BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

Mutual Biography, Resilience and Exceptionalism: A Feminist Reading of Tinyiko Maluleke's "Memoir of a Special Kind"

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SHORT BIO

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SUBMISSION DATE
05/07/2026

ACCEPTANCE DATE
07/07/2026

DOI
https://doi.org/10.36615/812c7w58

ABSTRACT

Public celebration of women's leadership often obscures the structural conditions that have historically denied women recognition while narratives of resilience risk valorising survival without interrogating the systems that make such survival necessary. This essay argues that Tinyiko Maluleke's Faces and Phases of Resilience: A Memoir of a Special Kind offers an important interlocutor for rethinking these questions. Although the memoir is not explicitly a work of feminist theology, the essay demonstrates that reading its women-centred narratives through feminist theological lenses reveals three significant interventions: a relational methodology of "mutual biography"; a critique of resilience that redirects attention to structural injustice; and a politics of recognition that challenges exceptionalist accounts of women's achievement. Drawing on Black feminist epistemology, African feminist theology, and feminist institutional critique, the essay argues that Maluleke's memoir makes an important contribution to feminist theological scholarship.

KEYWORDS
mutual biography, black feminist epistemology, African feminist theology, memoir, resilience, exceptionalism

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ISSN 2707-2991

Introduction: Ruthless Africa and Feminist Knowledge

Twenty-five years ago, Tinyiko Maluleke dismantled my first scholarly publication. The year was 2001. I had recently completed my Master's degree and was thrilled—thanks to generous feminist mentorship—to contribute a chapter to Musa Dube's edited collection, *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*.[1] Seeing my name in print, alongside scholars whose work I deeply admired, felt like an initiation into academic life. My chapter offered what I then described in the title as a "South African Indian womanist" reading of the biblical character Ruth, celebrating her capacity to survive widowhood and great precarity by reading her alongside the experiences of Indian widows, including my own mother, whose life had likewise required extraordinary endurance. The clumsiness of the multiple scholarly and personal positionings announced in the title should reveal just how much that young and immature scholar was still finding her theoretical footing.

Tinyiko Maluleke's response essay in that book[2] bore a memorable sub-section entitled "Nadar to the Rescue of Ruth". With characteristic precision, he exposed what he saw as the central weakness of my argument. My reading, he suggested, had become too invested in celebrating Ruth's resilience without asking the more difficult question: what kind of world required such resilience in the first place? His concern was not that survival was unimportant. It was that I had mistaken survival for the story rather than recognising it as a symptom of "ruthless Africa." At the time, I experienced his critique as unsettling. Now, however, I have come to regard it as one of the most formative intellectual gifts of my scholarly life. It permanently altered, not only the questions I ask of biblical texts, but also the questions I ask of the worlds that produce them.

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1 Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 159-75.

2 Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africas: Reflections of an African Mordecai," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 237-51.

Twenty-five years later, reading his memoir: *Faces and Phases of Resilience: A Memoir of a Special Kind* [3] brought me, unexpectedly, back to that experience. Yet, what struck me was not simply that Maluleke had returned to the themes of resilience and survival, rather, that the lesson he had taught me through Ruth was, itself, the product of another scholarly relationship. In the *Author's Introduction*, Maluleke recalls how one of his own earliest publications attracted severe criticism from several senior, Swiss theologians, led by Klauspeter Blaser. Years later, when Blaser examined his doctoral dissertation, what Maluleke had feared would be a hostile encounter instead became the beginning of a lasting friendship. Looking back, he reflects: "From that time, I learnt that in scholarship, one's harshest critics should be treasured above everyone else. While one's praise singers may not be dismissed, their praises should always be handled with a measure of sobriety and frugality."[4]

I found myself strangely inside that story. Just as Blaser's critique became formative rather than destructive for Maluleke, so did Maluleke's critique become formative rather than destructive for me. We began as critic and criticised. We would later become collaborators, co-authors, and friends. It is difficult not to recognise in these intertwined stories something of the memoir's own logic. Intellectual lives are not fashioned in isolation. They are, instead, formed through conversations, disagreements, mentorships, friendships, and relationships that continue to shape us long after the original encounter has passed. There is something characteristically and, perhaps profoundly, feminist about this.

In this article I, therefore, argue that *Faces and Phases of Resilience* should be read, not simply as a memoir, nor merely as a collection of biographical reflections, but as a significant contribution to intersectional feminist theological scholarship. Although the memoir is not presented as a work of feminist theory or theology, I suggest that it advances feminist theological reflection in three closely related ways. First, it models a feminist methodology in which knowledge is generated through relationship and storytelling rather than detached observation. Second, it challenges survivalist narratives by shifting attention away from celebrating women's

[3] Tinyiko Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience: A Memoir of a Special Kind* (Tracey McDonald Publishers, 2025).

