

Burnishing History: The Legacies of Maria Martinez and Nesta Nala in Dialogue: Part I: An Historian's Perspective

By: [Elizabeth Perrill](#)

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Abstract:

This article is in two parts. "Part II: An Artists' Conversation" immediately follows this article. As a complimentary historical overview, this text seeks to contextualize the Martinez and Nala families' early entrées into high-end, nonindigenous markets. As such, the 1910s–1920s and 1980s–1990s are extensively discussed in the context of the Puebloan and Zulu regions, respectively. Although the rise of Martinez and Nala as doyens of art-pottery took place in these two locations nearly three-quarters of a century apart, the rhetorical devices of death, purity, and archeological inspiration used are strikingly similar. A full picture of the intercultural negotiations, both interpersonally and aesthetically, in which Martinez and Nala took part is impossible to portray in one article. Rather, the author traces the parallels between portrayals of these famous women and the comparative views of the Martinez and Nala lineages that have led to multiple references to Nala as "the Maria Martinez of South Africa." The meanings of this comparison and the infrastructures of support surrounding each family are juxtaposed, and the challenges facing South African potters seeking to replicate the successes of the American Southwest are highlighted.

Keywords: Ceramics | pottery | Pueblo | South Africa | contemporary art | Zulu | San Ildefonso | Tewa

Article:

It has been suggested that the matriarchal lineage of Nala potters can be likened to the famous Maria Martinez family, whose pottery based on traditional Pueblo Indian designs has received international acclaim. (Cruise 2005: 140)

On July 21, 2014 Barbara Gonzales, great-granddaughter of Maria and Julian Martinez (San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico, USA, 1887–1980), sat down with Jabulile (Jabu) and Thembile

(Thembi) Nala, daughters of Nesta Nala (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, 1940–2005). This online conversation and its transcription, published in this volume, marked the beginning of a dialogue. For readers unfamiliar with these famous clans, it is useful to know that both the Martinez and Nala families draw on traditions of burnished, blackened pottery, respectively, from the Rio Grande Puebloan¹ and South African Zulu regions. Vessels from both areas are often, but not always, spherical or ovoid with neither feet nor handles (see Figures 5 and 7). The participants listed above acknowledge the striking similarities between their vessels, but their discussion quickly moved beyond aesthetic parallels. Covering topics ranging from material logistics to the sacred nature of clay, from artistic identity to individual control over marketing and sales, Gonzales and the Nalas spoke as makers, masters, and proprietors of their craft. This type of artist-to-artist interaction is transforming the international pottery landscape. In 2014, Tibetan potters from Nixi village in the Yunnan Province of China began a dialogue with Gonzales' sister Kathy Sanchez and her family at San Ildefonso Pueblo. Peer-to-peer interviews and collaborations are shifting the dialogue from speaking “about” ceramics to speaking with and between pottery traditions.

The Gonzales–Nala conversation is part of a movement toward a multicentered approach to the history of pottery; this text is a companion piece meant to highlight the importance of this dialogue which forms the second part of this article. Herein, I historicize comparisons made between the Martinez and Nala traditions that began in the 1980s. In particular, I focus on the Martinez and Nala families' early entrées into high-end, nonindigenous markets. However, it is important to point out that comparisons between these two lineages are in many ways asymmetrical within the history of this medium's commercial growth. Pueblo traditions entered external markets three-quarters of a century before Zulu pots were collected outside of contexts of use. In 2008, ceramic historian Moira Vincentelli (2008: 21) noted that, “Nesta Nala's story has remarkable similarities to that of Maria Martinez.” As implied in this statement, the Martinez lineage is a reference point for international comparisons of pottery sales and indigenous artists' biographies (Figure 1); Nesta Nala and her family, on the other hand, have struggled to clarify their reputation and market position from the early 1980s to the present (Figure 2). Thus, my analysis begins in the 1980s, during the height of the international cultural boycotts on South Africa, an era when a renaissance in coil-built ceramics was taking shape in many parts of the world and Puebloan pottery was solidifying its centrality as an icon of indigenous pottery production.

¹ Puebloan is a term derived from the Spanish *pueblo*, a town or village. In the Southwestern US, this term refers to American Indian peoples with a history of fixed settlement reaching back to at least 700 CE. Many Pueblos resisted against Western colonization and continue today, both as political and physical entities.



Fig 1. Julian and Maria Martinez displaying finished pottery, San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico. 1937–1938. Photograph by Wyatt Davis. Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Negative #4591.



Fig 2. Nesta Nala, c. 1996, Durban, South Africa. Photo courtesy the African Art Centre, Durban, South Africa.

Coil-Building in the 1980s: International Interest

During the transition into the 1980s, hand-building, in opposition to throwing, was gaining a new sense of legitimacy among artists and academics working in the Anglophone art world. Books such as *Ceramics by Coil and Slab* (Priolo and Priolo 1979), *Clay, Hand Building* (Shapiro 1979), and in particular, *Coiled Pottery: Traditional and Contemporary Ways* (Blandino 1984, 1997, and 2003) were popular in universities and craft centers in the United States and the United Kingdom. In turn, these publications quickly appeared on shelves in the Anglophone diaspora: New Zealand, Australia, Nigeria, South Africa.

