

Child, You Are Death, You Are Dead, You have Died

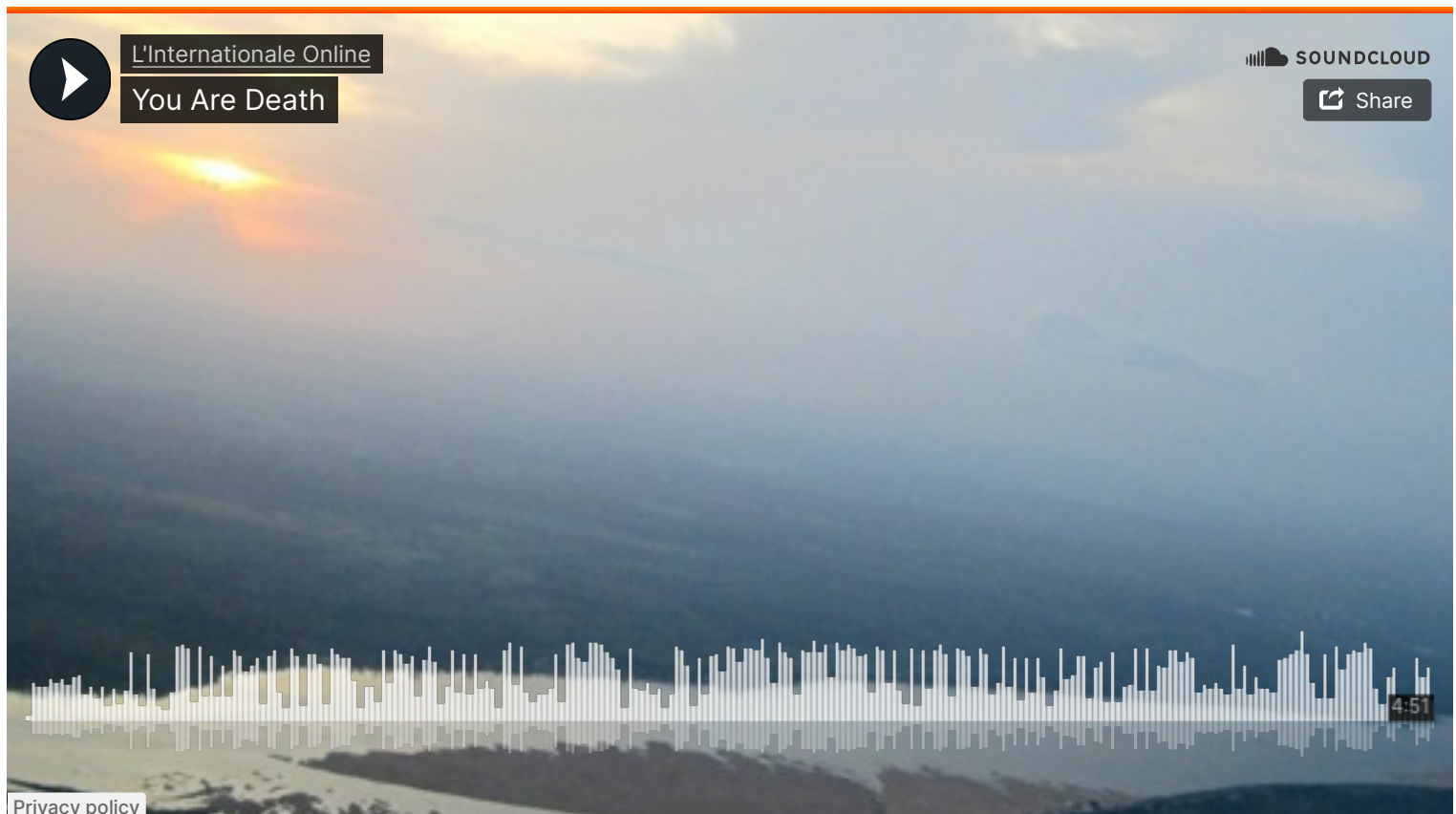
Part of [what about support and what about struggle](#)

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Poetic Response

When the water crisis hit my hometown (Qwaqwa) few years ago. It was presumed that it was and still is not a natural disaster but a political act. The water that sprang in our back yards, and wells of water that have been abandoned and neglected have led to the existing and pressing drought that saw a young girl drowning in one of the dams while fetching water with her brother.



