**Poetry in South Africa**

**Towards a Language of Aesthetic Response**

Michael Chapman

This article has two interrelated aims: first, to offer readers a critical survey of poetry production in South Africa over the last thirty years, the thirty-year period being preceded by a consideration of key markers in the poetry of the 1970s and 1980s; second, to engage in debates on distinctions between the poetry of the high mimetic and the low mimetic; on poetry of the page and the stage; and on women’s poetry and the womanist poem. With consideration of women’s poetry having raised debates among US-based poet-critics on Lyric/L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics, the overarching objective is to pursue a language of criticism that is responsive to the aesthetic range and variety of poetry in South Africa.

**Keywords**: poetry in South Africa 1970-2022; aesthetics/politics; written and oral expression; the lyric; L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics; page/stage; women’s voices/the womanist poem

This article has two interrelated aims: first, to offer readers a critical survey of poetry production in South Africa over the last thirty years, the thirty-year period being preceded by a consideration of key markers in the poetry of the 1970s and 1980s; second, to engage in debates on distinctions between the poetry of the high mimetic and the low mimetic; on poetry of the page and the stage; and on women’s poetry and the womanist poem. With consideration of women’s poetry having raised debates among US-based poet-critics on Lyric/L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics, the overarching objective is to pursue a language of criticism that is responsive to the aesthetic range and variety of poetry in South Africa.

The poetry scene has been and continues to be sustained by small, independent publishers, by occasional festivals, and/or Slam events, and – where most readers read poetry – by anthologies. The two prominent and comprehensive anthologies are *A Century of South African Poetry* (1981), revised in 2002 and updated in 2018 as *The New Century of South African Poetry*, and republished and updated numerous times and devoted solely to Afrikaans poetry, *Groot verseboek*.1 No anthology of equivalent comprehensiveness is devoted to poetry in the African languages of South Africa. The inclusion, in translation, of representative Afrikaans poems and African-language poems has become a feature of *The New Century* but – poetry translation being a difficult and scarce skill and/or art – the emphasis of *The New Century* remains poetry written or spoken originally in English. In fact, when we talk of ‘South African poetry’, we usually infer poems in English. Poetry in Afrikaans retains its nomenclature of ‘Afrikaans Poetry’. We have Zulu poetry, Xhosa poetry, Sotho poetry, Tswana poetry, and Venda poetry, the indigenous languages usually categorised together as African-language poetry. The expression of First People (Bushmen/San and Khoi) has arrived to us in both English and Afrikaans translation, or perhaps ‘re-creation’ is the more appropriate term. My point is that the current article, written mainly for a readership conversant with English, cannot avoid its own English-language preference in selection and commentary.

While the economics of sales and readership play a role in the kind of anthology that is published, poetry is neither well served in schools (where, for the most part, meanings are extracted from texts with scant attention to the structure of the poem) nor in university literature courses where poetry occupies a minor role alongside that of prose fiction. (Who would have taught the teachers how to teach poetry?)2 Literary criticism of poetry is not a major enterprise. Over the last thirty years, there have been, in English, only two monographs on poets (on Douglas Livingstone and Sydney Clouts)3 while articles on poetry occur sporadically in literary journals. A consequence of sporadic interest is that the articles do not always show knowledge of, or recognise or acknowledge, the contribution of existing commentary.

Such a parsimony of local recognition or acknowledgement characterises several articles on poetry criticism by the poet and academic, Kelwyn Sole.4 In ‘“Here it is safe to assume nothing at all”: Aesthetics and the Impasse of South African Poetry Criticism’ (2016: 85-98) Sole begins with a mischaracterisation: that ‘the antimony of “formal” versus “sociological” approaches, first criticised by [Jeremy] Cronin three decades ago, is still present, and mars any attempt by critics to understand and assess the diversity of the output of South African poets more fully’ (85). He goes on to pose the question, ‘hyperbolically’, as to whether such a thing as ‘South African poetry’ exists, ‘whether there is at hand a sufficiently general and embracing system of analysis and apperception to enable discussion of the manifold manifestations of poetry in South Africa from a relatively assured basis, so that readers and audiences can begin to widen the judgements from an incorporative position’ (90). The lyric, he avers, is the resilient form in anthologies, but what is lost is a willingness to problematise the relationship between the individual lyrical voice and the social community (88). I shall return to the matter of the lyric in the course of this article; we may note here that Sole’s contention of an ongoing dichotomy between the formal and the sociological is taken out of its originating context: that of the heated ‘culture wars’ of the dying days of apartheid, captured in abbreviation (the value of the individual voice versus the collective voice of worker struggle) not only by Cronin (1985), but also in Lionel Abrahams’s reply to a subsequent response by Jeremy Cronin (both, 1987) as well as in Stephen Watson’s attack on the ‘politicisation’ of poetry (1990 [1985]). Readers may judge the adequacy of Sole’s generalisation – formal versus sociological – by turning to the several articles on poetry in South Africa, listed in the References, that both predate and postdate the contretemps between Cronin and Abrahams. To move to Sole’s question on whether such a thing as ‘South African poetry’ exists, I have suggested something of the difficulty of language categorisation. Nonetheless, anthologists, whether in South Africa, England, the United States, or wherever, are driven by publishing demands to incorporate in titles phrases such as ‘of South African poetry’ or ‘of American poetry’. At the same time, no anthologist would be able to, or would wish to, fit all the poetry of any country into an all-embracing system of analysis and apperception. The ‘blurb’ of the *Groot verseboek* (as translated into English), for example, talks of a landscape of Afrikaans poetry, originally marked only by whites, but now expanded to encompass brown and black voices as well. There is nostalgia, prophetic inspiration, with sonnets and haikus and odes and crosswords and lullabies and hard-boiled realism, with the erotic and the sardonic, with blasphemy and the sly or the iconoclastic. There is sexual excess, forgiveness or blame, femininity and masculinity, childhood and unforgiving approaches of old age and death. It is such range and diversity that I attempt to address in my Introduction to *The New Century of South African Poetry* (Chapman 2018: xix-xxv), the genesis of which I now turn.

**Looking Back**

As I indicated above, the title, *The New Century…*, suggests the title of the earlier anthology, *A Century of South African Poetry*. In politically turbulent times, the 1981 anthology aimed in its representations to broaden the range and variety of poetry written by South Africans, or about South Africa, by challenging Guy Butler’s conclusion to his important Oxford *Book of South African Verse* (1959): that, regrettably, South African poetry – he confined his remarks to poetry in English – had no popular songs but was an ‘educated man’s affair’ (xix). In response, *A Century* excavated early periodical verse and long-forgotten collections in search of popular or colloquial voices, occasional poems, and the rhetorical, satirical, derisory, and polemical expression of a cantankerous and contentious public life. Alongside the serious, though somewhat derivative words of Thomas Pringle – this 1820 Scottish settler is, or was, usually billed as the Father of South African Poetry –

Afar in the Desert I love to ride.

With the silent Bush-boy alone by my side:

Away – away – in the Wilderness vast,

Where the White Man’s foot hath never passed.

(*from* ‘Afar in the Desert’, in Chapman, ed., 1981: 35-7)

we encounter the rough-hewn ‘settler’ voices of the periodical press:

Two gentlemen shoemakers, my shipmate Jack and me,

Took a start to Algoa Bay, a precious way by sea;

We went among the blacks, to make our fortins, you must know,

For mayn’t shoemakers look for trade, where people barefoot go?

(Frederic Brooks, *from* ‘The Emigrant Shoemakers; or, A Trip to Algoa Bay’,

in Chapman, ed., 1981: 42-4)

In contrast to the 1981 anthology, *The New Century* of 2002 does not begin with the 1820 Settlers. Instead, it begins with the chants, prayers, songs, and stories of the First People of the subcontinent:

Xkoagu, give me your heart

that you may sit with in plenty.

Take my heart, my heart

small and famished without hope

so that like you I too may be full

for I hunger.

(*from* ‘Prayer to the Hunting Star, Canopus’, in Chapman, ed., 2002: 3-4)

These words arrive on the pages of the anthology by an admittedly complex and circuitous route: from fragments told by grandparents to mid-19th-century ‘semi-colonised’ Bushmen; to be transcribed and translated from the now extinct click language initially by the German linguist at the Cape, Dr W H I Bleek, and his sister-in-law, Lucy C Lloyd (1968 [1911]), and reworked subsequently by, among others, the poet and short-story writer Jack Cope, as in the lines above.5

The challenge of *The New Century* – more so than its predecessor of 1981 – was to subject diverse, even disparate poems to a common field of consideration. Its vantage points were two ‘ends’ of significance: the end of apartheid (1994), at least legislative if not economic apartheid, and the end of the Cold War. *The New Century* revisits the poetry from a dual perspective: South Africa wishes to rejoin the world as it searches for a ‘post-apartheid’ identity, or sense of a home. The key criterion of selection ties the imagination to a compelling life experience.

It is a life experience that at times deliberately undermines the high imagination of the modernist. In revisiting poets who have evidently been influenced by early twentieth-century Euro-American modernism – in its romantic-symbolism, imagism, and abrupt juxtapositions – I perceive among several South African poets a certain discomfort in inhabiting, entirely, the art-world of the poem. Roy Campbell’s colonial boorishness in the 1920s struggled against its own admiration of high literary tradition. N P van Wyk Louw’s massive image-structures in the 1930s cannot exclude the voice of the Afrikaner Calvinist disgusted at people’s eagerness to embrace crass materialism. As in D J Opperman in the 1950s and 1960s, Douglas Livingstone’s crafted images are strangely susceptible to small observations and sympathies, as in the following lines from his last collection, *A Littoral Zone* (1991). This is a collection described by Peter Sacks as ‘one of the finest and most crucial works to have emerged anywhere in contemporary poetry’ (1992: n.p.):

The mess on the sand incredible:

scraps, vomit and cartons abound.

Most redolent of Decembers!

…

meat was grilled on the embers;

crushed beer cans and ashes lie mute.

The approximation to justice

the perfectibility of man,

the conservation of beauty,

the final attainment of truth

our salients that ever evade us,

part of our yoke in being human;

the striving still almost a duty

and part of the joke on our youth.

(*from* ‘The Christmas Chefs of Station 1A’, 1991: 12)

Once the preserve of Afrikanerdom, the braai (or barbecue) is now the shared experience of a cross-section of South Africans, even if not regarded by some as ‘politically correct’. We note the poet’s ironic tolerance of us, ‘the clowns of creation’. Is it a yoke or a joke or both –

the poet, by profession a marine bacteriologist, poses the question in *A Littoral Zone* – that our ethical strivings (in culture) continue to vie with the instincts of our biology?

Whereas T S Eliot’s Euro-American modernism preferred archetypes to people, the archetypes in Livingstone and Opperman retain human fallibility. (Similarly in several other poets whose first work precedes the last thirty years, including Antjie Krog, Wilma Stockenström, and Breyten Breytenbach.) Whereas Eliot believed that modern poetry was bound to be difficult, poetry in South Africa often achieves an immediacy of communication.

This ‘communicability’ characterises the unusual range of poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. The period demanded new perceptions and new languages for a society in transition. As Nadine Gordimer (1988) put it in quoting Antonio Gramsci (1971 [1920s], the old (apartheid) order was dying; the new struggled to be born. Seeking a role, poets grasped at the loose ends of a modernist/anti-modernist habit. They attached status either to the permanence of the well-made artefact as a bulwark against politicking or to word weapons with which to bash in the heads of the (white) bourgeoisie. In ‘The Poet as a Clever Invention’, elements of modernist eccentricity and game-playing serve paradoxically to highlight what the German-educated Peter Horn – with Bertolt Brecht’s ‘anti-poetry’ in mind – sees as the literary and ideological shortcomings of those very modernist elements:

in purple shirt and orange tie

half-automated beauty-dispenser

i am a clever invention

of careless homicides

who wash their souls

in Ajax and Ulysses

looking at you I realise: 1 bottle of beer

is better than 1 volume of poetry

of any FORM & CONTENT poet

looking at you I realise: the only

adequate criticism

of the society

would be

TO BASH IN YOUR HEADS.