Blandino's widely referenced text emphasized what she referred to as "ethnic potters" (2003: 19). Through her illustrations and chapter structure, this artist/author highlighted the value of indigenous knowledge. Blandino featured named and unnamed potters from indigenous traditions as primary sources of technical knowledge and heritage. Her first four chapters feature makers from Kenya, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, the UK, and the USA, including multiple images of Maria Martinez. Potters working in chronologically contiguous areas of culturally informed pottery production are discussed in a subsection of chapter one, "Ethnic Potters Today" (2003: 16–19). This section is followed by "The Contemporary Potter," who is described as having "not inherited his craft" and who is instead, "stamped by innovation and individuality" (2003: 19). Divisions between "ethnic" and "contemporary" are emphasized through phrases such as, "a concern of many contemporary hand-builders is to achieve the spontaneity of the ethnic pot" (Blandino 2003: 85). The implication that "ethnic" potters are not "contemporary" or innovative is a concept that many have fought against since the 1990s (Errington 1998; Karp and Lavine 1991; Myers 2001; Phillips and Steiner 1999). I reassert that contemporary should more accurately be used as a chronological descriptor, events happening in the current moment, rather than a term to separate out the various degrees of innovation or traditional continuity. This helps avoid the insidious tendency to lock indigenous peoples into a timeless or static existence (Silver 1993).

Dated conceptions of ethnicity and innovation notwithstanding, Blandino paved the road for more sophisticated perceptions of hand-built ceramics as an art form that could encourage intercultural dialogue. Contemporary artist Diego Romero, who draws upon his Cochiti Pueblo roots in his work, recalls seeing coil-building by Maria Martinez and Magdalena Odundo, a British artist born in Kenya, juxtaposed on facing pages in Blandino's book. At the Institute of American Indian Arts under the mentorship of Hopi potter Otellie Loloma, Romero experimented with both Native American and African techniques featured in *Coiled Pottery* (Romero 2014). The idea that there was a resonance between Native American and African coil-building also appealed to South African audiences in the 1980s when most pottery was dominated by white, Anglophone South African potters who were educated within the wheel-thrown traditions of Bernard Leach, referred to in South Africa as Anglo-Orientalism. By 1982 and 1983, there was growing discontent with the emphasis placed on British and Asian wheel-based ceramics (Mikula 2004: 32, 46–55).

During a time when mixing of cultures between members of state-defined racial categories was taboo in South Africa, Blandino's text encouraged the premise that white artists could engage with local coil-building and strive for a similar "spontaneity." When viewed anachronistically,

this approach smacks of the cultural appropriation that fueled debates surrounding Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986) and the "world music craze" (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000; Hutnyk 1999; Meintjes 1990). However, in the 1980s, many South African potters, gallery owners, and museum professionals saw "ethnic" inspiration as a way forward, and closely studied Native American arts infrastructures and art histories as a vehicle for understanding indigenous South Africa ceramic promotions.

Crafting Visions of an "Ethnic" Zulu Potter

In 1984, Jo Thorpe, a prominent Durban art personality, visited a North Carolina Cherokee reservation while researching craft development for The African Art Centre, a project of the South African Institute of Race Relations. In her field reports from North Carolina, Thorpe made explicit her belief that craft development in US Native American reservations might be a prototype for craft development in the South African apartheid system of ethnic "reserves," also known as "homelands" (Thorpe 1984: n.p.). Her trip took place during the height of the international cultural boycott on South Africa, when trips abroad by South Africans were both controversial and influential in the context of closed South Africa art and craft worlds. Thus, it is significant that directly following Thorpe's trip The African Art Centre entered work by two Zulu potters—Nesta Nala and Miriam Mbonambi—into a 1984 Natal Society for the Arts (NSA) Gallery exhibition. The Durban Gallery of Art acquired Mbonambi's earthenware vessels in 1984, followed closely in 1985 by Nala (Perrill 2012: 54–56).

As was the case for Maria Martinez three-quarters of a century earlier in the USA, Mbonambi and Nala were marginalized from urban markets. For Native Americans, histories of war, "removals," destruction of traditional economies, and consequent forced dependency upon the US government unfolded between 1776 and the 1870s. From the 1930s and the 1970s, Maria Martinez and her family witnessed multiple waves of government-to-government² policies pushing assimilation, "termination" of US and tribal relations, and finally self-determination, a policy that emphasizes tribal nationhood and independent control (Fadden and Wall 2011: 29). In the KwaZulu-Natal area of South Africa, the chronology of colonial wars with Anglophone forces official began in the 1870s. By 1909 the infamous "Durban System," complete with urban/rural segregation, banned women from urban spaces and utilized profits from beer-halls to support Zulu male migrant labor (La Hausse 1982: 63–64). Nationwide apartheid laws endured from 1948 to 1994, but the policies of racial division and their impacts spill over these chronological boundaries. Under apartheid, women from indigenous groups were forced to live in "homelands" unless they carried documents from an urban employer. In both the Puebloan and Zulu cases, physical distance hindered women's interactions with patrons. In both cases, cultural and linguistic norms increased potters' distance from more lucrative markets; nevertheless, they both begin with access to tourist markets.

