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Faculty of English

Poetry and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
June 2017

Alice Patricia Meyer
PhD Abstract

Poetry and Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa

This thesis explores the ability of poetry to articulate political critique in Post-Apartheid South Africa. The aim of the project is to evaluate the extent to which poetry provides criticism of a contemporary political climate marked by government corruption, rising social inequality and widespread immiseration. I argue that both 'poetry' and 'post-Apartheid' are developing and contested concepts that acquire meaning in concrete circumstances and continue to take on fresh resonance in South Africa today. I contend that poetry does not passively reflect historical circumstances nor docilely take its place in a post-Apartheid political climate. Instead, it actively engages with the milieu within which it finds itself and contributes in a meaningful way to our understanding of what the post-Apartheid era actually means.

My study focuses on six poets who represent the innovative and politically charged character of post-Apartheid poetry. The writers I choose to examine are Ari Sitas, Seitlhamo Motsapi, Lesego Rampolokeng, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Vonani Bila, and Angifi Dladla. All of these poets lived through Apartheid and were young, or of middle age, at the dawn of liberation. Eager and able citizens willing to build a new democracy, these artists have been bitterly disappointed by the African National Congress's abandonment of South Africa's black majority. The poets in question have set about bearing witness to unrelenting social ills through drawing upon the dynamism of poetry in order to rejuvenate public language, dialogue and debate. Confronted with the over-simplification of information in an epoch of late-capitalism, the poets in this thesis seek to revitalise language, through innovative use of form, in order to fashion new perceptions of the world in which they live. In this regard, post-Apartheid poetry draws upon a range of international and indigenous traditions, fuses low and high culture, cuts across the page and the stage and challenges accepted literary categorisation, such as the binary between African and European art.

Notably, all of the writers in this thesis have been involved in politics or activism and make a point of incorporating these real world experiences into their work. Thus,

Sitas invokes worker chants from his time spent in Durban's labour movement and Dladla remains fascinated by the Gauteng prisons where he has taught creative writing. The poetry I examine is moulded by the active public life of its writers and in turn seeks to participate in a wider world. In this line of thought, many of these poets have started their own literary journals and publishing initiatives, often with strong ties to social justice movements and grass-roots communities. Here, one can mention Nyezwa's development of the English/isiXhosa multicultural arts journal *Kotaz* in the Eastern Cape and Bila's *Timbila* publishing in the Limpopo province. Through autonomous methods of poetic production and distribution, poets are able to create spaces in which non-commercial and potentially revolutionary art can be heard.

Ultimately, my doctorate spotlights the artistic and political victories of a pioneering group of poets, who are little known both locally and abroad. My research underscores the politically critical qualities of poetic form and thus has resonance beyond a narrowly South African context. Indeed, I believe my PhD can contribute in a valuable way to debates pertaining to the social relevance of poetry in the world today.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the generosity and support of University of Cambridge, academic mentors, friends, family, and the South African artists who are the subject of this dissertation. Words cannot express the depth of my gratitude for the faith you have all shown in me.

I'd like to thank the South African poets and performers who I met on fieldwork in 2015, namely Vonani Bila, Angifi Dladla, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Karen Press, Robert Berold and Ari Sitas. Thank you for transforming my sense of art and giving me hope in the future of our country.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the ability of poetry to articulate political critique in post-Apartheid South Africa. The aim of the project is to evaluate the extent to which poetry provides criticism of a contemporary political climate marked by government corruption, rising social inequality and widespread immiseration. I argue that both 'poetry' and 'post-Apartheid' are contested concepts that acquire meaning in concrete circumstances and continue to take on fresh resonance in South Africa today. Poetry does not passively reflect historical circumstances nor docilely take its place in a post-Apartheid political climate. Instead, it actively engages with the milieu within which it finds itself and contributes in a meaningful way to our understanding of what the post-Apartheid era actually means. My study focuses on six poets who represent the innovative and politically charged character of post-Apartheid poetry. The writers I examine are Ari Sitas, Seitlhamo Motsapi, Lesego Rampolokeng, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Vonani Bila, and Angifi Dladla.

The post-Apartheid era has been marked by two major political shortcomings that have hampered the establishment of an equal society for all. These twin governmental failings are the primary objects of denunciation for the poets examined in this thesis. The first political betrayal has been the implementation of neoliberal policies adopted early into Nelson Mandela's term and championed by Thabo Mbeki. The second is the corrupt nature of crony capitalism that has characterised Jacob Zuma's presidency. The inauguration of Mandela in May 1994 seemed to herald a new era of freedom for South Africa's previously disempowered black majority but the early hopes of the new democracy were undermined by decisions taken by his government, which bound the country's fate to the trajectory of international capital. Political economist Patrick Bond has published extensively on the issue and summarises the extent to which the African National Congress succumbed to the pressures of multinational capital at the dawn of the Post-Apartheid nation, hence sacrificing the country's nascent independence:

> In 1993 long-standing ANC promises to nationalise the banks, mines, and monopoly capital were dropped; Nelson Mandela agreed to repay $25 billion of inherited apartheid-era foreign debt; the central bank was granted formal independence in an interim constitution; South Africa joined the General

> Agreement on Tariffs and Trade on disadvantageous terms, because Pretoria's application for developing country status was rejected by US Trade Representative Ron Brown; and the IMF provided a $850 million loan with standard Washington Consensus conditions attached, including reducing public sector wages and maintaining a high interest rate.[1]

Bond highlights that the African National Congress backtracked on an economic revolution to match formal democratic reforms. Post-1994, the promise to nationalise banks and mines was reneged upon and the interests of monopoly capital remained intact while Mandela took on debt inherited from the very Apartheid regime he had fought against. Even though South Africa was clearly a developing economy, the country was pressurised by Washington to enter trade agreements on disadvantageous terms. South Africa accepted International Monetary Fund loans with standard Washington Consensus restrictions including the protection of property rights, the privatisation of state assets and the relaxation of exchange controls. Another watershed moment of Mandela's rule was the decision to terminate the Reconstruction and Development Programme, which focused on assuaging poverty. This framework was eschewed in favour of the policy of Growth, Employment and Redistribution. Thus, in 1996 the African National Congress entrenched its neoliberal agenda and 'government's stated macroeconomic priorities became the management of inflation, the deregulation of financial markets, tariff reduction and trade liberalisation as well as limiting government expenditure'. [2] Writing for the journal of Southern African Studies, Ashman, Fine and Newman note the irony of Growth Employment and Redistribution, which aimed 'to attract foreign direct investment' but ultimately led to increased 'outflow of domestic capital – even while the hoped-for long-term inward investment failed to materialise'.[3]

The African National Congresses' collusion with international capital, and disregard for the poor, exemplifies Frantz Fanon's insights regarding the national bourgeoisie's corruption after the demise of colonialism. In his famous chapter in *The Wretched of the*

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[1] Patrick Bond, "Debt, Uneven Development and Capitalist Crisis in South Africa: from Moody's macroeconomic monitoring to Marikana microfinance mashonisas", *Third World Quarterly*, 34:4 (2013), 569-592 (p.576).
[2] Sam Ashman, Ben Fine and Susan Newman, "Amnesty International? The Nature, Impact and Scale of Capital Flight from South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37:1 (2010), 7-25 (p. 14).
[3] Ashman, Fine and Newman, "Amnesty International? The Nature, Impact and Scale of Capital Flight from South Africa", p.14.

Earth, entitled "The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness", Fanon writes of the new bourgeoisie, 'its vocation is not to transform the nation but prosaically serve as a conveyer belt for capitalism, forced to camouflage itself behind the mask of neocolonialism.'[4] Fanon underscores the willingness of a new national bourgeoisie to capitulate to the pressures of international capital.[5] Writing as he does in the 1960s, he does not use a term such as neoliberalism but the latter can be seen as a defining feature of neocolonialism in South Africa. Despite government engaging in social spending and welfare initiatives, a conservative macroeconomic agenda was sedimented during Mbeki's term in office. In this regard, there has been a basic contradiction between policies that promote social upliftment and the macroeconomic orthodoxies of strategies such as Growth Employment and Redistribution. As Fantu Cheru argues,

> [T]he heavy reliance on market forces to redress the legacies of apartheid is misguided and unsustainable in a society marked by extreme inequality and poverty. The gulf between the government's macro-economic policy and its social policy is glaringly apparent.[6]

The cleavage between social policy and a conservative macroeconomic system has entailed that over two decades into democracy the post-Apartheid state has not provided the hoped for liberation of all South African people. Post-Apartheid South Africa is one of the most unequal societies on earth in which the richest 20% of the country earn 70% of the Nation's wealth while the poorest 60% receive just 10% of national income.[7] 52% of South Africans fall below the official poverty line and unemployment stands at 25-36% but at the same time the country boasts some 47,000 Dollar millionaires.[8] A market-based approach has contributed to growing levels of inequality, and in instances where material welfare has improved this has been achieved through state intervention. Cheru notes,

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[4] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.100.
[5] Patrick Bond notes the relevance of Fanonian thought to the betrayals of the Post-Apartheid dispensation. Cf. "Talk Left, Walk Right: Rhetoric and Reality in the New South Africa", *Global Dialogue,* 6: 3/4 (2004), 127-140 (p. 132).
[6] Fantu Cheru, "Overcoming Apartheid's Legacy: The Ascendancy of Neoliberalism in South Africa's Anti-Poverty Strategy", *Third World Quarterly*, 22: 4 (2001), 505-527 (p.521).
[7] Arden Finn Murray & Leibbrandt Vimal Ranchhod, "Post-apartheid poverty and inequality trends", in *The Oxford Companion to the Economics of South Africa,* ed. Haroon Bhorat, Alan Hirsch, Ravi Kanbur, and Mthuli Ncube (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 292-297 (p.295).
[8] Roger Southall, "The coming crisis of Zuma's ANC: the party state confronts fiscal crisis", *Review of African Political Economy,* 43:147 (2016), 73–88 (p.76).

> [I]n cases where clear social gains have been registered since 1994, (eg provision of water supply and education), these are the results of direct and concerted government intervention (in the face of budget reductions) rather than an outcome of the magic of the market place.[9]

Government has found itself caught between a commitment to redressing imbalances and obligations made to capitalist power. As the years have shown, dependence on economic growth is no substitute for a strong welfare policy and South Africa's black majority continue to suffer.

Apart from the travesty of capitalist policies, the African National Congress has also engendered structural and economic woes through operating an elaborate system of patronage. This is a form of corruption in which close allies are appointed to key state roles and government grants are bestowed upon favoured individuals.[10] The trend had become noticeable by the time Mbeki assumed office in 1999 and has reached its nadir under Zuma's presidency, ultimately proving an immense drain on public funds.[11] Writing for the *Review of African Political Economy*, Roger Southall notes the, 'inexorable rise in the number and cost of government employees' and that 'those in employment in central and provincial government had risen by 27% between 2005 and 2012, but their average per capita remuneration had doubled in that period'.[12] During this timeframe, total state employment went up by 13% but the cost of this rose 76%. According to Southall's recent calculation, if civil service salaries and government handouts continue to be meted out at the current rate, all public revenue will be absorbed by 2026. [13] In this regard, Fanon's thought continues to be apposite in describing the deplorable behaviour of the African National Congress. Speaking of the depravity of the new elite, Fanon writes, 'favors abound, corruption triumphs, and morals decline. Today the vultures are too numerous and too greedy, considering the meagerness of the national spoils'. [14] Fanon encapsulates well the rapacious nature of a new bourgeoisie, who prey upon the nation's resources, desiring more than it can provide.

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[9] Cheru, "Overcoming Apartheid's Legacy: The Ascendancy of Neoliberalism in South Africa's Anti-Poverty Strategy", p. 509.
[10] RW Johnson, *How Long Will South Africa Survive?* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), p.245.
[11] Southall, "The coming crisis of Zuma's ANC: the party state confronts fiscal crisis", p. 81.
[12] Southall, "The coming crisis of Zuma's ANC: the party state confronts fiscal crisis", p.76.
[13] Southall, "The coming crisis of Zuma's ANC: the party state confronts fiscal crisis", p.76.
[14] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 116.

There is a crisis at hand and inflated public sector salaries are placing great strain on the national budget. The cost of keeping party acolytes in lucrative government positions far outstrips productive investment in the economy and portends unprecedented structural woes. Over his eight years in office, President Zuma has set an appalling example from the very highest position in government most prominently through spending 248 million Rands of public funds on upgrades to his private home in Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal, an act which has been criticised and called to account by the ex-Public Protector Thuli Madonsela.[15] The rise of an individualistic and self-serving model of black identity, propounded by the African National Congress, has built a class all too willing to profit at the expense of public good and this has compromised notions of racial unity, complicating any liberation project based on the criteria of race alone. Blackness can no longer be conceptualised as the primary determinant of an insurgent and revolutionary identity. A liberatory agenda will have to work for the empowerment of the black poor through taking into account the gaping chasm between their plight and the privileged lifestyles of a new select group of empowered individuals.

It is pivotal to note that the use, and abuse, of language has been instrumental to the legitimation of an inequitable post-Apartheid dispensation. Revolutionary rhetoric handed down from the anti-Apartheid movement now markets, disguises and obfuscates the corruption and failures of the new democracy. Bond has defined this as a situation in which politicians 'talk left, walk right'.[16] The language of struggle, economic revolution and black solidarity has been corrupted in an attempt to secure continued support from the disempowered majority.[17] In the process, the unjust nature of the contemporary socio-economic terrain has become embellished. The importance for poets to resist the commercialisation of language is particularly pressing in contemporary South Africa. Kelwyn Sole highlights,

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[15] Southall, "The coming crisis of Zuma's ANC: the party state confronts fiscal crisis", p. 76. Notably, in response to Thuli Madonsela's report, Jacob Zuma eventually paid back R7.8 million—a part of taxpayer's money spent on non-security upgrades to Nkandla. Cf. Govan Whittles, "Zuma pays back the money—but where did he get the R7.8 million?", *Mail & Guardian*, 12 September 2016, <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-09-12-zuma-pays-back-the-money-but-where-did-he-get-the-r78-million> [Accessed 29/09/2016] (Para. 1 of 18).
[16] Patrick Bond, "Talk Left, Walk Right: Rhetoric and Reality in the New South Africa", p. 132.
[17] Patrick Bond, "Talk Left, Walk Right: Rhetoric and Reality in the New South Africa", p. 132.

> There is a discernible tendency by organs of the state and big business to turn to poetry in order to communicate marketing and political messages, as well as helping shape the subjectivity of the 'ideal individual' required by the nation and state capitalism.[18]

Sole draws attention to SASOL Oil Company's *Inzalo* project, which 'featured prominent poets as part of their promotion drive' and 'offered 19 million ordinary shares in SASOL to black people'.[19] *Inzalo* is one instance of an enterprise that is both corporate and infused with patriotic rhetoric. In the words of past CEO Pat Davies, 'Sasol is truly committed to South Africa's transformation and wants to make broad-based economic empowerment a reality […by] providing the majority of South Africans with the opportunity to develop the skills needed to build our nation'.[20] In the *Inzalo* advertisements, poets such as Don Mattera, Lebo Mashile and Mac Manaka lend their support to a discourse of national reconstruction.

Given the washed out nature of a once vibrant struggle tradition and the encroachment of state and capital upon poetic independence, the politics and poetry of the post-Apartheid era demand a new idiom. Innovative poetry can be a means of subverting government and corporate representations of individuality, citizenship and collective belonging in the post-Apartheid milieu. Through formal inventiveness, poets are able to craft new lenses through which to view the political realm. Below, I sketch the genesis of post-Apartheid literary experimentation.

While it is true that the post-Apartheid era has not seen true economic equality for all of South Africa's people, it has to be acknowledged that the dawn of a new nation has opened up expressive and artistic possibilities that were previously unachievable and unattainable in the country's history. On the one hand, Apartheid and colonial rule was marked by censorship and blatant disregard for the cultures and languages of

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[18] Kelwyn Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa", *Mediations*, 24.1 (2008), 132-165 (p. 159). Note that Sole's article is quoted in Patel, "Marikana: Putting words to tragedy" (Para.9 Of 22)
[19] Sole, p. 158.
[20] "SASOL INZALO: THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA FOR SUSTAINED BROAD-BASED BEE", *SASOL Investor Centre*, 25 March 2008 < http://www.sasol.co.za/investor-centre/sasol-inzalo/sasol-inzalo-dawn-new-era-sustained-broad-based-bee> [Accessed 23 April 2014]

South Africa's indigenous people. On the other, anti-Apartheid movements frequently called for culture to be a weapon of struggle and emphasised the importance of solidarity literature. Between the repressive forces of the nationalist government and the coercive demands of the liberation movement, art often found itself constrained and limited by politics. As it became clear that Apartheid would be surmounted and a black government would take the reins in South Africa, critics and commentators emphasised the importance of forging new models of subjectivity and creativity that went beyond the one-dimensionality of protest art or narrowly political themes. Albie Sachs's 1989 speech delivered at an African National Congress seminar in Lesotho entitled "Preparing ourselves for Freedom" is characteristic. In this paper, Sachs made the bold claim that members of the party should be banned from positioning art as a weapon of struggle.[21] Similarly, the prominent literary critic Njabulo Ndebele published his seminal collection of essays *South African Literature and Culture: The Rediscovery of the Ordinary* in 1994, that urged writers and poets to produce more nuanced and personal works of art than had gained hegemony during South Africa's struggle years.[22] In the realm of poetry, Soweto-born Lesego Rampolokeng has been an outspoken critic of simplistic solidarity art. In a 1999 interview with critic Robert Berold, Rampolokeng spoke of the strain that the struggle placed upon poetic vitality during the anti-apartheid campaign, 'People killed off their art because they were busy fighting a cause, which was the thing to do. They were fighting a cause and it killed off whatever was within them, as the essence of their art'[23]. In an effort to escape this straightjacket, in 1994, Rampolokeng, and other young poets like him, sought to chart new poetic territory and possibilities of literary articulation.

The early 1990s saw the emergence of more experimental styles of writing and a new cluster of poets began to emerge who were willing to push at the expressive limits of language, writing on a variety of themes and harnessing the range of South African languages. This new-found creativity did not typically eschew politics altogether. Sole argues that all these poets shared,

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[21] Albie Sachs, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines", *TDR*, 35:1 (1991), pp. 187-193 (p.187).
[22] Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (COSAW, 1991).
[23] Robert Berold, "Interview: Oral Poetry, Lesego Rampolokeng and Ike Mboneni Mulla", *New Coin*, 35:1 (1999), 36-45 (p.40).

> [A] purpose beyond the confines of both (on the one hand) the ungainly platitudes and sloganizing of a certain amount of previous political poetry, and (on the other) the sterile aestheticism and mimicking provincialism of a dated, predominantly Eurocentric, liberal poetic tradition [...] It is noteworthy that most of the poets who are active in forging this new poetry wish to combine sociopolitical commitment with a concern for appropriate poetic style.[24]

Sole draws attention to the fact that at the inception of the post-Apartheid era, a certain cluster of poets emerged who aimed to broaden the formal repertoire of South African letters but who also felt compelled to hold fast to political commitment. This is a style of politics rooted in a fidelity to capturing the everyday struggles and details of their immediate reality. Thus, flying in the face of critics such as Sachs and Ndebele, such poets did not feel the need to binarise political and non-political art, and in fact, saw original and personal poetic forms as a way of critiquing power. These writers came from a diversity of racial, linguistic and cultural backgrounds and included the likes of Tatamkhulu Afrika and editor Karen Press. The fresh and bold writing was most prominently displayed in the pages of the poetry journal *New Coin* between 1989 and 1999. Under the editorial stewardship of Eastern Cape poet and teacher Robert Berold, the poetry journal broke new ground in South African literature and in the years directly after Apartheid, *New Coin* exemplified some of the most exciting trends in recent South African poetry. Its pages did not create facile divisions between indigenous African cultures and metropolitan 'Western' forms of writing. In its editions, one viewed the establishment of voices formed by a plethora of South African and international traditions. *New Coin*'s writing developed sophisticated methods of commenting upon changing economic conditions, devising new forms adequate to shifting historical currents.[25]

My thesis focuses on the writing of six poets who rose to prominence during the bubble of poetic vitality that infused *New Coin* at the outset of the new democracy: Ari Sitas, Seitlhamo Motsapi, Lesego Rampolokeng, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Vonani Bila and Angifi Dladla. While these poets hail from diverse backgrounds, there are several key linkages and commonalities amongst them. All of these artists lived through Apartheid

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[24] Kelwyn Sole, "Bird Hearts Taking Wing: Trends in Contemporary South African Poetry Written in English", *World Literature Today*, 70:1 (1996), 25-31 (p.25).
[25] Kelwyn Sole, "The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculation, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa", *New Formations*, 45 (2001), 24-53 (p. 25).

and were young, or of middle age, at the dawn of liberation. Eager and able citizens willing to build a new democracy, they have been bitterly disappointed by the African National Congress's abandonment of South Africa's black majority. The poets in question have, in the words of Sole, set about 'bearing witness' to unrelenting social ills through drawing upon the dynamism of poetry in order to rejuvenate public language, dialogue and debate. [26] All of these writers have been involved in politics or activism. They make a point of incorporating these real world experiences into their work. Sitas invokes worker chants from his time spent in Durban's labour movement and Dladla remains fascinated by the Gauteng prisons where he has taught creative writing. The poetry under discussion is moulded by the active public life of its writers and in turn seeks to speak to a wider world.

The poetry of Sitas, Motsapi, Rampolokeng, Nyezwa, Bila and Dladla is distinct in South Africa's literary history. This is insofar as their work can be distinguished from the private and inward looking nature of South Africa's English lyric tradition and the strident, sometimes simplistic, style of solidarity art championed by organisations such as the United Democratic Front. These poets are united in rejecting the boundary between formally complex and political art.[27] Indeed, for all of these writers, it is precisely through formal play that a politics is enunciated. Aesthetic virtuosity is able to challenge anodyne and corporate styles of utterance, providing an alternative to the over-simplified messages of media, government and the capitalist world. [28]

These writers are connected through literary friendship, and are avid readers of one another's work, forming what Robert Berold has called 'very strong attachments' to each other's writing.[29] In addition, their literary output appears in common publishing bodies, for example *Deep South*, *Timbila* and *Kotaz*. There are also overlaps in poetic technique. Here, one can point to Sitas's and Nyezwa's use of surrealism to interpret and portray the strangeness of lived reality, Rampolokeng and Motsapi's interest in neologisms and Bila and Dladla's mutual pre-occupation with the longer form, as a

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[26] Kelwyn Sole, "The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculation, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa", p. 25.
[27] Kelwyn Sole, "I have learned to hear more acutely", *Cross-Cultural Poetics,* 21/22 (2009), 240 – 266 (pp. 241-242).
[28] Kelwyn Sole, "I have learned to hear more acutely", p. 242.
[29] Alice Meyer, "Interview with Robert Berold" (Grahamstown: 4 September 2015).

means of weaving comprehensive and multi-faceted narratives of South Africa's structural reality. Finally, the question of place and location is integral to all of this writing. It is this that makes its messages resonant. Rampolokeng's anger is rooted in the spirit of the 1976 Soweto revolts, Nyezwa represents the Eastern Cape landscape and Bila provides unique insight into the plight of South Africa's rural communities, a theme seldom explored in South African literature. The poetry revitalises language precisely because it is willing to tell stories of disregarded and forgotten places. Words, rhythm and form sound out the realities of localised injustices.

Structurally, this thesis is divided into six chapters, with each devoted to the work of a single poet. I here discuss the broad themes of my chapters and the contribution that the different writers in this study make to South African political poetry. The first chapter of my PhD hones in on a recent political event in order to evaluate the contemporary relevance of poetry in South Africa. The chapter engages with poetic response to the August 2012 Marikana mine massacre. I single out Ari Sitas's poem "Marikana" for special mention because of its literary accomplishment and perceptive political vision. Operating through surrealism, montage and layered metaphor, Sitas's poetry places emphasis upon the need to interrogate official depictions of the Marikana massacre. In context of the Marikana tragedy, that was portrayed through competing narratives, namely those of the police, the government and striking workers; the Cape Town poet and sociologist puts multiple voices into play. In so doing, he bursts apart homogenous representations of South Africa's left wing and working class, establishing a radical poetic form that matches his real-life trade union activism.

Chapter Two explores the poetry of Seitlhamo Motsapi, who produced the extraordinary collection *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow* in 1995. Specifically, I focus on the refusal of symbolic representation in Motsapi's work. By this I mean the way in which he intentionally subverts communication, language and public discourse in order to critique oppressive cultural systems, namely colonialism, Apartheid and neo-colonialism. I contend that it is through aesthetic dissonance and meditative silence that the book forges two competing techniques of overhauling corrupt systems of representative meaning. In terms of Motsapi's dissonance, the poet instantiates fissures

within language through stammers, interruptions and staccato poetic rhythms. In so doing, his style ruptures the eloquence of both colonial English and post-Apartheid 'Rainbow Nation' vocabulary. In a complimentary vein, Motsapi's silent spaces are a way of refusing historic racist culture and the contamination of democratic language by South Africa's new elite. In subverting the fluency of an historically oppressive English tongue, and placing linguistic checks upon facile representations of black unity, Motsapi articulates a critique of both language and power. The result is a decimation of, and a retreat from, the word.

The linguistic experiments of Lesego Rampolokeng form the subject of Chapter Three. Rampolokeng is the author of *Horns for Hondo* (1990), *Talking Rain* (1993), *The Bavino Sermons* (1999), *Head on Fire: Rants/Notes/ Poems 2001-2011* (2012) and *a half century thing* (2015). I evaluate Rampolokeng's project of 'Writing the Ungovernable' and argue that the poet's linguistic virtuosity can be a successful means of combatting oppressive ideologies of Apartheid and (neo)colonialism. While Rampolokeng shares Motsapi's passion for creating linguistic disorder, his project is also concerned to enunciate fresh means of expression. In detail, I analyse the interface between neologisms and neoliberalism in *Head on Fire*. Rampolokeng draws upon the productive potential of the former in order to overthrow the flexibility and mutability of the latter economic system. I find that Rampolokeng's political agenda necessitates renovation of the word and paves the way for innovative models of social identity in contemporary South Africa.

The poetry of Eastern Cape writer Mxolisi Nyezwa is reminiscent of Sitas's work in its use of surreal expression but Nyezwa deploys this technique in order to express the interconnectedness of humanity and environment. My fourth chapter examines the relationship between Nyezwa's surreal lyric and the ecology of his Eastern Cape surrounds. The political force of Nyezwa's work resides in its ability to reveal hidden bonds between humans and nature, registering the relationship between social and ecological justice in the post-Apartheid era. I contend that contemporary South Africa exemplifies Jason W. Moore's theorisation of a Capitalist World-Ecology in which the rapacity of capitalism, destruction of human potential and degradation of natural resources are enmeshed. The point has become manifestly evident in Nyezwa's local

Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality through the emergence of the Coega Industrial Complex. Ultimately, Nyezwa's lyric unveils and opposes the sordid relationship between capitalism and ecological decay in the post-Apartheid milieu.

Chapter Five examines the work of poet-Activist Vonani Bila, author of *No Free Sleeping* (1998), *In the Name of Amandla* (2004), *Magicstan Fires* (2006), *Handsome Jita* (2007) and *Bilakhulu* (2015). Firmly committed to preserving the culture of his native Elim, Bila works in both English and Xitsonga. He is a prominent advocate of the vitality of South African languages and is founder of the multilingual arts journal *Timbila*, which he runs from within his home village. I unpack Bila's poetics through reference to his *Timbila* poetry project. I argue that *Timbila* writing heralds a new aesthetic category in post-Apartheid South Africa and that this style is exemplified in Bila's own work. *Timbila* writing is a literature of social necessity that plays a vital role in recording the inequities and injustices of particular South African communities. This poetry makes masterful use of narrative style. I highlight Bila's narrative craftsmanship, which chronicles the realities of his home province of Limpopo. I strive for a deeper understanding of Bila's art as well as to contribute to a revitalised South African aesthetic vocabulary, one that walks in time with its historical moment.

My final chapter discusses the poetry of Angifi Proctor Dladla. A playwright and teacher, Dladla writes in both English and isiZulu and initiated the Femba project, which teaches creative writing to prison inmates, most notably in Boksburg prison. Dladla's first book of poems *The Girl Who Then Feared to Sleep* was published by Deep South in 2001, and in 2016 he published *We are all Rivers* and *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*. This chapter analyses Dladla's transition from shorter lyric poems to the use of longer epic and satirical forms over the period 2001-2015. I illustrate how evolutions in Dladla's poetry can both illuminate and critique societal unrest in South Africa today, specifically the vulnerability of the economy, the commercialisation of black identity and the decline of the African National Congress's political popularity.

Confronted with the over-simplification of information in an epoch of late-capitalism, the poets in this thesis seek to invigorate language in order to fashion new perceptions of the world in which they live. The words of the Language poet Charles Bernstein are relevant, 'As we consider the conventions of writing, we are entering into the politics of language'.[30] For Bernstein, the communal nature of language means that 'alternative aesthetic conventions […are] alternative social formations.'[31] This entails that formal ingenuity can be a way of countering power. Such an agenda dialogues well with contemporary South African writing, which undermines existing political structures through an overhaul of the word. One is reminded of Nathaniel Mackey's observation that experimental aesthetics are not only the provenance of privileged and metropolitan milieus. Speaking of transnational black writing, Mackey bemoans the tendency of critics to read literature from oppressed communities as straightforward narratives of identity. For Mackey, 'experimental writing, the aesthetic margin, is not the domain solely of those from socially nonmarginalized groups'[32]. The poetry examined in this thesis bears out Mackey's argument. Indeed, it constitutes art that emerges from disadvantaged and unstable socioeconomic environments and it reacts to this climate through radical literary praxis.

It is to be regretted that this thesis does not include poetry by women or women of colour, who continue to form the majority of South Africa's socially marginalised demographic. The reason for this omission is nuanced. There is a paucity of formally experimental and politically radical work by female writers in South Africa today. One can account for this by noting that women, especially black women, continue to suffer from unequal opportunities and lack access to resources, cultural capital and education in what is still a highly patriarchal nation. Women of colour suffer acutely from the double burden of racism and patriarchy, continuing to do the majority of the country's unpaid work, especially in rural communities.[33] The few black women who have received empowerment form part of an elite with little connection to the masses. The tone of their writing is frequently highly individualistic and relies on the

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[30] Charles Bernstein, "Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form", in *The Politics of Poetic Form*, ed. by Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990), pp. 235-244 (p.235).
[31] Bernstein, "Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form", p. 242.
[32] Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement, Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 19.
[33] Cheru, "Overcoming Apartheid's Legacy: The Ascendancy of Neoliberalism in South Africa's Anti-Poverty Strategy", p. 506.

marketisation of a socially mobile identity. The spoken word poetry of the performance artist Lebo Mashile is a prime example of this trend. Her work is both formally and politically dissatisfying, often operating through what Sole terms '*Cosmo*-speak', or the clichéd language of women's magazines, enunciating a glamorous persona concerned with individual success.[34] The model of society sold to the reader is one in which women are to be equal to men under the current dispensation of capitalist patriarchy. No wide-ranging systemic change is called for.

There are some female voices that were possible candidates for study in this thesis: Malika Ndlovu, Isabella Motandinyane and Karen Press. These women constitute some of the few truly interesting female voices in post-Apartheid South African poetry. They have been excluded with good reason. Ndlovu's best work comes through in performance and my study is concerned with poetry of the page. In her own turn, Motandinyane died tragically and prematurely of HIV/Aids in 2003, and her oeuvre remains fragmentary and incomplete.[35] Finally, Karen Press's white, middle-class background means that her poetry does not speak from the felt sense of marginalisation that makes much of the material in this thesis so striking. One can only hope that the conditions of possibility for women writers will shift in South Africa, that their creative output will flourish and that future doctorates will be written on the subject.

Another lacuna in this project is that all the poetry in this thesis is English language. This is an issue comparable to the absence of women's poetry because it underscores the limitations placed upon culture by the patriarchal, racist and Anglo-centric nature of South African society. The reason I do not pay attention to indigenous literature is that it is endangered in South Africa today, with very little writing being produced in these tongues. Patrick Ngulube highlights the, 'significant reluctance on the part of both the authors and publishers to produce indigenous titles because some languages are perceived to have a small market, and many rural people are thought to have

[34] Kelwyn Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky?: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa." *Mediations* 24:1 (2008) 132-165 (p.155)
[35] Cf. Isabella Motadinyane, *Complete Poems* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2016).

limited disposable income.'[36] In light of these facts, it is noteworthy that poets such as Bila and Nyezwa do make a point of incorporating multilingual work into their journals *Timbila* and *Kotaz* but ultimately there is not a great enough range of such writing for it to warrant close analysis. Even though the poetry under consideration is English, the impact of indigenous traditions is keenly felt in its rhythms and structure. Nyezwa's use of isiXhosa techniques of parallelism or Bila's Tsitsonga idiom defamiliarise the conventions of English. This tongue, which has become a tool of government and commerce, is re-invented and infused with new life.

The writers in this thesis are involved in groundbreaking publishing practices that match the startling nature of their work. Many of these poets have started their own literary journals and publishing initiatives, often with strong ties to grass-roots communities. Here, one can mention Mxolisi Nyezwa's development of the English/isiXhosa multicultural arts journal *Kotaz* in the Eastern Cape and Vonani Bila's *Timbila* publishing in the Limpopo province.[37] Poet Alan Finlay, the only scholar to have written extensively on the field of independent poetry publishing in the post-Apartheid era, argues that this work produces 'counterpublics'. Indeed, via use of independent journals and magazines, artists and writers depict their own cultural perspectives as legitimate alternatives to the mainstream media. For Finlay, this 'is a response to a felt sense of the marginalisation of voices […] This includes political perspectives such as the 'angry' […] voices of the poor, the voices of young black poets, socially and politically alert and critical new writing….' [38] Finlay asserts that self-determining publishing practices, such as those started by poets in this thesis, provide platforms from which marginalised voices are able to articulate their beliefs, political stances and sense of identity. While these publishing bodies have diverse concerns, through producing autonomous methods of poetic production and distribution, they are able to create spaces in which non-commercial and potentially revolutionary art can be heard.

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[36] Patrick Ngulube, "Revitalising and preserving endangered indigenous languages in South Africa through writing and publishing", *South African Journals of Libraries and Information Science*, 78:1 (2012), 11-24 (p.11).
[37] Alan Finlay, "Making space: the counterpublics of post-apartheid independent literary publishing activities (1994–2004)", *Social Dynamics*, 36:1 (2010), 166-178 (p. 167); Allan Kolski Horwitz *et al.*, eds., 1994. "What is BOTSOTSO? Editorial", *Botsotso,* 1 (1994), 1 (p.1).
[38] Alan Finlay, "Making space: the counterpublics of post-apartheid independent literary publishing activities (1994–2004)", *Social Dynamics*, pp. 171-172.

Finlay emphasises that the ethos of South Africa's independent poetry scene is not profit-orientated and is decidedly anti-capitalist in nature,

> That they still insist on publishing poetry in book form when it is commonly held that there is no market for poetry in South Africa would be remarkable under different circumstances. Instead it encapsulates the notion that the publishers are more concerned with their act of (poetic) world making than responding to what is marketable […] If sites of circulation are refused, this may be a cause for advocacy, not product change.[39]

Finlay's analysis allows one to understand the poets in this thesis as forming part of an anti-commercial presence in South African literature that is willing to back daring poetic forms on the basis of their ability to forge alternatives to mainstream culture. The dynamic nature of the poetry I examine is borne from pioneering material processes of labour and production. These practices of production and distribution operate at some distance from the academy. Indeed, while some poets in this thesis have received recognition, for example Nyezwa has been the recipient of the Thomas Pringle Award, these writers are little known locally and largely excluded from the University syllabus.

Even though this poetry distances itself from the mainstream and the readership for this work is small, as Finlay argues, it is precisely this sense of marginalisation that allows the work to defy corporate logic and pioneer innovative forms. Furthermore, it does have impact in specific community settings such as Bila's Elim, Nyezwa's Motherwell Township or the Gauteng prisons in which Dladla has run creative writing courses. These poets achieve local victories in a context of grand-scale structural injustice. This kind of proactive community work paves the way for empowered models of citizenship to come into being, laying ground for assertive models of cultural and political action. It is also vital to note that regardless of the extent of this poetry's readership, its existence is testament to the existence of a radical consciousness, constituting evidence of resistance to the disappointments of the post-Apartheid political realm.

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[39] Alan William Finlay, "*Making Space:* The counterpublics of post-apartheid independent literary publishing activities (1994-2004)" (unpublished master's thesis, University of the Witwaterstrand, 2009), pp. 132-133.

In closing, I underline the lack of intelligent criticism or secondary material on the poetry in question. In general, South African literary scholarship is far more interested in prose and even within the little-studied field of poetry, the writing in this thesis is considered peripheral. The work of Kelwyn Sole and Robert Berold has thus been invaluable in salvaging this poetry, promoting its qualities and providing analysis of its achievements. Apart from these figures, there is little scholarly material of worth available. These critics underline the fact that even when this poetry is studied, it is misinterpreted and misrepresented. Sole and Berold both argue that the country lacks adequate frameworks for understanding and discussing the nation's most talented poets.[40] Speaking in Cambridge in 2015 Sole stated, 'there is a challenge at hand. It is not a problem of the poetry itself: it is a problem of our ability, as critics, to keep abreast of, and adequately analyse, the topography of South African poetry'.[41] For Sole, this problem is particularly acute in relation to the evaluation of Black South African poetry in which 'consideration of poetics is seldom attempted [….] Formal discussion falters precisely at the point where discussion of aesthetics should be initiated.[42] Sole captures the fact that black South African poetry is frequently read sociologically or anthropologically without regard for its formal achievements. This thesis seeks to redress the failures of South African literary criticism by paying close attention to questions of post-Apartheid poetics.

Due to the paucity of academic and public information on the poets I examine, I conducted fieldwork in South Africa from August to September 2015. The aim of the project was to travel the country interviewing poets in the places and spaces where they create and feel most comfortable. During this time, I was impressed by the closeness with which these poets read each other's work, the centrality of community to their lives and also the extent to which they are influenced by a range of global cultural traditions including twentieth century modernism, Language poetry and pan-Africanism. Interviewing poets was an elucidating experience but fieldwork also spotlighted the need for critical intervention. Indeed, none of the writers I met proved

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[40] Kelwyn Sole, "The Endless Deferral of Value: 'Formal' vs. 'Sociological' Criticism in Black South African Poetry", presented at *Writing South Africa Now*, Cambridge, 26-27 June 2015, p.2; Alice Meyer, "Interview with Robert Berold".
[41] Sole, "The Endless Deferral of Value: 'Formal' vs. 'Sociological' Criticism in Black South African Poetry, p.2.
[42] Sole, "The Endless Deferral of Value: 'Formal' vs. 'Sociological' Criticism in Black South African Poetry", p. 12.

willing to interpret the shape, meaning or resonance of their poetry, preferring the material to speak for itself.

This dissertation performs a curatorial role in laying bibliographic and conceptual groundwork in what must be seen as a nascent field of study in the academy: contemporary South African poetry. I also offer poetic analysis of this material and relate its forms to a wider political landscape. I argue that this scholarly area needs to be developed and opened to scrutiny because post-Apartheid poetry challenges the formal and contextual vocabulary of existing literary criticism. Drawing as it does upon a range of international and indigenous traditions, fusing low and high culture, cutting across the page and the stage, South African poetry needs to be read with a fresh literary perception.[43] This culture of the aesthetic and political margin must be taken seriously as extending the global corpus of experimental poetry, challenging power through pioneering use of form.

[43]Sole, "The Endless Deferral of Value: 'Formal' vs. 'Sociological' Criticism in Black South African Poetry", p. 3.

Chapter One

Poetic Response to Marikana: The Political Value of Ari Sitas's Style

This chapter pays specific attention to poetry produced in the wake of the 2012 Marikana massacre. The range of poetic response to the most significant incident of police brutality in the post-Apartheid epoch casts edifying light upon the quality and texture of contemporary South African poetry and its ability to comment upon the most pressing political events of its time. After surveying a range of poetic material on Marikana, I ground my case for the political relevance of poetry through recourse to the work of well-known South African playwright and poet Ari Sitas, who is also a sociologist at the University of Cape Town. Sitas has produced politically engaged poetry under the apartheid regime and in the post-liberation epoch. *Tropical Scars* (1989) and *Slave Trades* (2000) are complex and formally demanding collections that are influenced by jazz music, avant-garde literature and surrealism but nevertheless comment insightfully upon social conflict. He was a key leader of anti-apartheid trade union movements in the 1980s. The poet's historical affiliation to the country's working class makes him a particularly apposite figure to draw upon when analysing the literature of the Rustenburg strikes. My chapter analyses Sitas's "Marikana". I underscore the poem's commitment to situating art firmly within the socioeconomic context in which it is produced. Through a discussion of "Marikana"'s shifts in vocal register and use of imagery, I place emphasis upon the relationship between its form and the political realm. Attention to questions of voice and metaphor suggests that poetry can perform a special kind of societal criticism. In Sitas's work, both the incorporation of interlocking personas and the use of figurative language, foreground issues of representation and the importance of symbol, to South Africa's struggling people.

The Marikana mine massacre was one of the most tragic events of the post-Apartheid era and marked disturbing continuity between the repressive Apartheid regime and South Africa's new black government. I begin by outlining the background to Marikana and the neoliberal economic dynamics that the event has laid bare. This act of contextualisation reveals the structural affinities between Apartheid and the democratic South Africa of today. A deeper socioeconomic knowledge of Marikana is necessary in order to understand the material co-ordinates in which South African literature is situated. The second stage of this argument will

describe cultural and literary response to Marikana and engages this emerging body of work with a longer view of the historical relationship between art and politics in the country. I will then move on to a close reading of Ari Sitas's poem, "Marikana" in order to establish the political value of contemporary South African poetry. The manipulation of form will be seen as pivotal to articulating critique of the post-Apartheid nation.

The Marikana massacre took place on the 16th of August 2012 outside Rustenburg in the North West Province of South Africa. Police shot and killed thirty-four striking workers at Lonmin platinum mine in an act of state violence reminiscent of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and the Soweto student uprisings of 1976.[1] Members of the police have stated that they acted in self-defence but their testimony appears unreliable given that workers were camping peacefully at a rocky outcrop when 'police reeled out razor wire in front of them'[2]. This act of aggression caused the miners to fear entrapment and begin walking towards Nkaneng, an informal settlement, which was home to many of the strikers. Miners were retreating and not a threat to police at the time that a special task force opened fire upon them. Twenty men were killed within a matter of seconds causing the remaining fourteen to gather at a small hill some 300m from their original location. Here, these survivors were cornered and brutally killed. South African scholar and activist Martin Legassick underscores the inexcusable nature of state force, 'autopsies reveal that most of the workers were shot in the back, confirmation that they were mowed down by the police while escaping'.[3] The credibility of the police is further brought into question in light of evidence that they positioned weapons alongside the corpses of the victims in order to make the strikers appear more violent than they really were. It is pivotal to recognise that the police were not isolated actors. Crucially, both the National Union of Mine Workers and London-based Lonmin, the world's third largest producer of platinum pressurised the government to view the non-unionised strikes as criminal actions rather than as a labour dispute and this rationalised a higher level of violence. [4] The actions

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[1] Peter Alexander, "Marikana, Turning Point in South Africa's History", *Review of African Political Economy, Special Issue: Revisting The South African Developmental Impasse: The National Neoliberal Revolution*, ed. by Nicolas Pons-Vignon, Aurelia Segatti and Ray Bush, 40 (2013), 605-619 (p.605).
[2] Alexander, "Marikana, Turning Point in South Africa's History", p. 608
[3] Martin Legassick, "South Africa: Marikana Massacre – A Turning Point?", *Links* (2012) <http://links.org.au/node/3002> [Accessed 21 April 2014] (Para 12. Of 37).
[4]Alexander, p. 608 & Mauve McClenaghan and David Smith, "The British Mine Owners, the Police and South Africa's Day of Blood", *The Observer*, 24 November 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/nov/24/lonmin-mine-shooting-police> [Accessed 21 April 2014] (Para 8. Of 52).

taken at Marikana can be interpreted as resulting from the indifference of unions, big business and the government to the plight of ordinary workers.

Marikana has been interpreted as emblematic of deeper inequities within South Africa in which former anti-Apartheid heroes have betrayed the cause of South Africa's poor. Writing for the European socialist magazine *Red Pepper*, Leonard Gentle argues, 'The ANC's moral legitimacy as the leading force in the struggle for democracy has now been irrevocably squandered and the struggle for social justice has now passed on to a whole new working class'.[5] According to Gentle, the injustice of Marikana emphasises that the historic Tripartite Alliance consisting of the African National Congress, The Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party has lost credibility among the left. A particularly striking example of a former activist turned profiteer is Cyril Ramaphosa. The deputy president of the country and former trade union leader was Lonmin's largest shareholder at the time of the strikes and used his political influence to garner state support for the platinum company in the days leading up to the massacre. One can interpret Ramaphosa's willingness to profit at the expense of slain miners as paradigmatic of Fanon's portrayal of opportunistic, greedy individuals within the new national bourgeoisie, 'inside the new regime […] some are able to cash in on all sides and prove to be brilliant opportunists. Favours abound, corruption triumphs, and morals decline'.[6] Crucially, Ramaphosa has never been held to account by South Africa's legal system and Judge Farlam, who headed the official inquiry into the Marikana killings, deemed the political leader innocent.[7]

Marikana condenses the two most significant political failings of the post-Apartheid dispensation because the incident is bound up with both the pressures of international capital and the onset of crony capitalism. The event illustrates the hidden dependency of neoliberalism upon corrupt state intervention and crony deals. In the December 2013 issue of *Review of African Political Economy*, Nicolas Pons-Vignon and Aurelia Segatti explain that even

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[5] Leonard Gentle, "Marikana Miners: The Massacre of our Illusions", *Red Pepper*, August 2012 <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/marikana-miners-the-massacre-of-our-illusions/> [Accessed 21 April 2014] (Para. 4 of 38).
[6] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 116.
[7] Greg Nicholson, "Marikana report: Key findings and recommendations", 26 June 2015, *Daily Maverick* <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-06-26-marikana-report-key-findings-and-recommendations/#.WNy3aWXF7zI> [Accessed 30/03/2017] (Para. 3 of 18).

though neoliberalism is an ideology that emphasises free trade and the deregulation of markets in order to achieve maximum profits, it also relies on the assistance of the state in order to ensure the dominance of capital, particularly finance capital over labour.[8] State violence at Marikana, motivated by the participation of key leaders, provides a sobering example of the way in which capital depends upon the support and networks of South Africa's democratically elected, largely black government. Workers were fighting for a living wage of R12,500 a month from a company whose top three managers received R44.6 million in 2011 alone.[9] Yet instead of government opting to support strikers, it pursued a line of action that harshly quashed labour in the interests of ensuring maximum profits for Lonmin's operations. The state-supported Farlam commission also emerged as critical of the miners' protests and sought to defend police authority. The conclusion of the report states,

> Bearing arms against a lawful authority should provoke widespread outrage. A career in the police service should not be a death warrant. Those who are found to have been culpable in relation to the criminal acts in the period 9 to 16 August 2012 in Marikana must bear the consequences of their conduct.[10]

The above words do not say that many of those involved in the 'criminal acts' surrounding Marikana have already borne the 'consequences of their conduct' through being unjustly killed. The report also does not acknowledge or condemn the structural violence of capitalism and the leaders who sustain its mechanisms. The law is upheld as ethically uncontentious, obfuscating the relationship between capital and oppression in South Africa's mining industry.

