

Projecting radicalism

BY

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Noni Jabavu was one of South Africa's most trailblazing writers. Her commitment to elite ambivalence makes it difficult to hail her as a black feminist icon.



From the cover of *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home*.

In 1933, Noni Jabavu boarded a ship from East London to Cape Town to meet the couple who would become her caregivers in England. Despite attending Lovedale Girls' School, a prestigious missionary-run institution in South Africa, it was decided that she would pursue the rest of her education in the imperial core, following the footsteps of her father,

Professor Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu (or DDT Jabavu), who had been educated at the University of London. At a rustic farmhouse in Claremont belonging to none other than General Jan Smuts, former Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, a 13-year-old Jabavu was assured she would be safe in the hands of Arthur Bevington Gillett and Margaret Clark Gillett, the heirs to successful banking and shoe family businesses respectively.

“I learned then that the plan was for me to be trained as a doctor to serve my people,” Jabavu writes in “Smuts and I,” the title of one of the newspaper columns featured in *Noni Jabavu: A Stranger at Home*. “Oom Jannie”, as Jabavu refers to Smuts, was part of the Cape Colony liberals of 19th-century British colonial South Africa, a group [made up](#) of members of the black intelligentsia like the Jabavus, Quakers, businessmen, and enterprising politicians wary of the growing economic power of the rival colonies. While they may have come from different walks of life, they were united by their belief in the “[Cape liberal tradition](#),” which prized the so-called [civilizing mission](#) behind European colonialism. In “Smuts and I,” Jabavu reflects sentimentally on the arrangement that would alter the course of her life, writing that she “was not too well primed about the negotiations that must have gone on between [her] parents and [her] prospective loco parentis,” but that it was “a practical demonstration of the generations of friendship between the families.”

It’s these kinds of revelations in *A Stranger at Home* which give readers insight into the political, economic, religious, and intellectual coalitions that produced people like Noni Jabavu. It also offers a snapshot of class in black South Africa before apartheid, disproving the misconception that the black middle class only arose after the country’s democratic elections in 1994. Born in 1919, she descended from educated and prominent people on both sides of her family. Her grandfather, John Tengo Jabavu, established the Xhosa and English-language newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu*, the first black-run and owned periodical in the country. Her father, Professor DDT Jabavu, was a distinguished academic at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape province, as well as

a [founding member](#) of the All African Convention, an organization that challenged the erosion of black men's voting rights in South Africa. Her mother, Florence Jabavu (née Makiwane), had been an organizer in self-help women's group, while her aunt Cecilia Makiwane was the first black nurse on the continent, and her other aunt, Daisy Makiwane, a journalist and editor at *Imvo Zabantsundu*.

A Stranger at Home is a culmination of years long scholarship, research and advocacy work between Makhosazana Xaba and Athambile Masola. As writers and academics, both assembled the writings Jabavu produced in 1977, when the *Daily Dispatch*, an English-language newspaper based in the Eastern Cape, hired her to write a weekly column titled "Noni on Wednesdays." Having spent more than majority of her life living abroad, holding temporary and permanent residences in countries such as England, Italy, Spain, Canada, Mexico, Jamaica, the US, Uganda and Kenya, to name a few, Jabavu's return to South Africa was buoyed by her mission to collect materials necessary to write a biography on her father—a task that she never got around to completing. The last time she had visited the country was in 1955, when she attended the funeral of her younger brother, who was murdered by a gang while studying medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

This experience of personal loss, coupled with the loss of a country as she had once known it, inspired Jabavu to pen her first memoir, *Drawn in Color: African Contrasts* in 1960. Not only was it a [critical success](#) with reviews published in *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Scotsman*, but it was also a commercial success, [receiving](#) five reprintings during its initial publication. It also made Jabavu the first black South African woman to publish a memoir. She followed *Drawn in Color* with *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life*, published in 1963, another memoir that infused her personal history with travel writing.

Xaba first took an interest in Jabavu when she [was working on](#) her MA in Creative Writing at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2004. For close to 20 years, she has led the charge to resuscitate Jabavu's work, [traveling](#) across the continent and the world to gather information that would shed more light on her life and writing. Masola's desire to study Jabavu began when she started writing for the *Daily Dispatch*, prompting her to search for other black women writers who had contributed to the newspaper. She [completed](#) her PhD in English Literature, where she explored the concept of home, exile, and transnationalism in both Noni Jabavu and Sisonke Msimang's memoirs. In the introduction and afterword for *A Stranger at Home*, Xaba and Masola describe the book as a "project against the erasure and flattening of black women's identities," and an "intentional calling of [Jabavu's] name in order to resist the intellectual erasure of her work."

