

Those Who Can't Write Teach

Written by: Lumumba Mthembu

Edited by: Lindiwe Mngxitama

After suspending my PhD candidacy in 2018, I found myself floating in KwaZulu-Natal, bereft of a profession. The University of Zululand had offered me a post as an English Lecturer however, after a campus tour, it became clear to me that the move from Rhodes University to the outskirts of Richards Bay would be too traumatic a transition to make. Subsequently, I did not announce myself in the main admin building, opting to hide at the local Spur instead.

The call came during a lunch of vegetables and rump steak.

“Mr Mthembu, have you arrived?”

“Yes, but I must decline after seeing the facilities.”

“Oh, sometimes lecturers fear they won't adjust. I'm sorry to hear it, Mr Mthembu. All the best going forward.”

I was surprised that my script had been heard before. Instead of pushing back, the recruiter sympathised with my culture-shock. Comforting as this was, the forfeiture of a six-figure annual salary meant that I had to find my feet in Durban some other way. I am middle class in the sense that I went to private schools and a prestigious university on scholarships. This gave me the accent and contacts to effect some social mobility in my life. But as an orphan with no financial or family support, no base to retreat to, I have always felt homeless and well outside of the middle class.

In “Who Gets to Be a Creative”, a piece penned a year ago for *THE BLOCK*, Lindiwe Mngxitama writes: “A close friend and I once had a conversation about the nervous precarity that is being Black, femme and so-called middle class in South Africa. How it is amplified when you work in creative industries like ours and how – with no trust fund or inter-generational wealth to cushion us – we were at any time one missed paycheck away from being broke.”

True to Mngxitama’s description of precarity, I was one missed invoice payment away from the streets. Reliant on a bursary to cover my rent, my security lasted as long as my mental health, which had frayed at the edges after five years of postgraduate study. I had been warned to take a break between the MA and PhD, but funding was my only source of income. Circumstances eventually led me to drop out, and although not known for small mercies, the University then known as Rhodes, did not come after me.

I threw myself into freelancing. From the fiction I had been writing in the spare time away from my studies, I transitioned to creative nonfiction, blending narratives into reviews of Zakifo Music Festival, the Durban International Film Festival, and Oppikoppi. Mary Sibande ghosted into town to unveil *Let Me Tell You about Red*, at Durban Art Gallery, which curator Gcotyelwa Mashiqua had invited me to write about. The *Mail & Guardian* picked up this review, splashing it across the first two pages of their Arts section. The *Friday* Editor rolled out the red carpet, availing her personal phone number to carefully manage the editing process.

“Our policy is to pay 30 days after publication,” emailed the editorial assistant, and true to form, the invoice was fulfilled not long after the said period. My partner at the time had shared horror stories about non-payment at the famous old paper, with testimonials from her Co-Editors at *Ja Magazine*, who had long since ceased to write for the *Mail & Guardian*.

I was on a roll: the Braam-based publication carried my reviews of Themba Mbuyisa, Lindokuhle Ndlovu, and *Sarafina!* Here is my pocket, I thought. Recognition came in the short-form journalism of arts reviews. I felt like a sprinter who’d finally been given the chance to demonstrate his speed in the field.

But how many people need to remind you that it is when things are going swimmingly that sharks gather? Trouble started brewing with my review of *Mlungu Wam*—the Toronto International Film Festival honourable mention—which the editor had asked me to cover in September 2022. That month, my partner of eight years broke up with me. I was at rock bottom when I interviewed Co-Directors Jenna Cato-Bass and Babalwa Bartaan.

In spite of this, we had a great time: they loved the process and the piece, which was eventually published after multiple prods from their publicist. I could not tell them what the *Mail & Guardian's* hold up was in publishing the piece, but on the 10th of October the article finally saw the light of day. Did the *Mail & Guardian* fulfil that invoice? No, I have yet to be paid, even as I write this.

Since *Mlungu Wam*, they have published my writing on Fred Khumalo's Young Adult novel, *Crossing the River* and Juby Mayet's autobiography, *Freedom Writer*—both of which gleaned glowing reviews from the authors and publishers. The *Mail & Guardian* has not paid me for book and film reviews of *Sidney*, *The Redeem Team* nor for Astrid Mudimba and Chinny Ukata's *It's a Continent*. At R4.00 per word, these invoices run into the tens of thousands.

"Have you followed up?" You may be asking. Well, to answer that dear reader, for months I have blown up the CFO's inbox with queries escalating in desperation, CCs and BCCs. I called—only to be told he was in a meeting—so I left a message, which he did not return. When he finally acknowledged my badgering, it was to tell me that I would be paid in November. The paper's debtors had not paid them timeously so there was a cash-flow blockage, according to the money-man.

The editorial staff were silent on the issue, even as the assistant continued to solicit material from contributors. Mum was the word over the festive period, as I imagined them enjoying the bonuses of their employment contracts. I was depending on my invoices to finance a relocation from my cousin's flat to my own dwelling, but had to do without them, as I still do today.

The editor did take up the cudgels on one occasion in a "Reply to All" email, asking the CFO to weigh in on my non-payment. That was before the invoices piled up, after I had confided in her regarding my break-up and unemployment. Besides that, the only other time the editor has commented on the situation is as recently as the 10th of February, in a blanket email to contributors entitled "Update for Friday 2023". Strategies to streamline content production are outlined in the mail, such as keeping the bulk of it in-house "until such time that we're able to recoup some of the cashflow we've been waiting for from our debtors". The editor goes on to write that, "[the CFO] will be in touch with you regarding outstanding payments and how those will be settled. Thank you for your continued patience during this challenging time."