In today's democratic South Africa, it is to be expected that public reaction would evince resistance to the injustice of Marikana. It is thus disturbing that many prominent South African news sources demonstrated a tendency to bow to the status quo. Publications such as the *Financial Mail* focused upon the damage that labour unrest had upon platinum productivity and ran letters stereotyping workers as rowdy and uncontrolled.[11] In his

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[8] Nicolas Pons-Vignon and Aurelia Segatti, "'the art of neoliberalism': accumulation, institutional change and social order since the end of apartheid", *Review of African Political Economy, Special Issue: Revisiting The South African Developmental Impasse: The National Neoliberal Revolution*, ed. by Nicolas Pons-Vignon, Aurelia Segatti and Ray Bush, 40 (2013), 507-517 (p. 509).

[9] Legasick, "South Africa: Marikana Massacre – A Turning Point?" (Para. 5 & 7 of 37).

[10] "SAPS", in *The Marikana Commission of Inquiry*, <http://www.marikanacomm.org.za/docs/201411-HoA-SAPS.pdf> [Accessed 30/03/2017], p. 210.

[11] Charlotte Mathews, "Platinum Woes- Can Industry Survive Crisis?", *Financial Mail*, 11 September 2012 <http://www.financialmail.co.za/politics/2012/09/06/platinum-woes---can-industry-survive-crisis> [Accessed 12 May 2014]; Ted O' Connor, "Letter Marikana Shooting, What workers really need", *Financial Mail*, 4

contribution to *Moneyweb*, award-winning journalist and retired economics broadcaster Jerry Schuitema wrote, 'If I had a machine gun and they came storming at me from the hill, I doubt whether I could have resisted the urge to open fire'. [12] Schuitema's words indicate empathy for police violence against workers and Jane Duncan of Rhodes argues that such opinions are fairly typical of reporters, 'activists complain of experiencing persecution twice over: first at the hands of the police, then at the hands of the media'.[13]

Peter Alexander, Thapelo Lekgowa, Botsang Mmope, Luke Sinwell and Bongani Xezwi are a group of researchers affiliated with the University of the Witwaterstrand who sought to redress the marginalisation of worker perspectives at Marikana. These academics conducted extensive fieldwork in the Rustenburg area immediately after the massacre and secured interviews with miners who survived the strikes. In their seminal book *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* the group conclude, 'In contrast to the dominant view put forward by the media, government and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), we learned that the workers were, and remain, disciplined, peaceful and very well organised'.[14] The above extract indicates that far from being a source of accurate information, the South African media have frequently exhibited an elite bias in their attitude towards Marikana's workers.

In the immediate aftermath of Marikana, poetry too reached for a public voice and proved willing to respond to both government and media. Khadija Patel's article "Marikana: Putting words to tragedy" which appeared in *The Daily Maverick* on the 24th September 2012 testifies to the dynamic nature of poetic response to the event. Patel's article is significant because she is an influential voice in South African media and champions some of the country's most progressive grass-roots organisations such as the shack-dweller movement Abahlali

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September 2012 <http://www.financialmail.co.za/fm/2012/09/04/what-workers-really-need> [Accessed 12 May 2014].

[12] Jerry Schuitema, "Marikana as a microcosm", *Moneyweb*, 23 August 2012 <http://www.moneyweb.co.za/moneyweb-the-human-touch/marikana-as-a-microcosm> [Accessed 12 May 2014].

[13] Jane Duncan, "Media underplaying police, state brutality", *Sunday Independent*, 26 August 2012 <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/media-underplaying-police-state-brutality-1.1369675> [Accessed 21 April 2014] (Para. 21 of 31).

[14] Luke Sinwell, Thapelo Lekgowa, Botsang Mmope and Bongani Xezwi, "Introduction: Encounters in Marikana", in *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer*, by Peter Alexander, Luke Sinwell, Thapelo Lekgowa, Botsang Mmope and Bongani Xezwi (Jacana Media: South Africa, 2012; London: Bookmarks Publications, 2013), pp. 13-22 (p. 14).

baseMjondolo.[15] Even though Patel is herself a journalist, her article does not seek to establish the worth of the media in relation to commenting upon the massacre but aims to defend the ongoing relevance of poetry to political consideration of the incident. "Putting Words to Tragedy" is one of the earliest articles to identify the social value of art in the wake of Marikana and provides a springboard from which to explore the cultural and literary response to the killings.

At the outset of "Putting Words to Tragedy", Patel writes that poetic and musical portrayals of Marikana suggest that South African society is 'deeply conflicted' in its 'understanding of the tragedy, its causes and its potential effects'.[16] In order to demonstrate this societal friction, Patel includes diverse material such as a poem by sociologist Ari Sitas, to which I will return, lines by an anonymous policeman and a link to a rap song by Soundz of the South entitled, "Blood Shed of the Innocent". The clash in outlook between these last two works is particularly striking, with the policeman-poet defending the perspective of the police whilst Soundz of the South speak a message of systemic change and define themselves as, 'a network of activists who use hip-hop and poetry to spread revolutionary messages, raise consciousness and critique neo-liberalism'.[17] Anele Africa, a member of Soundz of the South, explains that the group wrote the song in order to 'add our voices in support of the miners demanding better working conditions, better living conditions and better pay'.[18] Soundz of the South's outlook indicates that verbal art has proved willing to oppose government and the corporate world in the wake of Marikana. In so doing, it offers an alternative to the sycophancy of legal response and media reports which have frequently sought to re-affirm state authority.

Marikana, A Moment in Time compiled and edited by Raphael d'Abdon (2013) was published soon after Patel's article and confirms the imbrication of South African poetry and politics. The book is dedicated to the memories of the dead miners and is a compilation of articles, artworks, short stories and poems by an array of local and international contributors, all of

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[15] Khadija Patel, "Abahlali baseMjondolo organise march of thousands in Durban in protest at repression", *Libcom.Org*, 17 September 2013 <https://libcom.org/news/abahlali-basemjondolo-organise-march-thousands-durban-protest-repression-17092013> [Accessed 25 April 2014].
[16] Khadija Patel, "Marikana: Putting words to tragedy", *The Daily Maverick*, 24 September 2012 <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-09-24-marikana-putting-words-to-tragedy/#.UxKIgIWuR5o> [Accessed 3 February 2014] (Para.1 of 22).
[17] Soundz of the South, "Soundz of the South Blogspot" <http://soundzofthesouth.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 3 February 2014] (Para.1 of 1).
[18] Patel, "Marikana: Putting words to tragedy" (Para.10 of 22).

whom aim to speak out against the injustice of the massacre. The collection, by Geko Publishing, is not commercially mainstream but it does include a paper by one of South Africa's foremost literary scholars Njabulo S Ndebele. It also reprints Ari Sitas's, "Marikana", which first rose to prominence in the online newspaper, *The Daily Maverick*. "Marikana" was circulated widely on the Internet, in the aftermath of the massacre, before the poet himself had the opportunity to fully reflect on the poem.

The range of work in d'Abdon's collection and its uneven literary quality underscores an ongoing thematic of this thesis. I contend that poetry can be valuable to society but this does not entail that all socially engaged art is of equal political worth. In order to illustrate the point, I shall discuss the poetry of Allan Kolski Horwitz and Pitika Ntuli who are two of the most celebrated artists to feature in *Marikana, A Moment in Time*. Whilst both artists demonstrate admirable sympathy with worker perspective, both poets fail to forge poetic form adequate to critiquing the historical conditions of Marikana. The weakness of this work can be contrasted with the stylistic accomplishment of Ari Sitas. The Cape Town sociologist's formal innovations place cognitive demands upon readers that cause one to critically reflect upon the massacre and its representation.

Allan Kolski Horwitz is a member of the arts collective Botsotso Jesters who manage their own literary magazine, *Botsotso* and are well-known for anti-government performance poems such as "Freedom Chanter" and "Land of Plenty". Horwitz hails from a white, middle-class background but much of his work seeks to speak on behalf of the black working class. The poem, "A New Spirit is our Backbone" is a case in point as it identifies with the position of Marikana's mineworkers and highlights their collective exploitation,

> Our reality is shacks
> Our reality is blasting new tunnels.[19]

Horwitz's poem is blunt, forthright and crammed with harsh material facts. "A New Spirit is our Backbone" details worker dissatisfaction with labour brokers and concludes by enjoining workers to 'ORGANIZE'.

[19] Allan Kolski Horwitz, "A new spirit is our backbone", in *Marikana, A Moment in Time*, ed. by Raphael d'Abdon (Johannesburg: Geko Publishing, 2013), pp. 95-100 (p.97, ll. 58-60).

Horwitz's desire to draw attention to the underclass is praiseworthy but the banality and straightforward nature of his statements does render the social value of poetry unclear. There is little identifiably poetic about his writing, which means that its confrontational stance could just as easily be propounded via other mediums such as a political rally or speech. The result is a simplistic portrayal of working class struggles and a flattened out account of the needs of this demographic. Horwitz's writing can be considered in the light of academic accounts of poetry in order to elaborate the ways in which his work falls short of poetic discourse. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines poetry as 'an instance of *verbal art*'.[20] The medium is the materiality of language itself and words are understood to have non-semantic properties as visual shapes and 'pure sound'.[21] Thus, 'critics who take meaning or "theme"' as the most important aspect of poetry 'neglect the medium'.[22] Similarly, many of the most prominent past and present poetic theorists underscore the non-propositional and non-communicative aspects of poetic expression. In *The Art of Poetry*, Paul Valéry contends that poetry is distinct from, 'utilitarian language: the language I use to express my design, my desire, my command, my opinion'.[23] The contemporary critic Mutlu Konuk Blasing echoes Valéry's emphasis upon the non-utilitarian qualities of poetry when she writes that it draws on, 'microrhetorical processes that make light of the coherency of the word unit. Rhymes, assonance, consonance and wordplays like anagrams and puns all work to destabilize reference'.[24] The above interpretations are edifying because they show that a key measure of whether images and tropes become 'poetic' is the extent to which these linguistic devices foreground language *qua* language regardless of semantic meaning. Horwitz's poetry is not wholly devoid of metaphor and word play but these techniques do not create 'poetic' effect because his primary goal is to wield language to represent an external reality. Horwitz does not dwell upon the complex and mediatory qualities of the signifier.

"A New Spirit is Our Backbone" contains several examples of conventionally poetic devices such as repetition and metaphor that fail to achieve poetic status. An example is the

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[20] "Poetry", in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (New York: MJF Books, 1993), pp. 938-942 (p.939).
[21] "Poetry", in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 939.
[22] "Poetry", in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 939.
[23] Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. by Jackson Mathews, 15 vols (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1957-1975), *VII*; *The Art of Poetry*, trans. by Denise Folliot (1958), p. 71.
[24] Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric poetry: the pain and pleasure of words* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 135.

metaphorical imagery in Horwitz's poem that compares the expanse occupied by shareholders stocks to the vastness of 'superstar space',

> Our reality is Makgoshas and pap and gizzards
> Our reality is shareholders whose share
> Fills superstar space.[25]

This description highlights the obscene extent of shareholder's wealth and creates a pun upon 'superstar', which can equally refer to an aspect of the solar system or a personality of celebrity culture. The latter meaning of the term has connotations of class privilege and highlights the shareholders' affluence but 'superstar' as a symbol for wealth is clichéd and this word-choice lacks vitality or innovation. Similarly, the stanza's line-breaks abrasively propound a message at the expense of literary creativity. The language is overtly mimetic with 'fills' literally enacting the process of re-filling a new line. Horwitz's manipulation of visual space indicates a faith in the ability of words to transparently reflect political fact.

The prosaic and unimaginative texture of Horwitz's writing is not anomalous of the poetry to have emerged from Marikana. Moreover, his emphasis upon mobilisation is echoed in the work of other contributors to *Marikana, a Moment in Time* such as that of poet, writer and sculptor, Professor Pitika Ntuli. Ntuli has created prominent visual art on the massacre and his work has been photographed and included in d'Abdon's collection. His series of sculptures entitled, "Marikana! Marikana!" presents images of the dead miners constructed out of recycled material such as 'hoes, wheelbarrows, spades, corrugated iron, seating pipes and old chairs'.[26] The artistic method evidences a concern for the environment but also relates to the fact that many of the miners lived in informal shacks and appalling housing conditions. Ntuli's decision to pay tribute to the victims in the form of recycled bone, stone, and iron foregrounds the poverty in which they lived. His sculptures have achieved national renown and were displayed at Constitution Hill, Braamfontein: a former prison that has housed anti-Apartheid struggle heroes such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Albert Luthuli and Joe Slovo.[27] "Marikana! Marikana!" and the Constitution Hill site both seek to re-appropriate

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[25] Horwitz, "A new spirit is our backbone", p.97, ll.60-62.
[26] Ntombi Ndhlovu, 'Art Salvages our History', *The Star*, 31 October 2012 <http://www.iol.co.za/the-star/art-salvages-our-history-1.1414600#.UxQ5_IWuR5o> [Accessed March 3 2014] (Para. 7 of 13).
[27] "Marikana Hill to Constitution Hill exhibition launch", *Moja Heritage Collection, Culture and Art Blog,* February 2013 <http://www.heritagecollection.co.za/article/items/marikana-hill-to-constitution-hill-exhibition-launch.html> [Accessed 5 March 2014].

harmful legacies of the past. Ntuli's poem, "Where were you when Marikana died?" also displays resilience of spirit,

> I want to write a trickster poem
> An Eshu, Chakijana, an Anansi the Spider playing tricks on power
> Switching the shower as Il Duce washes
> Disrupting the rape of justice
> Squirting teargas as operatives try to wipe out tapes
> Confusing fingers as they rig votes
> Mooing whilst cattle vote
> Dawn broke loose I had a visitation from the land of rhetorical questions:
>
> Where were you when machine guns blazed at the massacre in Marikana?[28]

Ntuli draws on traditional African culture such as the image of 'Chakijana', a famed trickster in Zulu folklore, in order to poke fun at 'Il Duce'. The latter term is striking as it is the title that the Italian leader Mussolini adopted for himself during World War Two and is a reference that has become synonymous with fascism. In this context, 'Il Duce' is presumably President Jacob Zuma as the mention of a 'shower' and the 'rape of justice' obliquely refer to Zuma's 2006 rape trial in which he notoriously claimed that showering after unprotected sex could prevent HIV/ AIDs. Ntuli's poetry is sparky, feisty and engaged but the blankness and simple unadornment of statements such as, 'Where were you when machine guns blazed at the massacre in/ Marikana?' is arguably too antagonistic and moralistic to provide an artistic vision that allows for imaginative free play or complexity.

The writing of both Horwitz and Ntuli brings up a much-debated question in the history of South African literature. This concerns whether politically committed poetry inevitably compromises creativity. Criticism of the way in which political struggle can adversely affect literary technique was frequently levelled at Black Consciousness poets who worked in the 1960s and 1970s. These poets wrote in the wake of savage political events, such as Sharpeville and the Soweto riots to which Marikana is often compared. It is significant that poems such as "A New Spirit is our Backbone" bear similarities to the militancy and direct tone of Black Consciousness poetry. Horwitz's Botsotso group have stated that they are influenced by the

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[28] Pitika Ntuli, "Where were you when Marikana died?", in *Marikana, A Moment in Time*, pp. 31-40 (p.32, ll. 42-52).

artists of 1976.[29] Thengani H. Ngwenya points out that Black Consciousness work was 'patently ideological, decidedly literalist and political in its themes, diction and imagery. It is primarily for this reason that some critics have found it banal and lacking in sophistication'.[30] Poets such as Sipho Sepamla, Mafika Gwala, Oswald Mtshali and Mongane Serote were not unaware of potential criticism but sought to liberate their minds from predetermined western definitions of what constitutes good 'art' or poetry. The unabashedly confrontational work of these writers drew upon the philosophy of Steve Biko in order to reclaim the human dignity of black South Africans and 'fight for political freedom'[31]. Ngwenya further notes that this poetry 'had a direct impact on political mobilisation' and played an influential role in South Africa's freedom struggle.[32]

Given the lack of systemic change in South Africa, one can appreciate why writers such as Horwitz and Ntuli may not see struggle literature as out-dated. Even so, in the post-Apartheid context the defiant nature of protest aesthetics have arguably been shorn of their ability to shock, startle, and surprise and the political relevance of this style of writing is uncertain. I argue that if there is nothing unique or original about poetic response to Marikana as poetry then its role is dispensable. A poetic style that grounds itself in factual statement lends itself to being replaced by more efficient forms of communication such as newspapers and websites. In contrast, Ian Patterson argues for the distinct value of poetry during times of social crisis, 'Its distinctiveness consists in being non-propositional, in constructing its thought in a different way from information discourses'.[33] The non-propositional character of poetry is arguably vital in the case of the Rustenburg strikes in which sources of information, such as the media, presented unquestioning accounts of the event, and all too readily exhibited bias in favour of government and Lonmin. In such a milieu, statement-based poetry potentially exhibits stylistic affinity with the status quo. This accords with J.H. Prynne's observation regarding the susceptibility of language to become corrupted by power. For Prynne, discourse can all too easily revert 'to facile acceptance of the commonplace, to bending compliantly

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[29] Robert Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters", *New Coin*, 34 (1998), 23-31 (p.23).
[30] Thengani H. Ngwenya, "Black Consciousness poetry: writing against apartheid", in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. by David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 500-522 (p. 507).
[31] Ngwenya, p. 504.
[32] Ngwenya, p. 504.
[33] Ian Patterson, "No man is an I, Recent developments in the lyric", in *The Lyric Poem, Formations and Transformations*, ed.by Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 217-236 (p. 220).

under commercial or political distortions'.[34] Furthermore, Sole has drawn astute connections between protest literature and recent projects of post-Apartheid nation building such as *Inzalo*. At first glance, the two are starkly opposed. The first critiques the continued inequity of social relations whilst the second celebrates the growth-based economics of South Africa's new democracy. Even so, both poetry initiatives evince strident and unthinking support of a social campaign.[35] The fact that the inflexibility of polemic can align poetry of social conscience with the simplistic quality of government propaganda is testament to the critical limits of any cultural expression that aims to produce 'truth' value and does not fully interrogate processes of representation. Poetic response to Marikana needs to grapple with the conventional and readily interpretable forms of language if it is to constitute a consistent and convincing protest to both state and capital. In the final section of this chapter, I will probe the extent to which the exploratory techniques of poetic form, such as its control of metaphor, can prove valuable and critical in the case of Marikana.

The poetic oeuvre of Ari Sitas has consistently demonstrated a willingness to develop nuanced and multi-layered portrayals of social conflict. In this regard, the poet does not seek to detach his own personality from scenes portrayed but weaves his individual perspective and emotions into creative meditations on social trauma. In an interview that I conducted with Sitas in 2014, he disclosed his personal investment in writing the poem "Marikana", 'I am describing the consequences of *my* revolution; not someone else's; not an odd thing happening out there but miners I could have organised (I did help Ramophosa in the very ancient days)'.[36] Sitas's sociological career has been built upon real-life involvement in working class resistance and he has publically condemned the Marikana Massacre, a stark contrast to Ramaphosa's collusion with Lonmin. Sitas's poem "Marikana" appears in Patel's "Putting Words to Tragedy" and d'Abdon's, *Marikana, A Moment in Time*. The poem was partly inspired by Sitas's encounter with one of Ntuli's sculptures, "The man in the green blanket". The latter figure is Mgcineni Noki who was one of the victims to feature most 'prominently in TV footage leading up to the shooting of 34 miners at Marikana'.[37] Sitas also composed the poem in reaction to his own heartache at viewing video recordings of Marikana. Even so, his poetic

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[34] J.H. Prynne, "Poetic Thought", *Textual Practice*, 24 (2010), 595-606 (p.598).
[35] Kelwyn Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa", *Mediations*, 24:1 (2008), 132-165 (p.159).
[36] Alice Meyer, "Email interview with Ari Sitas", 7 March 2014.
[37] Athandiwe Saba, "Remembering Marikana: The Man in the Green Blanket", *City Press*, 8 September 2012 <http://www.citypress.co.za/news/remembering-marikana-the-man-in-the-green-blanket-20120908/> [Accessed 3 March 2014] (Para.2 of 14).

composition does not read as a private response nor does it speak on behalf of a unitary consciousness. "Marikana" is reticent to disclose a clear narrative scaffolding and assembles a montage of different backdrops and vantages on the tragedy. Some of the key scenes include the 'cops' relaxing and drinking beer as they prepare for bed, a lyric voice addressing a beloved, and a jaded character that criticises the luxuriousness of an upper-class mansion from without. The juxtaposition of different viewpoints is consistent with Sitas's earlier work, much of which was produced after witnessing violence and undergoing the sadness of losing valued comrades. In his interview with Robert Berold in the poetry journal *New Coin* in 1995, he discusses the difficulty of writing an early work, *Slave Trades*, and how he aimed to construct a variety of voices in order to capture different kinds of slaveries and oppression. Sitas explains that he is experimenting with 'multiple voices that create tensions and say something that is about all the times we've lost, also the times that we might get'.[38] An example of this literary technique occurs towards the end of *Slave Trades* when one hears a tortured voice speak in yearning tones of the hope for a more prosperous future,

> There was cart, more of a boat inside a dream than cart,
> that always prowed on, despite mist or cold, towards the
> brilliant, fanciful city
> of our hope
> the city which was unhaunted by the sights of all those cut
> which was without the tear, the soaked bread, the shrill sound of
> a shovel against a stone, metal on stone
> the city which had our household, its wooden rafters fragrant
> still, from a memory of root.[39]

The voice might speak of pain and hardship but still holds fast to the notion of the ability to journey on via both land and sea, by 'cart' and 'boat', towards a city of dreams. Such a place is unmarked by the prevalence of worker hardship explored in "Marikana". The future city is devoid of scenes of labour such as 'a shovel against stone, metal on stone'. This utopian place is 'brilliant', 'fanciful' and 'fragrant' and holds the promise of returning disenfranchised people to longed for roots and a sense of home.

In "Marikana", Sitas re-deploys *Slave Trades*' strategy of speaking from multiple perspectives but his later poem pivots upon expressions of loss rather than on optimistic personalities who hope for a better future. The poem's opening stanza dwells upon televised recording of

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[38] Robert Berold, "Interview: Ari Sitas", *New Coin*, 31 (1995), 40-50 (p. 44).
[39] Ari Sitas, *Slave Trades & an Artist's Notebook* (Cape Town: Deep South, 2000), p.109.

Marikana as a frustrated speaker rewinds images of the miners in a failed attempt to resurrect those who were slain,

> I reverse the footage bringing the miners back to life
> in vain, the footage surges back and the first bullet
> reappears and the next and the next and the next
> and I reverse the footage in vain, again and again in vain.[40]

Visual media can replay footage of Marikana but it cannot salvage those who were lost and this is underlined through the repetition of the word 'vain', which places emphasis upon the futility of any effort to alter the past. The rhyme of 'vain' with 'again' links the former word with notions of recurrence and stresses the speaker's ongoing wish to connect with the plight of those who died. The compulsion to reverse the footage may seem obsessive considering the inability of this gesture to compensate for the reality of death. Even so, the speaker's preoccupation with televised recordings holds considerable critical potential in better understanding Marikana and the sources of information through which it has been portrayed. The need to pause, re-examine and re-assess dominant narratives is an important skill in the context of the Rustenburg unrest, which is an event that was often broadcast in meretricious and biased ways by government, newspapers, and Lonmin. The speaker's desire to manipulate images, in order to resurrect the dead, suggests that if visual media could be traced to its source then a physical and physiological history would be unveiled. The fact that there is a visceral life force in this digital footage is insinuated by the word 'surges', which is strongly connoted with the rush of blood itself. The bodily associations attached to the term are accentuated by the fact that when 'vain' is pronounced orally, it is indistinguishable from 'vein', which is the medium through which human blood flows. If the reversal of footage takes place 'in vein' then this foregrounds that cultural records are filtered through and determined by real life. Beneath misleading accounts of Marikana there is a somatic referent and objective truth even if it has to be approached through a process of mediation. Sitas's poem operates as a more general reflection on works of cultural production, which may not directly express reality, and often mask it, but nevertheless are planted in the material world. The reader is reminded that Sitas's own poetic 'footage' deploys non-narrative techniques but draws its resonance from concrete existence.

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[40] Sitas, "Marikana", in *Marikana a Moment in* Time, p.20, ll. 10-13.

Sitas's "Marikana" is an instance of an artwork that gains its meaning and motivation from the embodied oppression of workers and this endows his poetry with a measure of responsibility. In a context of social volatility the poet is confronted with important decisions regarding the most effective means through which to do justice to his subject. This was underscored in my interview with Sitas,

> **Alice Meyer**: *I want to begin by re-stating, in a fresh context, the question that Robert Berold asked of you in "New Coin" in 1995: 'How does one find a workable aesthetics or poetics when you are so surrounded by violence?'*
>
> **Ari Sitas** : I am worried that my thinking hasn't changed much. I felt the debate deeply: take the prowess and horrific poise of Celan's "Fugue of Death". I appreciated Adorno's challenge whether there could be poetry after Auschwitz. He has to register the horror that such formal finesse could be deployed to describe the indescribable. […] I have only recently lived outside the ambit of violence from my childhood to really my recent move to Cape Town and I am at a loss of how to respond since I had chosen not to be silent and I had chosen to write and reach for the 'indescribable'. I am not sure whether the violence I experienced viscerally or the violence experienced at a distance trying to process its horror has created two 'workable aesthetics/ poetics' or whether there is a peculiar continuum.[41]

Sitas's response indicates that the decision to write about political turmoil is one that he has lived with and consciously adopted for the last two decades. He reveals that during this time he has taken to heart Theodor Adorno's argument that it is ethically contentious to aestheticise real-life tragedy through literature.[42] Language games or 'formal finesse' can be interpreted as detracting from the gravity of human loss and as exhibiting artistic prowess at the expense of honouring the dead. Sitas acknowledges violence to be 'indescribable' but still feels driven to represent conflict in his art. In contrast to his past experience in anti-Apartheid labour movements, Sitas now relates to violence 'at a distance' and he is unsure if this has created a fundamentally different 'aesthetics/ poetics'. His commentary is alive to potential distinctions between art produced by those who have experienced a traumatic event and that which is created by more distanced observers.

Sitas's literary technique in "Marikana" does demonstrate a different aesthetic to his earlier poetry. Arguably, the poet's recent artistic style has been inflected by a degree of material

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[41] Alice Meyer, "Email interview with Ari Sitas".
[42] Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Neville Spearman: London, 1967), pp. 19 -34 (p.34).

security and his remove from tragic events. A work such as *Slave Trades* was constituted through Sitas's own observations of violent trade union struggle and includes the outlooks of oppressed and silenced groups. *Slave Trades* is a creative re-enactment of Arthur Rimbaud's time in Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century and seeks to speak from the perspective of indigenous Ethiopians who were misused by the French symbolist poet during his time spent profiting from the local gun trade. Sitas's imaginative retrieval of these voices becomes a refracted way of commenting upon lost and suppressed voices in the violent struggle against Apartheid. The poetic persona speaks on behalf of Rimbaud's mistress Marta Haymanot, who was bought from her father, a local chief, to pander to the poet's pleasure,

> I am the she, whose centre disappears
> I am not
> I am unwritten
> unclassified
> I am the last murmur of something older than chattel or rifle
> I am the dangerous she
> unbaptized
> exposed without purdah
> uncircumcised
> bought for guns, but unpriced.[43]

The striking facet of the passage is the poetry's willingness to take on the silenced and subjugated subjectivity of a racial and cultural other. Sitas is not afraid to explore Marta Haymanot's experiences and this arguably stems from his own real proximity to trauma in the 1980s and 1990s. It is also buttressed by intensive research he conducted on Ethiopian history. While Sitas cannot know the life journey of Marta, this is a voice that feels close to scenes of oppression and informed enough to portray it. "Marikana" shares *Slave Trade's* shifting perspectives and exploration of oppression but it does not attempt to speak for the working class or those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Sitas's 2012 poem the most resonant voices are those of bourgeois consumers who are plagued by their own indirect complicity in the Rustenburg massacre and these subjectivities are comparable to Sitas's own class position as tenured professor and acclaimed writer.

Sitas may not articulate the voice of the underclass but the personalities he chooses to portray are often tortured by the luxury of their own economic comfort. One of "Marikana's" special

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[43] Ari Sitas, *Slave Trades & an Artist's Notebook*, p. 24.

strengths lies in its ability to both embody and critique the situation of privileged South Africans and international consumers. The August 16th shooting was orchestrated via the triumvirate of Lonmin, police and government but the event was also determined by actors not immediately present in the situation such as local and international investors in the platinum sector. One may even extend a level of culpability to a global public who make use of platinum in their cars and jewellery, hence creating an incentive for multinational corporations to seek profit and extract surplus value from workers. "Marikana" offers profound insight into bourgeois guilt and confusion when confronted with the reality of the platinum industry,

> My love, did I not gift you a necklace with a wondrous bird
> pure royal platinum to mark our bond? Was it not the work of the
> most reckless angel of craft and ingenuity? Was it not pretty?
> Didn't the bird have an enticing beak of orange with green tint?
> Throw it away quickly, tonight it will turn nasty and gouge
> a shaft into your slender neck
> And it will hurt because our metals are the hardest—gold, pig iron
> manganese
> yes, platinum
> Humanity has somehow died in Marikana.[44]

The scene marks a point at which the writing shifts from a fixation on video footage of the shootings to the realm of private romantic relations. The stanza takes place amidst a scenario of wealth, in which a lyric voice presents a beloved with a platinum necklace. One is struck by the contrast between the devastation of Marikana and the luxury of this context. The description of the platinum necklace highlights a growing bourgeois consciousness regarding the decadent status and oppressive origins of the possessions it owns. The piece of jewellery is presented in an array of descriptive detail and through an accumulation of adjectives. An extravagance of language matches the opulence of the object. There is a bird affixed to the necklace and this creature is described as 'wondrous'. Similarly, the bird's beak is both 'enticing' and a particular shade of 'orange with green tint'. The phrase 'pure royal' is another articulation of acute precision. The fact that the term 'pure' is used to qualify the authenticity of the 'royal platinum' suggests an anxiety that this metal could be imperfect, tarnished or not as unadulterated as it appears. The sense of doubt surrounding the purity of platinum marks the continuity between this situation and that of the slain miners. In line with

[44] Sitas, "Marikana", in *Marikana, A Moment in Time*, pp. 20-21, ll. 28-37.

this thought, 'Royal' denotes a system of monarchy and underlines that the necklace has roots in the hierarchical relations of South Africa's minerals-energy complex.

Platinum necklaces, like the one portrayed in Sitas's poem, owe their existence to an inhumane industry. 'Rock drillers work underground in temperatures of 40-45 degrees Celsius, in cramped, damp, poorly ventilated areas where rocks fall daily'.[45] Rock-drillers, who led the Marikana strikes, confront death on a daily basis, and in "Marikana", the atrocious history of the platinum necklace accounts for why the speaker expresses a mood of disquiet as evidenced by the insistent and even belligerent use of the interrogative. The lyric voice doesn't seem to care for genuine dialogue but levels rapid questions at an unresponsive beloved. These questions concern the social channels through which gifts are exchanged and the real value of indulgent products. The speaker recognises that the necklace may not be unproblematically beautiful because its existence is predicated upon exploitation. A foreboding possibility arises that the tainted product of mining will turn back upon the ruling class. The speaker warns the addressee that the 'wondrous bird' attached to the necklace has the potential to 'gouge/ a shaft into your slender neck'. Crucially, rock is a substance into which one can 'gouge' and the bourgeois neck becomes equated with the shaft of the mine. Here, the body of the consumer is made to suffer for the ills of the mineral industry and to viscerally experience the human strife enfolded within the rock's history. The finished product of the mining process attacks the source from which it has sprung in an act that lends animation to the class antagonism embedded in the jewellery. This bird's capacity to create an indenture or shaft aligns the creature with a miner who drills holes into the earth, the commodity becomes identified with the real human beings that produced it. The use of 'necklace' as a figure for conflict is also particularly effective given the historical associations of the word. In South Africa's anti-Apartheid struggle, 'necklacing' was one of the key forms of vigilantism used by the ANC in order to ensure loyalty. The brutal process involves 'burning somebody alive by placing a fuel-soaked car-tyre around their body and lighting it'.[46] Winnie Mandela became notorious for declaring, 'with our boxes of matches and our

[45] Legassick, "South Africa: Marikana Massacre – A Turning Point?" (Para.5 of 37).
[46] Lars Buur, "The horror of the mob, The Violence of Imagination in South Africa", *Critique of Anthropology,* 29 (2009), 27-46 (p.45).

necklaces we shall liberate this country'.[47] In Sitas's contemporary poem, the violent connotations of 'necklace' are revisited as it comes to stand for the barbarism of class inequity.

The fact that the metaphor of the wondrous bird is dramatised through a lyric persona provides an example of the special kind of political work that poetry can do. Indeed, lyric provides a lens through which to understand the effects that historical forces have upon the formation of subjectivity. Patterson notes that in contemporary times 'the politics of lyric identity' have profoundly shifted when its language is also that of 'consumer society where existence is predicated on exploitation, aggression, and cruelty elsewhere'.[48] Sitas's lyric voice demonstrates a disconcerted awareness of its own responsibility in reproducing an epoch of consumerism and is a post-Apartheid example of lyric as 'the ground of a sometimes painful intersection of private and public'.[49] Personal utterances of desire in "Marikana" are marked by the echo of global immiseration as evident in the charged connotations of words such as 'necklace' and 'platinum'. A romantic situation replete with beautiful gifts would usually be connoted with joy and fulfilment. In contrast, the tone of Sitas's 'I' is both anxious and aggressive which suggests that in the wake of massacre, discourses of private longing and satisfaction are no longer viable. Sitas's manipulation of vocal register confronts the limits of bourgeois subjectivity in the post-Apartheid era and underscores Sole's point that the traditional lyric poem 'is taking a great deal of strain' in contemporary South Africa.[50]

Some might dismiss this lyric section as an example of parody due to the inclusion of high-flown and potentially archaic language such as 'My love', 'gift', and 'wondrous'. Even so, Sitas has expressed profound attachment to "Marikana"'s lyric 'I', and this causes one to pay attention to the sincerity of his speaker's words. Sitas stated that while composing "Marikana" he felt compelled to return to an 'I', 'that is showing the world things from all kinds of angles, and who also speaks to a lover' and his words indicate a belief in the ability of lyric to unveil the unexplored avenues of lived experience.[51] I interpret the misgivings of the voice in stanza

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[47] David Smith, "Nelson and Winnie Mandela's Marriage ended, but the bond was never broken", *The Guardian*, 6 December 2013 < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/06/nelson-winnie-mandela-marriage> [Accessed 9 November 2017] (Para. 10 of 13).
[48] Patterson, "No man is an I, Recent developments in the lyric", p.221.
[49] Patterson, "No man is an I, Recent developments in the lyric", p. 221.
[50] Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa", p. 146.
[51] Meyer, "Email interview with Ari Sitas".

three as underlining the precariousness of contemporary South African life, which is characterised by 'an ambience of insecurity and instability'.[52] Sitas's speaker tacitly acknowledges the tenuous nature of its class privilege and invokes change in a love relationship. The 'I' implores the addressee to throw away the jewellery and sever the chains, which lock customs of courtship to a cold-blooded system of production. The stanza ends with the sombre refrain, 'Humanity has somehow died in Marikana', which pushes home the extent to which the August 16th shootings were a violation of dignity that altered the terms of personal identity in all spheres of South African society.

Turning to questions of imagery, "Marikana"'s portrayal of 'rock' has a palpable connection to the working conditions of Rustenburg's miners. The 2012 August strikes were led by rock-drillers who have to perform some of the most arduous underground labour. The hardships undergone by rock-drillers in the depths of the earth were mirrored in the fact that strikers chose to encamp at a rocky outcrop or 'koppie' while they waited for their demands to be heard. It is at this koppie that the massacre ensued. The rock of South Africa's mines has also been witness to the largely unknown and undocumented battles of an exploited black proletariat since the discovery of gold and diamonds in the nineteenth century. Sitas himself notes,'in the mine's deep rock, the rock of seams and gold and platinum there must be thousands of ghosts of ancestors who have died meaningless deaths'.[53] The powerful socioeconomic legacy of rock opens up questions surrounding the processes through which poetic images are produced. Rock is both a literal reality and a literary image. The undeniable 'thingness' of rock is a challenge to the autonomy of language from material history. Rock carries linguistic and political force in Sitas's poem because the element is so closely aligned with the physical battles of Marikana's massacred victims. On the other hand, the presentation of rock as poetic motif opens up space for language to sharpen perception of real life.

J.M. Coetzee has articulated an understanding of rock as a literary trope that is associated with a particularly critical mode of interpreting reality. In his 1988 text *White Writing*, Coetzee singles out the heritage of landscape art for portraying 'the true South African landscape' as a

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[52] Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa", p.142.
[53] Meyer, "Email interview with Ari Sitas".

terrain 'of rock, not of foliage'.[54] He posits that Olive Schreiner pioneered this tradition, 'in the early phase of her career when she was under the influence of her reading of natural history and evolutionary theory'. In terms of this optic, the capacity to perceive 'rock' is 'an art of deep reading' and requires the ability to penetrate beneath surface distractions such as flora and fauna.[55] Rock becomes a figure for the hidden realities behind superficial phenomena and this makes it an ideal image through which to discuss the concealed structural causes and layered historical background of the Marikana.

The image of rock emerges most clearly towards the end of Sitas's poem,

> The meerkat paces through the scent of blood
> I want it to pace through the scent of blood,
> she is the mascot, the living totem
> of the mine's deep rock,
> the one who guards the clans from the night's devil
> she is there as the restless ghosts of ancestors
> by the rock-face
> feeding her sinew and pap
>
> goading her on:
> the women who have loved the dead alive
> the homesteads that have earned their sweat and glands
> impassive nature that has heard their songs
> the miners of our daily wealth that still defy
> the harsh landscape of new furies
> the meerkat endures—
> torn certainties of class endure.[56]

In this passage, the 'deep rock' is that of the mine and it is represented via a mascot or 'living totem'. 'Mascot' and 'totem' are both terms that are strongly connoted with the ability to stand in for a collective. The former is often chosen to represent a sports team, while 'totem' denotes an animal or object that is emblematic of a clan or family. The communal spirit congealed in the rock only attains life through a totemic predator. One is thus confronted with the challenge of analysing the meerkat in order to conceptualise the human cause it stands for. Sitas's meerkat is tied to ritualised custom as she 'guards the clans from the night's devil' and is fed 'sinew and pap' by 'the ghosts of ancestors'. She is guardian of ancient African values but also takes her place within 'torn certainties of class', which knits her

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[54] J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: on the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1988; Braamfontein: Pentz Publishers, 2007), p. 172.
[55] Coetzee, *White Writing*, p. 172.
[56] Sitas, "Marikana", pp.21-22, ll.55-73.

embodiment of kinship to the sphere of capitalist exploitation. Similarly, both 'the homesteads that have earned their sweat and glands' and 'the miners of our daily wealth', goad the meerkat on. The predatory creature represents the interests of traditional communities and those of an oppressed proletariat. Her identity questions binaries between modern and pre-modern societies and reminds one of Harold Wolpe's argument that the rural African household was 'a crucial condition of the reproduction of the migrant working class' during the onset of gold mining in South Africa's earliest phase of industrialisation.[57] The homestead provided the migrant labourer with 'access to means of subsistence, outside the capitalist sector' and allowed white capitalist employers 'to pay the worker *below* the cost of his reproduction' or less than it would require the labourer to survive.[58] South Africa's migrant labour system has forever altered the dynamics of family but the resilience of "Marikana"s' meerkat suggests the tenacity of the country's oppressed people.[59] The ability of the mascot to endure, living in underground tunnels, implies that a history of arduous labour has seen the persistence of community and collective courage. The meerkat's personal qualities shed light on the meaning of the deep rock she animates. Through recourse to the vitality of its totem, one understands that rock does not only symbolise worker subjugation within the heart of the mine but also the ability of ideals such as unity and fellowship to survive.

The figurative language surrounding the portrayal of rock forces the reader to grapple with processes of interpretation. One comprehends that this element is welded to Marikana's workers, their families, and an industry built upon rural-urban migration through attention to a totem or group symbol. Sitas's literary style highlights the fortitude that is required if one is to understand the plight of those who do battle with stone. Sustained patience is necessary in order to encounter the marginalised subjectivities of South Africa's mining class and this was brought to the fore in the context of Marikana which was marked by hostile rhetoric stemming from the National Union of Mineworkers, government, Lonmin and the media. Sitas's "Marikana" places emphasis on the importance of taking time to think through the ways in which South Africa's working class and the Rustenburg shootings are portrayed. The

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[57] Harold Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa, From segregation to apartheid", in *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, ed. by William Beinhart and Saul Dubow (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 60-90 (p. 74).
[58] Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa, From segregation to apartheid", p.69.
[59] It is relevant that Sitas has stated that he is particularly interested in meerkats as 'metaphors for survival in daily struggles'. Cf. Meyer "Email interview with Ari Sitas".

diligence of slowly questioning and interrogating the basis of information regarding the Lonmin strikes is a mode of reading that operates as a useful check to the instantaneous, statement-oriented and often prejudiced nature of news sources.

The layered hermeneutic process through which one connects rock to the cause of workers can be productively engaged with poetic critic Robert von Hallberg's insights regarding the ability of poetry to challenge ossified modes of perception. Von Hallberg argues, 'In poetry the conventional expectation is that terms and structures of meaning are still open to thought, that their apparent signification is not their full significance'. [60] 'Structures of meaning' remain open-ended in Sitas's presentation of rock and the human struggles it enfolds because the seams of the mine only attain breath and character through an animalistic mascot. The rock becomes associated with the revenge of oppressed communities through the fact that its mascot 'paces through the scent of blood', 'goad[ed]' by miners and their kin. Rock as the site of exploitation and festering resentment emerges indirectly in the depiction of the wondrous bird 'turning nasty' and assaulting the shaft of the bourgeois neck. The earth's energies also portend a volatile justice in stanza four, when a lyric voice waits for 'the lava of restitution'. The aforementioned examples emphasise the consistency with which rock is linked to far more than concrete physicality. "Marikana's" rock is a motif that recurrently picks up on the life-force of an underclass but this effect is achieved in oblique and refracted ways: jewellery is understood within the context of the mining industry, retribution of workers is compared to volcanic eruption and finally rock gains spirit in the vengeful reflexes of a predatory creature. The fact that the meaning of rock is never nakedly laid bare means that its depiction is an instance of poetry's ability to leave, 'meaning implicit, loaded not unpacked'.[61]

Sitas may not speak for the workers but his control of rock imagery leaves implicit some of their key concerns such as the disparity between luxury goods and their grotesque origins or the toll that migrant labour has taken on traditional households. The fact that Sitas does not unpack these themes by way of statement is particularly welcome in relation to the Marikana massacre in which information sources have flattened out the complexities of class strife. There is immense power in a poetic discourse that refuses to propound an over-simplified workers' perspective or revert to the dogmatic tone of propaganda. Sitas's depiction of rock

[60] Robert Von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008) p. 115.
[61] Von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers*, p.129.

enshrines interpretive vigilance and this complements Coetzee's alignment of the element with techniques of profound reading and observation. Sitas and Coetzee are very different writers. The former is defined by impassioned activism, whereas the latter has always upheld the right to distance his art and academic career from explicit political messages. Despite their divergent intellectual standpoints, both Sitas and Coetzee understand rock to be a symbol connected to insightful and astute modes of perception.

Sitas's representation of rock suggests that the truths of Marikana's workers lie buried beneath surface reports of the August 16th strikes. Notably, it is Coetzee who first paved the way for understanding rock to be a trope closely tied to questions of social justice and the ability of marginalised voices to be heard. For Coetzee, the irony of the fact that 'rock' has been aligned with 'deep reading' is that the vision of a stony South African terrain is an ideological product of the imperial genre of English landscape poetry. From this perspective, the presentation of stony land is not a profound or insightful interpretation of reality at all but a prism skewed by elite bias. A British metropolis was able to give birth to this landscape art because English society had become economically differentiated enough to produce privileged subjects who no longer viewed the land in terms of subsistence.[62] The elitism and chauvinism of the landscape poet is expressed in poetry that portrays the African land as 'a mere negative reflection or shadow of Europe'.[63] The landscape poet wonders 'whether the African landscape can be articulated in a European language' and for Coetzee this view of a blank, inexpressible and rocky country is underpinned by a certain ideology.[64] The genre of landscape poetry suggests South Africa to be emptier and more inhospitable than it really is,

> In all the poetry commemorating meetings with the silence and emptiness of Africa—it must finally be said—it is hard not to read a certain historical will to see as silent and empty a land that has been, if not full of human figures, not empty of them either; that is arid and infertile, perhaps, but not inhospitable to human life, and certainly not uninhabited.[65]

For Coetzee, a writing that depicts the South African landscape as pitiless, hostile, and bare is not simply a matter of observing and describing geographic reality. Instead, 'the poetry of

[62] Coetzee, *White Writing*, p.180.
[63] Coetzee, *White Writing*, p.174.
[64] Coetzee, *White Writing*, p. 174.
[65] Coetzee, *White Writing* p. 182.

empty space' becomes a way of furthering a certain 'fiction' regarding Africa and its people.[66] The literature manipulates the motif of barren, empty rock in order to refuse to acknowledge Africa's potential fecundity or depth of indigenous culture. The English landscape poet insidiously participates in an imperial project that devalues Africa in relation to the metropolis, exploits the earth for its own needs, and rejects the existence of other claimants upon the land.

Sitas dialogues with the tradition of landscape poetry defined by Coetzee insofar as "Marikana" also envisages rock as a silent, unresponsive entity. Sitas's landscape is 'harsh' and the rock of "Marikana" accords with an imperialist view of Africa to the extent that it is an impassive object that can only be known or understood through a 'living' representative or mascot. The muteness of Sitas's rock parallels his decision to omit a worker's outlook and is akin to the imperial gaze that depicts vacancy or unresponsiveness in place of an entity that could be portrayed with complexity and vitality. The point is striking given that in some of his other poetry Sitas does speak for the working class and directly associates labour with the rock they work upon. A recent poem, "Ghosts of the Quarry: Insurrection", reads,

> We are the ghosts
> of the quarry
> limestone of crescent moons.[67]

A poetic voice speaks on behalf of a workforce, who describes themselves as ghosts, haunting the quarry they toil in. These people are so deeply consumed by their labour that they become metaphorically compared to the limestone, which forms the backdrop of their drudgery. Sitas's decision to not animate rock in "Marikana" is ideologically significant and risks replaying the inhumanity of English landscape poetry. Landscape poetry tendentiously represents unreceptive aridity in lieu of potential settlement or autochthonous cultures, and so too Sitas enfolds his poetic subjects within the silence of the earth and does not explore their real and pulsating human struggles. The landscape poet reflects upon the environment from a position of security and the voices that Sitas dramatises in "Marikana", and his own poetic agency that underlies them, speak precisely because they are not victims of tragedy.

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[66] Coetzee, *White Writing* p.182.
[67] Ari Sitas, "Ghosts of the Quarry: Insurrection", in *Rough Music*, (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2013), p.143, ll.16-18.

In the dialectic between an imperial desire to reduce multi-dimensional cultures or landscapes to the silence of stone, and a miner's enslavement to the physicality of the land, Sitas's poetic technique occupies a liminal position. I argue that the way in which "Marikana" ventriloquises voices of privilege and works through the tradition of an unspeaking rock functions more critically than the imperial gaze. Sitas participates in the English literary tradition of landscape art in South Africa to the extent that his rock is a lifeless, muffled entity, but instead of using this motif to deny the existence of a people, he politicises the inarticulate nature of the physical environment. The austerity of "Marikana"s' landscape is accompanied by explicit mention of 'the miners of our daily wealth'. The bleakness of rock is not ideologically located in transcendent nature but its antagonisms are firmly situated in the realm of class struggle. The quality of silence captures the brutality of labour, particularly the difficult work performed by rock-drillers and the way in which this subdues the human spirit. Rock is represented in a way that foregrounds processes of mediation. This underlines that the act of describing a land and its cultures always involves a degree of active interpretation. Sitas's poem emphasises that the consciousness of those who died can never be fully recovered and that despite special work such as *Marikana, A View from the Mountain*, the needs of the working class are not adequately represented within South Africa's current ruling order.

