Hope St. John (HS):

Hi there! Welcome back to Season Six of *Write for You*, the Odegaard Writing and Research Center's podcast on the process and practice of writing. I'm Hope, your host, fellow writer, and disembodied writing buddy. Come along with me as I chat with graduate writers from across the University of Washington campus about their strategies, motivations, and approach to writing within graduate school and beyond.

On this episode, we'll talk with Sikose, a third-year PhD student in English, who shares with us her perspective on writing as an extension of personal and scholarly commitments, taking care and the power that comes from using your voice.

Please note that this episode includes discussions of police and state violence.

Now I'll turn it over to Sikose to introduce herself and to tell us more about her scholarship writing and approach.

Sikose Mjali (SM):

My name is Sikose, Sikose Mjali. I use she/her pronouns. If I was talking to a South African audience, I might be tempted to say my name is Sikose Mjali, but I'm okay with being called Sikose Mjali. That's what they call me in the UK.

I am a third-year PhD student. I'm on the language and rhetoric track in the English Department, so I focus on language, power, identity, and resistance. I'm really, really interested in how my ancestors, black South Africans, people who were really fighting for freedom, how they were using language and power and their identities to resist apartheid.

So my research is really deeply rooted in uncovering and amplifying those silenced voices of apartheid in South Africa. I look at South Africa in the 1960s up until 1990 when the negotiations began for freedom. Most people will know Nelson Mandela came out of prison in 1990 and some of our political prisoners as well. So I'm interested in what was happening in the decades preceding that.

I have over a decade of teaching in England. I moved to England when I was 15, and, well, let's just say I'm a lot older than 15 right now. So I have over a decade teaching in England. I taught in Saudi Arabia, taught in Oman, which is a beautiful country. Just spent quite a while in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and now I'm in the US.

So I think my global experiences really shape my approach to writing, my approach to being in the world, to being in this classroom that is the world, and then the physical classroom. So I think my global experiences also shape how I teach and how I learn.

HS:

So, I want to pick up on a couple of things that you've mentioned in your intro. I definitely want to touch on the global experience aspect. I think that that's really rich, and also I want to ask you about your experience and background in writing, whether that is personal experience or otherwise, and how that

informs your current approach, whether through your research, whether in the classroom, whether broadly.

SM:

That's a really good question. Oh gosh, that's a whole podcast on its own. So personally, I don't think it's hyperbolic for me to say writing my life quite literally. It's how I make sense of the world around me. It's how I make sense of a world that wasn't built for people like me, for people who look like me. It's how I make sense of where I fit into this world.

When I moved to the Middle East, I found that the practice of journaling would be everything for me. So I think at this point, the writer that I am now is thinking very scholarly, thinking the articles and the books and all of that, but actually it's journaling that made me take myself seriously as a writer and go, "Oh, actually, maybe there's something that needs to be unpacked here."

I always joke to my friends that if anyone ever discovered my journals, they'll be like, "Oh my gosh, she was so depressed and then she was so happy." It's these two different people, and I think that's what you get from being a formerly colonized person, this double consciousness of, I know I'm free because I'm a human being, and yet I live in a world that has tried to tell me that I'm nonhuman.

So journaling for me, particularly in my time in the Middle East, it became a way for me to make sense of what was happening around me and what is happening internally as well. How that relates to how I write now. I was thinking the other day that sometimes it can feel very much like, oh, I'm just typing up my journals. I should probably start a blog called “Typing Up My Journals.”

But I've been thinking about, I had this push-pull of autobiographical work, and I was trained in the UK, so I got my master's in Applied Linguistics and TESOL in the UK. And, you know, Brits are charged with being, you know, quite stoic, this kind of like culturally repressed, and so a lot of my training was “be objective, be objective. Separate yourself from the work.”

And so I struggle a lot with my writing now as I'm, I guess on this journey of, “Hm, hang on a minute, there's nothing objective about what I'm writing about.” I'm writing about my people who were silenced and whose voices, they were quite literally banned. The apartheid government would ban people. And so I'm looking at this literature that they were writing underground, and so I'm working on an unsilencing project. There's nothing neutral about that.

And so the writer that I am is like, how do I keep this academic and scholarly, but what does that all even mean? And the cost of code switching, right? Big part of me is like, "Oh, who's my audience? And how do I, as a writer, write to people who are trying to navigate their voices being unsilenced?"

