

**Witness to Everything: Representations of Precarity in Selected Works of Four South  
African Poets**

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment / partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, in the Graduate Programme in English Studies, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

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## Abstract

This dissertation identifies and analyses representations of precarity in selected poems of Mxolisi Nyezwa, Seithlamo Motsapi, Angifi Dladla and Ike Mboneni Muila, revealing how precarity is conveyed through their innovative use of language and aesthetic approach. The four poets offer a creative reaction to precarity through their poetry, with their language strategies and aesthetic outlook enabling them to remould modes of perception, interpretation and communication in literary praxis. Furthermore, their poetry is also able to represent the precariousness of life while crucially distinguishing between socio-economically induced precarity and overall human precariousness.

I will be engaging with four texts: *Malikhanye* (Nyezwa, 2012), *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (Motsapi, 1995), *the girl who then feared to sleep* (2004), *Gova* (2004). I discuss in detail and with the aid of close textual analysis the various forms and the considered use of techniques whereby their poetry represents precarity and also manifests reactions to precarity. By applying the theoretical insights of a variety of local and international theorists and engaging with the poetic texts selected, I further unlock and explain the precise effectiveness of their aesthetic approaches. Through an analysis of the selected poems I also reveal key connections between precarity and concepts such as slow death, slow violence, cruel optimism, hauntology, and the unlanguage.

The poets lead the reader away from a facile acceptance of everyday hegemonies and thereby challenge thought patterns and identify the shape of socio-economically induced precarity. Their poetic oeuvre embraces a broader world than the restricted categorisations and processes of capitalism and neo-liberalism, pointing the reader towards a possible world that is based on awareness and embrace of alterity, acceptance of egalitarianism, an acknowledgement of planetarity and the precarious nature of life and of other lives.

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My supervisor, Professor Cheryl Stobie, has been very helpful and insightful and has guided me effectively through the entire process of putting together this dissertation. She has understood my intentions and motivations in doing this project and has assisted me in paring down this work to its essential core and through her mentorship enhanced my academic writing skills as well as critical abilities within the academic sphere.

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I am grateful to the poets I have covered in this dissertation for being among those who inspired a love of poetry in me, and encouraged me to encounter and embrace poetry and use language as a tool of change, freedom and broader apprehension.

My family support has enabled me to spend sufficient time on this dissertation and give the topic the justice it deserves. Their sacrifices have played a major role in this work being completed.

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## Introduction: it all begins

*it begins with thunder in the middle of the road,  
it all begins with people bleeding from the intestine –  
it begins with one statement,  
with the scratch of one pen.*

(Nyezwa, 1999, p.14)

My focus in this dissertation is on selected works of Mxolisi Nyezwa, Seithamo Motsapi, Angifi Dladla and Ike Mboneni Muila. Using textual analysis, and in conjunction with theories of precarity, as well as inputs from closely connected or related concepts, my primary objective is to identify and analyse representations of precarity in the selected works of these poets.

In this Introduction, I start by clarifying and delineating the focus of my dissertation. I introduce and briefly discuss my objectives. I follow this by giving a brief motivation, outlining the literary, socially relevant and personal reasons for my choosing this topic. I then move on to the background of the four poets who are the focus of the dissertation, looking at their commonalities, publication history and aesthetic practices. I subsequently explain and discuss the theoretical frameworks that I will be using, introducing key concepts and theories and giving information about their relevance and application to the objectives of this dissertation. I introduce the concept of precarity in great detail and discuss comprehensively its history and applications, as well as introducing connected concepts such as slow death, cruel optimism, necropolitics, the spectral, hauntology and the unlinguaged. I discuss the ways in which the poets articulate the concept of precarity and related concepts by engaging briefly with some of their selected poems. This is followed by a more in-depth analysis in the individual chapters. I then end the chapter with an overview of the dissertation, giving a breakdown of my chapters and a summary of their contents and purpose.

I will be focusing predominantly on four selected works: *Malikhanye* (Nyezwa, 2011), *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (Motsapi, 1995), *the girl who then feared to sleep* (Dladla, 2001), and *Gova* (Muila, 2004). The four publications I have chosen are spread across the first two decades of democracy, but are united by common attitudes and an ability to engage with social issues through their use of form and content. The spread of dates enables an effective sense of commentary on the state, or even “stasis” of the nation, narrating the enduring socio-economic precarity of the marginalised in South Africa. Each of the books chosen gives a kind of “cockroach eye view” (Slasha, 2018) into the manifestations and nature of precarity in South Africa.

I will, where necessary, quote or analyse poems by these four poets that might not feature in the above selected books, to contextualise my argument or offer crucial background information.

I will be theorising precarity, particularly in a local context, as well as the ways in which it is challenged in the poets’ works. I aim to identify and establish the connections between “precarity” (Butler, 2004), “slow death” (Berlant, 2007), “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2011), “hauntology/the spectral” (Derrida, 1994), “necropolitics” (Mbembe and Meintjes, 2003), “the unlanguage” (Slasha, 2017, 2018) and Georges Perec’s concept of the “infra-ordinary” (1973) (and as discussed by Unathi Slasha, 2018). These connections exist in the work of the poets that are discussed in this dissertation, and an analysis of their poetry will reveal the ways in which they represent precarity while simultaneously breaking new ground in South African literature. This analysis involves close textual reading, and a clarification and discussion about the ways in which their poetry ruptures and transforms the previous codes of poetic expression in South Africa. This breaking of code is by no means simply a technical device enabling fresh expression, but also a revelation of the rupture in meaning and the state of existential uncertainty in contemporary society. The stanza of Nyezwa used as an epigraph strongly sums up both the rupture and wounding in society (“it begins with thunder in the middle of the road, / it all begins with people bleeding from the intestine –”) as well as being a nod to the power of words (both spoken and written) and the act of writing (“it begins with one statement, / with the scratch of one pen”). The “it” in these lines represents the existential situation of a member of society.