Many scholars have not seen the innovation in Nala's work, tending instead to view it as part of unchanging, static tradition. One similarity between Nala and Martinez's practice is their courting of tourists, and later high-end gallery markets. In 1985, American scholar Rhoda

² The term "government-to-government" refers to the fact that American Indian Reservations, including Southwestern Pueblos, maintain independent tribal governments. Pueblo to US governmental relations that have undergone various phases of cultural policies.

Levinsohn wrote in the *International Review of African American Art* that, “Nesta Nala, who is truly devoted to preserving a significant segment of her culture, has neither ventured into new forms nor succumbed to the pressures of change” (Levinsohn 1985: 13). Today, this statement can be proven as false. South African ceramist Ian Garrett’s 1996 MFA thesis traces the origins of Nala’s market for external audiences to approximately 1976. In his interviews, Nala recounted how she was “talent scouted” by the Vukani Association, an organization founded in 1972 (Garrett 1997: 3). Vukani originally focused on reviving Zulu basketry as an income-generating export good for rural Zulu communities and was directly supported by Jo Thorpe and the African Art Centre (Winters 1998). Thorpe made multiple trips to the small town of Eshowe, where Nala and other artists engaged in direct conversations with Vukani staff and Thorpe about the types of objects that would sell well at the African Art Centre in Durban and to export markets abroad (Thorpe 1984).



Fig 3. Nesta Nala. *Double gourd-shaped vessel*, 1985. Earthenware. 6.3 × 12.4 cm. Photo by Elizabeth Perrill. Collection of the Durban Art Gallery, South Africa.

A small vessel originally purchased by the Durban Art Gallery in 1985, for instance, was a gourd skeuomorph under five inches in height bearing an incised flower decoration (Figure 3). This miniature was a typical vessel intended for white, tourist audiences that one might compare to

Maria Martinez's early bookend or candlestick forms (Figure 4). These objects—small, portable ornaments designed for Western style interiors—were created early in Martinez and Nala's respective commercial careers. However, as the narratives below point out, both women were accomplished and known artists within their communities before they produced work for external markets. Likewise for both, tourist markets were a first step into external sales and led to more lucrative gallery contacts.



Fig 4. Maria Poveka Martinez. *Bookends*, c. 1935. Pottery, slip. 14 × 14 × 15 cm. National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (26/4421). Photo by Walter Larrimore.

Yet, nostalgic constructions surrounding Nala's identity continue. In a March 3, 2010 posting in *The Website of The Journal of Modern Craft*, Steven Smith wrote of Nesta Nala,

Her pottery was traditional in the true sense—functional pots used in everyday Zulu tribal life and prized by the local rural community for its beauty. Considering the rudimentary equipment and method, her work is startling, exhibiting purity of form, perfect proportion and embellished with exquisitely simple reliefs. While much of her decoration style was in the Zulu geometric patterning tradition, she later experimented with fish and other motifs. Hints of European influence are found in her later pieces where she was encouraged to sign and date her work—a very unAfrican practice. (Smith 2010: 2)

Smith reinforces multiple stereotypes about Nala, a rural woman's career path, and the possibilities of African identities. Although the word "tribe" is sometimes used in South Africa, "kingdom" more accurately describes the Zulu cultural and political group. The use of "tribe" in this paragraph reinforces connotations of authenticity, as do "true," "rudimentary," "purity,"

“simplicity,” and “unAfrican.” Each term locks Nala, and other Zulu potters, into an unchanging ethnographic existence. By contrast, family members, gallery owners, and NGO-staff describe Nala as a self-assertive and self-promoting, powerful woman (Addelson 2005; Armstrong 2006; Garrett 2006; J. Nala 2006; T. Nala 2006). She was a part of a lineage of rural potters, but she sold to external patrons for three decades and signed her work for over twenty years.

Additionally, floral themes were a common motif used by Siphwiwe, Nesta’s mother, while the distinctive geometric patterning Nesta adopted is part of a complex history of archeological recreation and improvisation, explained below.

Two Tales of Death, Purity, Passivity, and Archaeology

Both Puebloan and Zulu indigenous pottery traditions have been described as “dying” arts; this rhetoric was particularly widespread during the emergence of Martinez and Nala as celebrated artists (Chapman and Munson 2007: 67; King Galleries 2015; Levinsohn 1984: 69; Reusch 1998: 19; Roscoe 2015: 1). Additionally, amidst attempts to define the “purity” or “passivity” of these cultural traditions, archaeology and archaeologists have often been celebrated. The development and overlap of tropes surrounding the concepts of purity and archeology can help illuminate why Nala has been called the Maria Martinez of South Africa, for it is not merely burnishing and blackening techniques that tie together these two families of potters.

