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ASSOCIATION
OF SOUTH AFRICA**
DEDICATED TO EMPOWERING AUTHORS

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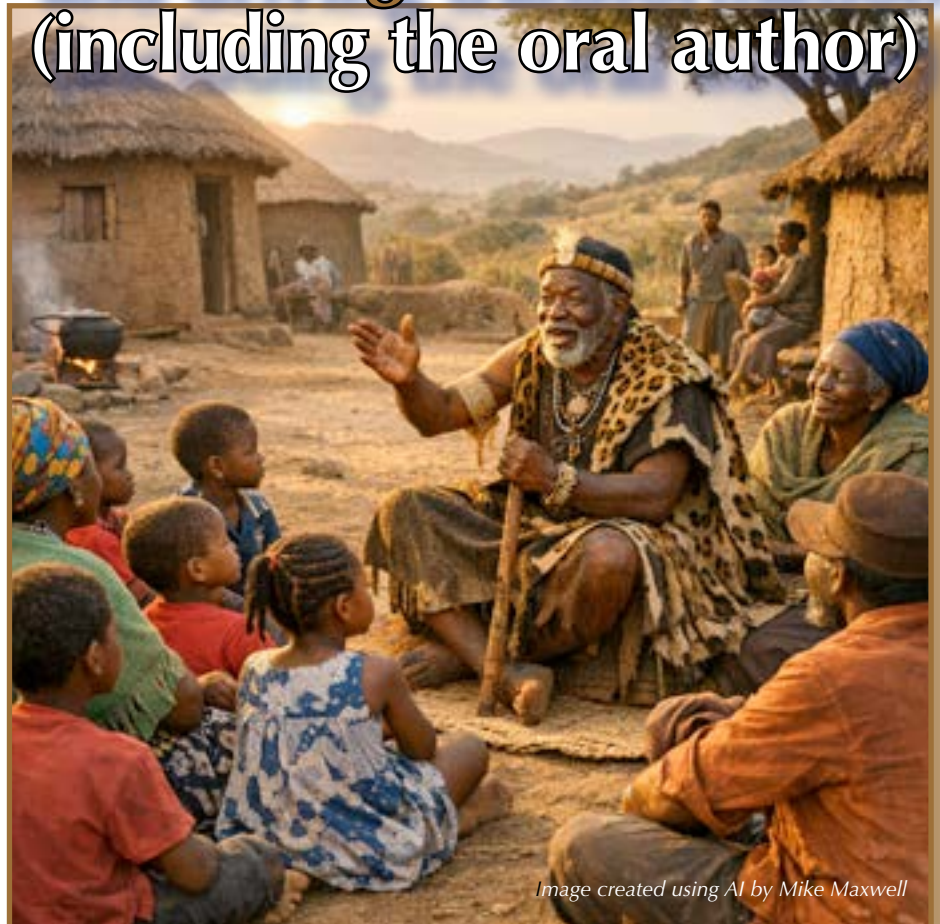
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Facilitating the transition from oral heritage to written

The role of authors in healing societal wounds and driving transformation (including the oral author)



Mary Elizabeth Lange*

South Africa has a rich oral heritage, with an abundance of potential oral authors¹ in rural, peri-urban, and urban areas. How can we, as writers and publishers, serve as facilitators of this intangible heritage, transforming it into tangible forms while ensuring that the oral author ethically receives the same respect and consideration as we writers? I share part of my journey here, trying to narrow this divide through using an applied participatory approach.

¹ Based on Lange's oral presentation at the ANFASA's Fourth Annual Power of Authors international Symposium held on 25 March 2025.

