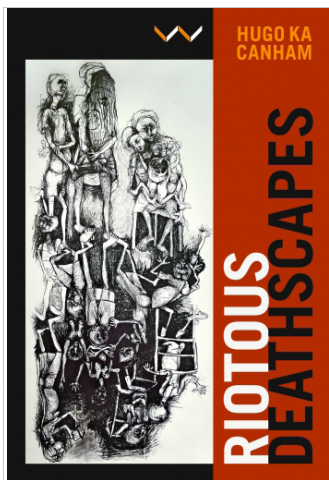


Critical Narrative, Storytelling, and Black Psychosocial Analysis of Mpondoland

A review of Hugo Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes*



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The book 'Riotous Deathscapes' by Hugo Ka Canham proposes Mpondo Theory as both a black and indigenous way of understanding life and death. Canham writes with a deep sense of emotion. These are emotions that reveal the author's deep connections with Mpondoland. One is not surprised by this, seeing how the author has previously written on subjects such as protest and black rage in prior works (see Canham, 2017, 2018; 2024).

In essence, the theoretical and methodological approaches this book embodies qualify it as a protest text; one that is written with a deep sense of rage and all other indiscernible emotions. Canham steps into history, the present and the future, through the Mpondo heuristic as an intervention that can enable a deeper understanding of the Mpondoland people's resilience and survival. The book offers a gateway into alternative yet creative ways of thinking and writing, from a community existing at the margins of not only South Africa but the world. In this marginalised community, the natural world is considered a site of being and of resistance, yet also offering a place for the living and the ancestors to connect.

Canham's book is a firm contribution to black studies. In the book's introduction titled 'Mpondo Orientations', Canham provides an account of their connections with Mpondoland. Here, an account of the dire living circumstances from disease, alcoholism, crime, unemployment and poor infrastructure is highlighted. A personal recollection of how Canham's brother was involved in a car accident that led to amputation was, for the author, a moment of Kaffirization; that moment when the doctor places a plaster instead of suturing a vein (Canham, 2023). The author describes this moment as an instance demonstrating how rural life can be so cheap, 'it goes to the hospital to die' (p. 3). Captured in 'Mpondo Orientations' are events such as multiple dyings, among a defiant group of people who exist within temporalities that rub against colonial time. Canham writes with sophistication but remembers to bring everything home. Mpondo theory is described in this introduction as 'A way of seeing, knowing, being, and living with and against sedimented devastation' (Canham, 2023, p. 6). It involves intentionally looking backwards, presently and ahead.

In the first chapter, named 'Watchful Ocean Observer,' Canham interprets the ocean and mountain landscapes of Mpondoland as vibrant accounts of black, indigenous, and castaway histories. Employing the approach of looking askance at surfaces to reveal overlooked narratives, he explores how Mpondo identity arises from intricate relational connections among San and Khoekhoe forebears,

Bantu communities, enslaved Africans and Asians, as well as European shipwreck survivors. By exploring family history, oral traditions, and the interpretation of landscapes, he illustrates that the concept of blackness in Mpondoland is fluid, interconnected, and influenced by centuries of living together, escaping, integrating, and resisting. This chapter questions strict racial classifications, critiques colonial stories of purity and disappearance, and reinterprets the shipwrecks along the Wild Coast as spaces for interaction, shared change, and different ways of existing as human beings. In the end, Canham reintroduces Mpondo theory, this time as a framework for contemplating identity through connections, environment, and ancestral influence, providing a decolonial basis for comprehending African existence beyond the confines of colonial time and racial rigidity.

This idea reverberates into the next chapter. In 'Fortifying Rivers,' Canham explores the concept of Mpondo theory by utilising the imagery of the river, illustrating how water, ritual, and the body serve as avenues of resistance, memory, and strength against the forces of colonial and neoliberal oppression. Canham intricately connects three significant occurrences: the sinking of the SS Mendi, the prophetic journey and state oppression of Nontetha Nkwenkwe, and the Mpondo Revolt of 1960, to demonstrate how communities navigate trauma through ancestral cleansing rituals, collective resistance, and a worldview where the physical, spiritual, and ecological realms are intertwined. By engaging in a critical examination, the chapter reinterprets rivers and oceans as repositories of Black mortality and resilience, conceptualises fortification rituals as physical expressions of political action, and emphasises a queer interconnectedness that disrupts colonial temporality, conventional identities, and capitalist constructions of reality. Ultimately, the chapter contends that the life-making practices of the Mpondo, encompassing ritual, revolt, memory, and cosmology, represent a profound method of opposing Kaffirization and envisioning Black freedom throughout history.

Chapter 3, titled 'Riotous Spirits-Ukuphuka Izizwe', delves into Izizwe, which are ancestral family spirits the author considers pivotal in the formation of identity, the process of healing, and the preservation of continuity in Mpondo culture. Canham illustrates how these entities ascend during pivotal life events, leading individuals towards knowledge, compassion, and a sense of ritual connection. The chapter weaves together narratives of family migrations, illness, dreams, and a calling to spiritual work, showcasing how communities enliven daily existence, challenge colonial definitions of religion and psychology, and connect individuals to a vibrant lineage that transcends generations, landscapes, and physical forms.

In chapter 4 titled 'Levitating Graves and Ancestral Frequencies,' Canham delves into the ancestral aspect of Mpondo theory, illustrating how the Mpondo community perceives death as a source of life, connection, and enduring presence rather than mere absence. Employing a frequential, multisensory approach, Canham interprets Mpondo graves through sonic, visual, and haptic vibrations to explore how the deceased continue to influence black existence, memory, and social connections. By focusing on these nuanced frequencies instead of overarching stories, the chapter uncovers how Mpondo's deathscapes resonate with ancestral energy and shed light on histories of violence, continuity, and potential. This emphasis on the continuity between life and death among the Mpondo is an important rehashing of the meaning of life and death in black studies.

Chapter 4 is titled 'Rioting Hills and Occult Insurrections.' This chapter focuses on the hill as a significant ancestral and political location within Mpondo theory. The chapter explores how Mpondo communities engage in survivance, a manifestation of Black Indigenous existence that defies erasure amidst death, neoliberal violence, and historical dispossession. Through ukwakumkanya, Canham interprets occult practices, cannibalism, vampire narratives, and the violence of everyday markets not as signs of collapse, but as intricate strategies for survival, resilience, and liberation in the face of economic marginalisation and the harsh realities imposed on Black existence. Ultimately, the chapter uncovers how the Mpondo community manoeuvres through the ongoing interplay of life

and death, employing ancestral wisdom and unconventional methods of consumption to affirm their existence in a world designed to erase them.

In 'Future Dreamscapes: An Afterword,' Canham emphasises how the book is not in the past, but in the now. The afterword is a coming home of sorts. Canham reflects on their grandmother's dementia and how it represents a longing for her childhood home, one she has not revisited for at least 70 years. Here, Canham leaves us with a provocation. One described in the following words: "Tonight, she [my mother] will not sleep. Grief will wrack her body, pinning her to the floor. Accompanied by the wind's Mpondo blues, I lay awake and before me spreads a vast deathscape of ancestors who demand witnessing' (Canham, 2023, p. 211). Overall, Canham's book is a critical mix of narrative, storytelling and black psychosocial analysis of his roots in Mpondoland, and how, in black being, exists a productive pro-black way of developing theory. In Canham's case, that theory is the Mpondo theory.

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