Death and its Definitions

The death of nonindustrial, indigenous pottery traditions is most often attributed to industrialization or acculturation. British archeologist Marit K. Munson’s 2007 annotation of American archaeologist, artist, and entrepreneur Kenneth Chapman’s memoirs asserts that,

Even before Chapman arrived in the [US] Southwest, pottery was, in many respects, a dying art in the pueblos; by 1885, most women were beginning to replace handmade vessels with the durable metal buckets, pots and pans that the railroad made widely available. (Chapman and Munson 2007: 67)

In the same paragraph, Munson describes how pottery was widely made for the tourist trade. Thus, death does not mean ceramics were not made. Rather, they were not made as regularly for domestic use or in the styles preferred by white patrons with an interest in establishing a very specific type of American or Native American authenticity.

By 1904, Maria Martinez had travelled to the St. Louis World’s Fair, also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, as a demonstrator (Howard and Pardue 1996: 74). The Fred Harvey Company, a hotelier and tourism promoter, began featuring her in promotional materials and planning trips to her home as early as 1905 (Howard and Pardue 1996: 74). Among other trips, Martinez travelled again to demonstrate at the 1915 Panama–California Exposition in San Diego and the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair (Peterson 1981: 78). However, the success that came from expositions and tourism sales did not encourage the type of production that elites, including archaeologists and philanthropists, had in mind (Chapman and Munson 2007: 68). To avoid further replication of “trivialities” and “tourist bait,” both camps of vested white patrons instituted infrastructures around the arts, in particular pottery (Chapman and Munson 2007: 68).

Summer workshops started in 1917–1918 by two wealthy patrons, Rose Dougan and Verra von Blumenthal, were designed to coach Puebloan women in “proper” taste, informed by archaeological understandings of ancestral traditions. A latter iteration of this program, the Pueblo Pottery Improvement Program run out of the Museum of New Mexico, placed Kenneth Chapman and Wesley Bradfield in charge of vetting work and paid pueblo artists 25% above the current price for work that met these museum staff members’ expectations (Bernstein 2012: 54; Chapman and Munson 2007: 68; see also Levis 2007). By 1922, the Pueblo Pottery Fund, which has gone through several iterations, ensured historical pieces were collected and on view for Puebloan artists. However, neither early twentieth-century social Darwinist portrayals of American Indian cultures at world’s fairs (Greenhalgh 2011: 140) nor programs designed to revitalize “dying” art traditions reveal the sociocultural complexity of pottery creation in the Pueblos. The aesthetic, political, and economic negotiations that potters like Maria and Julian Martinez had to make as they formed their careers and the pottery produced are testaments to these individuals’ intercultural, savvy, roles as culture bearers, and their technical mastery (Figure 5).



Fig 5. Maria Poveka Martinez and Julian Pocano Martinez, *Jar*, 1934–1943. Pottery, slip. 21.7 × 26.7 cm. Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection, Department of the Interior at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (26/0183). Photo by Aaron M. Crayne.

Half a world away and nearly three-quarters of a century later, a similar cry of Zulu cultural endangerment was taken up in South Africa. In the 1980s, Zulu culture and pottery in particular, was described as on the verge of extinction. American scholar Rhoda Levinsohn wrote of the increasingly negative effects that cultural transformation was having in Zulu rural areas. In Levinsohn’s *Art and Craft of Southern Africa: Treasures in Transition* (1984), the author emphasizes Nesta Nala’s exceptionalism. Levinsohn juxtaposes Nala’s supposed purity with the negative impacts of acculturation in a chapter entitled, “Pottery—a Dying Tradition.” The fact is

that the majority of the Zulu speakers had been part of migrant labor structures since the late nineteenth century, and apartheid did not prevent rural potters from adapting innovative iconography and forms. Levinsohn's reports of the "death" of Zulu ceramics are more a testament to her own integration into the American African art world of the period.

1982 to 1984 was a key moment in the institutional support of what was then called "Primitive" art, which included both African and American Indian work. Shelly Errington eloquently describes the events that followed in the wake of the 1982 opening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art and the 1984 launch of the Museum of Modern Art exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art* (1998, 2–6). In the early 1980s, "Dealers would unhesitatingly explain to customers who were resisting the high price of a tribal artifact, 'But they're not making it anymore'" (Errington 1998: 3–4). The argument that "authentic" pottery from any "primitive" culture was dying due to acculturation answered the preconceptions of the day. One can still find echoes of this sentiment in contemporary media. Influential gallery owner Douglas Dawson recently stated in a film clip posted on the influential ceramics website, C-File, that "traditional" pottery production in Africa will be non-existent "in two decades" (Dawson 2014).

A new spin on death and dying recently appeared in promotional materials and sales sites of Zulu artworks. In 2015, South African-based dealer and collector Ken Karner's Gallery Ezakwantu site stated that:

Over time, numerous potters and basket weavers had died due to HIV-AIDS, while social upheaval in the area increased sharply. Due to the instability and crime, accessing the areas became increasingly dangerous for collectors, dealers and researchers. Members of all three categories, as well as some potters were killed. As a result, we no longer receive Zulu beer vessels from the hinterland. (Karner 2015: n.p.)

It is implied that disease and violence, rather than acculturation, are bringing a new type of death to Zulu pottery. These problems certainly exist and often impact rural women. The death by shooting of anthropologist Dieter Reusch took place in 2003 (Natalia 2003: 67). In 2006, Nesta Nala's daughter Nonhlanhla was shot and killed at the Nala homestead. And, in 2007, Azolina MaMcube Ngema, a 70-year-old potter, was shot in the arm and abdomen; she survived only to disappear into hiding. The lack of recourse to law enforcement in rural KwaZulu-Natal can be a huge challenge for potters; women with a public profile, particularly those who are financially prosperous, can become targets of violence.