The progressive nature of Sitas's poetry can be attributed to the fact that unlike the landscape poet, he does have material knowledge of worker struggles. His profound understanding of the social context surrounding Marikana distinguishes his gaze from that of the landscape poet, who overlooks the cruel processes through which a mastery of nature is attained. Sitas spoke out on the issue while being interviewed, stating, 'I hope my life and my poetry are a constant challenge to the reified logic of capitalism'[68] Sitas's response places his politics at the polar end from the imperial project of domination. Such a commitment to exploring and bearing witness to the ills of acquisitive economic structures recurs throughout Sitas's work such as in "Our little tropical scars", a poem from his 1989 book *Tropical Scars*. In this poem, a speaker reflects:

> And I was told that—
> From the hill on a clear day you can see the class
> struggle forever
> on the hill my dear
> lives get caught in these damp afternoons

[68] Meyer, "Email interview with Ari Sitas".

and it's too hot to read Frantz Fanon
you are condemned to consume
to suffer the melancholy stalking of shopping malls.[69]

The poem, set in Ethekwini, directly confronts the question of class struggle. It compares the clarity of gazing at the landscape from atop a hill to the ability to view the reality of the fight against capital without an ideologically tarnished gaze. The form of "our little tropical scars" causes one to pause after the word 'class'. A line break forces one to halt before progressing to the notion of 'struggle', which begins the next line. The structure of the poem mimics the experience of standing on a hilltop, as one surveys the land beneath. One literally has to look over the end of a line to grasp its semantic sense. In this way, the poem enacts the physical experience it seeks to describe and calls for a lucidity of political vision that is sorely needed in the scenes portrayed. Ethekwini is presented as a milieu in which people are caught in the grip of capitalism. In this respect, the laziness caused by the heat of the Durban climate is used as a metaphor for a public's inability to heed the revolutionary voice of Fanon. The speaker draws attention to the ennui of consumer mentality in which the habits of consumption, such as shopping in malls, becomes a state of condemnation. The sentiment of the poem is that capitalism is a kind of hell and that one needs to seek a vantage point from which to question and understand its workings.

Like *Tropical Scars*, *Slave Trades* continually critiques materialistic economic structures, through charting and calling to account the onset of nineteenth-century capitalism. An example of this is the way in which the poem derides instrumental logic and its lack of concern for the beauty of nature,

Then came the steamboat and the gun and the financiers
and all the old time warriors were pelted off the plank
then came the profiteers and auditors and chartered
ropehands that didn't care about how the light
dances on the scales of barracuda in the melancholy
straights of Magellan.[70]

The arrival of steamboats, guns, financiers, and profiteers is documented. The fact that these entities are introduced in the form of a list highlights the nature of a commodity system that is

[69] Ari Sitas, "Our little tropical scars", in *Rough Music*, p. 16, ll. 19-26.
[70] Sitas, *Slave Trades*, p. 31.

bent upon producing an endless stream of goods. In such a context, regard for the aesthetic grandeur of the ocean or its sea-life is lost. The poem combats the reified nature of capitalism by vividly portraying the life and splendour of the natural world, such as through describing light dancing 'on the scales of barracuda' or the poetic melancholy evoked by journeying through the Magellan sea route.

As the above examples indicate, all of Sitas's books of poems aim to call capitalism to account and draw attention to the evils of this social structure. It is with this literary background in mind that one must interpret "Marikana" and its political victories. While the poem is most certainly a politically resonant response to massacre, it forms part of a larger corpus that profoundly meditates on the mode of production that structures the post-Apartheid epoch. Sitas's oeuvre bears testimony to the ongoing relevance of poetry in today's political climate and its ability to challenge commercialised modes of thought. His poetic style moves beyond the defiance of statement. It works through perspective, imagery, and form to communicate its social stance.

Cultural response to Marikana indicates the ongoing importance of poetry to political life and has revealed a group of artists and writers who are eager to confront questions of class conflict. Literature produced in the wake of the Lonmin massacre demonstrates remarkable continuity in both its style and aims with poetry produced under Apartheid, particularly that of the Black Consciousness Movement. These continuities are less surprising than they might originally appear, given that the material legacy of Apartheid is still a lived reality for the majority of black South Africans. Sitas's "Marikana" underscores the deep injustice of class inequity. The poem approaches this reality through the exploration of perspective and processes of mediation. Sitas's poetry is distinct from traditional anti-Apartheid literature and the more simplistic verse that has emerged from Marikana. An accommodation of complexity is vital in the case of Marikana, which has revealed the stratified nature of South Africa's production process and the political fragmentation of the left. Sitas's work illustrates that poetic form can offer a means of expression that is more affective than political speeches or newspaper articles. Through manipulation of poetic voice and imagery, the poet allows one to view "Marikana" with fresher, more critical eyes.

Chapter Two
The Refusal of Representation: Dissonance and Silence in the Poetry of Seitlhamo Motsapi

This chapter focuses upon Seitlhamo Motsapi's 1995 book *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*. The collection of poems is one of the extraordinary literary accomplishments of the post-Apartheid period and numerous critics have praised its depth and quality. *Deep South's* Paul Wessels hails the publication as 'an explosive work of staggering proportions […] by turns difficult, brilliant, and obscure'.[1] Similarly, Laura Chrisman says of the work, 'The political urgency is never here compromised by empty rhetorical posturing, aesthetic banality: this is a rich experimental poetry, raining down fresh imagery, complex conceits, carefully patterned to produce a volume of striking originality and stylistic rigour'.[2] I contend that it is in grappling with the question of representation, both aesthetic and political, that the collection displays greatest artistic ingenuity and also makes its most profound social critique. Motsapi's poetry seeks to challenge colonialism and Apartheid through refuting their symbolic legacies. His poetic style questions post-Apartheid national discourses that enshrine individualistic models of liberated black subjectivity. Through deploying dissonant aesthetic forms, Motsapi disrupts the fluency of historic racist ideology and new national platitudes of individual freedom. In a complementary vein, he embraces the quietude of spiritual salvation as a haven from both the injustices of the past and the profit-driven ethic of South Africa's new black elite. Motsapi's disdain for a nascent society built upon the enrichment of a few means that he rejects calls to celebrate personal identity. He subverts symbolisation and, at times, retreats from the realm of representation altogether in a powerful form of protest against political dispensations he cannot condone.

Motsapi was born in Bela-Bela, Limpopo Province in 1966. His biography is coloured by scepticism for the integrity of the word and continual objection to corrupt modes of articulation. The writer lost faith in the relevance of poetry and somewhat dramatically retired at the launch of his only published collection. Apart from a handful of occasional

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[1] Paul Wessels, "'deep in it…'", *Donga*, 3 (2001), 8-9, (p.8).
[2] Laura Chrisman, "A Review Essay: EARTHSTEPPER/THE OCEAN IS VERY SHALLOW, by Seitlhamo Motsapi", *The Black Scholar,* 26:2 (1996), 33-36 (p.33)

poems, he has stayed true to his word and eschewed the literary front ever since.[3] Subsequent to Motsapi's retirement from poetry, he worked in advertising and the office of the President but ultimately left these occupations, too, both of which he felt 'compromised his principles'. Most famously, the poet resigned as Thabo Mbeki's speechwriter in 2002 announcing, 'I could not compromise my integrity crafting lies. I did not possess the passion for illusion, the love of guile, the worship of obfuscation and the desecration of the world that makes speechwriters'.[4] At present, Motsapi has removed himself from public life altogether with few details being known of his whereabouts or occupation.[5] The motivation behind Motsapi's decision to isolate himself is a radical commitment to Christianity and the concomitant desire to attain spiritual peace.[6]

The two dominant features of Motsapi's poetry are aesthetic and political dissidence and spiritual mysticism. The kinship between explosive artistic innovation and meditative serenity has not been opened to scrutiny. This has caused equivocation in the critical heritage of *earthstepper*. In her early review of the book, Laura Chrisman focuses upon the collection's volatility and states that it 'emphasizes the divided and unfinished nature of the regenerative condition'. In contrast, her 2006 article, "Black Modernity, Nationalism and Transnationalism: The Challenge of Black South African Poetry" interprets *earthstepper* as promoting themes of social harmony and spiritual quietude. In this latter article, Chrisman writes that *earthstepper* 'traces a clear trajectory from insurgency through to the peaceful triumph of a Christian (if also pantheistic) redemption'.[7] Notably, neither of Chrisman's interpretations is wrong but she falls short of exploring the continuum between aggression and tranquillity. This presents a seeming contradiction. It is the relationship between these apparent opposites that holds the key to Motsapi's poetry. I argue that both aesthetic dissonance and spiritual retreat are grounded in a refusal of corrupt cultural infrastructure and systems of symbolic meaning. The poetry's resistance towards signification operates as political critique insofar as it subverts dehumanising discourses of colonialism, Apartheid, and

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[3] Gary Cummiskey, "earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow by Seitlhamo Motsapi (Deep South Publishers/ ISEA,1995)" *Bleksem*, 5 (1996), 13-14 (p.13).
[4] William Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (Cape Town: Zebra Publishing, 2005), p. 33.
[5] Alice Meyer, "Email correspondence with Robert Berold" (used with permission), 18 July 2015.
[6] Cummiskey, "earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow", p. 13.
[7] Chrisman, "A Review Essay, *Earthstepper/The Ocean is Very Shallow*", p.36; Laura, Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", in *Beyond the Black Atlantic, Relocating modernization and technology*, ed. by Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.29-46 (p. 40).

neo-Apartheid. I begin with a discussion of Motsapi's dissident, volatile disruption of language before moving on to an analysis of his more peaceful and spiritual poems.

Critical response to *earthstepper* has foregrounded Motsapi's exploration of dissonant styles of black cultural production. Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack argue,

> Motsapi elaborates a poetic idiom and style that has its precursors in the jazz poetry of Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Michael S Hamburger, Yusuf Komunyakaa, as well as the improvised poetry of Nathaniel Mackey, black Atlantic music has a distinct significance in his verse. Its multivalent meaning […] is fashioned at the intersection of the poet's local (South African context) and global flows of the black historical imaginary. Through references to reggae, jazz, dub, gospel and the blues, Motsapi constructs a complex response to the culture of repetition and commodification that defines capitalist modernity, as well as the afflictions of (black) subordination that mark its emergence […] his commitment to the dissonance of free jazz specifically and his more general resistance to the popular music industry indicate a particular mode of ideological critique based in reclaiming the freedom to deny and defy.[8]

Titlestad and Kissack elaborate the core of Motsapi's aesthetic, which takes inspiration from a pan-African cultural heritage including the likes of poets Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey. Crucially, the artistic lineage that Motsapi responds to is not only literary but also musical. 'Noise' and instrumental experimentation inspire the poet's rejection of capitalist modernity. Chrisman argues for Motsapi's investment in 'African musical violence' and notes that he envisions 'the musical dissonance' of jazz' as 'a necessary violence, a refusal of social resolution'.[9] In terms of these interpretations, Motsapi's poetry is an antagonistic and volatile force committed to defying inhumane cultures through use of aesthetic play. This ethos comes through clearly in the poem "malombo paten dansi", the title of which pays homage to the South African jazz band Malambo,

> […] with abdullah walking the ivories
> we cd always do a thing or two
> to the fetters
> we cd silence the predators howl
> that had rent eardrums
> through-out history into submission'.[10]

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[8] Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack, "'The mangled flesh of our griots': music in the verse of Seitlhamo Motsapi", *Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa,* 9:1 (2004), 56-67, (p.57).
[9] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", pp. 34 & 35.
[10] Seitlhamo Motsapi, "malambo paten dansi", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*' (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2003), p. 40.

The quote salutes the liberating qualities of Abdullah Ibrahim's jazz and speaks of the musician's ability to silence the 'predators' of history through his piano playing. In a complementary vein, Motsapi's poem forges its own dissonant aesthetic procedures, which interrupt colonial language and express the marginalisation of silenced black people by English discourse. Thus, the vowels in the verb 'could' are omitted. This violates the conventional laws of English and conveys the fact that when black people rise against their oppressors, and combat histories of submission, they also desecrate colonial culture and epistemology. For Motsapi, the naming of verbs has to be different in order to interrupt English conceptions of action and to conceptualise new ways of achieving mobilisation. Similarly, the poem's frequent line breaks interrupt a fluent reading of the statement and lacerate language. This style of writing grounds itself in experimental black aesthetics and in turn contrives its own explosive means of defying oppressive systems of symbolic meaning. The result is an English shot through with abrasions, a discourse marked by the presence of what it has not and cannot represent.

One of the most significant of Motsapi's techniques of questioning and interrogating the limits of language is through the instantiation of ruptures within speech. Stammers, stutters, pauses, dislocated rhythms and caesuras are all manipulated in order to decry obscene symbolic systems. Motsapi's linguistic novelty introduces fissures and breakages into conventional communication and here he builds on longer traditions of postcolonial and non-metropolitan literature. American literary critic and poet Nathaniel Mackey, of whose style Motsapi's is reminiscent, argues that 'postcolonial speech begins in a stammer'.[11] Mackey highlights the 'generative' nature of linguistic falters, halts and pauses, which break down the regime of the 'word' into its most minute parts, critically interrogating the linguistic structures of the coloniser. Mackey's insights are an apposite lens through which to read Motsapi's poetry, in which the thematisation and performance of linguistic breakage becomes a creative, exuberant process that queries the contours of English expression.

[11] Nathaniel Mackey, "Wringing the Word", *World Literature Today*, 68:4 (1994), 733-740 (p. 734). Saliently, Mackey is writing of Edward Kamau Braithwaite, a Caribbean poet who has been influential upon Motsapi, cf. Gary Cummiskey, "Khulile Nxumalo: Seeking New Ways of Saying", *The Dye Hard Interviews*, 19 September 2013 <http://dyehardinterviews.blogspot.co.za> [Accessed 4 September 2015] (Para. 2 of 8). In this interview Nxumalo explains to Cummiskey that it is Motsapi who introduced him to Braithwaite.

"the sun used to be white", foregrounds Motsapi's use of fractured utterance and intentional deformation of the word. The poem explores the cultural silencing of blacks by whites both in South Africa and the globe,

> we was born blk in a time & planet
> where blk petered into absences and voids
> where blk was the disco/dant melody
> of the primal song of emptiness.[12]

The words underline that for the speaker, and the 'we' s/he speaks for, to be black means to partake in a subjectivity that has been stamped out and muffled by those in power. The texture and imagery of the language underscore that blackness is not something that can be fully known or understood amidst a world order that has attempted to extinguish the authentic voices of people of colour. In this line of thought, the word 'black' is never fully spelt out but only written as 'blk'. This is a literary decision that omits letters in order to suggest that black people cannot be adequately represented within the existing terms of English. In Motsapi's writing, the attempt to name blackness enacts an absence. The mutilated nature of Motsapi's language is paralleled by images of physiological injury. 'Blk' is portrayed as 'the colour and caress of abysses' while the bodies of black people are marked by scars, wounds and holes. One hears of the 'festered cracks on the faces of slaves' and 'the punctured hearts of my loved ones'. Voids and disfigurements express that a people have been violently muted and mutilated by powerful masters. Through deploying imagery of physical violence, Motsapi gives the reader to understand that the denial of black speech, expression, and historical recognition has been carried out with brutal material force.

In "the sun used to be white", one is given to understand that colonialism, and forces of white supremacy, have decimated the social and material life-worlds of black people,

> meaning spat at us high white & dry
> like an ache over Kilimanjaro
> the scowl of the sun and the sneer of the skies
> lacerating mah history into a scarred holler.[13]

Racist values, ideologies, and systems of 'meaning' are compared to the whiteness of snow falling from the heights of Kilimanjaro. Similarly, the 'scowl' of the fierce sun and the 'sneer'

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[12] Motsapi, "The sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 23, ll. 22-25.
[13] Motsapi, "the sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.23, ll.9-12.

of the sky emphasise the overwhelming might of colonial and Apartheid cultures, which are seen to be so all-encompassing as to be akin to forces of nature. The impact of racism is seen to have 'lacerated' the speaker's 'history into a scarred holler'. In response, Motsapi's speaker wreaks vengeance upon the medium of English expression.

Motsapi's socio-political comment on white racism gains purchase through a proliferation of linguistic games that interrupt the laws of English. The writing is consciously dissident towards the metropolitan tongue and neologisms abound. One example is 'disco/dant', which fuses the words 'disco' and 'dissident'. 'Disco' conjures up images of dance and movement while 'dissident' signals the ability to resist authority. When merged, the two terms describe the historic capacity of black culture to disrupt narrative and linguistic harmony in contexts of white supremacy. The use of the forward slash in 'disco/dant' spotlights the potential of black identity to create severances and rifts in hegemonic symbolic forms. Conventional English is splintered and this provides tacit judgment upon the language's political affiliation with settler colonialism. Racism in America is also implicitly ridiculed in

> amerikkka shrieked
> her rotting din of deceit & conceit.[14]

American prejudice is alluded to through coinage of the word 'amerikkka'. The letters 'kkk' are incorporated into the very name of the American state thus making a pointed allusion to the Ku Klux Klan. The coinage foregrounds the extent to which racism has played a fundamental part in America's foundation, namely through slavery. Motsapi's subversive diction and syntax cause pause and critical reflection on the part of a reader. One is called to review and re-examine the colonial tongue of English and the cultural heritage it bears. In the process, it becomes apparent that this language is not the carrier of universal human values but has historically represented the interests of white power. Motsapi's poetry expresses this fact and embodies the difficulties of articulating black personhood via the English medium. In English, black cultural identity emerges as an aggressive and rebellious force that lurks beneath Eurocentric forms of communication. Black culture materialises as a discordant energy that refuses to be fully known but makes its presence felt through clamorous linguistic virtuosity.

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[14] Motsapi, "The sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 24, ll.51-52.

The linguistic breakages of *earthstepper* do not only convey a sense of anger and volatility towards colonial power but also cause a certain level of discomfort for Motsapi's poetic persona. One witnesses the disquiet of a black subjectivity in an English language in which it is not at home. For the colonised and the oppressed, representing herself or himself on colonial terms can only cause injury and pain. The speaker of "soro" calls out,

> i erred, i erred
> as you can see my ears are scarred
> from the discord cut of my plunders
> as you can see my ease escapes me
> into the rent language of razors.[15]

The acts of erring that the persona refers to are presumably the plethora of linguistic games, literary experimentations, and disjunctive rhythms that permeate the poetry in question. The lines themselves enact linguistic play. Speech is interrupted through the repetition of the phrase 'i erred'. The poem begins in a halted rhythm of error and it presents language as a splintered entity able to maim the speaker who uses it. The imperfect rhyme between 'erred' and 'scarred' connotes the linguistic ruptures of *earthstepper* with wound and injury, while refusing to deliver the pleasure that a neat rhyme scheme would engender. Harmony and peace are rendered inaccessible in this poem, which underscores language's ability to cause harm and does so through embodying splices within speech. The 'rent language of razors' is a form of communication that the speaker actively participates in and one that impairs his or her own ability to hear. The mention of 'scarred' ears, a concept lent all the more force by a partial aural-visual similarity between 'sc**ar**s' and 'e**ar**s', augments the sense of pain experienced by the colonised subject in English. The possibility of words incurring deafness emphasises the inability of the speaker to recognise her or himself in colonial speech.

Motsapi's exploration of the antagonistic elements of colonial and racist language can be more deeply understood when read against Fanon's conceptions of anti-colonial violence. In poems such as "soro", Motsapi is able to extend one's understanding of Fanon's theory, and also, of the consequences of violent revolution on the part of the colonised. In this line of thought, Fanon's arguments in his chapter "concerning violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth* are elucidating. Fanon describes the way in which colonial values dehumanise colonised populations and explains the resulting bitterness and revolt on the part of the oppressed,

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[15] Motsapi, "soro", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 14, ll.1-5.

> As soon as the native begins to pull on his moorings, and to cause anxiety to the settler, he is handed over to well-meaning souls who in cultural congresses point out to him the specificity and wealth of Western values. But every time Western values are mentioned they produce in the native a sort of stiffening or muscular lockjaw. During the period of decolonization, the natives's reason is appealed to. He is offered definite values, he is told frequently that decolonization need not mean regression, and that he must put his trust in qualities, which are well tried, solid, and highly esteemed. But it so happens that when the native hears a speech about Western culture he pulls out his knife—or at least he makes sure it is within reach. The violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the ways of life and of thought of the native mean that in revenge, the native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him. In the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values. In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up.[16]

During the decolonisation process, former masters aim to hand over power to indigenous people on Eurocentric terms. At this point, the 'native' is said to 'pull out his knife', or at least ensure that it is within grasp because he knows that 'white values' have been entrenched through brutal and repressive political processes. These so called 'civilised' values go hand in hand with material force and thus need to be resisted with vehemence and arms. Fanon's arguments allow one to more fully comprehend the strain of anger in Motsapi's writing. The poet's 'rent language of razors' can be interpreted as a literary strategy for countering the colonial values of English. For Fanon, there is a kind of 'lockjaw' produced in the colonised when confronted with colonial culture and this ties in well with Motsapi's project of displaying a colonised subjectivity, which feels unable to fully articulate itself within the medium of English expression. Motsapi's work allows one to reflect upon the fact that the anti-colonial disaggregation of, and discomposure in, Western values causes a kind of discomfort to the colonised, as well as, most obviously, to the coloniser. In a poem such as "soro", Motsapi's speaker is denied any kind of ease as s/he cannot adopt a culture that has been the cause of oppression. Instead, colonial culture and its language must be overthrown in a process that wreaks a measure of destruction on coloniser and colonised alike. In Motsapi's writing, the retributive violence wreaked against colonial culture destroys this system of meaning but in the process his speaker is also harmed. The ill caused to the subjectivity of Motsapi's speaker while wrestling with the medium of English is akin to Fanon's description of the colonised 'vomiting' up inhumane world-views. The destabilisation

[16] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.8.

of Western hegemony causes a kind of sickness in the colonised and Motsapi's speaker becomes deaf to the Eurocentric ideologies it has wreaked havoc upon. It is in this sense that Motsapi's poetry illustrates that 'decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder'.[17] Compellingly, the South African poet chooses to delve into the disorders that affect the colonised during the process of material and cultural rebellion. The result is annihilation of coherent subjectivity and expression in English. This is a tormented form of protest towards colonial rule. Once the colonised has irrevocably burst apart the ideologies s/he has been taught to imbibe, the terms and representation of selfhood are irrevocably rent asunder.

Motsapi's motivation for problematising the representation of black personhood goes well beyond the need to speak out against white racism's historical and present discrimination against people of colour. The poet also deforms and fragments language in order to deconstruct and critically examine the nature of blackness.[18] In *earthstepper*, black subjectivity is not only seen as difficult to delineate through language due to historical oppression by whites but the identity is also placed into question because categories such as 'the colonised' or 'black' encompass myriad and diverse members of society. The introductory lines of "the sun used to be white" express this ambiguity,

> blkness can be a betrayal or
> a shuttling blaze of glory rending the sky.[19]

The statement indicates that the heritage of the black race contains both betrayals and glorious moments. The strategic use of caesura creates a pause and allows one to consider two different aspects of black humanity.

In terms of blackness being a racial identity worthy of veneration, in "the sun used to be white" the speaker feels connected to the legacy of the black consciousness leader Steve Biko and also to Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican politician who was a leading proponent of pan-

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[17] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.2.
[18] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", p.31.
[19] Motsapi, "the sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*, p.23, ll.1-2.

Africanism, founding the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914.[20] Indeed, it is said,

> in my head guerrillas ecstatic
> like storms or ash
> it was biko like a yell of crosses
> preaching deliverance from up on housetops
>
> […]
>
> in my head
> it was gahvi rolling hills and hurling boulders
> over lies and cries. [21]

The quote illustrates the ability of Biko's message to bring spiritual deliverance and the power of Garvey's politics to overturn all obstacles, including deceitful individuals culpable of 'lies'. It is these pioneers of black rights that are the courageous voices that resound in the speaker's head. In "the sun used to be white", these figures of black accomplishment are contrasted with a coded rebuke of a contemporary black elite, which has sold out to multinational capitalism. The poem can be read as a critique of the black bourgeoisie, namely the African National Congress. The title "the sun used to be white" refers to the fact that power, here symbolised by the 'sun' is no longer solely a possession of white people but has passed into black hands that have forsaken the ideals of anti-Apartheid struggle. Hesitancies, stammers and blank spaces on the page allow the reader to pause and consider the equivocal nature of black identity. It is intimated that along with racist forces of white domination, another obstruction to the speaker's ability to freely articulate a history of black people is the fact that the meaning of racial identity is multivalent. It is with this in mind that one can interpret the somewhat cryptic lines,

> i was stumbling upon the rock of onelessnes
> up over the precipice where handshakes
> triple hastily into hammers or typhoons.[22]

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[20] "Marcus Garvey", in *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, ed. Paul Boyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), *Oxford Reference Online* <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195082098.001.0001/acref-9780195082098-e-0593?rskey=rIXfoE&result=2> [Accessed 20/02/2017] (Para. 1 of 1).
[21] Motsapi, "the sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.23, ll.41-44 & ll.48-50.
[22] Motsapi, "the sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.23, ll.33-35.

The 'rock of onelessnes' is surely the disintegrating ground of false racial cohesion over which Motsapi's speaker stumbles, a terrain of mistrust where 'handshakes' very soon become threatening forces symbolised by 'hammers or typhoons'.

While Motsapi's poetry never explicitly names the African National Congress, one can conjecture that the traitorous presence that the speaker alludes to is the new black leadership who have wholeheartedly embraced white capital. Contextually, the period at which *earthstepper* was written, the world of the early- to mid 1990s, was one in which, as Ronnie Kasrils argues, the African National Congress underwent a 'Faustian moment'. For Kasrils, a past head of intelligence for Umkhonto we Sizwe, South African Communist Party stalwart and former member of the African National Congress's National Executive council,

> What I call our Faustian moment came when we took an IMF loan on the eve of our first democratic election. That loan, with strings attached that precluded a radical economic agenda, was considered a necessary evil, as were concessions to keep negotiations on track and take delivery of the promised land for our people. Doubt had come to reign supreme: we believed, wrongly, there was no other option; that we had to be cautious, since by 1991 our once powerful ally, the Soviet Union, bankrupted by the arms race, had collapsed. Inexcusably, we had lost faith in the ability of our own revolutionary masses to overcome all obstacles. Whatever the threats to isolate a radicalising South Africa, the world could not have done without our vast reserves of minerals. To lose our nerve was not necessary or inevitable. The ANC leadership needed to remain determined, united and free of corruption – and, above all, to hold on to its revolutionary will. Instead, we chickened out. The ANC leadership needed to remain true to its commitment of serving the people. This would have given it the hegemony it required not only over the entrenched capitalist class but over emergent elitists, many of whom would seek wealth through black economic empowerment, corrupt practices and selling political influence.[23]

In the above quote, Kasrils's relates the way in which the African National Congress betrayed the trust of South Africa's black majority by making a pact with evil, or the historically white, force of global capital. Kasrils correctly points out that the decision to backtrack on a socialist agenda was not inevitable, even though it was a choice heavily influenced by international economic currents, namely the fall of the Soviet Union. Kasrils notes that given South Africa's rich mineral wealth, the African National Congress had bargaining leverage but

[23] Ronnie Kasrils, "How the ANC's Faustian pact sold out South Africa's poorest: In the early 1990s we in the leadership of the ANC made a serious error. Our people are still paying the price", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/24/anc-faustian-pact-mandela-fatal-error> [Accessed 9/02/2017].

instead chose a soft option and bowed to neoliberal pressure. As a result, the leadership not only ceded authority to entrenched white capitalists but also fuelled the growth of an emerging black elite. Specifically, Kasrils singles out the International Monetary Fund loan of $850 million, which the government took on in December 1993. Notably, the loan was granted on conventionally neoliberal terms entailing sector spending cuts.[24] The fact that the African National Congress's deal with the International Monetary Fund represented a clear continuity with the Apartheid regime was lucidly illustrated when, in the January of 1994, the International Monetary Fund's manager Michel Camdessus allegedly requested that Mandela re-appoint Apartheid-era leaders to key economic positions. An example of this is that Christian Stals resumed his former role as central bank governor. [25] Kasrils' words gesture towards the fact that black identity and racial solidarity have been irrevocably compromised in South Africa. The country's black leaders wield class power over their mainly impoverished support base. It is this new journey, away from past racial solidarity, that Motsapi seeks to chart.

Motsapi's mistrust of South Africa's new Rainbow nation saturates his oeuvre. The poem "galawas" effectively portrays this. It elaborates a speaker's own unwillingness to participate in rising hegemonies and also extends one's understanding of the psychological and emotional impact that the burdens of corruption, mis-governance, and abuse of language can have upon post-Apartheid South African subjectivity. "Galawas" portrays a speaker worn out with the mantle of personhood. The voice arguably evinces a distinctly post-Apartheid mood of moral fatigue as s/he embraces a subdued and withdrawn weariness in the face of a depraved political environment,

> & so
> i finally arrived
> at the mouth of the hole
> where they bury abominations
> well wearied and worn
>
> […]

[24] John S. Saul and Patrick Bond. "The Apartheid Endgame, 1990–1994", in *South Africa - The Present as History: From Mrs Ples to Mandela and Marikana*, by John S. Saul and Patrick Bond (Boydell & Brewer: 2014), 121–42 (p. 130).
[25] Saul and Bond. "The Apartheid Endgame, 1990–1994", p. 130.

> my teeth red
> from eating too many profanities.[26]

This is a speaker, who claims to be exhausted as s/he arrives at an unspecified pit where abominations are buried and covered over. The descriptions of the persona's surrounds are vague and obtuse but in the context of South Africa's transition to democracy, one can surmise that the horror that s/he alludes to is the years of conflict and human rights abuse of both apartheid power and the struggle against this system of evil. This is not a voice imbued with a sense of liberation or freedom but rather a speaker who feels tainted as evidenced in the phrase 'my teeth red/ from eating too many profanities'. The sentiment conveyed is that the ugliness that went into South Africa's journey for independence has left the persona irrevocably bloodied, as indicated by the redness of teeth. It seems that s/he feels marred by the discourse and curses that s/he has swallowed or absorbed. The metaphor of blood is a salient reminder that words have a direct connection to embodied experience. Diction has a physical impact upon the speaker. One is forced to recall that language has always been caught up in material tussles over power in South Africa, as was prominently seen in the United Democratic Front's call that culture should become mobilised in the service of the struggle in the 1980s.[27]

The speaker of "galawas" refuses to add its own voice to that of those who celebrate the victories of the new era in joyous and decorated tones,

> i fed the mendicants no hope
> sang them no sugar or salt
> i forgot to wash their feet
> i did not put enough brother
> in the handshake. [28]

The culinary metaphors of 'sugar' and 'salt' surely allude to the poetic persona's unwillingness to add 'flavour' or sycophantic praise to the celebratory feast of democracy. 'Sugar' and 'salt' are substances that enhance, mask or change the flavours of a dish and, in this poem, they symbolise words and agendas that torque or manipulate the representation of South African freedom. Arguably, the comparative language works to present a persona who will either speak truth or not give breath to utterance at all. The voice eschews the meretricious, which

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[26] Motsapi, "galawas", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 76, ll.1-5 & ll.8-9.
[27] Christopher Warnes, "Postcolonial Writing in South Africa", in *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature,* Volume I, ed. Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 329-351 (p.344).
[28] Motsapi, "galawas", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 76, ll.12-16.

in some ways foreshadows the poet's own resignation as Thabo Mbeki's speechwriter for personal reasons of integrity. This is a speaker who spurns showy displays of reconciliation, as is made apparent in the stated refusal of a brotherly handshake. The speaker primarily takes objection to displaying brotherliness towards a wealthy black elite. It is made manifestly apparent that the voice does not buy into official narratives of harmony at the dawn of a new nation.

"Galawas" foregrounds a speaker who struggles to enunciate identity in language,

> i stammer so
> a cipher in time's footnotes.[29]

Here, a poetic persona professes to stammer and in this regard the poem echoes the jarring and fractured tone of much of Motsapi's anti-colonial poetry. Crucially, in "galawas", the impediment towards linguistic communication, is caused by fundamental objections to corrupt black power. This is why Motsapi's fragmentary utterances are 'ciphers' in the passage of time. Indeed, these linguistic dissonances do not have a unitary meaning but must be decoded with reference to their context. In "galawas", resistance to expression is not a reaction to the colonial nature of English but a refutation of the washed out nature of South Africa's struggle tradition. The stutter becomes a veiled but concrete way of indicating a fatigued political conscience that is profoundly dissatisfied with South Africa's post-Apartheid dispensation. The speaker writes,

> slowly slowly
> i unlearn the lions
> their mauling surnames[30].

The words illustrate that the names of heroes or 'lions' must be 'unlearned' because these leaders have betrayed the noble cause for which they once stood. [31] In the face of ideological disenchantment, the speaker turns inwards, refusing to venerate corrupt struggle icons. Verbal hesitancies instantiate fissures in self-congratulating narratives of democracy and display a refusal to sycophantically partake in discourses of celebration. While the stammer is a form of reticence, even a measure of an over-exerted moral stamina, it is nevertheless an indelible mark in the passage of time, indicating a stern repudiation of a false sense of social

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[29] Motsapi, "galawas", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 76, ll.17-18.
[30] Motsapi, "galawas", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 76, ll.19-21.
[31] Motsapi, "galawas", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 76.

harmony. Motsapi's writing is presented as the honourable alternative to mouthing tarnished liberation ideals.

The critique of commercialised black music becomes one of Motsapi's most prominent ways of calling out the co-option of African culture by capital. It is against this backdrop that one can more fully understand Motsapi's commitment to aesthetic dissonance. Through noise and procedures of interruption, the poet seeks to reclaim the radical roots of pan-African art, and calls both local and international black artists to account. In her article "Black Modernity, Nationalism and Transnationalism, The Challenge of Black South African Poetry", Chrisman argues that for Motsapi, 'a pan-Africanist music is as much an object of critique as it is a subject of affirmation, as much an obstacle to black self-realization as it is a utopian anticipation of it.'[32] On this note, the poem "moni" denigrates the 'new blackses' who have accrued wealth or 'moni' while the majority of South Africans remain impoverished. One of the key signs of the degeneration of this class is the dilapidated nature of their songs,

> the gravy of their songs
> smells like the slow piss of calculatahs.[33]

Scatological images of bodily excrement are deployed in order to underline the base nature of a commercial music that panders to the will of the market or 'calculatahs'. For Motsapi, progressive politics go hand in hand with independent, innovative art. The paucity of the latter in contemporary black culture comes to be seen as a sign of moral decay that must be vehemently resisted in every moment of poetic expression.

earthstepper's desire to both pay homage to the positive potentiality of black art and need to transcend the corruption of black aesthetic production comes to the fore in the Rastafarian-styled poem, "brotha saul". In the poem, a speaker takes on the dialect and cadences of Rastafarianism. A musician, seemingly called saul, is apostrophised and addressed as 'ras', which is one appellation under which Rastafarians are commonly known,

> dear ras
> i greet de lyaans
> in their roar of marble

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[32] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", p.33.
[33] Motsapi, "moni", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 53, ll.10-12.

frozen in their gloss of postcard
i greet u lyaan
in yr mane of fire.[34]

Here, one sees Motsapi greet a heritage of rastafarian icons 'frozen in their gloss of postcard'. 'Ras' and his artistic cohort are named 'lyaans' in order to signal their historical bravery and brilliance. Indeed, Rastafarian culture was initially a movement that strove to distance itself from capitalist forces of consumerism and white power. The religion originated in worship of Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, as the son of God, or God himself. In this belief system, the deification of an African leader is envisaged as a means of black people interpreting religion from their own perspective and it is a spiritual outlook that was championed by the pan-African leader Marcus Garvey.[35]

The speaker of Motsapi's poem delivers something of an encomium to saul's talent.

what a boom of exploding riff
what a tremor of bassline
thunder of drum
yr rock of voice
whatta bomb-bomb
yr stained finger of kaya
calling from mount zion.[36]

Reference is made to the riffs, baselines, drums and voice of saul's music. The lines salute the powerful impact of saul's loud and reverberating noises, namely through the words 'boom', 'tremor' and 'thunder'. The regular and frequent caesuras create pause and invite the reader to listen to the resounding quintessence of saul's musicianship, which is seen to have a direct connection to heaven or 'zion'.

Manipulation of line-breaks causes pause and hesitancy that achieve more than simply praising saul's talent. These linguistic breakages also allow one to more slowly and fully consider the legacy of Rastafarianism. Motsapi's motivation for forging these moments of cogitation is that he is preparing to launch an interrogation of the corruption of Rastafarian

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[34] Motsapi, "brotha saul", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.21, ll.1-6.
[35] "Rastafarianism", in *The Oxford Companion to Black British History*, ed. David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), *Oxford Reference Online* <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192804396.001.0001/acref-9780192804396-e-341?rskey=kvhIl0&result=1> [Accessed 4 February 2017].
[36] Motsapi, "brotha saul", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.21, ll.9-15.

culture. While the religion originally beckoned black spiritual liberation, it has, through time, become detached from its early roots and developed into a flourishing and highly profitable cultural market spawning such notable figures as Bob Marley.[37] The speaker cautions Saul against succumbing to the flow of market interests and the capitalist appropriation of formerly resilient Rastafarian art,[38]

> lissen ras lissen here,
> jus don let de green of de spliff,
> curtain u from the red of mah blood
> as piggin babylon runs with de gold'.[39]

The poetic persona warns 'ras' not to become allied with the hedonistic world of 'Babylon' or consumer society that Rastafarianism has traditionally opposed. The red of the speaker's blood forms a striking contrast to 'de green of de spliff', a reference to marijuana, which is a popular drug in Rastafarian communities. Even while Motsapi's persona inhabits Reggae influenced dialect, as evidenced in the use of words such as 'de' instead of 'the', s/he establishes a distance from the easy-going, pleasure-seeking elements of this culture.[40]

It seems that the key to reclaiming Rastafarianism's insurgent potential lies in a control of rhythm. Motsapi's speaker instructs 'ras',

> don let de rhythm ride u
> when mah glass of freedom splinters
> don let u be muted rub-a-dub
> to de clang-a-lang-lang of de chain.[41]

The message conveyed is that artists such as saul should exert agency upon the form of their writing and not let the rhythm of consumer culture control their medium of expression. Motsapi's point is expressed through his own dissonant modes of articulation that interrupt a smooth, easily digestible reading of the poem. Freedom is reclaimed through a process of

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[37] "Marley, Bob", *World Encyclopedia* (Philip's, 2014), *Oxford Reference Online* <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199546091.001.0001/acref-9780199546091-e-7264?rskey=eCpHOx&result=2> [Accessed 27/02/2017]
[38] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", p.34.
[39] Motsapi, "brotha saul", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.21, ll.16-19.
[40] Laura Chrisman argues that "brotha saul" intimates that the pleasure-seeking aspects of Rastafarian culture can create a 'criminal indifference to African realities'. Cf. Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry, p. 32.
[41] Motsapi, "brotha saul", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.21, ll.20-25.

splintering tempo and language. In a similar fashion to earlier moments of the poem, line structure creates breaks in which one can think through the issues at hand. Furthermore, the diction creates an effect of unruliness and noise. The oppression of capitalist chains is countered through the onomatopoetic word 'clang-a-lang-lang', which allows the reader to experience the speaker's anger at anodyne, flattened out modes of representation. In this way "brotha saul" engages with, critiques and reappraises a pan-African cultural struggle for human dignity and liberation from colonial power.[42]

In "brotha saul", Motsapi's speaker emphasises the lines of connection between art and material conditions of turmoil. This is the reason that the speaker must continue to make contentious and confrontational art. Culture is seen to have a responsibility towards expressing the jagged contours of ongoing subjugation,

> lissen ras
> i write u so short
> as outside fire mounts up de road
> des a firebomb shattering
> brotha's skull goes a-cracking
> while de blinking on/off blue light
> & de noising pierce of siren scream
> confuse de night
>
> remember lyaan
> death hovers above like ready vultures
> mah bass is de fire
> blood muffles de drum
> & de mic gurgles red
>
> i'll keep u de yelling red
> while i chase de looted gold
> mah green is a bridge to u
>
> till then
> ras
> keep de lyaans roaring,
> xex[43]

The speaker of Motsapi's poem is one who seemingly writes a hasty note, 'so short', because s/he exists amidst a milieu of conflict, 'outside fire mounts up de road/ des a firebomb

[42] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", pp.32-35.
[43] Motsapi, "brotha saul", in *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*, pp.21-22, ll.27-45.

shattering/ brotha's skull goes a-cracking'. One can interpret the lines as referring to an environ in which black subjects struggle for liberation from historic colonialism and present-day economic inequity. In "brotha saul", art is deeply wedded to these bloody fights for justice. Indeed, for the speaker, cultural production cannot stand apart from societal conflict in an elevated bourgeois fashion but perforce takes its place amidst scenes of death and hardship. The point is emphasised in the lines, 'death hovers above like ready vultures/ mah bass is de fire/ blood muffles de drum/ & de mic gurgles red'. Against a backdrop of revolution and warfare, the poetic voice insists that outspoken, militant music, both in sentiment and style, should continue to be made. Conversely, such politicised art must remain cognisant of the fact that its sound is saturated with the silence of unspeakable histories of bereavement. This entails that even as music might be powerful, loud and viscerally experienced, it is also inevitably muffled, dwarfed and humbled by the reality of the gory nature of its surrounds and of the scenes of travail it is embedded within. In this line of thought, in the final stanza of "brotha saul", the speaker asks for 'ras' to keep the 'lyaans' or the lions 'roaring' with passion. Ostensibly the word 'lyaans' denotes a wild African animal and is also, traditionally a symbol of pan-African power. Yet, 'lyaans' comes to refer to Saul's and Motsapi's own lines, which ideally, should emit a kind of 'roar' through continuing to make powerful, fearless art. Even so, the broken nature of the injunction, effected through use of caesuras, instantiates aural-visual lacunae that underscore the need for saul to consider the enunciation of his art with care and patience. The use of the term 'roar' is suggestive here because it pays homage to the gravity of inexpressible pain on the part of oppressed African people both in the past and the present.

Given that the poetry of *earthstepper* never explicitly details the heritage of racial oppression, nor names specific betrayals of the contemporary black government, Motsapi's social criticism remains indirect. The reader is forced to read into the uncertainties of poetic expression in order to understand that the work is intended to produce condemnation of existing social and communicative orders. The refracted nature of Motsapi's political commentary permeates every aspect of his poetry and is foregrounded in "The sun used to be white". The comparative language of the poem offers a clue as to what the mysterious symbol of the ocean, so prominently foregrounded in the collection's title, betokens and also offers a hope for an ideal society,

> For the masterplan is not a flag or two
> up the invisible masts of rebirths

it's more than the solid pre-harmony
of shrieks & screams
as we holler our thunder over the wounds
it's not the comical contentedness
of your own bucketful of the ocean
love is in the receding wave of the heart
the cool slink from the heart
into the embrace of the mesenja

& though the ocean clamours into a roar
though the waters invoke the drowsy spirit
of thunder
the ocean is very shallow
a time short like loss
a mountain low like hate
the ocean is very shallow[44]

Motsapi's speaker obliquely and surreptitiously decries the logic of profit through insinuating that true regeneration lies beyond the property relationship. The latter is symbolised through ownership over a 'bucketful of the ocean', which is seen to produce emotions of 'comical contentedness'. Here, a degree of scorn is meted out against those who greedily claim communal assets for their own private gain. The ocean can be interpreted to represent goods, natural resources and commodities that are looted by a new black elite. 'The ocean is very shallow' because it has been paled out by avaricious individuals, leaving little or nothing left for the public to enjoy. Given the political background of "the sun used to be white", Motsapi's writing can be envisaged as a pointed critique of South Africa's 1993 interim constitution, which secured individual property rights.[45]

Along with covertly mocking capitalist relations, "the sun used to be white" indirectly introduces concepts of systemic politics through mentioning the existence of a 'masterplan' The latter only appears in ghostly form, through the appearance of its antithesis. The poetry utilises innuendo and allusion, as opposed to direct statement, in order to suggest that there might be a comprehensive blueprint for thought and action in the search for national justice. A 'masterplan' is invoked through explicit statement of what it is not, 'a flag or two/ up the invisible mast of rebirths […or] the solid pre-harmony/ of shrieks and screams'. The mention of 'flags' and 'pre-harmony of shrieks and screams' speaks to the reality of a new nation,

[44] Motsapi, "the sun used to be white", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, pp. 25, ll. 58-74.
[45] John S. Saul and Patrick Bond. "The Apartheid Endgame, 1990–1994", p. 130.

which is only bound together by 'flags' or symbols of unity that are meaningless amidst the continued existence of pain and suffering. For Motsapi, neither of the aforementioned can constitute a viable trajectory along which the 'ship of state' can sail. The poem derides these false 'masterplans' but never details a vision of what a future, more progressive, political infrastructure might look like. Even so, there is arguably a hint of the utopian in Motsapi's use of terminology. Through summoning up, via negation, the possibility of a 'masterplan', he gestures to the continued viability of organised action, collective resistance and systemic socioeconomic revolution in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Motsapi's veiled mode of political critique and eschewal of factual representation arguably partakes in a definitively post-Apartheid literary moment, in which political commentary or sloganeering in literature fell out of vogue. Specifically, one might note the poetry's affinity with another literary masterpiece of its time, Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, which came out in 1995, the year before *earthstepper* was published. Both works share a common impulse to engage with structural reality but stop short of naming the social landscapes they seek to portray. Mda details a journey of rural-urban migration on the part of the professional mourner Toloki. Despite the plot's willingness to weave a story that makes seemingly unmistakable reference to South African life, such as allusion to the violence between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party in the early 1990s, the novel refuses to situate itself in a particular time and place.[46] Similarly, Motsapi engages with the political betrayals of his time, both local and global, but simultaneously never names specifics of the countries or people under discussion. In terms of works discussed in this thesis, one can argue that Ari Sitas's *Slave Trades* is another literary text, which seeks to explore post-Apartheid politics, while refusing to name the context outright. In the case of *Slave Trades*, Sitas does not simply circle around the name of South Africa but sketches local issues against the backdrop of Arthur Rimbaud's Ethiopia.

Given the widespread nature of a certain literary failure to name South Africa in several canonical post-Apartheid texts, one can see that *earthstepper's* hesitancy to directly chart the country is important. It can be argued that such a tendency has value from both a creative and ethical perspective. Indeed, the act of presenting national character in opaque terms

[46] Christopher Warnes, "Postcolonial Writing in South Africa", pp.346-347.

allows for greater artistic liberties and has the moral worth of not presuming complete mastery or knowledge over a nascent structural milieu. Furthermore, it becomes easier to view national affairs as part of a broader human and global tapestry. On the other hand, the lack of a desire to specify the South African context could indicate a fear of rebuke from a political elite, exhibiting a similar strain of anxiety and claustrophobia that permeated Apartheid literature burdened by censorship. Another consideration is that in temporally and spatially non-specific writing, such as Motsapi's, the voices of marginalised groups and communities, many of which deserve to be acknowledged in all their specificity, risk being swamped and homogenised into a more general representation of a racial underclass. Motsapi's resistance towards clearly defined protocols of political and literary representation, which encompasses his use of noise and interruption, is an aesthetically and morally equivocal position. Positively it defies corrupt and hackneyed accounts of subjective and social life, while also delivering poetic pleasure through surprising images and rhythms. Negatively, the writing does not describe or offer solutions to social problems. Even so, curiosity and independent thought are encouraged in the reader who must perforce view socioeconomic realities at an aesthetic distance. While this process is no foolproof plan of social action, it does foster creativity and proactivity of thought on the part of an audience. This latter skill is arguably foundational to a vibrant and healthy democracy.

