Molebatsi; NG is Ntokozo Gcwabaza; VG is vangile gantsho; and SM is Stephanie Mangapa.

We have analysed this poem in terms of the possibilities of historical learning. There are aspects of the poem we did not analyse here, choosing specific themes to unpack that relate to our article.

Poem Two

I want to speak to my children,
Those who have been forced out of their homes in the middle of the night
And those who remain sleeping, warm, in comfortable beds
Those who walk barefoot towards uncertain futures
And those who have been swept under Exile's carpet
I want to speak to the youth of '76
The children of Sierra Leone,
The Lost Boys of Sudan
I want to hold each one of them in my arms
Whisper courage into their ears
Tell them that they will spark revolutions
Stand as a constant reminder of our need to repent
I want to assure them that God has not grown tired of them
That their homes, though broken, are not beyond repair

Come to me my little ones,
My beautiful ones, come to me
Ours is the bond of mother and child
Deeply rooted in the Cradle of Humankind
You, little Anathi's and Adewale's
Need to be told the Nubian truth
Of how the Kush decorated our homes
Filled them with art and knowledge and architecture
And walls that were books
You need to know that you come from a people who spoke with stars
Long before they were sold astrology

Bring me my children
Let them come and sit at my feet. Ndiza kubabalisela iinstomi

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I want to tell them tales of magnificent battles where their fathers were heroes
Paint them a portrait of Isandlwana
Take them to El Obeid and Shekan
I want to journey with them to the beautiful forgotten land of Adwa
Where Menelik and Taitu won a colossal victory
Against the dark forces of colonialism
I need my children to know that we have our own epic stories
That they are then lions' historians
Lions who have left many scars on the face of the audacious hunt

And when my children sleep
I want them to dream
Dream of the courageous Yaa Asantewa
The beautiful Queen Makeda
Dream of Kemet and Songhai and Timbuktu
Of Nkrumah and Nyerere and Garvey =
Then I want them to awake!
And to write!
I want my children to write for Gaddafi and the South Sudan
For Zimbabwe and the DRC
For the Pan African Movement
And the hypocrisies of the International Criminal Court
Tell our tales through fresh discerning eyes
Imagine us on our behalves.
Tell us what is to be
My young lion scribes!

Call all my children to me
Tell them to come home
Tell them youth is purpose
Tell them to learn and to remember
That although history has already been told
They are the authors of our tomorrow
Rooted
Triumphant
Beautiful

As we have always been.

– vangile gantsho 'I want to speak to my children'

vangile gantsho is a South African Black queer feminist and pan-Africanist poet and healer. She has published two collections and is co-founder of the pan-Africanist feminist press impepho press. She writes about African history and present from a spirit-lens, from a Black-woman lens, and from a pan-Africanist lens. She attends to inter-generational harm from the perspective of both gender and race. This is a poem explicitly about history, historical narrative, the historical lens, historical erasure, and historical revival. In this poem, gantsho is explicitly calling on historical narratives to be unearthed, revisited and rewritten from a pan-Africanist perspective. In this way, the poem engages specifically with historical perspectives, suggesting that the histories of Africa that have been written show the continent and its peoples as victims, rather than as full humans possessing all the complexity, all the light and the dark, of other peoples.

gantsho uses the trope of describing herself as mother to all young Africans, stressing a pan-Africanist relationship between people throughout the continent. She specifically chooses children as children both have the capacity to learn and represent the future, the 'authors of our tomorrow' that she invokes. In this, students have the opportunity to learn from the historical events and people gantsho mentions, but also to see themselves as possible historians, and to become aware of the different historical and future worlds that are opening up by learning about different historical narratives. Again,

this learning happens partly in the poem, and partly outside of it. We are invited to follow the poem to learn about the anti-colonial struggles fought by Yaa Asantewaa, for example, who led the Ashanti rebellion against the British (the colonial rulers of Ghana at that time) in 1900–1901, or the battle of Isandlwana where the amaZulu warriors defeated the British in South Africa in 1879. gantsho consciously evokes a history that pulls away from the 'dark continent' trope or the history that is exclusively about colonial powers defeating Indigenous peoples. This history exists, but it is not the history often cited in history classrooms or textbooks. gantsho wants African children to know that their histories are more glorious, powerful and provocative than the ones often told, and especially those often memorialised in the West, or even in South Africa, where the curriculum remains Eurocentric (Maluleka, 2021). The way that anti-colonial struggles are historicised in South Africa often minimises the resistance of Indigenous peoples. For example, the 'Xhosa Frontier Wars' are named as such, rather than as the '100 year war', which gives a much greater scope to the strength and duration of the amaXhosa resistance (Gqola, 2015).