Despite serving as the first black person and first woman to edit the British literary magazine *The New Strand* and cultivating an impressive literary career in the 1960s, Jabavu's name does not feature in the pantheon of notable 20th-century South African writers. In fact, until very recently, little was known about her at all. One can speculate the reasons for this. Typically, the category of "great South African writer" has been reserved for white South Africans like Nadine Gordimer, JM Coetzee and Athol Fugard, no doubt because of their insights and talents, but also because of the Western world's tendency to look to white liberal South Africans to interpret the race problem in the country. Furthermore, *Drawn in Color* and *The Ochre People* were not published in South Africa at the time of their release. It was only in 1982 when the latter was published locally by Ravan Press, with [another reprinting](#) in 1995.

There's also the matter of how to define a black woman writer with a background and perspective like Noni Jabavu. Unlike some of her younger peers, she did not grow up witnessing the cruelty of the apartheid regime, nor did she throw herself into a life of political activism, theory, or writing designed to advance the cause of black liberation. While she wrote

disapprovingly of racialism in her *Daily Dispatch* columns, she also held elitist views typical of the class position her family held in South Africa, and that she would later occupy in Britain and other parts of the world. In one of her columns, Jabavu speaks proudly of being part of the lineage of “Cape liberals such as Cronwright, Hofmeyer, Jabavu, Rose Innes, Molteno, Schreiner, Merriman, Sauer,” gloats about her proximity to “English tycoons, upper class, bankers, industrialists [and] conservative liberals,” discusses her marriage to ex-husband Michael Cadbury Crosfield, related to the founder of the chocolate company Cadbury, and reveals a life of maids, butlers, footmen, servants, chaperones, and chauffeurs in her service. In an introduction to “Noni on Wednesdays,” written by Peter Kenny, she describes personal and family history as such: “accidents of birth have produced people like me, middle class, indeed upper class for five black generations here in South Africa. Landowners, politicians, educationists, lawyers, doctors and writers. Am I not lucky to be one of them?”

This is what makes Jabavu a confounding figure in the world of South African letters. Both Xaba and Masola have acknowledged how her class position complicated the relation she held to South Africa and her other identities. In her dissertation, “Jabavu’s journey,” Xaba [writes](#) that “Noni was aware of the role her class position played in her life and how it cuts across being a woman, being black, and a foreigner in many of the countries she lived in as a writer,” explaining that her “class status distinguishe[d] her from the other women who in comparison rose from nowhere and struggled their way through to becoming writers.” In a 2017 article for the *Mail & Guardian*, Masola [writes](#) that Jabavu “drifts in and out of the identity politics that seeks to homogenize what it means to be black in South Africa.”

It raises the question of whether the exceptionalism of Jabavu’s achievements and the uniqueness of her life can be contextualized through a black feminist politic given that she did not appear to write, or see herself through this ideological framework. *A Stranger at Home* is

structured around the 49 columns Jabavu wrote over her tenure at the *Daily Dispatch*, with Xaba and Masola prefacing each chapter with a brief summary of the themes and concerns that she explored. This approach organizes the contents of the book for a reader who might feel lost without that kind of anchoring, allowing Xaba and Masola to reinforce their argument that Jabavu was a pioneering black woman writer whose existence posed an affront to patriarchal norms.

Yet ascribing a feminist subversion to someone who was “elite by birth, by family of adoption, later by marriage and inevitably by association,” as Xaba writes in her dissertation, doesn’t seem appropriate or convincing. Too often, radicalism is projected onto black people who are recognized as “the firsts” in their field, regardless of their ideological position. It’s an avenue through which the significance of their successes can be rendered legitimate and legible, particularly when those figures have historically been overlooked or denied their due. However, by engaging in this practice, we run the risk of inserting our own political agendas into the work of black women writers whose perspectives do not speak to our modern sensibilities or expectations.

And despite being rooted in progressive intentions, it can turn into a flattening and erasure of its own kind. This is especially the case when Xaba wonders whether Jabavu ever read *Grace*, or *The Townships Housewife*, (black women’s magazines [published](#) in South Africa from the mid-to-late 1960s), and the work of other black women writers such as Patience Khumalo and vice versa. While it’s soothing to imagine the works of these women writers traveling across “borders to faraway lands,” creating “holes through concrete walls, cross bridges,” as Xaba muses, the prospect of that doesn’t appear likely. In her columns, Jabavu doesn’t mention reading the works of any black South African writers, but she does mention writers like Leo Tolstoy, Terence Rattigan, Robert Graves, WM Thackeray, Arnold Bennett, Philip Mayer, and Harold Ross, a persuasive indication of what her literary tastes and preferences probably looked like.