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1. because another tropical storm is looming

because the levees that protect New Orleans from floods are weak

because of his failure to step in

because of a dispute over where to install them

because FEMA regulations prohibit them from being installed in flood-prone coastal areas

because most of the victims were black

because of the war in Iraq

because many of the victims were poor and black

because the Hurricane Center says at least another twenty minutes before we call where the eye made landfall

because the winds come up this way over this way and then down this way

because, in fact, the wind is actually blowing offshore

because the lights went out in this block

because you're, obviously, potentially in harm's way there

because we're not here to play around in the wind and then take cover

because the water was so deep already, flooding so immense at this point, that it was too unsafe to keep driving

because of that

because there is just busloads of people

because, of course, that's not really the priority

because I guess that's the real problem, isn't it?

because it's a point of contention when the eye makes landfall

because that's when you know

that if you look outside, you can actually see stars or see the sun rise through the eye

because the power is out

because it is, after all, built below sea level

because now it looks like we're going to be in the most dangerous part of the storm

because clearly he doesn't have a radar there that he can see

because thousands and thousands of people there affected, thousands, ten thousand maybe

because it started to rain

because, of course, the Superdome can fit many tens of thousands of people

because they were concerned—and still are, of course—about flooding

because there's the eye itself moving right over Empire

because right near here is the only phone in the house that is a land line

because we have focused a lot of our attention on New Orleans, because of great concern about the number of people there and the fact that it is so low-lying

because the sun was shining outside, but they were not allowed to go home

because it reveals clearly the complete fraud of the "war on terrorism"

because the entire purpose of the "war on terrorism" has not been to respond to a disaster, natural or otherwise

because a new owner would have to pay substantially higher flood insurance rates

because the new data assumes that repaired levees will not break

because of the area's important oil and natural gas infrastructure and fisheries

Backdrop: The tragic death of a young eight-year-old girl – Modisa Mbhele – in QwaQwa has led to violent protests in the eastern Free State town (South Africa), and the arrest of over 30 people. Modisa's death was being blamed on the water crisis in the area.

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The aim of the below poem was to weave two poetic narratives together like how rain threads of Modisa's childhood gurgled in the joyful laughter of the gutters of her life was cut short... only to multiply and resonate in a consort which avoided monotony but was joined together by poetic delicacy of two poets.

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You Are Death, You Are Dead, You have Died

Child, you are death- you are dead, You have died

Your name was borrowed
From your grandmother's clan names
Curled up around the tongue of your mother
That sings loud

diboko-seboko
puo-dipuo
pina-dipina

To grow
In the garden of her eyes

peo-popelong

To glow
Like the orange of everything in her sky

hodimo-mahodimo

To flow
Not as her landscape
But as a peeping sun-
Through her clouds

sehla-tshehlana
tsatsie-letsatsing

Child, you are death- you are dead, You have died

Your path

because we'll have people dying

because of water coming up

because we can't get them medical treatment in our affected counties

because he ignored the risks of global warming

because he diverted funds and manpower to Iraq

because his unfair tax policies inflicted on the poor and vulnerable no other choice

because of a combination of factors that had not been anticipated

because of the inherent weakness of the soils behind it and pushed into the adjoining neighborhood

because tens of thousands of mostly African-American voters displaced by the storm have not yet come home

because I have to keep up now with where everybody, where they are now

because they didn't trust voting early or absentee

because of flooding

because of damage or flooding

because so much is really at stake in all of this because my heart was just failing

because it's exactly what you want

because I've got to go home

because of security concerns

because of the storm

(Excerpt from Francis Lo, *A Series of Un/Natural/ Disasters*, Commune editions, 2016, page 9-12.)

Marked with curves,
Cliffs and hills around her waist

tsela-tseleng
letheka-thekeng
Lefika- Mafika

Is a reminder
To come home alive, always

But then, you are death- you are dead, you have died

lefu-leholo-ke-ditshego

Like a shadow of a pebble that drowned
Not in her womb

peo-popelong

But over the over flooding river of her being

Your people will no longer
Soil themselves out of you

Modimo-Badimo

For you are death- you are dead, you have died

lefu-leholo-ke-ditshego

Your grandmother
Will no longer drink your mounting tears

dikgapha-tse-kgapatsehang
Mmé motswadi- kgapukgapu

Your Mother
Will never clean fear off
the walls of your face

fahla- sefahleho

Nor wipe the landmarks of grief
On your body

mmele-pelo-le-moya

Child, you no longer sing your screams
Or have your girlish voice pierce through river-banks

melapo le melatswana
dinoka-le-dinkwana

Your lungs can no longer
Carry waters that dripped between your fingers

fahla-sefahleho

Your spirit swam and swam
...leaped through political crack
To sink your soul
To wet your childhood
To well up like a storm growing inside you

didiba-le-madiboho
lefu-leholo-ke-ditsheho
furalletse- satalletse
didiba-le-madiboho little house

Now in our garden
Your grave lies

melapong-le-mafikeng
lefu-leholo-ke-ditsheho

Everything is damp with sorrow

Child, you are death- you are dead, you have died

lefu-leholo-ke-ditsheho

While our silence ate into the wind

Who... who survives drowning?