gantsho also speaks explicitly to the future, through directing the piece at African children: 'Then I want them to awake!/ And to write!' She is speaking directly to the power that history has over identity, belonging and self-esteem. In this, she is also speaking about historiography and ethical thinking around the histories that have been written, and how those portray Africans in a particular light. Even if the futures of the children are 'uncertain', gantsho wants to ensure that these African children know that their pasts are 'triumphant'. And she wishes that for their future. She draws the link between the future and the past in the last section of the poem 'They are the authors of tomorrow/ rooted/ beautiful/ triumphant/ as we have always been'. With these lines she affirms the presence of the positive histories she points towards throughout the poem (while not denying the existence of the negative histories) and ties all the children she is addressing in the poem into a pan-African community with the 'we' in the last line.

gantsho is writing to different communities of youth, drawing on a pan-African framing, to address a collective experience of youth in Africa, of hardship and heroism. Above all she is affirming the preciousness of the youth of Africa, up and down the continent. This writing is affirming a belonging denied by some Euro-Western historians (like Trevor Roper) who wrote that Africa had no history and did not belong to history. Thus, this claiming and inscribing of belonging is important. gantsho writes to 'tell them!' that their importance must be known to the children so they can embrace their belonging. In this, she is also telling each of the students who may be reading this poem to take and claim their own importance, in the present and in the history their present is making. This shows how poetry can be a site of learning about historical significance and historical perspectives, tying in with historical thinking (Seixas, 2017). Beyond this, it presents history as a way to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

gantsho is also writing about a very broad span of history, ranging from Kush and Nubia (referring to Ancient Egyptian history and earlier) to relatively recent historical references to Nkrumah (the first prime minister and president of Ghana when it gained independence from Britain, and a famous pan-Africanist) and the International Criminal Court (which is sometimes critiqued for prosecuting African and not Western leaders). While there is not space here to unpack each of her historical references, she traverses both the continent and millennia to draw a map of historical Africa that challenges some current historical narratives. These mentions can inspire students who are interested to conduct further research and trace these historical narratives. Mostly, however, the poem is an offering to African children, a narrative that shows that they are so much more than they are aware of. It offers them this beautiful, proud history that they are part of, and seems to command them to know it, and live from it. This has the potential to make the poem very compelling to young African students or young Black students in other parts of the world. In this way, it connects with relevant themes of identity and belonging for the students.

The poem, importantly, should not be seen as rewriting history. All the histories gantsho references are historically documented, just often not included in mainstream histories of the region, or of the world. gantsho is also writing from a South African perspective, where there are deficiencies in South African engagement with histories from the rest of the African continent. So, while Yaa Asantewaa is well known in Ghana, her struggle is not well documented in South Africa. This also offers the historical nuance of engaging author positionality.

This poem is explicitly a site of historical learning, and more than that, it is an invitation for the students to write their own histories. This offer serves to draw students into the process of writing history. It teaches students not only about historical narratives but also about historical knowledge production. It shows students that knowledge also comes from them and as the poem alludes to African histories existing in oral format rather than written (Field, 2007), it urges them to take up their

place as historians. This demonstrates the concept of history as unfolding and challenges existing or not-yet-existing histories of Africa.

Poems as a site of historical discovery

In this section, we analyse two poems written by students from university history courses as a response to an assessment prompt to understand poetry as a site of historical discovery. These poems came out of historical content courses (the first from a course titled 'Columbus and the USA: Themes of Belonging' and the second from a course on the Haitian and French Revolutions, working with themes of freedom). The students have requested to be named as the authors of the poems, and this is per the provisions in the ethical clearance for this research project. These poems will be analysed in terms of what they potentially display about historical connection, historical engagement and historical learning. It is important to note that these poems (like the poems above) show a particular historical perspective and historical argument, which can be contested, and may show positions considered problematic. The point of the poems and the analysis below is to assess historical engagement, not historical 'correctness'. The poems are moments of historical connection and learning for the students which can be jumping off points for contesting historical argument and critical engagement.

Poem Three (from the course 'Columbus and the USA: Themes of Belonging')

My fellow people ask
Do I belong to those I gave sand to and they nourished it?
Do I belong to those I gave land to and they made a home out of it?
Do I belong to those that appreciated what my hand had to offer?

My fellow colonizers,
How could I belong to you when you took what my sand had to offer?
When you destroyed the beautiful garden my land had turned into?
When you grasped with every inch what my hand had offered?
My fellow colonizers,
How could I belong to you when you came into my home
And dilapidated the walls of my people?
How could I belong to you when you disintegrated the peace I had offered to my people?
How could I belong to you when you sailed with boats and ships through the ocean,
With your Columbus master and landed in the gates of my home,
Then fooled my people into thinking you came bearing gifts?
But all you bared was hearts made of stone,
When all you bared was pain,
Pain you intended on inflicting on my people
How could I belong to you when you took the food out of my children's mouth?
When you shamed my people by enslaving them in their own home?
How could I possibly belong to you when your master
Commenced the colonisation of my land without ever setting foot in my land?
When you disfigured me?
How could I belong to you when you had packed a suitcase of diseases
For the purpose of extincting my people?
Finding laughter in making them watch as your burn their home into ashes.
In your hands I bled almost to death.
In your hands I was crushed.
How could I belong to you when you never showed respect to my people?
Calling them names "Red Indians"
Instead of putting some respect on their indigenousness
When you called my adopted children Negroes
Instead of respecting their African-Americanisms.