Through detailing Motsapi's art it has become apparent that he resists oppressive systems of symbolic meaning through antagonism and aesthetic dissidence. Yet there is another aspect to his overhaul of cogent representative structures and it is one that also casts a veil of mystery over everyday political realities. This other quality of Motsapi's writing is his mysticism, quietude and depiction of a universal human spirit. Sam Radithlalo writes of the poet's 'transcendental humanity' and 'rejection of the post-modern world as ordained by materialism.'[47] Similarly, Ritske Zuidema posits that Motsapi's writing invokes 'the peace that is inherent in each one of us'.[48] Motsapi's mystical embrace of inner peace foregrounds the spiritual power of quietude. Indeed, for Gary Cummiskey, the poet's 'meditative lines embody the poet's withdrawal into silence'.[49] Ostensibly the mystic and tranquil element of

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[47] Sam Radithlalo, "The seeds of a storm within, Seitlhamo Motsapi. 1995. *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*. Grahamstown: Deep South/ ISEA", *Scrutiny 2*, 3:1, 1998, 82-84, (p.83).
[48] Ndavhe Ramakuela, "Stepping with Seitlhamo Motsapi: Direction for South African Poetry", *English Studies in Africa*, 40:2, 1997, 33-40, (p.34).
[49] Gary Cummiskey, "*earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow* by Seitlhamo Motsapi (Deep South Publishers/ ISEA 1995)", *Bleksem* 5, 1996, pp.13-14, (p.14).

Motsapi's writing is directly opposed to the linguistic virtuosity and antagonistic wordplay of his dissident style. Yet, I argue that silence is also a way of shunning soiled racist traditions and the call of South Africa's new government to celebrate a democracy established for the benefit of the few. Withdrawal from debate, articulation, and subjective representation becomes a stance of moral strength insofar as these actions spurn meretricious and inhumane ideologies.

The concluding poem of *earthstepper*, "river robert", portrays quietude as a redemptive and even utopian force. The poem depicts silence as an active decision taken by marginalised people to forgive the wrongs committed against them and accept peace as a worthy human value. Motsapi's speaker seems to have moved away from aggressive critique and instead, adopts serenity,

> we are at peace here
> even while our lungs are full
> of secret wars
> & primordial fears bruise our suns
> we are at peace here robert.[50]

The speaker apostrophises "robert" who is an ambiguous symbol or persona. Here, the addressee is potentially Robert Sobukwe, founder of the Pan Africanist Congress, or Robert Mugabe the now corrupted liberation leader of Zimbabwe, a country that is closely bordered by Motsapi's own home province of Limpopo. Notably, both public figures have advocated a militant Africanist politics, which can be contrasted with the inner peace and slow wisdom, forwarded by Motsapi's speaker.[51] The emphasis on social harmony is striking given that the poem repeatedly states that this is a reconciliation that co-exists with the violence and discord 'of secret wars'. The speaker's inner conflicts, that infuse both lungs and breast, are never revealed. This allusive and illusive atmosphere cultivates a tone of silence and mysticism.

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[50] Motsapi, "river robert", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.84, ll. 1-5.

[51] "Pan-Africanist Congress", in *A Dictionary of World History*, 3rd edition (Oxford University Press, 2015), *Oxford Reference Online* <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199685691.001.0001/acref-9780199685691-e-2765?rskey=yGZQO0&result=4> [Accessed 04/03/2017]; "Mugabe, Robert Gabriel", in *A Dictionary of Political Biography*, 2nd edition, ed. Dennis Kavanagh and Christopher Riches (Oxford University Press, 2013), *Oxford Reference Online* <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191751080.001.0001/acref-9780191751080-e-529?rskey=Uy8u8E&result=7> [Accessed 04/03/2017]; Chrisman, "Black Modernity, Nationalism and Transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", p.41.

"River robert" is a poem defined by mysterious and inscrutable imagery that symbolises the hopes and pains of a speaker who refuses to articulate meaning in a direct way,

> i have one eye full of dreams & hintentions
>
> the other is full of broken mirrors
> & cracked churchbells
>
> i have one eye full of rivers & welcomes
> the other is full of flickers & fades
>
> i have
> a memory full of paths & anointings
> a mouth full of ripe infant suns
> seven legs for the dancing river & the clement abyss[52]

Surreal imagery paints a picture of a poetic persona who does not so much have his own identity as act as a reflection and a vessel for other systems of meaning. Thus, her or his eyes are seen to hold 'cracked churchbells', 'rivers & welcomes', 'flickers & fades'. Similarly, the speaker's memory spills over with 'paths & anointings' while her or his mouth is filled with 'ripe infant suns' and 'seven legs for the dancing river & the clement abyss'. On the literal level, no human subject could represent or resemble this array of physical objects, natural forces and emotional states. The persona becomes a receptacle for the material and spiritual aura of its surrounds, which has the effect of emptying out personal identity. In turn, a speaker acts as something of a 'broken mirror' through reflecting its external environment in refracted ways that reform and obfuscate any clear sense of social or political understanding. Thus one conjectures that 'rivers' stand for the passage of time or that 'infant suns' herald the birth of a new democracy yet these images are never decoded. In this line of thought, the notion of 'seven legs' at the brink of an abyss is entirely obtuse and its meaning cannot be unveiled. One might guess that the speaker is a magical creature with multiple limbs. The effect of this startling imagery is to de-humanise and de-individualise a persona who refuses to take on a one-dimensional identity. Meaning is never conveyed in a commonsensical fashion and the identity of the persona and his or her surrounds remains veiled in silence. This speaker is defined by 'hintentions'. The neologism clearly expresses that the poem's content and intent will only be known through 'hint' and gesture.

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[52] Motsapi, "river robert", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.84, ll. 14-22.

In the context of Motsapi's writing, the suggestive and emotive images presented can have multiple valences but certainly refer to the liberation struggle to overcome Apartheid rule. This factual landscape is rendered clearer through reference to 'the rainbow' of the new democracy,

> we are at peace here
> across the rock & scrub
> a sole rainbow pillar
> protrudes from the earth, full
> of promise & solace.[53]

The promise and solace found in Motsapi's poem is distinct from the national discourse of harmony, reconciliation and resolution propounded by the African National Congress. The reticence and enigma of Motsapi's writing forms a stark contrast to a bold establishment of black personhood or the cathartic processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which began hearings in 1996. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in accordance with the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, No. 34, 1995 and aimed to provide hearings for those who had committed human rights violations under Apartheid. Significantly, one of the court's functions was to provide amnesty to perpetrators of injustice.[54] While 'river robert' shares the values of peace and forgiveness championed by the commission, it refuses the notion that the pain of the past, or the present, can be publically presented or resolved. Instead, the poem retreats into the realm of spirituality and myth, spurning clear representations of feeling, emotion or subjectivity.

As the poem concludes, one receives knowledge of inward tribulations that cannot be charted by official narratives,

> as we learn the painful lessons of love
> as we learn to respect the night's sovereignty
> & the slow stern wisdom of the desert
> we bless the mysteries & the silence.[55]

Love and harmony are not qualities that can be fully understood or enshrined in public or constitutional terms. These are values that persist and exist amidst silence and the cover of

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[53] Motsapi, "river robert", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.84, ll.9-13.
[54] "Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995", <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>, pp. 1-39, (pp.1-2) [Accessed 04/03/2017].
[55] Motsapi, "river robert", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p. 85, ll.33-36.

night. The rhythm of the poem accentuates this fact in the drawn out tempo created by the long sounds of alliteration in the phrase 'slow stern wisdom'. The reader is compelled to pause and accept Motsapi's silences for herself. In the process, one connects to the immanence of a serenity that cannot be articulated in language.

The acceptance and calm of "river robert" has been interpreted as a call for stability and reconciliation in the aftermath of Apartheid trauma.[56] Thus, when Motsapi writes of forgiveness and promotes peace, such qualities have concrete application in terms of South Africa's democratic transition. Yet, "river robert's" call to embrace amity and values of social unity is not un-ambivalent and the journey to a higher plane of acceptance is beset with scenes of trial and uncertainty. This is brought to the fore in the following stanzas,

> we bless the long rough road
> we bless the inscrutable darkness
> where our names are rent into spirit
> we bless the splinters & the air
> full of asphyxiations & amnesia
> we bless our lacerations & our deformities
>
> we bless the belligerent strangers
> who stay on in our throats
> long after forgotten festivities[57]

The route to reconciliation is a 'long rough road' through 'inscrutable darkness'. In the face of 'belligerent strangers' and the historical weight of hardship, an understandable response would be to wreak vengeance or call out in rage. The poem's emphasis upon the act of blessing is therefore most powerful and striking. In this regard, the incantatory repetition of the phrase, 'we bless' is juxtaposed with states of being that seem virtually impossible to sanctify or condone. There is a certain violence and agony to 'blessing' such realities as 'asphyxiation & amnesia' or 'lacerations' and 'deformities'. Even as the poem suggests a dignified sentiment of pacifism, it insists on the historical weight of hardship that remains insurmountable and inexpressible. The fact that this remains unspoken, intimates unseen depths of torture and suffering. Anguish is not brushed over or swept aside but left to permeate the very 'air' of the poem. This is achieved through continually reflecting upon the

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[56] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", pp. 40-41.
[57] Motsapi, "river robert", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, pp.84-85, ll.24-32.

difficulties involved in loving one's oppressors. The ambivalence of 'river robert' gains even greater resonance given that 'river robert' is the concluding poem of the collection. As the reader finishes the text, s/he is impressed with an attitude of silence that commands an ethical higher ground, inasmuch as this stance both symbolises forgiveness and insistent respect for hurt that cannot be brought to light or understood. The recurrent repetition of the collective pronoun 'we', which gathers particular force in stanzas seven and eight, has the effect of emphasising a collective gesture of grace on the part of a community of people who have made the challenging decision to spurn vengeance, even if anger and resentment towards maltreatment persists. Ultimately, silence emerges as an empowered and informed choice. Instead of being a state of existence imposed upon those who are denied expression, it becomes a conscious and mature mode of engagement with the political demands of a nation which has already been rent apart by discord and divide among its people. In this regard, the decision to cultivate non-violence does not only benefit the country, but also, the individual. If one takes into account Motsapi's commitment to Christianity, the silence of forgiveness is one that sets the one who grants amnesty free.

An abiding question when looking at Motsapi's oeuvre is whether the final moments of spiritual upliftment represent a move away from insurgency and anti-colonial anger. On one level, one *can* trace a movement from a speaking voice pre-occupied with past wrongs, anger, and frustration to a persona who adopts harmony and tranquillity. From this perspective, one follows the speaker's own path of learning as s/he discovers a higher plane of being. Notably, this latter reading would fit well with Motsapi's personal biography. Even so, a simplistic teleology needs to be problematised. One reason for this is that some of Motsapi's most powerful poems detail conflict and righteous anger and it is impossible to forget or ignore them at the book's conclusion, as their force lingers on. Similarly, poems that promote themes of quietude and peace begin to emerge in the book's earliest pages. In this regard, the love poem "Tenda" is paradigmatic,

> i will always remember you
> & your face that is the end of all roads
> poetry will never travel
> i will remember you
> when i have learned the rustle of rivers
> when i have learned the inconvenient gestures of compassion
> when i have learned to be infinitely present

& yet invisible like the sky[58]

In the extract, one sees a persona tenderly and sensitively address a beloved whose qualities of peace, humility, and grace s/he would like to emulate. In many ways, the tone and aspirations of the piece are similar to themes in "river robert" insofar as the voice seeks compassion, spiritual presence, and a degree of humility, as is indicated in the need to be 'invisible like the sky'. Yet this is one of the very first offerings in *earthstepper* and takes its place alongside, and before, some of Motsapi's more insurgent poems, such as "brotha saul". The connection between Motsapi's volatility and mysticism needs to be understood as springing from a common impulse. This is a deep-seated desire to overturn and refuse corrupt systems of representative meaning, whether these are colonial cultural messages or post-Apartheid political statements. One is called upon to explore a mode of political engagement that spurns sloganeering, ruptures coherent political programs, and sometimes refuses to partake in utterance at all. The value of this political and aesthetic strategy is that it brings disorder to meretricious and immoral dispensations. The negative aspect to Motsapi's poetics is that it presents no clear societal policy of its own. An attitude of refusal effectively protests the status quo but offers little guidance as to what a future or more just society might look like.

I argue that in Motsapi's work, disruption and silence may not point to a clear way forward but these qualities do splice through the heart of oppressive regimes. Furthermore, these tactics gesture to the presence of unspoken and unspeakable realities deemed beyond the ambit of consciousness. Motsapi's eschewal of representation is never abstract or one-dimensional but an aesthetic imbued with particularity. An example of this is that the common strategy of the stammer can be both a refutation of colonial culture or post-Apartheid corruption, depending upon the milieu in which Motsapi situates it. Motsapi handles interruption and silence in ways that craft precise moments of the unheard in South African and international politics, creating specific moments of disturbance and stillness that work to portray the spirits of marginalised people and overlooked voices. *Earthstepper* makes space in the fabric of discourse for the aggression and resilience of subjugated people to emerge. The political realities behind fractures in language are insisted upon. Form bears witness to history.

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[58] "Tenda", in *earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow*, p.11, ll.23-30.

Chapter Three

"Writing the Ungovernable"[1]

Lesego Rampolokeng's Revitalised Protest Aesthetic

'As part of the Pavlovian experiment that was Bantu Education, I was force-fed the soul-deadening and mind-poisoning literature and art of debasement, inhumanity and colonialism that sought to reduce me to sub-human status from an early age. I kicked out against it and reached out to the life-affirming side of things, where I found the art and literature of social conscience that lifted me to another plane. From Fela Kuti and Frantz Fanon to Ingoapele Madingoane, Dumile Feni, Lefifi Tladi, the dub poetry of LKJ, Jean Binta Breeze and Mutabaruka to the proto-rap of Gil Scott-Heron. I am part of that unfortunate generation called ungovernable, who were never debriefed. Having started from mere existence, I am trying to write myself to a life.' [2]

The above quotation introduces Lesego Rampolokeng's lecture "Writing the Ungovernable", which he delivered on the 12th of June 2012 while a Mellon writer in residence at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. In this seminar, the poet works through the 'thinking, scribbles, scrawling, pencil-scratches, paint-dabs & sound-notes' that inspired him to overcome the 'soul-deadening and mind-poisoning' education he received under Apartheid.[3] The public talk places emphasis upon the importance of art and literature in nourishing social consciousness and for this reason it offers an ideal entry point into a discussion of Rampolokeng's career. For Rampolokeng, cultural expression can play a vital role in fostering individual and communal resistance to oppressive political regimes. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the 'ungovernable' properties of Rampolokeng's poetry and to investigate the extent to which his work constitutes an effective means of 'kick[ing] out' against Apartheid, colonialism and contemporary political hegemonies. Unlike Motsapi, Rampolokeng's poetry does not simply offer critique of what is, but also endeavours to establish positive new models of black identity. I explore Rampolokeng's ability to 'Write [him]self to a life' and bring into being an unshackled post-Apartheid subjectivity.

The major question posed by Rampolokeng's work is how a South African writer is able to adopt an authentic stance of opposition in a context in which the legacy of racial defiance has been co-opted by finance capital and corruption. Adopting a simplistic protest aesthetic is complicated because to be a hero of struggle has become a highly fashionable identity

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[1] Title used with permission from Lesego Rampolokeng.
[2] Lesego Rampolokeng, "Writing the Ungovernable", [Poster], (Grahamstown: The University of Rhodes, 2012).
[3] Rampolokeng, "Writing the Ungovernable", [Poster].

adopted by corrupt leaders. In his poem, "Koshun in the Bog", Rampolokeng portrays anti-Apartheid veterans as 'human machines recycled at the pavlov-lab' who peddle 'tears on the market' and display their wounds upon 'the global ramp'[4]. Such figures have sold their stories to multinational capital in a context of 'oppression commodity freedom business liberation economics', in which narratives of the triumph over Apartheid have become an industry.[5] Rampolokeng is particularly scathing of poets who recount hackneyed tales of the battle against white rule and blindly celebrate the new democracy. These writers claim to be artists of social conscience but are uncritical participants in an

> age of the automatic storyteller machine
> & the rent-a-poet enterprise.[6]

Such work was exemplified in the 'celebratory anthology of poetry and prose […] issued at the presidential inauguration of Thabo Mbeki'.[7] Poets featured in this collection, and others like them, claim to be working in the vein of indigenous praise poetry and laud the achievements of the post-Apartheid dispensation. Speaking to Robert Berold in 1993, Rampolokeng argues that such poets neglect the traditionally critical role of poets in African society,

> In the old days the praise-singers were traditionally the only people in the nation who could criticise the kings and get away with it. That seemed to me a good tradition, one to be followed. But I found that in the political set-up in this country today that doesn't work: if you start introducing criticism then you're supposed to be reactionary, counter-revolutionary—although people don't say counter-revolutionary because the word revolution has itself fallen foul of the politics of this country.[8]

Rampolokeng is contemptuous of poets who claim to be working in accordance with traditional African creeds but do little to counter contemporary inequality. I argue that Rampolokeng manages to reappraise the legacy of the African praise poet through respecting, criticising, and overhauling the heritage of black struggle in South Africa. Here, he also lives up to his Fanonian credentials through trumpeting self-criticism as 'an African institution'.[9] In

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[4] Lesego Rampolokeng, "Koshun in the Bog", in *Head on Fire: Rants/ Notes Poems 2001-2011* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2012), p. 142, l.106 & l.111.
[5] "Koshun in the Bog", in *Head on Fire*, p.142, l.12.
[6] Rampolokeng, "Talking Prose", in *Head on Fire*, p. 46, l.1.
[7] Kelwyn Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa", *Mediations*, 24:1 (2008), 132-165 (p.136).
[8] Robert Berold, "Lesego Rampolokeng, December 1993", *South African Poets on Poetry, Interviews From New Coin 1992-2001* (Scottsville: Gecko Poetry, 2003), pp. 22-33 (p. 28).
[9] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 47.

the face of a national sell-out, a writer such as Motsapi recedes into silence but Rampolokeng accepts the task of reconstructing a language of action. In this regard, there is specific relationship between innovative language and neoliberalism in Rampolokeng's work. His own productive force and linguistic showmanship both reflects and outstrips the innovations of global capitalism. The poet beats capital at its own game and in the process writes an ungovernable warrior poetics into being.

Born in 1965, Rampolokeng was raised in Orlando West, Soweto, which is an area that lies at the heart of black South Africa's battle for linguistic and cultural freedom.[10] The 1976 Soweto uprisings originated in the township and arose as a direct response to the Bantu Education Department, which decreed in 1974 that Afrikaans should be the medium of instruction in all schools. This policy drew opposition from black South African teachers and students who argued that they were not fluent in Afrikaans and hence could not be expected to adopt the language as a compulsory medium of education. Hostility to the 1974 legislation was rooted in long-standing resentment towards the entire edifice of Bantu Education initiated by Hendrik Verwoerd in 1953. Under this system, blacks were to receive an inferior education to whites in order that they might be brought up to accept a subordinate status in South African Society. Dissatisfaction against a racist schooling system culminated on the 16th of June 1976 when thousands of students, mobilised by the South African Students Movement's Action Committee supported by the BCM (Black Consciousness Movement) initiated a peaceful march to protest against the government's new policy. On their way towards Orlando Stadium, the unarmed protestors were met by police who fired both teargas and ammunition upon them.[11] These events caused both national and international outcry with youth revolt spreading across the whole of South Africa. It is against the backdrop of Soweto that Rampolokeng's craft has been formed. In a 2013 interview with Doug Valentine for the US political journal *Counterpunch* he frankly discussed his personal experiences,

> June 16, 1976, I stood at the door of a gutted bottle store, dressed in slippers torn so that my toes showed and I had my nose full of tear-gas with a case of beer on my head even though I had never tasted alcohol in my life…and as I walked out, across the way was police truck…and there were teams of uniformed officers-of-the-gore

[10] Doug Valentine, *An Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng, Post-Freedom Poetry*, in *Counterpunch*, 13-15 September 2013 <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/09/13/post-freedom-poetry/> [Accessed 01 October 2014] (Para 2 & 23. Of 50).

[11] Ruth Kerkham Simbao, "The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Soweto Uprisings: Reading the Shadow in Sam Nzima's Iconic Photograph of Hector Pieterson", *African Arts*, 40:2 (2007), 52-69 (pp.52-52).

> standing there throwing dead bodies into the back of that blasted police vehicle? I was 11 years old.[12]

The mention of 'tear-gas' and 'dead bodies' suggests that Rampolokeng could easily have been one of the casualties of the 1976 unrest. As the poet himself notes, 'Hector Pieterson the first child victim of the apartheid beast, was shot 200 meters from the house where I was born'.[13] Unlike Pieterson, Rampolokeng survived one of the bloodiest massacres in South Africa's history and has gone on to write collections of poetry that chronicle the country's political journey, *Horns for Hondo* (1990), *Talking Rain* (1993), *The Bavino Sermons* (1999), *Head on Fire* (2012) and *a half century thing* (2015).

Rampolokeng spurns poetry that toes a party line and was famously cautioned by African National Congress officials at Walter Sisulu's 80th Birthday party for refusing to recite anodyne praise poetry. As he explains, 'COSAW was advised to put me on a leash […] I'd conducted myself like a mad dog, they said'.[14] Rampolokeng's rejection of official African National Congress discourses of reconciliation manifests in poetry that charts the contemporary meaning of struggle. This question is foregrounded in "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles", which is the opening poem of *Head on Fire.* The poem propels the reader into a world in which a redemptive writerly praxis is haunted by the commercialisation of liberation ideals. As the name of the poem suggests, it is set in Orlando West, which is portrayed as an area ravaged by violence and depravation. Here one encounters 'head-slices'[15], while 'suppertime is hunger-flame lit'.[16] "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles" offers food for thought because it does not seem to share the optimism of "Writing the Ungovernable" in terms of claiming the ability to overcome a legacy of mental slavery. The poem does not ostensibly dwell upon literature's relationship towards the 'life-affirming side of things' but bravely confronts the relative unimportance of poetic subjectivity in areas of dire socioeconomic want. According to the "Chronicles", one of the most depressing aspects of life in the Johannesburg Township, is the fact that landmarks built to commemorate the fight for liberation have lost their association with communal upliftment and strength. The Hector Pieterson Memorial Museum was established in memory of the Soweto riots and Mandela

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[12] Valentine, "An Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng" (Para 35. of 50).
[13] Valentine, "An Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng" (Para 35. of 50).
[14] Berold, "Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng, 1993", p. 29.
[15] Rampolokeng, "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles", in *Head on Fire: Rants*, pp. 11-14 (p.11, l. 3).
[16] Rampolokeng, "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles", p. 11, l. 12.

House pays tribute to the home where Nelson Mandela lived as a young lawyer but in today's Orlando they have become symbols of the commercialisation of contemporary South Africa.[17]

The history of these sites is now marketed to eager European tourists. This arguably replicates the submissiveness that blacks were taught to exercise under Apartheid. In Rampolokeng's poem, one is told, 'the struggle house a museum' where one can "buy a piece of struggle-dream"'[18]. Furthermore, 'the memorial-stone erect on a child-hood-death-site' is 'now a tourist hot spot'[19]. These phrases suggest that South Africa's national heritage is a commodity like any other and available to be sold to the highest bidder. The extent to which this process becomes a kind of neo-colonialism is brought to the fore in the line 'colonial theories & bones in the nose moans strike a pose'[20]. The expression mocks locals who parade in pre-modern and outmoded stances through wearing archaic trinkets such as bones through their nose or engage in excessive and unintelligible moaning in order to performatively enact the persona of an uncultivated savage. These gestures are a sham designed to comply with colonial stereotypes of black identity. Ultimately they masquerade cultural capital in a fashion that mirrors the spectacular character of South Africa's material resources, which are showcased on the international market as items to be bet upon and sold. The false 'African' identities that are ridiculed in Rampolokeng's poem are evidence of post-Apartheid mentalities that remain embroiled with the oppressive legacy of Bantu Education. Lamenting mental entrapment re-enacts familiar patterns in which Africa grovels and bows to foreign taste. Emblems, images, and icons of Apartheid subjugation become recycled as profitable objects to be consumed by the European gaze. Laura Chrisman has noted the tendency of African histories to become 'commodified instruments of globalization' in the post-Apartheid period. [21] Rampolokeng calls out this commodification of identity and makes a point of asserting the freedom of his own consciousness.

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[17] J.L. França Junior, "Verses, Subverses and Subversion in Contemporary Postcolonial Poetry, The arts of resistance in the works of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Lesego Rampolokeng" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Cape Town, 2009), pp. 91-92.
[18] Rampolokeng, "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles", in *Head on Fire*, p.11, l.26.
[19] Rampolokeng, "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles", in *Head on Fire*, p. 12, ll.51-52.
[20] Rampolokeng, "Orlando West Cockroach Chronicles", in *Head on Fire*, p. 13, l. 73.
[21] Laura Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", in *Beyond the Black Atlantic, Relocating modernization and technology*, ed. by Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 29-46 (p. 39).

Rampolokeng forges techniques of surmounting colonialism, cultural essentialism, and recycled struggle rhetoric. Crucial features of the writer's early poetry have persisted and matured throughout his career. These include the vehement desire to overthrow oppression and the will to go beyond an aesthetic of simple opposition in order to establish non-binary realms of political experience. As Andries Walter Oliphant, one of the most astute scholars of Rampolokeng's work, argues,

> [Rampolokeng] encodes the struggles of all colonized people in the quest to overthrow the shackles of domination. In speech it involves the compulsion to expose the moral unacceptability of oppression and the need for change articulated in terms understandable by the oppressor. These forces at work in Lesego's poetry render it more than mere protest and moral outrage. It postulates a world different to the one we presently inhabit.[22]

Oliphant is writing of Ramapolokeng's debut *Horns for Hondo* but his words also capture the spirit of the poet's oeuvre as a whole. Indeed, Rampolokeng's anti-colonial standpoint does not hark back to a mythological African essence but works through re-appropriating English and its literary conventions. Here, I want to focus on Oliphant's mention of Rampolokeng's 'formal and thematic syncretism'[23] and what Flora Veit-Wild goes on to term his hybrid style which 'fuses influences from Jamaican dub poetry with American ghetto rap, jazz and contemporary popular music as well as some indigenous sounds and rhythms'.[24] The significance of these qualities of Rampolokeng's writing is that they are geared to overcoming constricting systems of authority through overhauling tradition and bringing new and unheard voices into being. Such a venture engages with poetic paradigms inherited from both Africa and Europe but ultimately surpasses both in order to present 'an alternative affirmative articulation' within a global living language.[25] "Rap 22" in *Horns for Hondo* is a youthful statement of Rampolokeng's ambition to craft unique literary forms and the poem provides a compass for his later imaginative trajectory,

> for it's not just enough to say no
> even while repression makes mental excavation
> make no poetry of reiteration
> grabbing the nearest weapon in desperation
> it's bluntness might lead to our extinction

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[22] Andries Walter Oliphant, "Introduction, The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng", in *Horns For Hondo* (Fordsburg: Cosaw, 1990), pp. i-vi (privy).
[23] Oliphant, "Introduction, The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng", p. iv.
[24] Flora Veit-Wild, "Carnival and Hybridity in Texts by Dambudzo Marechera and Lesego Rampolokeng", *Journal of South African Studies*, 23 (1997), 553-564 (pp. 561-562).
[25] Oliphant, "Introduction, The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng", vi.

fixated on a distant time
be not asphyxiated in present slime
in the face of radical advancement
put blunt harping to retrenchment
this is my blood sweat & tears endorsement
en route to empowerment
for the time has come to restore the natural
inject potence into tradition written & oral
i rap these words
for the freedom of the birds.[26]

Rampolokeng refuses to be 'fixated on a distant time' or bogged down by the 'slime' of a challenging present. Instead, he positions himself 'en route to empowerment'. 'Poetry of reiteration' will not be adequate to this future-oriented outlook. It is significant that the speaker does not simply seek to surmount a 'written' tradition, which would encompass the European literary canon but also aims to invigorate 'oral' literature. The endeavour to go beyond the latter includes rejuvenating black South African culture such as the SeSotho Dithoko song style that has been formative for Rampolokeng in which a 'singer talk-sings the lyrics accompanied by instrumental music'.[27] One way in which Rampolokeng injects 'potence' into an oral medium is through blending older traditions with newer performance genres such as rap. From these promising beginnings, the poet's repertoire has continued to expand and he has found fresh tactics for countering ossified patterns of writing and speech. Taking inspiration from Rampolokeng's stated wish to 'put blunt harping to retrenchment', my chapter explores two formal features that define his mature poetry in order to illustrate the means and mechanisms whereby he disrupts conventional poetic and political language.

The first poetic characteristic I highlight is Rampolokeng's prolific development of neologisms. The second is his strategic deployment of puns. My discussion suggests an affinity between Rampolokeng's use of these literary devices and the aims of metropolitan avant-garde movements, namely the Language poets.[28] Marjorie Perloff succinctly summarises the aims of the language school in a fashion that elucidates how their project dialogues with the neoliberalised South African context,

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[26] Rampolokeng, "rap 22", in *Horns for Hondo*, pp. 35-36.
[27] Oliphant, "Introduction, The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng", p. v.
[28] Kelwyn Sole, "'Inside our bodies/ the terrible words must burn': editing a new selection of South African poetry', *New Coin*, 49:1 (2013), 105-108, (p. 108).

> Given the overproduction of such instrumental discourses in late-twentieth-century America, with its glut of junk mail, advertising brochures, beepers, bumper stickers, answering-machine messages, and especially its increasing video coercion […] poetry […] is coming to see its role as the production of what might be called an alternate language system. Hence the name, pretentious but essentially accurate, Language poetry.[29]

The group of diverse poets who emerged in America in the 1960s and 70s envisage the political task of poetry to lie in shaking up commercial modes and patterns of discourse. This entails that formal ingenuity can be a way of countering power. Their aesthetic intentions resonate with Rampolokeng's intention to 'write the ungovernable' and this similarity of outlook reminds one of Sole's insight 'in the world in which we live, one must then expect poetic influences to interweave and echo among divergent global modernities'.[30] While post-Apartheid South Africa is most certainly a different context to late twenty-first century America, it is also true that both literary-political spaces belong to a single capitalist modernity and tackle comparable problems. Like Language school precursors, Rampolokeng faces a media that propounds a 'glut' of 'instrumental discourses'. Confronted with the over-simplification of information in an epoch of late-capitalism Rampolokeng seeks to challenge the limits of linguistic expressivity. Below I sketch the political vision articulated through his dexterous manipulation of neologisms and puns which work to forge an 'alternate language system'.

A neologism is a 'word or phrase, which is new to the language' or the 'coining or use of new words or phrases'.[31] In its own turn, a pun is defined as the,

> use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words.[32]

The two literary devices can arguably serve similar and complementary ends given that both uncover new or previously unacknowledged interpretations of words. For Sole, in the poetry

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[29] Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice, Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 49.
[30] Kelwyn Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", *Cross-Cultural Poetics,* 21/22 (2009), 240 – 266 (p.249).
[31] "neologism, n.", in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/126040?redirectedFrom=neologism&>[Accessed 24/09/2014].
[32] "pun, n.", in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/154549?rskey=8p1nK8&result=1#eid> [Accessed 24/09/2014].

of Rampolokeng, and some other black South African poets such as Seitlhamo Motsapi, neologisms and puns can effectively unveil ideologies and prejudices that are latent within the English language. The formal strategies in question can

> invert the traditional connotations of English words, thereby exposing these words' historically loaded bias and the political issues which accompanied the language's spread as a handmaiden of colonial power. In such a process, vulgarity of expression is common and serves a purpose. In a situation such as the one I am describing, such devices serve a consciously *disruptive* purpose—whereby English is exhibited as a language, like any other, bearing its weight of politics and history.[33]

Sole's argument insightfully calls attention to the way in which the connotative properties of word units are always deeply imbricated in the social fabric of the real world. The point brings to light the power interests that discourse disguises and the fact that supposedly intangible elements of language like diction, syntax or sentence structure are intimately related towards concrete existence. In the case of English, purportedly neutral registers of articulation and expression have in the past buttressed regimes based on bigotry, chauvinism and racial discrimination. A simple example of this would be the way in which the pejorative associations attributed to 'black' or 'blackness' justified the British colonial enterprise through implying that dark-skinned people are innately inferior. Sole's analysis places emphasis on the political dimension of form, which entails that a writer's stylistic choices have consequences for mapping his or her relationship towards authority.

Sole's observation of the disruptive potential of neologisms can be explored in the light of Juliana Sphar's understanding of the political possibilities of poetic discourse. In her study of Language poets and writers, who share affiliated technique, Sphar contends that unorthodox use of language can question 'literary criticism's emphasis on the desirability of fluent reading by always asking who controls reading, for what purpose. It undermines all easy assumptions about language, class, and ethnicity'.[34] In the case of Rampolokeng, and also Motsapi, neologisms and linguistic interruption, can expose the Eurocentric bias of words and phrases. This institutes fractures in accepted discourse. Such interruptions inserted into the very fabric of the poem force the reader to pause and reflect upon the naturalised ethnic and racial

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[33] Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", pp.253-254.
[34] Juliana Sphar, *Everybody's Autonomy, Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), p. 47.

prejudices of English and in so doing successfully challenge a legacy of European hegemony. The word play of Rampolokeng and Motsapi does not only serve to unmask the historical prejudices of colonialism. In her article on both of these poets, Laura Chrisman singles out Rampolokeng's writing, arguing that he envisions, 'the new obstacle to social emancipation […] not [as] apartheid but ANC neo-liberalism'.[35] Thus the new intent of Rampolokeng's poetic missiles is to implode the mythic status of post-Apartheid freedom discourse and the neoliberal orthodoxies it shelters.

Rampolokeng's 2012 work *Head on Fire* is his most accomplished poetic work. I focus upon it because the collection foregrounds his ability to devise fresh forms of social and literary articulation. The book is an experimental body of poetry that is rich in allusive texture and recurrently strives to pioneer unfamiliar idioms and phrases. Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo argues that the 'latest collection […] is markedly different from the earlier ones from *Talking Rain* (COSAW, 1993), *End Beginnings* (Munich: Marino, 1998), *The Bavino Sermons* (Gecko, 1999) and *the second chapter*'. [36] Raditlhalo states that in his recent work Rampolokeng, 'abandons any pretence at being an entertainer, and shows a shift towards dexterity and complexity'.[37] *Head on Fire's* novelty has intimidated many critics such as Kwanele Sosibo, who writing for the *Mail & Guardian* in May 2012 chose to label his review "Fragments of Obscurity". Sosibo portends that *Head on Fire's* inaccessibility is only going to further Rampolokeng's 'receding prominence' in mainstream poetry and performance circles. The reviewer derides Rampolokeng's departure from the 'easy to follow couplets that populated *Horns for Hondo* or *The Bavino Sermons'* sweeping' style.[38] Even while Sosibo complains that much of the work is 'impossibly mangled and dismembered' he does acknowledge that it reaches towards 'untouched habitats of language'.[39] Here I want to agree with Sosibo in his understanding of a drive in Rampolokeng's work towards more radical modes of enunciation but I choose to celebrate the undiscovered habitats of language that are unearthed through densely worked neologisms and punning. Raditlhalo rightly registers Rampolokeng's precision of diction

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[35] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", p. 39.
[36] Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo, "Review: 'Rampsteranterage': Snot-Kop Poetry Revisited *Head on Fire: Rants/ Notes/ Poems 2001-2011*", *New Coin*, 49:1 (2013), pp. 109-113 (p.109).
[37] Raditlhalo, "Review: 'Rampsteranterage': Snot-Kop Poetry Revisited *Head on Fire: Rants/ Notes/ Poems 2001-2011*" (p.109).
[38] Kwanele Sosibo, "Lesego Rampolokeng: Fragments of obscurity", *Mail & Guardian Online*, 11 May 2012 <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-05-11-lesego-rampolokeng-fragments-of-obscurity> [Accessed 24 September 2014] (Para 4. & 10. Of 21).
[39] Sosibo, "Lesego Rampolokeng: Fragments of obscurity", (Para 10. & 14 of 21).

when he states that the poet, 'uses words as a surgeon uses a scalpel'.[40] Yet the comparison to a scalpel does not do justice to Rampolokeng's ability to dismantle the tool-kit of language itself. Indeed, Rampolokeng cuts into the microcosm of lexical and semantic units through shifting their associative registers. His journey towards an ungovernable poetics is taken right to the heart of individual words. Through reclaiming unexplored resonances of diction, Rampolokeng resuscitates its ability to create an empowered consciousness.

The meta-textual strain in Rampolokeng's work has never been stronger and some of *Head on Fire's* most striking neologisms are those which posit new terms for portraying and defining poetry, literature and language. Arguably, there is no better way to reflect upon the hidden meanings of ordinary vocabulary than to replace the worn-out labels used to describe the linguistic medium itself. Some of the clearest examples of this occur in the poem "Dedication (for the critic)" which is something of a poetic manifesto challenging conservative literary scholars who make it their prerogative to trap art within old-fashioned academic orthodoxies. In the very first lines of "Dedication" one reads,

> this is for the critic
> knows right
> wrong no moral question
> but the faecesthetic dictates.[41]

The opening passage attacks critics who establish inflexible and 'objective' standards for poetry and it reinforces Oliphant's observation that Rampolokeng's oeuvre is 'fired by the urge to debunk liberal aesthetics [and…] sterile formalism'[42]. In "Dedication" the coinage of 'faecesthetic' conjoins 'faeces' with 'aesthetic' in order to forge a compound adjective. The term is a scatological one and aligns the aesthetic realm with the unpalatable substance of excrement. The suggestion provocatively questions literary formalism, which often positions the artistic sphere as a hallowed and pure arena untouched by the practical concerns of human life. As Sole notes, in the South African context the perception of an autonomous art and 'the traditional notion of the well-wrought organic poem' tend to descend from 'Leavisite and New Criticism', which take their cue from a narrow European and American canon.[43]

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[40] Raditlhalo, "Review: 'Rampsteranterage': Snot-Kop Poetry Revisited *Head on Fire: Rants/ Notes/ Poems 2001-2011*", p. 111.
[41] Rampolokeng, "Dedication (for the critic)", in *Head on Fire*, p. 25, ll. 1-3.
[42] Oliphant, "Introduction, The Poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng", p. iii
[43] Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", p. 255.

Rampolokeng's antagonism to the formalist understanding of poetry must be understood as a continuation of a career-long desire to take possession of his own mind and counter restrictive European prescriptions placed upon creativity.

"Dedication"'s speaker ridicules 'noah's academics' who are

> caught cold paralytic in script confines
> enshrined cryptic.[44]

Such scholars are portrayed as asphyxiated within the 'hollow […] con-script'.[45] Intellectuals who dogmatically cling to unchanging standards of correct English are portrayed as antiquated and wrapped up in a bygone time akin to the ancient world of Noah in the Old Testament. The extract contains a skilful use of punning, which accentuates Rampolokeng's polemic. 'Caught cold paralytic in script confines/ enshrined cryptic' puns upon the 'crypt' in 's***cript***'. This is achieved in the emphasis upon the sound itself through its repetition in 's***cript***', 'cr***ypt***ic' and 'con-s***cript***'. Here even the imperfect rhyme between 'cryptic' and 'paralytic' serves to reinforce a sense of aural continuity. The reader is left to grapple with the symbolic layers of 'crypt' as the phrase 'caught cold paralytic' summons up connotations of an inert and immobile corpse. The effect of this wordplay is for one to apprehend that the poetic 'script' can become a kind of death-chamber or crypt if restricted to austere and inflexible academic rubrics.

It is significant that the play on 'cryptic' brings out the ghastly connotations of this word. One discerns a double meaning, in which this adjective can either denote abstruseness or the physical environ of the grave. The implication is that the cryptic nature of 'high' art is static and lifeless as it indulges in obtuseness for the sake of defending its own prestige. Rampolokeng's own use of elliptical or oblique language is premised upon an understanding of vernacular dynamism whereas that of scholastic pedants is grounded in a rigid attachment to a hollow, decaying 'con-script'. Here, 'con-script' is a new term that makes riveting connections between, 'conning', 'script', 'crypt' and military conscription. The neologism implies that the policing of culture, through higher education institutions or processes of

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[44] Rampolokeng, "Dedication (for the critic)", in *Head on Fire*, pp.25-25, ll.31-32.
[45] Rampolokeng, "Dedication (for the critic)", in *Head on Fire*, p.26, l.41.

canonicity, is a lie or 'con' that establishes a putrid aesthetics. The patrolling of poetry's fecund plurality becomes a form of conscription akin to the process soldiers undergo when they are forced to sign up for armed service. The 'con-script' of liberal, historically European aesthetics, which earlier in the poem Rampolokeng states has been 'suckled on the race-tit' of white domination, is false, constricting, and life-denying. The fact that such writing is aligned with both death and armed service insinuates that not only is this poetry linguistically dissatisfying but it has also been shadowed by structural injustice, the murder of innocent people and military aggression.

"Dedication" is a poem deeply concerned to foreground the serious consequences that words do have,

> cos the WORD is no joke on the BEAT-path
> there's death in the laughter-math[46].

'Laughter-math' teases through the rhyme between 'laughter' and 'after', and cross-references the clichéd English expression 'He who laughs last, laughs longest', in order to create a new idiom in which the aftermath of wordplay results in laughter. Yet this is not a carefree or humorous form of amusement but one caught up in conditions of human casualty and loss of life. The 'WORD is no joke' reminds one of the militant drives underpinning Rampolokeng's manipulation of poetic style. Indeed, as Mphutlane wa Bofelo argues,

> It is succinctly clear that Rampolokeng adds a spice and puts a spin and twist to words and concepts not as an exercise in word-play but as a "subversive" act of questioning […] His is a critical, skeptical engagement with official, dominant discourse and established literary and political canon.[47]

Bofelo offers a salutary reminder of how fundamental it is to understand Rampolokeng's verbal gymnastics as political acts that take place on a cultural battleground. "Dedication" and many other poems in *Head on Fire*, illustrate that Rampolokeng's zest to overthrow the conservative English of academic tradition is tied to its historic links with white colonialism and the need to overcome internalised complexes of inferiority. Rampolokeng brings new linguistic structures into being in order to sculpt a different kind of world. Such an intention complements the Language poet Bruce Andrews's claim that in poetry, 'the reading might

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[46] Rampolokeng, "Dedication (for the critic)", p.25, ll. 21-22

[47] Mphutlane wa Bofelo, "Bantu Ghost: a stream of (black) unconsciousness" <http://kaganof.com/kagablog/2009/12/01/bantu-ghost-a-stream-of-black-unconsciousness-by-lesego-rampolokeng-reviewed-by-mphutlane-wa-bofelo/ > [Accessed 03/10/2014] (Para 2. Of 23).

solicit a different future, by getting distance on the sign & getting distance on identity, on how they're produced; by *rereading* the reading that a social status quo puts us through.'[48] Rampolokeng's poems force the reader to get distance on the sign system of language and the different identities and meanings it produces. He achieves this through punning upon and splicing through taken for granted patterns of speech. Rampolokeng's ability to 'sing dinnovators of the form', defamiliarises ordinary words and phrases allowing one to perceive that these signs can have alternate meaning and be reclaimed by previously disempowered subjects. [49] I have argued that many of Rampolokeng's most artful uses of neologisms and puns take place through re-minting literary and linguistic terms themselves. This is a poet who scorns petty fixations on stagnant etymologies through creating a term such as 'pettymological'[50] and who calls attention to 'stereo-type'[51] through fashioning a word in which both 'stereo' or musical genres and written 'typed' expressions are criticised for becoming clichéd and outworn. These examples underscore the ineluctable imbrication of form and content in Rampolokeng's oeuvre and mark his importance as a poet. Indeed, his 'message' is not ultimately paraphraseable but has to be apprehended through engagement with his word play.

For Rampolokeng, the vehemence and violence of his language is called for by the volatility of his material surrounds. This atmosphere of instability entails that art cannot possibly separate itself from economics or politics in an elevated fashion. In his interview with Berold in *New Coin* in 1993 Rampolokeng explains his artistic outlook, 'My entire existence is itself an assault upon the senses. We're a nation in the grip of psychosis and mass hysteria. I don't think I could come to terms with it by writing poetry fit for lounges and studies'.[52] As a living member of Soweto's 'ungovernable generation', and as a past member of the Black Consciousness Movement, Rampolokeng has always seen his cultural production as inevitably situated within South Africa's turbulent political terrain.[53] He elucidates this fact in his interview with Berold,

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[48] Bruce Andrews, "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis", in *The Politics of Poetic Form*, pp. 23-43 (p. 27).
[49] Rampolokeng, "Dedication (for the critic)", in *Head on Fire*, p. 25, l.9.
[50] Rampolokeng, "Dread-Word/ H.A.L.F.", in *Head on Fire*, p. 27, l.27.
[51] Rampolokeng, "The Tosh Song Trilogy", in *Head on Fire*, p. 56, l.28.
[52] Lesego Rampolokeng, "Interview with Robert Berold 1993", in *South African Poets on Poetry, Interviews from New Coin 1992-2001*, ed. by Robert Berold (KwaZulu-Natal: Gecko Poetry, 2003), pp. 22-33 (p. 32).
[53] Joanna Wright, "Syncretism as a strategy of political resistance in the poetry of Lesego Rampolokeng", *Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 9:1 (2004), 88-98, (p.91).

> I was caught in the political environment in this country, and there was no way in which I could lift myself above it. I was born into a particular situation and particular circumstances that were themselves influenced by the political factors in the country. The way I looked at it then was that I couldn't really draw a line between my political and my artistic activities—until it became a fusion of the two: my artistic expression had to be a form of political activity and the other way around.[54]

For Rampolokeng, growing up in Apartheid Soweto negated the possibility of divorcing art from the desire for political emancipation. Just as his 'artistic expression' had to be politically engaged, so did his politics need to strive towards the condition of art. The latter claim is significant and implies that social justice movements can be strengthened and infused with new life through drawing upon the creative capacities of culture.

While the derision of high formalism and a commitment to exploring politics through dynamic aesthetic technique marks a decided continuity in Rampolokeng's work, it is essential to note that the mechanisms through which he chooses to pursue this artistic arc have dramatically evolved during the course of his career. An early poem, "Dawn of a Dying Time (A Bavino Monologue)" from the 1993 collection *Talking Rain* illustrates the point. "Dawn of a Dying Time" is an accomplished poem to the extent that its doubts as to the security of the post-Apartheid future presage the disappointments and failures of the liberated South African nation. The poem accords with many of the sentiments expressed in *Head on Fire* in that it sees no place for pristine literary formalism in times of social turmoil,

> there's no god's eye in the pigsty
> of this clean formalism lie
> my words are swine in suit & tie
> striking poetic poses
> speaking romantic roses
> eating the moon
> with a golden penspoon.[55]

This poem eloquently presents Rampolokeng's ongoing antipathy towards 'clean formalism', which is seen to be a 'lie'. High art stands in direct contrast to a speaker who is ready and willing to align its own voice with the 'swine' of this world and their messier material conflicts. Even so, the poem retains the 'suit and tie' of a more conservative poetic tradition with its

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[54] Berold, "Interview with Lesego Rampolokeng, 1993", p. 29.
[55] Lesego Rampolokeng, "Dawn of a Dying Time (A Bavino Monologue)", in *Talking Rain* (Johannesburg: COSAW Publishing, 1993) p. 21, ll.73-79.

neat rhyming couplets and recourse to traditional symbols of poetic beauty such as the moon. These lines simply do not do the work that *Head on Fire* does in terms of subverting the coherence of individual word units. It is not so much that Rampolokeng's past work is devoid of such gestures. Indeed, other poems from *Talking Rain* such as "Broederbondage" contain puns as is evident in the similar sounding nature of 'Bondage' and 'Broederbond'.[56] This latter example suggests that the new democracy may be trapped within a legacy inherited from the Broederbond, which was an all-male, Calvinist, Afrikaner organisation, founded in the early twentieth-century. The group was established in order to further Afrikaner power and its members were instrumental in designing Apartheid.[57] Despite the fact that neologisms and wordplay do surface in Rampolokeng's earlier writing, in *Head on Fire* they become foregrounded as one of the primary means through which poetic rebellion is constituted and this needs to be accounted for. Neologisms become more prominent as neoliberalism gains in ascendancy in South Africa. Rampolokeng's productive energy is designed to counter that of a technocratic global era.