However, rural pottery production based on Zulu traditions as well as research in this field continues. In 2006, University of KwaZulu-Natal MFA student Jane Todd produced a documentary on the Magwaza Potters under the tutelage of Juliet Armstrong, a white, Anglophone South African researcher who continued to travel regularly in rural Zulu regions until her battle with cancer and death in 2012. Kent Fowler, Gavin Whitelaw, the staff of the Tatham Art Gallery, myself, and others continue to conduct pottery research in rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Douglas Dawson in Chicago is planning a solo show of rural potter Mncane Mzuza's work for 2016. Moreover, Nesta Nala's remaining daughters, Bongisiwe (Bongi MaNala Mahlaba), Jabulile (Jabu), and Thembile (Thembi) continue to produce pottery, as do

many other prominent families. Bonggi lives near Nesta's former home, but Jabu and Thembi both live in cities, Johannesburg and Empangeni, respectively. These sisters' urban lives confound connotations of ethnic purity or isolation that the word "hinterland," referred to in the Ezakwantu quotation above, implies within the politics of post-apartheid South African art and craft production.

One might joke that reports of the "death" of both Puebloan and Zulu pottery traditions has been greatly exaggerated. However, anxieties surrounding death are quite serious and, moreover, are key elements of the uncanny parallels found between Maria Martinez and Nesta Nala's life histories. Both artists' pottery styles were refined and marketed by means of a complex network of social relationships, a network in which these savvy potters satisfied both indigenous and external aesthetic systems (Mullin 2001; Jolles 2012).

Passivity, Purity, and Archaeology

In *Pueblo Pottery Making: A Study at the Village of San Ildefonso*, which bears a full-plate image of Maria Martinez as its frontispiece, the author Carl Guthe writes:

From prehistoric archaeology to modern pottery making may seem a far cry, but in the Southwest the past merges almost imperceptibly into the present, and the Pueblos of today live in almost exactly the same way, and practice almost exactly the same arts, as did their ancestors of a thousand years ago. (Guthe 1925: 1)

Guthe's text is one of the first focused studies published on San Ildefonso pueblo pottery, and the sentiments he expresses are deeply tied to beliefs held by Dr. Edgar Lee Hewett, a university professor, archaeologist, and director of the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe from 1909 until 1946 (Wyckoff 1996: 26, 68). Both men saw contemporary Pueblo pottery as a type of living archaeology, history before one's eyes.

In 1908, Hewett asked Maria Martinez to reproduce blackware and polychrome ceramics collected from his Pajarito Plateau excavations. After extensive research and experimentation, Maria and Julian Martinez created polychrome and blackware work that not merely reproduced the archeological work, but took the techniques and patterning in new directions (Chapman and Munson 2008: 152; Hirschfelder and De Montaña 1993: 157; Peterson 1981: 89–94; Spivey 2003: 11–12). An oft-repeated trope recounts how Dr. Hewett changed the Martinez's fate.

[Maria's] reverence for Hewett and the men who came to her pueblo, whose interest in her and her artistic husband Julian changed forever their fate, makes her happy to tell the story a thousand more times. (Peterson 1981: 89)

Today, it would be naïve to see Maria's and Julian's intercultural relationships with Hewett, Chapman, and the many other patrons and officials who were interested in Pueblo ceramics as anything less than multifaceted and complex negotiations. Racial, cultural, and administrative power relations are obscured when a figure such as Hewett is put on a pedestal as a savior or a changer of fates. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out Hewett was a particularly

controversial person. He espoused beliefs in “ancestral purity,” held views that Pueblo pottery had lost its “racial purity” past 1600, and he disapproved of the experimentation and product development instituted by Dougan, von Blumenthal, Chapman, Bradfield, and “a network of highly educated women who, during the 1920s and 1930s, bought property in Northern New Mexico and became important patrons of Native American and Spanish Colonial art” (Bernstein 2012: 37; quotation, Mullin 2001: 11; Chapman and Munson 2007: 76).

In the Martinez–Nala nexus, the development of Nesta Nala’s artistic narrative in South Africa seems to have mirrored the Martinez-Hewett trope. Levinsohn’s publications of the 1980s laid the groundwork for a “primitivist idealization of Zulu ceramic traditions” (Garrett 1997, 21). The idea that Zulu pottery was dying was in place by the 1980s. Then, in 1991, South African ceramist and scholar Wilma Cruise published her foundational book, *Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa*, a richly illustrated volume that featured a page-long biographical profile of Siphwiwe (Nesta’s mother) and Nesta Nala that closed with the following,

An embryonic hope for the revival of the art of pottery lies in new markets: as with Mexican and Hopi Indian ceramics, where a rebirth was spurred by archaeological finds, the impetus provided by people like Len van Schalkwyk may be vital. (Cruise 1991: 124)

Confirming the decade-long comparison between the legacies of the Native American ceramics and those of the Zulu people, Cruise shifts Zulu pottery’s revitalization away from either the potters or the white South African women who had been marketing and promoting Zulu ceramics for over a decade. Instead, the potential savior is Leonard (Len) Van Schalkwyk, an archaeologist who asked Nala to reproduce excavated pot shards in 1983. Cruise emphasizes this archaeological tie by featuring an image of both Nesta and Siphwiwe Nala’s vessels arranged amidst Iron Age shards from 600 to 800 CE as a full-page image opposite her introduction to the chapter “The Tradition of the Rural Potter” (1991: 123).