My fellow children
My indigenous people

How could I not belong to you when you were the first
The first to always make sure my sand was watered everyday
When you took good care of me
And was never greedy about what I had to offer.
When you celebrated me.
When you fought for my independence when the colonizers tried taking me away.
When you experienced a bloodbath of your brothers and sisters in your own home.
But still remained resistant and unshaken
How could I not belong to you?

My fellow African Americans
How could I not belong to you even when you were brought to me,
Uninvited, Unannounced but also Unknowingly.
When you landed in my sand scared and stranded,
Taken away from your home with no compass to get back,
Sold like things that do not matter and about to be made slaves
But I became your home
But I became your hope.
How could I not belong to you when you wore the heart of bravery of a honey badger
And also for my Independence,
Even when I never gave birth to you?
How could I not belong to you when you fought battle after battle?
The battle of my Independence,
A country you're a stranger to.
A battle of your Freedom within that Independent country.

Well then my fellow people I believe it is wise for me not to ask
Who do I belong to?
But rather Who belongs to me?
Well here's my answer,

Those that belong to the USA
Are those that were fortunate to amble first in my world
Are those that nourished the sand I gave them.
Are those that made a home out of the land I gave them,
Are those that appreciated what my hand offered,
Those that landed in my home positively unaware,
Those that cared for my heart
And like an elephant were very much protective of my wealth
Those that fought for me,
Those that endeavor to be fair and true
Those that don't judge others according to their skin colour
But understand our differences make us peculiar,
Those that belong to Me
And those that never gave up on me even when the going got hard,
Are those that even after fighting tooth and nail for Me
Still live in poverty in their own country holding on to the hope,
And those that are my Indigenous People,
And those that are my African-Americans.

– Ntokozo Gcwabaza, 'Who do I belong to?'

Thematic analysis

Ntokozo Gcwabaza is Black South African woman, a history teacher at Highlands North Boys High School, and an alumna of Wits School of Education, where she completed her Bachelor of Education with distinction. She is the first born of three girls and embodies a deep sense of determination and leadership. She is an avid lover of poetry, finding solace in its creative expression. This poem looks

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overall at the theme of belonging. The poet is writing from the perspective of the country, the USA, that she has personified. She then goes through different major population groups in the USA to contend with the theme of 'belonging' for each of them. Rather than conducting an in-depth analysis of this poem, we will draw out some points to show this poem as a site of historical learning.

The student has engaged with the violence of colonisation, which will resonate with a South African student, but has also engaged with the nuances of different population groups on the question of belonging. She makes a controversial argument for the USA belonging to Indigenous people and African Americans, rather than colonisers. In this she is going against the mainstream US view of history, but she is also relating her course to her home context, where the question of belonging, and specifically land ownership, remains unresolved.

After having clearly denied colonisers' belonging, she gives a historical context for this view. Citing violence, claims of ownership, and treachery that can be read into the history of the USA, she allows a broader belonging at the end of the poem. She qualifies this: 'those that endeavor to be fair and true/ those that don't judge others according to their skin colour/ but understand our differences make us peculiar'. She allows for a belonging qualified by behaviour and relationships, rather than historical claim. In this, she has used the poem to explore the concept of belonging and the histories she had explored in class from different perspectives. What we consider important is that the poem is historically grounded and presents a historical argument that is nuanced, however controversial.

We claim that this shows the poem as a site of historical discovery because the student was able to creatively embody the histories she had been exposed to and creatively respond to a question put to her. Rather than a historical essay, this poem shows a response that allows an emotive exploring to achieve a historical argument. This can then be taken as a point of provocation for further learning, probing the claims made in the poem and presenting different historical evidence to challenge different aspects of the poem.

We understand that this poem is controversial. There are elements open to historical engagement and challenge. We are not analysing this poem for its historical accuracy or what the historical argument suggests but rather looking at it from the perspective of analysing the historical connection and discovery that were evidenced in the poem. We also consider what historical relationships are explored in the poem. The student explores the relationships between different historical population groups and their historical (and current) relationship to the USA. This displays an engagement with history. The poem also shows a historical argument presented in a way that allows an emotive as well as historical engagement, and hints at how this student might relate the histories learnt to her own lived experience. To hone this, further guidance would be necessary, and this demonstrates poetry as a site of learning, like any other, that is in itself incomplete. It suggests that historical learning outside the classroom needs to be multiple and layered. We argue, however, that the perspective-taking of poetry writing necessitates a grounding in historical knowledge and thus facilitates historical learning. In addition to this, poetry makes space for personal viewpoints and emotive experiences.

