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Interdisciplinary Art Practice

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REGARDING TANIA HABERLAND

Dear Selection Committee

I have been in touch with Tania Haberland since 2004, when she first attracted attention as a poet of Mauritian descent in the Indian Ocean slave port of Cape Town, South Africa. This subjectivity alone positions her as a rare voice that deserves to be heard. However, there is nothing local about Tania. She performed with the women's collective "And the Word was Woman", alongside other poets who have gone on to international careers, such as Toni Stuart & Malika Ndlovu. With a multinational upbringing, fluent in five languages, a cross-over artist and collaborator, Tania's experimental approach stood out in the provincial performance poetry scene. She also worked as a performance artist with critically acclaimed artists and curators such as Bettina Malcomess, and in prestigious institutions such as the SANG (South African National Gallery).

Her academic background is solid. Tania read and wrote for an MA degree in Creative Writing in the English Department at the University of Cape Town. As a fellow student at the time, I observed that she was held in high esteem by Professor Stephen Watson, to such an extent that her first collection of poetry, "Hyphen" was published by the University of Cape Town Press upon her graduation (www.uctwriters.co.za/hyphen). This is an extremely rare honour. Tania followed up with a spectacular and very well-attended launch at the Two Oceans Aquarium, in which acclaimed poets read her work in the dim blue light of sharks and manta rays gliding past. (<http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2009/08/03/deep-delights-at-the-aquarium-launch-of-hyphen-videos/>)

"Hyphen" tests the erotic tension in relationships and her own body and subjectivity as a bridge. It caused a stir in local poetry circles, and went on to win the country's most coveted award for poetry, the Ingrid Jonker prize, named after the Afrikaans anti-apartheid activist. The awards committee's press release calls Tania's debut "a rich addition to English South African writing" which would "expand the reader's consciousness", "a literary poetry, rich in ideas".

Grace Kim, of the Stellenbosch Literary Project, praises: "Van Schalkwyk's work is impressive for its apparent effortlessness... A young poet ... slicing open and splicing the 'normal' with lyrical powers of Eros so distinctive that it's hard to re-enter the 'real' world again unmoved from one's perceptual axis."

As a curator of artist's moving image, I had the pleasure of screening Tania's experimental short film "the electrician", a sardonic collaboration with the novelist and filmmaker Terry Westby-Nunn. The film fantasises that South Africa's frequent power failures could be the fault of a single citizen's "power". Tania plays the title character, whose overactive imagination runs away with her to hilarious consequences. "The electrician" was a sure crowd-pleaser, showing off Tania's ability to write playfully

about a serious issue, as well as comic genius in styling and performance. The film was shown as part of CITY BREATH Festival of Video Poetry (2010), in which artists, poets and choreographers from four cities in South Africa collaborated. It went on to screen in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Grahamstown, London, Edinburgh, Vancouver, Berlin, Marseille & Kharkiv (<https://vimeo.com/31072061>).

The “hyphen” in Tania makes her extremely adaptable to changing circumstances, a virtue required of all third-culture kids in a world of increasingly transnational globalised subjectivities. In August 2010, she was publicly featured in a glamorous fashion shoot amongst other South African female poets for the release of O Magazine's Phenomenal Woman poetry CD featuring Maya Angelou (I have heard strangers raving about Tania's voice). Meanwhile, in private, the path of her heart took Tania through a painful divorce, a brave return to her maiden name after being catapulted to prominence under her South African husband's surname, and a relocation to Milan, Italy. When I caught up with her there six months later on a visit to Europe, I found her already fluent in Italian, transplanting herself into another culture and making it her own.

It is above all her strong personal voice and sense of self that enables her to do this. Water, eros and the constraints and fluidities of personal interdependence have increasingly defined what Tania's voice wants to say on behalf of women's bodies in the world, and those who wish to love them. The “hyphen” gives way to her second collection 'Other', which occupied much of her time in Milan. From what I have read of it, Tania's range and the daring of her ideas have grown in often startling ways. It is a deserving volume that will require a significant amount of time given to the poet to oversee its completion.

This three-stage interdisciplinary poetry project confidently offers us the voice of a 21st century female writer unashamed of her sexuality, yet consistently intrigued by its power. It explores the encounter with the world as an odd beloved 'other' - in the form of water, as male, and as muse. These forces that animate her desire inform the recurring images in the text.

Personal intimacy also confronts public witnesses of the 'tenderness' performances evolved in Milan. Here, Tania began to collaborate in earnest with her partner, martial artist and bodyworker Fabrizio Dalle Piane, a former European Karate champion, drawing on the best of their shared knowledge of working with breath, sound, words and movement. This series of live meditative experiences included 'Dark Room' at MacaO's Inedito festival (2015), and 'The Technology of Tenderness' commission for Monza's Binario 7 theatre (2015).

She also collaborated with the sculptor and poet (leader of the Italian slam league) and artistic Director of PoesiaPresente, Dome Bulfaro. Fused with the sounds of pencils drawing and electronic beats, Tania's voice and writing feature on the album "All the Music is Played. All the Rhythm is Drawn", a project by MATITA (musician Fabio Bonelli & People From the Mountains, a collective of graphic artists and musicians). The track 'Pietà' showcases Tania's nuanced vocal skills with spoken and musical rhythms (<https://matita.bandcamp.com/track/pieta>).

While Tania was at home in Europe, where she gathered ideas and contacts, the yearning for home never left her. Whenever possible, she wrote me, she would return to the ocean to write. In December 2015 she finally moved back to her native Mauritius. For more than six months now, I have been receiving the occasional photo taken while she was kayaking at 5 AM to greet the sunrise, or swimming between

tropical fish, or sitting rapt among late night players of local Sega music. Tania tells me she is embarking on a new experiment with these musicians, to mix poetry and lullabies with the shamanic 'ravanne' (drum) music of the island home she has reclaimed from her childhood.

Her ambitious vision for 'Other' befits a third-culture woman in her prime, drawing on an eclectic community of collaborators scattered across the globe. It is already a book in the final stages of composition and editing. It is transforming into songs and soundscapes. As a woman and as a poet, Tania celebrates the body's capacity for pleasure, one that she does not wish to withhold from others.

In explaining her concept of carnal poetics to me, Tania mentions the simple act of holding someone whilst reciting a poem, or using touch to trace words written specially for a person into their body. By inviting audiences to witness such 'technologies of tenderness', as she calls them, she aims to address issues of sexual violence. It may even be seen as a form of relationship education to promote the growth of positive people and environments.

In its third and final stage the project is intended to grow into live collaborations with movement artists and bodyworkers, to create and experience a 'technology of tenderness'. Tania sees the combination of interdisciplinary arts and tenderness as a "preventative medicine and connection tool between people and places". Her project echoes larger trends in the arts at the moment, breaking down the elitist hierarchies of traditions.

Tania's projects pursue a philosophy and politics of the feminine. As a writer, it is not enough to her to merely express thoughts in her mind. Her projects are lived and shared in her body, her interaction with her various communities and cultural worlds. This is how she creates her resonance. I have no doubt recommending Tania for this fellowship, or indeed, any thing she is in need of to realise her contribution as a woman body in the world.

My best wishes accompany Tania in this and in all her endeavours. Please feel free to contact me regarding further information.



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Winner of the Barclays l'Atelier Award 2015 for African Artists.
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