[4] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience*, xxvi–xxvii.

resilience towards the political, economic, social, and theological conditions that make resilience necessary in the first place. Finally, it unsettles exceptionalist narratives by shifting the politics of recognition away from individual capability and towards the structures that constrained that capability in the first place.

While *Faces and Phases of Resilience* features many compelling male figures, my concern in this article is with the women who move through its pages. The memoir undoubtedly invites a sustained analysis of masculinity and the formation of Black male subjectivities, a project that deserves an essay of its own. Here, however, I argue that it is through the women of the memoir that Maluleke's most significant methodological, theological, and political interventions become visible. Paying attention to these women, therefore, reveals the distinctive way in which the memoir generates knowledge. Before it offers a feminist critique of resilience or exceptionalism, it first models a feminist way of knowing and, as a result, I contend that the memoir's first contribution is methodological.

I. Mutual Biography: A Feminist Methodological Intervention

Throughout the memoir, Maluleke develops a mode of scholarship that resonates deeply with intersectional feminist epistemology and African feminist theology as knowledge` consistently emerges through relationships rather than apart from them. Methodological reflection is woven into the texture of the narrative itself, becoming visible in the ways lives are remembered and stories are juxtaposed. The memoir, therefore, invites readers to understand scholarship less as the production of abstract knowledge than as an ongoing practice of relational interpretation in which conversation and storytelling become constitutive of theory itself. Stories constitute, in this sense, a mode of Black feminist epistemology. As I have argued elsewhere, stories are not simply the objects of analysis but are themselves a way of knowing—what I describe as "data with soul", extending

Brené Brown's memorable formulation to argue that narrative generates, rather than merely illustrates, theoretical insight.[5]

Maluleke extends this methodological orientation in the *Author's Introduction*, where he cautions readers that the essays are "not biographical in the conventional sense of the word." Although many of the chapters profile other people, he explains that they are simultaneously autobiographical because "my own story intersects, overlaps and resonates with theirs".[6] This is more an epistemological claim than a literary observation, because the self is not imagined as autonomous, self-contained, or prior to relationships. Rather, it comes into being through them. Read in this way, *Faces and Phases of Resilience* invites, what I describe as, mutual biography: a relational mode of life writing in which the story of one life becomes intelligible only through the stories of others. The lives narrated are not simply placed alongside one another, nor does one merely illustrate the other. Each life becomes the condition through which the other is understood. Mutual biography, therefore, refuses the distinction between subject and observer, insisting, instead, that both the narrator and narrated are continually constituted through their encounters with one another.

This understanding of knowledge places the memoir in conversation with a rich tradition of feminist epistemology. Donna Haraway's critique of the "god trick" famously rejected the fantasy of a disembodied observer capable of seeing everything from nowhere, insisting instead that "feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges".[7] Patricia Hill Collins extends this insight by arguing that Black feminist thought has developed "alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself".[8] Rather than separating everyday experience from scholarly reflection, Collins insists that the "two levels of knowledge are interdependent".[9] Black feminist thought articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge of ordinary women's lives, even as it rearticulates that knowledge into specialised intellectual work. African

5 Sarojini Nadar, "'Stories Are Data with Soul': Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology," in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism*, ed. Tasha Oren and Andrea L. Press (Routledge, 2019), 34-45.

6 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience, xxvi.*

7 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

8 Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 746

9 Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 750.

feminist theologians have amplified these insights in distinctive ways. Mercy Oduyoye has consistently argued that theology begins, not with abstract doctrinal formulations but, rather, with the lived realities of women in community. Theology is generated through relationships, memory, ritual, and everyday practices of survival and care rather than through detached speculation.[10] Read alongside these scholars, *Faces and Phases of Resilience* then appears, not simply to reflect feminist methodology, but to practise it.

The form of the memoir is, therefore, as significant as its content. Behind each chapter lies substantial scholarly labour where historical events are carefully reconstructed and institutional histories are pieced together from multiple sources. Colleagues, friends, and public figures are interviewed at length,[11] yet, remarkably little of this labour is foregrounded, as is common practice in scholarly writing. Maluleke deliberately allows the apparatus of scholarship to recede behind the stories themselves. The claim, by Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, that writing itself constitutes "a method of inquiry" is helpful here.[12] They argue that writing is not merely a way of communicating ideas that already exist. Rather, it is one of the practices through which ideas come into being. The result is, simply, scholarship written relationally.

The memoir's understanding of scholarship as a relational practice is perhaps captured most beautifully in its opening invitation. "Come then," Maluleke writes, "let me invite you to take off your 'shoes' as you enter the proverbial house built of testaments of resilience…".[13] The invitation to remove one's shoes evokes reverence and hospitality; it asks the reader to enter, not as a detached observer, but as a guest. However, immediately after this literary and symbolic gesture, Maluleke reminds readers that these essays have been "comprehensively rewritten" and "annotated with

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10 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 9-27.