(1974: 33)

Relying irreverently on allusions to classical heroes and a well-known South African brand of washing powder (AJAX – The Foaming Cleanser) Horn sets up the inventive image only to knock it down. Individuality of response – whether in the modernist sense of strange visionary or the more traditional sense of fine conscience – is felt to constitute a cultural annexation on the part of the bourgeois middle class (a taming of the power of popular gut sentiment); form-making, including the crafted line and ‘pure’ lyrical expression, is similarly dismissed in favour of blunt statement. For the latter is the only kind of utterance – Horn would seem to say – that is likely to be understood by a society which has vilified and demeaned all that is precious and human in most of its citizens. The art of the unattractive – to the anti-poet – can have its own kind of beauty: a moral beauty that is dependent on an appropriate language register of socio-economic truth.

In contrast, Horn’s contemporary, Patrick Cullinan, achieves resonance without recourse to the dramatic image or gesture. His clear, lucid, and conversational tones are polished and unobtrusive yet have the necessary flexibility and ironic insight to accommodate the local situation at the edges of empire. In ‘The Billiard Room’ a father-son relationship is allowed to mirror a clash of generations between a self-confident colonialism and its latter-day inheritance in ‘tokens of power’ rather than in a continuum of culture that is lively and sustaining:

The play of his power,

the living, you can smell

it in this room: the cues glitter like weapons,

the green nap of the table

was a battleground for him where conflicts broke

in the strategy of the game.

…

Though I stand by a half open window

and breathe in the air

the dust still stays about me,

raised by a step on the floor,

and the smell that comes up is the smell of old power,

and breaking love, unfinished war.

(1978: 49)

Flooded by his memories of an encrusted ritual, by the relics of gentlemanly sport and the ceremonies of an older order, the son finds little vantage point from which to view an altered world.

If Soweto 1976 signalled the beginning of the ‘unfinished war’ – the 16 June march by schoolchildren against the enforced teaching of Afrikaans; the callous response of the apartheid police who shot children dead – the poetry scene of the 1970s may be defined by what were called the New Black Poets, and later (in 1982), the Soweto poets.6 With Mongane Wally Serote as probably the most forceful and versatile of these poets, we have alongside his lyrically restrained ‘For Don M Banned’ – ‘it is a dry white season/… but seasons come to pass’ (1974: 58) – the direct statement of ‘What’s in This Black “Shit”’: ‘I said it in his face, /A thing my father wouldn’t dare do./ That’s what’s in this black “Shit”’ (1972: 8). Parallel with the graphic depictions of ghetto life in ‘Death Survey’ –

i saw them take a kierie and try to beat out some brain

out of a boy who was kneeling and trying to scream

frightened

i ran loose

to Frank’s place at ninth avenue and found that the bulldozer

had been there –

(1974: 11)

there is the surrealistic nightmare of ‘A Poem on Black and White’:

if i pour petrol on a white child’s face

and give flames the taste of his flesh

it won’t be a new thing

i wonder how I will feel when his eyes pop

and when my nostrils sip the smell of his flesh

and his scream touches my heart

i wonder if I will be able to sleep.

(1974: 11)

Similarly, in ‘Sunset’ the poet cries out after bloody revolution:

it will be a brand-new destination,

that night,

black child’s laughter will ring in the dark sky.

(1974: 62)

But having successfully inverted the literary associations of ‘sunshine’ and ‘night’ and having surprise the reader by presenting night as the time of black truth, Serote is forced to admit to a painful qualification: ‘Only/I wonder where I’ll cleanse my hands’ (62).

Thus, Serote’s consciousness is revealed in conflict with its own contradictory revolutionary and African-humanist impulses; in conflict too with the respective ideas of revolutionary justice and a Shakespearean-Christian guilt. Though this suggests a personality divided against itself, one caught between the demands of ‘popular’ and ‘bourgeois-romantic’ moralities, such a response is felt by the poet to be real as opposed to ideal. The terrors consequent upon a course of political activism are not minimised but are envisioned together with the poet’s commitment to processes of upheaval and change.

Serote’s determination to represent community feeling began to be dictated by the energies of an oral impulse. As he sought to move beyond text-bound communication to the expressive statement, he turned to a hyperbolic, ‘boasting’ imagery like that of the traditional praise poem. This is evident in ‘Introit’:

I have lain on my back

flat like a long dead reptile

I lie here while my load clutches my heart like a frightened child

And the horrors of my stomach throbbed to my eyes

I am a black man child

I am he who has defeated defeat.

(1972: 20)

Though ‘Introit’ avoids the metaphoric allusiveness of the praise poem, the pounding rhythms and the heroic, larger-than-life figures in the landscape find antecedents in the conventional nineteenth-century panegyric, for example in ‘Praises to King Shaka’ (an extract translated from the isiZulu by Jack Cope):

Son of the righteous one

he who thunders on the ground,

bird, devourer of other birds,

great leaper who bounds over all others.

(In Chapman and Dangor, eds, 1982: 23)

If in Serote there are echoes of the praise poem (the isibongo), there are also echoes of other modes of expression such as the Christian litany, the ballad, and the jazz score. The volatile circumstances of Soweto 76, in fact, entertained concepts of poetry-turned-theatre: the elevation of oral improvisation above a Western, Platonic sense of Ideal Form. While stage spectacle undoubtedly has a legitimacy within any aesthetic of poetry-turned-theatre, once the poet chooses to compromise his position as oral spokesperson and appear in print, he automatically subscribes to the demands of a visually directed, as opposed to an auditory-directed, convention. The difficulty then becomes one of finding a printed form able to shape the oral expression of the poem, one that actively negates the poem as written text, as ‘memorial for contemplation’, and affirms it is a transcript for performance.

Just as his African American counterpart Amiri Baraka often seeks to transfer his voice from the role of the teller to that of the agent of destruction, so does Mafika Gwala. In ‘Getting off the Ride’, the power of the oral mode is arrested, and a ‘crafted impurity’ is sought, one capable of encompassing the urgency of political content:

…

I hear the sound of African drums beating

to freedom songs; and the sounds of the Voice come:

Khunga, Khunga!

Untshu, Untshu!

…

The Voice Speaks:

‘I’m the Voice that moves with the Black Thunder

I’m the Wrath of the Moment

…

I leave in stealth

and return in Black anger

O…m! Ohhh…mmmm! O….hhhhhmmmm!!!’

(1977: 67-8)

Whereas Serote usually proceeds by visual definition even as he reaches beyond imagist limits, Gwala elevates sound above sight. In a mix of praise song and the rhythms of jive, he seeks to elevate tone above phonetic elements: to give sound its meaning. ‘Getting off the Ride’ insists that in a human universe the human being is the principle of organisation and it is this principle that becomes the form of the poem. In a situation of crisis, there is felt to be little time for what Gwala might term the ‘luxury’ of contemplation. Instead, one perception must immediately follow another with the poem composed hurriedly and ‘imperfectly’ at points along the road of history. In such circumstances, the poet is compelled to break out of privacy into a field of collective experience. By naming in public invocation, by locating himself within the sphere of identifiable Black Experience, by chronicling the times and enunciating a programme of consciousness-raising, the poet spokesperson creates a voice that does not remain with the individual but becomes communal, striving to make speakers of the audience in a pattern of call-and-response.

Such a description of poetry as expressive act also applies to Baraka’s poetic practice in the United States. Both poets realised commitment in a fusion of African, Marxist and projectivist techniques, in which the common concept of Life as Energy complies with a central tenet of African ontological thought. Behind the attempts to privilege sound above sight as the mark of apprehension, we recognise not only the ideals of solidarity but also the need to occupy what both poets would regard as the trivial moral space of the well-made artefact. As Charles Olson – the formulator in the 1950s of Projective Verse Theory – has it, the ‘moment a poet ventures beyond closed verse, he enters a field of composition, where form is never more than an extension of content’ (1973 [1951]: 148). More so than Serote, Gwala perceives an intricate connection between racist and capitalist ideologies: his black man is oppressed not only by the truncheon, but also by the persuasive overtures of consumerism. (‘Man’ was the operative word in Black Consciousness diction of the 1970s.) The verbal registers of commerce and industry – the poet firmly believes – have the effect of taking the black man for a ride, of tantalising the black status seekers with the promise of bourgeois consumerism, of undermining the revolutionary impulse and hence a sense of pride in his community. Finally, it is the restoration of Black Identity, the ‘energetic release from the shackles of Kaffir, Bantu, non-white’, which defines the intellectual and emotional significance of ‘Getting off the Ride’. If the concept of revolution suggests social action, it also presupposes a revolution of language and Gwala’s poem may be summarised as a rediscovery of words of Being.7

To return to my earlier point, the two reactions – the well-made artefact and the word weapon – can be characterised as obverse sides of a similar recognition about the destabilisation of the referent. If so, we have an unusual link between personal and public poetry, both of which raid a miscellany of references. In the case of the New Black Poets, references include US Black Power, the Projective Verse of the Beat Generation, jazz culture, and the oral memory of the great Zulu kings. The common characteristic is a contract between the poet and the citizen, in which – to reiterate – the imagination holds the expression to experiential account. It is at this point of human community, a point usually incomprehensible in Euro-American modernism, that the poetic voice meets its life utterance: its need to speak; its need to release the poem from its originator or artist; its need to become the property of the society.

This does not suggest that a uniform reading or listening public necessarily awaits the poetic utterance. The society is thin, at best uneven, in its literacy and literary appreciation. *The New Century* identifies, nonetheless, a characteristic of South African poetry that connects the ‘I’ and the ‘We’, or the individual and the communal concern. To take as examples the understated word-art of Lionel Abrahams and the voice-power of rapper Lesego Rampolokeng:

I half forget what poetry we read

(our own? New-found Mtshali? Plath’s?)

but clearly recall the humane affirmative thrust

of two scientist-poets out of Europe’s east

…

Herbert familiar of Warsaw,

Holub of unimaginable Prague.

(Abrahams, *from* ‘Place’, in Chapman, ed., 2018: 184)

ORAL it is moral

gut reaction purgation it is

cleansing for

a social living purity it is

superlative

supra-charged

kinetic it

is MOTION in the word

(Rampolokeng, *from* ‘For the Oral’, in Chapman, ed., 2018: 322)

Looking back, we may identify a key criterion: that of functionality. Such a criterion permits both edges of the modern sensibility – the romantic-symbolist and the anti-poet – to operate simultaneously in a society, in South Africa, in which the pre-modern, the modern, and the post-modern jostle together on the pavements of the present day.

This simultaneity of tradition and modernity gives substance to the primary assumption of *The New Century*: that the range of the poetry, whether written or oral, emerges from a single society shaped by a multiplicity of impositions and influences. By placing alongside one another the sefela or migrant songs of Makeka Likhojane (‘What do I say, inveterate travellers?/The knobkierrie poets, men of the mines’, in Chapman, ed., 2018: 233) and the quiet contemplations of Mzi Mahola –

People say children are alike;

it confounds me

how much they change with time.

…

Is it because they are asking

if this world is changing?

Or is the world changing

because they are asking?

(*from* ‘The Question’, in Chapman, ed., 2018: 322) –

I have wished to replicate the model of a society that is characterised by a high degree of differentiated modernity. It is limiting, in consequence, to confine poetry in South Africa to the ‘educated’ expression of the little magazine or, more recently, the university creative-writing course. Similarly, it is limiting to represent fewer poets by larger selections of their work. Although it is tempting to take stock, to consolidate a tradition, I have preferred to convey a sense of an ‘uneven’ literary culture. I hope that *The New Century* suggests unusualness, variety, accessibility and, above all, necessity.

A necessity in extending poetic voices across the society involves a willingness to grant intervention to the translator. By featuring English translations of a long African past – as in the Bushman expression to which I have referred – we are reminded that a considerable human dimension predated colonisation. At the same time, we cannot separate Bushman tradition from the influence of colonial settlement. We owe the recovery of early African expression – in its recording, transmission, and translation – to an influential aspect of colonial endeavour in the fieldwork of linguists, missionaries, and enthusiastic amateurs. All invoked the act, or art, of translation as a method of transferring message and feeling across the barriers of language and culture, whatever the particular purpose.