Poem Four (from the course 'Social Science I: Freedom in the French and Haitian Revolutions')

You
You hid from all of us a scheme
To give the French groom the wrong bride
Oh Son of Breda, how did your great mind manifest such?
A beautiful sly and freeing trick
He had his mind set on another time

Oh Son of Breda, how dare you be so free?
How dare you be so unruly, so –
Heavens above saw you bite the hand that flayed you
Their unparched scarlet tongues wagged 'Rights of Man'
But only you heard that tighten the iron round our dry ankles
Knit more years onto our toil
Bury deep into their soil
Ah wa right to expressions and access to the world as equal to the sons

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Of our Masters
He had his mind set on another time

Fi yuh nuh betray wi;

Un,
We cud neva forget di day it happen
Those to whom our lives were owed galloped in,
T'was the early hours of the morning when the dew hung fresh from the head of the shuga cane
The memories of Breda did not make you flinch the master's roar.
Instead you rested calming in the memory of your hidden wife,
You had that calm mien upon your face.
Oh,
But our knees buckled not only from the
Guerilla training last night but from the anger and the fear we felt for the master;
We were like a hungry lion waiting for the click to go in and attack
For we could not be tamed any longer
The cunning fox was now a weak pig
The wind shook as the sun scorched as our ancestors frowned at the
Faux-compromise
Rocks for bread they say.
For our liberty was nothing to them but a bitter tea.
He had his mind set on anticrime and not unpaid overtime.

Deux
They had come to fight us not save us,
'Gainst the French you made us to come to blows
T'was grotty and not up to snuff' f'ya
For we had seen you the night before,
Haha forgive us for we looked through the window of confusion
And mistrust of your divine and phrenic capability.
You dined with the Spanish but you did not fill your belly,
In lieu
You filled your cheeks with irony,
And like the true bearer of freedom you spat the truth into our mouths.
And we locked horns with French
And you had us pull in the direction of our manumission
Alongside our Spanish imprisoners like brothers and friends
And not like master and slave
And we thwarted the
Almighty and inconquerable mountain
Of the French four thousand

Trois
Son of Breda,
You never once took your eye off them.
Les rats espagnole
Covered in a jumbuck garment
You were a black man in sheep's clothing.
You were a conquerer with the face of a black man
A black Napoleon.
Born a slave but nature gave you the soul of a free man,
He had his mind set on another time,
And Freedom called him first.
May the words of the history books paint and sculpt you as the man who had his mind set on
Another time.
A man who had his one hand on freedom and the other one on

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The slasher
You breathed collective freedom, you revolted for future freedom.
You craved the day black slaves would walk side by side,
Hand in hand
With our backs straightened,
Alongside our white brothers and sisters
Your desires contradicted by your class,
You didn't dream in colour and chains
You dreamt in freedom

For you always had your mind set on another time,
Patron Saint of the soil,
Son of Breda
Mother of our Freedom!
Freedom has come, freedom we say,
Freedom Freedom Freedom
The black man finally gets to eat.

– Stephanie Mangapa, 'You'

Stephanie Mangapa is a Black African woman, currently a fourth-year Bachelor of Education student at Wits University. She is from Zimbabwe, and her identity as Zimbabwean is important to her. She enjoys engaging with decoloniality. She felt passionate upon learning about Haitian revolution leader Toussaint Louverture and his life, and felt compelled to write this poem, which shows a deep historical understanding of a complex character. By writing the poem almost in the form of a praise poem (a form of oral poetry, and oral history, in South Africa), the poet is able to express her admiration of the historical character of Toussaint Louverture. This is important because it shows an aspect of historical discovery as she explores his life through the poem. She refers to him as 'Son of Breda' alluding to his time as a slave, and his employment at the Breda plantation from which he became involved in the Haitian revolution. She refers consistently to his heroism, and how he 'had his mind set on another time' – suggesting he was able to foresee a freedom that was far from given when he became involved in the Haitian revolution, a few months into it. She chooses to frame his choices around heroism and not engage in the complexities of his life: his love for France, the complexities of the constitution he legislated in Haiti, and the possibility that he owned slaves at one point. This is a historical decision, and again, one afforded by the form of poetry. She can explore to its fullness one aspect of Toussaint's character, highlighting his commitment to freedom, and his skill as a strategist (how he was able to be victorious against three different colonial powers by playing them off against each other).

Her expression draws on different linguistic heritages, including Haitian creole to express a sense of authenticity, as the poem is from the perspective of Haitians who see Toussaint as the 'mother of our freedom'. This sentence is in itself interesting, describing Toussaint as 'mother' rather than 'father', presumably referring to the fact that liberty is generally portrayed as a woman. It shows the numerous connections that students can explore historically and linguistically in the form of poetry, whereby links can be made across words, across thoughts, across temporalities and realities. In the poem these connections are expressed via allusion rather than a clear argument, although they do contribute to historical argument.