Rampolokeng envisions the African National Congress's co-option by finance capital as a new incarnation of mental slavishness. In this regard, submissive patterns of behaviour are not envisaged to have fallen away with the eradication of Bantu Education and Rampolokeng frequently portrays an emerging nation that has been brainwashed into unquestioning acceptance of neo-colonialism through imbibing the precepts of multinational capitalism. Rampolokeng describes the neoliberal order as, 'VAMPIRE-GLOBAL-CONGLEMORATED'[58], which emphasises the cruelty and horror of profiteers. In this context there is,

> no jingle/rustle no notes of dissonance
> it foreign exchanges in the silence of finance's terms
> dictates of THE NEW VAMPIRES.[59]

The phrase 'notes of dissonance' puns on the different denotations of music notes and bank notes in order to suggest that just as the economy has become narrowly regimented so have songs of true protest been stamped out. The comparison between music and money implies

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[56] Rampolokeng, "Broederbondage", in *Talking Rain*, p. 11.
[57] G.H. Pirie, C. M. Rogerson, and K. S. O. Beavon, "Covert Power in South Africa: The Geography of the Afrikaner Broederbond", *Area*, 12:2 (1980), 97-104 (97-98).
[58] Rampolokeng, "The Tosh Song Trilogy", in *Head on Fire*, p. 57, l.
[59] Rampolokeng, "The Tosh Song Trilogy", in *Head on Fire*, p. 57, ll. 80-82.

that works of culture are potentially complicit in capitalist processes and this stresses the significance of Rampolokeng's message.

Rampolokeng's work is one instance of an art that refuses to sell-out or bow before the status quo and this stance is often given concrete embodiment through diction that seeks to rework and oppose finance's terms. Instances of this include the word 'sin-vestment'[60], which casts investment as morally depraved. One might also cite '*Randscape*', which fuses 'Rand' with 'landscape' in order to illustrate that commodity values have become so dominant in South Africa that they are practically part of the natural environment. [61] Rampolokeng's literary style thus works to counter the innovations of capital through a revolution of its vocabulary. Notably, he continues this trend in his most recent book *a half century thing*. The collection reads as something of an artistic manifesto and often comes across as more of a factual account of Rampolokeng's artistic trajectory than as an explosive work of poetry but it continues the fast-paced coinage of words that is so prominently foregrounded in *Head on Fire* and is similarly concerned to denounce the language of finance. Thus the poet critiques 'equal coprotunity', which ridicules the assumption that equality can be achieved through corporate structures and denounces 'sick-lie finance freakonomics' by portraying the economic codes of finance as deformed and freakish.[62]

The rapid rate of financialisation in the post-Apartheid period contextualises the social relevance of Rampolokeng's writing.[63] Gilad Isaacs notes that the post-Apartheid period has seen the financial sector grow to almost double the size of the real economy. This has adversely effected investment in the development of business while perpetuating the 'the heavy concentration of the economy around mining, industries linked to mining, energy and finance'[64]. As borne out by the tragedy of Marikana, the historically white infrastructure of mining capital has remained intact. The fact that this industry now pivots around global speculation in commodities such as gold and platinum means that price has 'become separated from actual production costs and demand' which causes 'instability and volatility in

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[60] Rampolokeng, "The Base Re-Incarnate", p. 48, l.32.
[61] Rampolokeng, "The Loner Booty-Son", p. 123, l.111.
[62] Lesego Rampolokeng, *a half century thing*, (Black Ghost Press, 2015), p.44 & 72.
[63] Gilad Isaacs, "The Financialization of the South African Economy and the Havoc It Wreaks", *The South African Civil Society Information Service*, 27 March 2014 <http://sacsis.org.za/site/article/1959> [Accessed 22/04/2017] (Para 3. of 22).
[64] Isaacs, "The Financialization of the South African Economy and the Havoc It Wreaks" (Para 2. of 22).

these markets with the potential for bubbles and crashes'.[65] Apart from the economic instability caused by financialisation, the structure of the economy has also been a major driver of inequality. Economist Susan Newman points out,

> Wage inequality is the main driver of inequality in South Africa […] Its association with financialisation comes from corporate restructuring associated with financialisation, namely downsizing and outsourcing of non-key functions and increasingly precarious employment standards and high levels of informality that place downward pressures on wages for low-skilled jobs.[66]

Financialisation has a negative impact upon workers who are increasingly subjected to 'precarious' and flexible employment arrangements while the assets of finance capital remain in the hands of actors living in the top echelon of society.

Notably this economic structure has stemmed from global trends and pressures namely the African National Congress's collusion with the International Monetary Fund at the inception of the post-Apartheid era.[67] As has become evident, Rampolokeng is hugely critical of neoliberal government macroeconomic strategies, propounded most notably by Mbeki, which he describes as 'a backwards march to a commerce-embrace'.[68] The extent to which Mbeki's presidency bowed to an international order based upon speculation, accumulation, and private profit is seen as a new manifestation of colonial obedience in which the post-Apartheid nation has internalised macroeconomic orthodoxies designed to ensure its own socioeconomic marginalisation. Rampolokeng's liberation project extends beyond specific national paradigms and hence must be distinguished from the anti-Apartheid movement. Chrisman argues that the poet thus participates 'in a radical alternative social imagination that embraces international socialism and Third World nationalism'.[69] As such, Rampolokeng is arguably most concerned to criticise global capital as a whole and his opposition towards local power structures can be understood as stemming from their vested interest in corporate finance. As discussed in the introduction, this is not to suggest that financialisation and neoliberalism are the only political disasters in South Africa today but they have played a major role and are legitimate objects of criticism.

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[65] Isaacs, "The Financialization of the South African Economy and the Havoc It Wreaks" (Para.8 Of 22).
[66] Susan Newman, "Financialisation and the Financial and Economic Crisis; The Case of South Africa", *FESSUD, Studies in Financial Systems*, 26, 2014, p.73.
[67] Patrick Bond, "Contradictions in consumer credit: innovations South African super-exploitation", *Critical Arts,* 29:2, 2015, 218-239, (p.221).
[68] Rampolokeng, "Word To Serote", in *a half century thing*, p.57.
[69] Chrisman, "Black modernity, nationalism and transnationalism, The challenge of black South African poetry", p. 32.

Rampolokeng's growing penchant for neologisms and unorthodox puns can be understood against this backdrop of neoliberal financialisation, in which the poet's unstable and fast-paced language mirrors the character of the economic climate. Yet I would contrast Rampolokeng's radical linguistic virtuosity with the form of South Africa's new democracy and that of globalisation because for Rampolokeng, novelty and innovation are not motivated by profit but by a need to insist upon the persistence of inequality and structural injustice. Rampolokeng's poetry works at the level of both style and content in order to defy multinational capitalism and the South African state's acquiescence to its terms. In order to illustrate my argument, I shall isolate some more detailed examples in which Rampolokeng's poetic form directly challenges post-Apartheid nationalism and its obsequious submission to corporate finance through highlighting the mental slavery of the new elite. In this regard, Rampolokeng's work is not simply destructive but forges new possibilities for liberated subjectivity.

"Notes from the Smoke" is the penultimate poem in *Head on Fire* and it demonstrates Rampolokeng's fervour to disaggregate capitalist authority. In this poem, the birth of the new South Africa is portrayed in grim terms and seems far more akin to an apocalypse than an age teeming with fresh possibility. This is an era of

> *crack fiends pavlovian hounds*
> *born & drawn to violent sounds*.[70]

The lines reiterate the prevalence of volatility, violence and disorder in the country. The adjective 'pavlovian' is significant and refers to the research of Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov who produced pioneering knowledge 'on conditioned reflexes' and designates 'a learned reaction or response made without reflection'.[71]In the opening extract to this chapter, Rampolokeng initially uses the term to describe the process through which black South Africans were socialised into accepting political inferiority by Apartheid's Bantu Education policy. Yet in, "Notes from the Smoke", the quality of submissive pavlovian obedience is applied to the way in which liberation leaders have uncritically imbibed capitalist macroeconomic strategies,

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[70] Rampolokeng, "Notes From the Smoke", in *Head on Fire*, p. 154, l. 13-15
[71] "Pavlovian, n. and adj." in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/139115?redirectedFrom=Pavlovian&> [Accessed 01/ 09/ 2014] (Para 2. Of 4).

> toxic times
> a mental pollutant state
> high intellects become industrial waste
> they set their dialectical co-ordinates by materialism's dictates…
> the duty free revolutionaries
> their privatised parts in swiss bank accounts.[72]

The poetry lucidly reveals the identity and mind-set of a new pack of 'pavlovian hounds'. The mental pollution of the post-Apartheid generation resides in those revolutionaries of the past who have become profit-seeking corporate and government leaders. The phrase, 'they set their dialectical co-ordinates by materialism's dictates' puns upon the resemblance between 'historical materialism', a Marxist mode of interpreting societal change, and the superficiality of consumer materialism in order to intimate that former heroes have forsaken left-wing commitments in pursuit of personal gain. In its own turn, the coinage of 'duty free revolutionaries' equates the tax-exempt stores so often found in zones of international thoroughfare with the abrogation of responsibility by anti-Apartheid icons. The insinuation is that government leaders spend more time travelling and shopping in duty free stores than they do upon redressing crucial national issues. The mention of 'privatised parts in swiss bank accounts' is also significant. In the poem, 'Privatised parts' directly refers to the international investments of wealthy black individuals but it is also a phrase that connotes genitalia. The latter sense of the words imply that elite black people, who collude in the expatriation of South Africa's wealth, have prostituted themselves to Europe.

"Notes from the Smoke" both points out the persistence of mental and material slavery in the post-Apartheid era and works to counter it. In so doing, Rampolokeng's poetry identifies the life-denying forces of 'neo-colonialism' and seeks to overthrow its workings. The following passage outlines the 'cerebral manacles' of neoliberalism and challenges the reader to break these chains. Rampolokeng speaks for an underclass, which has been treated as an inhuman object of exchange by its leaders,

> *we are the gore they don't parade*
> *(as prescribed by silent law) but trade…*
> *each for a 4 x 4 (drive up/down to our earth's core)*

[72] Rampolokeng, "Notes From the Smoke", in *Head on Fire*, p. 166, ll. 256-260.

contemptible…but still our reality (is) not convertible
we are the inscription…invisible…on the heroes' memorial

locked in cerebral manacles /// we rattle our brains…
unhinged intellects
(how do you embalm a phantom?)

pedestals in the sewer-system mean
our definition is: royalty wrecks on gutter-thrones
the rage turns in…implosion
disengage…the enemy within[73]

The extract suggests that South Africa's poor have been traded in by a black elite who has purchased material gain at the expense of consigning the majority to living in degraded and poverty-stricken circumstances. Rampolokeng vocalises a struggle that is not yet 'visible' on national memorials and derides the 'cerebral manacles' that continue to lock and restrict the downtrodden. In response to learned patterns of self-loathing and unquestioning acceptance of the legitimacy of a government, which propounds capitalist dogmas of individual profit, the speaker calls for a public to 'disengage the enemy within'. He speaks of a reality that is 'not convertible', which brings out the double meaning of 'convertible' in order to make the point that the lives of ordinary black people are divorced from the luxurious lifestyles of their wealthy leaders who drive upmarket motor vehicles. Not only are the poor far removed from scenes of wealth but unlike affluent members of society, these people literally cannot 'convert' their reality to any other form. Lacking power and resources, they are consigned to an unchanging and bleak existence. Given that almost half of all South Africans lack access to financial services, the pun also highlights the fact that a vast proportion of the public cannot 'convert' its assets through economic processes of speculation.[74] Rampolokeng himself occupies a perspective that is mutable and shifting as the dictates of finance but he does so in order to overturn uncritical attitudes towards the 'silent' government of commerce.

Rampolokeng's critique of black individualism is extensive and searing. In the poem, "Mission Emphatic (*for thabs*)" he continues his attack upon an emerging black elite who have betrayed the anti-Apartheid vision and are now parasitic upon the majority,

There's a rub-a-dub in the hot-snot-suburb
& blood fills the wrath-tub

[73] Rampolokeng, "Notes From the Smoke", in *Head on Fire*, p. 160-161, ll. 148-159.
[74] Newman, " Financialisation and the Financial and Economic Crisis; The Case of South Africa", p.6.

manicure can't cure the manic
so fists clench around cheques car-jacks & heart-attacks
lick ice-dreams stick lie-screams down the drain
oh the stink in the sink makes you think so pink
you ease the conscience-strain with sham-pain/champagne
brain-locked behind contact-lenses and electric-fences
scared to make contact with yr senses
you drink the menses of the dead
bank slavery-bonds 'cos it's fishy in yr ponds[75].

Rampolokeng's speaker satirises the domestic comforts of South Africa's post-Apartheid, black middle-class. The luxuriousness of a bathtub is replaced by the anger of a bloody 'wrath-tub', intimating that there shall be retribution for the dispossessed. The theme of this stanza is that behind professions of struggle credentials or claims to have undergone racial oppression, the new empowered few are in fact very well off. The 'screams' of such a class are seen to be a lie behind which they revel in 'ice-dreams' akin to the decadence of ice cream. Similarly, the equation of 'sham-pain' with 'champagne' underscores the hypocrisy of those who bask in recounting narratives of hardship when in fact they are profiteering and able to indulge in all the luxuries that money can buy. These heroes of bygone days are trapped in a rigid obedience towards consumer capital and find themselves enslaved to mortgages. The poem teases at the parameters of language in order to mock and expose those who physically sequester themselves behind barriers such as 'electric-fences' and lock their brains against the truth of their social position.

In the face of elite corruption, "Mission Emphatic *(for thabs)*" aims to construct new forms of racial solidarity and identity that depart from miming past movements of black unity,

but check how the black-monkey-man-mimes
but about-face can't deface/debase/retrace
the race back to base-
SICK! blackness' invocations
conscious forgetfulness is a wilful turn-away
like that dog is a stray this bitch is domestic
with an itch for dick come what may the first day
workers of the world YOU-night ME-day
we flow natural check the con-textual
one text into the next so tight the limp-pimp can't play—
but harder warrior come out & fight
the Malcolm X chop the hout-kop crack

[75] Rampolokeng, "Mission Emphatic", in *Head on Fire*, pp. 34-35, ll. 53-63.

> & no glue can stick it back to blaaack…
> mental reflex i reflect & irie flex mental on FANON
> not doctrine/gospel/golden god-voice
> end-all but start some black sounds BIKO echoes
> PANTHER dread vision liberation mission states
> & station free thought transmits revolution's dictates[76]

The speaker ridicules the 'black-monkey-man', who uncritically 'mimes' inherited maxims of racial liberation. Rampolokeng is especially critical of politicians and a public who seek to revert to essentialised concepts of blackness at a time when to 'retrace/ the race back to base' is to debase the relevant issues of a contemporary struggle. Ashraf Jamal notes Rampolokeng's antipathy toward simplistic notions of racial identity and the ideologically damaging role these can play in shrouding the African National Congress's class privilege,

> By challenging the calling card of race, by implicating the ANC in the hypocritical and dehumanizing deployment thereof, by exposing the "black on black/ black attacks" Rampolokeng points to the stunted and deformed nature of the societal and cultural imaginary he challenges and seeks to alter.[77]

Jamal points out that for Rampolokeng, the government's betrayal of South Africa's black majority constitutes a kind of 'black on black attack' and the party's claim to share identity with a popular African support base is hypocritical. "Mission Emphatic" underscores that homogenous definitions of blackness are a social malaise and neglect the demands that should be placed upon a free consciousness. Rampolokeng's disdain for those who wilfully 'turn-away' from analysing true structural injustice is expressed through manipulating diction in such a way as to force the reader to interrogate slogans of left-wing solidarity and black power. The speaker declares, 'workers of the world YOU-night ME-day' which puns upon the familiar call 'workers of the world unite' in order to mint a phrase that defies those who blindly repeat past socialist mantras and become relegated to the bleakness of 'night'. The fact that night-time is conventionally connoted with blackness reinforces that the out-dated stance of such workers may be premised on a false sense of racial homogeneity. In contrast, Rampolokeng's speaker is able to envision the world in which it lives with the clarity of day and proceeds to re-articulate a series of inherited 'texts' pertaining to historic quests for black independence and dignity.

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[76] Rampolokeng, "Mission Emphatic", in *Head on Fire*, pp. 33-34, ll. 27-44.
[77] Ashraf Jamal, "The navigating harlequin: speculations on the syncretic", *Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 8:1 (2003), 3-20 (p. 17).

The voice of "Mission Emphatic" claims that the creeds of black heroes such as Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko and Malcolm X should not be taken as 'gospel' or 'doctrine' and implores the 'harder warrior [to] come out & fight' a living battle through asking questions of past legacies. The poem seeks to destroy and 'crack' open demeaning stereotypes of blackness such as 'houtkop', which in Afrikaans means 'wooden head' and is a term that was frequently used by white racists during Apartheid. Punning upon the catchphrase 'back-to-back' the speaker notes that surmounting pejorative racial prejudice will not be achieved by going 'back to blaaack' but only through a full overhaul of cognitive habit. One is told 'reflex i reflect & irie flex mental on Fanon', which puts a new spin on the notion of 'mental reflex' in order to portray the peace that can be attained if one re-engages with the thought of activists such as Fanon. 'Irie flex mental' reverses 'reflex i' and the Rastafarian term 'irie' replaces the subject position. Irie is Rastafarian slang for a feeling of harmony with the universe and the fact that it is used instead of the 'i' implies the sense of well being that might be attained if one moves beyond capitalist discourses of personal gain. The neologism 'irie flex' plays up its homonym 'i reflex' revealing subjectivity itself to be a kind of learned behaviour and suggests that part of mentally championing Fanon's principles will involve re-assessing the notion of individuality and its place in a collective cause.

Rampolokeng's poetic outlook accords well with Fanon's own thesis that at the moment of anti-colonial revolution, 'the native intellectual' dispenses with the notion of individualism,

> The native intellectual had learnt from his masters that the individual ought to express himself fully. The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organization of the struggle will suggest to him a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend—these are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie, because for them my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on. The native intellectual takes part, in a sort of auto-da-fé, in the destruction of all his idols: egoism, recrimination that springs from pride, and the childish stupidity of those who always want to have the last word. Such a colonized intellectual, dusted over by colonial culture, will in the same way discover the substance of village assemblies, the cohesion of people's committees, and the extraordinary fruitfulness of local meetings and groupments. Henceforward, the interests of one will be the interests of all.[78]

[78] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 46.

Fanon encapsulates well the importance of overcoming Eurocentric and capitalist models of personal identity during moments of anti-colonial overhaul. What he does not quite predict is the extent to which discourses of collective harmony such as 'brother, sister, friend' and languages of community can be used by individuals in power to mask the profit-driven nature of their politics. It is with this in mind, that one can interpret the linguistic innovations of "Mission Emphatic", which turns black consciousness traditions on their head in order to re-appropriate their mentally liberating qualities and separate the contemporary struggle against capitalist modernity from anodyne pronouncements of rainbow nation harmony. Thus, Rampolokeng's speaker states,

> i hit & run with it … (let none beat me down once 'cos ten times
> i make them bounce)
> unchristian action ill-health intention
> with all pain i drain the nymph-fart-tick
> for gain of the HYMPHATIC generation
>
> i rant ridic chant riddimatic liberation hymn emphatic
> & the hymphatic generation ska-dunk the bumboklaatistic
> …check it.[79]

The term 'nymph-fart-tick' riffs upon 'tic' and 'tick' and aligns the phenomenon of involuntary, repetitive behaviour with the character of a bloated, farting and sexually depraved arachnid, hence furthering the case against the repetitive and compulsive nature of market ideology. Instead of legitimating the ethos of a 'nymph-fart-tick', the speaker champions 'HYMNPHATIC' possibilities and preaches a 'liberation hymn' that 'sku-dunks' or puts down the 'bumboklaatistic'. The latter word fuses the Jamaican profanity 'bumboklaat' with 'statistics' in order to point out that standardised records, such as stock market statistics are unsavoury and demand disaggregation. Rampolokeng's speaker is a voice ready to 'rant' beyond coherent notions of the ridiculous in order to reframe black consciousness through a re-staging of its lexicon in a fashion that overcomes the contemporary commercialisation of black identity.

Rampolokeng's poetry as a whole, and *Head on Fire* in particular, rouses the reader out of mental lassitude and awakens critical capacities. Bernstein notes that literature bearing this

[79]Rampolokeng, "Mission Emphatic", in *Head on Fire*, pp. 33-34, ll.45-52.

quality is a significant form of opposition 'within a political context that fosters passivity'[80]. The South Africa of today is arguably such a milieu in which little public criticism of the African National Congress or President Zuma is permitted.[81] In the post-Apartheid nation, slogans of democracy and freedom need to be vigilantly interrogated in order to come to grips with the government and corporate interests that structure them. Rampolokeng's poetry offers one such perspective on power and how it might be overcome. His work is arguably exemplary of Alex Houen's proposition that literature has the ability to imagine new possible worlds,

> a novel's narrator or a poem's speaker or a play's character is suspended from the world, but that doesn't prevent the text from eliciting thoughts, desires, and feelings that do take place in the real bodies and minds of readers and audiences. *Just because a literary work shapes worlds of possibility doesn't mean it's incapable of real affective potency*.[82]

I argue that Rampolokeng's vitality of diction has the ability to rouse 'thoughts, desires, and feelings', which allow one to more critically engage with and actively participate in South African society.

Rampolokeng seeks to inject potency into what he describes as a 'dry write season'[83] in South Africa's literary landscape. The latter expression revisits the opening lines of Mongane Wally Serote's poem on the banning of writer Don Mattera by the Apartheid government and suggests that cultural dogma persists under the African National Congress, which does not sanction public criticism. 'A Dry White Season' is also an allusion to Andre Brink's famous novel of the same name, which is set against the backdrop of the Soweto riots. The cross-reference insinuates that the battle for intellectual freedom remains paramount in South Africa today. Rampolokeng is critical of local artistic scenes populated by 'the literati rent a cloud'[84]. Scholars and critics are compared to a rented crowd prepared to market unsubstantial critical perspectives in order to attain profit. The poet consciously positions himself against this context in which 'posterior-fronted corporate verses leave a toxic mess for posterity'.[85] In this regard, his poetry takes an independent stand against commercialised and

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[80] Bernstein, "Comedy and the Poetics of Political Form", p. 236.
[81] Stephen Grootes, "Analysis: What if Zuma refuses to go?", *Daily Maverick* , 19 April 2017, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-04-19-analysis-what-if-zuma-refuses-to-go/#.WTa9R2VOLzI> [Accessed 06/06/2017].
[82] Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility, Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 10.
[83] Rampolokeng, "Notes from the Smoke", in *Head on* Fire, p. 168, l.300.
[84] Rampolokeng, "Notes from the Smoke", in *Head on Fire*, p.168, l. 301.
[85]Rampolokeng, "Notes from the Smoke", in *Head on Fire*, p. 156, ll. 56-57.

state-backed praise poetry. As Neil Lazarus argues, one of the standout features of Rampolokeng's work is its ability to make one 'aware of the potential power of poetic dissidence, which can cut through ideology like a knife through butter'.[86]

Rampolokeng endeavours to dismantle the 'objectivity' of European formalism and the hypocrisy of African National Congress National discourse. His oeuvre does not gesture towards an easy artistic relativism or pluralisation of poetic standards. I argue Rampolokeng's work recurrently makes a claim to its own superiority on the grounds of its ability to dislodge static patterns of thought. Rampolokeng powerfully states that his writing is, 'Open art surgery operating on a sic culture', which puns upon 'sic' in order to posit that contemporary society is sick in its contentment to quote and re-quote discourses of the past without amending their errors and weaknesses. [87] The searing nature of his art is akin to a kind of surgery, which redeems the heart of a people through a radical transformation of accepted cognitive and cultural structures. The project of ungovernability is localised through revolutionising idiom, slips of the tongue and language. Aesthetic merit and social values can no longer be rigidly separated in a pioneering project, in which linguistic innovation holds out the promise of a new world.

[86] Neil Lazarus, "The South African Ideology: The Myth of Exceptionalism, the Idea of the Renaissance", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103:4 (2004), 607-628 (p. 626).
[87] Rampolokeng, "Name of the Pharaoh", in *Head on Fire*, p. 79, l. 121.

Chapter Four

Lyric and Ecology in the Poetry of Mxolisi Nyezwa

This chapter focuses upon the writing of Mxolisi Nyezwa who is the 2009 winner of the Thomas Pringle National Award and the South African Literary Award for poetry.[1] The author of *Song Trials* (2000), *New Country* (2008) and *Malikhanye* (2011), Nyezwa is a distinctly post-Apartheid voice and his poem "It All Begins" inspired the title of Robert Berold's seminal 2002 anthology.[2] Born in 1967, Nyezwa has lived all his life in the poor community of Motherwell Township, which is located just outside Port Elizabeth.[3] A firm advocate of independent publishing, Nyezwa founded the English/ IsiXhosa arts journal *Kotaz* in 1998, which accepts poetry, prose, interviews and reviews in any South African language and aims to foster the development of local writing.[4] Apart from his role as poet and editor, Nyezwa is also a teacher. He lectures creative writing at Rhodes University in Grahamstown and runs skills training courses for unemployed youth from an old steel container in Motherwell.

Nyezwa is embedded in a struggling socioeconomic milieu and his poetry is marked by the need to speak out against the poverty of his surrounds. A 2012 interview with *New Coin* Editor Gary Cummiskey offers a useful inroad into the way in which Nyezwa's poetic project sensitively registers the brutality of capitalism. The interview highlights the poet's consciousness of an intimate relationship between ecology, humanity, and global politics:

> I like to think of my poetry as reflecting the dismal nature of politics and individual existence in the modern society, a reflection on greed and how capitalism and the financial system have devastated people's lives and cultures without shame. Poetry that identifies this kind of aggression, which is really driven by financial interests as the basis for corruption against human beings, must necessarily be bleak. The poetry must in turn invoke its unique form, impact the usual language extraordinarily, enmeshing

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[1] "Mxolisi Nyezwa", *The Common Online* , ed. by Jennifer Acker (Amherst College, Massachusetts: Frost Library,2013) <http://www.thecommononline.org/bio/mxolisi-nyezwa> [Accessed11/01/2015] (Para.1 of 1).
[2] Cf. Mxolisi Nyezwa "It All Begins", in *It All Begins: Poems from Postliberation South Africa*, ed. by Robert Berold (Scottsville: Gecko Poetry, 2002)
[3] "Mxolisi Nyezwa", in *In the Heat of Shadows, South African Poetry 1996-2013*, ed. by Denis Hirson (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2014) p. 273 (p.273).
[4] Alan William Finlay "*Making Space*: The counterpublics of post-apartheid independent literary publishing activities (1994-2004)" (unpublished master's thesis, University of the Witwaterstrand, 2009), pp. 42-43.

> flowers, human lives and global manifestations. In so many ways poets are writing to change the world.[5]

Nyezwa envisions the poetic task as a bleak one that is bound to tackle a 'financial system', which has 'devastated people's lives and cultures'. Poetry must resist corporate greed through drawing on inimitable formal properties and re-sculpting everyday language, portraying the interconnectedness of 'flowers, human lives and global manifestations'. The poet's words connect social and environmental justice in post-Apartheid South Africa. The purpose of this chapter is to explore Nyezwa's portrayal of this relationship, and its political salience. Through negating the binary between humans and environment, Nyezwa writes to change the world and makes a special contribution to the politics of post-Apartheid literature.

I begin by outlining the ecological state of contemporary South Africa, with specific reference to local developments in Nyezwa's Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality. I argue that post-Apartheid megaprojects such Mandela Bay's Coega Industrial Complex exemplify Jason W. Moore's description of a Capitalist World-Ecology built upon 'the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of nature'.[6] Once I have established socioeconomic context, I move to a discussion of Nyezwa's poetry. His lyric voice complicates the sacrosanct nature of human subjectivity and pioneers an enlightened optic on the imbrication of humanity and ecology.

The post-Apartheid ecology is in crisis. This was statistically borne out in Yale's 2012 Environmental Performance Index in which South Africa ranked 128 out of 132 countries. Writing for the Yale Center of Environmental Law and Policy in November 2012 Aaron Reuben and Omar Malik note,

> Our index ranks the countries of the world on aggregated measures of environmental performance, in sectors like air and water quality, forest and fisheries protection, regulation of pesticides, and greenhouse gas emissions. Across the general board (though there are exceptions), South Africa is one of the world's worst performers and the worst in Africa.[7]

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[5] Gary Cummiskey, "Mxolisi Nyezwa: A new dawn for poetry", *The Dye Hard Interviews*, 7 January 2012 <http://dyehardinterviews.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/mxolisi-nyezwa-new-dawn-for-poetry.html> [Accessed 25/02/2015] (Para. 4 of 13).

[6] Jason W.Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature & Origins of Our Ecological Crisis" (2014), 1-38 (p.11) <http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/The_Capitalocene__Part_I__June_2014.pdf> [Accessed 13 January 2015]

[7] Aaron Reuben and Omar Malik, "Troubling Trends for South Africa", *Yale Center for Environmental Law &*

One of the reasons that South Africa has performed so badly is that over 90% of the country's electricity is coal generated, rendering it the biggest emitter of greenhouse gas in Africa.[8] South Africa's energy supply is an important topic in a nation that is experiencing load shedding or rotational blackouts. Despite national scarcity, the African National Congress has proved all too willing to market cheap, unsustainable electricity to corporate bidders. This proves Fanon's historic point that the new national bourgeoisie 'oversee the looting of […] national resources'.[9] Government utility Eskom has a shameful history of providing subsidies to multinational corporations and its 'record of sweetheart deals' includes 'Lakshmi Mittal's steel mills (formerly Iscor), Anglo American's mining operations, and BHP Billiton's smelters'.[10] Big business has been gifted with discounted energy prices with scant regard for the basic needs of the public or for the devastation coal plants wreak on the wider ecosystem.

Nyezwa's local Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality has found itself home to one of the biggest post-Apartheid energy controversies in the form of the Coega Industrial Complex. Coega was designed to lure international corporations through the promise of inexpensive energy. The site was initially meant to incorporate aluminium and manganese smelters; a petrochemical zone and refinery; an Industrial Development Zone (IDZ), and the expansive new Port of Ngqura, which opened in 2008.[11] A particularly repellent feature of this deal was the role played by Canadian aluminium company Alcan, who in 2006 signed a twenty-five year agreement with Eskom securing electricity for less than the R0.14 cents per hour usually charged to industrial users.[12] At the time this was the cheapest energy in the world. The 2008 financial crash put the brakes on the aluminium industry and this coincided with an unprecedented electricity crisis in South Africa. In light of these events, the deal with Alcan was put on hold and Coega's expansion had to be scaled down. Regardless of whether plans for aluminium and manganese smelters ever go through, the negative environmental impact of Coega is devastating. Of particular concern is the development's enormous water

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Policy, 19 November 2012 <http://environment.yale.edu/envirocenter/chinas/P105/ > [Accessed 22 February 2015].

[8] Reuben and Malik, "Troubling Trends for South Africa" (Para 7. Of 13).

[9] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 12

[10] Patrick Bond. "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", *Mediations* 24:1 (2008) 8-27 (p.18).

[11] Bond, "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", pp.17-18.

[12] Bond, "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", p. 18.

and electricity usage. Furthermore, industrial processes pollute both the air and surrounding marine life.[13]

For Patrick Bond, 'Coega, if not the outstanding symbol, is indeed one of several excellent examples of post-apartheid failure and folly, representing a nexus of crony capitalism and negative environmental/climatic effects'.[14] The project represents one of several 'megaprojects' undertaken by the post-Apartheid government such as the Pebble Bed Nuclear Reactors and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project.[15] Purportedly these 'White Elephants' are designed to create jobs and attract Foreign Direct Investment but ultimately have ended up sapping public funds and resources. In the case of Coega, the vast sums of money being pumped into industrial development could be more profitably channelled into addressing basic needs in the Eastern Cape, which is one of South Africa's poorest provinces.[16] The destructive consequences of Coega have been recognised by grassroots social movements and Green movements alike namely, citrus farmers, The Valley Bushveld Affected Parties, Nimble, Earthlife Africa and The Zwartkops Trust.[17] In sum, Coega is a government initiative that prioritises international capital over respect for human and environmental justice.

The case of Coega illustrates that corporate interests have been placed ahead of social and ecological health in the post-Apartheid period. Contemporary South African geopolitics demonstrate Jason W. Moore's point that the capitalist world system's drive towards endless accumulation operates via a rampant destruction of nature. For Moore, capitalism should really be understood as a 'Capitalist World-Ecology', in which wage labour becomes the 'decisive metric of wealth', even as the creation of value depends upon 'massive contributions of unpaid work, outside the commodity system'.[18] Unpaid resources such as cheap energy and raw materials check rising labour costs, provide an outlet for fixed capital and underpin production. The paradox is that 'we don't yet have an adequate language to talk and act and

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[13] Bond. "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", p. 18.
[14] Bond. "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", p. 18.
[15] Patrick Bond, "South Africa Embraces Corporate Welfare: Mega Deal Subsidies Over Services for the Poor", *Multinational Moniter* (2006) 22-25,40 (p.23).
[16] Bond. "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", p.17.
[17] Bond. "South Africa's 'Developmental State' Distraction", p.21 & 19.
[18] Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I", pp.11-12.

analyse as if humans and the rest of nature mutually constitute each other' because capitalism depends upon a devalourisation and appropriation of the latter.[19] One of the great political challenges of contemporary times is to fashion a mode of expression that surmounts the dualistic divisions of capitalism. I argue that the radicalism of Nyezwa's poetry lies in its ability to fashion the 'adequate language' Moore speaks of, one that expresses the co-constitution of humans and nature. Nyezwa's lyric expresses profound connectedness to its surrounding society and ecology, a model of selfhood at odds with bourgeois individualism.

Nyezwa's attunement to voices of the natural world emerges in "Simple Poems", which evinces a desire to voyage beyond the parameters of human expression,

> *today i had no idea of time, of human hands*
> *and i could not breathe. nothing at all was happening.*
>
> *today i committed myself wholeheartedly to the finest things*
> *in life, to write the simple poems*
>
> *and to sing line by line*
> *the cry of geese.*[20]

The speaker reflects upon an experience of detachment from linear time and diachronic events. The lyric's remove from usual temporal flows seems connected to a more general disavowal of its own life force or breath. A renunciation of personal concerns is coupled by a turn to writing 'simple poems', which are among 'the finest things'. Here, poetry is bound up in the immediacy of 'today' and able to accommodate animal subjectivity in 'the cry of geese.' Nyezwa's portrayal of poetic subjectivity eschews the self-reflexivity and pre-occupation with ego so often associated with lyric, a typically inward looking and androcentric genre. Unfortunately, South African poetry criticism has failed to register Nyezwa's challenge to the boundaries of a human identity that is not co-constituted by its ecological and social surrounds.[21] Gary Cummiskey is one of only a handful of literary critics to provide detailed

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[19] Note Moore's research is a rich synthesis of feminism, green thought and Marxism. He is indebted to Donna Haraway's work on the situatedness of knowledge production, Val Plumwood's critique of nature/ society dualisms and David Harvey's scholarship regarding Capitalism's dependency upon the appropriation of Nature's free gifts. Cf. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies*, 14: 3 (1988), 575-599, (p.579); Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 42; David Harvey *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), p. 322.

[20] Mxolisi Nyezwa, *Song Trials* (Scotssville: Gecko, 2000), p. 53, ll.3-8.

[21] In her brief comments on Nyezwa in "Where the Heart is'" Joan Metlerkamp does emphasise the poet's sense of rootedness to nature, animals, the earth and his surrounding locale. Yet she does not explore how this fact might complicate the nature of human subjectivity. Cf. Joan Metelerkamp, "Where the heart is: Poetry review", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 13:1 (2001), 108-129 (p.124-125).

readings of Nyezwa's work. His review of *New Country* is a case in point. Cummiskey focuses upon Nyezwa's 'sensitive lyrical voice' and argues that the 'work is characterised by intensely personal meditations'.[22] Cummiskey's observations are typical of a prominent strand in white South African academia, which restrictively understands lyric form as a conduit of individual expression. Influential poets such as Stephen Watson and Lionel Abrahams have worked to ensure that lyric is still widely interpreted through a liberal lens in South African Universities and publishing circles. Sole argues that the genre is frequently portrayed as an authentic means through which to articulate a rich inner life supposedly divorced from public, political or ecological concerns.[23]

In contrast to a mode of private lyric utterance, many of Nyezwa's poems express an awareness of capitalism's ability to conquer new territories, extend the zone of commodity production and manipulate nature. "Heaven's Prisons" reads,

> the universe is divided
> and sub-divided.[24]

The lines describe the partitioning of the universe through the vocabulary of development housing. The insinuation is that no space is vast or infinite enough to escape the market-orientation of a Capitalist World-Ecology. The poem "To my people" expresses a similar sentiment,

> the streets,
> the storerooms, the seaports
> remind me of an earth
> that is laced in smoke. [25]

The lines allude to the toxic impact that industry and commerce have had upon the land. A more cryptic example appears in "Walking the earth" when the speaker makes use of an unusual image,

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[22] Gary Cummiskey, "Lyrical, intensely personal collections", *Business Day (South Africa)*, 7 February 2009 <https://global.factiva.com/ga/default.aspx> [Accessed 25/02/2015] (Para 1-2 of 20).
[23] Kelwyn Sole, "Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa", *Mediations*, 24:1 (2008), 132-165 (p. 145).
[24] Mxolisi Nyezwa, "Heaven's Prisons", in *Malikhanye* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2011) p.40, ll.1-2.
[25] Nyezwa, "To my people", in *Malikhanye*, pp.44-45, (p.44, ll. 15-19).

> all i can make of my country
> is a sulphurous compound.[26]

Decontextualised, the metaphor is striking but arcane. Knowledge of Nyezwa's background provides inspiration for interpreting the image. The reference to sulphur surely connects to the fact that one of the most harmful effects of Coega is an unhealthy emission of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere.[27] The poetic decision to compare an entire country to 'a sulphurous compound' harnesses the Coega development as a symbol for capitalism's violent contamination of nature.

Nyezwa's poetic form is instrumental in revealing unseen connections amongst economics, humanity and ecology. In particular, the technique of parallelism is an outstanding feature of his work, and this stylistic device crafts a poetry that challenges binaries between humans and the external world in which they live.[28] Parallelism is defined by the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* as 'a repetition of structure or pattern in adjacent phrases, clauses or sentences within discourse in general and poetry in particular.'[29] It is a versatile stylistic device and includes the repetition of syntax, rhythm and vocabulary.[30] The use of parallelism is prominent in Southern African cultures and Jeff Opland argues that it is one way of defining the metre of isiXhosa poetry.[31] Indeed, isiXhosa does not make use of stress or syllable count. Markers such as anaphora are deployed to establish rhythmic regularity and structure.[32] Nyezwa's use of patterned repetitions has roots in his isiXhosa heritage but it has also been influenced by reading Spanish poetry in translation. He is especially inspired by the work of Federico García Lorca and César Vallejo.[33]

Nyezwa's manipulation of parallelism challenges any easy separation between 'natural' and historical time. This is foregrounded in the poem "songs of rage and contentment",

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[26] Nyezwa, "Walking the earth", in *Malikhanye*, p. 21, ll.10-11.
[27] "Local economic development choices in Port Elizabeth", *Eastern Cape Socio Economic Consultative Council (ECSECC)*, 24 June 2011 <http://www.ecsecc.org/files/library/documents/LED_choices_in_PE.pdf> [Accessed 26/02/2015], pp. 1-31 (p.14-15).
[28] Kelwyn Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", Cross-Cultural Poetics, 21/22 (2009), 240-266 (pp.247-248).
[29] "Parallelism", in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* ed. Roland Greene et al (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 997-999 (p.997).
[30] "Parallelism", in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p.997.
[31] Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1998), pp.20 & 23.
[32] Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*, p. 21.
[33] Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", pp.247-248.

> A year is a timeless tree, a flower with no leaves. A year can be
> brokered, you said. History is negotiable.[34]

At first glance, the calm and serene temporal space embodied in flora and fauna seems at odds with the volatility of history. The contingent and fragmented quality of the latter is emphasised in the line break after 'be' which mimetically enacts a process of rupture and underscores the meaning of 'brokered'. Despite the apparent opposition between the timelessness of trees and the instability of history, the repetition of two words, 'a year', brings polarities into dialogue. The recycling of lexicon aligns seemingly disparate realms of experience.[35] The parallel use of 'a year' connects different temporalities and is a basic example of Nyezwa's ability to foreground connections between the ostensibly distinct spheres of nature and history. In what follows, I analyse two key themes in Nyezwa's poetry. The first is the representation of the embodied mind and the second is the depiction of water. In both cases, parallelism is a pivotal formal cog that deepens and nuances a poetry welding humanity to environment.

Nyezwa's oeuvre can be engaged with Moore's point that human intelligence is interwoven with the wider ecological metabolism. In this regard, Moore draws on Marx's characterisation of ideas as a 'material force'. For Moore, nature does not only operate 'outside and inside our bodies […] but also through our bodies, including our embodied minds'.[36] Capitalist society and its cultural achievements are materially nourished and sustained through the appropriation of natural resources. Nyezwa's lyric registers the fact that the symbolic realm of poetry is embedded in its eco-historical surrounds. In *Malikhanye*, one reads the words, 'books and instruments […] are hard to assemble' and 'break easily into animals and stones'.[37] The poetry aligns the implements of writing with the productive energies of nature, and captures the imbrication of culture and environment. Nyezwa's poetry can be contrasted with the ideology of the Capitalocene.[38] Indeed, ever since its inception in Early Modern Europe, between 1450 and 1640, capitalism has drawn upon the powers of art, literature and science to portray nature as an external object 'to be mapped, quantified, and

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[34] Nyezwa, "songs of rage and contentment", in *Song Trials*, p. 74.
[35] "Parallelism", in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p.997.
[36] Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I", p. 4.
[37] Mxolisi Nyezwa, *Malikhanye* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2011), p. 13.
[38] Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. II, transl. David Fernbach (New York: Pelican, 1978), p.60.

regulated' in order to meet its own accumulative urges.[39] In defiance of such logic, Nyezwa fashions a world-view that reveals the material and ecological qualities of intellectual creativity.

The opening poem of Nyezwa's debut collection eschews detached philosophising, foregrounding the somatic aspects of cognition. It illustrates that the physical experience of reading poetry can operate as a profound form of social engagement. "I cannot think of all the pains" gives the poem its name and forms the body of the first line. The poem underlines the lyric's inability to reflect upon unnamed sources of suffering,

> i cannot think of all the pains in men's breasts
> without the urge to sleep or lie down, i cannot think
> without seeing God's face in the child's smile,
> or in the lonely cry in the night and in the sea.[40]

The writing emphasises the entwinement of mental reflection and embodied life, by stating that the process of thinking upon injustice and human agony causes physical exhaustion and weakness in the speaker. Thought directly causes the persona to 'sleep or lie down', indicating the bodily nature of feeling and perception. Furthermore, simply 'thinking', upon no defined object in particular, results in envisioning 'God' in both the smile of a child and in the sounds of the night and sea. One is given to understand that private cognition is always enmeshed with a wider cosmic dimension that encompasses spirituality, other human lives, and nature. An element of synaesthesia is produced through portrayal of a consciousness able to visualise the face of 'God' in 'the cry' of natural forces such as the ocean. Seeing and hearing cannot be rigidly separated and this underscores the relationality of human perception. This stands in contradistinction to the logic of capitalism, which seeks to divide, compartmentalise and isolate diverse elements of human existence. In Nyezwa's poetry, one cannot rigidly separate the human senses from each other and the external world they inhabit.

'I cannot think of all the pains' and 'i cannot think' are the syntactic units that shape the iterative musculature of Nyezwa's poem. Their repetition highlights that there are avenues of anguish into which the speaker cannot probe. The implication is that thought alone is

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[39] Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I", pp.6-7.
[40] Nyezwa, "I cannot think of all the pains", in *Song Trials*, p.13, ll.1-4.

incapable of grasping the true nature of sorrow. The limits of a mode of cognition premised solely on intellectual processes are underlined,

> i cannot think of all the pains that have come
> and gone, pains in men's waists
> and in men's shoes—
>
> […]
>
> i cannot think of all the pains and all the years wasted,
> all the craze of lonely men in village rooms,
> and all the bodies that lie out cold, in avoided streets.[41]

The phrase 'i cannot think of all the pains' forms a sequence of rhythmic patterns that create a significant poetic time, one that records adversity and distress within the flexing and tensing of the poem's anatomy. The physical process of reading the poem allows insight into concepts of anguish that cannot be fully disclosed through statement. This enables one to understand that political knowledge and empathy with scenes of poverty are not purely cerebral phenomena but states of being that infuse both mind and body. The use of central syntactic units reinforces the isiXhosa tradition of deploying repetitive phrases to establish rhythmic regularity and even a kind of metre. Metre is 'the measure of sound patterning in verse, occurring when a rhythm is repeated throughout a passage of lang. with such regularity that a base unit (such as a foot) becomes a norm and governs poetic composition'.[42] Nyezwa's poem draws upon isiXhosa heritage to create metrical effects. In so doing, he infuses English with the structure of a distantiate language, destabilises conventional understandings of metre and creates affective potency. This causes the reader to be physically impacted by the reality of waists tortured by hunger, desolate men and forgotten bodies. On this level, poetic form comes to embody and evoke pain and engender sympathy. Thinking and feeling can no longer be neatly bifurcated. Formal ingenuity refutes the reified categories of the Capitalocene.

Nyezwa's appeal to the isiXhosa technique of parallelism works in tandem with conventional English rhythms. Anglophone stresses add nuance to the ostensible message of the poem. The identifiably iambic nature of 'i cannot think' places recurrent emphasis on the syllables 'can'

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[41] Nyezwa, "I cannot think of all the pains", in *Song Trials*, p.13, ll.13-20.
[42] "Meter", in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 872.

and 'think', suggesting that the speaker might in fact be capable of 'thinking' after all. The fact that this concept of thought can only be approached through an engagement with rhythm, and contradicts the superficial meaning of the statement, reinforces the physicality of cognition. It is underscored that the only available reflection on pain and suffering is one enmeshed with breath and form. Both parallel structures and stressed cadences in "I cannot think of all the pains" portray the corporeality of intellect via use of poetic style.