It is incontestable that both the Martinez and Nala families’ interactions with archaeologists brought them in contact with a more diverse set of ceramic motifs and models than some of their peers. However, constant repetition of narratives surrounding archeological inspiration have placed the Martinez and Nala families in the perpetual position of defending the refinement, creativity, and originality within a traditional medium that each family has striven to maintain. The acknowledgment of archaeologists as just one of many influences on each of these lineages of tradition bearers is perhaps a more modest and advisable tactic.

Nostalgic Nationalism to Self-Determination

US Nationalism and the Southwest

After “The Great War” many wealthy US citizens, from the east coast to the west, were searching for a national identity and an American culture that did not rely on Europe, a “truly American art” (Mullin 1992: 395). The Southwest and Santa Fe’s role in this new American conception of art has been written on extensively. Molly Mullin’s many foundational articles and book *Culture in the Marketplace* (2001) place art and its patronage front and center. Chris Wilson’s *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition* traces how adobe

facades, ethnic identities, and public celebrations were all used to construct Santa Fe as a site of historically “authentic” cultural power (1997). And, in *Under the Palace Portal: Native American Artists in Santa Fe*, Karle A. Hoerig traces the emergence of the Santa Fe portal sales site and the Indian Fair, later Market, as key locations of arts development and negotiations of power in what is today a billion-dollar economy (Hoerig 2003: 47; Mitchell and Reynis 2007).

The development of the Santa Fe art world involved many audiences, often with conflicting perspectives or interests. In the late 1800s, just as American Indian land rights were under attack and assimilation pushed via the Dawes Act of 1887, tourism interest in the region began to flourish. Marketing the American Southwest as a site of domestic “exoticism” went hand-in-hand with the topics discussed above: American Indians as a “dying” people, demonstrations at various regional or world’s fairs, and the authentication of pottery via archaeological credentials. To unpack the complete network of support that facilitated the career of Maria and Julian Martinez, and later Maria’s collaborations with her daughter-in-law Santana and her son Popovi Da, is clearly beyond the bounds of one article. However, a discussion of a few moments in Maria Martinez’s career clarify the strength of the Southwest infrastructure and will, in turn, highlight the challenges facing contemporary South African potting lineages.

One of the major principles that Barbara Gonzales emphasized in her 2014 conversation with the Nala Family was cutting out the middleman, a business model with a long history in the US Southwest. In the 1920s, Maria and Julian Martinez “would become the centerpiece of the new Indian Fair” (Bernstein 2012: 55). The Indian Fair in Santa Fe, New Mexico began as a means to highlight regional work and has gone through many organizational models. The Indian Market of 1936 introduced the idea of artist as salesperson (Bernstein 2012: 90–92). The Santa Fe Indian Market, in particular, has become an event of transnational importance, bringing together American Indian artists from throughout North America. The model is still widespread, and holding Indian markets or fairs remains a strong method of maintaining economic control for many American Indian traditions. The key principle of face-to-face sales allows makers to control the statements made about their art and crafts. In the words of Bruce Bernstein, “the real currency of Indian Market is relationships” (2012: 134). “We all have booths [at Indian Market] and we sell our artwork there, but I [also] have a store at the Pueblo at which I sell my pieces every day,” Gonzales told Jabu and Thembi Nala.

During her lifetime, Maria Martinez won a range of awards and was honored by both national and international bodies (Figure 6). Many of these honors came after her career was well-established, but they reflect how the Southwestern infrastructure of pottery production has chosen to highlight Martinez’s achievements and lineage. Martinez was presented with a Craftsmanship Medal from the American Institute of Architects in 1954, a Presidential Citation from the American Ceramic Society in 1968, and honorary doctorates from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces in 1971 and Columbia College in 1977 (Peterson 1981: 81, Spivey 2003: 168–170). Martinez’s list of exhibitions is impressive; she was received in the White House four times, and continues to be a foundational figure in art history textbooks. These brief biographical details provide a sense of contrast with the meteoric rise of Nesta Nala, her death, and the tenuous state of her lineage and its success today.



Fig 6. Maria Poveka Martinez and Popovi Da (Tony) Martinez, *Plate*, 1955–1957. Pottery, slip. 5.5 × 37.5 cm. Indian Arts and Crafts Board Collection, Department of the Interior, at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (25/8830). Photo by Walter Larrimore.