HS:

I think that you lead us in a really important direction. And so your research is actually dealing with this process or practice of unsilencing, and I'm wondering how you embark on unsilencing yourself.

SM:

With great difficulty. It's both terrifying and satisfying. I look at the ones who have come before me, and maybe that's what led me to this topic in particular because I just couldn't find the words. I was living in Oman in 2020 when all our lives changed, and some of us were asking really big questions about who we are and how we fit in this whole thing.

And so I was in Oman in the summer of 2020, and I just came to mind this far and no further moment, I've been listening to so much *Wicked*, which is awesome, but there's that scene where Elphaba is like, "Something has changed within me." And she's like, "I'm through with playing by the rules of somebody else's game."

That was me in 2020. I was like, "Oh my gosh." Because I will never forget how I felt when I saw the life drain out of George Floyd. And I was literally like, "Wow, how are we here again?" These were the scenes in South Africa in the '80s when I was born. In the '80s, South Africa was in and out of states of emergency. And I was like, "Wow."

And also, I remember my first week in Saudi Arabia, somebody came to me. Well-meaning. You know, somebody else can write the book about the racism and the anti-blackness in brown spaces, and I'm sure somebody has written that book, but this person was looking out for me and she said to me, "You should probably just say you're British when people ask."

And I remember thinking, well, this is an invitation for me to reject my South African-ness and reject who I am. And also, it doesn't matter how British I am, I am somebody who's come into the world as a Black woman—proudly, by the way—and so when a few years later, I found myself in Oman and watching this black man's life drain from him on screen while we were all at home, I had my Elphaba moment.

I was just like, "I am tired of not using my voice." I have been gifted. I'm a pretty good researcher. I can write, I can teach. And then I looked long and hard at those who came before me. There is a legacy of freedom fighters who were silenced. The literature that I look at is underground literature. So even from the underground, my ancestors and the elders, people who are still alive now because we think about history itself as something that's like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, it's in the past." But a lot of it is actually recent history. I was born during apartheid.

So for my own journey as a writer, I had my Elphaba moment. Something did change inside me, and then I looked to my people, how they were liberating me that I can even come here to the US and pursue higher education. They had something called the Bantu Education Act, Bantu being the Xhosa, Zulu word for person, ironically.

So Bantu… Bantu Education Act of '57 said that the Black child will not have recourse to intellectual property. When I started school, they were still negotiating how to integrate us into curricula. So for my own journey of unsilencing, I was like, "Okay, A, I need to write about this, and I can't unsee what I've seen. How can I use the skills that I have and what I know?" And I look to the people who've come before me.

There's a Xhosa expression, "indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili," and it means we ask about the road ahead from those who have come before. So I think a lot of my writing as well is me thinking deeply about what people had to give up so that I can be here and pursue all of me.

HS:

I think that's really informative and thought-provoking, and I think it leads me into a question for you about what do you want your writing to do, having reflected on the work that's come before?

SM:

I just want to document this moment in time. There's a South African artist, Simmy. She has this song where she's like, "Kuzo bhalwa ama-board-i, kumenyezela [they will have us up on billboards, and there will be sparkles], kumenyezela ukuthi [and there will be glitter and sparkles everywhere, proclaiming],

we were here.” This idea that Black people were never here or we were erased, and yet from the underground, we were here. And I love the bit where she's like, "Kumenyezela”—“It's going to glimmer and there's going to be glitter everywhere.” It's going to be a celebration.

And so I hope that my writing, even if it reaches one person and it says, "Hey, by the way, there were freedom fighters in South Africa during apartheid. There were these people doing amazing work to unsilence.” They were doing amazing work to imagine me into the future, and here I am, to imagine those who look like me into the future. These people were doing incredible work. And how were they doing it? How were they using language?

And I also want my work to be accessible, which is, I call it the B&B, the blessing and the burden. It's such a blessing to be able to write and such a burden sometimes because especially in academia where this idea of publish or perish, I'm like, "What? Those are my only options?" It's such a limited view. And so I think I am always thinking about not falling into that scarcity mindset. What can my writing do? And I want it to be accessible.

I left South Africa when I was 15, and I had a nanny who was just amazing, and I write with her in mind. And I want my nanny in Ndabakazi, in the most rural parts of South Africa, to be able to access my work. So I think a lot about accessibility. I want her to be able to access my work in her language. South Africa has 11 official languages, and I think a lot about who gets left out when we center English as the default.