Complementing the non-binary logic conveyed in the poem's use of metre and rhythm, the phrases 'i cannot think' and 'i cannot' are manipulated in a fashion that negates any easy parameters between the pains undergone by human communities and those experienced by the animal and natural world. This becomes evident in the closing stanza of the poem,

> i can't run out old, like a joyful child
>
> and watch a sky pregnant with pain, or with turbulent rain;
> i cannot think of the soil without lying down,
> i cannot think of tears, lonely geographies
> and the third world, without the urge to cry or to sit down.[43]

Nyezwa's technique of substitution is particularly effective and the refrain 'i cannot think of all the pains' is modified to read 'i cannot think of the soil without lying down/ i cannot think of tears, lonely geographies'. 'Soil', 'tears' and 'lonely geographies' occupy the syntactic position previously reserved for 'all the pains', which equates the suffering formerly internal to men's 'breasts' with the externality of the landscape. Grammatical turnover of nouns embeds human immiseration in the soil itself, 'the pains' that scar and affect men are not simply personal and psychological but are also connected to environmental degradation.

The breaching of androcentric logic in "I cannot think of all the pains" is made possible by the patterned repetition of 'i cannot think', and this prompts the reader to more fully engage with the semantic resonance of the poem's closing stanza. Indeed, 'tears' can take on a double denotation in the above context. The word seemingly refers to the outpouring of human emotion but when placed alongside depictions of land and ecology also plays upon its homograph, tear or to rent. The latter meaning would allude to the desecration of the soil and align it with the weeping of humans. The associative import of 'tear' questions schisms

[43] Nyezwa, "I cannot think of all the pains", in *Song Trials*, p.13, ll. 16-20.

between 'men' and 'nature' and becomes a figure for the profound identity between the wretchedness of humans and that of the earth.

Nyezwa's parallelism encourages natural responses to his poem's rhythmic intonations through creating non-linear associations between culture and ecology. Simultaneously, repetitive structures emphasise the constructed nature of poetic form. The physicality of the poetry appeals to instinct but takes care to leave traces of its artful design thus circumventing an easy separation between nature and culture. Nyezwa's poetic form defies capitalist dualisms and contributes in a valuable way to academic debate surrounding the 'naturalness' of metre and rhythm. There has been much critical speculation on whether poetic rhythms are related to innate properties of human consciousness or are products of culture. Simon Jarvis notes that metre is typically 'understood either as something naturally cognitive, hard-wired into brain structure, or as something symbolic, an achievement of culture'[44]. Contrary to such a bifurcation, Jarvis highlights the 'slipperiness and subtle intermediateness of nature and culture'[45]. Arguably, binary approaches to poetic metre are deeply related to their situation in a capitalist world-ecology. In defiance of such logic, Nyezwa's use of parallel forms solicits both spontaneous and studied response. The fact that these parallel structures serve to bridge divides between history and ecology emphasises that poetic form is both intellectual and material.

"I cannot think of all the pains" is one of many poems by Nyezwa that portrays the embodied nature of thought and a poetic consciousness deeply pre-occupied with the natural world. The poem "lilies" rewards a process of close reading because it portrays a lyric persona imbricated in the material and ecological aspects of its surrounding world. The opening lines read,

> i breathe
> so are the symbolic gestures of thieves[46]

The writing signals a profound interest in the relationship between environmental justice and the materiality of culture. Nyezwa's elliptical language means that the 'symbolic gestures of

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[44] Simon Jarvis, "Thinking in verse" in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. James Chandler and Maureen McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 98-116, (p.112).
[45] Jarvis, "Thinking in verse", p. 112.
[46] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, ll.1-2.

thieves' are never defined but the fact that they are compared to the breath of the speaker alludes to the poem's own contribution towards increasing levels of carbon dioxide on the planet. Literal and physical inhalation of air, by a presumed real life persona steals air from the atmosphere and the poem's textual breathing indirectly does the same. One can note that the trees felled to produce Nyezwa's book would have produced oxygen for the ecosystem as a whole. The introductory lines of the poem relate literary breath to a kind of theft underscoring that symbolic or cultural production is bound up in broader issues of conservation and sustainability.

On the topic of 'symbolic gestures', the poem's first set of parallel statements introduce thematics that will enable Nyezwa to obliquely explore intersections between nature and culture. The speaker declares,

> i'm thankful that i'm alive
> i'm overwhelmed by the blackest chaos[47].

Repetition of the contraction 'i'm' followed by a verb establishes parallelism and aligns 'thankful', 'alive' and 'overwhelmed' hence associating the lyric's feelings of gratitude for its life with the experience of being overcome by chaos. A certain element of surprise is created given that emotions of appreciation for being alive are not ostensibly compatible with the ferocity of a tumultuous chaotic presence. The link between chaos and the pulse of life is made evident via grammatical adjacency and this reminds the reader that in both Greek cosmogony and Christian theology 'chaos' is the term used to describe the state of all existent matter at the inception of the universe.[48] In Nyezwa's poem, the tie between chaos and primordial forces is tightened given that its blackness references the void or formlessness before the creation of the world. Moreover, the fact that later in the poem the hounds of chaos are said to 'guard the morose sea'[49] allies the force with water and recalls Genesis's description of the watery mass at the earth's beginning.[50] Nyezwa's 'i' is both over-awed and

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[47] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, ll.3-4.
[48] Cf. Hesiod, "Theogony", l.115 in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* transl. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1914) via *Perseus Digital Library* <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+116> [Accessed 26 February 2015]; "Genesis 1:2", in *The Living Bible* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971), via *Bible Gateway* <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Genesis%201:2> [Accessed 26/02/2015].
[49] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, l.6.
[50] Cf. "Genesis 1:2", *21st Century King James Version* (Deuel Enterprises, Inc: 1994) via *Bible Gateway*< https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:2&version=KJ21> [Accessed 26 February 2015].

offered a sort of patronage by the generative figure of chaos, which he calls 'my protector'.[51] The insinuation is that the persona's poetic labour is not autonomous but subject to the ebb and flow of mightier productive rhythms. It is from this perspective that one can interpret the lines,

> and nothing's new
> neither the voice as they say my name
> neither my poetry.[52]

Properties of voice and poetic expression are not portrayed as acts of original human genius but spring from a longer heritage of natural potencies. The poem questions the hegemony of human creative capacities and intimates that its own formal structures are subject to more ancient life-giving powers. "Lilies" suggests that a powerful natural matrix influences the intellectual work of poetic expression.

The black and dark nature of chaos is foregrounded in the poem. This works to both politicise the figure and link elemental forces to human identity and struggle. The colour of chaos is politically evocative in the context of South African literature in which references to blackness are almost synonymous with racial classification and prejudice. The fact that the poem also portrays chaos's eyes as 'black or blue'[53] alludes to linkages between blackness and an oppressed people. Indeed, the phrase is reminiscent of an idiom used to designate a badly beaten body, 'black and blue'. Chaos's eyes bear the hue of physical subjection and this affiliates it with the historical oppression of South Africa's black majority. The significance of such a connection is explored in subsequent parallel statements that imbricate natural production and exploited black labour,

> *in the black earth*
> *the figure of the Madonna makes its promises*
> *in the black earth*
> *we sweat with our hands forever*.[54]

Like chaos, the earth is black and aligned with procreative capacities. A mother or 'Madonna' figure is located within its depths reinforcing associations between fertility and the land. The

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[51] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, l. 5.
[52] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, ll.8-10.
[53] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, l.6.
[54] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, ll.14-17.

phrase '*we sweat with our hands forever*' is surely a reference to the manifold ways in which South Africa's black population have undertaken arduous manual work in and on the country's earth. The key instance of such toil is the use of a black proletariat in mining.[55]

The mention of sweat and eternal drudgery brings out the latent meaning of 'the black earth'. The latter is not only literally darker due to its rocks, minerals, and soil but is also a metaphor for the human travails it encodes. Here, one is reminded of the way in which Sitas identifies rock with the spirit of oppressed people. "Lilies"'s strategic repetition of the word 'black', and its re-emergence in the parallel use of '*in the black earth*', is a crucial formal component of the poem. The colour's shifting associative meanings allow one to overcome dichotomies between human labour and that of commanding natural energies. The inaugural chaos of the universe and the life-bearing properties of the earth are experienced in and through human endeavour.

In a context in which there is a correlation between the work of nature and that of humans, one can more easily interpret the speaker's mysterious utterance, 'my labour is a huge nettle of snow'.[56] Ostensibly the whiteness of snow would be juxtaposed with the blackness of chaos and earth but all of these entities are portrayed in such a way as to emphasise the interpenetration of natural and human creative capacities. The merging of seeming opposites allows one to unpack the symbolic resonance of the poem's title. "Lilies" would usually announce whiteness and purity but the content of this poem deals with tumultuous, soiled and even grimy realities. The insinuation is that the pristine and decorative realm of culture is not a superstructure elevated above the entirety of society. Nyezwa's poem offers itself up as a flower immanently rooted in the vibrancy of all living matter.

"Lilies" present a lyric speaker willing to explore a holistic view of the web of life. As Nyezwa puts it in the recent poem "Because I did not smile" published in *New Coin* in December 2013,

> in all that we are living
> something has flowed from the past

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[55] Cf. Harold Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa, From segregation to apartheid", in *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, ed. by William Beinhart and Saul Dubow (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 60-90.
[56] Nyezwa, "Lilies", in *Song Trials*, p.86, l.11.

below
towards us
in all living things that breath now
there are remnants of a life
already lived and buried
below the earth.[57]

Human civilisation is not self-determined or foundational but must be placed within a longer context of the earth's deep history. Cultural production does not spring from inviolable human genius but is co-constituted by ecology and history. Individual inspiration and knowledge only gain form and texture through intimate engagement with environmental and social surrounds.

The content and style of Nyezwa's writing questions the sanctity of the sequestered ego and places dualistic divisions between nature and culture under erasure. Despite a difference in context, his poetry can be fruitfully compared with the theoretical work of Drew Milne and Denise Riley. Both critics probe the possibility of reading lyric beyond the confines of the human voice and note that it is only in modern times that lyric powers have become identified with human consciousness. Milne reminds one that the origins of lyric lie in ancient Greek works such as those of Pindar and Sappho, which align the muses with 'gods and the mythic forces of nature'.[58] Similarly, Riley writes 'today's lyric form, frequently a vehicle for innocuous display and confessionals, is at odds with its remoter history'.[59] Milne and Riley are sensitive to the potential of lyric to express the co-constitution of humanity and environment but their writing does not explore how such poetry might play out in non-metropolitan contexts.[60] Nyezwa's poetry complements contemporary critique of lyric humanism but displays a cognisance of socioeconomic inequity that is lacking in Milne and Riley. The power of Nyezwa's work is to dismantle capitalism's individualistic and anthropocentric outlook within the specific material context of South Africa's Eastern Cape.

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[57] Mxolisi Nyezwa, "Because I did not smile", *New Coin*, 49 (December 2013), 80-82, (p. 82, ll. 46-53).
[58] Drew Milne, "In Memory of the Pterodactyl: the limits of lyric humanism", in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 361-367 (p. 362).
[59] Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 94.
[60] Milne, "In Memory of the Pterodactyl: the limits of lyric humanism", p.362., Riley, *The Words of Selves*, p.95.

Nyezwa's style is abstract and often operates through obscure imagery, which means that attentive reading is required in order to map his depiction of his socioeconomic surrounds. Nyezwa's 2012 interview with Cummiskey offers some useful pointers. Nyezwa stresses the need to analyse 'the context around the imagery'[61]. He goes on, 'I think therein lies sometimes the value of poetry, because these references are about lived experiences. Experiences that others are being exposed to that none of us may be aware of.'[62] In other words, imagery, metaphor and simile gain depth and resonance through shared knowledge of the specific events they reference. The observer who has no acquaintance with the writer's background is pushed to learn more about the unknown locale.[63]

The poem "song of beauty"' illustrates how Nyezwa's poetry is enriched through situating it against the specificity of his Eastern Cape surrounds. Consider the lines,

> but for me it is enough to say i'm no longer dead, but live.
> it suffices to say the universe also sprouts its tentacles of blood,
> and there's a rich flower from my shoulder to my hand,
> in what was beautiful, in what was growing impossibly thin.
>
> for now i'm no longer dead but live in the soil's core
> the mist of the land covers my sins.[64]

"Song of beauty" establishes the symbiosis of humans and nature via the correlative dynamism of adjacent parallel phrases. Just as '***it is enough*** to say i'm no longer dead, but live' so '***it suffices*** to say the universe also sprouts its tentacles of blood'. The reader is alerted to the fact that the speaker's ability to 'live' is connected to the fecundity of the universe as a whole. "Song of beauty's" attempt to marry human and ecological fertility can be read in relation to the fact that agricultural health in the Eastern Cape is closely linked to human livelihood. Jobs could be created in the Coega area and Sundays River Valleys if the water consumed by the Coega IDZ were redirected into farming. [65] An initiative that would particularly thrive is the Logan Braes initiative. The project is both sustainable and philanthropic, and could potentially create 8,000 jobs for previously disadvantaged black

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[61] Cummiskey, "Mxolisi Nyezwa: A new dawn for poetry" (Para. 3 of 13).
[62] Cummiskey, "Mxolisi Nyezwa: A new dawn for poetry" (Para. 3 of 13).
[63] Joan Metelerkamp notes Nyezwa's rootedness to place: 'there is never any question of where Nyezwa belongs, or of where "home" is for him'. Cf. Joan Metelerkamp, "Where the heart is: Poetry review", p.124.
[64] Nyezwa, "song of beauty", in *Song Trials*, p. 37, ll.12-17.
[65] "The COEGA HARBOUR and IDZ".

farmers on 2,700 hectares of arable land in the IDZ area.[66] In Nyezwa's lived environment, emerging farmers stand to gain from productive agricultural investment. In this milieu analogies between humanity and the land lose generality and gain charge.

The speaking voice in Nyezwa's poem identifies itself with the life-giving powers of the land implying that the cognitive mechanisms of the poem are ineluctably grounded and material. The substance in which the 'I' resides is the 'soil's core' itself. This persona is not identifiably human but akin to a fecund earth able to birth flora and fauna. The latter point is evident in the lines,

> there's a rich flower from my shoulder to my hand,
> in what was beautiful
> in what was growing impossibly thin.[67]

Nyezwa's "song of beauty" creates a sense of the human and ecological potentiality in Nelson Mandela Bay. The image of the 'rich flower' is suggestive given that it is Citrus farming that would most flourish in the Coega region and a sign of the health of such crops is the ability to bloom. "Song of beauty" is one of many seemingly personal or abstract poems by Nyezwa that gains in political texture if one understands its imagery in relation to a specific milieu. Nyezwa lives in close proximity to one of post-Apartheid's greatest industrial megaprojects and this fact permeates his work. The political force of the poet's writing resides in its challenge to the appropriative logic of corporate capital that has had such a negative impact upon his lived surrounds.

For the remainder of this chapter, I choose to focus upon those poems by Nyezwa that tackle the theme of water. Comments made by Nyezwa during a 2008 interview with Alan Finlay for *New Coin* elucidate the centrality of the trope to his poetic outlook, 'a poem tries to capture a watery history—a transient memory'. [68] Nyezwa posits that it is the job of poetry to capture the slipperiness of history and one can interpret the analogy between water and history quite literally in the South African context. The motif of water rewards a materialist reading given that it is one of the greatest issues of environmental sustainability in the post-Apartheid nation. As became evident in Sitas's description of 'rock' and the mining industry, attention to

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[66] "The COEGA HARBOUR and IDZ".
[67] Nyezwa, "song of beauty", in *Song Trials*, p. 37, ll.12-15.
[68] Alan Finlay, "Kotaz Interview: Mxolisi Nyezwa", *New Coin*, 44 (2008), 20-25 (p.24).

imagery that connects to the material world of South Africa allows one to gain greater understanding of the relevance of post-Apartheid poetry to contemporary society. Through understanding the significance of water in Nyezwa's oeuvre, one can better come to grips with central political and ecological questions in the post-Apartheid era. South Africa naturally lacks consistent and reliable water supplies given that annual rainfall is six times less than that of the world average. The country's water crisis was explored in a February 2015 article from the *Mail and Guardian*, which notes that 98% of the country's water is already fully allotted and that by the year 2030 national water requirements will 'will exceed supply by 17%.'[69] The African National Congress's failure to provide adequate access to water has become a key index of the neoliberalisation of a formerly revolutionary political party. After liberation in 1994 clean and free water was decreed a right of all South Africa's citizens but by the dawn of the new millennium state services had become increasingly commodified.

Severe cholera outbreaks in KwaZulu-Natal in August 2000 put pressure on government and a Free Basic Water policy was established in 2001. The programme typifies the hypocrisy of the post-Apartheid dispensation, promising fair access to a public resource but ultimately enshrining the principle of privatisation. One can cite the example of Johannesburg in the early 2000s in which 'all households received 6000 litres (1585 US gallons) per month for free' but then had to confront unaffordable charges for further water usage. [70] The incredible rise in the price of additional water blocks meant that average monthly water bills remained the same leaving the poor disconnected once they had received an initial tokenistic 6000 litres.[71] The story has been the same across the board and water commodification has seen the mobilisation of some of the most significant grass-roots activism in post-Apartheid South Africa. Memorably, the Anti-Privatization Forum marched on the Constitutional Court on Human Rights Day in 2004 to object to Soweto's pre-paid water meters.[72] Close to Nyezwa's home, protest also broke out in Grahamstown. In 2013, Academics and township residents streamed to the city council, bearing banners and placards to launch a complaint against a

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[69] Sipho Kings, Sarah Wild, Rapula Moatshe & Phillip de Wet "South Africa's great thirst has begun", *Mail and Guardian Online*, 23 January 2015 <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-01-22-south-africas-great-thirst-has-begun> [Accessed 22/02/2015].
[70] Saul, John S. and Patrick Bond. *South Africa - The Present as History*. 1st ed. (Woodbridge, UK, Boydell & Brewer: 2014), *University Publishing Online*. Web. 22 February 2015. <http://universitypublishingonline.org/boydell/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781782042433>, p. 194.
[71] Saul and Bond. *South Africa - The Present as History*, p. 194.
[72] Saul and Bond, *South Africa - The Present as History*, p. 190

fourteen day water cut.[73] Water has emerged as an issue able to unite a wide spectrum of South African society and it is an image that pre-occupies Nyezwa. The poem, "at each place i meet my black sorrow" portrays water as a symbol enmeshed in questions of geopolitical justice:

> at each place i meet my black sorrow,
> and from my pocket retrieve my smile.
> i have free-fallen, buried my head beneath the sand.
> i have seen the earth tumble,
> the heavens tripping and fall.
>
> i have thought long and hard about living,
> and fixed my universe on rwandan skulls.
> i placed my faith in a blind crowd.
> hurt my hand, bared my soul
> in a bath-tub.[74]

The poem unfolds in a series of statements regarding various actions the speaker has been involved in and sights it has seen. The incantatory nature of these assertions creates a kind of parallel structure to the extent that the reader begins to expect that adjacent phrases and clauses will name a new activity performed or experience undergone. Furthermore, almost all of the states of being described by the speaker have a kind of grandeur or serious import. Thus in stanza one, 'i have seen the earth tumble/ the heavens tripping and fall' deals with great universal forces and the fate of earth and heaven. Similarly, in stanza two, 'i have thought long and hard about living/ fixed my universe on Rwandan skulls' tackles the meaning of life itself and meditates on questions of mortality through reference to 1994's Rwandan genocide.

In the above context, 'hurt my hand/ bared my soul' ostensibly implies a similar tone, especially given that 'soul' is in keeping with the high tone of stanza one's spiritual reference to 'heaven'. The reader is set up for the following line to parallel previous examples of trial or meditation placed against a larger cosmic or philosophical background. Here, 'in a bathtub' is literally obscure and the line stands out as incongruous. It is not specified how the speaker's hand was hurt and it is certainly not self-explanatory why this would be an appropriate place to bare one's soul. The image of the 'bathtub' is bathetic in its association with domestic

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[73] Sipho Kings, Sarah Wild, Rapula Moatshe & Phillip de Wet "South Africa's great thirst has begun".
[74] Nyezwa, "at each place i meet my black sorrow", in *New Country*, p. 26, ll. 9-10.

routines of personal cleanliness. One moves from contemplating the vast arenas of earth, heaven and history to the interiority of ablution facilities.

Nyezwa's use of parallelism interlinks a quotidian scene with grand-scale concerns and the effect is both bizarre and disconcerting. The presentation of the bathtub instantiates a formal rupture and a seamless reading is frustrated. The image presents a contradiction that one is prompted to solve. The extraordinary symbol can be better understood if one takes into account the dire lack of access to water for purposes of sanitation in South Africa. The country fared poorly in Yale's 2014's Environmental Performance Index ranking 108 out of 178 countries in terms of having adequate water for hygiene and cleanliness. [75] Contextual knowledge does not fully explicate the symbolic meaning of the bathtub but the reader is given clearer insight into why a domestic scene is mentioned alongside an instance of genocide. The implication is that questions of sanitation and hygiene are of equal importance to ostensibly graver concerns. The structural idiosyncrasy of the poem prompts one to plumb its political context. Literary analysis and material realities inform and elucidate one another.

The social and ecological significance of water is further alluded to in stanza three,

> i understand i exhausted myself.
> denied the bone its torrential rain.
> simply existed for the simple sake
> of a weak body,
> a temple with no flame.[76]

The lines connect bodily exhaustion to the fact that the speaker has denied 'the bone its torrential rain'. Given that the 'i' is announcing its personal bodily fatigue one can assume that 'the bone' is its own. It is ambiguous whether or not 'rain' refers to an element that bones, like clouds, are capable of releasing or whether the reason the bones are weak is because they have been parched of moisture. The latter meaning is closer to literal sense but the former has precedents in other poems in *New Country*. In "i have to be serious about many things" the persona declares,

> i have to be serious about where i
> will dress my body tonight.

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[75] "Country Profile South Africa", *Yale Environmental Performance Index*, 2014 <http://epi.yale.edu/epi/country-profile/south-africa> [Accessed 22/02/2015].
[76] Nyezwa, "at each place i meet my black sorrow", in *New Country*, p. 26, ll.11-15.

and where my rains will go.[77]

This poetry envisions the body as able to produce rain in a fashion akin to a force of nature.[78] Similarly in "before the child destroys the world" one hears,

> days now appear slanted like the sun
> the rain begins from your body a new prohibition begins—
> your body clings to the earth
> like fire over the burning sky. [79]

In all three of these poems, one sees the human body aligned with natural energies, which speaks to the way in which humans are able to influence weather patterns and are shaped by this process. The point is particularly relevant to South Africa given that the nation is one of the world's leading contributors to climate change. The post-Apartheid nation rivals first world superpowers. In 2012 South Africa's impact upon the global climate was proportionally twenty times greater than that of the United States.[80] "At each place i meet my black sorrow" and "before the child destroys the world" both align fire and water within a single body, and this too can be interpreted in the context of broader climate shifts.[81] The seeming illogicality of merging fire and water is potentially explained if one considers the body as akin to cumulonimbus clouds containing the heat of lightening and the presence of heavy rain. Such an analogy has social and ecological relevance given that one of the key consequences of climate change in South Africa is the emergence of stormier, heavier and shorter rainfalls. Climate Change Projections suggest that the increase in violent showers will make it ever more difficult to collect water in catchment areas in the years to come.[82]

Nyezwa's exploration of the trope of water is multifaceted. He both alludes to the importance of water as a basic household need and also manipulates the symbol to unravel humanity's ability to influence, shape and condition the course of world ecology. The content of his poetry exemplifies Moore's contention that humanity does not stand apart from its environment but actively produces the web of life it depends upon.[83] One is reminded of

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[77] Nyezwa, "i have to be serious about many things", in *New Country*, p.8, ll.6-8.
[78] Nyezwa, "i have to be serious about many things", in *New Country*, p.8, ll.3-6.
[79] Nyezwa, "before the child destroys the world", in *New Country*, p. 51, ll.8-10.
[80] Saul and Bond, *South Africa - The Present as History*, p.170.
[81] Nyezwa, "before the child destroys the world", in *New Country*, p. 51, ll.8-12.
[82] Sipho Kings, Sarah Wild, Rapula Moatshe & Phillip de Wet "South Africa's great thirst has begun".
[83] Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I", p. 11.

Marx's thesis that man 'confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature'.[84] Nyezwa's poetry deploys the image of water to define the nexus between humanity and ecology. The latter point speaks to the fact that this resource embodies the comingling of human and extra-human natures in the post-Apartheid era. A free gift of nature, a tool of corporate privatisation and an element subject to humanity's manipulation of world climate, water embodies some of South Africa's most significant geopolitical conflicts.

I end this chapter with a reading of the poem, "A burning sea" because it encapsulates the extent to which the symbol of water is able to express the interconnectedness of human civilisation and world ecology. "A burning sea" extends the trope of water to encompass reference to the ocean,

> there's a world of beginnings
> and a world of endings
> and for everyone else
> a burning sea.[85]

The poem's opening statements work to underline the fiery quality of the ocean. The parallel lines 'there's a world of beginnings/ and a world of endings' set up a trochaic rhythm that contrasts with, and highlights, the iambic nature of line four. Iambic stresses in 'a burning sea' stand out as particularly marked given the rhythmic juxtaposition with the first two lines. The poem's formal structure causes the reader to especially pause upon the significance of the words 'burn' and 'sea'. These stresses can be interpreted as an injunction to reflect upon the high temperatures required to smelt and refine heavy metals at Coega's Coastal Complex. Smelters and refineries at Coega emit non-biodegradable minerals that build up in an ecosystem and pollute soil, plants and water over time. [86] Nyezwa's poetry represents this fact through use of the present participle in 'burning'. Poetic diction implies that processes of 'burning' at Coega have set in motion ecological consequences that are continuous and ongoing.

The poem portrays the sea as a liminal zone between beginnings and endings. The ocean as a symbol for an interstitial space gestures to the historical significance of the Algoa Bay area in

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[84] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, transl. Ben Fowkes (London: Pelican Books, 1976), p. 283.
[85] Nyezwa, "A burning sea", in Malikhanye, p.47, ll.1-4
[86] "Local economic development choices in Port Elizabeth", p.14.

which Port Elizabeth is located. The bay was an important resting stop for Portuguese explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries while plying the Indian Ocean Trade route. In contemporary times, Port Elizabeth has found itself caught in the thoroughfare of Coega's Ngqura Port, which handles industrial commodities and services transhipment demands. The in-between precinct of the 'burning sea' is more than a poetic flight of fancy but resonates with the Eastern Cape Coastline's past and present relationship towards commerce and industry.

"A burning sea" zones in on the motif of water through the curious depiction of a 'circular river',

> there's an invisible line that crosses
> from universe to universe
> like a circular river, a broad unending space.[87]

Here, 'the circular river' is a simile used to describe 'an invisible line' between different universes. The literal meaning of this expression is unclear, given that rivers are not circular in structure and typically flow in one direction, from land to sea. The universes in question remain similarly undefined and are not distinguished or named. It becomes easier to understand the lines if one takes the liberty of drawing 'an invisible line' to the following stanza which is a parallel iteration of this verse structure,

> the sky talks to the soul like a brother
> from one world to another.[88]

These lines echo the depiction of an invisible line crossing from universe to universe in forming a tercet with an initial line in pentameter. The second lines of both quotes contain the prepositions 'from' and 'to'. In the latter extract, 'world' metonymically replaces 'universe'. This use of metonymy elucidates that the barriers the speaker is interested in bridging are those between personal consciousness and greater natural forces. The 'invisible line' or 'circular river' crossing 'from universe to universe' is correlated with the brotherhood of soul and sky. Nyezwa's poem creates unseen correlations between 'uni' verses, which allows the latter lines to elaborate upon the former's portrayal of cosmic holism. In the process, human spirit is welded to the surrounding world. The fact that the image of the river is crucial in weaving individual consciousness and outer life reinforces that water is a question of both personal and ecological importance in the post-Apartheid era.

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[87] Nyezwa, "A burning sea", in Malikhanye, p.47, ll.9-11.
[88] Nyezwa, "A burning sea", in Malikhanye, p.47, ll.12-13.

"A burning sea" describes 'the arrogance of water' underlining its capacity to control and subdue those who depend upon it for sustenance,

> the sky has known for millions of years
> the arrogance of water, of places disinterred.[89]

The fact that water's arrogance is mentioned adjacent to 'places disinterred', suggests the element's ability to reveal, that which has been buried. The capacity of water to disinter and expose the unseen can be interpreted as symbolic of the fact that it is a trope able to explore and unveil hidden relations between humanity, economy and environment. Through a close reading of the trope in Nyezwa's work it has become evident that water as basic need, force of nature, and economic commodity expresses the kinship of environmental forces and human life in South Africa today.

Nyezwa's poetry captures the interconnectedness of environment and humanity through working in a lyric mode that speaks with and through its ecology. One of the key ways in which this is achieved is through underlining the materiality and physicality of cultural production. This is a poetic voice that emphasises the relationship between poetic voice and planet. I have posited that parallelism is a crucial formal means through which Nyezwa conveys a political message. Nyezwa's use of parallel phrases creates new links between the supposedly disparate realms of culture, commerce, and nature expressing Moore's thesis of the interconnectedness of the Capitalist World-Ecology. As Moore notes, the English language is built upon diction that enshrines dualisms. The power of Nyezwa's poetry is that it uses form to re-adjust the connotative properties of existing vocabulary. Like Rampolokeng, the Eastern Cape poet shifts the cognitive associations of conventional language and communication.

Nyezwa decries the self-sufficiency of art and is interested in an anti-elite model of poetry. He achieves this by unravelling the connections between political praxis, environmental sustainability and lyric aesthetics. The experiences Nyezwa meditates upon encompass the comingling of natural and human forces in driving historical change. In particular, his

[89] Nyezwa, "A burning sea", in Malikhanye, p.47, ll.15-16.

depiction of the theme of water critiques and sensitively responds to South Africa's environmental crisis through paying specific attention to ways in which water is an element co-constituted by both humans and society.

Nyezwa's poetic world provides a concrete context for observations made by literary critics such as Milne and Riley, who are dissatisfied with arid definitions of lyric and the limiting dogma of humanism. Nyezwa's subversion of capitalist ideology that sees time as 'linear', space as 'flat', and nature as 'external' means his work should be of interest to contemporary Marxists, such as Moore, who want to re-read the role of culture in shaping relations of value between man and nature.[90] Finally, Nyezwa's writing gains its greatest resonance when understood against the specificities of South Africa's place in a Capitalist World-Ecology and the poet's real-life proximity to the Coega Industrial Complex. Nyezwa's experimental and astonishing use of poetic form offers a profound challenge to the corporate logic of his surrounds.

[90] Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part II: Abstract Social Nature and the Limits to Capital" (2014), 1-52 (p.3). <http://www.jasonwmoore.com/uploads/The_Capitalocene___Part_II__June_2014.pdf> .

Chapter Five
Timbila Poetry
Vonani Bila's Poetic Project

This chapter focuses on the work of Limpopo based poet, translator, and editor Vonani Bila. I evaluate the extent to which he maps fresh aesthetic categories for the post-Apartheid era. Bila has sought to chart new trajectories for contemporary South African poetry but his poetics have yet to be fully expounded. I aim to elaborate the intellectual potential of Bila's aesthetic statements through reference to his *Timbila Poetry Project*. *Timbila's* aim is to craft a 'necessary poetry' adequate to the political conditions of South Africa today. I argue that such an approach is best exemplified in Bila's own poetry, which is defined by a clear-sighted commitment to exploring difficult and pressing realities, specifically the poverty of his home province of Limpopo. [1] Through tracking Bila's poetics and reading for their emergence in his creative work, I move towards a more precise critical idiom in contemporary South African letters. One that fully takes on board the relationship between politics and the pen, context and style.

As noted in the introduction, the state of contemporary South African poetics is dire and the significance of re-assessing our literary vocabulary is paramount. Literary scholarship offers scant resources for understanding post-Apartheid poetics. In a 2015 interview in Grahamstown, Robert Berold emphasised the failure of South African literary criticism by stating that thus far members of the academy have proved 'the worst people' in understanding the country's poetry.[2] Both Berold and Kelwyn Sole argue that it is creative writers themselves who have the clearest understanding of post-Apartheid poetry and they urge readers to be attentive to the cultural world-views of poets.[3] In paying close attention to the poetic statements of Vonani Bila, an artistic practitioner, I take my cue from Berold and Sole in order to register new literary aesthetics in South Africa. Bila's poetics have not been synthesised or systematised into anything that might approach a more general theory of literature and society and here there is scope for productive academic work to take place. I

[1] Robert Berold, "Poetry of political betrayal, domestic cruelty", *The Sunday Independent*, 16 January 2005, 18.
[2] Alice Meyer, "Interview with Robert Berold" (Grahamstown: 4 September 2015).
[3] Sole, "The Endless Deferral of Value: 'Formal' vs. 'Sociological' Criticism in Black South African Poetry", p.2; Alice Meyer, "Interview with Robert Berold" (Grahamstown: 4 September 2015).

begin with a brief outline of Bila's life and work before moving to a discussion of his poetics and poetry.

Born in 1972, Bila came of age at the dawn of the post-Apartheid era. He has lived all his life in the rural village of Shirley, Elim, which is located in South Africa's northernmost, and most poverty stricken, province of Limpopo. A veteran of the South African poetry scene, Bila has authored five books of poems: *No Free Sleeping* (1998), *In the Name of Amandla* (2004), *Magicstan Fires* (2006), *Handsome Jita* (2007) and *Bilakhulu!* (2015).[4] Bila writes in both English and Xitsonga. His passion for nourishing and preserving African languages has seen him put together eight books of literacy for young adult readers in English, Xitsonga, and Sepedi.[5] Bila is also a pioneering editor, founding the arts journal *Timbila* in 2000.The journal takes its title from the African word *mbira* meaning 'finger-harp' and it endeavours to 'intelligently synthesise form and content to articulate fresh poetry, reaffirming poetry's cultural multiplicity and its diverse modes of expression'.[6] Operating from the heart of Elim, the multilingual publication has called into being a new generation of South African writers who exhibit a novelty of artistic vision and experiment with the expressive possibilities of poetic language. The journal has been pivotal in launching the careers of relatively famous writers like Makhosazana Xaba and regularly features work by some of South Africa's most exciting living poets, such as Mxolisi Nyezwa, Liesl Jobson, and David Wa Maahlamela. Since its inception in 2000, *Timbila* has developed into a fully-fledged non-profit cultural movement conducting workshops, seminars, readings and performances across South Africa, most recently opening a rural retreat for writers in Elim.[7]

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[4] Liesl Jobson, "Vonani Bila", *Poetry International*, 1 September 2008 <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/12611/10/Vonani-Bila > [Accessed 7 September 2015] (Para. 7 of 7) and Gary Cummiskey, "Launch of Bhilakhulu by Vonani Bila", *Dye Hard Press*, 26 July 2015 <http://dyehard-press.blogspot.co.za/2015/07/launch-of-bilakhulu-by-vonani-bila.html> [Accessed 7 September 2015].

[5] Gary Cummiskey, "Launch of Bhilakhulu by Vonani Bila", *Dye Hard Press*, 26 July 2015 <http://dyehard-press.blogspot.co.za/2015/07/launch-of-bilakhulu-by-vonani-bila.html> [Accessed 7 September 2015] (Para. 4. of 5).

[6] Vonani Bila (ed). *Timbila*, 1:1 (2000), p. 3. & Bila, "Introduction, Our Relationship With The Word & The World", p. 10.

[7] Vonani Bila, "Building Socially Committed Writers through the Timbila Writing Model", 1-25 (pp.1-2); Tshifhiwa Mukwevho, "Own village for regions' authors and artists", *Limpopo Mirror*, 13 December 2013 <http://limpopomirror.co.za/articles/entertainment/22572/2013-12-13/own-village-for-regions-authors-and-artists> [Accessed 7 September 2015]

Timbila is a key platform from which Bila formulates his poetics and explores poetry's relationship towards pressing social issues of our time. He describes the journal as a work of 'Onion Skin Writing', which designates the ability of its artists to demonstrate a raw, authentic and startling writing praxis.[8] Like fastidiously prising apart the layers of an onion's skin, the skill of *Timbila's* work lies in its ability to unravel myriad levels of socio-economic and cultural reality in the post-Apartheid era. The description of *Timbila*'s poetry in its first edition, offers invaluable insight into Bila's poetics. He frames *Timbila* poetry as,

> Provocative, harsh, vivid, graphical, probing, direct, revolutionary, zigzagging, scattering, muscular, fertile, different, surreal, lucid, rhythmic, musical, refreshing, stimulating, therapeutic, sensual, moving, electric, oral, written, dramatic, exquisite. It's a kind of necessary poetry that records the personal and the social conscience. It's poetry that cannot be ignored. It's powerful.[9]

The array of suggestive adjectives such as 'surreal', 'oral' and 'dramatic' conveys the fact that a journal of *Timbila* poetry encompasses a great range of styles and moods in order to do justice to the diversity of the post-Apartheid milieu. Yet, arguably, it is the umbrella category of 'necessary poetry' that truly defines the journal's aesthetic and political aims, enfolding myriad registers that pivot upon a single purpose. The adjective 'necessary' encapsulates the full scope of Bila's poetry and that of contemporary literatures of social conscience.

The necessary denotes that which is 'indispensable, vital, essential, requisite' and the word underlines that for Bila, socially powerful poetry is a basic requirement of a healthy political climate.[10] The sentiment reverberates throughout *Timbila's* 2001 poetry manifesto, which proclaims, 'We, poets of South Africa, declare for all the country and the world to know that a country that does not appreciate poetry is a doomed country, that our poetry, just like our music and dance, contributed a great deal to South Africa's present dispensation'.[11] These words articulate that poetry played a dynamic role in building the new South Africa and that if the nation is to prosper then it must take the poetic medium seriously. Beyond his journal, Bila has sought to establish the political relevance of *Timbila* poetry through the creation of a 'Republic of Poetry'. The 'Republic of Poetry' was launched in 2006 and builds on Percy

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[8] Vonani Bila, "Introduction, Our Relationship With The Word & The World", *Timbila*, 1:1 (2000), 11-17 (p.11).
[9] Bila, "Introduction, Our Relationship With The Word & The World", p. 11.
[10] "necessary, adj.", in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2015). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125629?redirectedFrom=necessary#eid> [Accessed 6 January 2016].
[11] "Timbila Poetry Manifesto" (Adopted at the Timbila Poetry Workshop, Polokwane, 2001).

Bysshe Shelley's famous dictum that 'Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. The initiative seeks to connect a national network of writers who raise collective consciousness, call attention to salient civic matters and fight for social justice.[12] Bila's 'Republic of Poetry' demonstrates that a socially necessary writing is grounded in accountability to place and community. The programme aims for each municipality in South Africa to have its own Poet Laureate. These new Poet Laureates are to be public figures that offer critique of political leaders and insight into issues of governance. Here, the role of poetry is to engage in the politics of its specific locale in order to produce art that connects with objective conditions of human struggle, misery and pleasure.

'Necessary' is a controversial aesthetic category. This is given the fact that it is usually a term that denotes moral or practical outlooks. This question is precisely what is at stake in re-appraising South Africa's literary vocabulary. The aesthetics of socially aware artistic movements have been underworked in a discussion of South African literature precisely because poetic movements of political conscience have not been conceptualised as craft. Thengani H.Ngwenya criticises the fact that politicised writing, such as that of the Black Consciousness poets, has all too often been glibly dismissed as artless, functional and lacking in form.[13] Conversely, I contend that *Timbila's* necessary poetry is a literature that roots itself in the needs of South Africa's impoverished people and emerges as a disciplined, artistically rigorous mode of writing. In this chapter, I focus upon Bila's manipulation of narrative in order to unpack the creative finesse of *Timbila* poetry. The art of storytelling forms the backbone of his poetic project.

A driving force in Bila's writing is the desire to narrate the stories and beliefs of overlooked spaces in South Africa, particularly those of rural areas. This is a socially necessary literature to the extent that it records and pays tribute to cultures and realities that are often ignored by commercial centres. The poet's strongest writing is that which grounds itself in the immediacy of his home province of Limpopo. In an interview I conducted with Bila in Shirley in August 2015, he elaborated the centrality of his social and economic environment to his poetry,

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[12] Vonani Bila, "Editor's Notes", *New Coin*, 49:1 (2013), 1 (p.1). Vonani Bila, "The Republic of Poetry project: Timbila launches a writer development programme", The *Books Newsletter*, 14 March 2006, 2-4 (pp. 2-3).
[13] Thengani H. Ngwenya, "Black Consciousness poetry: writing against apartheid", in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. by David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 500-522 (p. 507).

> It is the basis of my poetry […] Place is very central in the creation of work because how do you divorce yourself from your place? […] A writer, a poet you know is a product of society, a product of place so I see my work as some kind of social construction, belonging to this environment.[14]

Bila's words convey the fact that *Timbila* writing is site specific. It is a literature that tailors its form to the social, economic and ecological environment in which it is situated.

Bila's commitment to crafting poetry salient to the needs of his lived surrounds is epitomised in poems that confront immiseration in Elim. Relying heavily on narrative form, the poems that focus on his hometown are content-dense and intensify concentration on some of the area's most urgent social troubles.[15] An example is the poem "Giyani Block", which speaks of death in Elim's local hospital. The title "Giyani Block" refers to a 'ward for critically ill patients at Elim hospital' and the poem offers a sobering account of illness and disease in the area,[16]

> When the sun recedes
> into the Soutpansberg,
> Giyani Block puts on a
> black adder coat;
> a mirror of death and despair.[17]

Just as a poisonous and deathly black adder has a shining dark coat so does the ward of Giyani take on a dark and ominous hue as the sun begins to set. The metaphorical association forged between the hospital ward and a predatory creature personifies Giyani Block and grants it a beastly life of its own. So begins Bila's narrative of doctors, nurses and village citizens who wage war on this "faceless, tailless monster" who is said to walk 'like a dragon snake in the mountain'.[18] As is evident in the comparison of the hospital to a beast, Bila deploys elements of fantasy and myth to interpret rural life. Thus, Death is said to be 'a burrowing mole;/ [a lion]/ with sharpened teeth, awaiting a rabbit'.[19] Death's fatal power imbues it with both the surreptitiousness of a mole and the ferocity of a lion. Furthermore, it is said,

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[14] Alice Meyer, "Interview with Vonani Bila" (Shirley, 29 August 2015).
[15] Robert Berold, "Poets who do not soothe or create distance from our turmoil", *The Sunday Independent*, 9 May 2009, p.20.
[16] Bila, *In the name of Amandla*, p. 118.
[17] Bila, "Giyani Block", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 7, ll.1-4.
[18] Bila, "Giyani Block", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 7, l.10 & l.13.
[19] Bila, "Giyani Block", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 7.

> Whether you are the most feared inyanga
> with a calabash full of muti,
> or a priest with the bible in hand
>
> […]
>
> Giyani Block remains a black sea
> that wrecks our boats,
> leaving no evidence or trace.[20]

Bila's mythical language intimates that no one is able to escape Giyani Block's 'black sea' and neither priests nor traditional healers (inyangas) can overcome its fatal currents.

Buttressing the striking and dramatic descriptions of death, Bila's poem also contains other extraordinary comparative language. The strongest section of the poem is that which presents the speaker's feeble neighbour Ncindhani, one of the hospital's suffering inhabitants. Ncindhani is said to be so weak that he can be 'washed away like a rope'. As "Giyani Block" moves ever deeper into a moving description of Ncindhani, the man's frail body begins to take on its own story, climate and timescale of suffering. His eyes are filled with 'clouds of death',

> deeply sunken like the sun falling
> into the mouth of the horizon.[21]

Such metaphors and similes convey the depth of the man's suffering and grant it an expansiveness usually reserved for natural forces such as clouds or the sun itself. In the final dramatic gesture of "Giyani Block", it is said of Ncindhani,

> fleshless ribs and his amulet stand out
> like a rinderpest, drought-stricken goat
> by the stream.[22]

The shocking way in which the man's ribs and amulet protrude from his bony frame is compared to the physiology of a plague-ridden goat. The force of the comparison is derived from its originality and this is due to the fact that the images and linguistic turns of Bila's

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[20] Bila, "Giyani Block", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 7.
[21] Bila, "Giyani Block", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 8, l.38 & ll.39-40.
[22] Bila, "Giyani Block", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 8, ll. 43-45.

poem are drawn from Xitsonga.

"Giyani Block" was originally composed in Xitsonga, and later translated into English. The poem introduces the speech patterns of Limpopo into Bila's text. The remarkable use of language is politically transformative because it startles the reader out of familiar habits of cognition and casts new light on ordinary scenes such as the travails of the desperate Ncindhani. Bila's style is marked by an agile and idiosyncratic use of idiom that infuses the strong and sombre narrative vision with intensity and force. It is in this sense that the additional meaning beneath the word' 'giya' in the poem's title is most apposite. 'Giya' means 'to dance in Xitsonga and IsiZulu' and the word well-captures the flair and innovative qualities of Bila's poetry, which introduces fresh concepts and idiom into English expression in order to weave compelling narratives.[23] The unexpected and unnerving qualities of Bila's writing regenerate the English language and mould a poetry that plays a revitalising social function through awakening one's senses to stories of death and poverty. Bila underscored the ability of poetry to metamorphosise human perception in my 2015 interview with him, 'If we have good poetry which is really sharp, it will renew us […] and [we will] see the world differently'.[24] In the case of "Giyani Block", innovation of language sheds light upon rural reality and in this process of lexical overhaul, Bila succeeds in drawing heightened attention to the plights of Elim's community.[25]

Bila's desire to pay witness to the reality of his living milieu is nowhere more evident than in his most recent collection. Published in 2015, the highly autobiographical *Bilakhulu!* is composed of seven long narrative poems, which disclose memories of the Bila family and the history of their life in Elim. Physical, concrete, contextualised: the book speaks through visceral rhythms and clear description in order to capture Bila's heritage, lived surrounds, and own artistic journey. Zoning in on the historical background of Bila's own family tree, the poet's greatest achievement is to interpret a rich local terrain through relating its characters and valourising the political depth of their experience. One is confronted with a register of 'necessary' writing that primarily records the personal aspects of place. Focusing upon the

[23] Bila, *In the name of Amandla*, p. 118.
[24] Alice Meyer, "Interview with Vonani Bila" (Elim: August 2015).
[25] Alan Finlay, "'Making it Visible", Interview with Vonani Bila", *Bleksem*, 7 (1999); Jenkins, "Freedom is flying in all directions", p.20.

lives of individuals in an impoverished area, Bila portrays their emotions and experiences as worthy of being chronicled in art.

Bilakhulu! traces Bila's own path to intellectual maturity, including his education in Economics and Business Economics at Tivumbeni College in the early 1990's. The poems sketch the lives of Bila's family members and relate noteworthy stories of local figures. "Missing" speculates upon the unknown whereabouts of Bila's lost cousins Daniel Makhubele and Joel Hon'wana while "N'wa-yingwani" tells the tale of Xiringa, a young man native to Elim who was forced to leave the village after killing a white farmer who mistreated his aunt. The collection is distinguished by carefully plotted and well-thought out experiments in prose poetry. It includes poems of substantial length such as "Autobiography", which is twenty-four pages in total. Throughout *Bilakhulu!*, Bila controls and sustains the vitality of the long narrative form by working through a range of tones, registers and themes. An example of this is the poem "Images from Childhood", which forms the opening to Bila's latest book. The social importance of the poem lies in its ability to enshrine unique Apartheid histories. Indeed, "Images from Childhood", works through a series of Bila's memories in order to convey vivid and unaffected portrayals of his youth such as this image of his schooling experience,

> winter days at lemana high
> white teachers opened windows
> for the chilly air to freeze our toes
> the same teachers who were paid a tolerance bonus to teach a black child.[26]

Memory is used to critique institutional racism through description of the fact that white teachers were paid a 'tolerance bonus' for the supposed trial of teaching black students. Compounding the indignity of being taught in a racist institution, it is said that Bila and his peers were intentionally frozen by their white educators, who would open windows during the coldest time of year. Later in the poem, one is also told of the manner in which Bila's family home was systematically excluded from electricity by being left in darkness and 'smog' while wealthier inhabitants of the area attained the privilege of warmth,

> the wooden electric pole behind our house
> planted in the family cemetery
>
> […]

[26] Vonani Bila, "Images from childhood", in *Bilakhulu! Longer Poems* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2015), p.10, ll.1-4.

cables of modern fire that galloped kilometres from town
to supply a certain dombani, victor, magantawa
and Bernard with warmth
bypassing our darkness and the smog.[27]

This is a poetry that seeks to record rather than reminisce and lines are not introduced through use of an egoistic 'I' but begin with depictions of places, spaces, and people. Syntactically, it is the external world of 'winter days at lemana high', 'white teachers', and particular objects, such as the 'wooden electric pole behind our house' that are foregrounded. In these instances, memory is neither private nor self-centred and the writing pivots upon factual observation.