The author also locates this history temporally and in terms of argument with the last line of the poem 'the Black man finally gets to eat'. This positions the Haitian revolution in the trajectory of Black liberation movements. Although chronologically it is prior to many histories that Mangapa would have been exposed to in her history curriculum in South Africa, she is alluding to 'eating' linked to Black liberation history more broadly, as well as the 'eating' that came with the relative freedom of Haiti. This again shows the flexibility of poetry to explore different temporalities together and in relation to each other.

This poem demonstrates poetry as a space for historical discovery, the collation of historical argument, and the creation of personal relationships with historical characters. The linguistic creative allowances foster an emotive exploration that is difficult to achieve in a standard history essay. For these reasons, we argue that these poems written by students show poetry as a site of history learning.

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Poetry and disciplinary history education

Disciplinary history is an approach to history that focuses on teaching historical skills, or the skills used by historians (Seixas, 2017; Wineburg, 2001). This has been taken up among many Western countries over the past few decades as a much-needed move away from rote learning and memorisation. However, it has recently and increasingly been critiqued for its alignment with settler colonialism (Cutrara, 2018; Keynes, 2021; Thorp and Persson, 2020). We argue that poetry has a function both within and beyond this space.

To understand poetry as a site of history learning outside the classroom, we need to explore poetry as a site of learning for history as disciplinary education. We have alluded to this earlier: poetry is often used as a historical source, although this has not been thoroughly theorised. There is little literature on poetry in history education, but where it exists, it is mostly written around the topic of historical literacy and empathy. Poetry, as used as a historical source, is also touched upon (Lopez, 2014; Ribeiro, 2018). We note that this is useful, and the first two poems we have explored offer ways in which disciplinary history can be taught: they offer historical content and historical argument, and can be analysed as historical sources (with all the criticality brought to each source). Thus, poetry is an under-theorised element that can be used in the exploration of historical perspective, the use of evidence, and even ethical thinking. Poems can challenge established perspectives, or present provocative perspectives for engagement. The reception of this relies on the students' own knowledge of historical fact and thus could be challenged as it requires a factual learning (teaching the 'right' facts) for it to be successful. However, this could be true of much of history education; its success requires contextual knowledge. Poetry, even in disciplinary history, offers a space for the engagement of perspective that can be used to both present and challenge various historical narratives. It also offers this with the potential of an emotive engagement that can move beyond disciplinary history, into a space where history lives in the present, and inside us. This emotive engagement needs to be carefully approached: criticality and contestation need to be held as an essential part of this engagement, and this must be rooted in historical knowledge. However, the emotive – often too big, or difficult, for the history classroom – is an aspect of our own relationship to, and engagement with, history.

Poetry is a potential tool, outside of formalised learning spaces, through which we can explore our connection to histories: both those close to us and those removed in time and space. The poems we analysed showed the connection of the poets with history: whether this was through a conversation between the author and a historical actor (poems one and four), a treatise on marginalised histories (poem two), or taking a historical perspective written in the first person (poem three). The poems examined expressed historical arguments with a personal and emotive element.

Somers (1999) points out that well-selected poetry can allow discussions, seek out pupils' views, and listen to their interpretations. This is done through engaging with the nuanced language and symbolism in poetry. Students are encouraged to share their perspectives, articulate their understanding, and listen to the diverse interpretations of their peers. This process not only helps to explore different viewpoints but also deepens critical thinking and analytical skills. We argue that beyond this, and beyond the history classroom, poetry has a deep connection to human engagement with the world and with others (Creely, 2019).

The poems above show historical connection, themes of belonging and marginalised histories, and historical knowledge production. They also show historical thinking (in a broader sense than the disciplinary). Each of these poets, both students and published poets, would, if asked, be able to find historical sources to back up the historical arguments made in the poems. Historical engagement, historical connection, and historical thinking happen in the writing.

Through engaging with carefully selected written poetry and engaging in writing historical poetry students can engage with history outside a formalised education space. In this way the learning is not narrowed by curriculum or assessment procedures that govern school learning. By integrating carefully selected poetry into history education, history teachers can create a transformative learning environment where the pain and trauma of the past are not only discussed but also felt and expressed on an emotive, personal and nuanced level. Poetry allows history to live and be explored outside of the history classroom. While it can be a useful source in the history classroom, poetry is bigger than this and can be a site of learning in and of itself, in terms of both reading and writing.