11 In a personal phone-text conversation with Maluleke, he explained that many of the chapters were preceded by extensive interviews and conversations with the individuals concerned.

12 Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Sage, 2005), 959-978.

13 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience, xxvii.*

scholarly references and citations",[14] signalling that rigorous scholarship and relational storytelling are not opposing modes of knowledge, but mutually constitutive practices. This, I suggest, is one of the memoir's most profound feminist theological insights.

Finally, the memoir also arrives at a particularly significant historical moment. At a time when artificial intelligence can generate competent prose and imitate scholarly conventions with increasing sophistication, this book reminds us of something machines cannot reproduce. AI can synthesise information. It cannot generate decades of friendship and shared struggle. The authority of this book lies precisely in those relationships. Its knowledge emerges, not from detached observation, but from lived encounter. The critiques of survivalism and exceptionalism that follow derive their force precisely from this relational way of knowing.

II. Beyond Resilience: A Feminist Refusal of Survivalist Celebration

If the memoir's first intervention is methodological, its second is political. Having established a mode of knowledge production grounded in relationship and mutual formation, Maluleke uses that methodology to unsettle one of the most familiar narratives in both South African public discourse and feminist scholarship: the celebration of resilience. Resilience has become one of the defining moral vocabularies through which Black women's lives are narrated. Across popular discourse, institutional rhetoric, and even liberatory scholarship, Black women frequently appear as figures of extraordinary endurance whose capacity to survive is itself taken as evidence of strength. Feminist scholarship has, rightly, insisted that these histories of survival be documented and honoured. Yet, as indicated in my opening story, Maluleke has long questioned whether the language of resilience risks obscuring the structural conditions that make such resilience necessary in the first place. In the memoir, resilience remains visible but, despite appearing in the title of the book, it is never allowed to become the endpoint of interpretation.

[14] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience, xxvii.*

The opening chapters already begin with this challenge. The first two chapters are devoted to Mamayila Mabyeletela Xiviti, Maluleke's mother who died when he was only three years old, and Kokwani Nhlupheki Madzivandlela Ntavasi, the grandmother who raised him and shaped his intellectual, moral, political, and spiritual formation. The sequence matters. Before readers encounter institutional leadership, public recognition, or national significance, they encounter the relationships through which his life is formed. The memoir's practice of mutual biography is, therefore, carried forward into its politics. Achievement is approached through the ordinary lives that make achievement imaginable.

The chapter on Mamayila provides the memoir's first sustained and, in many ways, haunting reflection on resilience. She is remembered through stories told by others, through family recollection, and through an imaginative reconstruction that openly acknowledges the limits of what can be known. Maluleke invites readers into a journey he himself could never have witnessed: a young mother accompanying her husband to the bus stop before he returns to Johannesburg to resume migrant labour. She is already unwell, perhaps more seriously than either she or those around her appreciate, yet she insists on making the journey with him. The journey is narrated with remarkable sensory precision: the thick forest, the Ketlani stream, the choir of frogs and toads, the landmark fig tree, the Mambedi river, the red-dust road, the banana and orange plantations. The landscape is described in such extraordinary ways that it draws readers into the journey itself. Reading these pages, I was reminded of the immersive visual world of the movie *Avatar*, where the landscape is so graphically rendered that one feels drawn, almost bodily, into it. Maluleke's description creates a similar three-dimensional experience. I could almost hear "the choir of frogs and toads" and felt I was walking alongside Mamayila on the red-dust path. The result, for me as a reader, is, therefore, a powerful intimacy with a woman whom the author himself scarcely knew! Such is Tinyiko Maluleke's gift as a writer. Yet the power of the scene is that the same prose that evokes forests and frogs also reveals a world structured by migrant labour, rural poverty, and the gendered obligations imposed upon women within patriarchal marriage.

As the chapter unfolds, the beauty of the landscape and the brutality of the social order are cunningly juxtaposed. The walk to the bus stop gathers

emotional weight as every detail of the journey is embedded within the political economy of apartheid South Africa. The force of this movement reaches its climax in a passage that, I suggest, stands at the centre of any feminist theological reading of the memoir:

> In those days young black women like her were spoilt for choice when it came to ways of dying – difficult pregnancy, childbirth, physical labour, hunger, heartache, hopelessness and domestic violence, amongst many other possibilities. Many women died from waiting…[15]

The phrase, "spoilt for choice", is devastating precisely because it appropriates the language of abundance to describe a landscape of deprivation and death. Within ordinary usage, "choice" evokes possibility, freedom, and agency. Here, it names the proliferation of conditions through which Black women were exposed to premature death. The irony is heartbreaking. Pregnancy, childbirth, physical labour, hunger, heartache, domestic violence, and the endless labour of waiting emerge as historically produced conditions rather than isolated misfortunes. They constitute what might be described as the ordinary architecture of gendered disposability. The most striking part of the chapter is the account of Mamayila's return journey that, ultimately, becomes the journey on which she dies. Having accompanied her husband to the bus stop, she begins the walk home alone. She pauses to rest several times along the way but continues, Maluleke imagines, "if only for the sake of the infant", her fourth child whom she had left with her mother-in-law. Eventually, her strength fails her near the Malumbe fig tree.