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How There Was so Much Water ²

2. how there was so much water. how things need water to survive. how to be human. human bodies are made of water. how to find the line. how can there be too much of a good thing.

hyponatremia. the imbalance of water to salt in the body. how overwatering can be more hazardous than going without. how water enters the lungs and prevents the absorption of oxygen.

houses filled with water.

how struggle is replaced by co-

So based on Lo's poem on page 19–20 I re-created a strong juxtaposition questions using Basotho/ Batswana/ Bapedi childhood games... linked to rain.

operation. how to be human.

how there is a difference between refugee and evacuee. how one is marked as an other. how to be human.

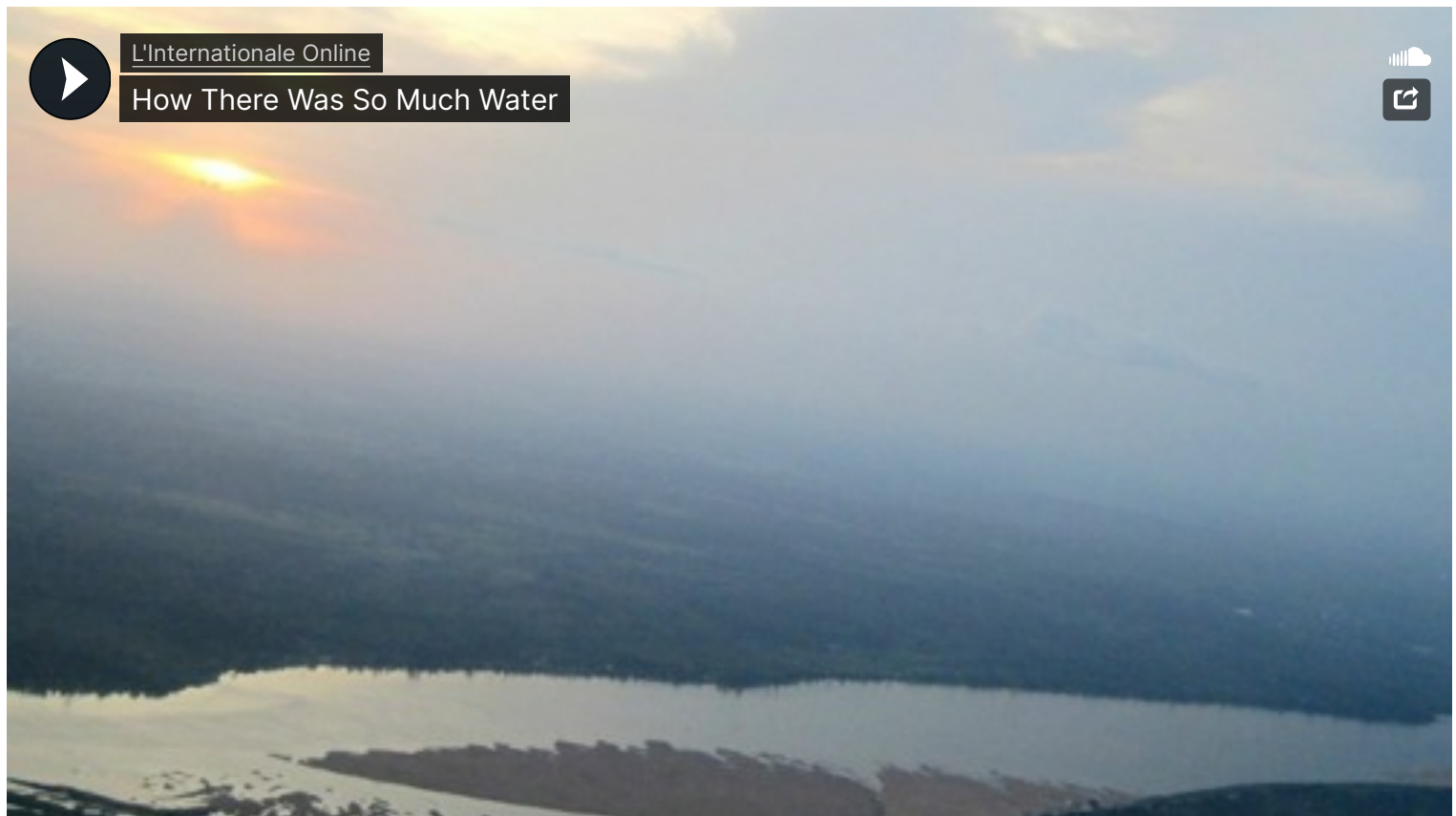
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how nature is layered on the manmade.

or how man interferes with nature and fails. something about lines and boundaries and naming. something about the ugly being beautiful.

how what's dirty is actually crystal clear.