An immediate irony, however, is apparent. To recollect an earlier point, the economics of publishing in South Africa, taken together with the limited multilingualism of most of the citizenry, dictate that, as the language of state, commerce, and higher education, English is increasingly the most influential medium of communication in the arts and culture. Although it is easy to object to this, it is not easy to retreat into language difference in a society that must emerge from the enforced ‘differences’ of its apartheid past. Translation is not regarded, therefore, simply as a utilitarian activity. Rather, I chose translations that in preserving the intent and spirit of the original, make an impact as poems in their own right. The approach is not subject-to-object, but subject-to-subject; the literary-cultural equivalent is simultaneity of expression; the social equivalent seeks equality and respect. I acknowledge, accordingly, those who have enhanced understanding and appreciation of the range and variety of voices through recordings and translations of oral forms including migrant songs and modern praises. Translation suggests the potential of a difficult, but shared inheritance. At the same time as Adam Small pits Kaaps (Cape Coloured working-class dialect) against the tyranny of official Afrikaans – ‘en hier sit Jacquelintjie Kenndy/en hier’s ou Lawrence van daai stoute Lady Chatterley’ (in Chapman, ed., 2018: 146), this professor of philosophy translates the ‘Milton’ of Afrikaans poetry, N P van Wyk Louw, into English:

When you gave me your laughter

and your eyes intent

I stand before you love sombre and bent

for what could I give you

I was so poor? Come

would you take some of my darkness/

of my darkness some?

(*from* Van Wyk Louw’s ‘What Could I Give You…’, in Chapman, ed., 2018: 81)

We should be wary of affiliating poets too closely to the politics of the day.

A community of poets in South Africa emerges in tentative and tenuous ways: in acts of translation as acts of respect; in salutes to other poets; in poets of different persuasions finding currency in common ‘traditions’. Yet if such a community can begin to be classified as South African, the denominator is often more disjunctive than conjunctive. Whether the expression is the hymn, the praise poem, the sefela song, or the contemplative lyric, the mark of racial, linguistic, and cultural ‘impurity’ speaks of numerous crossings of borders, whether enforced or voluntary. From the perspective of the new century, I looked critically at the art/politics debate so central to South African literature. Have certain poems been overtaken by more recent political events? Do certain preoccupations – for example, ‘the struggle’ – now seem dated? I found that a fresh look at several poets revealed ‘contemporary issues’ that had not always been highlighted. The focus on Livingstone’s *A Littoral Zone* lends emphasis to ‘green’ concerns. Similarly, a fresh look of Gwala’s poems reminds us that this poet’s Black Consciousness affiliation always took cognisance of what in the 1990s was called the local/global debate. In short, the question of whether poems of a particular political moment or occasion have dated cannot be answered in any singular way. Oratory at political funerals in the emergency years of the 1980s probably profits now from a note on context: ‘Say no to SADF, say no! NO!/Say yes to MK, say yes! YES!’ (in Chapman, ed., 2018: 268). Serote’s ‘City Johannesburg’, in contrast, transcends its reference to the pass laws to speak as powerfully today as it did almost fifty years ago about the attachment and the alienation of the individual in community:8

My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets

For my thin, even lean wallet,

While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,

Jo’burg City.

(*from* ‘City Johannesburg’, in Chapman, ed., 2018: 167)

As *The New Century* has a responsibility to memory, conscience, and commitment, it seemed important to continue to represent the voices of the emergency. Simultaneously, *The New Century* has an ongoing responsibility, as in the case of ‘City Johannesburg’, to poems that ‘stretch’ language and perception. The lyric, the epic, rap rhythms, the Kaaps accent, the rhetoric of the occasion, the eccentric observation, the proverbial utterance, together, comprise the poem of the society, or the society of the poem. To do justice to such agility of content and form, a language of literary criticism requires its own agility of both ideological and aesthetic reference, whether responding to the oral praises of the Zulu kings or the oral-based projective influences of US Beat poetry and digital culture, whether tracing adaptations of Euro-American modernism or east-European anti-poetry. To return to Kelwyn Sole’s article (2016), to which I referred earlier on,9 if I have suggested a few guidelines of approach, I have resisted any all-embracing system or apperception as to what might constitute ‘South African Poetry’. I talk more tentatively, in any case, of ‘poetry in South Africa’.

**From the High Mimetic to the Low Mimetic**

At the end of his book, *How to Read a Poem* (2007), Terry Eagleton notes that of all the literary genres ‘poetry would seem the one most stubbornly resistant to political criticism, most sequestered from the winds of history’ (164). A critic of Marxist persuasion, Eagleton says this not as negative judgement, but in recognition that poetry works in its own way, has its own ‘thickness and density, which are not to be summarily reduced to symptoms of something else’ (164). In almost the next sentence, he might seem to refute his own recognition when he asks, ‘What kind of society is it in which poetry feels it has to turn its back? What has happened to the content of social experience when the poem feels compelled to take its own forms as its content, rather than draw from a common fund of meaning?’ (164). The questions, however, are rhetorical. Eagleton has provided his own context for recognising the uneasy relationship between poetry and politics. He paraphrases Roland Barthes’s observation that a little form in poetry is a dangerous thing (that is, a superficial splitting of form and content; a neglect of *how* it is said for *what* is said); content embodied in form, on the other hand, could be salutary in that a more comprehensive grasp of form is like grasping the history of the political culture itself. To illustrate, Eagleton turns to Alexander Pope’s heroic couplets: the balances, inversions, and antitheses, disciplined within the paired pentameters as embodying the social ideology – order, harmony – of the eighteenth-century patrician class, or to W B Yeats’s tone – his mournful resignation or defiant exaltation – as a register of the wider historical context: the decline of the Anglo-Irish governing class of which Yeats was a self-appointed representative (Eagleton, 161-2). The politics of both Pope and Yeats are no doubt anathema to Eagleton’s continuing Marxist commitment; yet he can understand and appreciate the poetry.

Notwithstanding the distance of these two poets – Pope and Yeats – from the current state of British society, it is simpler in contemporary Europe or North America than in the politically over-determined postcolonies of the world to appreciate the poetic medium even when its message is not to one’s political liking. The relative value of form and content is an old story in literature from South Africa, according to which, as I have referred, we may chart the ‘culture wars’ of the 1970s and 1980s. The question is: has ‘liberation’ in South Africa heralded a significant change in the uneasy relationship between poetry and politics?

To such a question there is no neat answer. The unbanning of liberation movements by then Prime Minister F W de Klerk on 2 February 1990 came as a jolt. The morally bankrupt National Party government, which had made a tactic of adjusting to crises, had evidently reached its end game. The ‘unbanning’ announcement engendered the catchphrase ‘the new South Africa’. What to write about after apartheid? Could colours, rhythms, rhyming, and the private experience all replace the dour, ‘un-artistic’ speechscapes of political commitment? (As I suggested in the previous section, however, the speechscapes of the poetry were neither dour nor un-artistic.) A language of mutual antagonism in art circles, nonetheless, continued to echo an earlier language of the 1980s: bourgeoisie versus workers; Eurocentrism versus Africanism; the private Western lyric versus the African oral voice; white aesthetics or black aesthetics. Peter Horn captured the leftist political response, a nightmare of the so-called bourgeoisie, when in taking issue with the ‘dominant South African “canon” of reviewing’, he stated that ‘the debate about what would constitute an aesthetic of a new, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, non-elitist South Africa has not yet even started in earnest’ (1992: 5). To which Joan Metelerkamp in a review of several volumes of poetry replied: ‘If one is going to talk of *an* aesthetic at all, it cannot be a narrow one: different kinds of poetry appeal to different people and are useful for different ends (surely this is one of the criteria of democracy and fundamental human rights)’ (1993:119). And as if to show that she, who lives ‘in the suburbs, in the white suburbs […]. Mothering in the white suburbs’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 14), has remained alert to different kinds of poetry, Metelerkamp praised Mongane Serote’s lengthy, ‘un-suburban’ *Third World Express* (1992):

… *this* is a *real* poem! [...] The complexity of a long poem. [...] Serote grappling with the meanings of violence which lacks the allure of heroism [...] the movement of the lines echoes the development of simplicity to complexity [...] a symbol of process itself: there is nothing apocalyptic about it, even if it is powerful and noisy’. (1993: 120)

One might choose to find behind Metelerkamp’s words a certain domestic anxiety, a relief, almost, that Serote does not advocate a takeover of the white suburbs. It is complexity – we are to understand – that lends *Third World Express* its value; it is a lack of complexity that, in contrast, condemns Sandile Dikeni’s *Guava Juice* (1992) in its exhortation to violence (‘Murderous advocates of genocide/oppressors of my black blood’, 9). ‘Surely,’ says Metelerkamp with some condescension towards expression that ‘eschews the questioning exploring “I”’, that may be rousing at a political rally but that offers nothing new ‘on the complexity of human experience in the eighties in the Cape […] surely, I was not the audience he [Dikeni] had in mind for the poems (a white woman, reading alone in her room in the suburbs)’. Unlike Dikeni – Metelerkamp concludes – Serote challenges Horn’s ‘parochial aesthetic, formally and thematically, by linking an immediate South African experience to the rest of the world’ (1993:120-1).

Whether Horn felt suitably chastised to change his ‘parochial’ tune or whether what he said, he said in the context of ‘people’s literature’ (his words were published in the ‘popular’ magazine, *Staffrider*), his responses to questions put to him, in 1995, deny any parochialism: ‘I think there are three things really – that make great poetry [...] having something to say […] a very individualised voice [and] we must break loose from preconceptions of what form is’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 58). In illustration, Horn points to the content load of struggle poetry, to the distinctive voice of his own Brechtian ‘anti-poetry’, and to a poetics sufficiently flexible to be adapted to the haiku, the lyric, and oral praises. Of Serote, Horn says, ‘He became weak in *Third World Express* […] too influenced by attempting to go back to his African roots’ whereas in his earlier work [in the 1970s] there was a ‘tension’ between his political content and his ‘speaking to a European [white South African?] audience’ (60). Refuting any idea that because of his own commitment to the struggle he is a party ideologue, Horn makes clear that he will not defend the African National Congress (the liberation movement; the post-1990 government) ‘when it is indefensible’ (62); and that any South African aesthetic is likely to invoke ‘hybrids’ of European and African ‘ways of thinking and experiencing’ (60).

The comments of both Metelerkamp and Horn are instructive. Despite each having preferences, neither endorses any reduction of the poem to a prescription. (Metelerkamp is at times narrower than Horn in that any poets who present women in ways which she regards as demeaning receive short shrift.) Neither ties categories like Europe and Africa to rigid expectations of individualism or communalism, or closed (Western) lyrical forms or open oral (African) expressiveness. Whatever the political talk (poets are citizens, who think and speak not only in the world of poetry), poetry talk in South Africa has always been and continues to be uneasy about its own threatened politicisation. Here are a few random comments. Tatamkhulu Afrika: ‘After February 1990, it is still necessary to write a political poetry [as] a protest, not against political dominance but against dominance of wealth of privilege, residual class barriers, which are very much there [...]. But we must write poetry which is poetry. It mustn’t be sloganeering anymore’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 6-7). Lesego Rampolokeng: ‘I’ve always tried to tread the midline between the word in motion, the word free – I mean without bounds – and the WRITTEN word [...] poetry that would leave a smudge on the page as it would on the stage’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 32). Kelwyn Sole: ‘We’ll need a political poetry in the future: but not of the kind that mouths platitudes of praise or is satisfied supporting politicians or institutionalised positions’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 40-1). Such partisanship might well describe Serote’s *History Is the Home Address* (2004), another of his ‘epics’, but without the experiential load, the complexity, which Metelerkamp found in the earlier *Third World Express*. In *History*, Serote displayed his ANC colours in his resentment of those who had attacked then President Mbeki’s AIDS-denialism (they don’t understand the man, we are told). ‘Told’ is the operative word: there is little rhythmical justification for the line breaks, cliché abounds, and we are given roll calls of heroes which, it is taken for granted, we will all endorse.