What is significant, however, is not only the event itself but the way Maluleke narrates it. At only three years old when his mother died, he has no memory of the journey. The account is, therefore, reconstructed from family stories and personal imagination. Yet rather than using his imagination to manufacture certainty, Maluleke repeatedly foregrounds the limits of what can be known. "We will never know" whether his mother collapsed suddenly or slowly lowered herself to the ground. "We will never know" whether she called for her mother, her husband, or her children. The repetition is significant. It acknowledges the incompleteness of the archive available to

[15] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience, 6.*

him while resisting the temptation to fill every silence of women's stories with narrative certainty.

Interestingly, despite the circumstances of Mamayila's final moments being uncertain, the consequences of her absence are narrated with remarkable certainty. Maluleke may not know what his mother's final thoughts were, but he knows precisely what her absence came to mean across the decades that followed:

> Sometimes I am angry at her for chickening out. I weep for the children she left to grow up motherlessly and rudderlessly. At other times, I rue the formative memories I missed out on with her. I cry for the grandchildren she never cuddled, and the great-grandchildren whose cheeks she never kissed. I lament her absence in my doctoral graduation. I am sad that she missed my investiture as Vice-Chancellor and Principal.[16]

Yet the story of absence is simultaneously a story of presence. If Mamayila's death created a void that could never be filled, the memoir is equally clear about the woman who stepped into that void. The next chapter introduces Madzivandlela N'wati Nhlupheki Maswanganyi, the grandmother who raised Maluleke after his mother's death. Where Mamayila is reconstructed through fragments and imagination, Grandma Nhlupheki appears everywhere: in food, discipline, ritual, education, protection and humour. Maluleke writes that she became "the most resilient, the most constant, most consistent and most reliable presence" in his life. With no tangible memory of his own mother, she became "the only perceptible evidence" that he "did really have a mother, once upon a very short time".[17]

Read through feminist theological lenses, three aspects of the accounts of Mother and Grandma are especially significant. First, the chapter refuses the theological tendency to romanticise women's suffering. Feminist theologians have long noted how Christian traditions have often presented suffering as women's divinely ordained burden. As Aruna Gnanadason observes, women are taught by patriarchal religious systems that "Christ died for you

16 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience, 8.*
17 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience, 9.*

on the Cross, can you not bear some suffering too?'[18] and are, consequently, left asking whether the sacrifice and suffering demanded of them has a purpose. The problem is the ways in which suffering becomes normalised, spiritualised, and even valorised as part of women's moral and religious vocation. Mamayila's story resists such a reading. Her death is not presented as redemptive.

Second, the chapter resists another form of violence: the presumption that one can fully know and speak for women's suffering. Feminist scholars have long warned against interpretive practices that overwrite women's experiences with explanations generated by others. What is striking about Maluleke's account is his refusal to convert uncertainty into narrative authority. Instead, he repeatedly insists, "We will never know". In doing so, he models an intellectual humility that stands in sharp contrast to traditions that too readily explain women's pain on their behalf. His refusal recalls Rupi Kaur's poetic observation:

> our backs
> tell stories
> no books
> have the spine
> to carry[19]

The point is not that women's experiences are unknowable, but that some dimensions of suffering exceed the narratives imposed upon them. The memoir acknowledges this limit rather than attempt to overcome it. However, the memoir does not leave us only with what cannot be known. Grandma Nhlupheki's story is marked by epistemic abundance. Through stories, rituals, practical wisdom, humour, discipline, and care, she becomes a bearer of knowledge in her own right. The memoir, therefore, refuses two extremes simultaneously: the presumption that everything can be known about women's lives and the assumption that women without formal education possess no knowledge worth transmitting, an aspect I shall explore in the last section of this essay.

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18 Aruna Gnanadason, "'We Have Spoken So Long O God: When Will We Be Heard?' Theological Reflections on Overcoming Violence against Women," *Theology & Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2006): 6.

