

Admiration is Not Consent: Notes on Love and Extraction

What would it require for capital to flow toward coherence rather than extraction—especially in spaces where love is claimed but not structurally held?

This essay weaves through several worlds to follow this curiosity. Documentary, fiction, diasporic and Xhosa cosmological worlds all collude in the asking of it in the present. In their collusion, two clear patterns make themselves known; one a wound and the second salve. Rupture, and repair. As these patterns pull against each other, the essay tunes into four guides that might allow for syntropic flow.

the thing about untoondo is she doesn't stay in the same place for quite long enough. she is a wanderer. where others are fearful she is curious. where some might judge, she seeks to understand. this, her great gift, is also the thing that gets her into quicksand.

if legacy is a fault then it's all of ours that she is like that. our lineage is one that is, has always been, prone to wonder. however, this time her body has chosen a world that is so impatient and so very efficient at drawing straight lines that our spirit inside her is activated. and it falls to us, her elders, to help her find regulation.

in this way untoondo liberates us from complacency - always pushing us to remember what it is that we know and towards what we can discover. she keeps us on our toes; as she should. after all, the only way to navigate quicksand is on your toes.

she has wandered from ixhanti. she has wandered so long that her trail has gone cold, and so we must gather Voice, and go find her.

"We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."

(Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 1993)

Part 1: Rupture

Admiration is not Consent.

Despite having had enough sleep she feels too tired to join this meeting. Maybe it's the three hours on Zoom, for the third time this week, for the nth time this year. The Zoom is necessary: her partners are in different parts of the globe, all beaming in across different timezones. Something that she was quite drawn to at first; it seemed synergistic, generous, alchemical, even sexy. However, more and more she finds herself leaving these calls feeling drained and she can't quite identify where the leak is.

She considers making up an excuse not to have her camera on. She knows her partners find it easier to connect when they can see faces, and yet, right now, this need requires so much more of her. Inside those digital boxes she feels framed: reduced to just what the others see. She talks herself out of making an excuse to keep the camera off by reminding herself that she knows how to work with people she doesn't like. And these people she *does* like; very much so. And they, in turn, tell her almost daily how much they like her.

After all, it was they who sought her out to join them in starting something new. Something that would elevate how organisations all over the world experience work and each other at work. When she asked why her, they looked at each and shared a smile that seemed just too charmed by her humility. As if her asking the question made them want her even more. They invited her to join them in her full self, to do what it is that she does so *she* could find out why she wanted to be part of this new thing. Remembering this, she switches her camera on and immediately 3 sets of virtual smiles spread across her monitor.

the sky that holds ixhanti crackles with Voice. here, the air vibrates at the frequency of all of our clan, whatever our cosmological co-ordinates. it is here where generations of us disabuse ourselves of our bones so that we may step through worlds unencumbered. and here is where our earth-based charges come to commune with each other, and therefore with us. for all these reasons, ixhanti must be our starting point from which to pick up untondo's trail.

her brothers, sisters and mother have not seen her in a while. they understand she is building something with others empuma koloni. they have always encouraged her curiosity. as it does with us, it challenges them to expand their thinking - to go back to what they know, interrogate it for some new ripple of understanding it may bring. they have learnt to allow her a wide berth. so when her visits back home started to dwindle, and her contributions to her mother's welfare lessened, they neither pressure nor ask her awkward questions. they know she knows where home is. they know she knows who she is. and now we know where she is: empuma koloni ..

The meeting is intentionally informal. There's no agenda to keep it on course; and once it is over no minutes will be shared about what was discussed, nor what agreements were reached. This is one of the group's way of rejecting the taken-for-granted organisational practices that instrumentalise the work, hoard power and effectively reduce individuals to roles in their organisations. Informality is a load-bearing wall of their flat structure.

The group looks to their shared values to structure their meetings, decisions and work-flows. She racks her brain but can't remember when this modality was discussed and agreed upon. It's not her preference; she appreciates the synthesising utility of minutes. She feels safe having a place that documents discussions had, strategies devised, points of contention. Today she wonders how she would have been the voice of dissent.

But this flat structure is also doing something right because in their time together they have built something: they have a small pool of paying clients, a growing pool of partners who are invested in being part of the work's development and a method that is developing its robustness. It's easy for her to see how they can grow and connect others into something that will be meaningful to many at the same time as sustaining the 4 co-founders.

In the meeting she raises payment again. The under-compensation has gone on longer than necessary; there have been more contracts—they could pay themselves better—yet they continue to reserve money for “growing the organisation.” In the meantime, she has begun drawing on her own reserves to subsidise her contribution.

Each time she raises it, the air shifts—subtle but unmistakable. A quiet distaste settles around the question of paying themselves comparably.