South African National Arts: Post-Apartheid Urgency, Contemporary Diffusion

The official end of apartheid marked by the free and fair elections in 1994, pushed South African artists of color to the forefront in order to create a new creative nationalism for the “Rainbow Nation” (Marschall 2001: 55). By the early 1980s, Nala’s experimentation with burnishing techniques resulted in surfaces far smoother than those of typical domestic wares and she “was producing ceramics primarily for tourists and collectors” (Garrett 1997: 7). Her work had already been vetted by the Vukani Association, Jo Thorpe and decades of buyers. Nesta Nala’s inclusion in museum collections as early as 1985 meant she was in a prime position to become part of the post-apartheid canon (Figure 7). Thus, with a very modest infrastructure of galleries and museums, the KwaZulu-Natal art world launched Nala into the national and international spotlight.



Fig 7. Nesta Nala. *Beer drinking vessel (ukhamba)*, 2004. Earthenware. 29.8 × 26 cm. Photo by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague, courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Gallery owners and museum staff entered Nala into award competitions. Gallery owner Sue Greenberg was responsible for entering Nesta Nala's work into the 1994 Cairo Ceramics Biennale. Greenberg also filled out Nala's entry for the 1995 First National Bank (FNB) Vita award, a national South African competition akin to the UK's Turner Prize (Artthrob 1998). An African Art Centre employee dropped off Nala's pot at Greenberg's home and she recalls there was:

No entry form, no anything ... I don't know [how] it had come to the African Art Centre, but anyway it arrived at my house one evening and, I filled in the form. We had no idea what she wanted for the pot. We had no way of contacting her to find out what she wanted for it, and so we put it on the FNB Vita, the original, the very first FNB Vita. (Greenberg 2006)

Nesta Nala won first prize. As Greenberg's quotation implies, the circumstances surrounding Nala's rise to fame were unclear and part of a highly arbitrated art world.

Nala had refined her aesthetics and techniques over decades of intercultural contacts, and she quickly became an icon at a time when South Africa was seeking out national symbols. Nala's accolades continued. In 1996, she added first place in ceramics at the *Jabulisa: The Art of KwaZulu-Natal* exhibition and first prize at the *Associate Potters of Southern Africa Exhibition (APSA)* to her laurels. Her prize-winning pot from the APSA exhibition was added to the Corobrik Ceramic Collection, the top national South African ceramics collection established in

1977. In 1999, Nala was selected to represent South Africa at the Smithsonian Institution Folklife Festival in Washington, DC and took her one and only international trip. Thus, between 1994 and 1999, Nesta Nala went from regionally acclaimed potter to international representative of a national tradition. Her US trip marked an arrival akin to Maria Martinez's participation in regional and world fairs. Nesta's daughters also experienced some successes during this period when South Africa was redefining its national identity. Jabu and Thembi were featured in the 1998 FNB Vita Craft Exhibition, where Thembi won the Silver Award (T. Nala 2006).



Fig 8. Bongisiwe MaNala Mahlaba, *Miniature necked vessel (uphiso)*, 2007. Earthenware. 14.1 × 13.4 cm. Photo by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague, courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

Sadly, after just a decade of steady sales and local exhibitions for the Nala family, Nesta Nala passed away in 2005 at the age of 65 due to a lung condition. In 2006, Nala's two youngest daughters both died tragically. The family was left reeling, and eventually, the three remaining sisters moved off the rural homestead that had been occupied by their grandmother and mother. Nesta's only married daughter, Bongi, moved to a homestead nearby her mother's former rural home (Figure 8). Jabu moved to Johannesburg, South Africa's largest metropolis, and Thembi

lives primarily in Empangeni, a city in the KwaZulu-Natal province. All three continue to produce pottery, sell at galleries, and submit work to exhibitions (T. Nala 2014).

The African Arts Centre, the Kim Sacks Gallery (Johannesburg), and the Artisan Gallery (Durban, formerly Bayside Gallery) host periodic Nala family exhibitions and sell the family's pottery. However, the sisters struggle to interact with patrons, apart from during rare exhibition openings or workshops. The direct control and contact that is an integral component of Barbara Gonzales' family business model eludes the Nalas.

Ukuthi abantu abazi sinabi nayo indawo sisebenza kuyona sisebenze ndawonye apho abantu bezobona from ukhamba luqala baze babone la seluphele khona. Ehhe, leyonto iyasikhathaza kakhulu.

(Because we don't have a place where we can work together and our clients can come and observe our work from the starting point of the pot creation until the finishing point. Yes, that worries us a lot.) (J. Nala 2014)

Control over profit margins has been historically exacerbated in South Africa by a distrust of consignment sales. The majority of Zulu potters, like many Pueblo potters, only accept direct and immediate payments for goods; galleries adjust prices to what the market will bear (J. Nala 2006; Romero 2014). Thus, the percentage of profit to the artist can vary from fifty percent at best to ten percent in some extreme cases.

The distance between sites of production and consumption are a challenge that places an additional burden on South African potters. Jabu Nala and male South African potter Clive Sithole, who apprenticed with Nesta Nala, both recall devastating moments when an entire shipment of delicate earthenware from KwaZulu-Natal has arrived broken at the Kim Sacks Gallery in Johannesburg and they were forced to return home empty-handed. Jabu solved this dilemma by moving her studio to Johannesburg, but this has, in turn, increased her production costs (Figure 9). Thembi, hoping to create new paths for her career, has completed a bachelor's degree in general studies. Bongzi continues to work in rural KwaZulu-Natal.