19 Rupi Kaur, "Women of Color." *Milk and Honey* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2015), 171.

Third, these two chapters resonate strongly with the work of Delores Williams, one of the foundational figures in womanist theology. In her influential reading of the biblical figure Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian woman who is used by Abraham and Sarah to bear a child before being expelled into the wilderness with her son, Williams challenges a long theological tradition that derives meaning from women's suffering.[20] Her concern is not only that Black women suffer disproportionately, but that their suffering is frequently appropriated as a source of redemption for others. Hagar's story, Williams argues, should not be read as a lesson in noble sacrifice. Rather, it is a story about a woman struggling to preserve her own life and the life of her child under conditions not of her choosing. Williams's intervention offers an important lens through which to read Mamayila's story. One could easily construct a narrative in which her hardships acquire meaning because of what followed. After all, the young woman who died at twenty-nine left behind a son who would become a distinguished scholar, Vice-Chancellor, and one of Africa's leading public intellectuals. Such stories are culturally powerful because they reassure us that suffering ultimately serves a larger purpose. Hardship becomes the necessary precondition for future success. Yet Maluleke refuses this logic. Although he reflects movingly on the achievements his mother never witnessed, he never suggests that her suffering was justified by them. Nor does he imply that her death somehow enabled or produced his future accomplishments. The value of a woman's life cannot be retrospectively justified by what others become because of her suffering. To suggest otherwise is to convert a woman's pain into a resource for someone else's flourishing. This pattern extends beyond his mother and grandmother to the women he profiles in later chapters, which I will explore in the next section.

III. Beyond Exceptionalism: Three Feminist Lessons on Recognition

In the previous section, I argue that the memoir refuses survivalist narratives. In this section, I show that it similarly refuses exceptionalist ones. The two critiques are closely related but do not operate in the same way. Survivalist narratives invite admiration for those who endure. Exceptionalist narratives

[20] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books, 1993).

invite admiration for those who succeed despite conditions designed to prevent their flourishing. In both cases, the individual becomes the object of fascination, while the structures that produce exclusion and delayed recognition, remain insufficiently examined. This is where *Faces and Phases of Resilience* makes another important intervention. The women who populate the memoir are not assembled to form a gallery of exceptional achievement. Instead, their stories invite reflection on the uneven distribution of recognition itself. Some occupy positions of national prominence, others remain almost entirely outside official histories. Some receive awards, honorary degrees, or public office, others are remembered only within families, friendships, and local communities. In this last section of the essay, I examine three different chapters below that enter a longstanding feminist conversation about recognition as a question of justice rather than just celebration. The three chapters illuminate different dimensions of this politics of recognition, thereby providing three important feminist lessons.

Feminist Lesson One: Women's Leadership and Recognition

The first feminist lesson on recognition emerges in Chapter 11, "Phenomenal Women – Puleng LenkaBula and Tsakani Maluleke". At first glance, the chapter appears to belong to a familiar genre of celebratory writing about successful Black women leaders. Puleng LenkaBula, the first Black woman Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa, and Tsakani Maluleke, South Africa's first woman Auditor-General, are introduced as women whose appointments marked important institutional milestones. Yet the chapter quickly unsettles any reading that would reduce their stories to narratives of individual triumph. Recognition, Maluleke suggests, is too often narrated as though institutions have finally discovered extraordinary women, when the more urgent historical question concerns why women of comparable ability remained unrecognised for so long.

The point reaches its sharpest expression when he writes:

> The Puleng LenkaBulas, Tsakani Malulekes and Kamala Harrises of this world are willing, able and qualified. However, they are not the first black women capable of leading great institutions. They are among the first to *be allowed to*. For hundreds of years, many capable black women were denied the conditions, and not given the

> opportunity to lead, by the racist and patriarchal forces that blocked, crushed and often killed them.[21]

The force of this passage lies in the distinction between capability and permission. The achievement under discussion is not the sudden appearance of gifted women but the slow and uneven dismantling of institutional barriers that had long prevented their gifts from being recognised. Sara Ahmed's work provides an illuminating conversation partner at this point. In *Complaint!* she describes her project as offering "a phenomenology of the institution",[22] asking what institutions look like from the standpoint of those who encounter their procedures, resistances, and walls. Rather than taking institutions at their own word, Ahmed invites us to attend to how they are actually experienced by those whose movement through them is slowed, redirected, or blocked. Read alongside Maluleke, the question, therefore, shifts from whether institutions eventually recognised Black women to how those institutions were organised for centuries to delay such recognition.

Maluleke develops this insight further when he cautions against praising institutions for what he memorably calls their "small kindnesses":

> It is mischievous not to acknowledge and valorise the talents of exceptional black women, and choosing instead to exaggerate the significance of the small "kindnesses" of racist and patriarchal structures – whose enduring historical mission, for the past 400 years at least, has been to exclude black women. As we celebrate black female leaders, we must not bark our praises up the wrong trees. We have a responsibility to acknowledge the agency of black women in its full elegance and in its own right.[23]

The language of "small kindnesses" is devastating because the centre of gravity shifts away from the women whose labour, brilliance, and persistence made these appointments possible and towards institutions congratulating themselves for finally allowing what should never have required permission. Ahmed's analysis of "diversity work" sharpens this critique still further.

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21 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience,* 72.
22 Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021), 19.
23 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience,* 71-72.