Despite the poem's fixedness upon real figures and events, "Images from Childhood" retains a dreamlike quality through juxtaposing disparate experiences, which are introduced without any explanatory scaffolding. The most striking memory is that of the large dam in which Bila used to play with friends and family as a young boy. The site is introduced as a 'colossal deep dam of death' built and owned by the economically privileged Dombani. It embodies the asymmetrical power relations between the rich and the poor. Even though black youth enjoy merriment in the dam's waters, it is ultimately not a place where they can embrace carefree naked swimming. This fact is lucidly related in the following lines,

i remember
dombani the hefty burly-surly man
clad in khaki wear and veldskoene
the man with a bloodthirsty temper
wielding a rifle
on horseback
at sunset
cracking shots in the air
reptiles and porcupines retreating to holes
riding around the dam
watching for the black boy
to raise his head above water
to fire with delight
to crack the boy's skull
to halt his breath
or to just see the little boy consumed by water
to teach him a lesson
that under the orbiting sun

[27] Vonani Bila, "Images from childhood", in *Bilakhulu!*, p.10, ll.40-41 & ll. 44-47.

> the dam is not for naked black boys
> it's not for a speck of village dust
> but it's for sailing white men in boats
> who catch fish.[28]

The dam's depths are remembered as a kind of graveyard, where innocent children are shot by a cruel master. It is made apparent that the childhood of the disadvantaged cannot be sheltered or protected but is marked by oppression, humiliation, and fear. The above excerpt's rhythm underscores the gravity of the ordeals undergone by the young black boys. The accretion of adjectives, such as 'colossal' and 'deep' impel the reader to pause in a fashion akin to the way in which the breath of the young black boys is stopped by bullets. Similarly, the structure of Bila's statements forces one to halt and more fully comprehend the fundamental injustice of the circumstance portrayed. Prose-like statements such as, 'to fire with delight/ to crack the boy's skull/ to halt his breath' are broken into short lines which instantiates a foreclosure of poetic rhythm. Baldness and simplicity of diction throw one back upon the underlying reality behind language and accentuate an atmosphere of reflection. Rather than deploying highly wrought or melodramatic vocabulary, Bila's narrator sparsely details a world in which the pleasure of the powerful is bought at the expense of the weak. Verbs such as 'fire', 'crack', 'halt' and 'teach' are easily digestible and gain their resonance and power from the fact that these simple actions have sobering consequences in the lives of real people.

Bilakhulu! narrates and sketches the social importance of individual life. This is foregrounded in "Ancestral Wealth". The poem is a tribute to Bila's father, Risimati Daniel Bila, who died in 1989 and it explores his tough existence in Elim. In the following scene, one hears the narrator, who is presumably Bila himself, being taken aside by his dying Father as he outlines his will,

> You sat on your three quarter bed
> Wearing that brown striped t-shirt from Pep stores
> Eyes fixed on the old leaking zinc roof
> Then you paged through the Old Mutual policy document
> And you said:
> *Mhana Oom* (he called me Oom)
> *Lwangu leri i ra khale* (the roof is old)
> *Switina ndzi xavile* (I have bought the bricks)

[28] Vonani Bila, "Images from childhood", in *Bilakhulu!*, p.10, ll.53-74.

> *Kambe a swi nge eneli ku aka yindlu ya kahle* (But they'll not be enough to build a decent house)
> *Loko va ku nyika swimalana swa mina swa phenxeni* (When they give you my little pension fund)
> *Vumbu yindlu* (Build a house)[29]

The last living wish of Risimati Daniel Bila is to have a respectable house built in his memory. The humility of Risimati Daniel Bila's living conditions and the modesty of his pension fund, express the trials of his own life, which involved performing some of Elim Hospital's most difficult practical tasks, such as taking patients into theatre and scrubbing floors, all for a paltry salary. The moment in which Bila's father relates the dying request to his son is portrayed with penetrating exactitude. Deft descriptions, such as the observation of the father's 'pep' t-shirt forge an inimitable immanence of expression. The mention of one of South Africa's best-known cheap clothing brands is painstakingly meticulous, setting a scene of under-stated poetic realism. In a similar line of thought, the instructions of Bila's father are narrated in Xitsonga, which allows the reader to make contact with the cadences and speech patterns of people in the community of Elim. The inclusion of local language grants the narrative an authentic texture, allowing for an intimacy with Bila's father's last night on earth.

"Ancestral Wealth's" close attention to Risimati Daniel Bila's poverty, and testing living conditions, passes comment upon issues of infrastructural failure and resource scarcity in Elim as a whole. Risimati Daniel Bila's personal ordeals are interlinked with the inadequacy of medical care in Elim,

> Papa, you came home to rest forever
> Because the groaning and wailing movie never stops in the hospital
> Some pale-faced patients urinate in coffee mugs and plates
> The very same mugs they use for coffee and tea
> Some patients jump from the bed like impalas
> Tearing drips and tubes away
> They race around the ward wearing the catheters
> Bubbling with urine tea.[30]

Bila's narrator spurns politeness or delicacy of tone by openly discussing the unacceptable standards of hygiene at Elim Hospital where patients are forced to drink tea and coffee out of the very same vessels in which they urinate. One is not only made to feel that Risimati Daniel

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[29] Bila, "Ancestral Wealth", in *Bilakhulu!*, p. 30, ll. 70-81.
[30] Bila, "Ancestral Wealth", in *Bilakhulu!*, p. 38, ll. 342-354.

Bila cannot cope in this environ but also that the hospital is uninhabitable for anyone aspiring towards a basic level of human dignity. The section offers powerful political critique and the simile likening frenzied patients to leaping 'impalas' is particularly arresting. Conventional English idiom is subverted and a novel expression is established for the madness and fear that overcomes many people when desperately ill or close to death. The poet's idiomatic flair allows a sharpened view on the everyday health battles towards which the wealthy and privileged seem to have become numb or apathetic. The startling comparative language proves that poetry committed to tackling social immiseration need not come off as flat-footed but can be surprising and even exhilarating.

"Ancestral Wealth" concludes through describing the act of honour and homage that Bila has paid to his father through erecting a tombstone in his memory. The physical act of paying tribute to Daniel Risimati Bila in the built environment parallels the poem's own narrative commemoration of Bila's father,

> Papa, I know it took us twenty years to erect your tombstone
> All along the wind was blowing you away
> The sun was burning you
> Your pillow was your hand
> But now Bila, Mhlahlandela, rest in peace
> Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts.[31]

These concluding words deploy an unconventional bricolage of linguistic registers,

> The sun was burning you
> Your pillow was your hand
> But now Bila Mhlahlandela, rest in peace
> Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts.[32]

A lyrical and tender address describes the way in which Risimati Daniel Bila's earthly remains are finally given a place to rest after twenty years of dwelling amongst natural forces such as wind and sun. Contrasted with this philosophical, and also physical meditation on rituals of burial and commemoration, is the injunction, 'Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts'. The picture of a jauntily dressed man arising from the grave dressed in shorts is not straightforwardly literal and hits a note of the bizarre. The image arises from translating

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[31] Bila, "Ancestral Wealth", in *Bilakhulu!*, p. 41, ll.456-461.
[32] Bila, "Ancestral Wealth", in *Bilakhulu!*, p.41, ll. 458-461.

Xitsonga expression into English and it has the effect of injecting the language with new potency. A dissonance of tone compels attention to the story at hand while also suggesting that seemingly unlike realms such as the beautiful and the absurd, or the dead and the living, are closely related. In this respect, "Ancestral Wealth" is representative of Bila's sustained ability to yoke together a wide range of subject matter and literary styles in order to narrate detailed and personal accounts of poverty.

It has become evident that the narrative turn in Bila's writing is able to make profound connections between individual and community, part and whole. This style portrays the fact that *Timbila* poetry is able to make socially necessary use of narrative. The aesthetic has a centripetal function, absorbing the minutiae of personal lives into a cohesive and structured account of society. The worth of such writing lies in its capacity to dexterously unveil the connectedness of subjective pain to broader political issues. Many of Bila's poems are concerned to connect isolated situations of injustice to centralised government power and the structural violence of capitalism. Such writing allows insight into the plights of poor areas and the roots of inequity in South Africa today. Given that the bulk of South African literature focuses on metropolitan and middle class scenes, Bila's poetry is socially vital.

The title poem of Bila's second collection, *In the Name of Amandla*, tackles the lack of socioeconomic change in an unnamed village and it presents the community's plights as embodying the failures of the post-Apartheid nation. The poem offers an acute critique of the uneven and unequal nature of South Africa,

> In the name of *Amandla*
> Tell me what has changed in this village
> There's no food in the kitchen
> Bare children with chapped lips can't go to school
> Another hungry child knocked down by a rich man contributed to a cheap coffin
> Everyone thought he would rot in prison.
> It's winter, the school has no desks, textbooks & windows
> Our leaders send their children to private schools
> Ask them
>
> In the name of *Amandla*
> Tell me what has changed in this village[33]

[33] Bila, "In the name of *Amandla*", in *In the name of Amandla*, p.98, ll.1-12.

A key aspect of "In the Name of *Amandla*'s' aesthetic is an endeavour to connect with an audience through creating an atmosphere of dialogue. In this way, Bila's poetry is reminiscent of Fanon's description of national art in the struggle for liberation. For Fanon, 'every time the storyteller narrates a new episode, the public is treated to a real invocation.'[34] Similarly, Bila's poem is not content to passively describe the post-Apartheid era but actively seeks to rouse national consciousness. Formally, the poem pivots upon the recurrence of the phrase 'in the name of *Amandla*' and the rallying cry invokes an historic community. 'Amandla' means 'power' in isiZulu and isiXhosa and was a famous slogan of the anti-Apartheid movement during the time in which it sought to establish a liberated South Africa. Departing from the sentiments of the past, Bila's poem is less concerned to build unity than to question national cohesion. The poetic speaker repeatedly invokes 'Amandla' in order to emphasise the disparity between the ideals of those who fought the brutality of Apartheid and present day socioeconomic circumstances in a supposedly free and non-racial country. Bila himself has noted that 'if you use a chant properly—it becomes such a powerful political poem. If you do it intelligently it is effective'.[35] The poet's point is lucidly illustrated through the continual cry of Amandla, which condenses anger towards past and present social injustice into a single word. The poem's combination of repetition and apostrophe craft a tone that is structurally comprehensible and conversational. The reverberation of 'Tell me what has changed in this village' calls out the lack of transformation in the speaker's everyday environment and also has the effect of soliciting response and engagement. Here, South Africa is not an object to be spoken at, or about, but a public to be invited into debate. The reader is invited to help construct the country's history, present, and future.

The poem's simplicity of diction clearly speaks of particular aspects of poverty. One hears of the reality of hunger, 'bare children with chapped lips' who cannot attend school or a 'hungry child' run over by a wealthy and reckless driver. The difficult life of a grandmother is most closely traced. Magogo has lived through Apartheid and its aftermath, finding scant opportunity for transformation or upliftment,

> In the name of *Amandla*
> Tell me what has changed in this village
> The tap is dry
> coughs hot air

[34] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p.174.
[35] Meyer, "Interview with Vonani Bila".

> The pump is off
> Granny has no cash to buy diesel
> She walks distances to draw dirty water
> In the still pool
> In the poisoned dam
> Where people share water with animals
> Granny washes in a cracked red plastic basin
> She buys water and pushes a wheelbarrow
> She is old, 70!
> Her hut collapsed during the days of the flood
> She survived,
> Because she was busy collecting wood in the bush
> She waited for her pension at 60 years of age
> She stands in a queue, shoving and shuffling
> Someone of her age collapses in the smothering sun
> She closes her eyes, sniffs snuff
> She sneezes, tears run down her cheeks[36]

Like her home village, the elderly woman has experienced little positive change since liberation in 1994 and her story embodies the disempowerment of countless black women in South Africa. Magogo's everyday routine is punishing and she has to walk miles to draw water for drinking and cleaning. The water source is not even hygienic but emanates from a poisonous dam. Washing in contaminated water, the old woman is forced to clean herself in the same 'cracked red plastic basin' day in and day out, only dreaming of one day taking a shower. Later in the poem, it is related that Magogo's lack of access to adequate hygiene means that she actually offends commuters on taxis through smelling of urine. Years on from liberation, *Magogo* still has to stand in queues for a paltry pension that towards the poem's conclusion one learns can only purchase the most basic of food in the form of mieliemeal. It seems that Magogo's one piece of luck in life was to survive the collapse of her hut during a flood, though this very event underscores the sub-standard nature of her housing. The reason she was not at home was that she was out collecting 'wood in the bush'. Given that Magogo's years have passed with no hope of betterment, there seems little reason for the old grandmother to celebrate her existence and its lack of dignity.

The conclusion of "In the name of *Amandla*" highlights the relationship between the travails of people like Magogo and African National Congress policy,

> In the holy name of *Amandla*
> Tell me what has changed in this village

[36] Bila, "In the name of *Amandla*", in *In the name of Amandla*, p.98, ll. 11-31.

> Our RDP house leaks when it rains
> We can't fit, it's a toilet
> We hear & see them making love
> In a room divided by a curtain
> There can't be any secret
> We sleep in the kitchen
> Wake up like elephants early in the morning
> Verwoerd, my enemy, built much bigger houses
> Trevor Manuel can't stop buying submarines, corvettes
> and jetfighters
> Our taxes can do something better
> War is coming we are told.[37]

The poem criticises the fact that houses built by the supposedly progressive Reconstruction and Development Programme leak and do not have adequate space to house their inhabitants. Dwellers are forced to live in uncomfortably close quarters where they can hear one another making love or must use the kitchen floor as a bedding place. It seems that the reason for sub-standard housing does not reside in there being insufficient funding but rather is owing to the fact that a disproportionate amount of tax money has been spent on arms by ex-finance minister Trevor Manuel. The irony of big budget military spending for supposed purposes of defence is that this use of funds actually threatens South Africa's internal security. Arming for wars that never materialise seems a gross waste of resources in light of the fact that the country's rural areas are currently suffering severe poverty and would benefit from greater financial support. The poem connects particular disadvantaged circumstances to government incompetence on the part of the African National Congress. Bila chooses to characterise the failures of the post-Apartheid era through reference to finely detailed accounts of personal depravation while always taking care to underscore that individual narratives are connected to a larger political whole.

"Comrades, Don't We Delude Ourselves?" is another poem that perceptively relates community and personal suffering to Apartheid rule and present day capitalism and it similarly relies on chant in order to invite an audience to reconstruct the story of South Africa's political reality. The speaker cries,

> Comrades, comrades, don't we delude ourselves?
>
> Malan, Pee Wee die Krokodil, Mango, De Klerk,

[37] Bila, "In the name of *Amandla*", in *In the name of Amandla*, p.98, ll.71-84.

Hasahasa! Jackels of this world walk scot free;
It's total amnesty
Justice is but a jamboree,
Poverty grinds the poor in the bundus of Elim,
Bare-skinned children have nothing in their mouths,
Victims always get a raw deal,
Fat cheques, perks and sex are for leaders,
Them and their First World comfort in Third World
Africa—

Comrades, don't we delude ourselves?[38]

In a comparable fashion to "In the Name of Amandla", Bila's poem aims for engagement from the heirs of liberation. 'Comrades' was a common appellation amongst communist and anti-Apartheid resistance movements and is still used by African National Congress members today. The repetition of "Comrades, don't we delude ourselves' incites thought and action regarding the state of South Africa. Poetic technique decries the notion of nation as an inert and pre-given reality, and vigorously seeks to create discourse surrounding the country's future. The reality of justice in post-Apartheid South Africa is explicitly mocked and said to be 'a jamboree' implying that it is merely a grand celebration lacking in political substance. The reason for this is that those who perpetuated Apartheid brutality, such as P.W Botha or F.W De Klerk, have never been called to account. The latter was even awarded a Nobel Peace prize for his work in South Africa's transition to democracy. For Bila's speaker such ceremonies are shams that fail to understand or bring white racism to justice. In the poem, the economic structures that these white leaders supported and implemented are still seen to be in place under the new government of the African National Congress. Neo-colonialism persists in the form of 'pure capitalism' and as a result, those in the 'bundus of Elim' and other rural areas continue to be structurally disadvantaged. Under a fiscally conservative economic dispensation, the 'fat cheques' are reserved for leaders without an equitable redistribution of the country's wealth.

"Comrades, don't we delude ourselves" skilfully interweaves calls to action in a variety of African languages. The writing bridges tribal divides and works towards creating an ethnically cosmopolitan national consciousness,

Corporatism swells on red mother earth,

[38] Bila, "Comrades, don't we delude ourselves?", in *In the name of Amandla*, ll.19-30.

Pacts between elites are confused as RDP,
E-e, a hi swona!
It's neo-colonialism!
It's pure capitalism we abhor.
Haves always climb the bread and butter ladder,
Have nots, ek tell djou:
Mphe-mphe ya lapisa,
Munhu u hanya hi swa yena.
Vuk' uzenzele dyambu ri humile,
The sun has risen,
but that terrible drought has no mercy.
It has killed all my father's cattle.
Now I watch ladies and gentlemen
Pulled aboard the gravy train,
Pain rocks through my weary face,
I weep like a half burnt witch
Asazi!
Aredzi![39]

The words, 'Mphe-mphe ya lapisa,/ Munhu u hanya hi swa yena./ Vuk' uzenzele dyambu ri humile' stand out. The lines fuse Sesotho, Swahili and isiZulu, and can be translated as 'begging sucks/ a man depends on his own sweat/ wake up and do it yourself, the sun has risen'. The lines urge the public to be proactive about taking charge of their own futures instead of helplessly allowing African National Congress greed and corruption to dictate their destinies. Here, the gesture of writing in the mother tongues of black people is a subversive act that reinforces rebellion to public government rhetoric. Indeed, despite a constitution that officially enshrines eleven official languages, in reality it is English that is the lingua franca of the corporate and political world in South Africa. The fact that SeSotho, Swahili and IsiZulu are used to inspire hard work and travail is one way of wresting the discourse of labour away from capitalist power. Bila aims to speak with disenfranchised voices on their own terms and his use of language from many different parts of the country acknowledges the range and diversity of South African culture.

Skilful use of non-English diction and idiom drawn from local Limpopo is key to Bila's poetic strategy. The technique recurs throughout his oeuvre. This is exemplified in the poem "Dahl Street Pietersburg". The poem is dedicated to Tebego, a retired prostitute, who is one of many to have suffered from the degenerate quality of life in the town of Pietersburg, which is now known as Polokwane. In the following extract, one is faced with the gross dilapidation of

[39] Bila, "Comrades, don't we delude ourselves?", in *In the name of Amandla*, p. 83, ll. 104-122.

Dahl Street's beer-hall. Bila's continual engagement with local speech and non-English lexicon dramatises the many voices of Dahl Street. In the process, the poet stakes a claim for literature to play an important role in expressing the lived circumstances of Limpopo's urban populace,

> Dahl Street
> Pietersburg
> Eeh, the beer-hall is stuffy
> Satan has taken over the world's saints
> *Ku nuhwa khehele*
> Most are water adversaries
> Their armpits smell, rotten eggs
> They wear dirty takkies
> Dance *spantsula* on smoking dust
> Blasting kwaito moves with nerves
> Socks and underpants thick with dirt
> Some dance with unzipped trousers
> Some kiss with dagga-darkened lips
> Burping the stench of beer
> It stinks like shit
> Love has no borders
> Just kiss those donga road-like gums[40]

The revolting scenes of Pietersburg are viscerally portrayed through the description of the claustrophobic beer-hall and dirty men who are seen to have smelly armpits and soiled underwear. The use of language drawn from local surrounds is integral to this vivid narrative. One is absorbed into the culture of township life through mention of Kwaito music and the vigorous style of pantsula dancing. 'Love has no borders/ Just kiss those donga road-like gums' is similarly noteworthy. In this quote, the holes in the gums of the beer hall's inhabitants are compared to 'dongas'. The latter is a South African colloquialism for holes or ruts in the road and the term makes for an original comparison in its appeal to the country's demotic language. The distinctive likening of gums to damaged roads is surprising and draws parallels between the degradation of Pietersburg's population and the urban environment itself.

Xitsonga, Zulu, and Afrikaans words inject the poem with the rhythms and dialect of those who frequent Dahl Street. The un-translated words stand out, dislocating the rhythm and jolting the reader into a certain position of unease to match the unattractive scene portrayed.

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[40] Vonani Bila, "Dahl Street, Pietersburg", in *In the Name of Amandla*, pp.66-67, ll. 226-241.

Examples of untranslated language abound such as when the speaker incorporates the crude catcalls of the beer-hall's men,

> Chisa nyama
> Woza mtwana[41]

'Chisa Nyama' is a Zulu expression for the open space where men drink and grill meat and 'woza mtwana' translates as 'come here baby'. In the passage, men are calling to women to come and spend time with them. Shortly after these Zulu lines, the speaker moves into the Afrikaans 'vat & sit'. The latter is a slang term for a one-night stand and conveys the sense that Dahl Street is an environment of easy sexual encounters.[42] A final example of the incorporation of non-English voices is the quote,

> *Seshego se botse boshego*
> We are entertaining ourselves
> *Wa lala wa sala*
> *U huma kwihi m'fana loyi?/ Phashasha.*[43]

The extract strikingly juxtaposes English and Xitsonga. Translated line by line it reads, 'Seshego township is lovely in the night', 'we are entertaining ourselves', 'you sleep, you miss', 'where does this come from?', and 'that's fine'.[44] The section captures fragments of dialogue amongst pleasure-seeking men who encourage each other to revel the night away in the nearby township of Seshego. The use of a variety of South African languages destabilises a fluent process of reading and impels one to come to grips with the language of Pietersburg and the life force of its urban figures.

"Dahl Street" indicates that for Bila, poetic form is not an abstract or theoretical category externally imposed upon the outside world. Instead, aesthetic techniques dialogue with living circumstances and gain their relevance from the physical conditions of people. In the case of 'Dahl Street Pietersburg', this means infusing poetry with the jolted rhythms of city life hence drawing heightened attention to the actuality of urban Limpopo. The reader is made aware of political circumstances in a form apposite to the reality portrayed. In "Dahl Street", the derelict urban environment is directly linked to the evils of capitalism. The beer-hall stands in

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[41]Vonani Bila, "Dahl Street, Pietersburg", in *In the Name of Amandla*, p.67, ll.250-251.
[42] Bila, "Glossary", in *In the Name of Amandla,* p.119.
[43] Bila, "In the name of *Amandla*", in *In the name of Amandla*, pp.67-68, ll.263-267.
[44] Bila, "Glossary", in *In the Name of Amandla*, p. 120.

shocking contrast to the Holiday Inn where leaders recline and smoke cigars,

> Dahl Street
> Sham festival of life lost
> Wasteland Pietersburg
> Leaders smoke Cuban cigars
> Fidel Castro's people are literate
> In Holiday Inn, they buy beers with credit cards
> Next plane to US
> With navy blue suits
> Hobbling from one meeting to the other
> Trapped in crony capitalism.[45]

It is made apparent that while the majority socialise in slum-like conditions, the elite few relax in luxury hotels, buying beers with credit cards. Crucially, the pain that 'crony capitalism' causes to the wealthy is articulated through the description of the rich as 'trapped' and disabled as indicated in the use of the term 'hobbling'. The fact that a societal structure based on hierarchical divisions is also harmful to the empowered, through gifting them with a surplus of what they need and separating them from community, is conveyed. Bila's representations of the structural reality of Limpopo and South Africa are necessary to the extent that they pay witness to post-Apartheid corruption and call for widespread change. The links forged between microcosm and macrocosm express the importance of small communities while never losing sight of the fact that their hardships are instances of a more general, national exploitation.

Aside from his gritty and sometimes scatological depictions of rural and urban poverty, Bila also writes in a more elevated register. In this respect, his poems that pay tribute to artistic life offer moving accounts of creative genius and frequently seek to highlight the rich imaginative worlds of rural and small communities. In his article, "In the heart of the country", Bila evinces his admiration for rural cultures and hope to detail their traditions,

> Our rural areas are reservoirs of both the blended and the unspoilt language of the majority of people in South Africa. It would be worth recording their folktales the way the Finnish poet Elias Lonrot did in his country in the early 19th century. Lonrot travelled the length and breadth of rural Finland listening to people's stories, cries and joys—patiently excavating the epic poem *Kalevala*.[46]

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[45] Vonani Bila, "Dahl Street, Pietersburg", in *In the Name of Amandla*, p.68, ll.268-277.
[46] Vonani Bila, "In the heart of the country", *The Big Issue*, 2013/2014, pp.58-59 (p.59).

Bila has yet to write an epic poem or comprehensively transcribe South African folklore but his poetry does devote a great deal of time and care to the tales, languages, and art of South Africa's rural cultures. An example of this is the poem "wood warrior", written in recognition of master carver Jackson Xidonkana Hlungwani. The poem exemplifies the beautiful and visionary qualities of rural culture. Hlungwani is presented as a figure that is formed by the customs of his home village of Mbhokota, which is located in the Vhembe District Municipality of Limpopo. In a complimentary vein, Hlungwani is seen as making novel contributions to the village's artistic heritage,

> regal eccentric *xidonkana*
> son of pavalala the migrant worker
> diminutive man flogging a dead tree peacefully
> birds chirp cheerfully
> immortal wood warrior in dawn
> fighting a voodoo wood war in the bush
> dew between toes
>
> *mantra with working hands*
> *immortal wood warrior*
>
> years ago
> you saw satan with your own naked eyes
> shooting arrows through your legs
> you say one arrow sunk into your body
> becoming a snake
> then you burnt your leg & sins
> warmed the rotting wound on fire
> now it has healed
> and the magnetized world knows
> the mystic sculptures come from mbhokota[47]

"Wood Warrior" illustrates that a socially necessary poetry does not only operate through literal description or hard-hitting social commentary. Another manner of immanently conveying the ambience of place is to speak in the register of its spiritual and folkloric beliefs. The high tone of Bila's poem is inherited from Xitsonga praise poetry and it celebrates the life of Jackson Xidonkana Hlungwani through highly wrought epithetic language. Hlungwani is described as a 'wood warrior', which attributes bravery and daring to his artistic character. In a fashion akin to African heroes of old, Hlungwani does combat with voodoo spirits, translating trees and plants from the stuff of nature into mesmerising carvings that make his village famous. Hlungwani's dignity and pre-eminence are further elaborated when he is

[47] Vonani Bila, "wood warrior", in *Magicstan Fires* (Elim: Timbila Poetry, 2006), p.12, ll.1-19.

introduced as 'regal eccentric *xidonkana/* son of pavalala the migrant worker'. The gesture of tracing the Carver's lineage is a form of tribute. He is praised through the adjectives, 'regal' and 'eccentric'. 'Regal' suggests that Hlungwani is on a par with royalty while 'eccentric' indicates that his habits, psyche and gifts are different from those of the rest of society. 'Xidonkana' lends the line a note of affection. The word is Xitsonga for 'hard-working donkey' and it is the name by which Hlungwani was lovingly known by those in his community. It becomes clear that "wood warrior" is concerned to pay homage to Hlungwani in terms derived from the world-view of Mbhokoto.

In the final section of the poem, the villagers of Mbhokoto affirm Hlungwani in the traditional praise language of the village,

> *hlunga-vukosi*
> *ndzhundzhu*
> *xikwembu xa le matini*.[48]

Hlunga-vukosi is the customary language by which the Hlungwan is praise themselves and it literally means 'a revolutionary who brews storms to challenge the ruling class.'[49] The words from the villagers grant a revolutionary aspect to the force of Hlungwani's art and radiate a sense of pride that the Carver is exemplifying the very best qualities of his clan. *Ndzhundzhu*' and '*xikwembu xa le matini*' are both terms for water gods and the inclusion of these praise words illustrates Hlungwani's affiliation with deities and supernatural forces. One receives the sense that this is an artist with deep connections to a reality other than our own. The Carver is said to have seen 'satan' with his own eyes and to have been shot in the leg by the 'devil's' serpentine arrow. Hlungwani's engagement with the spiritual world inspires and infuses his woodcarvings in which,

> adam wears short pants and sandals
> jesus is a dribbling soccer wizard.[50]

Jackson's carvings are not simply content to retell old stories of religion and faith but also portray ancient figures in a new light. Jesus is dressed in the contemporary attire of shorts while Adam of Genesis is portrayed in the persona of a soccer star. The creation of

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[48] Vonani Bila, "wood warrior", in *Magicstan Fires*, p.15, ll.109-111.
[49] Bila, "Glossary", in *Magicstan Fires*, p. 94.
[50] Vonani Bila, "wood warrior", in *Magicstan Fires*, p.13, ll.37-38.

Hlungwani's art is itself a kind of supernatural process in which he patiently transforms the spirit of 'sand & grass' into original and memorable works of genius. Hlungwani's own work makes a vital contribution to Mbhokota's cultural life and is a part of its folkloric heritage. Bila's ekphrastic homage provides an analogue for the poet's task. Like Hlungwani, Bila seeks to portray the beauty of rural culture and enshrine it in art.

One of the most remarkable phrases of Bila's poem is that which lauds the ethereal and spiritual properties of Hlungwani's talent, '*mantra with working hands/ immortal wood warrior*'.[51] The refrain recurs throughout the poem and is somewhat puzzling because it apostrophises Hlungwani through suggesting that the artist himself is a kind of mantra. It is not clear how a human being could be 'a word or sound that is believed to have a special spiritual power' or 'a word or phrase that is often repeated and expresses a particular strong belief'.[52] Presumably, Bila is intimating that the carver's very existence is a kind of living symbol of power and that repeated relation of his life and works is able to invoke spiritual presences of creativity. Given that mantras are rarely logical statements, it is appropriate that the construction of Bila's address does not make literal sense and its opacity augments the atmosphere of mystery that is woven around Hlungwani. Complementing the interesting representation of man as mantra, Bila's poem itself takes on a note of incantation through reiteration of the phrase in question. Both the carver, and the poem that seeks to capture his quintessence, are instilled with otherworldly authority and express the rich visionary world of Mbhokota.

The triumph of "wood warrior" lies in its ability to adapt tropes from Xitsonga oral culture, such as elaborate epithet, praise poetry and mystical language in order to forge an evocative and dream-like impression of Mbhokoto. The reader is connected to the village through the area's own idiom and thus gains a profound insight into its art and culture. The political importance of capturing rural creativity is paramount given that historically, much of South Africa's white, colonial poetry has portrayed the South African country as empty and devoid of life. As discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, J.M. Coetzee has singled out the English landscape poet for particular criticism, arguing that his presentation of bleak,

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[51] Vonani Bila, "wood warrior", in *Magicstan Fires*, pp.12-15.
[52] "mantra, noun", in *Cambridge Dictionaries Online* <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mantra> [Accessed 3 October 2015] .

uninhabited space is ideological and neglects South Africa's indigenous cultures.[53] In contrast, Bila's poetry fills some of the country's most out-of-the-way locations with personalities of genius and honours their heritage.

Bila painstakingly atomises South Africa's glaring inequalities and those of Limpopo in particular. The writing is socially essential in ensuring that the lives of disempowered peoples are not forgotten or swept aside. In Bila's own words, 'Yes, I confront the reader with stories of shame, degradation, retrenched workers, prostitutes in substandard conditions, the unemployed and beggars—these are the stories few dare to tell with honesty, love and compassion'.[54] It is apparent that for Bila, locales are always filled with characters that viscerally define their landscapes. Places are not primarily characterised through reference to the built or natural environment but also by those who live in them. The representation of place as a social entity provides vital commentary on the dissonance between spaces of empowerment and disadvantage in South Africa today. Thematically, Bila's poetry tackles a wide range of subject matter. His poems on Elim prioritise the importance of individual lives and the realities of his home village, while his depictions of urban scenes such as "Dahl Street" dramatise the slum-like conditions of workers. In a different register, a poem such as "wood warrior" pays tribute to rural creativity and highlights the resilience of indigenous cultures amidst humble circumstances. All of Bila's work is concerned to underscore links between poor environments and macrocosmic social structures.

Bila has stated that 'the commitment to place is also the commitment to language'.[55] His work narrates context through vocabulary and forms drawn from the sites he seeks to represent. Techniques such as apostrophe or the chant hail from the struggle tradition and serve to interrogate the nation it fought for. Similarly, interweaving sayings, rhythms, and myth from Xitsonga and other African cultures into English immanently connects Bila's writing to the heritage of the stories he represents. The importance of registering Bila's poetic strategies, and those of others in the *Timbila* movement, is vital for understanding some of the country's most important political critique. Fidelity to narrative is a craft and clear representations of reality

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[53] J.M.Coetzee, *White Writing: on the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1988; Braamfontein: Pentz Publishers, 2007), p.182.
[54] Gary Cummiskey, "Vonani Bila: no brand-puppet poet", *The Dye Hard Interviews*, 7 May 2010 < http://dyehardinterviews.blogspot.co.za/2010/05/no-brand-puppet-poet.html> [Accessed 8 September 2015] (Para.17 of 32).
[55] Meyer, "Interview with Vonani Bila".

require structure and form. A socially necessary writing is one that uses place and circumstance to inform its aesthetic. Through such language, poetry is confident enough to imply that words can convey truth and that this truth passes its own political and moral judgment.

Chapter Six
From Lyric to Epic?
Angifi Dladla's Formal Trajectory

This chapter focuses on the writing of poet, teacher, and dramatist Angifi Dladla. Born in Thaka township in 1950 and now based in Germiston, Dladla is author of the poetry collections, *the girl who then feared to sleep and other poems* (2001), *We are All Rivers* (2010), and *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve* (2015). He is founder of the Femba project which supports the development of writing skills in prisons and he has edited notable books to have emerged from this community work namely *Reaching Out: Voices from Groenpunt Maximum Security Prison* (2010). Dladla is a versatile poet, who experiments with a variety of literary styles. While his formal dexterity is a marker of his creative ability, I argue that shifts in Dladla's aesthetic technique need to be read against specific developments in South Africa's political landscape. This chapter traces Dladla's transition from shorter lyric poems to the use of longer epic and satirical forms over the period 2001-2015. I illustrate how changes in the shape of Dladla's poetry illuminate and critique contemporary events in South African politics, specifically the vulnerability of the economy, the commercialisation of black identity, and the decline of the African National Congress's political legitimacy.

In his 2005 book, *Rewriting Modernity*, David Attwell provides insight into the relationship between aesthetics and political change in South Africa. His observations are relevant to the evaluation of Dladla's career. In the chapter, "From Lyric to Epic", Attwell argues that Black Consciousness poetry underwent significant formal transformation in the 60s and 70s, transitioning from a predominantly lyric mode to an epic form.[1] Attwell contends that this formal evolution was a response to the turbulent South African political climate in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto uprisings. During this time, the black resistance movement began to gather a growing sense of cohesion and momentum. Against this backdrop, writers such as Mongane Wally Serote sought to forge new portrayals of the self that positioned individual consciousness in relation to, and as part of, the great social collective acting in

[1] David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), pp.144-145. Attwell's discussion of lyric and epic draws inspiration from the following lines in Jeremy Cronin's poem "Three reasons for a mixed, *umrabulo*, round-the-corner poetry": 'Between, let's say / May 1984 and May 1986 / *(Speaking from my own limited, personal experience, of course)* / There was a shift out there / From lyric to epic'. Attwell moves the dates of Cronin's statement a decade forward and for the sake of argument, chooses to interpret his words literally. Cf. Jeremy Cronin, *Even the Dead: Poems, Parables and Jeremiad* (Bellville: Mayibuye, 1997), p.1.

defiance of the Apartheid regime.[2] Attwell argues that epic became a more apposite form than lyric as its traditional preoccupation with grand themes of destiny and nation building allowed poets to articulate the full scale of the anti-Apartheid liberation project.[3] Attwell's synopsis is compelling but his observations do not in fact apply to all writing of the Black Consciousness movement. Even so, his argument has productive potential because it prompts one to read experiments with epic form in South African literature as a stylistic means of registering crisis, social unrest, and the consideration of deep national questions.[4] As such, *Rewriting Modernity* provides inspiration from which to interpret the development of Dladla's poetry over the course of the last two decades. Dladla does not register societal instability and issues of national conscience through epic alone but also through exploiting myriad genres, namely satire. His formal trajectory suggests that in times of deep turmoil, conventions of epic are apposite to exploring large-scale concerns of justice and equality but that epic can also be undercut and scrutinised through a more satirical voice. In the process, axiomatic principles of nation building are placed into question.

Dladla's first collection, *the girl who then feared to sleep* is characterised by short, lyrical and imagist poems but over the years his writing has demonstrated an increasing preoccupation with the longer form. His most recent work, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, is his most ambitious publication to date.[5] The book-length poem contains prominent features of epic and Dladla's turn to this genre is arguably symptomatic of the fact that the South African state is undergoing acute turmoil.[6] Dladla's creative praxis can be read against the country's current economic downturn and the African National Congress's governmental failures. In such a context, epic expresses the magnitude of events that could have potentially epochal consequences, such as national insolvency. Discussion of the political potential of epic begs the question of how one is to define the form and how it might be relevant to South Africa today. Two authoritative definitions of epic include that of M.H. Abrams and the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.* Abrams writes that epic is 'a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine

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[2] Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, p. 161.
[3] Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, pp.165-168.
[4] Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, pp.164-168.
[5] Kelwyn Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", *Cross-Cultural Poetics,* 21/22 (2009), 240-266 (pp.249-250); Kelwyn Sole, "Introduction", in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve* (Germiston, Chakida Publishers, 2014), pp. xi-xvi (pp. xi-xiii).
[6] Sole notes the prominence of epic features in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Sohanguve*; Sole, "Introduction", in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. xii-xiii.

figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or […] the human race'.[7] The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* similarly describes the genre as 'a long narrative poem of heroic action'.[8] Both definitions emphasise the narrative elements of epic, highlighting its ability to relate a story in a degree of depth and detail. Furthermore, both Abrams and the *Princeton Encyclopedia* underline epic's preoccupation with grand themes such as heroism. Abrams particularly draws attention to the form's proclivity for focusing on questions of destiny and national fate. The aforementioned generic definitions cannot be copied and pasted onto the post-Apartheid context but it will become evident that the totalising ambitions of epic are well-suited to ameliorating the fragmented nature of contemporary political consciousness in the wake of the splintering of black unity, in a situation in which the African National Congress have betrayed the impoverished majority. Moreover, it will be argued that Dladla's growing desire to portray the structural realities of the post-Apartheid era is well-served by a form robust enough to explore national character.

Dladla's latest work is not an epic in the purest sense due to its strongly satirical nature and hence must primarily be read as an experimental, hybrid work. *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve* departs from the serious tone of traditional epic.[9] Dladla arguably opts to blend epic and satire because at present there is no clear alternative to the failed promises of the African National Congress's 'Rainbow Nation' nor is it as easy to believe in national ideals such as equality or a non-racial society. Whereas conventional epic offers an account of a nation's establishment, writers in South Africa today face a far more fractured reality. Opposition to the African National Congress lacks cohesion given the vastly different outlooks of some of its most prominent opponents such as the liberal Democratic Alliance and the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters.[10] Satire is characterised by its ability to undercut and ridicule and does not typically offer positive narratives or visions.[11] As a generic trope, it thus suits the contemporary South African milieu in which poets such as Dladla increasingly work with a strong sense of the country's glaring social problems but can offer no clear

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[7] M.H. Abrams, "Satire", in *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Seventh Edition* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), pp.275-278 (p. 76).
[8] "Epic", in *The Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics*, (4th ed.), ed. Roland Greene, (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).
[9] Sole notes the fusion of literary traditions such as epic and satire in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*; Sole, "Introduction", in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. xii-xiii.
[10] Immanuel Wallerstein, "South Africa's ANC Is Slipping Away", *Immanuel Wallerstein*, commentary 431, 15 August 2016 <http://iwallerstein.com/south-africas-anc-is-slipping-away/> [Accessed 16 August 2016] (Para. 8 of 12).
[11] Abrams, "Satire", in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p.275.

insights into the development of a future world. In a context in which the certitude of destiny intimated by epic does not seem viable, Dladla's use of satire presents the absurdity of present day political affairs. I begin with a brief account of the crisis of government legitimacy and discuss the growing sense of national catastrophe in the post-Apartheid state. I then move to a reading of Dladla's work, in which I more deeply explore his stylistic evolutions and track their relationship to the political environment.

The August 2016 municipal elections foregrounded the African National Congresses' waning political power and attracted widespread international press coverage. While it was expected that the party would lose significant support in urban areas, the scale of its losses in the country's major cities was not fully anticipated and is without precedent in the post-Apartheid era.[12] The party lost both Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality in the Eastern Cape and the city of Pretoria to the official opposition, the Democratic Alliance. The African National Congress's fall from favour in these two areas is deeply symbolic, the former bearing the name of the first democratic president and historically being a stronghold of anti-Apartheid resistance while the latter is one of the country's capital cities.[13] Aside from the losses in these municipalities, it is significant that the party only narrowly secured victory over the economic hub of Johannesburg. The President himself saw his home village of Nkandla lost to the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party.[14] On the national scale, the overall statistics are telling. Justice Malala notes'In local elections in 2006, the party got 66.3% votes nationwide. The DA took 14.8%' but in 2016 'the ANC reached just under 54% and the main opposition DA stood at 27%'.[15] The loss of voter confidence in the African National Congress reflects dissatisfaction with poor governance. It is against this backdrop of political precariousness, and the economy's downgrade to junk status, that Dladla crafts his poetry. The unrest in the country permeates the writer's work and his most significant poetry has emerged post-millennium, at

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[12] Krista Mahr & David Pilling, "South Africa's ANC suffers worst election result since end of apartheid", *Financial Times*, 5 August 2016 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/a4d6f4c2-5a03-11e6-9f70-badea1b336d4.html#axzz4HP1X2RL5> [Accessed 15 August 2016].
[13] Justice Malala, "South Africa has broken the postcolonial narrative. It's a thrilling turning point", *The Guardian*, 7 August 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/06/anc-elections-south-africa-democracy-zuma> [Accessed 10 August 2016] (Paras. 4-5 of 18).
[14] Tshidi Madia, "Election results a final warning to ANC- Cosatu", *News24*, 12 August 2016 <http://www.news24.com/elections/news/election-results-a-final-warning-to-anc-cosatu-20160812> [Accessed 15 August 2016]; Matthew Savides, "IFP wins a commanding majority on the Nkandla Council", *Business Day,* 4 August 2016 <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/politics/2016/08/04/ifp-wins-a-commanding-majority-on-the-nkandla-council>[Accessed 15 August 2016].
[15] Justice Malala, "South Africa has broken the postcolonial narrative. It's a thrilling turning point" (Para. 6 of 18).

a time when many of post-Apartheid's greatest disappointments and challenges have become apparent.

Despite having a well-established background in community theatre, it was only in 2001 that Dladla published his first poetry collection, *the girl who then feared to sleep*. The book contains several poems written from the perspective of a first person lyric 'I' but as Sole notes this is not a voice that relishes in private reflection or the confession of personal emotion.[16] Like Nyezwa, Dladla is concerned to overcome the sequestered nature of the private lyric voice, preferring to connect subjectivity to his surrounding world. In political terms, one might read Dladla's reticence to inhabit a personal voice as a response to the tainted profile of black individuality in a post-Apartheid era that has seen an elite profit at the expense of national good. No longer unequivocally a force for liberation, to claim one's value as an individual of colour, has become a tool with which to secure high profile public sector jobs and curry government favour. Ironically, such processes have meant that a suffering black majority remain disadvantaged. The capacity of the lyric form to allow for the enunciation of subjectivity potentially loses its appeal in a milieu in which the terms of identity have become over-determined by market values.

In *the girl who then feared to sleep*, Dladla's strongest work comes through in finely worked, shorter, imagist pieces. These poems eschew the exploration of inward emotion and in so doing register the pitfalls of individualism in South Africa's post-millennial environ. These poems of brevity have an 'objective' quality with the 'I' becoming a point of observation from which to record social phenomena.[17] The point is apparent in one of Dladla's most well known poems "impression":

> off I flinched,
> drained
> dizzy and dazed.
> behind; outsize
> black wound
> in the earth
> where the tyre has nailed him.

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[16] Kelwyn Sole, "Introduction", in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve* (Germiston: Chakida Publishing, 2014), p. xi.
[17] Joan Metelerkamp notes the 'objective' quality of Dladla's poetry; Joan Metelerkamp, "Angifi Dladla, December 2001", in *South African Poets on Poetry, Interviews From New Coin 1992-2001* (Scottsville: Gecko Poetry, 2003), pp. 172-182 (p. 173).

human gravy in the sun[18]

In the above lines, one is presented with a concise and hard-hitting description of a black body that has been run over by a motor vehicle. The poem is framed as an impression and one does not hear details of who exactly has been killed nor the circumstances under which life was lost. As noted, this is not a writing that is concerned with tracing the contours of lyric consciousness or presenting a character behind the speaking voice. The force of the poem derives from its fidelity to capturing a moment in time, at a point before observation can become analysis. One is plunged into the life of a speaker who is experiencing an extreme state of shock as evidenced by the fact that s/he is flinching, 'dizzy', and 'dazed'. The reader is encouraged to feel the same sense of disorientation as the persona. Just as the spectacle of a dead body lies 'behind' the speaker, so one is only brought to awareness of the victim after first being subjected to the observer's dazed state. The presentation of the corpse is surreptitious, with the object at first emerging as an extraordinarily large black wound in the earth. It is only in the final lines of the poem that one comes to full cognisance of the fact that the scene is portraying an actual human being who is represented as 'gravy in the sun'. The portrayal of a black body as a wound in the earth creates an alignment between the suffering of the world as a whole and that of people of colour in South Africa. The fact that this same body is later compared to 'gravy' is a graphic description of the extent to which the individual in question has been mutilated. The victim's close association with food intimates that South African society feeds off its weaker members. Imagery intimates a strong sense of the dead body's ability to stand in for broader systems of injustice but also makes this reality tangible through appeal to the human senses.

"Impression" isolates a specific situation of violence and works to present it with lucidity, originality, and precision. Sole has argued that Dladla's writing is reminiscent of the poetry of modernist imagism, a movement distinguished by its dissatisfaction with traditional lyric forms and a need to focus upon objects external to the self, in all of their singularity and exactitude.[19] Despite being far removed in time and place from early twentieth century England and America, the texture of Dladla's work is comparable to that of writers such as

[18] Dladla, "impression", in *the girl who then feared to sleep* (Grahamstown: Deep South, 2001), p.22, ll.1-8.
[19] Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste", *Poetry*, 1: 6 (1913), 200-206 (p. 201), Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20569730.

Ezra Pound.[20] Pound's well-known imagist poem "In a Station of the Metro" illustrates the point

> the apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet, black bough.[21]

Apart from the fact that Dladla seeks recourse to a lyric 'I', his poem is akin to imagist writing in its surprising comparative language, exactitude of diction, and close attention to the particularity of a moment.[22] The South African poetry also accords well with Pound's definition of an imagist poem, which is 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'[23]. For Pound, imagism entails 'using no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something'.[24] Dladla's rigorous focus on a single event and its effect on an individual witness is combined with an astonishing economy of language that aligns his writing with Pound's dictates. "Impression" foregrounds the extent to which contemporary South African writers share affinities with a range of literary traditions, in this case, aesthetic modernism.