And so I'm a Xhosa speaker, I have that skillset. And I don't want my research to be trapped behind academic paywalls and language barriers and all of that. So I think that also speaks to my background, having lived in so many different places, I've seen what's possible linguistically. Oman has beautiful languages. I would hear Swahili in the classroom. My students spoke Arabic and Swahili, Balochi, I believe. It was so linguistically rich.

And so I'm constantly thinking about, how do we make this research of ours from the ivory tower accessible and public facing so that everybody's included, so that it's not just this exclusive thing? I don't want to write for an audience of three. So I think the goal of my work is to make things accessible, really sit in the tension of using one's voice. How do we use our voices? How do we unsilence?

HS:

So, you're a multilingual speaker. You're a multilingual writer. Does that factor into your approach to writing at all?

SM:

Oh, I love this question. Yes. So Francis Meli wrote a lot about South Africa during apartheid and also wrote from the underground. And I keep using the word from the underground because, let me give a chronological order to an audience that might not know about South Africa's history in depth.

So what happens is in 1960, we have the Sharpeville Massacre. Up until 1960, really, the rest of the world didn't know what was really happening in South Africa. Apartheid as a system was really good at making up these really weird laws. So one of them was the pass laws. So if you were Black, over the age of 15, I believe it was, you had to carry a *dompas*, a pass.

And so you would get stopped. Let's say moving from Seattle to Olympia, you would have a checkpoint and you'd have to show your pass. So one day, the Pan-African Congress, they organized this protest against the pass laws. And a peaceful protest as many of them were, but then of course, turned really bloody and fatal. And so many people end up getting shot, many people wounded, many people die.

Sharpeville is one of those key moments where South Africa is on the world stage and people are beginning to ask questions. So this is in 1960. And so the South African government goes, "Oh, hang on a minute. People are starting to talk about what's happening in here, and it's not feeding the apartheid ideology." And so they ban the organizers, and you're not allowed to print these people's names in the media. You're not allowed to talk about them.

There's so much fear around, oh my gosh, you can't mention a banned person's name, blah, blah, blah. So three years later, the Rivonia Trial happens, and that's the trial where Nelson Mandela being one of the most famous political prisoners, and there were others, there were a lot more, they all are arrested and given life sentences. So they go underground and then they start writing as well.

A few years later, they're writing from the underground. So that's the literature that I look at. That's why I keep saying from the underground. So to go back to your question of using the languages that live inside me, to think through my work, absolutely. And I take so much inspiration from Francis Meli, who was one of the writers from the underground, and he would say things like, "We're writing in English because we had to write in English." They had to write a lot of things in English because they were trying to get global solidarity. And so there's something to be said about the lingua franca and something to be said about using one language that we all understand. So he would say things like, "We're writing from the underground and we're writing something that is English in form, but African in content."

And I love that, and I feel like that inspires me so much as I'm writing, because I definitely will come across metaphors where I'm like, "Oh, this could be so good." And I work and I translate it into English, and then I'm like, "No, the Xhosa word really encapsulates it." So my Xhosa and my English are constantly working together.

And it's this idea of in the end, I am in the English Department, I am going to produce a dissertation that is in English, but I'm also thinking about how do I bring wisdom from my own language? So to write in a way that is, as Meli would say, English in form, but very African in content.

HS:

I love that. I wonder if you might be willing to speak a little bit to how you take care of yourself as you're doing all of this work.

SM:

Do you know what? One thing I've seen in the archives is, wow, my people are hilarious. We need some levity, because these are difficult, difficult times. I'm in that archive writing, reading about massacre after massacre of my people, people who look like me. But within the archive as well, oh my gosh, these writers are hilarious, they would really poke fun at the system, and that helps me. Humor is my go-to.

I also think about the fact that I'm writing about resistance and liberation. That is pretty big deal, and that keeps me grounded. That's joyful for me.

Napping, I take very seriously. Tricia Hersey's *Rest Is Resistance* is oftentimes next to my bed. And I take sleep very seriously. I remember as a child, my grandmother would say this a lot, "Ndisayongqhengqha," which means I'm just going to lie down.

And it's not a nap. It's what Tricia Hersey describes in *Rest is Resistance*. It's like, “I'm going to go and be. I'm going to sit in stillness. I'm going to be in this place between thinking, but also just being.” Ngqhengqha, just go and lay down. So I do a lot of ngqhengqha-ing. Is it a verb? Can we Xhosa-rize English? I don't know.

But have a really good support system around me. That's really cool. Community is how we get through some of the hardest stuff that we write about.