By the time of *History*, however, the social landscape had registered significant changes, changes even from the first years of freedom in the early 1990s. Disabusing South Africa of any exceptionalism, Alec Russell observed that

The history of countries throwing off tyrannical regimes tends to follow a pattern. In the immediate aftermath there is euphoria, accompanied by utopian pledges for the future. Then the new rulers find the business of governing more difficult and messier than they could ever have imagined. They also find that it is harder to overcome their own past than they had appreciated as they plotted their takeover in prison or in exile. It is this second stage that the true meaning and trajectory of a revolution unfolds. (2009: xiii)

Or, as Serote’s one-time Black Consciousness Movement colleague Mamphela Ramphele put it in the context of the withdrawal on technicalities by the National Prosecuting Authority of corruption charges against the then ANC and South African president, Jacob Zuma: ‘The conflation of the ruling party with the government and the state is fuelled by the myth of the ruling party as the liberator of a passive citizenry’ (2009: 8). To transfer the comment to poetry, Sole (with Serote, now government apparatchik, possibly in mind) says, ‘When some of our older writers start getting comfy jobs as university professors, as members of parliament, at cultural desks, it’s time for younger writers to get into the streets and hidden corners and find out how people are really living’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 41). Or as Cronin put it, what is required of poetry in South Africa is that it ‘forces the actual and the desirable into continuous dialogue’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 34). Or, ‘It’s between the classicists and the new guys. I’m halfway between the two’ (Afrika, qtd in Berold 2003: 7). Or, writing poetry is always ‘being on the edge of falling off the world [...] Needing love, needing a kind of home that the universe doesn’t offer you – there’s all that mysterious human pain that goes beyond just being “an oppressed member of your class”’ (Karen Press, qtd in Berold 2003: 19-20).

The ‘aesthetic’, then, has its various impulsions; there are, however, recurrent features, summed up by Cronin as poetry trying to connect different discursive practices (‘trying to be a fully-fledged citizen in the midst of our complicated reality’, qtd in Berold 2003:129). It is what I have described elsewhere as poetry of the low mimetic (2003a [1996]: 414). Such an aesthetic (a post-apartheid aesthetic?) may be identified in distinction – and I am generalising for the sake of mapping a field – from a poetry of the high mimetic, such as we encounter in the work of D J Opperman, Douglas Livingstone, Breyten Breytenbach, or Wilma Stockenström, to name but four of several representatives of modernist predisposition. Theirs is a poetry that, in its abrupt juxtapositions of self-conscious form and elemental observation (sometimes occurring within a single poem), may be set aside somewhat from a low mimetic subscription to the language, rhythms, and routines of ordinary living. Paradoxically, and in a different way, the high mimetic also characterised the Soweto poetry of the pre-1990 years, summarised – again, in a handy generalisation – by Njabulo S Ndebele’s distinction between the ‘spectacular’ and the ‘ordinary’ (2006 [1984]). In its Fanonist psychodrama (a new language as constituent of a new social self) Soweto poetry is a poetry of ‘high’ confrontation: ‘But what’s good, is, I said it in his face,/A thing my father wouldn’t dare do. /That’s what’s in this black “Shit”’ (Serote 1972: 8). When women appear in the universe of the high mimetic, their representation is likely to be iconic: Mary or Magdalen; Mother Afrika; susta of the [male] revolutionary hero. The high mimetic is the inheritance also of Don Maclennan’s considerable output of philosophical minimalism, a minimalism that obeys the imagist tenet of the exact word as the adequate symbol:

Words are nothing

to the juices of oranges,

the reassurance of warm stone,

and holding you in my arms

feeling you breathe.

(*from* ‘The Only Truth’ 2006: 163)

In differentiating the high mimetic from the low mimetic, we might say that Nick Meihuizen (2003: 75) would not find it appropriate to apply to Livingstone, or Serote, or Maclennan, the critical register that he finds appropriate to the work of Chris Mann:

*Heartlands* (2002) makes it that much easier to live in contemporary South Africa. Reading it is something of a lesson in living, loving, acknowledging, appreciating […]. Consider the following from ‘Carpark Oyster-sellers’, where the poor and the downtrodden of the earth are a discomfiting, uncomfortable, haunting presence:

‘Please, my bossie,’ she says. ‘Me and my family is hungry.’

You hate the blank-faced demeanour you use to distance her.

You wince at the obsequious charade she starts to perform.

(Mann, 2002: 25)

Alert to, at times self-conscious of, his own relative privilege in a landscape of the poor, Mann tempers a religious predisposition to a qualified spirituality, infusing the ordinary with the potential of transfiguration, as in these lines from ‘The Magic of Motse’:

Motse for you was always the pits.

…

A taxi-rank hell-hole, way out in the backveld,

with pitted streets, boarded-up shoe-shops.

But then the small observation distinguishes the unusual individual from the commonplace:

But then you meet someone who lives in Motse,

Lesego, a teacher and catechist, whose community

work changes the town in front of your eyes.

(2002: 6)

The observation is captured without sentimentality, but with a conviction that lends apparent ‘talk’ a poetic charge. As Meihuizen concludes his observtions, above, on Mann’s *Heartlands*:

Each poem is so well crafted, thought out, and so purely modest in its pretensions that it appears to be eternal, central, complete, even as it deals with transitory moments in a changing history in a backward country on the edge of the world. (2003: 75)

If Mann’s voice is understated in compressed nuance, not all the voices of the 1990s should be categorised as low mimetic. Lesego Rampolokeng and Vonani Bila both fill the air with sound (Fuck the IMF; Fuck the Washington Consensus). At their best, however, both eschew the global language of US/Third World rappers. I have already referred to Rampolokeng. Bila, for his part, digs into the grit of the township. Political slogans about ubuntu (we are all one in community relationships) meet the realities of survival; love and transaction are not always separable. When the poet’s 73-year-old Christian uncle dies of pills given to him not from Elim Hospital, but to ‘help his penis to get hard &/Strong’,

A young girl cries bitterly

She will not see him any more

Her businessman, lovey

Uncle.

(*from* ‘Overdose’ 2007:10)

If the township streets entered poetry in Oswald Mtshali’s collection *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971) and in Serote’s *Yakhal’inkomo* and *Tsetlo* (1972, 1974, respectively), the streets are given a carnival colouring in one of the more memorable voices of the last thirty years, that of Seitlhamo Motsapi in his only collection to date, *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (1995). Similar in oral fire power to Rampolokeng, Motsapi attaches sound to a visual display, in a combination reminiscent of Serote’s shorter poems. In Motsapi’s ‘shak-shak’, as in these lines, the ‘carnival entered the last streets/ of the shantytown…’,

& so the poor wd throw pots of paint

curdled in the heart to the drowsy skies

so the portraits wd sprout, paint

of our joy colouring the clouds

riotous multicolour, righteous marching

shak-shak prophet majaja in front

(49)

How do we connect spiritual transfiguration to socio-economic circumstance? We do not pause to ask but are carried along by rhythms of parallelism and images of outrageous juxtaposition. And that is imaginatively right in a poetry of performance. We are convinced beyond ratiocination that the sign in the sky should be scribbled on the walls of the township houses where ‘HISTRYS ON DE SIDE/OF DE OPRESS’ (50).

Yet if Motsapi is high mimetic, Mann’s low mimetic – to return to the main thread of my argument – is more characteristic of poetry of the 1990s, in which the image is disciplined to the speaking voice. The shift might denote that whereas the poets of the high mimetic felt compelled to pit the exceptional image and voice against the rigidity of big systems of authority – apartheid; the Cold War – poets since the early 1990s, whether in South Africa or, let us say, the former eastern bloc, have experienced the new gradations of a civic space. Or perhaps in the aftermath of big systems, there has been a hesitancy about what to pursue, what to reject.

If most poets of the high mimetic are men – sometimes macho men – Ingrid de Kok permits us a more intricate perspective on the challenges of a civic milieu. Without ignoring intimate joy and pain – ‘And grief is one thing nearly personal, /a hairline fracture in an individual skull’ (‘What Everyone Should Know about Grief’ 2006: 58) – De Kok in temper and tone moves subtly between the lyrical and the elegiac to engage the public sphere even as she moves back again to feel the personal ache, at times in the same poem:10

In this country you may not

mourn small passings.

…

I think these mothers dream

headstones of the unborn.

Their mourning rises like a wall

no vine will cling to.

They will not tell you your suffering is white.

…

I think they may say to you:

Come with us to the place of mothers.

We will stroke your flat empty belly,

let you weep with us in the dark,

and arm you with one of our babies

to carry home on your back.

(*from* ‘Small Passing’ 2006 [1988]: 48-9)

The poem beyond the cliché might summarise De Kok’s achievement over a thirty-year career, whether she is granting us an original angle on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or, as in the following lines, an original angle on a ‘post-liberation’ enthusiasm for rewriting history (new names for towns, streets, and buildings):

Let’s put Verwoerd back

on a public corner like a blister on the lips;

let’s walk past him and his moulded hat,

direct traffic through his legs,

and the legs of his cronies of steel and stone.

(*from* ‘Bring the Statues Back’ 2006: 124)

To those – usually white South Africans – who want to forget the past and get on with it (a recurrent sentiment in letters to the editors of the daily newspapers), De Kok checks any easy passage through the healing process in both her reflections and her poetry (‘We are all, whether poets or citizens, in need of some reckoning, and that’s a slow and arduous process’, qtd in Berold 2003: 117):

But few who have been badly hurt

are ever healed. In the wounded heart

there lives a need to hurt in turn,

perhaps even to be hurt again.

…

What to do? Watch and pray?

No benign conclusion waits

in the wings, enters to pull the curtain

down over hunger, grief and hate.

(*from* ‘Too Long a Sacrifice’ 2006: 122-3)

If the nation is in pain, pain of a more domestic kind should not be ‘written out’ of the world of poetry, again whether in South Africa or elsewhere. If De Kok the poet is a citizen, she may also be a lover, a mother, a parent:

They have to go: all children need to leave,

give up their childish things. Open the champagne!

It’s no use hoping for a last reprieve.

…

They’ll visit us; their love can be retrieved

if we can feign good cheer, our poise retain.

They have to go: all children need to leave.

It’s no use hoping for a last reprieve.

(*from* ‘When Children Leave’ 2006: 139)

It is said that modern societal disjunction has led many poets to abandon rhyme. Or is it often less profound; more a case of many who write poetry not being able to ‘write’ a rhyme? Whatever, De Kok can play unobtrusively with rhyme and para-rhyme, appropriate to some occasions and not appropriate to other occasions.

A variation on the poem of small yet penetrating insight is to be found also, in different ways, in Joan Metelerkamp, Karen Press, and Kelwyn Sole; in poems in which, while the image is disciplined to the speaking voice, the voice accumulates insight in the process of the poem. Such poems, often longer poems of unfolding experience, do not always receive due recognition in anthologies, where the demand of space favours the shorter poem as product. Like Mann and De Kok, Metelerkamp, Press, and Sole began to appear in the last days of apartheid and have continued to adjust focus and style to a changing country in a changing world. In Metelerkamp, to gender politics; more to race and class in Press and Sole. In ‘Come Together’ Metelerkamp weaves her ‘story’ in backtrackings and forward probings of syntactical complexity to suggest what Jane Donovan (1987: 98) regards as the interrupted time of women’s experience:11

I consult the old oracle,

I draw the Dao of Perseverance –

make it all come together –

…

you’re in a good mood my husband laughs

…

there he goes into the world with our whistling son –

I lie back, glance at recipe books, consider supper,

consider a party when our daughter comes back,

consider the lilies,

consider the spring, decide it’s begun

get up: bring it all together:

get into that matter.

(2009: 50)

If the ‘I’ in Metelerkamp’s poetry defies any privileging of privacy, Karen Press finds her poetic register in ‘found’ details that do not detract from but, in precision of observation, accentuate the experience of many women’s daily lives, especially women who are neither white nor middle class. The following lines gather force as part of a sequence, titled ironically *The Little Museum of Working Life*:

Monday is sausages

Tuesday is chops

Wednesday is rissoles

…

go to bed you’ve got school tomorrow

…

we never went hungry, not one day in twenty years

(‘She came home every night and went straight into the kitchen’ 2004: 46)

Distinctions between the poetic and prosaic are also explored in Kelwyn Sole’s collection of prose poems, *Land Dreaming*. This is a series of finely judged, ironically foreshortened perspectives on a post-liberation South Africa, in which ‘liberation’ has resulted too often in sardonic replays of entrenched racial and class positions:

‘We also use leaves and twigs for coughs … My uncle said …’

‘– no, Dick [Mkhomazi Dindi], not actually. Your uncle was thinking of Helichrysum nudifolium’ (*from* ‘Gardening Tips’ 2006: 79).

Or, indeed, does liberation promise only greater freedom to be a charlatan?

… My friend it’s a miracle today that you

receive this letter and you have to count yourself lucky.