At first, she conceded to it. Then she tried to work around it—offering solutions, proposing strategies for scale, filling gaps, taking on work that serves growth rather than her own interests. At times, she simply made herself smaller. She didn't speak up when the group would move in a direction that would increase her financial precarity.

Every few months her self-censorship would become unbearable, and she would raise it again—each time more clearly, more directly, taking care to be more explicit. And each time she was met with thanks, with kindness, even with empathy. And each time, nothing changed.

get out. it doesn't matter which one of us says it first, we all agree: she is engaged in the senseless dance of bending her voice in order to be heard. she must get out. we speak louder and louder; centuries of our clan's voices undulating over each other into a mighty ocean of ebb and flow. get out. get out. get out!

Get Out

The first time Chris wakes up he is bound to a leather chair, panic coursing through him even before he has fully registered his situation. Like a hunted animal on borrowed time, his head whips from side to side looking for a way out; he pulls and bites at his restraints. In front of him a TV that no ancestor of his ever owned flickers on. The white-haired white man who speaks welcomes him, assures Chris there's nothing to worry about, before saying the thing that confirms that Chris is in grave danger: “You have been chosen because of the physical

advantages you have enjoyed your entire lifetime. With your natural gifts and our determination we could both be part of something greater. Something perfect". The TV flickers off.

Chris looks up at the deer head mounted above the anachronistic TV. No doubt the speaker admired this animal's physical advantages too. But then the teacup resumes its abrasive lullaby and Chris drops back into the sunken place.

This time when Chris wakes up he is exhausted. The screen flickers on again and he sees a familiar face. Fear makes way for suspicion. It's the same man who had, just a few days prior, admired his talent as a photographer so eloquently, with what seemed like raw humility.

Today that humility is not there. His friendly words land like bricks, as if to beat Chris's humanity out of him. No remorse in his voice as he tells Chris the procedure that they are preparing him for and what his fate is to be after it: "You won't be gone, a slither of you will still be in there, limited consciousness. You'll be able to see and hear what your body is doing, but your existence will be but a passenger. An audience. You'll live in ... "

Chris understands and finishes the sentence: " .. the sunken place."

His greatest gift is about to be extracted from him, without his consent, by those who admire parts of him. Even in this moment the man feels moved to exempt himself from one particular prejudice. He insists that his entitlement is not activated by Chris's race, but his discerning talent: "I want your eye man, I want those things that you see through".

Ntondo pauses the film and lets the realisation land: this flat structure is consuming her. Under cover of admiration it inures itself from acknowledging the value she has brought in to where they are: her ideas, her ability to recognise and name patterns, her relational capacities, the legitimacy she brings to the collective, her precious time. All these they have benefitted from, they have openly admired, however they are not willing to compensate appropriately.

Her stomach remembers that they never answered her question when she asked, "Why me"? Instead they summoned their admiration and left it to her to do the rest. And so she had: she had invested in this dream that those who owned it saw no need to name even as they expected her to help them build it.

In her chest she feels an anger brewing but remembers that this partnership is built on a 10 year friendship. A friendship held together by shared values and so much vulnerability. Maybe their inability to see the risk they are asking her to expose herself to is a function of her having been too careful in how she has worded things. Maybe she needs to speak clearly, friend to friend, in order to bridge the divide.

She requests a meeting with the longstanding friend in the group. Because she wants to order her thoughts, she writes a letter she knows she will never send.

The Letter That Was Never Sent

" Dear Global North Colleague, and real-life friend of 10 years,

I am writing this for my own clarity, because when I picture me speaking this to you I am overcome with dread. And I am scared of what speaking might threaten between you and I. But the nature of our friendship demands that it be spoken. Because it is bigger than just you and I. And if we are to do this work, then we must do so in our integrity.

This is a conversation about power. I am asking you to hear me say that as a Black queer Majority World woman, I cannot afford to let go of power in the ways that you can.

For the time that we have worked together on this new venture, we have moved in good faith. We have claimed a flat structure, deaf to race, class, gender, and geopolitical privilege. Ten years of love and friendship have allowed us to ride this conceit.

And I wanted to believe. I was building something with people I liked, who invited me to show up fully, doing work that felt meaningful and could potentially help so many others like us.

But the truth is I have been vulnerable and alone in this partnership. When I return to moments where something didn't sit right I realise I was being asked to let go of power. And I did. When I couldn't hold back tears, you asked why it was so hard for me to keep it together. I couldn't say then that it was because you were not hearing me when I said that as a Black queer woman, I am the one most punished when I give up power.