HS:

You mentioned your grandmother. Are there writers in your family?

SM:

I love this question. Yeah, there are. I really didn't know this until recent years. But as I started asking questions, turns out that I have an aunt on my dad's side of the family. She's also called Sikose, Sikose Mji. She just wrote her memoir. She's so cool. So she just released her memoir. It's called, *On The Stage Of Time*, by Sikose Mji.

And this is another thing that keeps me going. Wherever there is oppression, there are people opposing that oppression because there are people standing firm in their right to be on this planet. And so my aunt was one of those people. She was a 22-year-old girl when the Soweto Uprisings happened. And the Soweto Uprisings, ironically, were protests against language.

And here's where the oppression in apartheid South Africa was so carefully engineered to the level of language. So they were saying, "We want to make Afrikaans the language of instruction in Black schools." So when the Dutch came, brought along Afrikaans, and so Afrikaaner extremists were trying to make Afrikaans the language of instruction in schools. And then we protested all over again, similar to the pass laws.

And so this was a protest against language. You know, what does my oppressor know about language that one of the first things he does is commit this linguicide? Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls it linguicide. And so they have this protest. My aunt is one of these young people who protested against Afrikaans being made the medium of instruction, and then she goes underground as well. And so in her memoir, she's documenting.

And it's cool because I'm like, "Oh, my dear, she's a writer. No wonder why I have this itch to write." And her mother, my grandmother as well who was Sikose Mjali, was also a writer. And I was going through my auntie's shelves when I was on a research trip to South Africa last summer, and I was going through and found this book, and I'm like, "What?" Nanku uMakhulu. Here's grandma. A short story that she wrote is featured in this book. And I don't know how autobiographical her short story was, but maybe she was writing herself, writing about her story, doing a lot of what I was doing through journaling, making sense of the world. Maybe this was her making sense of the world, or maybe it was just a story. Who knows? But my grandmother, Sikose Mjali was a writer, Sikose Mji is a writer, so we share the name and the love for writing.

HS:

What a fantastic discovery.

SM:

I know. I would never have known had I not been chasing this. I got so excited when I found this out. 'Cause writing can get so lonely. And I'm all alone in these archives. I'm interpreting, I'm analyzing, I'm

self-soothing, I'm doing a lot of self-soothing. So it can feel really lonely, but actually I'm not alone, and that's comforting.

HS:

In perhaps a different way, this idea of writing as being a lonely endeavor is something that I hear often, and it seems like finding avenues of connection is what makes the process sustainable. I'm wondering if that's something that you have thoughts on?

SM:

I'm so glad I solo traveled. I think that prepped me really well for this season of my life. I think another side of traveling and solo traveling in particular is the loneliness. But it's also where you really get to have a long, hard look at yourself. And that's exciting, but it takes courage.

I think the reason I am often so terrified when it comes to writing and unsilencing is because of how much courage it needs and how much courage it takes, and how much courage it takes to return to the archives and tell people's stories and amplify voices that were previously silenced. That takes a lot of courage.

Maya Angelou, she was also an incredible activist during the civil rights era as well, and she spoke about courage and says, "Courage is perhaps the most important of all the virtues, because without courage, it's very difficult to exercise the other virtues with consistency." So I think how that ties into the loneliness, but the need to keep returning to the archive and keep returning to the writing is at the other end.

Actually, I've had so many students that say to me, "Oh my gosh, thank you for teaching this class. I learned so much in this class." Those are the moments where I'm like, "Oh, okay, the work is worth it." And they're the moments where I'm like, "Oh, I am so glad I wrote this, even if it's for just myself." So yeah, it can get lonely, but there's a point is what I'm trying to say. There's a point to it.

Sometimes you feel like, what's it all for? You know, you're just like, "Ah..." But actually, again, going back to the South African context, and these writers from the underground, they must have all had many days where they must have been thinking, what's it all for? But if some of them were alive to see what they have done... mm.

HS:

Yeah.

We've talked a lot about writing as a process, constantly entangled with power, whether that is enacting or resisting, which I think is really important. But I also know sometimes the actual process of writing at a personal level can be challenging. And so I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about what that's like for you?

SM:

Again, terrifying and necessary. Going back to the double consciousness, it's hard 'cause you're speaking to power as a formerly colonized person, but before I ever sit down, I'm like, "Oh, okay, which Sikose is showing up today? Which writer is going to show up today? Is it going to be the girl who is still acquiescing?"