\*Asthma, cancer, blood pressure, diabetes, body pains,\*

\*epileptic fits, all skin diseases, AIDS symptoms gone!\*

… though if you want to speak to my spirits, that’s a special arrangement

(*from* ‘This Is Not a Chain Letter’, 81)

Like Press’s poetry, Sole’s poetry embodies socialist ideals of what should have been social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. Again, like Press, Sole is a poet before he is an ideologue. While ‘Marxism’s ideal of a future society is [his]’, he is ‘one of those annoying “yes, but…” people’ (Sole 2019: 48):

To be honest, nothing really shifts or changes.

Loud hunger tears forever at the throats of gulls.

Tourists renew their pilgrimages in summer

while routinely the world falls from us. Who we are

is bitten, from teeth chipped and yellowed that

have nibbled around too many spoons. Each year

it’s harder to move past incrustations of habit –

‘… but after all’ I say to the Congolese professor

now reduced to touting parking spots for tips,

‘it should be clear to us that when Fanon says…’

– then I find that he’s no longer listening.

(*from* ‘Seafront’ 2017: 26)

***A politician who would be a poet; or, a poet who would be a politician?***

As Jeremy Cronin asks, ‘Where to begin?’:

We returned in 1990.

I took part in the multi-party negotiations. I shopped at Pick ’n Pay. I wrote poems. Kate was born. She complains she’s the only one who’s never been ‘overseas’. Gemma, Ben and I shake our heads. Kate says ‘overseas’… we think ‘exile’.

In 1999 I became an MP.

‘We saw you in parliament on TV last night,’ friends say with a disapproving look. ‘But are you still at least…’ (here come capital letters) ‘… WRITING?’

‘Yes, plenty,’ I’m inclined to reply. ‘An SACP discussion document. A newspaper article. Not forgetting this week’s Pick ’n Pay shopping list.’ (Why separate poetry from what poetry is not?)

…

Slovo the person (not Joe Slovo the fire-devastated squatter camp) wasn’t a poet, more a raconteur with a string of jokes about socialism’s fallibilities.

But Neruda was.

Brecht, Hikmet, Mayakovsky, Eluard, Ritsos – all communists (all male) … but wonderful poets.

Because of some inherent virtue in the cause?

Or to break a calamitous silence in the party line?

Is poetry the irruption of the suppressed? Or is it a holding onto the faith?

Is poetry a jail-break of memory from the state archive, I wonder, as I miss first gear at the lights in front of parliament and my car does a lurching

iambic pentameter – er-uhh… five times (even if it wants to become a poem)?

Is it possible for a shopping list to fall in love with the Chilean poet?

(*from* ‘Where to Begin?’ 2006: 7-8; double-spacing in the original)

It is as a prominent political spokesperson rather than a talented poet, however, that most people in South Africa will have heard of Jeremy Cronin. As a politician, Cronin – until his retreat from political office – was identified as the intellectual voice of the South African Communist Party and the Tripartite Alliance (the ANC, the SACP, and the South African Congress of Trade Unions). As a deputy minister and a somewhat lonely intellectual voice in the decidedly anti-intellectual Zuma Cabinet, Cronin penned an article in the *Sunday Times* (29 April 2012) on ‘How Our History Haunts Us’. Reading the article, I had a memory flashback to my first exposure to Cronin’s work. Then he was not a political bigwig of the new dispensation, but a recently released political prisoner of the old dispensation, and the author of a first book of poetry, *Inside* (1983). He had been arrested in 1976 under the then Terrorism Act for his underground activities as a member of a banned organisation. He spent seven years in Pretoria prisons and, on his release, his commitment to the struggle undiminished, he revealed a poet’s voice that was striking in its originality: ‘sisulu-mandela-tambo/LONGleev! LONGleev! / shouted longleev!/Your voices, brothers/Down these concrete/ Corridors of power’ (‘Death Row’, 30-31). Power is shifted from oppressor to oppressed. Almost as if the echoing corridors of his incarceration had been etched in his imagination, Cronin the poet moved his readers from the cruel past to a free space, a space alive with future possibilities.

Reviewing *Inside* I was concerned that, like many South African poets whose poetry had arisen from an exceptional experience (imprisonment, in this case), Cronin might turn out to be a one-collection poet (1984c:177-202). Well, Cronin continued to grow in stature as a poet. Like post-World War II anti-poets – he has more than once acknowledged his debt to Neruda – Cronin’s everyday speech is infused in its context with moral resonance: Neruda ‘acquired humility in the hop of a sparrow’; he ‘acknowledged that those hardened in struggle can end up with stone hearts’ yet ‘He pitied the baobab’ (‘A Reply to Pablo Neruda’ 1997: 31-2.) In an earlier article on poetry (2011: 177-202), I quoted Cronin’s own words as befitting his poetry: ‘[To] take on the deadening dogma of market totalitarianism, neoliberalism [...] and enliven the dogma to new possibilities’ (Cronin qtd in Berold 2003: 129):

Amnesia classifies Third World countries as ‘developing’

(structurally adjusted amnesia)

CNN is globalised amnesia

The Gulf War – lobotomised amnesia

Santa Barbara, the Bold and the Beautiful, Restless Years – the milk of amnesia

Amnesia embraces the global reality of 23 million per annum

dead of hunger and hunger-related disease

That’s a daily average equivalent, in fatalities, of one Hiroshima

Buried each day

Under the cloud of amnesia

(*from* ‘Even the Dead’ 1997: 43)

Neither does Cronin forget that, even as his Marxist predilections disparage the bourgeoisie, he too is middle class; that poetry is also importantly about the possibilities of ‘love and marriage, love and rearing kids, love and shopping’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 128):

Is it the improbable notion to anchor

At the anchorage of carnal love,

Between two consenting adults,

A social scaffold called: family?

This entity of cooking, shopping, paying bills,

Reproduction, the joint dodging of security police, and the rearing of kids?

…

Our biological moorage

To birth, love, death, that we push

In time always, and yet

Through all human times, stretched out

From toe to lip,

Like conjugal bodies

Affirming, something, moving now towards

Unabashed the romantic closure,

Lagoon and land lie alive to and

Touching each other every

Inch of the way.

(*from* ‘Moorage’ 1997: 12-13)

Unlike fellow poet and activist Breyten Breytenbach, Cronin does not ‘end up declaring the whole post-1994 situation a sell-out’ (Cronin qtd in Berold 2003: 133). Unlike another fellow poet and activist, Mongane Wally Serote, he avoids ‘incanting the aspirational over and over, “ah/where/where are those moments which can be magic?”’ (133). Where, indeed, beyond the first heady days of our rainbow nation?

In his article on the haunting of our history, Cronin promises not the simple ‘them’ versus ‘us’ scenarios of so much of our public life. After eighteen years of democracy, he says, ‘our debate is trapped in an unhelpful tit-for-tat polemical exchange, in which this side dismisses the weight of the past on our collective present [the ‘un-collective’ chattering classes?] and that side offers simplistic evocations of the past as alibi for its own weaknesses’ [Mbeki-like Africana Gloriana or, Zuma-like, Blame it on Verwoerd?]. The result is shallow explanation of the ‘deep-seated challenges we confront’. This is a fair assessment, unfortunately, of a great deal of our public discourse, whether in the words and antics of leaders in politics, business, the trade unions, or education.

Cronin’s opening proposition, however, is not sustained in his argument. Instead, we are given a predictable history lesson – predictable from a leftist perspective – in which the theme is: all the ills of colonialism. The villain is traced to the late nineteenth-century ‘advanced, capital-intensive, mining-based industrial revolution’. The heroes are our ‘indigenous, pre-capitalist agricultural societies’. The latter – albeit at a terrible cost – resisted our going the Australian way: mass slaughter of yesteryear leading to a comfortable white-majority middle class of today. Our inheritance, in contrast, is a ‘toxic mix of problems’. Cronin’s conclusion? ‘Let’s rather work together to appreciate the huge weight of the past on our present and to appreciate the collective requirement to transform our often-dysfunctional reality.’ ‘Collective’, again – that favourite word of old Soviet-speak!

Nonetheless, we cannot object to the spirit of such a conclusion. By this stage the white whiners would have turned to the sports pages and, in tit-for-tat riposte, might be inclined to label Cronin as a red whiner! Be that as it may, the trouble is that Cronin’s upbeat conclusion is tacked onto a down-beat lesson. To add the kind of questions that could have enlivened the argument: why in 1998, after liberation and despite exchange controls, did the ANC government – without taking the so-called collective citizenry into its confidence – allow Anglo-American, De Beers, BHP-Billiton, etc., to flee our shores for foreign listings? (But Cronin is not ANC; he owed his position in parliament to the Tripartite Alliance.)

In another ‘history lesson’ Achille Mbembe avoids Cronin’s capitalist versus labour, or boss versus worker, diagnosis and with deliberate provocation says that the ‘main post-apartheid event has been the transformation of South African society from one of control to one of consumption’ (2014: 39). It is a transformation that cuts through older formulations of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. Unionised workers, to take an illustration, hardly share the same economic universe with a growing unemployed, unemployable underclass. At the same time, a middle class increasingly straddles race divisions even as the white minority (13% of the economically active population) continues to drive the personal tax base while enjoying the largest slice of the economic pie.

But, to return to Cronin. How to give spark to his history lesson? Ignore, as the tyranny of party-caucus solidarity or the ghost of Stalin, Cronin’s voluble support from parliamentary benches for the so-called Secrecy Bill, a Bill that surely should be anathema to Cronin’s literary imagination. In doing so, cut down on Cronin the politician; increase the presence of Cronin the poet. Of poetry Cronin says astutely: ‘I want poetry to emerge from [...] the conversation that is going on around all of us, in many registers, whether it be other poems, political debates, literacy classes, soap operas, the TRC evidence, or the monologue voice of CNN’ (qtd in Berold 2003: 129):

Those who lost the Cold War

Did not deserve to win in the end

Those who won the Cold War

Were (and are) entirely

Unworthy of their triumph

…

i-Management says, workers, the ball’s in your court

We have given you, they say

A good package

(Which is almost the same phrase Kgalema had just used with irony, 13 minutes before, as we waited for this very meeting with FAWU shop stewards)

(Which meeting eventually started two hours late)

(Which is why we’d been watching soccer on TV in a breakaway room, and I was distractedly trying also to write a poem about the end of the century, while Steve Lekoelea looped in a weak cross that was easily cut out by Chief’s defence)

And Kgalema said – ‘No,

It was a good pass

Just to the wrong team’

And I thought: That’s it!

That could be the poem about the end of the 20th century

(*from* ‘End of the Century – Which Is Why Wipers’ 2006: 18-19)

Despite such an apparently ‘democratic’ use of verse structure and language register, however, the poet stands a little apart, whatever Cronin the politician might say:

‘*In the past, the tourism industry*

*Presented South Africa merely as an exotic landscape.*’

It’s my friend, on TV, the minister,

‘*Now communities must learn*

*To package themselves and their cultures*.’

I think of poetry –when

There’s a sudden, flouncing, knock-kneed

Holding up of skirts that’s neither

Exotic nor packaged

As the heron bolts off in pursuit of a minnow…

…

I think, as I was saying, of poetry

The least commodified of arts,

Solitary, a bit, given to outburst

Suspicious of shine, wakeful to slipperiness

Each line weighted just so,

Insisting upon the actual, unpackaged, this-sidedness of things.

Tenacious to place,

Standing its ground,

Whatever the highway behind.

(*from* ‘Heron’s Place’ 2006: 47-8)

If not when he wears his politician’s hat then when he dons his poet’s mantle, Cronin would probably endorse Ingrid de Kok’s comment (quoted earlier on) that, whether poets or citizens, we require psychic reckoning, and that is a slow and arduous process.

**Page and Stage**

The update in 2018 of *The New Century of South African Poetry* granted me the space to add forty poets who had not appeared in print at the time of the 2002 edition of the anthology as well as to revisit selections from several poets who, since the turn of the century, have charted striking new directions. I encountered myriad interactions between the private and public domain: interactions which, despite political ramifications, impinged upon a need in all people for an enriching emotional, imaginative, and spiritual life. I identified the desire for a home, a job, a safe environment for children, and the need for a fulfilling personal relationship. It is in such intimations, not in state-of-the-nation issues, that poetry may find a distinctive signature. What I also found in the poets whom I added to the anthology was a greater ease than in earlier poetry with various forms of communication from the page to the stage. Phillipa Yaa de Villiers’s enlivening language and rhythms, for example, are accentuated in judicious rhyming words that propel the reader into a world of tough love (a woman of colour; the single mother; her child) in the mean flatlands of Jo’burg: ‘I set free/all the caged birds of my inner city’ (‘Connection’ 2006: 37). Like De Villiers, Lebogang Mashile sustains a reflection on belonging, hers in oral rhythms which are suited for the stage, but which also ‘work’ on the page and convey vividly and irreverently what it entails to be a black African woman in macho Johannesburg:

I smoked a spliff with Jesus Christ last night

…

But he was Jesus

And I’m a sister and I’ve been through more shit

Because I’m black

And life is hard in Jozi when you’ve got tits.