Perhaps the demands of sourcing material for her father's biography back in South Africa left little time for reading. In one column, however, Jabavu discusses the importance of being an avid reader to be a good writer, providing some evidence about the possibility that she spent this time reading widely. While she doesn't reference black South African writers, she does compliment the "black ethnic SABC programmes" that she listens to on her trip, furnishing them with high praise as a former BBC broadcaster and television personality. Ultimately, these details illustrate the dangers of reading our own private desires into the work of black women writers whose legacies we want to nurture and protect, creating a distortion of the very same history that we wish to see them written into.

Thankfully, Xaba and Masola keep this to a minimum, giving the reader enough room to draw their own conclusions about Jabavu's efforts to make sense of a country from which she had been absent. In a column titled "Back home again," she documents her struggle to acclimatize to the racial bureaucracy of petty apartheid, writing that "each moment for [her]...[was] a minor or major trauma." She likens the immigration officers whom she encounters at the Durban docks and what was known as Jan Smuts International Airport to "Hitler's stormtroopers," observing how the sight of them made her "feel anxious and guilty for no reason whatsoever." Jabavu is cognizant of how the project of Afrikaner supremacy allowed these young white men to embark on administrative power trips as they tried and failed to poke holes in her personal documentation.

As appalled as she is by these craven displays of discrimination, Jabavu retains an air of lofty bemusement at these racist spectacles. After an unsettling encounter with a white officer who doubted the veracity of her British passport, she returns to the white Capetonians whom she befriended on her voyage, cracking open a bottle of Campari to ease all their nerves. That Jabavu, who we're told possessed an "air of English gentry" and spoke an old-fashioned Xhosa, could befriend white South Africans at the height of separate development is further indication of how

her class position distinguished her from other black South Africans. Later in “Back home again,” Jabavu writes that she “had forgotten about the Group Areas Act,” an admission that is more shocking than it is insensitive. To their credit, Xaba and Masola avoid the temptation to editorialize these sorts of remarks, allowing them to highlight how generationally disconnected Jabavu had been from the country of her birth.

There are other examples of Jabavu trying to navigate around decades of being away from home. In “Getting used to color again,” she expresses frustration with the changing racial terminology. “[W]e used to be called ‘natives’ when I was young here. And correctly. Now I find people are called blacks or whites or browns,” she complains.. Eventually, she becomes more comfortable using the term “black” to describe herself and others, occasionally returning to native, but using black more assertively. Jabavu utilizes a confessional writing style, giving her pieces the feel of a diary entry, albeit a rather posh one. This use of a deceptively conversational tone also allows her to tackle sticky subject matter as seen in “The Special Branch call.” Here, she speaks of her confusion that two officers from the Security Branch, a notoriously brutal section of the South African police, would follow her to her hometown of Middledrift. She deals with them politely, engaging in small talk and referring to them as “Clean-shaven” and “Mustache.” Towards the end of the column, she calls the incident “cat and mouse stalking,” dismissing the decision to trail her as one of “ineptitude.”

Even Masola wonders how Jabavu could be puzzled that she would be pursued by apartheid authorities given her relation to political families like the Makiwanes and Matthews. It could be attributed to the fact that Jabavu does not believe she is political, or knows much about South African politics. In one of her other columns, she writes of being described as a “political half-wit” by a friend, a designation that she more or less accepts. Xaba and Masola see it differently, leaning on the idea that the “personal is political,” a [deeply entrenched misinterpretation](#) of the most famous line from US feminist Carol Hanisch’s 1970 essay. While Jabavu has no

qualms voicing her disdain for the racist machinations of the apartheid regime, she also puts this down to her responsibility to observe and detail as a writer, instead of any compulsion to be political, or critical of the apartheid government.

Xaba mentions that Jabavu regarded her writing as “personalized journalism” in her introduction. In today’s terms, this would be understood as personal essays, a form of writing that has long been [coded](#) as feminine in the age of digital media, rendering it trite, vain, and unserious. Like most first-person essayists, she uses the self as a both narrative and thematic device, parsing through her biography to excavate anecdotes and pathologies that will enhance her storytelling. Over the course of *A Stranger at Home*, this use of the self changes shape, adopting various personas, voices, or ways of moving through the world, all done in the best interests of the story. There’s Noni Jabavu, the “black girl in search of her father,” the “black European” with “white British ethnic servants who knew better than the talk above a whisper while working for [her],” the middle-aged woman with her gray wigs, reflecting on a childhood of being loved less than her younger sister who was considered the pretty one, the toff who grew up around British aristocracy and banking magnets yet supposedly knows little about handling money, the fifth-generation member of an illustrious family who has an “atavistic” reverence for Xhosa culture, language and people, but regularly describes black people in the kind of white ethnographic language that even eugenicist would find offensive.