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* Dr Mary Elizabeth Lange is a South African academic and author with specific interests in oral narratives

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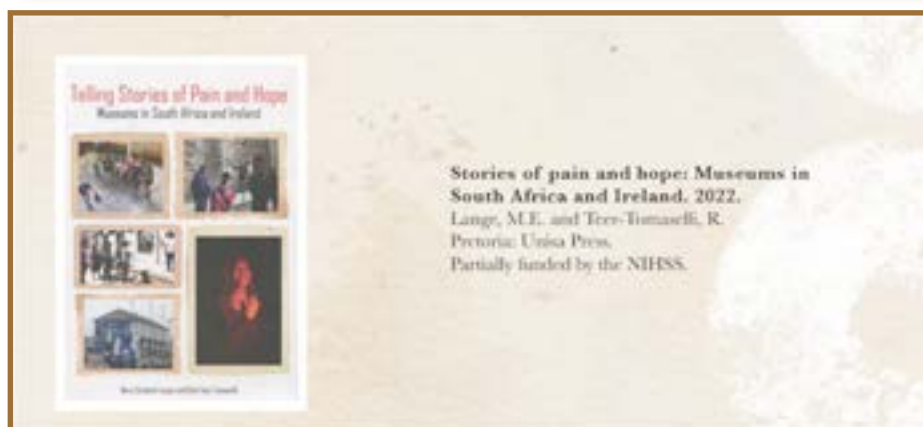
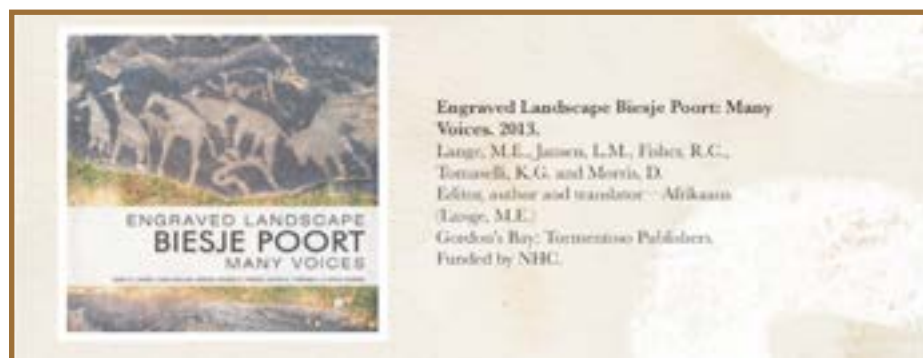
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Influences of methodology

The influences on my applied participatory approach are interdisciplinary. These derive primarily from my studies in drama and English, having a focus on Gender Studies, Visual Anthropology and Communication for Social Change (see Lange, 2024). There are several influences from my theatre training, but Credo Mutwa's *Indaba My Children* (1964) and Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, as in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1979), are relevant to this discussion. Credo Mutwa revealed the power of the African oral tradition, with its rich imagery and cyclical nature, and transformed it into the written word. Brecht's advocacy of theatre for social action sparked my sustained belief in the relevance of the applied arts and heritage, including the publication of oral narratives for social healing. The UNISA English undergraduate course, which I took as one of my majors in 1999, was interdisciplinary and included Post-colonial and Gender Studies, particularly highlighting 'othering', reflexivity and the subaltern (Spivak, 1988).

The postgraduate Visual Anthropology course devised and presented by Professor Keyan Tomaselli at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2001), true to critical theory and his foreshadowing of a decolonial approach, focused on the context and development of the ethics of Visual Anthropology – the visual recording (through photography, film, and video) of cultures, particularly those of Indigenous peoples (see Tomaselli, 1999). How could the visual ethnography of Indigenous peoples be captured and disseminated without 'othering' the subaltern? The concluding case studies in this particular coursework highlighted that, for genuine social justice in this field, the ethnography should be



filmed by the Indigenous peoples themselves.

This form of Visual Anthropology could therefore, with respect to authorship, be termed 'autoethnography' – a combination of biography and ethnography (see Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). More specifically, within an Ubuntu-influenced African context (see Shutte, 2001), it could be regarded as a form of community autoethnography (see Lange and Teer-Tomaselli, 2024). This is the specific form of oral authorship that I pursue. It is one underscored by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he calls for a participatory, bottom-up approach. These approaches, with the philosophy of Ubuntu, namely 'one made by many', are the main influences on my commitment to collaborative oral authorship.