(*from* ‘I Smoked a Spliff’ 2005: 39-40)

Or to invoke another poet who is at home on both the stage and the page, Koleka Putumi:

\*You call us sell-outs and feminazis when we exhume the fungus from your politics.

\*I cannot tell if I am breaking bread or being poisoned.

\*fanon and biko sound like venom in your mouth.

\*How come references to your revolution are only limited to biko, fanon and malcolm?

\*Do you read?

\*Your solidarity, it seems, is anchored by undermining black womxn’s struggle.

(*from* ‘On Black Solidarity’ 2017: 79-80)

As I have indicated, the revolutionary voice in the New Black Poetry of the 1970s was reserved for a scarred but defiant masculinity; Putuma severely undercuts any heroic assumptions that might be held by black men.

Yet even as spoken word poetry is an invigorating feature of the times, A Miller’s point cannot easily be dismissed:

Simplistic rhyming ideology often trumps more nuanced verse in the performance game […]. The urban scene throws up a great deal of generic, noisy thinking […]. A typical city spoken word session will involve healthy doses of misogyny, crazy feminism, outright racism, cultural blindness of all types, mlungu [white] bashing, illogical references to colonial mythology, and so on. (2013: n.p.)

A champion of the spoken word, Raphael d’Abdon does not entirely disagree with the above observations but emphasises Miller’s qualification of his own comments: ‘… as much second-rate content as there is, every session will deliver – at the very least – a flash of breath-taking full-time delivery’ (D’Abdon 2016: 53).12 It is these ‘flashes’ that link Matshile and Putuma to a previous generation of voice poets, most notably to Rampolokeng and Motsapi, as well as to the contemporaneous expression of Vangile Gatsho and Mandi Poefficent Vundla, the latter in these lines from ‘Black-out’:

I’ve never thrown bones to avenge our dead

…

BLACK LIVES are *dead matter* coming back to life

from the jawline of the street

…

When we trace our bloodline from your

power-cables to bring you light

Do not *short-circuit*

Do not *black-out.*

(In Chapman, ed., 2018: 467)

As in Vundla’s poety, Busisiwe Mahlangu’s aptly titled collection, *Surviving Loss* (2018), carries over easily and impressively from the stage to the page. The individual poems of this winner of the Tshwane Speak Out Loud Poetry Competition (2016/2017) gather cumulative force in a range of perspectives on and responses to a single theme: growing up in a culture where ‘men do not stay with their families,/men wander off to evaporate’ (‘Fathers Who Are Water’, 40) and where ‘Loneliness is how a spirit slowly leaves a book./It bids goodbye by clutching onto flesh’ (‘Alone’, 22-3). The words – simple, raw in feeling – attach to unexpected images, brief and resonant: ‘Your home is a house with tools for dying you practise death on the stove’ (‘Busy’, 54); ‘All the thread I owned left with a man with shovel hands’ (‘Needles’, 46); ‘Finding a job is finding a slaughterhouse’ (‘Scraps’, 30); ‘My anger is a log in a fire’ (‘Violation’, 34). Survival, however, is the antidote, experienced and recorded without melodrama, victimhood, or self-pity; survival is conveyed on the page in appropriate aphorism:

Start here

Fold a shirt into a grasshopper.

Fold trousers into a new journey.

Pack a bag for your freedom.

(*from* ‘Forgetting Home’, 2)

I regret that *Surviving Loss* appeared only after the deadline for the inclusion of poems in *The New Century of South African Poetry*. Mahlangu’s is a memorable voice: a voice that says much in few words. In a gender-violent country,

Paint your left foot red

and your right, green.

a woman needs emergency signs

to go

running at 5pm.

[No title, 14]

As in Mahlangu, the value of a self that is devoid of selfishness and the challenge of relatedness in the family recur in several poets. There is Megan Hall’s unusual take on the commonplace theme of love:

Love is a habit, like brushing your teeth or cleaning the bath.

And if love is a habit, is grieving one too?

(*from* ‘Love Is a Habit’ 2007: 37)

Or we have Finuala Dowling’s yoking together of apparently unconnected pursuits:

I was meant to be writing a poem

but because I’m human I made lasagne instead

while simultaneously composing a poem in my head

…

In fact, I made two lasagnes, since some people like meat

whereas others won’t eat things which once had feet.

(*from* ‘Talk, Share and Listen’ 2006: 76)

A very different voice to Dowling’s belongs to Gabeba Baderoon for whom life is threatening beyond her need for security. She evokes her father’s experience of apartheid removals, lent poignancy by the fact that with his own hands he had crafted the door of the dwelling which the family, under the Group Areas Act, was forced to vacate (‘How Not to Stop’ 2006: 20). There are, in contrast, the comforting smells of family cooking, memories to the poet who now lives away from the country of her cultural ties:

… I have slow,

apricot memories

…

A girl learning to keep from crying

when she slices an onion, when

she remembers the country she has left.

All day I watch to keep from crying.

(*from* ‘Hunger’ 2005: 24)

Baderoon brings normality to the experience of global citizenry: an experience of ‘homelessness’ enforced no longer by politics but, ironically, by the circumstances (love; marriage) of her own fulfilling life.

If delicacy of tone describes Baderoon’s poetry, then Makhosazana Xaba ranges from the intimate portrait –

I wish we’d run the Soweto Marathon together

…

Although I knew you wouldn’t come

I still bought two pairs of cotton socks –

(*from* ‘Cotton Socks’ 2008: 34)

to the public voice of oral pronouncement:

*Her body has not been found*.

…

The police have still not found police constable Frances

Rasuge’s body, 369 days after she disappeared.

Yes, that’s what I want, not this:

*Her body has not been found*.

(*from* ‘Her Body Has Not Been Found’ 2008: 49-50)

We are reminded in Xaba’s poetry that, as in the poetry of Yaa de Villiers and Baderoon, the middle class is no longer the preserve of white people in leafy suburbs. In Xaba as well as in Putuma, we are reminded that women-women relationships are not ‘un-African’ (as we still hear from the mouths of Big Men); and that violence against women is a scourge in the so-called rainbow nation.

**Women’s Poetry and the Womanist Poem**

Of the new poets whom I included in the 2018 edition of *The New Century of South African Poetry*, most are women.13 The last twenty years or so have seen poetry by women in South Africa come to the fore in individual collections, in representations in anthologies, and in critical discussion. The flourishing of poetry that the country witnessed in the 1970s and early 1980s was encouraged by several new literary publishers, most notably Ad Donker and Ravan Press. Both had a broadly ‘national’, anti-apartheid agenda. It was an agenda marked, in poetry, most specifically by what was dubbed the New Black Poetry of the 70s, a male-orientated poetry. The flourishing of poetry by women since around the year 2000 has enjoyed its own support from more recently established little presses, some of which, such as Modjaji Books and impepho press, are devoted specifically to women’s expression. It is an expression that draws influence and inspiration from a context, both global and local, that is more conducive than hitherto to reporting on issues affecting women, both in a generally supportive media (whether through conviction, guilt, or fear of negative publicity on social media platforms) and, more particularly, in the actions of advocacy-focused movements such as the theatre company (in South Africa) Right 2 Speak and, ‘internationally’, #MeToo!

To distinguish between women’s poetry and the womanist poem is to distinguish between a wider and narrower subscription to a gender-relevant purpose. Stretching beyond South Africa to include poems from writers in the United States, Brazil, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Nigeria (among other countries) compiler and editor Natalie Molebatsi (South Africa) entitles her anthology *Wild ~~Im~~perfections* (2021). The imperfections, as she puts it in her ‘Editor’s Notes’, refer to ‘a feminist poetic language wrested from the violence of patriarchy and racism; a language that accounts for the body’s trauma and its limitations […] while reaching beyond something yet to be formed’ (xvi). With feminist/womxnist poets using the form of the ‘imperfect’ as transgression against misogyny and in reclamation of the self and ownership, Molebatsi continues, the collection is an ‘invitation to spark new conversations and to continue existing ones where the poet creates space for the “wild” and “unruly”, the “loose” and the “dirty”, the “witches” and the “bitches”, who are perfect in their brokenness’ and who, being ‘women, womyn, womxn, and those who eschew the gender binary logic or non-binary people […] are no longer seeking permission for their rage, healing and joy’ (xvii).

While the intention is to open the range of the womanist poem to articulation and expression that might not figure in ‘mainstream’ selections, there is at the same time a constriction of a poet’s range. I take in illustration a poet to whom I referred in the previous section and who features in *The New Century*, Makhosazana Xaba. We are less likely in Molebatsi’s compilation to find Xaba’s ‘Cotton Socks’ (a poem of bitter-sweet longing for an absent and, by subtle implication, a same-sex lover or partner) than Xaba’s oral-inspired naming in public invocation, where the ‘poetic’ charge relies on repetition and parallelism:

We write your names in poems. Duduzile Baleni.

Nonhle Mbuthuma. MaSobhuza Sigcau.

We call on you to write the names of your sisters, those with whom you fight on those sands

of Xolobeni.

(*from* ‘Women of Xolobeni’, in Molebatsi 2021: 12)

Or we might consider Molebatsi’s choice of her own poem for inclusion in her anthology:

I do not know how to receive love

meaning: I do not know how to live

I do not know how to dance to love

meaning: I do not know how to be human

(*from* ‘We Have Lessons to Learn’, in Molebatsi 2021: 75)

The lines are devoid of a recognisably ‘poetic’ stamp; the lines are heartfelt, nonetheless, in their directness, a directness that could be accentuated by being spoken into a mic. What we might miss is the more enigmatic Molebatsi, as in these lines from her own collection, *Sardo Dance* (2009):

I asked how to chide the moon

with the ballo sardo

on the marble floors

of her endurance

…

… i never told that her body’s ways

remind all around, of a blue song’s

sway…

(*from* ‘Ballo Sardo (SardoDance)’, 20)

A disclaimer. I included the above poem in *The New Century* (2018: 451).

Yet, based on her Introduction to a special issue of the journal *Scrutiny2* on women’s poetry, Pumla Dineo Gqola might disagree with my choice of Molebatsi’s poem. Gqola sees women’s poetry as less about an ‘obsessive framing’ (she means, I think, formal or metaphoric layering) and more about a ‘questioning, exploratory stance’ linked to ‘opening spaces, breaking silences and the larger democratic project’ (2011: 6). While the phrase, breaking silences, is not new,14 the larger democratic project in Gqola’s formulation seems to point to a lack in that project: namely, to a neglect on the part of national politics in confronting misogynist violence and the policing of women’s bodies across class, race, location, and sexual orientation:

Women’s entitlement to bodily autonomy in public spaces is curtailed and diminished in the wide-spread rapes of Black lesbians, the attacks on a woman at Noord taxi-rank by taxi drivers because she was ‘provocatively’ dressed. (7)

It is undeniable that such stories appear with sickening regularity in the daily press. The question is, though: can the poem add to the graphic detail of journalistic description, or is the poem something slightly apart?