Discussion

Keynes (2021) writes: 'who am I by virtue of my past?—which prompts a subjective questioning of one's being in the present; this questioning entails learning from rather than just about history' (p. 425). This important question is answered in different ways, through relationality to different histories. The poems above all relate to history in different ways: honour a beloved ancestor (Molebatsi); to create collective belonging, esteem and purpose (Gantsho); personify a historical argument (Gcwabaza); or to pay tribute to an esteemed historical figure (Mangapa). They all show a relationship to historical content, historical narrative and historical knowledge. They also show commonalities: themes of resistance, of belonging and of marginalised histories. They offer ways to engage with marginalised, and previously colonised, historical characters and perspectives, and in this way, they offer a decolonial lens. They all show a connection and relationship to history: in conversing with historical characters, or historical moments, they place themselves in a history that asks questions about who is telling the history, who is being left out of the history, or what sense is being made of the historical narratives.

All the poets we chose are Black African women, who take, in their poems, a specific view on history that connects to who they are. This shows their interpretation of historical factors and ways of belonging, in history and in the present. We argue that this connection with history, and this perspective-taking, is valuable in and of itself. It allows history to be felt, and its connections and implications to be lived: history in the spirit. This is not to say that the histories presented in the poems should be uncontested – but they offer a position to be engaged with, with feeling and with historical reasoning.

We argue that poetry can be a site of historical learning that moves us both into and beyond the disciplinary model and presents a different way of connecting with history. These poems present intimate individual takes on history that are relational, weaving the poet and the history in an intricate web. The history is impacting the poet, but equally the poet is impacting the history: whether through an act of archive (Molebatsi) or an act of bringing together (Gantsho). One way of treating these poems is, as we have discussed, as sources to dissect and understand through context, through knowledge of the author, and through triangulating the historical evidence they contain. This has value but treating them as pieces of knowledge and engagement that are whole and meaningful in and of themselves also has value. In this, we can draw on histories where poetry was a history-keeper, rather than a historian's source (Mkhize, 2018). We are not calling for the presented poems to be accepted as historical 'truth', but as fragmented and fragmenting truths in themselves, each capturing a moment in and of history. This echoes Cutrara's call for an openness to different truths, truths that are compatible with different kinds of history (Cutrara, 2018).

What do we get then, as historians, as history educators, as history students, when we listen to or read poems like this? We can identify the historical arguments and contestations, but there is also a bigger assertion being made by each poem. Gantsho's, for example, is of a pan-African future, of the potential of a generation, and, ultimately, of love. Mangapa's is of a vision held for a future (now in the past), of the ability of one man to hold and fight fiercely for his vision. These assertions are part of Black histories, presents and futures. The potentially uncomfortable part of these poems, to our reasoned and trained historian's gaze, is the emotion and the emotional logic they hold, which demand attention alongside the historical narratives.

The main themes drawn from the poems show a sense of belonging in history, in and beyond the poet and poem. This seems to speak directly to Keynes' question 'who am I by virtue of my past?' (2021). We can formulate this in a different, more prosaic way: what does history mean for, with, and in us? There are many ways of answering this, and the answers will be different for each person, in each context. The poems we have analysed all show the poets' connection to, and with, the histories, through their intervention in historical knowledge creation and their historical argument. Figures 2–5 show the key themes from the poems analysed.

These themes all display elements of belonging and a relationship with historical knowledge (either in production or connection). This suggests a useful relationship being created between the present (and particularly lived experience) and the pasts that exist in the poems.

What is important in the poems, both as a site of historical learning and a site of historical discovery, is that they facilitate a historical experience for the reader or writer. These experiences vary from an intimate peek into an untold story (Molebatsi) to a drawing in to a proud pan-African history and future (Gantsho). When the student is writing, the experience involves finding parts of the history that resonate, that respond to their prior knowledge and their internal world, their 'being'. These sites of discovery are

not completed journeys of historical learning – they are points on the way. From these there needs to be a deepening and challenging of historical knowledge. Poetry provides an opportunity for historical discovery in a way that attends to belonging, to historical connection, to historical knowledge production, and that allows for, or even invites, emotive engagement. The emotive experience, different for each individual, allows for an intimate connection between history and present, and a dynamic, delicately languaged argument.

Figure 2. Thematic analysis of Poem One: 'a mending seasons' by Natalia Molebatsi