One of the ways I have given up power is by doing this work in the way you have asked of me. Which has meant that I have drawn on my own reserves. And doing that I have contributed less to my network of communities. And so my world has become smaller, more isolated—not because my community rejected me, but because I could not bear to have them silently subsidise this.

Last year I signed an agreement that made nothing I brought into the space mine, because “we know the agreement between us” and “there is nothing to own yet!”. I voiced discomfort, and nothing changed. I stayed. But I began to see how much I had invested into something that was not structurally mine—and that when my reserves died down, I get to leave, but then I leave with nothing.

I am speaking now because I want to break that pattern. I want to break the pattern of silent subsidisation. And I don't want to deny us, what we're building, the opportunity to truly learn.

I want to restore choice: to stay empowered, or to leave with dignity.

So I am asking for something that will level our power dynamic. I am asking that we build shared power into the structure of our work. I am asking you to give up power, so that what we are building can be brought home.”

Her colleague is late for the meeting. For the thirty minutes she waits she's not sure how to use the time and she is vaguely aware of some invisible thing soaking up the oxygen. When he arrives he laughs off his lateness in the same breath that he admits a nervousness about why she asked for the meeting. She sees he anticipates a reckoning. On her side she is looking for a friend to hear her, but even before the meeting starts she is disappointed.

we bear witness because the occasion merits it. when she maps out her precarity he surfaces his own. when she says explicitly that her community is subsidising this work, he takes on the posture of exceptionalism. when she speaks of her fear of isolation from community he says he relates. but like us, she notices that he is not moved when she says she is off her life-path. she notices and recognises that it's time to stop trying to get through to him. relieved he thanks her for challenging him, he makes words that sounds like a commitment of some sort but later when she plays the words back in her head she realises that what sounded like commitment is drenched in plausible deniability.

She wakes up at the usual hour, but today she can't get out of bed. Minutes stretch into hours before she realises that her body is telling her that she is grieving. She has looked for a friend and instead has been met with a run for cover. She continues to show up for the work, hoping that her global North colleague makes do on his promise to prioritise compensating themselves as much as they prioritise "perfecting the work". But weeks then months pass and still nothing changes. She keeps revisiting the moment where she told him she was off her life-path, words she has never uttered to another human being. Each time she looks for a facial expression that something in him was moved, but her memory always fails to put her mind at ease.

ah. it hurts but she is starting to see what we see; she is realising that she's caught in someone else's dream, in a world where he is empowered to put his dream before hers.

She feels remorse for letting her guard down. Those reserves she re-directed into her conceit had had a job to do in her community. She goes home to make amends to her family. Her eldest brother refuses the amend and instead cries with her. He cries because he feels with her, and he is powerless to make it right. But he does know he can remind her of who she is. Of her legacy; their ancestor who takes the form of the guinea fowl which refuses to mate in captivity. He reminds her of her ability to meet that which she fears the most on her terms. He reminds her what he knows to be true about her: that she would sooner live her own life than someone else's who thinks their admiration of her precludes them from having to ask for her consent.

she is ready. now she can be the love where there is none.

Part 2: Repair

The Letter That Becomes

To those who understand it, the opening scene in Milisuthando is devastating. Archival footage of that moment deep into democratic South Africa's young adulthood; when a naked woman walks up to the statue of Nelson Mandela at Sandton Square. She walks up and on a business day in broad daylight she stands before him, knowing that although the statue reaches meters above her he can't turn away.

Neither could we. The moment was captured on multiple cellphones from as many angles. Tongues ridiculed and scorned, while others wept. Those who wept did so from the knowing that in this setting, the black woman is the proverbial canary. That where a system is built on asymmetry it is the black woman who is the first to feel it hardest.

Where the world saw insanity, those who wept saw an act of vulnerability at its most powerful.

The documentary opens with this scene and maintains its visceral honesty all the way through.

Later in the documentary the filmmaker, Milisuthando - she who is called to be the love where there is none - asks: what *does* it mean to love across racial divides decades after we are told the power asymmetries no longer matter? At that moment in the documentary her best friend, white, of many years is asking for cover. Milisuthando wants to give it but knows that in the giving of it something will be lost again. Love and cover are uneasy bedmates, and there's been way too much of the latter. So instead of granting the cover she speaks the truth that she needs.

It is a long uncomfortable scene, made more so because the entire exchange takes place on black screen. Without the distraction of a visual you focus on the texture of their voices. The texture of one asking to be loved in fragments. The texture of another insisting that she be loved whole.

uNtondo has to excuse herself from the screening. In her ears she can hear the whispers of the millions of black South Africans who entered into reconciliation with Nelson Mandela only to remain dispossessed from the land taken from them centuries before. Taken never to be returned. Today the whispers are reaching out from the sunken place; from where they have been living as passengers in a world built in the image of someone else's dreams.

she sees it. that Love does not mean cover, that sometimes Love in order to be, must cut with blades so sharp that they cut things back into repair.