(Excerpt from Francis Lo, *A Series of Un/Natural/ Disasters*, Commune editions, 2016, page 19–20.)



Diketo

Pula tsa lehlohono
Ha di na ka medupi
Hohle e le diphororo
Le'na he o nkgopole
O jesu' mong'aka

O se ntebale le'na

Growing up in the mountains We used to play “diketo” Out of mined holes... dug up by our little brown fingers Across our backyards With the most amazing views of hills, and cliffs Two players would gather around the circled-hole That was housing twelve pebbles

Oho so mphete mon'ghadi
Bona, ke omeletse!
Rothisetsa marotho
Le'na o nkolobise
O jesu' mong'aka
O se ntebale le'na

One player out of two Will throw a hand-full of stones up into the air Then try to grab as many pebbles inside the hole Before catching that one stone from the air With the same hand... If player one doesn't catch the stone from the air quickly It means they would have failed to cup-off any pebbles From the mined hole So the next player takes over... it is their turn To capture as many pebbles... to win the game...

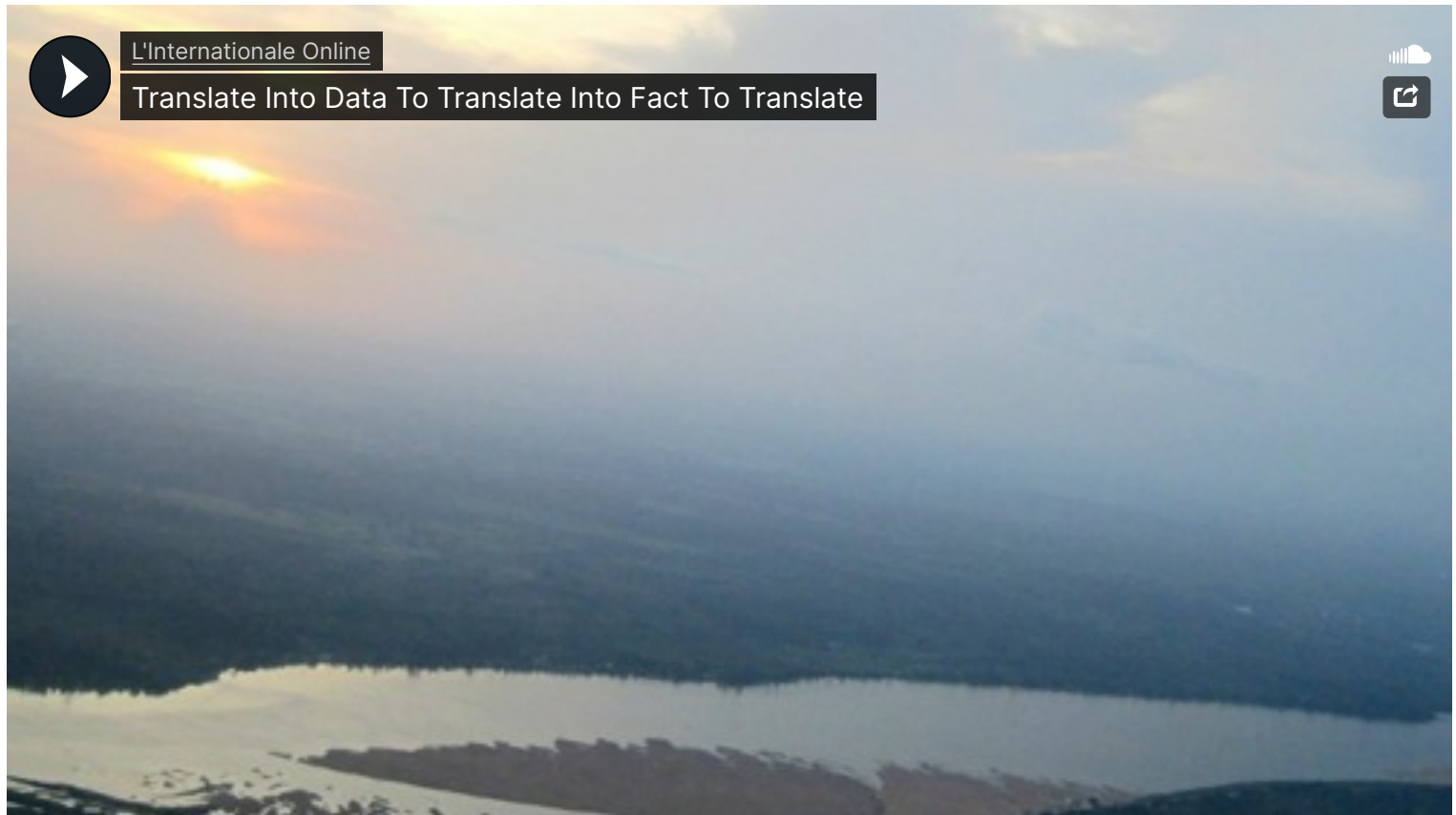
Moloki waka lerato
Ke khomaretse wena
Ha o fa ba bang ha kaalo,
Mphe hanyenyane le'na
O jesu' mong'aka
O se ntebale le'na