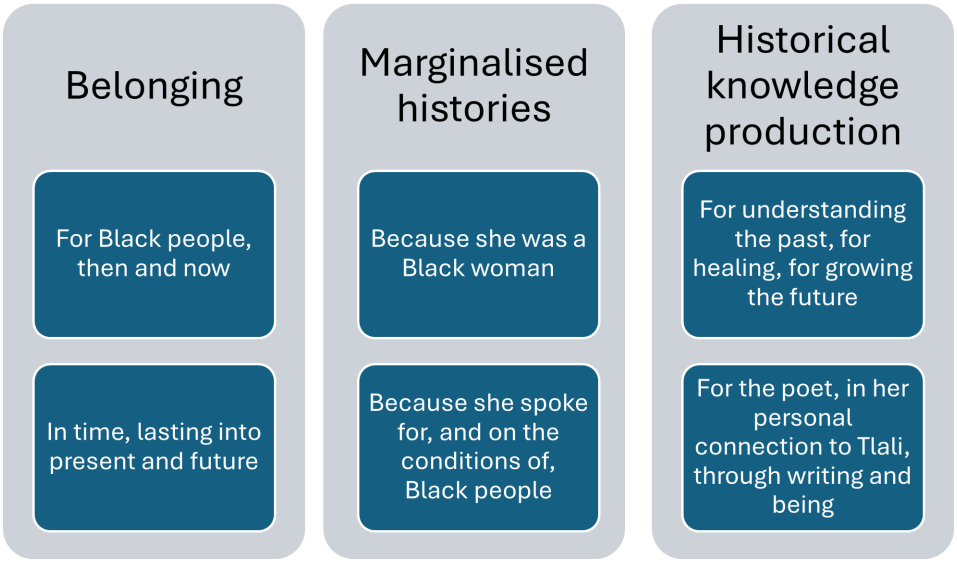

Figure 3. Thematic analysis of Poem Two: 'I want to speak to my children' by vangile gantsho

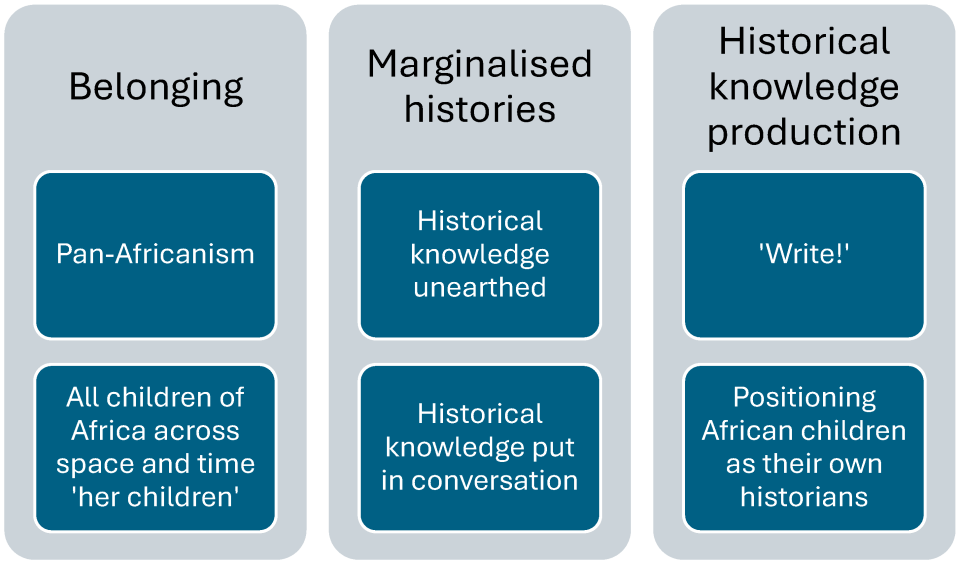

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Figure 4. Thematic analysis of Poem Three: 'Who do I belong to?' by Ntokozo Gcwabaza

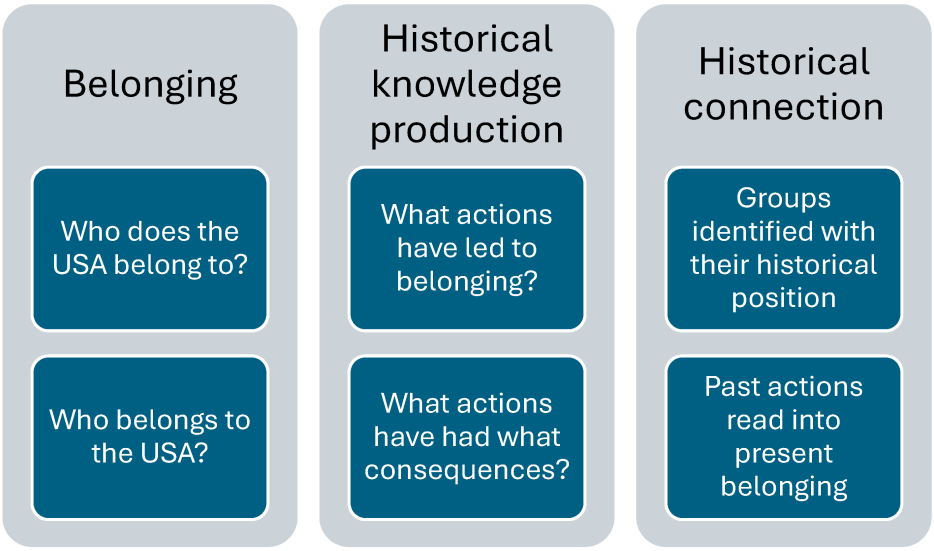
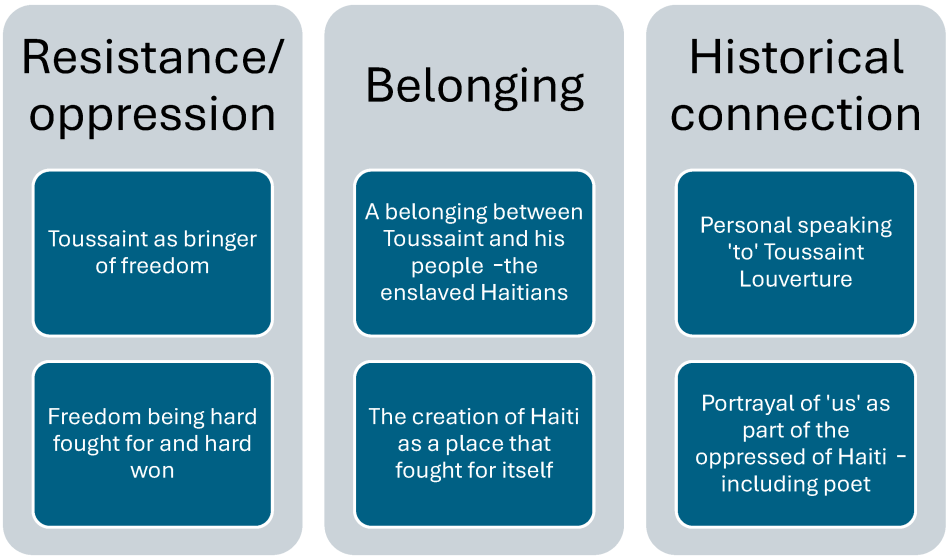