After the screening she finds herself at her laptop; and starts to type a letter she knows she will never send because she must speak it.

"To my colleagues. I'm not going to bury the lede. I want out and I want you to buy me out — over whatever period it takes. Twelve months. Eighteen. Over that time I will continue to contribute to the work, but do so knowing that I am being paid commensurately towards a dignified transition.

And when that is done, we are free to have a different conversation. One where we ask: okay, now what does what we have built look like with a long-term trajectory? But first, this.

Because I don't want to continue with the structure as it is. Because the structure, as it is, requires that I subsidise it with all that I hold dear.

Yes, as you have said so many times I can leave. But if I leave I leave with nothing. And this — this leaving with nothing — is a pattern I have lived too many times. I have erased myself, over and over, from things I have helped build. And each time I have walked away and called it integrity.

Not this time.

I want out. But I want to walk out as part of something that is bristlingly, incandescently honest. And what do we need to be honest about? That we built something from good intentions, from goodwill. And it distorted. And in its distortion it took from each of us — differently, not equally. What it took from me, I have carried home. To my mother. To my child. To my brother. To my sister. I have colluded in a rupture and then transported it into the people I love most. I cannot walk away without colluding in repair.

Repair that is structural. Not an apology. Not a conversation. Something that returns — materially — what was withdrawn. That is what I am asking for. That is why I am here saying: I want out. And I want us to end this cycle with integrity so that whatever the thing we have built becomes next, it becomes it whole.”

Her Voice does not waver. It is the clearest she has been in months.

she has not made herself smaller, she has spoken. and in speaking she is no longer asking to be understood, she is asking for what is required. this is enough. we gather ourselves around what has been seen. our Voice settles in dreams, songs, poetry and story.

On Coherence

if you admire, learn to ask. ask what it costs for someone to be where you see them. what they would need in order to remain whole in your presence. ask before you take what you can see. to admire well is to make space for refusal.

She writes: When we partner across power asymmetries we set the conditions for agency right at the beginning. Before any work begins, we ask what it will cost to be here, what is needed to remain whole; and we ensure that refusal can be expressed without penalty.

if you care, let your care change the conditions. feeling is easy; it is also not enough. take on what must be rearranged so that what you value can live. to care well is to build structures that do not require sacrifice to be sustained.

She writes: We do not continue where the conditions require some of us to quietly subsidise the work. Where subsidy is needed, it is named and chosen consciously; it is not carried by those with the least power. Equitable partnerships do not allow burden to follow existing power asymmetries. We reorganise the work so it can be sustained without unchosen sacrifice.

if you build together, name what you are building. informality enacted as cover serves extraction. do not call it shared when it is not shared. attune to not only what is held, but also what is absorbed. to build well is to make power visible, so that it can be shaped.

She writes: Where power is uneven, ambiguity does not create freedom—it transfers risk onto those with the least protection. Angela Davis reminds us that shared intention without shared structure will reproduce inequality. So we do not use informality to obscure power. What is shared, what is held, and what is absorbed is named at the outset and revisited as the work evolves.

when harm has happened, look for what must be returned. seek what must be changed so that it does not happen again. to repair well is to give back in ways that restore relationship—not just intention.

She writes: When harm has occurred, we name what was taken, what it cost, and what must be returned. Where value has been extracted, it must be restored; where conditions enabled the harm, they must be changed. Repair is not an apology or an insight—it requires material and structural response. If repair is not undertaken, we name that, too, and do not call the work whole.

these are not instructions. these are things we attune to when we are no longer trying to be innocent. these are the grooves that allow anything to flow towards coherence.

we can leave her. she remembers now that there are no flat structures in Nature.



Name	Ntondo
Geography	South Africa
Title	Admiration is Not Consent
Format	Essay 18 - minute read
Biography	<p><i>Ntondo is a South African researcher and practitioner whose work sits at the intersection of organisational development, relational practice and epistemic justice. Her contribution traces what happens when love is claimed but not structurally held — when admiration becomes a cover for extraction. She writes from inside a cross-border partnership that promised mutuality but delivered something else. The phrase at the heart of her work — "admiration is not consent" — names what many have felt but could not articulate. The worlds Ntondo insists on remembering are worlds where...</i></p> <p><i>.. Black people can stand in who they are without needing permission to exist. .. people feel the liberation of being well-loved without first having to survive extraction. .. modernity's crisis is recognised for what it is rather than who we are.</i></p>