Through loss/ grief/ disaster Many of us have been trying to play “diketo” With words... for our friends Who have lost love ones Through un/natural disasters We have been trying to – play- as co-mourner- comforter- co-healers We have been trying to dance with 12 pebbles inside a hole To ease- to sooth – to play – to catch the one from the air So that none of us can drown in our own tears- fears

O jesu' mong'aka
O se ntebale le'na
O jesu' mong'aka
O se ntebale le'na

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This poem presents a dialogue between two poets as they translate history/herstory/ their-story into data.



Translate Into Data to Translate Into Fact to Translate ³

1652

First Disaster... white butter flies came across the sea to eat our lands... Jan van Riebeeck the first colonist... set up a Dutch supply station by the Cape shores in 1652

1838

Abolishment of slavery engulfed in diamonds and gold sparked Anglo-Boer War in 1838

1909

The Union of South African without native South Africans... proclaimed by white dominion over majority of black people in 1909

1912

Black civil rights movement: South African Native National Congress is formed in 1912

1935 Social Security Act

1913

The Native Land Act (black people... black bodies... black voices cannot and will not own their own land) as of 1913

3. TRANSLATE INTO DATA TO TRANSLATE INTO FACT TO TRANSLATE

1935 Social Security Act

1938 Fair Labor Act

1946 National School Lunch Act

1960 Aid to Families with Dependent Children

1961 Food Stamps

1964 Economic Opportunity Act

1965 Housing and Urban Development Act

1966 Child Nutrition Act

1972 Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

1982 Job Training Partnership Act

1984 Truth in Sentencing

1984 Comprehensive Crime Control Act

1948

The birth of Apartheid, and white privilege in 1948

1946 National School Lunch Act

1952

Defiance Campaign: we carried you on our backs... you sucked milk from our breasts... how can we the ones who have raised you ask you for permission to walk on our lands 1952

Then 20 000 Mothers/ Sisters/ Daughters/ Women's... march against pass laws in 1956

1960

69 Sharpsville massacre... 69 demonstrators killed, 69 black people... black bodies... black voices... flooded by bullets and drowned in their own blood... in 1960

1960 Aid to Families with Dependent Children

1961 Food Stamps

1964 Economic Opportunity Act

1965 Housing and Urban Development Act

1966 Child Nutrition Act

1972 Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

1978

Steve Bantu Biko killed... 1978 after he said... "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed"-

1976

Solitary whistle of guns killed 600 students... 600 Solitary wailing of tears fell ... 600 school children's screamed ... in 1976 Youth Upraising

1982 Job Training Partnership Act

1984 Truth in Sentencing

1984 Comprehensive Crime Control Act

**1988 Office of National Drug Control Policy*

1992

Nelson Mandela released after 27 years in prison. We were sold out... in 1992

The dawn... the rise...the beginning of democracy. FREEDOM!!! in 1994

1994 Three Strikes Law in California

1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act

1998 Workforce Investment Act

2005- #FeesMustFall

What we felt scattered in the air - Betrayal. Fees- Must- Fall!

... Still there is no free education for a black child and its 2005

2012

Black people... black bodies... black voices... against... xenophobia/ afro-phobia/
corruption... black people... black bodies... black voices ... fought for crumbs of
bread... black people... black bodies... black voices have turned into dog-eat-dog...
“we will be killing each other today!” Marikana!!! That is in 2012

2013/2014/2015/2016/2017/2018/2019. Black women in South Africa have mastered
collecting bricks that build sisterhood of friendship on the foundation of trauma...