Reflecting on institutional diversity initiatives that have become increasingly fashionable in contemporary higher education contexts, she asks a cautionary question on whether "the ease of its incorporation by institutions is a sign of the loss of its critical edge".[24] Diversity, she suggests, can become part of an institution's own story about itself rather than a challenge to the histories through which that institution was constituted. Institutions readily celebrate diversity once diversity itself becomes institutional capital. Ahmed asks us to examine the institution itself, its habits, its histories, and the ways it absorbs the language of transformation without necessarily transforming its own organisational life.

Ahmed's analysis also invites a question that Maluleke leaves open in this chapter. If Black women finally enter institutions historically organised through whiteness and patriarchy, what becomes possible? Does leadership simply reproduce inherited institutional cultures under different demographic conditions, or do Black women leaders generate different practices of authority and care? Reflecting on the appointment and promotion of Black academics, Ahmed observes that "our arrival is read as evidence of commitment, of change, of progress" while appointments themselves are readily interpreted as signs that institutions have overcome their histories of exclusion. She cautions that, "when our appointments and promotion are taken up as signs of organisational commitment to equality and diversity, we are in trouble. Any success is read as a sign of an overcoming of institutional whiteness". [25] The problem, she argues, is that institutional diversity can become a matter of appearance rather than transformation, "changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organisations".[26]

The presence of Black women in leadership may, therefore, serve as evidence that an institution has changed, while the institution itself largely continues to reproduce the norms through which it has always operated. A similar question has emerged about women's leadership within the field of feminist ecclesiology. Reflecting on her experience as one of the first generation of women ordained to priesthood in the Anglican Church of

[24] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), 1.

[25] Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009): 41.

[26] Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity," 45.

Southern Africa, Wilma Jakobsen recalls that there remained "almost an unspoken assumption that women priests would come into the structures, into the system, and that they would really be like male priests". She continues:

> I have been in countless situations where I have heard myself saying inside my head that I would do this so differently. I have sometimes felt squeezed into a mould which is not one where I can be myself as a woman.[27]

Once the struggle moves beyond access, the more searching question concerns transformation. Recognition is no longer exhausted by the appointment of women to leadership but rather, extends to whether institutions themselves begin to exercise power differently because women are there.

Feminist Lesson Two: Black Joy

Having considered how Chapter 11 interrogates the institutional politics of "firstness," I turn now to an earlier chapter that approaches recognition from a strikingly different angle. Chapter 9, "Pamela Dube – The Woman Who Followed the Yellow Brick Road to Leadership", is ostensibly a portrait of one of South Africa's distinguished university leaders. Yet what makes the chapter remarkable is that leadership occupies surprisingly little of its narrative attention. Instead, Maluleke lingers over Pamela Dube's childhood with extraordinary care, inviting readers to dwell in the ordinary worlds that nurtured her imagination long before she assumed positions of institutional authority.

The chapter certainly recounts Dube's impressive academic journey—from her upbringing in KwaMakhutha, Amanzimtoti to her eventual appointments as Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Western Cape, and Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the Central University of Technology. Yet these achievements never become the organising principle of the narrative. Rather than constructing a linear story of ambition rewarded, Maluleke turns, not to

[27] Wilma Jakobsen, "Struggling to Come Home," in *Claiming Our Footprints: South African Women Reflect on Context, Identity and Spirituality*, eds. Denise Ackermann, Eliza Getman, Hantie Kotzé and Judy Tobler (The EFSA Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research, 2000), 135.

examinations, prizes, or academic distinction, but to books. Pamela's mother enrolled her in the local book exchange where, he recalls, "the elderly lady in charge of the facility took a liking to the 'curious and cute Black girl', a frequent visitor who read voraciously".[28] He lovingly catalogues the books that accompanied her childhood—*The Secret Seven, Little Women, Oliver Twist* and *Alice in Wonderland*—before observing that throughout her life, "her best and most dependable friends were always her late parents, her sister Penelope, her daughter Azande and her mountain of books".[29]

Reading these pages, I found myself unexpectedly returning to my own childhood. Although ours unfolded in different places and under different circumstances, I immediately recognised the world that books made possible. While mine was a materially impoverished childhood, it was also one of extraordinary imaginative abundance. I devoured Enid Blyton before graduating to Nancy Drew, the poetry of Emily Dickinson, the novels of the Brontë sisters, and the worlds of Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Miriam Tlali, and other African writers. Long before feminist scholarship became my intellectual home, literature had already taught me that books could enlarge the world beyond one's immediate circumstances. It is perhaps no coincidence that I eventually majored in English and African Literature for my undergraduate degree. Reading, before it became scholarship, was already a practice of intellectual freedom. Once again, the memoir performs what I earlier described as *mutual biography*: Pamela Dube's story becomes a point of recognition through which I understand something of my own.