There is no single answer to such a question, of course, even in the discussion of women’s poetry as distinct perhaps from discussion of the womanist poem. For Barbara Boswell the reply might be that women’s poetry seeks a ‘restorative ethic’ (2016: 24), but she confines her discussion to black women’s poetry. Does race in South Africa continue to trump gender? In any case, Boswell suggests that over the last twenty years black women’s voices have confronted not only critiques of oppression but have imagined new worlds and new ways of being in these new worlds. Deirdre Byrne extends such observations on poetry by black women to identify more generally in women’s poetry in South Africa the use of language as ‘a particular site of resistance against patriarchy and colonial discourses, an emphasis they share with feminist poets around the globe’ (2016: 28). The linguistic strategies used by South African women poets include: ‘claiming the right to speak […] overcoming the gendered public/private divide; and battling against the recalcitrance of language in order to achieve poetic expression’ (28). By the recalcitrance of language, Byrne probably means a language of response that assumes male-centred power. She illustrates her point from Beverly Rycroft’s ‘Living in a Shoe’, a poem that echoes the old nursery rhyme. Rycroft’s treatment – Byrne has it – subverts the stereotype of the self-sacrificing mother, born for nurturing, with the poem ending in a flouting of such conventional expectations, the lines devoid of sentimentality:

Finally

defeated

I turn to the only magic I knew

The shapeless, angry

loving you

(Qtd in Byrne 2016: 41)

Byrne’s is a deft analysis of Rycroft’s poem. But, as in the case of Molebatsi, we might want to qualify a too-singular womanist programme and permit Rycroft a more intricate expression of her ‘self’:

Let us just stick with

the scraps of heaven down

here. Like this businessman

off the flight from Brazzaville.

Dropping his briefcase

to the floor, he crouches

to fling his arms wide

braced for someone

calling from the crowd.

(*from* ‘Arrival’ 2017: 51)

Ignoring the cacophony of family greetings at the airport, the poet-speaker recognises a rare moment of human communion above any male/female dichotomy. Such an observation applies equally to several of the poets who have already been introduced in this article, including not only Makhosazana Xaba, but also Ingrid de Kok, Lebogang Mashile, and Busisiwe Mahlangu.

To attach theoretical underpinnings to what has been said so far about women’s poetry and the womanist poem, we can turn to two articles, one by Gillian Schutte, the other by Sally Ann Murray. Schutte attaches a ‘women’s poetic’ to French feminism of the 1970s, particularly in *écriture feminine*, the term coined by Hélène Cixoux in a passionate plea that ‘Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies’ (1976: 875). *Écriture feminine*, in reaction, emphasises the feeling and experience of women in an aesthetic which can privilege ‘cyclical writing’: an aesthetic which evades ‘the discourse [presumably a logic of cause-and-effect] that regulates the phallocentric system’ (883). The aim is a greater fluidity of signifiers as opposed to the rigidity of the signifier-signified relationship as in Cixoux’s characterisation of ‘masculine’ prose.

Whether such a feminisation is more semantic than real, more a matter of interpretation than innate style in poetry, is probably less significant than that female identity requires a definitional space within the patriarchal order in which so many women continue to live. Unfortunately, the critical vocabulary of *écriture feminine* – a subset of poststructural theory – has lost a great deal of its initial freshness and is now commonplace in academic circles, if not necessarily in the creative writing endeavour. It is refreshing, paradoxically, that very few practising poets in South Africa seem to write to a theoretical demand, unless we wish to follow Ndoni Khanyile, who states that her university literary education, infused with feminist discourse, planted the idea that it is essential for women to write their bodies, ‘“especially as black women writing ourselves is a revolutionary act […] an assertion of our dignity, our complexity, our very humanity”’ (qtd in Schutte 2016: 52):

My vagina is a mystery

a little stuck she is never easily pleased.

…

My vagina is confused, currently unused because

the last tenant was evicted for lack of maintenance.

(*from* ‘My Vagina Is…’, in Schutte 2016: 52)

Does experience, as expressed here, surmount theory? Or is it a theoretical supposition that, in Khanyile’s decidedly prosaic lines, experience surmounts poetry?

It is the poet’s way which, in contrast, traces its path through the second article that I mentioned above. In ‘Lyrics**<->**L/language…’ Sally Ann Murray shifts the focus from *écriture feminine* to another strand of poststructural consideration, as embodied in debates on L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics: that is, in debates that have exercised the critical and imaginative faculties of poet-critics mainly in the United States. As in Derridean and Foucauldian deconstruction, L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics draws on Saussure’s linguistic formulation of language not as ‘natural’ but as codes of convention. The making of meaning is seen as an artificial construct and is open, accordingly, to experimental and innovative changes of register. For Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Kathleen Fraser, Linda Kinnahan, Romana Huk and other poet-critics, such changes of register include the prising of emotion from its conventional assumption of naturalness. Nonetheless, we are reminded by Heiss that in Murray’s poetry ‘emotion’, as construct, does not necessarily preclude effect, knowledge, or even reportage (2007: 64). The point is that the lyric, as it is ‘conventionally’ associated with the expression of the woman’s voice, need not be understood as a ‘genre authorising the self’s primacy’; as an emotionally invested, autobiographical mode of expression marked by a ‘unified lyric subject and notions of transparent language’; or as a literary genre in which language expresses the private sensations and thoughts of the individual poet (Kinnahan 2004: 43).

In my view, however, such an argument sets up the lyric as something of a straw… eh, straw person, against which to promote an experimental poetics, but a poetics which, as Murray is aware, is not that new and can be traced back to late nineteenth-- and early twentieth-century modernism and onwards to postmodernism: the former seeking to ‘make strange’, the latter seeking an irreverent undermining of the former. Whatever the case in the United States, the case in South Africa is that the lyric – if the term has been employed with any consistency – has long had to accommodate its content and its form to a spectrum of experience, as adumbrated by theorist-practitioners of L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. poetry. Although the lyric in women’s poetry in South Africa has not received sustained consideration – we may return to an article in 1989 by Ingrid Fiske [de Kok]15 – the ‘I’ in the New Black Poets of the 1970s was more voluble and rebellious than could be reined to a poetry of the private world. As I have suggested, the ‘I’ in the New Black Poetry – admittedly, a poetry of male-ambition – encompassed the ‘we’ of community: the short, ‘lyrical’ form wanted to leave the page for the stage in the ‘epic’ journey of the long poem. (From Serote’s a-lyrical lyrics in *Yakhal’inkomo* to his 60-page *No Baby Must Weep.*)16

In the context of her own poetic practice, Murray notes that the lyric poem, in which lyric has been understood as a genre authorising the self’s primacy, can expand the *process* of the experience not only on the stage, but also on the page. She refers to Joan Metelerkamp’s poetry: a poetry which is ‘lyrical and not: Language, and not’ (Murray 2011: 26). Building on Kelwyn Sole’s appraisal of multiple voices – philosophical, angry, critical, sensuous (1996: 30) – and Kobus Moolman’s articulation of features of the long poem (2010), Murray suggests that it is time to develop a critical vocabulary appropriate to Metelerkamp’s poetics: ‘how to tackle a poetic praxis which is impatient with the poem as iconic instance and veers off towards other, less clearly imagined shapes’ (2011: 26).17 The lyric<-> L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. implication also has Murray attend to Karen Press’s *Echo Location: A Guide to Sea Point for Residents and Visitors* (1998), a sequence of poems in which, as Murray puts it, ‘there is the clamour of historical melée, the noisy, boisterous anti-poetry of the street which, loosely transcribed so as to resemble a poetics on foot, runs and crawls along the bottom of the contained page, wittily opening the space to concrete materiality, claiming a little right for all kinds of speech to co-exist’ (2011: 26):

Alida’s not my name

It’s from a dress left on the beach.

Alida Creations. 100% Silk.

…

They hate me washing cars. Want me to use my body

to earn money. ‘Woman’s advantage.’

I told them here in Sea Point there’s more would pay

for their cocks than my cunt. Berger broke my teeth for that.

Called me ‘seekoei’. ‘Kooi.’

Everyone laughed, till I stabbed him with a bottle.

Piece of shit. I wouldn’t let anyone touch me.

*cheddar cheese and rocket or smoked salmon and cream cheese, chocolate*

(*from* Press’s ‘100% Silk’ 1998: 30)

And, as in Cronin’s poetry (discussed earlier on), ‘it’s not such a great leap from the experimental aesthetic to the poem as a sign of the longed-for community of an ethical democracy’ (Murray 2011: 26). Which is not to negate, but to ‘open up’ to ongoing exploration Eagleton’s observation, to which I have referred, that poetry is the literary form ‘most sequestered from the winds of history’ (2007: 164).

Focusing on her own poetry Murray articulates her response to the poststructural influences of *écriture feminine* and L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics. The challenge in not one of choice, but of pushing the boundaries of both influences. It is to engage with the possibilities of an abstracted linguistic system, whether in disrupted forms, typographical play, or strange orthographies – that is, in techniques that dislocate the word from conventional usage – while at the same time maximising the power of subjective ‘voicing’. Voicing, according to US L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. Poetics, adds the presence of continuity to the abbreviated voice. Or as Blau DuPlessis has it, it is to avoid the either/or and capture the both/and of the conceptual and the perceptual fields, putting ‘daring rupture in heartfelt rapture’ (2002: n.p.).

In *Open Season* (2006), Murray ‘re-situates’ so-called women’s subjects – pregnancy, mothering – on disruptive ground, in which the killing of household rodents, or even her children’s pets that begin to multiply beyond their welcome, represents ‘lessons’ not only to her children but, more significantly, to herself, the working mother, wife, and individual person living in the helter-skelter of domesticity:

Come here then while I hold you tight. Listen:

Stay away young ones from your mother who

is exhausted, stay away from her she loves you

too much so much you must leave her alone.

(*from* ‘Vigour Mortis: An Interminable Domestic Epic of Life & Death’, 74-83)

As she acknowledges fellow-Durban poet Douglas Livingstone,

eyes closed against the sun,

the sea remains

and it remains the sea,

…

the life of an old salt stinging the eyes to water,

(*from* ‘After Douglas’, 1)

Murray seeks to go beyond the earlier poet’s word play upon the elements of the natural world. She makes poetry not only of the Mbilo river (‘The lower reaches float belly-up, /sluggish current slack against silt/sif with algae bloom’, ‘Mbilo’, 72), but out of almost anything, whether the smalls in the daily press – ‘A first timer Sexy Swazi model 4 wild f/hse…NOW STRIPPING 50 cars’, ‘Smalls (mixed massages)’, 25 – or the evolution of the *OED*:

For some, Murray’s\* breezy tolerance was intolerable.

*Whisky* or *whiskey* asked one? Reply: When in a hurry, save a fraction

of time by omitting the e, and when wanting to linger:

relax, savour the slow distilled flavour of protraction.

(*from* ‘Doing the Dictionary’, 31)

\*James Murray of the *OED*

Or why not a sonnet, ‘un-courtly’ in its content, adaptable in its form. Its quatrain begins,

I know a man, although lovely in his bones,

who sometimes burps and farts and snores,

while its closing couplet upends its own deflationary tone, ‘I am at home in his body. […] But you: will you make yourself at home/in this extraordinary love poem?’ (*from* ‘Love/Loss’: 39). Of *Open Season* Roy Robins said, ‘The poet isn’t afraid to risk a poem over a gag – I am sure this is a good thing’ (2006: 53) while Peter Strauss added, ‘This is Murray’s daring. It is what gives us poems that are observant, witty, companionable (but not comfy)’ (2007: 232).

*Open Season* serves as a prelude to *Otherwise Occupied* (2019), which in its own way achieves what Livingstone achieved in *A Littoral Zone* (1991): a collection which in its originality takes us where poetry has not taken us before. Murray ranges from the personal to the public. She encompasses lyrics (not the kind in which private emotion overwhelms thought or linguistic innovation); longer, narrative poems; ‘found’ adaptations; and several wonderful and wicked responses to the constraints of political correctness. The politically incorrect Donald Trump receives his comeuppance in a withering sideswipe: ‘*Grab them by the pussy… That’s my ethics talking*’ (‘Re: Reading and Re-reading. Page Proofs’, 84). It is a sideswipe that does not preclude a woman from commandeering her own (incorrect) upper hand:

Call me cynical a bad-mouthed bitch not anyway feminine

enough for such ritual female gongs. I admit.

…

But does that make me otherwise?

Flexibility is key. I can touch my toes and all the other

unladylike bits. Can do old-fashioned banana splits.

And while there’s no open-door policy, I offer

a fully stocked mini-bar well worth the tasting

should you crack the nod. Be my guest,

though I won’t press.

(‘Little Joys’, 21-2)

At times the mother’s voice, ironical in its play on gender codes, receives its own comeuppance from the voicing (not simply the voice) of a precocious daughter, the daughter being a self-assertive presence in the collection:

One woman picks out Afro; sticks the comb behind her ear; adjusts her bra.

Traffic fumes in passing. Stop/go. A potential client idles up; cop exits car.