2020 *un/natural disaster* South Africa has been declared the kingdom of femicide

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So What About the Instinct to Survive ⁴

*Here I explored with what Lo's poem can be when said in both English and Sesotho.
Almost like the meeting of two languages through poetry.*

*“... so what about birds and burying beetles. so what about support and what about
struggle. so what about ants and bees and termites. so what about the field upon
which tender feelings develop even amidst otherwise most cruel animals. so what
about migration. breeding. autumn. so what about the numberless lakes of the
russian and siberian steppes and what about aquatic birds, all living in perfect
peace...”*

*“... Joale ho thoe'ng ka linonyana le ho pata maleshoane. joale ho thoe'ng ka
ts'ehetso mme ho thoe'ng ka ntoa. ho thoe'ng ka bohloa le linotsi le bohloa. ho
thoe'ng ka lebala leo maikutlo a bonolo a holang har'a liphoofole tse sehlōhō ka ho
fetesisa. joale ho thoe'ng ka ho falla. ho tsoala. hoetla. joale ho thoe'ng ka mats'a a se
nang palo a masabasaba a Russia le a Siberia 'me ho thoe'ng ka linonyana tsa
metsing, kaofela ha tsona li phela ka khotso e phethahetseng...”*

Backdrop: The **Modjadjis'**, or **Rain Queens**, are the hereditary queens of the
Balobedu, a people of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Their ability to make
rain are believed to be reflected in the lush garden which surrounds her royal
compound. Surrounded by parched land, her garden contains the world's largest cy-
cad trees which are in abundance under a spectacular rain belt. The succession to
the position of Rain Queen is matrilineal, so her eldest daughter is the heir, and
males are not entitled to inherit the throne at all. The Rain Queen is believed to have
special powers, including the ability to control the clouds and rainfall. The Rain
Queen is not supposed to marry, but has many "wives".

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4. so what about the instinct to
survive.

so what about birds and burying
beetles.

so what about support and what
about struggle.

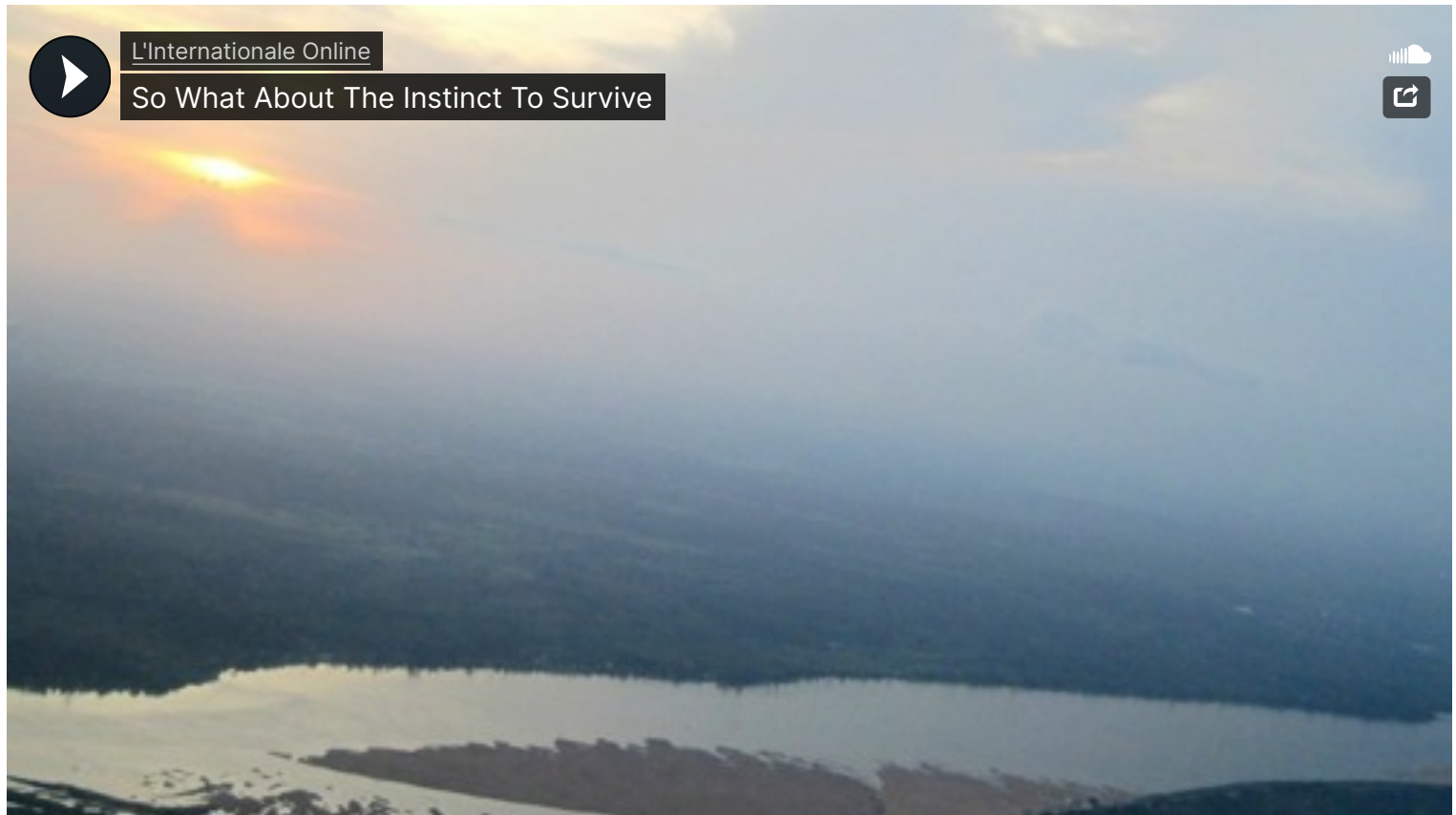
so what about ants and bees and
termites.