Figure 5. Thematic analysis of Poem Four: 'You' by Stephanie Mangapa



The point here is not to unpick historical inaccuracies or problems with the poems. It is to find the stories that are there and what they can give: a sense of common belonging with colonised peoples, at the same time as the poet is taking a position on the history of the USA, for example. While offering an homage to Toussaint Louverture, with some of his complexity, his history is located clearly in a trajectory of slavery and freedom and Black liberation more broadly. In this way, the poets are positioning themselves in relation to history and finding resonances with historical narratives and positions. They are making nuanced historical arguments about their positions on historical questions and characters. While a conversation might be needed about the arguments and evidence, the existence and complexity of these arguments stand. More importantly, these poems respond to Keynes' point, 'who am I by virtue of my past?' because the poems are combining personal takes and showing personal resonances. This could be critiqued as presentism; however, Keynes argues that answering this question is crucial in overcoming a Western framing of history and history education.

Conclusions

> who must I ask in these times of agreement
> who must I ask when it seems there are no witnesses
> in this time when the burden of the past is also mine?
>
> – Mongane Wally Serote, *History Is the Home Address*

The opening epigraph of this article alludes to where history lives. It asserts it as alive and inhabiting space, as well as time. It does this in a way that speaks poetically, as well as historically. History is the traces and present realities of the past, but it is also alive in realities felt as well as learnt. In this article, we have argued for poetry as a site of historical connection and historical learning through historical discovery. The poems ask about burden of the past, locating that burden in the individual, in 'me'. The argument we have presented in this article allows us to also 'ask' poetry about history, and to work through the burden of the past (perhaps particularly felt in societies living in the tendrils of coloniality) with and through poetry.

We have presented, analysed and unpacked four poems: two from published authors which we have examined as a site of historical learning, and two from students written as part of university history courses, which we have explored as a site of historical discovery. Though we have analysed these poems thematically, we have drawn the analysis into an understanding of that site of historical connection, historical exploration and discovery, and so historical learning. In this way we present both the reading and the writing of poetry as a site of historical learning. More than this, we argue that poetry as a site of historical learning can offer an emotive resonance and a different kind of experience than that offered by standard historical evidence or argument. We thereby align our argument with those of Cutrara (2018), Keynes (2021) and McGregor (2017) for a move beyond historical thinking as the only disciplinary approach.

We offer the potential of historical engagement with poetry, with the products of two students engaging in historical writing. Further research in this field will be welcomed, taking student engagement with poetry further and exploring the potential of this method as a site of historical learning. Thus, a limitation of this article is that we explore and present the potential without having extensive research on engagement in the classroom. We did this because we feel that poetry as a site of historical learning is important to theorise, as well as apply. We hope this article will lead to more research in this field.

We look towards different mediums used in the exploration of history, particularly outside the classroom, to avoid constraining history to the disciplinary approach that has been lauded in schools, especially in settler-colonial spaces. Poetry, with its linguistic flexibility and nuance, its emotion and expression, offers a space for young people to experiment with what they know and what they think about what they know. It is the learning from this experimentation that is important.

Poetry is not inherently radical or a site of historical learning. Poetry itself can be any range of things, from colonial to racist to misogynist. Thus, the way in which poetry is explored as a site of historical learning is important, and critical reflection on written, historically relevant poems becomes essential to develop a historical thinking process.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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