Community autoethnography

The book *Water Stories* (2007) is a collection of stories about a water deity in the Orange/Gariep River in

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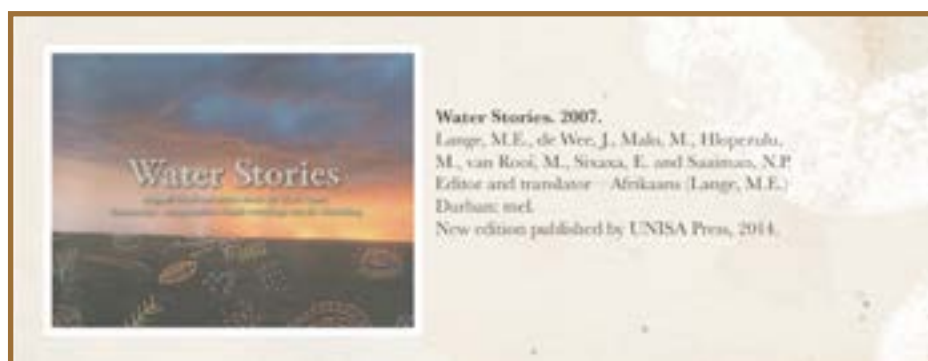
the Northern Cape. Here I collaborated with Ms de Wee, Malo, Hlopezulu, van Rooi, Sixaxa and Saaiman from Upington. These women, of diverse Indigenous backgrounds, shared their stories that they and the elders in their communities tell of their beliefs in a shape-shifting water deity. Interwoven with the stories are the women's biographies. The stories are recorded in the Afrikaans idiom typical of each individual woman's culture, and were thereafter translated into English. This results in a community autoethnography that provides a socio-cultural artefact, which includes the spiritual dimension.

Diverse landscapes and languages — The process reflected in the product

The Water Stories book impressed upon me, both as a co-author and editor, the importance of including Indigenous languages when facilitating the publication of oral authors. In *Engraved Landscape BiesjePoort* (2013), I proposed that the Indigenous oral authors from the Kalahari be given space to voice their views within whatever language they felt most comfortable. This resulted in the publication of contributions in their Nama and Afrikaans tongues, which were also translated into English.

Oral authors and healing — sensitivities

The process of recording the oral authors in the above-mentioned books highlighted that what may seem to outsiders as innocuous topics of discussion can unearth deep-seated trauma. This is particularly relevant to the displacement of Indigenous peoples and peoples of diverse lineage during colonial and apartheid times. The entire South Africa is a post-traumatic site, and narratives recounted, even if initially



not considered to be a topic that would raise trauma, can nevertheless elicit a strong emotional response in the narrator. In *Telling Stories of Pain and Hope* (2022), the oral authors specifically share how they cope with relating traumatic stories of displacement from District Six with tourists and the healing power of doing so. This is a theme that has prevailed in my work with oral authors — the healing power of not only telling one's story but also seeing it in print.

Reflecting many voices — Innovative solutions

A collaborative, participatory approach to publishing oral authors does have its challenges. One such challenge is moving away from the standard publishing practice of having either an individual or two or

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three authors' names appearing on the book's cover. I have had publishers question me about the practicalities of fitting multiple authors' names on the cover or of not featuring my name upfront, to give the book more academic weight than if only the names of unknown oral authors were used. In contrast, reviewers have criticised, for example, the *Engraved Landscape Biesje Poort: Many Voices* for only including the academic editors on the cover and not the Indigenous contributors.

To address this, *Water Stories* does not include any names on the cover. Instead, we are all named, with all our photographs, on the inner flaps. In the *Geomotional* (2025) book, an output from an applied arts and heritage project that I had devised and facilitated with diverse youth

and elders from several provinces in the country, we reference me as 'compiling' the book and all contributors' names, including oral authors, are included on the front and back covers as part of the design.

The above reflections have led to my advocacy for the collaborative inclusion of the oral author – the Indigenous author – who themselves might otherwise not have the means to publish. I have had many oral authors express a wish to leave a tangible version of their story for their descendants, communities, and the broader public, and to have it included in South African libraries. All this being considered, while continuing to search with the co-operation of publishers and traditional co-authors for ways in which the resulting books do not 'other' the oral author nor reinforce past traumas.

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