so what about the field upon
which tender feelings develop
even amidst otherwise most
cruel animals.

so what about migration. breed-
ing. autumn.

so what about the numberless
lakes of the russian and siberian
steppes and what about aquatic
birds, all living in perfect peace—

(Excerpt from Francis Lo, *A
Series of Un/Natural/ Disasters*,
Commune editions, 2016, page
38.)



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More so below I looked at the above poem from Lo and used it to compose a praise poem inspired by the narrative of the lineage of the Rain Queens, who were believed to have mystical rain making powers. Probably the response below was to merge two worlds on the landscape of African cultural roots.

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Rain

comes down as a delicate worn-out curtain,
a relentless but relatively slow descent
of quite small diamonds drops.
some look the size of corn;
others are like pieces of glowing stones,
or marbles hanging down in convex loops,
or smashed pieces of mirror balls.

these sky tears flow, overflow - flood, floods
with intention on the hand, sand, land
almost hitting, biting, flirting, dallying with the ground,
with vision, conviction, addiction, obsession

if anything, *Rain* when it breaks
and scatter...
scatter and breaks
like glittering, blistering, shooting, shelling needles.

if anything, when it comes,
Rain falls on every house,
not some or others, but all.

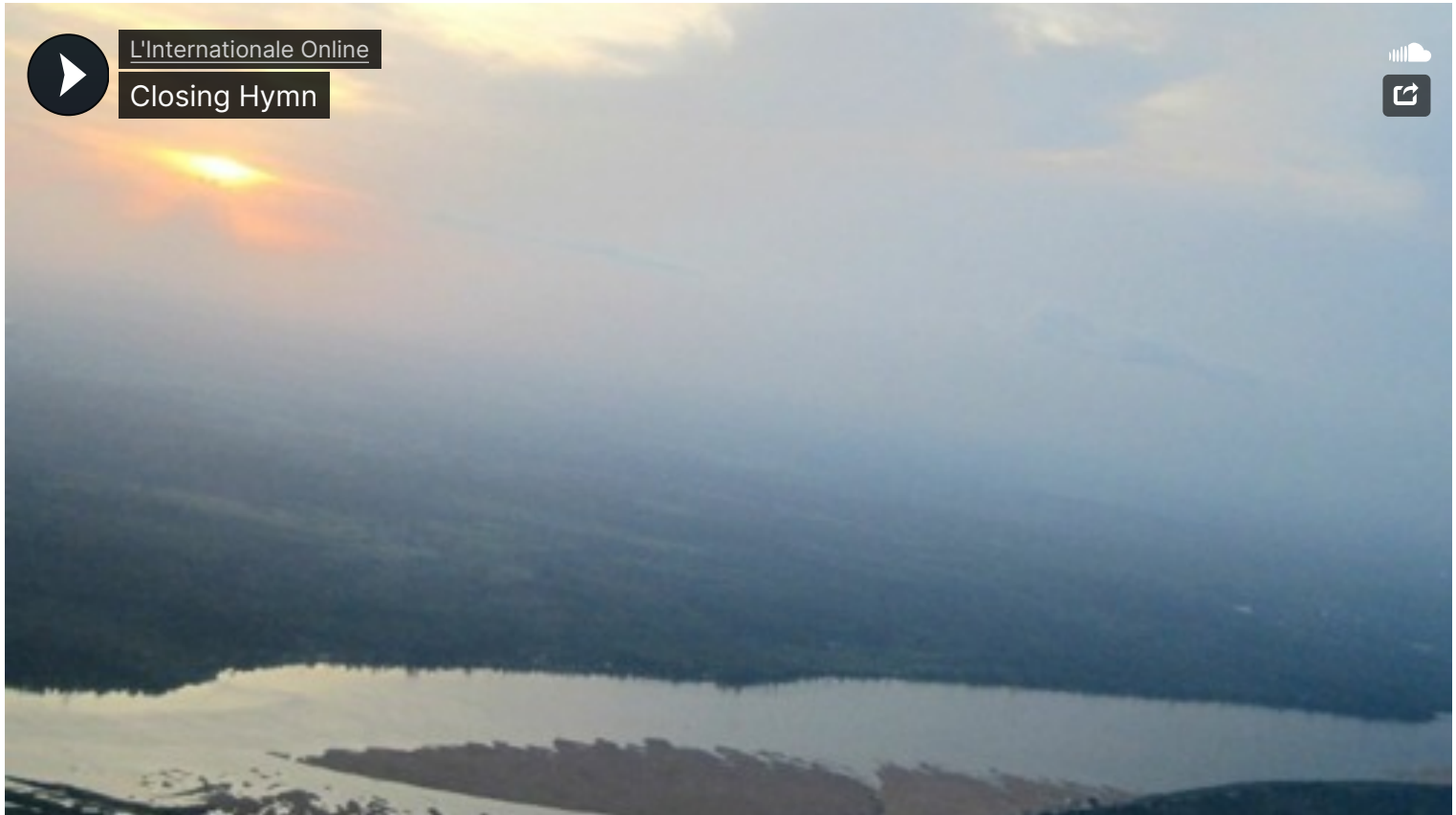
If anything, *Rain* when it lands
a lament
too hard to tame
too hard... to name
is a blessing and a curse
a curse and a blessing.
a natural un/natural water dance.