What interests me most, however, is not autobiographical recognition but what Maluleke's narrative makes possible for feminist scholarship. Black women's lives are too often narrated retrospectively, with childhood interpreted only as the prelude to later achievement. The child becomes interesting because she eventually becomes exceptional. Maluleke resists this logic. Pamela Dube is allowed to be curious before she is expected to be accomplished. She is permitted delight before responsibility, imagination before leadership, reading before recognition. The future Vice-Chancellor is first a child whose inner world matters. This narrative choice carries important political implications. Bettina Love's influential work as an abolitionist educator is built around a simple but radical proposition: Black

[28] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience,* 62.
[29] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience,* 62.

children deserve more than survival. In *We Want to Do More Than Survive*: *Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, she critiques educational systems that celebrate Black students for overcoming conditions that should never have existed, arguing that survival has become an impoverished measure of justice. Instead, she calls for educational spaces in which Black children can experience joy, wonder, creativity, intellectual play, and the freedom to imagine lives beyond oppression.[30] Read alongside Love, Maluleke's account of Pamela Dube's childhood acquires particular significance. The chapter refuses to value her only because she becomes an accomplished academic leader. Instead, it dwells over the imaginative conditions that made such a life possible.

Finally, I wish to suggest that this chapter also poses an important challenge for African feminist scholarship on religion. For understandable reasons, much of our work has necessarily concentrated on the intertwined realities of patriarchy, colonialism, poverty, gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, religious exclusion, and other structures that diminish women's lives. That scholarly tradition has been ethically indispensable. Yet Maluleke reminds us that justice cannot be sustained by critique alone. Feminist scholarship must become equally capable of describing the conditions under which women flourish. Curiosity, delight, friendship, reading, imagination and intellectual formation are not peripheral to liberation. Indeed, they are among its deepest expressions. If resilience names the capacity to survive an unjust world, flourishing names the conditions under which survival is no longer the highest aspiration.

Feminist Lesson Three: Invisibilised Leadership

The memoir develops its politics of recognition one step further in Chapter 13, "Dudu Mokoa – A Model of Diligence". Unlike the preceding chapters, this is neither a conventional biographical profile nor a celebration of institutional achievement. It is a memorial tribute adapted from the eulogy Maluleke delivered at Dudu Mokoa's funeral after her untimely death. The change in literary form matters because memorials do more than honour the dead; they reveal what kinds of lives a community considers worthy of public remembrance. Rather than commemorating a nationally recognised public

[30] Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Beacon Press, 2019).

figure, Maluleke remembers a woman whose life's work unfolded largely behind the scenes of university life. In doing so, he shifts the question that has animated the other chapters. If the chapters on Puleng LenkaBula, Tsakani Maluleke, and Pamela Dube ask how Black women come to be recognised as leaders, this chapter asks whose labour makes leadership possible in the first place?

The chapter opens with Dudu's interview in 2005 for the position of Personal Assistant to the Executive Director: Research at the University of South Africa. Maluleke recalls that "her charisma instantly captivated everyone present" and that the interview panel was struck by "the clarity of thought and brilliant ideas" she brought to the conversation before unanimously recommending her appointment. Yet the narrative quickly moves beyond the familiar trajectory of career advancement. Reflecting on her years at Unisa, Maluleke observes that together with a team of colleagues she "helped to construct the institutional scaffolding that has seen Unisa break into international rankings over the past decade".[31]

The metaphor deserves closer attention. Scaffolding is not the building itself. It is temporary, frequently unnoticed, and often dismantled once construction is complete. Precisely because it disappears it is rarely celebrated as an achievement in its own right. Yet without scaffolding, no building rises. Maluleke's metaphor, therefore, redirects recognition away from those who eventually occupy institutional prominence towards the organisational infrastructures that make institutional life possible. The point is that leadership is never the accomplishment of isolated individuals. Instead, it rests upon infrastructures of care and coordination that seldom receive public recognition. The same insight emerges through one of the chapter's most memorable images. Describing Dudu's later work in the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at the Tshwane University of Technology, Maluleke writes:

> if the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning was a symphony… Dudu would be that exceptional orchestra conductor with the rare ability to hear every instrument—loud and soft, big and small—

[31] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience*, 79.

> and…change the pace of song and uplift the mood of the audience and the orchestra with the slightest gesture.[32]

The conductor does not occupy centre stage. Her work consists precisely in enabling others to perform well together. This understanding of Dudu's work resonates strongly with feminist scholarship on care and recognition. Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins has long argued that Black women's labour has too often been interpreted through dominant assumptions about service, obscuring the knowledge practices embedded within that work. Rather than treating care as merely supportive or domestic, Collins demonstrates that Black women's experiences within families, communities, and institutions constitute distinctive sites of intellectual, ethical, and political knowledge production.[33] Collins makes visible what Maluleke calls Dudu's "diligence". Her contribution exceeds administrative competence and is more accurately understood as institutional care: the often invisibilised labour through which universities are maintained and the conditions for teaching, research, and leadership continually renewed.