Fig 9. Jabu Nala with vessel by the artist, 2012. African Art Centre, Durban, South Africa. Photo courtesy African Art Centre.

Conclusion

Regular customers for many in the Martinez family line come directly to their doors in San Ildefonso or travel to the annual Indian Market. This is not to say that making a living from pottery is not a challenge in the Pueblos, but patrons are closer at hand. From 2010 to 2013 and again in 2015, Jabu and Thembi had a glimpse of this style of selling; both sisters participated in the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market (IFAM), an event based directly upon the model of the Indian Market. However, intermediaries are still integral to these applications: The African Art Centre in Durban, the Vukani Museum in Eshowe, and other institutions assisted with the Nalas' applications for the IFAM. The International Folk Art Alliance and the South African Department of Trade and Industry sponsored the expensive international venture. It is difficult to know what types of support might create security for pottery traditions like that of the Nala lineage.

In a 1998 South African governmental report on Cultural Industries Growth in the "Craft Industry," Jabu Nala is mentioned as a "rare case where a producer has become recognized by

the ‘art world’ as a master,” but the report goes on to focus on strategies to assist “crafters” who have not won such laurels (DACST 1998: 46). In 2008, the South African Department of Labour commissioned a report on creative industries that were identified as potential areas of economic development, but there was no significant mention of pottery (Joffe and Newton 2008). Thembi Nala traveled to several trade fairs and art markets in Germany, Spain and the USA through programs run by the South African government between 2008 and 2014. Thembi is again traveling to New York for an art fair in 2015, and is hoping to set up future sales and exhibition opportunities. Her efforts are, in many ways, following slowly upon the successes of male potters from the Xhosa-speaking areas of South Africa. Vuyisa Potina, who works in burnished pottery and borrows directly from Zulu women’s pottery traditions as just one of his inspirations, attended some of the same international art fairs as Thembi Nala and was able to fulfill several international orders (Potina 2012). Most recently, at Design Miami 2014, Xhosa potter Madoda Fani exhibited pit-fired burnished wares. Andile Dyalvane, also of Xhosa origins, has had immense success at Design Miami, The Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, and Art Santa Fe.

These high-profile events are a coup for South African ceramic arts and craft, yet traditional potters, and women in particular, struggle to keep up with their male peers. The struggles of the Nalas have been exacerbated by language barriers not faced by their male Xhosa peers. English language training and education in rural KwaZulu-Natal does not provide the fluency demanded by the international art world. Yet, the Nalas are finding allies in gallery owners, scholars, as well as NGO and South African governmental programs.

Parallels between their famous family and the Martinez lineage continue. Many of the Southwestern institutions mentioned in this article, as well as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, adopted an activist slant by promoting folk art, folkways³ and folklife in the post-WWII era. On a national level, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife became a platform for honoring individuals known by the title “tradition bearers,” those who learned their expressive forms from community or family lineages (Williams 2007: 151). The Smithsonian, as well as institutions in the Southwest, has slowly transformed the cultures of US museums and educational institutions, which increasingly attempt to honor tradition bearers and traditional knowledge systems (Shankar and Hooee 2013). Rather than death, passivity, purity, or archaeological inspiration, museums and other cultural institutions are starting to view indigenous traditions as continuing and transforming arts and crafts with ancient roots.

For years many in the South African ceramics world have called for governmental acknowledgment of families like the Nalas as “National Living Treasures,” a term first used in Japan in 1950 (Figure 10). UNESCO has drafted “Guidelines for the Establishment of National ‘Living Human Treasures’ Systems,” and national programs of this type exist in France, Nigeria, the Philippines, Senegal, South Korea, and Thailand (Girard n.d.; UNESCO). South Africa’s Ministry of Arts and Culture even held conferences on “Celebrating South Africa’s Living Human Treasures from 2010 to 2012,” while “Living Heritage” was the theme of the 2010–2013 Heritage Month celebrations across South Africa (DAC 2010; SABC 2013). Will the Nala family receive acknowledgment within this new structure? It seems clear that the rich arts infrastructure of the American Southwest will not suddenly appear overnight in South Africa, but

³ “Folkways” is a key term in the Smithsonian Institution’s discussions of folk. Folkways here would be, for instance, the method of passing down methods of pottery.

acknowledging the mastery of ceramic lineages may be a step toward ensuring future generations can look back, as the family of Maria Martinez does, on a their own national living heritage.



Fig 10. Zanele Nala, *Beer drinking vessel (ukhamba)*, 2006. Earthenware, stain. 28.7 × 30 cm. Photo by Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague, courtesy Indiana University Art Museum.

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Notes on contributors

Dr. Elizabeth Perrill is an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, as well as Consulting Curator for African Art at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh. Her primary research interests include the history of hand-built ceramics, South African

contemporary art, and the economic history of ceramic arts in the modern and contemporary eras. Perrill's single-author works include *Zulu Pottery* (2012) and *Ukucwebezela: To Shine* (2008), as well as numerous articles on the history of ceramics and Southern African contemporary art.

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