... *Rain* plants its self in the ground,
meets seeds that feeds all.
at times its drops grow,
and flow, overflow - flood, floods
then falls on human walls,
to drown us... all in our own blood.

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Translator's note by Napo Masheane

*Oratures in Africa allow us to borrow from each other's poetic voices, styles, forms, and themes in their translations and interpretations. Part of each oratures' story, which is how I refer to myself and Lo's work, is that if we don't write ourselves into history... herstory and/or any-story, we won't remember our past and capture our urgent present experiences. This for me is the premise that connected my theatrics, poetics and narratives with Lo's poetic anthology, *A Series of Un/Natural Disasters*, which looked into social ills and issues, for instance in their poem; *Because Another Tropical Storm is Looming* - pg 9–12, which birthed out of me... *You Are Death, You Are Dead, You have Died*. A poem inspired by the tragic death of an eight-year-old girl – Modisa Mbhele – in QwaQwa, blamed on water crisis in the area, that led to violent protests in the eastern Free State town (South Africa), and the arrest of over 30 people.*

*Furthermore, there was Lo's poem... *Poor Marks for His Handling of Federal Response* – pg 28–34, that presented its self as a rhetorical statement, "poor people were evacuated by gun point". Here, the departing point inspiration was to compose a poem made out of the weaved-up childhood Basotho games, that are often shared through various translations across Southern Africa by number of ethnic groups to call-on or celebrate rain. I also explored with Lo's... *How There Was So Much Water* – pg 19–20, that became the principle dialogue between two poems asking more*

questions: What fascinates me with the choices the poet made was the way in which they used punctuation marks, where a rhetorical question ends with a full stop.

Fascinated by a saying in an African culture that amplifies that: “He- She- They... That Control History- Herstory... Control the Narrative,” I subsequently found that... Translate into Data to Translate into Fact to Translate – pg 48, by Lo again capturing historic/herstoric data, and translating it into time through a collective translation. I trialed with both of our data collection through slavery, apartheid, migration, civil wars, genocides, un/natural disasters and femicide, that closely knead into transverse ethnic similarities; between our two countries. While the last poem: Rain... speaks to the narrative of the lineage of the Rain Queens, who were (are) believed to have mystical rain making powers. But how the very same legacy of making rain can flood and drown feminine existence of its power. This drawn inspiration was a rendition from Lo’s poem... So What About the Instinct to Survive – pg 38, which stands as a juxtaposition of what two poetic voices can poetically achieve through commonalities that are in synch with the questions they have.

My overview of Lo’s artistic-poetic voice as an orature... allows any reader to engage with timeless questions such as; how far do we picture an un/natural disaster as natural or as another political act that vomits on those who are underprivileged? Lo’s tone as an orature challenges supremacy that is engulfed in some particular ritualistic aspects within our inherited traditions and culture. That for me is the crust of how we as poets can echo the politics of the stomach that hinder those who are a part of a world that will always un/naturally pickpocket those who are ‘the have not’ against (v/s) ‘the haves’.

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