Sorry, this is such a rubbish poem, mom.

It’s not even a poem. It doesn’t go anywhere. How dumb.

(It’s still rough. Not done! But it’s about trying to make connections by…)

Whatever. Please can we just kick it out already. Ok?

(‘Rubbish’, 24)

When we encounter a poet who can tease our poetic expectation, who can manipulate rhythm and rhyme to advantage (‘Little Joys’), we are likely to accept the ditching of metaphoric concentration for the colloquial and narrative prose register (‘Rubbish’) as the ploy of a poet who knows what she is about. And if the anti-poet threatens the poet, then we are reminded that on other occasions the poem makes it hard to brush aside the ambiguities of the words and images to nail down a single meaning:

everyone lives his own happiness

her own misery or their vice versa

Some men clubbing baby seals

is the other side of some women

cuddling babies in the scale of things

or some men cuddling baby seals

and some women clubbing babies

it depends on who you are

and who the other parties are

and what you’re party to

and where the parties

and when and how involved.

(‘Homilectics’: 12)

The edification of our nature and our conditioning (our nurture?) is inextricably bound in the exercise of the poetic form.

The other poet who, like Murray, can shock the reader is a poet of ongoing innovation from her first collections in the 1970s to her output in current times. I refer, of course, to Antjie Krog, who is commonly regarded, together with Breyten Breytenbach, not only as a major voice in Afrikaans poetry, but also a major voice in world literature.18 Whereas novels in Afrikaans are amenable to translation, poetry is not so amenable resulting, as I said in my opening remarks, to constraints in any mapping of poetry in a multilingual society. I am not able to do justice to Breytenbach’s poetry or to the contribution of several key Afrikaans poets, whether Joan Hambidge, whose allusive referencing links her locality to global voices –

if you ever talk of the Garden of Eternity

with the other gardener of Amherst,

with her, Sylvia, whose death

keeps on blooming like a black arum lily? –

(*from* ‘In Emily Dickinson’s Garden’, trans. Douglas Reid Skinner. In Chapman, ed., 2018: 317)

or the ‘voicing’ of Ronelda Kamfer, a young poet of Cape Flats experience:

dearest uncles, you with your creepy long greybeards, knee-length socks

and those of you who think khaki go wif eweryfing

…

yes, you bunch of shits

I discovered the secret

I speak your language

I eat your food

I reside in your fatherland

and drink your wine

I sing your songs

and, dear uncles, I, yes, I smooch your sons

(*from* ‘forgive me but I’m Afrikaans’, trans Leon de Kock. In Chapman, ed., 2018: 433-4)

That I can respond more confidently to Krog than to Breytenbach, Hambidge, or Kamfer is because, since her ‘international’ prominence as a commentator on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in the mid-1990s, Krog’s work, including her poetry, has been the subject of considerable translation by accomplished poets including herself. Whatever the limits of translation as dynamic equivalence (the re-creation in another language of the verbal adroitness of the original), her poetry receives compensation in translation as formal equivalence: that is, in the compulsion of situation, event, and message. Krog has always had important things to communicate; important things to share.19

Pursuing her overarching compulsion both in her poetry and narrative prose – on how to live together while acknowledging and respecting difference – Krog moved from her earlier Western inheritance to experiments of voice in African oral traditions. Based on the eighteenth-century sojourn to the Cape Colony of Lady Anne Barnard (wife of Andrew Barnard, the Colonial Secretary to the Governor of the Cape), Krog’s collection *Lady Anne* (1989)20 pursued in Afrikaans a modernist path of intertextual allusion and experiments with European forms including villanelles, sonnets, and French ballades. Her ‘oral-inflected’ poems in *the stars say ‘tsau’*/in Afrikaans, *die sterre sȇ ‘tsau’* (2004) draw on Bushman expression, via the mid-nineteenth-century transcripts and translations of W H I Bleek and Lucy C Lloyd (1911). In *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* (2000) [Colour Never Comes Alone], Krog captures the dialect of the Richtersveld descendants of Khoi and Afrikaners from the early Cape Colony. Such poems sprinkle vernacular words within freer rhythms and seek to escape the voice on the page even as an underlying discipline of form retains the page as the bedrock of communication. Krog seeks what Murray described as a democratising voice.

In yet another shift of focus, the private aches and challenges of ageing accompany the poems in *Body Bereft* (the English version of *Verweerskrif*, 2006) while private and public impulses conjoin in *Synapse* (*Mede-wete*, 2014), a poetry of belonging to the complex multilingual and multiracial land of Krog’s birth. The impact of the ‘ageing’ poems lies in unflinching observation, both in Afrikaans and English:

she reads about the wane

of oestrogen: the waist thickens and

the vagina wall thins and the colon crashes

through its own arse

…

mornings her piss smells like wet cement

(‘when tight is loose’ 2006: 23-4)

We encounter a language of ‘viscera’ reaction: ‘Meanwhile [if] terror lies exactly in how/one lives with the disintegrating body/[…] in how one resigns to vaginal atrophy and incontinence’ (‘God, Death, Love’, 20), there are, at least for this poet, female compensations (‘you no longer/use sex for yourself but for me […] into the luxury of experience I stretch myself out’) when

at times it seems easier to rage

against the dying of the light

than to eke out

the vocabulary of old age

(‘how do you say this’, 28-9)

You might say, it is a case of Dylan Thomas’s grandiloquence punctured by ‘bedpans […] and something/that looked like a potato peeler’ (‘it is true’, 12).

If *Body Bereft* with uncomfortable forthrightness approaches the ‘taboo’ subject of ageing (taboo in a mass culture geared to the glamour of youth), then *Synapse* opens with a 13-poem sequence, ‘the yard’, in which Krog evokes her autobiographical memory with all its warts of cruelty and compassion from the flailing of a Bushman stock thief by her ‘people’, the Afrikaans farming community, to her struggle to connect beyond the iron codes of the *volk*, as in the wonderfully captured ‘double vision’ of ‘it’s him!’:

that’s Pa! my heart surges up in my throat but as I turn

the corner it’s an old black man

in a neatly darned Harris Tweed jacket like the one you’d

find in Pa’s winter trunk I walk behind him

and my eyes are glued to the two-big jacket shoulders:

what if this man was my father what if it was his fingers

fumbling with a plastic bag under his arm

what if my father was black and old and full of integrity

surrendering to his worn-out muscles

…

as I turn away: my complicity unbearable. stuck

fast our present continues to die from our past

(2014: 22)

Synapse – the gap between nerve-end cells across which impulses pass beyond the rational mind – is embodied in the 15-page sequence, ‘Servants Talk’ [servants *do* talk], a painful interchange of disconnection between (white suburban) master/madam and the Xhosa domestic worker or, in suburban parlance, the domestic servant or just the ‘domestic’:

Victoria arrived at the kitchen table this morning with the neighbour’s maid

so that she can explain to me in good English:

it’s about a very important matter

a serious matter that affects everyone and has an influence on everything

and actually it was wonderful to hear Victoria talking so fluently in Xhosa

with such concentration and emphasis and then the careful translation

that Joyce did from next door cut to the chase woman,

how much does she want to borrow

wait, the son must go for initiation of course it had to come

and she wants to borrow twenty thousand rand twenty fucking thousand!!

she and the son will pay it off jesus christ

just shake the white people tree and watch the money falling

…

Yifihle lemali singekakhweli

Banintsi otsotsi nge Krimesi

Futhi ndifuna ukuphumla ngoku lapasela yam yeKrismesi ingqeyame ngam

*? hide this money before we get in there are lots of thieves around at christmas and I just want to relax now all my christmas presents are packed in it’s good to feel the bags of food against my legs*

(2014: 68)

If money is the connecting issue, then, as I suggested above, disconnection prevails, both in content and form. The language, isiXhosa, is unintelligible not only to the master and madam of the poems, but probably also to the likely readers of ‘Servants Talk’, whether in the Afrikaans or English-speaking version. Hence, the translation of the domestic worker’s interchange with her own family is necessary at the foot of each page.

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‘South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world’ and (a favourite on BBC World and CNN) ‘African people, particularly the women, or so resilient’ – such pat commentary reveals its hollowness in the context of Krog’s uncompromising explorations of inter-racial experience. In her poetry niceties of whether we hear a voice, or whether we are confronted with voicing, or whether she is a women’s poet or a womxn poet, can all be distractions from what is obvious: that Krog is a poet of rare talent. A similar observation applies to Sally Ann Murray.

What is not a distraction is that poetry more than fiction, or even more than non-fiction, has the potential to liberate itself from guilt, blame, or the clichés of the public platform. In considering a range of styles in a range of poets, I have attempted to show the necessity of a flexibility of aesthetic response. The poem asks its reader to hold back for longer than fiction from arriving at an ethical judgement; the poem, more directly than fiction, touches our affective life as a deep constant: as a biological trace which, whether we like it or not, can be a little devilish in how it responds to the conventions of the culture. Given such considerations, Antjie Krog is probably the appropriate poet on whose work to conclude my observations of poetry in South Africa.

**Notes on Contributor**

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**Notes**

1. For *A Century* and *The New Century*, see Chapman (1981; 2002; and 2018). For *Groot verseboek*, see Brink (2009). For other relevant anthologies of the last thirty years, see Lockett (1990), Hirson (1997 and 2014), Berold (2002), Mokhosi (2006), Molebatsi (2008 and 2021), Moolman (2017), Lechevallier (2020), Mbao (2021) and for Afrikaans poems in English translation, Joubert (2014).

For selective reference to earlier anthologies, see Chapman (1984a) and Foley (2019).

See Chapman (2019) on the ‘story of an anthology’.

2. The aim of the South African Poetry Project (ZAPP) is to encourage and improve the teaching of poetry in schools. See D’Abdon et al. (2020).

3. See Chapman (2016) and Wylie (2018). Thurman (2010) and Shum (2020) incorporate the poetry of Butler and Pringle, respectively, into a wider consideration of a ‘literary life’.

4. See Sole (2005; 2009; 2016; 2019). When he focuses on the poems rather than on the debates on poetry, Sole can be generous in its response, as in his ‘Afterword’ (2002).

5. *The Penguin Book of South African Verse* (1968), edited by Cope and Krige, was the first anthology of poetry from South Africa to introduce translations of poems from the click languages of First People (San/Bushmen and Khoi), from the African-languages, and from Afrikaans. For translations into English of earlier Afrikaans poetry, see Grové and Harvey (1962).

On ‘Bushman’ expression, see Chapman (2022).

6. For an anthology of critical articles on the poetry, see Chapman, ed. (2007 [1982]), and for an extended discussion of Soweto Poetry, see Chapman (1984b).

7. My discussion here on Soweto poems that broke beyond the print-bound form to enter an ‘open’ field of expression bears on considerations of the lyric or the epic as the more appropriate form for the experience. As the topic pertains to black poetry, see Msimang (2007 [1982]); Chapman (1984b); Brown (1998), and Attwell (2005). As the topic applies to more recent spoken word poetry, see D’Abdon (2016).

8. See Chapman (2016a).

9. Sole points to Ramanazi (2009) on a ‘transnational poetics’.

10. See Fiske [De Kok] on lyric and elegy (1998).

11. See, earlier on in this article, Metelerkamp’s response (1993) to Serote’s long poem, *Third World Express*, in which she might well have been describing her own compositional and aesthetic purpose. See also Moolman (2010) on Metelerkamp’s poetry.

12. See my earlier discussion in this article on Gwala’s ‘spoken word’ expression and Note 7, above, for references to a poetry of the ‘epic’ voice.

13. For an earlier anthology of poetry by women in South Africa, see Lockett (1990).

14. See Olsen (1978), Donovan (1987), Todd (1988), and Lockett (1990).

15. On the ‘politicisation’ of lyric, Fiske [De Kok] states that it has become a genre for women poets ‘to disassemble, reassemble and interpret, to reimagine the self’ (1989:78).

16. For discussion of the ‘lyric’ and ‘epic’ in black poetry, return to my discussion of Gwala’s ‘Getting off the Ride’ and for references to the discussion of the ‘epic’ form in back poetry, see Note 7, above.

17. See Note 13, above.

18. See Viljoen (2011) on Afrikaans poetry.

19. See Van Vuuren (2011) on Krog.

20. Originally in Afrikaans; now translated/reworked in English as *Lady Anne: A Chronicle in Verse* (2017).

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