Sonya Renee Taylor talks about how we're all colluding with the white supremacist delusion, and she calls it white supremacist delusion because it is not real. There is no such thing as somebody's superiority over another person. And so I think that term, WSD, is really helpful. So when I sit down, I have to figure out who's showing up today. Is it the formerly colonized version of me, the one who's going to tiptoe around certain things, not call things what they are? Or is it the person who is so sure of the need to celebrate my multiple identities and so sure of my writing being a journey as well, because there can be a lot of temptation to kind of like, I don't know, run before I walk? Yeah. So all of these people come to the front just before I sit down and write. So I'm constantly grappling that. And then am I going to stand in my power? And then I think about people like Busiswa, who's featured in the Beyonce *Black Is King* album.

She's in that song, “My Power,” and this is a Xhosa girl, and she's talking about, no, you will not take my power. And on a good writing day, that girl, that Sikose is writing, who is like, "You will not take my power. Guess how I know? Because the elders fought this and I belong." A lot of my experience and my journey in academia as an international student, there's all of that. And as a Black woman, there's all of that, and, and, and…

And so I spent a lot of time in my first and second year just convincing myself that I belong, that I belong here. And so there's tension there. But on a good writing day, I'm like, "Mm-mm, I belong here. How do I know? Because I'm here." And that sustains me. On a not so good writing day, the imposter voice is loud. On a good day, the voice is a whisper.

But now I'm just like, "I want to be here. And I have a responsibility to write my people into the future just like they did for me." So here I am.

HS:

That's wonderful.

I enjoy your references to pieces of popular culture, and I think that in a way, it speaks to the omnipresence of writing and how writing across media and across genres being leveraged in different ways. So you're in a doctoral program, so you're doing the sort of writing that is required in that context. Do you do other forms of writing in different genres or in different media?

SM:

Sure do! Because I'm super excited about this, which this is the other thing. I love learning. My curiosity sometimes has no bounds. So I've been thinking about the podcast genre and the English Department librarian, Elliott Stevens, such cool human does the Storytelling Fellows.

So I took that this quarter, and I'm thinking about how later on, this dissertation might be a podcast, because I'm sitting also with these interviews that I did last summer on my pilot study. I was lucky enough to get a fellowship to go and do some initial interviews. And what came out of that was how important and how quickly media is moving.

So when I think about this underground literature that I'm analyzing, they were writing at a time where there was no social media. They weren't able to just go live and live stream what was happening in South Africa, and yet they made lemonade out of those lemons. But now we are living in a different time. So again, as a writer, when we teach writing, we're often trained to spend time talking to students about your voice, your voice. I want to hear more of your voice.

And so this idea of the voice is a really cool one that I'm thinking of. And the voice can be written and spoken. I'm loving chatting with you because as I'm using my voice quite literally, it just feels more urgent and feels more accessible. So I'm thinking, I would love to see whatever I come up with in the end.

I still have a long road ahead of me in terms of this dissertation, but why not dream about media? And like scholarly podcasting as one of the things that I'm thinking about and one of the projects that I'm working on now as I have a little bit of data.

HS:

If you were to speak back to sort of your younger self, what's something that you would like to say to them?

SM:

Oh. That's so good. To my younger self, I'd just be like, "It's okay, babe. It's okay. Just be who you are. That's the good stuff." I would say that my voice does matter. All of our voices matter. But take the time... And this is me talking to me over and over again, take the time to do it your way. Because using my voice is so important because White supremacist delusion literally sustains itself with my silence.

So my silence is not an option, but how I use my voice, that's the juice and that's my sovereignty. The very sovereignty that apartheid tried to take away from me is what I get to use because people have fought for me to be here. But there is a Sikose way. Sikose Mji had her way of doing it. She's now written her memoir, *On The Stage Of Time*. Sikose Mjali, my grandmother, had her way of being in the world. I have my way of being. How I exist in the world is totally up to me. That's the whole very point of liberation. So I say to my younger self, "Do it your way, but also sit with yourself and figure out what your way is and really get to know yourself, but use your voice. Use it even if it shakes. Use it as it's cracking. Use it as a whisper. Voices do a lot of things. Voices whisper. Voices shout, they roar. They do all sorts. Just freaking use it."

HS:

I think that's a great closing message.

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Write for You is a podcast by the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing and Research Center. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Hope St. John. Music by Denis Pavlov, courtesy of Legis Music.