

donna Kukama  
*in living memory...*

16 November 2024 –  
18 January 2025

Know  
What...

Why  
Know...

*by Gabi Ngcobo*

what can one write for a world that seems only interested in reading your obituary?

Saul Williams  
posted on Instagram, November 2024

donna Kukama's immaterial, alphabetically unchronological *the history book for those who absolutely need to be remembered* 'exists' without the spillage of ink in ways we have come to understand the physicality of history books; first as drafts that become texts that can be edited, proofed, issued an identifying number, printed, published, (peer) reviewed, cited... donna's history book goes against the grain of how knowledge is perceived, constructed, disseminated, received and processed. By performing a history book donna performs the unknowable art of doing history.

The book is a series of performances that began with *TO BE ANNOUNCED* in 2015 in Berlin followed in 2016 by a performance of the same title in Johannesburg. Both years are significant in the recent history of South Africa, they gave birth to historical major student protest movement hash tagged #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall respectively. The two 'chapters' can be regarded as open interchangeable prologue and epilogue to a series of alphabetically identified chapters. donna is aware that writing, of any kind, is an act of bearing witness to history in the present.

Chapter C, A and B took place in São Paulo, Brazil in the context of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Sao Paulo Biennale titled "Live Uncertainties." They were choreographed site specifically to be in dialogue with historical sites located in the city; a burial ground and first necropolis of the city the Consolação Cemetery, Afro Brazil Museum (now Afro Brasil Emanuel Araujo Museum), a historical dedicated to the research, conservation and exhibition of works and objects related to histories of black people in Brazil and the Cicillio Matarazzo Biennale Pavilion, the site of the São Paulo biennale .

The Consolação Cemetery was founded in 1858, thirty years before the Empire of Brazil officially ended the trading of Africans for enslavement.

The cemetery had previously been a burial ground for the poor and the enslaved – whose bodies were exhumed and buried at the Cemetery of the Afflicted (also known as the Cemetery of the Hanged) in a different part of the city, today ironically known as Liberdade (a place of Freedom). Consolação Cemetery became a site for *Chapter C: The Genealogy of Pain* in which donna together with Diane, a collaborator, painstakingly counted all the years since the colonization of Brazil, thus performatively translating the total violence of slavery and giving it form as an unpayable debt. *Chapter A: The Anatomy of History* at the Afro Brazil Museum was enacted as a history lesson using the site of the museum as a historical reading of its collection focusing on bodies that went through physical and systematic violence. *Chapter B: I, Too* at the Biennale Pavilion functioned like credits at the end of a film in which an endless list of names of people who have endured discriminatory acts of hate and violence were listed in no particular order until the doors of the Biennale were closed to the public for the day.

In October 2016, a month after the series of performances took place in São Paulo, the classrooms and the entire University of Witwatersrand erupted in protests, tagged #FeesMustFall to demand a free, decolonial, quality education. Through the unfolding of these protests, which spread to other institutions of higher learning across the country, we could witness a generation refining the language of protest fearlessly and with a clarity of what can be easily historically misrepresented. In this way, the students wrote their own history book via placards directed to history (the older generation) and a history yet to be written in placards reading DEAR HISTORY, THIS REVOLUTION HAS WOMEN, GAYS, QUEERS & TRANS, REMEMBER THAT! Writing a history book, therefore, is writing a document to address the past in order to secure the future. We are always living in historical moments.

The universities responded with violence and by further tightening security and restricting entrance to the university grounds. This sparked protests that were happening around the university but also acts of solidarity with students coming from the university manual labor force, especially the workers that maintained the university, and whose struggles with university managements became intertwined with the student's demands.

*Chapter F: The Free School for Art and all ,Fings Necessary (until Fees Fall)*, performed at the Johannesburg Public Library in 2016 was informed by these events. For this chapter, donna wore a t-shirt bearing the words borrowed from Fela Kuti's 1986 song 'TEACHER DON'T TEACH ME NONSENSE. Created by art students, the t-shirts spoke to their brazen spirit and their ability to borrow from history to speak to the present. donna's title captures the newly constructed playfully opaque words and terms; the symbolic operation of language, that came out of the student movements and later became a code to identify with those who related to the joy and the trauma experienced during the height protests and its aftermaths.

To date, chapters of donna's history book have continued to unfold across different geographies and sites, responding to different but connected geo-political presences by revealing their historical embeddedness. The book has chapters covering 24 letters of the Latin alphabet with only 'w' and 'k' remaining.

Both the 'missing' letters can stand for the gaps that exist in the construction of knowledge as an academic discipline and in how questions can be posed to expose unknowable elements enacted in artistic research as play.

What results as stand-ins of the 'missing' letters are objects, drawings/ prints and sound pieces created from traces of recordings and scribbles of earlier chapters. The material is a call and invitation to create different non-discursive registers for the understanding of histories (colonial, racial, capital). The production of the material included as part of the *in living memory...* suggests a kind of sampling that offers more than what was known to be there to begin with. The works are physical embodiments towards an understanding of what may remain after history.