The temptation might be to read this chapter as giving voice to someone who is "voiceless", however, Arundhati Roy famously reminds us that "there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard".[34] Dudu Mokoa was never voiceless. She exercised considerable influence over the institutions she served. What Maluleke exposes, instead, are the processes through which particular forms of labour become invisibilised. The distinction is important. Mokoa's work occupied those institutional spaces where indispensable labour is most readily overlooked precisely because it is associated with administration, coordination, care, and service, rather than public authority.

Read in this way, the chapter also returns us to the memoir's opening pages. At first glance, Dudu Mokoa and Grandma Nhlupheki appear to inhabit entirely different worlds: one a university administrator working within complex higher education institutions, the other a rural grandmother who raised an orphaned grandson after the death of his mother. Yet Maluleke

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32 Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience,* 80.

33 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

34 Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (Penguin Books, 2005), 330.

narrates them according to a remarkably similar logic of recognition. Reflecting on his grandmother, he writes that she "registered no historic firsts", would never receive a National Order or an honorary doctorate, and was "no candidate for election into any hall of fame". Nevertheless, she remained "the most resilient, the most constant, most consistent, and most reliable presence" in his life and, indeed, "the real mother".[35] Grandma Nhlupheki and Dudu Mokoa reveal a recurring grammar of recognition running through the memoir. Although separated by geography, generation and institutional location, both women inhabit what might be called the infrastructures of flourishing. Grandma Nhlupheki creates the conditions under which a bereaved child becomes a scholar, public intellectual, and university leader. Dudu Mokoa creates the institutional conditions within which universities themselves are able to teach, research, and serve society. Neither occupies the centre of public memory, yet both make other people's achievements possible. Maluleke, thus, invites readers to look beyond visible accomplishment towards the social architectures that sustain excellence. Chapter 13, in many ways, heightens the memoir's feminist politics of recognition by insisting that justice requires more than celebrating those who eventually occupy positions of leadership. By bringing Dudu Mokoa's institutional care into the centre of the narrative, Maluleke expands the archive of recognition itself.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that *Faces and Phases of Resilience*: *A Memoir of a Special Kind* has, indeed, lived up to its title of being more than a memoir. Reading the women who move through its pages has revealed a series of feminist interventions that extend well beyond the lives they narrate and constitute what I have described as mutual biography: a process by which lives become intelligible through their constitutive relationships with others. In an important sense, writing this essay has itself become an exercise in mutual biography. Reading Maluleke's memoir repeatedly drew me back into my own intellectual and personal formation: to the young scholar whose first published article he rigorously critiqued, to my own childhood, where books opened worlds far beyond the material limitations of apartheid South Africa, and to the feminist scholar of religion I have since become. His memoir, therefore, does not simply recount relationships. It creates them.

[35] Maluleke, *Faces and Phases of Resilience*, 13-14.

The memoir ends, however, with a striking change in register. The final chapter, "The Day I Die", abandons celebration for warning. Maluleke imagines his own death, not as an inevitable consequence of ageing or illness, but at the hands of xenophobic violence because he is mistaken for a foreign African. Drawn from an opinion-editorial he first published in 2010, the chapter is profoundly unsettling as it reminds readers that the solidarities painstakingly cultivated throughout the memoir remain fragile. The relational ethic that has animated the book from its opening pages is confronted by the destructive politics of fear, ethnic chauvinism, and exclusion. Mutual biography reaches its final limit in mortality itself, asking who will remain within the circle of our moral concern when belonging becomes contested.

As I complete this essay a few days after 30 June 2026, when anti-migrant protests rocked South Africa, that warning feels disturbingly immediate. South Africa has once again witnessed anti-migrant mobilisation, through the March and March movement led by a woman named Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma, alongside renewed public demands for the exclusion of "undocumented" African migrants from the national community. Read in this context, Maluleke's closing chapter no longer appears as literary imagination alone. It reads as a prophetic caution against the ease with which societies construct new outsiders and new enemies. The current moment also reminds us of something else: Feminist scholarship has never argued that representation, by itself, is sufficient. The presence of women in positions of leadership does not necessarily produce more just institutions or more humane politics. Women, too, can reproduce xenophobia, nationalism, racism, and patriarchal forms of power. The ethical question, therefore, is never simply *who* leads but *how* leadership is exercised. Maluleke's memoir repeatedly refuses symbolic victories detached from structural justice. His celebration of remarkable women is never uncritical hero-worship. It remains grounded in a deeper commitment to dignity and accountability.

That, ultimately, is the enduring significance of *Faces and Phases of Resilience*. It invites us, not merely to admire lives well lived, but to become answerable to them. Mutual biography is, therefore, more than a literary form or a methodological innovation. It is an ethical practice. It asks us to recognise that our lives are always implicated in the lives of others and that

the measure of our scholarship lies, not only in whom we remember, but in the kinds of worlds our remembering makes possible.

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