The loadshedding rhetoric quoted above, in which contributors are thanked for their "patience" (coerced through non-payment), does not inspire confidence that "[the CFO] will be in touch". Let's face it: six months have passed, why break the habit? Peace of mind required that I delete the *Mail & Guardian's* unpaid invoices from my recycle bin ages ago.

I am an arts reviewer. That is my vocation even though I have had to turn to teaching English as a foreign language to pay the bills. Unscrupulous publications that take advantage of our inability to compel them to pay,

put us in a position where our side hustles inevitably become our primary sources of income.

We want to write; it is how we identify ourselves. However, not only is there a dearth of opportunities and publications, those currently in operation pay a pittance, do not pay at all, or string along contributors. I was the only consistently published Durban-based arts writer in 2022. Not because there are no writers in Durban, but because there are no platforms. Should we all migrate to Johannesburg to be closer to *Bubblegum Club* and the *Mail & Guardian*, or to Cape Town and *ArtThrob*? And what about the writers already competing for these spaces: do we play musical chairs until there is no pot left to piss in?

Writers of the calibre of Toni Morrison may possess the juggling skills to raise two children single-handedly, hold down a high-powered job at Random House, and commute from Rockland County (NY) to Manhattan, but I am at my best when I bed in for a single task. Angela Davis recalls in an interview with Dan White, seeing Morrison “pull out a little pad and write something” in the middle of traffic. I could never multitask in this fashion, and I know that I would rather write than teach. However, the South African arts scene has left me with little choice but to focus on my secondary outlet of productivity.

Before being contacted by my current employer who is based in Jakarta, I scoured LinkedIn looking for writing work but could not find much that was unrelated to copywriting in four months of unemployment. First I deferred making travel arrangements, then interviewed locally during the work permit and visa application, all in an attempt to buy time so I could find something in South Africa. Home had no love for me, but my prospective employers in Jakarta texted, phoned and emailed constantly to ensure that I did not feel forgotten. They set up virtual tours of the teaching centre, added me to staff WhatsApp groups and implored these staff members to call and text of their own accord to encourage me. My recruitment was a sustained courtship that made me feel wanted and valued.

Why we are not similarly wooed by the arts publications for which we supply content is a mystery to me. As the talent, surely there is value in securing and retaining our services? It’s as though the publication is doing us a favour by carrying our bylines. I can only hope that as more writers get disabused of the temporary celebrity that comes with a few clicks and double-taps, they boycott the publications that steal from them, spread the word among their peers, and use available platforms to inform the general public as I am doing now.

No writer should be giving away their ideas for free. Exposure, experience and editions are not payment.

Writing is a labour of love, not to be paid for with a kick in the teeth. Our vertebrae curl into question marks at our computer screens, incorporating the notes of editors late into the night. Our buns cry for cushioning from long sedentary hours, where dead legs and blurry vision test physical and mental stamina. The voices in our heads play tricks from reread after

reread to get the coherence right. We forget to eat, drink, exercise, and go outside. No writer complains about this because the excitement of creation is worth it, but we cannot continue to eat our love of writing without the due and just compensation we have earned.

Comment from the Mail & Guardian:

Regarding the essay written by Lumumba Mthembu about his experiences as a freelancer and his interactions with the Mail & Guardian.

We would like to express our gratitude to our writers and contributors for their invaluable contributions to our publications. We understand and appreciate the significance of their work, without which we would not be able to produce our esteemed journalism.

It is unfortunate that in the 4th quarter of 2022, we experienced an unexpected decline in revenue and a slowdown in payments from some of our debtors, one of whom is possibly entering liquidation. As a result, our cash flows have been under significant pressure, and we were unable to pay some of our contributors as initially anticipated.

We have been in communication with our contributors to establish new payment terms, and we are committed to ensuring that all our contributors are paid within the next few months.

In addition to the challenges faced in 2022 it should be noted that smaller independent newsrooms have been under significant pressure in recent years, with the migration from print to digital readership and advertising spend moving to global digital companies. These changes have forced us, like many other media organisations around the world, to redefine our business and operating models.

We appreciate the understanding and support of our contributors during this challenging time, and we remain dedicated to maintaining our tradition of producing quality journalism and supporting young journalists and writers.

Regards

Hoosain Karjieker

CEO

Mail and Guardian

Lumumba Mthembu is the in-house writer of the Durban-based NPO, Contemporary Archive Project, which chronicles – through documentary photography – the life of the city since the turn of the millennium. In this capacity, he has published reviews of photo series and exhibitions through the Mail & Guardian, ArtThrob and Bubblegum Club. He has also facilitated workshops regarding the non-fiction writing process. He graduated from Rhodes University in 2016, having obtained a Masters Degree with Distinction in English Literature, and was a Mandela Rhodes Scholar in 2015.

Lindiwe Mngxitama is a writer, editor, curator and artist currently living and working in Johannesburg. Her creative, critical, imaginative and storytelling practice(s) are rooted in Affect theory, Play, Phenomenology, Critical Race theory, Post-Colonial theory, Queer theory and Black Feminist Thought. Lindi is the former Editor of Bubblegum Club Magazine (2019 - 2022) and worked across the gallery – as curator and part of the Bubblegum Art Collective – its agency, and studio silos. As a storyteller and academic-in-crisis, Lindi thinks of the worlds she creates through language as radical spaces of (re)imagination, critical questioning and disruption towards futurity.

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