In addition, her romantic persona also appears to contain multitudes. To younger readers, a column with the title “Why I’m not marrying” would imply a disavowal of the pressures of entering into a binding heteronormative partnership. However, it actually exposes Jabavu’s conservative values, particularly as it concerns romance and love. She appears to relish being submissive to wealthy and powerful men, slipping into a giddy and coquettish performance of womanhood when describing her requirements in a man. She emphasizes that dating men within her

social class is something she will not budge on, writing that when she “became involved with a black, it was disastrous, not because of color, but class habits.” Xaba connects this declaration of class-based preferences to discourse around the “efficacy of hypergamy” within “younger feminist circles,” framing it as a matter of survival rather than social conditioning. Perhaps the most curious development in terminally online pop feminism is the rehashing of traditional, right-wing ideas around marriage, beauty standards, and gender roles as progressive. It isn’t so much that Jabavu was ahead of her time when making these demands of her male partners—one of whom is a younger, white Kenyan man who she nicknamed “vanilla gorilla”—it’s that [valid disillusionment with contemporary life](#) is so high that people are willing to give Victorian romantic ideals and values a try.

It isn’t clear to what extent Jabavu could have been taking creative liberties with the persona she conjures on the page. There are moments where one suspects she’s hamming up the poshness or creating the impression of ditziness for dramatic effect. But that could be anyone’s guess. In “Keeping tabs on tots,” she comes across as less haughty and playful as she does in her other pieces, sympathizing with a group of young people at a party who are critical of the government’s establishment of drinking parlors in black townships and homelands. When she is told that this is a ploy to demoralize and distract black South Africans, she confesses to being stunned, writing that “perhaps unlike me, you wouldn’t, in silence, have reached for another sip of pink gin,” arguably one of the most arresting lines in the book besides a “gunpowder of hostility.”

Nonetheless, the theme of disconnection remains consistent in *A Stranger at Home*, revealing the impact of Jabavu’s decadeslong separation from her country. The intensity of this isolation is evident in two columns. In “Jazz greats I have known,” she describes meeting the jazz legend Duke Ellington while accompanying her then husband to a work function. When he tries to pick her brain about “black township music,” she describes feeling like an “ignorant fool” because she knew nothing about it (Jabavu lived such a full life that she counted Nat King Cole as one of her friends).

In “Do you think that I’m a snob?,” Jabavu retaliates at a friend who accused her of being unconcerned with the plight of the proletariat and focusing disproportionately on the lives of “professors, dukes, viscountesses, all these upper classes, the elite of the world.”

It’s an accusation that stings despite Jabavu’s defiance. When she is asked why she doesn’t care for the workers of the world as someone who was a semi-skilled engineer during World War II, she defends herself by writing that her “experience was not unique” to constitute something significant, stating emphatically, “if I explain the reason I don’t write about the world’s workers and underprivileged, it’s the truth: I don’t know them!” Perhaps this defensiveness stemmed from feeling judged and misunderstood, especially in light of the column she had penned weeks prior titled “Message to the rich,” where she lambasts the heavy workload given to domestic workers, the closest she’s ever come to some kind of class consciousness.

Toward the end of Jabavu’s stint at the *Daily Dispatch*, editor Donald Woods would [face harassment](#) for covering the death of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko in detention. Consequently, there’s an air of sombreness to her writing, as she begins to look back on her time back home. In “Stranger at home,” she offers readers a bleak summary of her trip: “I’ve been away from South Africa for so long that I don’t understand your customs, and I’ve noticed that you don’t seem to understand mine either. Who should be blamed, or why blame anyone? Isn’t life like that? Shouldn’t we all accept one another as we are?” In some ways, it’s as if Jabavu anticipated that her work wouldn’t be read by her own people for years, leaving readers with a sense of her cynicism about reconciling “the two worlds with two loyalties” to which she belonged, as she writes in *Drawn in Color*.

A Stranger at Home makes a compelling case for the restoration of the work of black women journalists, writers and reporters who have been ignored. or unaccounted for throughout South Africa’s literary and

journalistic history. At a time when both print and digital media is experiencing a global downturn, we should endeavor to preserve the work of all of our writers for the sake of keeping them relevant. Having brought Jabavu's name to the attention of South Africa, Xaba and Masola have created an opportunity for wider engagement of all her works, adding texture to her legacy and ensuring that descriptions of her go beyond the appeal of being "[pioneering](#)" or "[problematic](#)."

Reference:

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