Dladla's imagist poems can be understood as providing nuanced renderings of the violence of South African life, both present and past. His local take on imagism constitutes evidence of Benita Parry's contention that postcolonial contexts do not simply replicate the traditions of the metropoles, but develop them significantly. For Parry:

> To relegate the modernities of peripheral societies to "shadow imitations" of what occurred in the metropole connotes an extraordinary insensitivity to the ways in which such experiential difference is apparent in prose and fiction dramatizing the trauma of modernity in situations radically distinct from those prevalent in capitalist countries.[25]

Parry primarily discusses prose but her argument can be applied to Dladla's imagist poetry. One sees Dladla significantly extend the political resonance of imagism through deploying the form in order to focus upon gritty scenes of trauma in South Africa. The five-line poem

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[20] Sole, "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely': Aesthetics, Agency and the Reader in Contemporary South African Poetry", pp. 249-250.
[21] Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro, *poets.org* <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/station-metro> [Accessed 30 April 2017].
[22] Note: Sole also quotes Pound's "In a Station of the Metro", in "'I Have Learned To Hear More Acutely'", p. 250.
[23] Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste", p. 200
[24] Pound, "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste", p. 201.
[25] Benita Parry, "The presence of the past in peripheral modernities", in *Beyond the Black Atlantic, Relocating modernization and technology*, ed. Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (London & New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 13-28 (p. 17).

"vacancy" is another case in point:

> red
> shoe on the railway
> licks shuddering wounds, and
> wails like a cheated
> coffin.[26]

One again sees painstaking attention to detail and a desire to capture a single situation. The object of focus is ostensibly a red shoe but its comparison to a 'cheated coffin' summons up the idea of death. One cannot help but wonder if this shoe belonged to an owner who was killed on the rail tracks and if oblique reference may be being made to a literal coffin that has been denied an inhabitant. There is an implicit question as to how an individual may have died. One wonders if there has been a suicide, murder or accident on the railway. The poem leaves the reader perturbed by the possibility of a forgotten body that will never receive proper burial. Poems such as "impression" and "vacancy" grant imagism a political relevance through spotlighting unseen incidents in South African social history.

While much of Dladla's early poetry is politically captivating, its form potentially limits the ability of the writer to pass wide-ranging social comment. *The girl who then feared to sleep* grapples with the parameters of lyric and experiments with imagistic forms in order to focus on 'objective' events or scenes external to a speaking consciousness. Yet as Sole notes, the form of lyric potentially distracts from analysis of the political terrain and lends itself to a focus on the individual and private consciousness.[27] Furthermore, Dladla's imagist writing would have to work hard to analyse South African society in a systematic way. Imagist poems are able to isolate specific moments of injustice or hardship but they do not necessarily allow for a multifaceted interrogation of communal wellbeing. A large collection of such poems would potentially read as a series of political snapshots, only connected by the presumed presence of a speaker who supposedly underpins the various points of observation. Dladla's early preference for image over voice also constrains the ability of the poetry to debate and dialogue on social issues. Arguably, if Dladla's poetry is to fully investigate South Africa's evolving political situation, then different formal solutions are required than those deployed in *the girl who then feared to sleep*. The latter fact has surely prompted the writer's experiments with

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[26] Dladla, "vacancy", in *the girl who then feared to sleep*, p.33, ll.1-5.
[27] Sole, "Introduction", in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. xii.

epic and satire as these forms have the potential to shift attention from individual identity to national fate. In the case of epic this is because of the genre's capacity to relate a large-scale story while satire's concern with ridicule renders the form a potent tool for undercutting the elite of South Africa today.

We are All Rivers is a useful text for understanding the changing trajectory of Dladla's art and its nascent interest in both epic and satire. The collection is an amalgamation of works spanning the entirety of his career but primarily consists of poems written between 2001 and 2015. In an interview I conducted with the poet in Germiston in September 2015, Dladla stated that it is in *We are All Rivers* that he began to try his hand at the longer form.[28] Thus one confronts an array of lengthier pieces, all of which tackle issues of social consequence. An example of such a poem is "Nans' Ingoma (a spirit possession anthem)", which is an anthem to black heroes from across South African history. The poem opens with an epigraph from South African writer Es'kia Mphahlele :'What inanity prompts people to even think they can tear out any pages from our historical records and continue to live a lie?'[29] Accordingly, "Nans' Ingoma" devotes itself to praising and remembering moments of resilience in South African black history such as the battle of Isandlwana in 1879 and the 1976 Soweto riots. Historical icons in the form of Zulu King Cetshwayo, pan-Africanist congress leader Robert Sobukwe, anti-Apartheid activist Lillian Ngoyi, Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko and the contemporary writer Zakes Mda are also paid tribute. The poem begins in an epic vein, emphasising themes of bravery and valour

> I sing of warriors to all ages.
> I gather schemes and thought forms
> from van riebeeck, grey, rhodes,
> kruger, verwoerd and other gods.
> And from images of a white jesus.
>
> Let no one back me at this moment.
> I sing how cannonballs fell upon us.[30]

The speaker desires to communicate with people from across many different ages, singing not only to warriors of the present, but also addressing those of the past. Alluding to the different heritages of racial oppression in South Africa, such as the British imperialist strategies of Cecil John Rhodes

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[28] Alice Meyer, "Interview with Angifi Dladla" (Germiston: September 2015).
[29] Angifi Dladla, "Nans' Ingoma (a spirit possession anthem)", in *We are All Rivers* (Germiston: Chakida Publishing, 2015), p.130. Note, I do not use line count when referring to Dladla's long poems. This rule applies to the poetry in *We are All Rivers* and *Maxwell the Gorilla*.
[30] Dladla, "Nans' Ingoma (a spirit possession anthem)", in *We are All Rivers*, p. 130.

and the Afrikaner Apartheid regime of H.F. Verwoerd, Dladla states that he is going to sing of how 'cannonballs fell upon us'. In an elevated and epic tone, he sets out to recount a heroic history of black resistance to white rule.

As the poem progresses, it appears that a new anthem is not only necessary in order to vanquish European ideology but also to combat the hollowed out nature of liberation discourse in South Africa today. Dladla's Anthem spends a great deal of time critiquing the corruption of South Africa's 'captured struggle'. The poem is a far cry from being a simplistic tribute to black power or nation. The point is evident in his description of struggle heroes, who have returned from exile as,

> lionized globalists, basking
> in semblance of democracy and diplomacy — extolling
> colonists' change of heart and rewarding yourselves
> for fighting apartheid while you unleash colonial arsenals — landlessness, flags, celebrations, hagiographies, televangelism, poverty, diseases, firepower, commissions of enquiries.[31]

The post-Apartheid leadership is seen as 'unleashing' a neo-colonial agenda and enshrining a 'semblance of democracy' that ultimately fails to provide true equality for all people. 'Celebrations' and 'flags' take their place alongside 'poverty', 'diseases' and 'landlessness' underscoring that new discourses of freedom have not provided anticipated structural change. Dladla's own poem undertakes something of an epic task in attempting to re-ground the ethical principles of the South African nation. It reads as something of a praise poem, an indigenous genre which is aligned with epic to the extent that it also employs an elevated tone and is concerned with the heritage of a community.[32] In "Nans' Ingoma", the traditional role of African praise poet, which as Rampolokeng has noted, in times of old, involved calling leadership to account and interrogating power is re-appraised.[33] The poem concludes with calling 'For real ownership, real inventions […] For the New Time, New World.' Dladla's song indicates a growing concern to discuss wide-ranging political concepts and to call for the representation of alternative social structures. A far remove from the short, sharp images in *the girl who then feared to sleep*, the writing works through statement and prose-like sentence structure in order to tell comprehensive

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[31] Dladla, "Nans' Ingoma (a spirit possession anthem)", in *We are All Rivers*, p.130.
[32] Duncan Brown, "Black consciousness, tradition and modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial'", *Current Writing*, 9:1 (1997), 1-26 (p. 17).
[33] Robert Berold, "Lesego Rampolokeng, December 1993", *South African Poets on Poetry, Interviews From New Coin 1992-2001*, pp. 22-33 (p.28).

stories and provide an overview of South Africa's political reality. The growing narrative strain in Dladla's poetry, and experiments with lengthier poems, are reminiscent of Bila's mature work. This commonality suggests that these writers are responding to a shared structural reality that demands an art able to relate large-scale, thought provoking narratives.

The evident desire of "Nans' Ingoma" to communicate a political message finds a parallel in Bertolt Brecht's theories of epic, which advocate lucidity of expression and the use of reason in order to create awareness of pressing social issues.[34] South African scholars such as Michael Chapman, Duncan Brown and C.T Msimang have all made comparisons between South African uses of epic and Brechtian theatre. Brecht positions epic as a form able to reveal the truth of living social relations in capitalist society:

> The epic theatre is chiefly interested in the attitudes which people adopt towards one another, wherever they are socio-historically significant (typical). It works out scenes where people adopt attitudes of such a sort that the social laws under which they are acting spring into sight […] The concern of the epic theatre is thus eminently practical. Human behaviour is shown as alterable; man himself as dependent on certain political and economic factors and at the same time as capable of altering them.[35]

This description of epic theatre emphasises its interest in uncovering specific socio-historical relations rather than a timeless or heroic past. It is a dynamic theatre able to intervene in the praxis of life and illuminate social laws that might otherwise remain obfuscated. Brecht positions epic as a form that intercedes in the power dynamics of history and one can see how such notions could be apposite to South African writing that aims to fight for a more just society. Msimang advocates the applicability of Brechtian theories of epic theatre to South African poetry, 'Although Brecht is concerned mainly with the epic *theatre* […] the views expressed apply with the same force to epic poetry […]. Seen in this light, epic poetry is a poetry of socio-political conscientisation'.[36] Msimang is specifically referring to the poetry of Ingoapele Madingoane. He presents the famous Black Consciousness writer as an epic poet who is able to use literature as a force to effect societal change. Msimang's observations back up Attwell's idea that Black Consciousness writing does use epic to register societal turmoil. Msimang's writing also allows one to view a specifically Brechtian definition of epic as

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[34] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, edited and translated by John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), p. 86.
[35] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre,* pp. 37-38.
[36] C.T. Msimang, "Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial': A Contemporary Black Epic", in *Soweto Poetry, literary perspectives*, ed. Michael Chapman (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), pp.204-212 (p.205).

relevant to South African poetry. Dladla's poetry does not only draw upon traditional epic tropes but also deploys a literary praxis of 'socio-political conscientisation'. His writing cannot be neatly assimilated to any existing theory of epic form but dramatises the mutable legacy of the genre and its ability to interweave itself with an array of literary styles.

We Are All Rivers is replete with longer poems that seek to voice wide-ranging social critique. In this way the collection indicates Dladla's growing need to represent South African society in more totalising terms. "These People" heralds Dladla's interest in satire and sets out to criticise the commercial value system of South Africa's new elite. In the poem, 'these people' are those in government and the corporate world who profit at the expense of public good. Strikingly, this demographic is satirically compared to 'giraffes'. Indeed, just as giraffes strain and bend to reach the ground, so do the rulers in the poem only reach a point of contact with those at the 'grass roots' of society with a concerted struggle,

> You sense something, something creepy
> about Giraffe-people, South of Africa,
> who only got into history, aha-ha-hah,
> riding, effortlessly, on the escalator
> heads of Willem De Klerk and Bill
> Clinton to the Global Village,
> but still landless like zoo denizens?
>
> 'Mission accomplished,' sighed de Klerk
> before sailing to Klerksdorp Hermitage.
>
> There they are, the Giraffe Veterans
> lowly and irrelevant in the global affairs
> like the moon in the roasting sun of Limpopo.
> Who's sure when they'll die.[37]

The 'Giraffe-people', who represent empowered black citizens, are portrayed as morally compromised and are envisioned as perpetuating the social structures of old white masters. They are said to dwell 'South of Africa', which plays on the real-life name of the country in order to suggest that the post-Apartheid nation is not truly part of Africa at all but a territory to the south of the continent. Struggle veterans are portrayed as having forsaken loyalty to Africans and as selling out to white capital in the form of the United States' Bill Clinton and the National Party's

[37] Dladla, "These People", in *We Are All Rivers*, p. 109.

F.W. de Klerk. In contrast to this ethos of accumulation, Dladla's poetry aims to dialogue with the reader, transform public outlook and establish communal recognition in non-commercial terms,

> You are the one within me
> […]
>
> I am the one within you,
>
> […]
>
> We are a birdsong, a snow crystal, a crop circle,
> toothless giggles of a toddler on a beach.[38]

One is encouraged to develop a rapport with the speaker based on non-monetary principles and to embrace a shared identity grounded in spontaneous and fleeting moments such as the song of birds or the laughter of children. The poem analyses South African national values and deploys satirical critique in order to strive for new terms upon which to build unity and identity as a post-Apartheid public. "These People" lays important groundwork for the deep questioning of the self, and its relationship towards society, that has become a pre-occupation of Dladla's later work.

We are all Rivers indicates shifts in Dladla's creative outlook. In *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve* this metamorphosis reaches maturity.[39] It is in the pages of this book that Dladla's experiments with the epic, satire, and the long poem culminate. *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve* takes as its inspiration the case of the shooting of Maxwell the Gorilla at Johannesburg Zoo in 1997 by Isaac Mofokeng who was fleeing police forces after being caught trespassing on a Saxonwold property. Max had been born in Frankfurt in 1971 and was resident in Johannesburg Zoo at the time that Mofokeng illegally entered his enclosure where the gorilla was peacefully dwelling with his partner Lisa. At the time, the incident made international headlines attracting visitors and journalists from all over the world into Johannesburg. Dladla's poem is liberal in interpreting the factual details of the event through adding his own commentary, dramatic scenes and characters. The entirety of the poem is narrated from the perspective of an ancient talking pot known as Qumqum Tatarado of Khoisan origins. This narrator is deeply critical of the urban environment of Johannesburg, which forms the backdrop to the poem. Dladla also changes the name of the criminal to Jerrie Daaimahn. These imaginative embellishments have the effect of defamiliarising ordinary scenes of city life. In particular, the Khoisan narrator grants the poem an

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[38] Dladla, "These People", in *We Are All Rivers*, p. 109.
[39] Sole, "Introduction", in *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. xii.

epic tone as contemporary urban life becomes recounted from the vantage point of a much longer history of settlement in South Africa. The edifice of the concrete jungle is contextualised against ancient traditions. Composed in six movements, *Max* is as much satire as epic, ridiculing media coverage of events, politician's public statements and courtroom proceedings. The incident of Max's shooting becomes a vehicle through which to critique national prejudice and government corruption.

Both in reality and in the world of the poem, the somewhat bizarre incident between man and ape is portrayed as paradigmatic of the extreme levels of crime sweeping South Africa's commercial hub. The poem enquires in its opening sections,

> What will become of city dwellers,
> Tell us, if a ciudad becomes radiated pockets
> of no-go areas, especially for the gringos?[40]

Qumqum wonders how city dwellers will survive in an environment riddled with no-go areas. The violation of the recreational space of the zoo is taken as symptomatic of the extent to which public space has become dangerous especially for foreigners or 'gringos' who might leisurely be touring the area without insight into its possible dangers. Dladla chooses to elaborate upon a sense of identity between the wildness of animals such as Max and the anarchy of Johannesburg life. This is evident in the portrayal of Jerrie's violent encounter with the Gorilla,

> Blood of man, blood of ape
> merged on man, on ape.
> Blood of ape, blood of man
> merged into the soil
> vagina, steamily.
> Law of the city, law of the jungle
> in the Capital of Gold.
> Glasses clinked, cups clinked
> as they bump-jived.
> Mirrors burst, screens cracked.
> Max the conductor, Max in control.
> Rainbow Capital, Capital of Culture
> and Commerce further cosmo-
> politanized.[41]

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[40] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 15
[41] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp.7-8.

The epic motif of battle comes through strongly in the above description and the language itself becomes 'cosmopolitanized' as the words 'bump jive' and collide with one another through use of enjambment. Similarly, one sees the phrase 'Blood of man, blood of ape' repeated, but in inverted form. This has the effect of rubbing words up against each other, confusing the structure of the poem by questioning whose blood is most important or who bleeds first. Furthermore, the fact that the same word 'law' is used to designate the vastly different realms of the city and the jungle creates an implicit collision between ostensible opposites. The extract is expressive of conflict and turbulent encounter, revealing the savagery of the modern world.

The poem flirts with the idea of Max as something of a modern-day hero through hailing his brave act of community policing, performed at a time when officers of the law failed to administer justice. Numerous characters in the poem laud Max's bravery. An example of this is the premier of Gauteng who states,

> Today, a member of the ape race
> has done it, has done it Worsie —
> Right in front of world paparazzi
> he did voluntary policing!
> Sublime poets will write, ho-ho, epics
> and legends to Maxwell Ebobo's name.[42]

Max's actions are one way in which the poem connects to the more traditional motifs of epic, such as the presence of a hero, and also questions their basis. At several junctures in the poem, Max is seen to embody the fêted hero through his great deed in subduing human crime. Ultimately, however, the poem relinquishes the notion of individual heroism in favour of propounding a more general awe at the power of nature and divine energy, a force that Max partially represents. The words of the esteemed animal rights advocate, Dladla's fictional Advocate Shiburi, carry particular weight and importance in the context of the poem. He is one of the few characters who is not explicitly mocked or ridiculed by the narrator Qumqum. Notably, Shiburi's pronouncements frequently question the concept of human glory,

> Time will come when man will stop
> his imperious monologue
>
> […]

[42] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 20.

> familiarize himself
> with plants, animals, Mother Nature.[43]

Shiburi's words indicate that an androcentric, individually orientated epic form is out of date and will eventually make way for portrayals of humans as relatively insignificant in the course of more powerful natural currents,

> Poets will cleanse their pens, say goodbye
> to tragic epics with their unnatural heroes that are not cut
> down to size in the nature of the moon and seasons.[44]

Arguably, Dladla's poem itself constitutes the revitalised epic that Shiburi prophecies, one that cuts human heroism down to size through use of satire. Dladla's decision to not lionise any one individual creates a kind of Brechtian alienation from the scenes presented in his experimental poem. The reader is not able to engage in shared empathy with a literary protagonist and is disabled from living vicariously through such a figure.

Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve actively disaggregates heroic values and surely does so in order to illustrate the folly of enshrining individualism and self-profit in contemporary South Africa. The expected conventions of epic are overturned. This formal idiosyncrasy highlights the need to overcome the commercialisation of identity in the post-Apartheid context. The ability of personality and character to become marketised in the contemporary political environment is foregrounded in the way in which Dladla portrays the South African public as transmuting Max's identity into a product to be consumed like any other. The point becomes apparent in the absurd nature of media, corporate, artistic and political response to Max's encounter with a criminal. One sees that the story of Max has prompted hyperbolic and exaggerated public reaction:

> No case in South Africa had ever drawn in
> peoples from all over the globe.[45]

The incident of a primate defending himself against an unexpected aggressor is blown entirely out of proportion. One example of such societal craze is the formation of a political party in Max's honour,

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[43] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p.81.
[44] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p.81.
[45] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp.49-50.

> Friends of Maxwell Ebobo and OZODI
> merged as United Mzansi Front'.[46]

The act of arrogating Max's identity to a social organization, the United Mzansi Front, makes little sense in animal terms and encapsulates the casual way with which the post-Apartheid public forms and reforms political trends. The thoughtless and impulsive nature of the movement to rally around Max is emphasised and this indirectly critiques the depth, theoretical underpinning, and integrity of South Africa's contemporary political culture.

The very name of one of the United Mzansi Front's key supporters, Thandi Oppenheimer, condenses the contradictions of affirmative action movements in the new South Africa. Here, a presumably black woman (Thandi) has taken on the legacy of previous white masters, the Oppenheimers, who are famously one of South Africa's wealthiest families. The intimation is that the promotion of young black females will not necessarily promote genuine social change but can also be accomplished while preserving historic capitalist infrastructure that does not markedly differ from that of white Apartheid. Given the ideology for which Thandi Oppenheimer stands, it seems likely that her Party's engagement with Max's plight will be superficial. Presumably, the United Mzansi Front is an excuse for new elites to promote their own social profiles through tapping into the popular energy surrounding the gorilla figure. In this corporate and populist context, it is inevitable that the reality of the non-human world will be glossed over and any immanent connection to Max as 'Other' will be lost. Dladla sets out to critique this ethos through satiric description of Thandi and the value system she stands for.

The spirit of excitement directed towards Max is market-centered in every respect. The throng of journalists, politicians, and tourists into the city is compared to something of a modern-day 'gold rush'. It is in the generation of a new market around Max that one sees the rapaciousness with which the South African public is able to turn virtually any social event into a commodity. An entire network of merchandise springs up around the gorilla 'hero'. Clothing, books, videos, DVDS, and jewellery all become customised to match the hype surrounding the shooting while shops and pavements are flooded with memorabilia. The literary style of the extract embodies the rampant commodification of everything, with its accumulation of detail vigorously confronting the

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[46] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp.49-50.

reader with an inundation of products. One is told of statues erected in Max's honour, in which their materials are described with intricacy as

> fashioned from skeletons
> of trucks, locomotives and bikes.[47]

Furthermore, one is given an imposing list of books that gain currency under the influence of Max's fame such as *The Biography of Maxwell Ebobo* and *The History of Johannesburg Zoo*. The effect of listing numerous titles, places the reader in the position of a buyer to whom various works are promoted and sold. Similarly, when a voice drowns out the narrator and directly advertises a competition,

> 'For R150 you identify 10 spoors, you win a Jeep
> and a summerhouse at Umhlanga Rocks, Thekwini.'[48]

One is given a visceral sense of the fact that the poem itself cannot quite control the commercial energies at play in the post-Apartheid nation.[49] The passage's density creates a sense that the page can barely hold descriptions of pageantry and paraphernalia as the text becomes crammed with minutia of Max's identity. The inflated social energy directed towards Max's deed displays the ease with which South African society appropriates events and personalities in order to create their own marketable and fashionable narratives.

Maxwell the Gorilla depicts a world in which story and art are no longer transcendent but have become a currency like any other. This is highlighted by the appearance of an opportunistic praise poet towards the end of Jerrie's criminal trial. The incident emphasises that it is not just the media, but poetry too, that is compromised amidst the contemporary democracy. The poet Tiglon Tau-tona's cameo appearance makes little narrative sense. This highlights the obnoxious nature of his interruption of the trial and egotistic poetic display,

> Outside from nowhere boomed
> a disembodied voice. There,
> with amazing force and agility
> a burnished spearhead stabbed
> up, up, up into the sky.
> Ululation, chants and whistles

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[47] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp.49-50.
[48] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p.49.
[49] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp.49-50.

> announced Tiglon Tau-tona;
> official poet from Taung.[50]

The words describe the self-serving behavior of the praise poet Tiglon Tau-tona, the representative poet of the small town of Taung in South Africa's North-West province. Ostensibly, the poet Tiglon Tau-tona has arrived to praise Max and proclaim him an example of the extent to which animals should be considered equal, if not superior, to human beings. Even so, the way in which the poet arrives seemingly 'from nowhere' and draws attention to himself through exaggerated 'ululation, chants and whistles' suggests that his performance is designed to draw attention to his own public profile.[51] The words with which the poet chooses to laud Max are most flattering and probably contain some truth, such as the fact that gorillas have well-developed brains or that the Primate's strength impressively managed to subdue a public threat in the form of the criminal Jerrie,

> O Gorilla-man, sharp, agile and sure is your mind
> like Shaka's spear thrusting through the enemy's heart,
> you cleaved the human skull and stir-fried
> the Learned Brain.[52]

Tiglon Tau-tona fails to hit a note of integrity because it is unclear whether or not the language with which he praises and addresses Max has any cogent connection to the reality of the Gorilla's life or consciousness. The sharpness of the Gorilla's mind is lauded in hopelessly androcentric terms and compared to the spear of Shaka. Furthermore, towards the end of his performance Tiglon Tau-tona hails Max as the new 'Minister of Safety and Security'.[53] This comes off as entirely ridiculous given that species barriers, namely language, would make it impossible for Max to take up such a public position. Superficially, Tiglon Tau-tona critiques the value systems that deem that creatures such as Max are 'cash-cows' that pander to the whims of human society. At the same time, the poet himself appropriates the representation of an animal whose cogitations and embodied identity lie beyond his discourse.

In Tiglon-Tau-tona's performance, there is a certain affinity created between the oppression of animals and the struggles of ordinary black people. At one point, Tiglon Tau-tona heralds,

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[50] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.
[51] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.
[52] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p.88.
[53] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.

> a new chapter in our country:
> Animals have legal rights![54]

The lines create an implicit connection between the marginalised creatures of the animal world and black people who only gained equal citizenship under law in 1994. Dladla satirises Tiglon Tau-tona's campaign for the achievement of animal liberty in order to question the basis of rights-based rhetoric. The case of animals finally being granted equality becomes an example of the way in which merely ushering new groups into the arena of individuality and personhood fails to achieve real social justice. Just as 'rights' might not be meaningful entities to members of the animal kingdom, so the formal liberation of the black population does not resonate with the truth of lived identity in a post-Apartheid context of continued structural injustice.

Through satire, the narrator goes out of his way to create a sense of alienation from the genre of praise poetry. Tiglon Tau-tona's praise is described in terms reminiscent of that tradition but in the process, the representative of Taung, and the genre itself, are rendered absurd. Stock-type epithets describe the actions of Tiglon Tau-tona such as when he is said to jump 'like a masai warrior'.[55] The Poet carries a spear and arrows, which aligns him with warriors from traditional praise works. Yet despite the Poet's elaborate dress in the form of, 'a cap of horns, an ibis head-feather,[…] a leopard gown', his appearance is still curiously immature and lacking in charismatic presence.[56] This is implied in that Tiglon Tau-tona is mentioned to be beardless and to have an unimpressive complexion, which is

> sallow
> like the inside of a pumpkin.[57]

Furthermore, Tiglon Tau-tona is sketched as a somewhat mad personality with a wild bodily demeanour and he is not a figure one can readily admire. In this respect, his performance culminates in a full-blown fit when he is seen to 'collapse' and 'somersault'. The scene ends with,

> 'Arrows, ululation, kudu-horn, drums,
> vuvuzelas
>
> […in]
> the Jo'burg sky'.[58]

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[54] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.
[55] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.
[56] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.
[57] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 89.

This hyperbolic environ leaves one feeling disorientated and confused.[59] One is with left with a sense that a noble tradition has been violated, appropriated, and misused.

The fact that the traditional form of the praise poem fails to ring true in *Maxwell the Gorilla* indicates that this genre is potentially compromised in contemporary times, and is in need of being injected with a critical and satirical tone. Dladla's decision to deploy satire in order to undercut the elevated tones of both epic and praise poetry is arguably one way in which his work connects to Brechtian philosophies of alienation. It is salient that for Brecht, in order for an audience to understand the social milieu in which they find themselves, they must not be wholly engaged in the plot of a play but be able to retain a critical distance from it. The idea is that spectators will learn to be astonished and amazed by ordinary human behavior that is usually seen as normal and immutable, 'The new alienations are only designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today.'[60] In the process of recognising the contingency of the social structures around them, the audience will come to the realisation that these can be changed and that alternative political possibilities could come into being. Dladla surely achieves a degree of such alienation through using satire to render ridiculous traditionally grand genres and by questioning democratic discourse, namely the vocabulary of human rights. The achievement of *Maxwell the Gorilla* is to query the terms upon which the country has re-entered modernity in the post-Apartheid epoch.

Dladla's work is not only Brechtian in intent but also in terms of style. The various movements of *Maxwell the Gorilla* are strung together in a kind of disjointed montage. The technique is reminiscent of Brecht's injunction that, 'The episodes must not succeed one other indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment'.[61] In *Maxwell the Gorilla*, the reader is given ample opportunity to 'interpose' his or her own judgement between scenes represented and this is no more apparent than before and after movement four, which offers a startling break in narrative. Both the rupture in narrative, and movement four's

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[58] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 90.
[59] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 88-90.
[60] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 192.
[61] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 201.

special work in alienating contemporary democratic discourse, mean that it deserves close reading.

Movement four is entitled "Is Yegor Bewitched" and it is especially adept at playing on the generic expectations of epic in order to underline the political pitfalls of homogenous descriptions of black unity and democratic values in the new South Africa. The movement is a variation of the *Katabasis* or descent into the underworld. The latter is a stock characteristic of epic form where the hero typically receives greater knowledge or insight into the nature of his own character, destiny or fate. The section registers something of a wild shift in narrative. A Russian journalist known as Yegor takes on the role of the hero voyaging to a perilous subterranean realm. Yegor is a personality who emerges as a peripheral character in movement one when he is listed as a reporter from the *Novaya Gazeta*. He is initially mentioned alongside a panoply of reporters from around the world who have all made the journey to Johannesburg to cover the story of Max's encounter with a vicious criminal. Yegor is neither a narrator nor a principal character and the reader can be forgiven for forgetting his presence in the poem until his reappearance in section four. Movement four opens with Yegor being delivered via taxi to an institution called Kyalami Earthlife Academy situated in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg. The reader is not precisely told what this academy is or why Yegor is brought there but from the outset it is clear that it provides a stark contrast to the violence and inequity rife in Johannesburg's urban centre. In the course of the descent into the academy, Max plays Virgil to Yegor's Dante as the primate greets the journalist and guides him into the interior of what is described as 'Mount Jozi',

> Down they walked to the bowels of the mountain.
>
> […]
>
> Down there a stone door opened to a polished tunnel
> carved through a colossal rock.
> There were relief sculptures seconded
> by bold writings on the walls:
>
> "EARTH FAMILY.
> SI MUNYE — NO DUALITY.
> INTERSPECIES COMMUNION.
> CRADLE OF A NEW LIFE."[62]

[62] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, pp. 92-93.

While the status of the academy remains mysterious, one is given to understand that it is a place where humans, animals, inhabitants of multiple nationalities, and even beings from other planets peacefully co-habit in dialogue and harmony. As in epic, Dladla's writing seeks to explore topics of great magnitude and portrays the possibility of a utopic underworld, or 'earth family', beneath a city filled with strife. The discourse of unity amidst diversity, propounded in the Academy, will be of note to any reader even vaguely acquainted with the post-Apartheid Rainbow nation and the liberties enshrined in its constitution. The description of the academy by one of its members is exemplary of this,

> As you have a human race,' continued the man
> blithely, 'there are billions of races in the galaxies,
> entirely different from one another.
> The difference is, outer space and inner space
> cherish and celebrate similarity, differences
>
> […]
>
> In space-worlds there is no discrimination,
> no prejudice, no sectarianism, no fear,
> no doubt, no exploitation.
> We visit one another as you visit your lovers,
> friends, relatives, co-workers and others.
> In space-worlds, no visas, no passports, no money
> as we don't need your papers to be here.[63]

While the description of Kyalami is obviously utopian, the vision of its life-enhancing properties is complicated. The conventions of epic dictate that this *katabasis* will be a descent into the realm of the dead, which lends an unfamiliar and even eerie tone to the celebration of a harmonious and bountiful life beneath the Johannesburg Mountains. Generic expectations lead one to question the moral status of a cosmic space in which no 'visas', 'passports' or 'money' are required and all discrimination has perished. One is also suspicious of Kyalami's discourse against 'prejudice' and 'fear', given that the institution is introduced through a dark, satirical tone at the inception of the movement. This is evident in the lines,

> On Mount Jozi in the northern suburbia,
> far from rumbling walls and sallow hills
> of exhausted mines and social ills,
> like the kingdom of the fairies, nestles
> Kyalami Earthlife Academy.[64]

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[63] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 107.
[64] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 91.

The academy is envisaged as a privileged site removed from the trauma of difficult social struggle in the rest of Johannesburg. One is reminded of the elitism of the Kyalami race track, which has hosted South Africa's Grand Prix many times. The rhyming couplet lends an air of frivolity to the academy's existence whilst the fact that it remains so comfortable in the face of socioeconomic hardship cause one to marvel how it can justify its prosperity in a context in which others lack security and have little or nothing to live on. The fact that 'hills' rhymes with 'ills' creates an implicit connection between the mountain of the academy and possible ills or calamity, suggesting that Kyalami may be more ethically dubious than at first appears. Qumqum's tone of levity mocks the institution in much the same way as he ridicules the chaotic world of urban Johannesburg. One is given to understand that this academy is not a more just alternative to the corruption of the urban centre.

When considering these questions, an important scene to examine is that in which Yegor gets a clear revelation of the nature of prayer from the fantastic and extra-terrestrial members of the academy, which include animals such as pythons, cats and dolphins fluent in Russian not to mention an Archbishop hailing from the second planet after Pluto. In a supernatural encounter, resembling a scene from science fiction, Yegor is humbled in the face of cosmic insights and asks for instruction on how to pray from the powerful creature Mother Zam

> Oh, Grandma Zam, I can't figure out
> what is happening within me,' he kneels,
> 'Please pray for me, please, Grandma Zam.
> 'I'm Half-Communist, Half-Whatyoucall it,
> I-don't-know. Teach me to pray.[65]

Grandma Zam responds in a fashion that is both hyperbolic and bizarre, parodying a discourse of self-discovery,

> True prayer is personal. It turns outside in.
>
> […]
>
> Why you don't listen
> to the sincere voice
> and true feelings
> from the G-spot of your being?
> Concern only with yourself, Yegor Griboyedov,
> absorb yourself into your inner Voice and Feelings.[66]

[65] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 99.

It is hard to take Grandma Zam's injunctions seriously. Her advice to Yegor, which includes listening to his 'sincere voice and true feelings', comes off as ridiculous given the absurd nature of the phrase, 'the g-spot of your being'. Zam's exaggerated and repetitive instructions for Yegor to ignore all that is around him, focus on himself and do absolutely nothing are blatantly satirical,

> 'Concern only with yourself, Yegor Griboyedov,
> absorb yourself into the Self
>
> […]
>
> Think of nothing, nothing, nothing.
> Go inside, inside, inside
> and do nothing, nothing'.[67]

The basis of the individual wisdom and personal reflection Zam promotes is founded on hazy notions of 'energy' and 'the cosmos'.[68] This grants personal truth a mythic quality, rendering it potentially groundless. One can interpret the extract as constituting a critique of a social harmony and peace that is rooted in a sense of the sacrosanct individual and personal rights. The passage conveys that a true utopia needs a sturdier foundation than one in which its constituent members embark on singular journeys. After reading Grandma Zam's words, the realm of the utopian academy far more closely resembles a modern-day hades but not an underworld from which a hero learns valuable lessons. The academy presents a world in which the dream of equality for all individuals in South Africa, and indeed the galaxy, has been achieved. Through distortion of epic convention, and skilful use of satire, the attainment of that dream is portrayed as unfulfilling and weird. One is prompted to reflect on South Africa's constitution, which 'enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom'.[69] In Kyalami such harmony is finally attained but its darker characteristics, and satiric depiction, suggest that if a new, progressive society is to be built then it needs to draw away from an ideology of individual rights. Dladla creates distance from the value system readers have been taught to endorse in the post-Apartheid nation and potential is created for the consideration of new social structures.

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[66] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 99-101.
[67] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 99-101.
[68] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 99-101.
[69] "7. Rights, Chapter 2: Bill of Rights", in *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, <http://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights#7> [Accessed 16/09/2016].

Dladla's satiric depiction of the self arguably offers a political alternative to the ethos of individual empowerment that underpins the nefarious patronage network of the African National Congress, a system that only benefits a select few at the expense of the many. Dladla's writing offers a sharp contrast to key government strategies of promoting racial equality such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment. An example of the difference in outlook between the Poet's social vision and that of contemporary government policy is evident in the National General Council document of 2015 on Economic Transformation. A stated aim of the latter is to:

> *Crowd-in new Black Industrialists* to build a dynamic and competitive class of black industrial players; advertently accumulating and disposing of industrial capital in line with the social objectives of breaking the racial domination of South Africa's economic assets. By Black Industrialists, we refer to black people directly involved in the origination, creation, significant ownership, management and operation of industrial enterprises that derive value from the manufacturing of goods and services at a large scale; acting to unlock the productive potential of our country's capital-assets for massive employment locally.[70]

There is a stated economic aim based upon individual ownership and competitiveness amongst empowered members of the industrial sector. Given the dereliction of South Africa's manufacturing sector, the government document is no less bizarre than Grandma Zam's Kyalami.[71] An unacknowledged premise behind the policy is the inherent worth of individual persons and the right of blacks to catch up to whites in the South African economy. This liberal understanding of politics accords with Fanon's contention that the new national bourgeoisie of formerly colonised countries appropriates western values, and 'does not hesitate to maintain a pretense of democratic ideals'.[72] Such notions of competing persons, who are all seen as equally worthy, are seldom questioned in South Africa or in major diplomatic bodies such as the United Nations. Dladla's poem distinguishes itself from the mainstream of liberal, capitalist ideology by repeatedly performing acts of philosophical and existential interrogation that complicate the position of the self in society. The reader is left perturbed, disturbed, and wondering if a just and equitable social world necessarily equates to the individual self-realisation of all its members.

The fact that Kyalami is a failed utopia is supported by the conventions of epic, which dictate that the backdrop to a *katabasis* will be an underworld. This generic expectation casts a sinister aura

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[70] "Economic Transformation", *in NGC Discussion Documents 2015*, Umrabulo, p.63 <http://www.anc.org.za/docs/umrabulo/2015/ngc_disc_docsy.pdf > [Accessed 16/09/2016].
[71] Johnson notes the dilapidation of the manufacturing sector in South Africa; Cf. RW Johnson, *How Long Will South Africa Survive?* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), pp. 158-159.
[72] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York, Grove Press, 1963), p.109.

over the academy and its members. Dladla's poem grimly suggests the non-existence of an outside or expanse to a city that is primarily depicted as a site of enclosures: the zoo, the prison, and now a cavern. Movement four ends unresolved with Yegor being greeted by a humble peasant man in brown clothes hailing from the past. It is not stated what becomes of Yegor but it is possible he is transported backwards in time to the early years of communist Russia intimating a re-connection with the ideals of the Soviet Union into which he was born. Unlike in the conventional aftermath of a *katabasis*, one does not see Yegor return to the world above enriched by his newfound knowledge.

The poem's closing movements focus on scenes in which Jerrie apologises to Max from within prison and Lisa gives birth to Max's son. Finally, Max passes away and the scene involving Kyalami is never revisited. The lack of revelation in Dladla's *katabatic* exploration expresses that his epic does not depict clear-cut visions of social harmony nor future political unity. *Maxwell the Gorilla* creates cause for critical reflection on existing liberal democracy but it does not seek to carve out alternative political futures.

Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve leaves the reader with serious questions to ponder. The epic scale of the poem provides a grand framework against which the reader is prompted to think more deeply over what a utopian or hellish society might look like. Such issues are not resolved but remain suspended and unanswered at the poem's closing where Qumqum breaks off into a trance-like medley of languages including Afrikaans, English, Haitian Creole, Swahili and Zulu as he announces the end of the story and a withdrawal from the city, retreating into an ancient time-space of Khoisan traditions. The narrator poignantly ends with the words that 'there is a dreamer dreaming us', which encapsulates the meta-level at which the poem operates.[73] Its miscellany of forms and voices provides different frames on contemporary events, forcing the reader to acknowledge the contingent presentation of the world in which s/he lives. Behind Qumqum's voice presumably lies the perspective of Dladla who has become a master at manipulating generic instability in order to depict a society that has potentially reached the outer limits of its expressive possibilities. Moving beyond lyric, the poet charts the terrain of epic, satire, and even science fiction in order to surprise and distort the expectations of all these genres. The sense of alienation created between the reader and recognisable forms is comparable to the aims of

[73] Dladla, *Maxwell the Gorilla and the Archbishop of Soshanguve*, p. 145.

Brechtian theatre but is distinctly of its own time in terms of content, technique and tone. Dladla's seemingly apocalyptic melange of forms is symptomatic of the impending sense of crisis and national change in South Africa. Arguably, nascent social structures might in turn prompt unprecedented aesthetics. For now, one is left to consider the changing oeuvre of an artist who has sought to exploit those literary styles that best spotlight the nation's deepest questions of identity, political empowerment and governmental stability.

Conclusion

This thesis offers fresh insight into the complex relationship between socioeconomic power and aesthetic form in post-Apartheid South Africa. This has been achieved through paying close attention to particular writers, working through a series of concrete case studies in order to spotlight specific instances of creative work that push at the boundaries of expressive possibility in South Africa today. In all of the writing I have examined, formal dexterity is never mere play nor a display of aesthetic prowess for its own sake. Stylistic decisions are imbued with ideological weight and come to be seen as strategies for negotiating a social terrain in which over-simplified messages of media, government, and the corporate world no longer hold traction with the masses.

Even though the poetry in this thesis is sometimes challenging to interpret, this is not work that pitches itself to an elite audience but aims to share its insights with ordinary people and to harness literature as a force for community justice. A writer such as Rampolokeng may be deliberately obscure and reject the notion that poetry should have 'a message', but the desire to hold corrupt power to account and raise critical consciousness permeates his oeuvre. This is evident in that he has sought to reappraise the role of indigenous South African praise poetry through acting as an antagonistic and critical public voice. In a related vein, Bila is strident in his belief that poetry should speak to the life-experiences of South Africa's disempowered majority. In my interview with him in Timbila village in August 2015 he stated, 'we should try to learn to make the language of poetry accessible'.[1] For his own part, Dladla is such a firm advocate of the 'democratisation' of literature that he even introduces such concepts into the creative writing workshops he runs, most prominently in the Femba project. In this regard, he contends,

> Imaginative writing is not only for the elite – even those relegated to the margins of society can write memorable work if given skills and opportunities. Once our libraries and bookshops have narratives from all sections of our communities, we will broaden the readership, share our humanity, and finally declare, "We are truly liberated!"[2]

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[1] Alice Meyer, "Interview with Vonani Bila" (Elim: August 2015).
[2] Angifi Dladla, "Demystifying Writing and the Democratisation of the Story and Knowledge", *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 27: 2 (2015), 86-95 (p.86).

Dladla articulates a view of creative writing that does not endorse the notion of individual genius nor a belief that quality work necessarily comes from privileged contexts. For him, just about anyone can be an accomplished writer and a more robust South African reading public will develop once there are books on library shelves that reflect the perspectives and aesthetics of all the country's people.[3] For the writers in this thesis, poetry traverses the boundary between 'high' and 'low' culture and also addresses ordinary people as gifted, intelligent citizens. Such a model of art constitutes a radical political agenda in the historical context of the notorious Bantu Education system, especially considering the extent to which this educational infrastructure patronised the intellect of black South Africans.

When analysing the political relevance of the work of Ari Sitas, Lesego Rampolokeng, Seitlhamo Motsapi, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Vonani Bila, and Angifi Dladla, it is worthy of note that the power of their social commentary goes well beyond the model of 'protest art'. Given the sophisticated and sometimes obtuse ways this literature approaches social issues; it betokens a new kind of engagement with politics. Ari Sitas's mercurial perspectives, Nyezwa's surrealist lyric or Dladla's exuberant and fantastical imagination do not neatly assimilate into any working social agenda. One would be at pains to read any of this work didactically or to use it to follow a programmatic political plan. Even so, this poetry can play a vital role in reawakening public imagination to potentially utopian possibilities, hence creating alternatives to the status quo. In this regard, I have argued that post-Apartheid poetry crafts new lenses through which to view the political realm. The poetry's form has a material analogue in the 'world-making' properties that Alan Finlay grants to independent poetry publishing in South Africa, a scene in which the writers under discussion are deeply embedded. Through community projects such as *Timbila* and *Kotaz* poets are involved in a process of anti-capitalist production that complements the anti-commercial nature of their writing. These poets may not have concrete solutions to social dilemmas but through rejuvenating language they counter neoliberal and corporate discourse and invent new ways of seeing the world. In so doing, alternative possibilities for social organisation come into being. The poetry fosters creative public dialogue, allowing readers to dream of dynamic and innovative ways to live.

[3] Dladla, "Demystifying Writing and the Democratisation of the Story and Knowledge", p. 92.

In this post-Apartheid poetry, there is a commitment to process as opposed to 'product'. Writers refuse for their labour to become a standardised commodity of capitalist labour. Here, one can point to the way in which Sitas's poem "Marikana" went viral on the Internet before the writer himself had a chance to reflect upon the material or mark it with a stamp of ownership. The importance of the poem was established through fast-paced circulation that preceded formal publication. One can also note Rampolokeng's style, which often operates as an endless stream of consciousness that can hardly be contained by the parameters of the page. The questions and social comments he throws out create a seemingly inexhaustible poetic energy that endlessly plays out in the minds of his readership. Similarly, Dladla has likened the experiment of writing to the procedures of science, 'There is something in common between a writer and a scientist […] Draft after draft or experiment after experiment do not indicate failure; but a signpost to openings that lead to art and the portal of wonder.'[4] One sees a rejection of the idea that art has to be 'perfect' but instead writing is conceived as an unfinished project with potentially limitless possibilities. This investment in process might mean that for some readers, post-Apartheid poetry can at times seem untidy, blunt, aggressive or unruly. Even so, it is a mode of writing that promotes exchange, dialogue, debate, and anti-elitism while rejecting the idea that poetry can be consumed or owned like any other product.

With regret, it must be noted that the effervescent burst of creativity in post-Apartheid poetry has somewhat lulled in recent years. The poets in this study came to prominence in the mid-1990s at a time when previously undreamt of possibilities seemed open for South Africa's disadvantaged people. While all the poets in this dissertation, with the exception of Motsapi, continue to produce fresh material, it has to be acknowledged that their legacy has not been built upon by a younger generation, who are in large are not producing experimental, cutting edge poetry. One reason for this might be the cultural ennui engendered by the post-Apartheid dispensation. In the wake of the African National Congress's numerous failings, there is a sense in which the country is becoming 'post-post-Apartheid' and hope in a brighter future has begun to wane. The importance of this thesis lies in capturing a unique bubble of aesthetic and political vitality in South Africa's history and holding fast to its legacy.

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[4] Dladla, "Demystifying Writing and the Democratisation of the Story and Knowledge", p. 91.

It is my hope that this doctoral thesis is one of many studies on post-Apartheid poetry, which as mentioned in this introduction, is of a calibre that deserves meticulous and sustained reading from scholars in the academy. Due to the limits of a doctoral thesis, much of my work has had to be introductory and more criticism needs to be written on the aesthetic form of the writers under examination. Academics might well find that the range of influences and techniques in post-Apartheid poetry challenge conventional poetic categories and enhance the academy's understanding of the significance of poetry in the world today. Given the spread of globalisation, and the extent to which international poetry has forged the creative outlooks of these poets, I urge that the innovations of the writers in question be viewed as contributing to a global canon of experimental poetry. Classifying these poets as purely 'South African writers' is dismissive. It does not do justice to their formal repertoire nor does it take on board their challenges to Eurocentric art.

Finally, it appears that one cannot conclusively define either poetry or politics but can rather say that poetry is able depict new possibilities for the political. One sees this in Sitas's exploration of perspective, Motsapi's disdain for corrupt forms of discourse, Rampolokeng's reinvention of the word, Nyezwa's surreal engagement with a sordid reality, Bila's spirit of resistance, and Dladla's dramatisation of bureaucratic folly. In all of this writing, conventional modes of utterance and easy sloganeering are subverted. This constitutes an effort to rethink the tenants of democracy in South Africa today. Arguably, if the post-Apartheid state is to reclaim its liberation, it is these kinds of cognitive processes, procedures that reconsider the structural and cultural organisation of society that will be key to any redemptive social project.

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