While discussing the ability of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Muila and Dladla to transform and remould language, I will explain ways in which they offer a creative reaction to precarity, and how their expression of ideas through their poetic production challenges precarisation, while not denying the living spectre of the past, the challenges of the present, or the uncertainty of the future. Their writing is strongly aware of the precariousness of life, and by asserting and celebrating life's ephemeral beauty, and engaging with the vulnerability and finiteness of life, their work also challenges a world which is heavily dominated by a culture of consumerism, performativity/audit culture,<sup>1</sup> and materialism. Their writing gives glimpses to a possible society where livability, the grievability of lives, and shared humanity is emphasised, as well as showing the potential of language to change society through altering the codes of meaning and focalising marginalised and precarious lives.

I sum my primary objectives up in the following questions:

How do these poets represent aspects of precarity in their writing?

How do the poets connect “precarity”, “slow death”, “slow violence”, “cruel optimism”, “hauntology /the spectral”, and “the unlanguage” within their poetry, enabling a broader understanding of precarity?

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Jean-Francois Lyotard speaks of the “audit culture” of contemporary society. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), he writes: “there are things that should be said, and there are ways of saying them. Thus: orders in the army, prayer in church, denotation in the schools, narration in families, questions in philosophy, performativity in businesses” (p.17). He further observes:

The decision makers, however, attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system's performance efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear.” (p.xxiv, Introduction)

I use the word performativity following from Lyotard's words, in the sense that a majority of creative work seems to be geared towards fulfilling prior expectations, aiming to meet certain requirements or fit in with trends, as opposed to challenging and possibly subverting expectations. Kelwyn Sole criticises this (2008), noting some writers gear their poetry towards an agenda. In more recent times, many writers will be superficially radical, creating poetry that speaks on the surface about radical change and social transformations, although their writing is aesthetically conservative and their outlook often very narcissistic and limited in creative innovation.

Apart from the focus on precarity in their work, in what ways does their work also offer a creative reaction to precarity and precarisation?

## **Motivation**

I have chosen this topic for literary, social relevance and personal purposes. From a literary perspective, I am inspired by the use of language and aesthetic practice of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila. Their poetry shows that aesthetic integrity and political engagement are not mutually exclusive terms. From a socially interpretive perspective, they retain a keen eye on micro issues and are able to render the universal and political through the description and evocation of the particular. They are unafraid of engaging with ambiguous possibilities. I admire the fresh qualities in their poetic language, which is the complete opposite of sloganeering, clichés and rhetoric. Their poetry has also influenced my work as a poet.

The concept of precarity is relevant to an understanding of our contemporary times, as it enables one to focus on individuals in situations of politically induced vulnerability, understanding them through an empathetic lens, and it enables one to look at society with a desire to be humane and to acknowledge the “face” and right to social value of the “other”. The poetry of the four selected writers in particular represents and conveys the reality of precarity in South Africa.

I have lived a life of varied challenges, which enables me to relate to precarity on a personal level, having encountered precarity not as a theory, but as a daily lived experience of uncertainty and unknowable futures, including long periods of unemployment, temporary work, work without a basic income, challenges with accommodation and an overall basic uncertainty about my future. I have carried the works of these writers with me in my life’s journeys, since first encountering their poetry in my teenage years, finding meaning and insight from their writing, both in my individual life situation, and in the broader state of South African society. As such, precarity is the word that gives a name to the sense of existential crisis which I and many of my generation have experienced and are currently living through. This is an awareness that things

have changed and yet simultaneously have not really changed; the change is largely superficial for those in precarious situations. This realisation leads to those who bear witness to this reality hoping “our failure will have more dignity” (Nyezwa, 1999).

The title “Witness to everything” comes from a conversation on 12 January 2019, which I had with Nyezwa, where he described the role of his poetry to be “a witness to everything”. Witness and witnessing are key words used in many other discussions of the poets. Alice Meyer in the abstract of her recent doctoral thesis, “Poetry and politics in post-apartheid South Africa” (2017), writes:

The poets in question have set about bearing *witness* to unrelenting social ills through drawing upon the dynamism of poetry in order to rejuvenate public language, dialogue and debate. (p.i)

## **Background to the writers**

As previously noted, the study analyses selected works of four South African poets: Mxolisi Nyezwa, Seithlamo Motsapi, Angifi Dladla and Ike Mboneni Muila. These poets, along with poets such as Khulile Nxumalo, Phillip Zhuwao, Lesego Rampolokeng, Karen Press, Joan Metelerkamp, and Isabella Motadinyane (poets whom I have not included in this dissertation due to space constraints), stand together as a poetic corpus owing to a number of commonalities they share. Their poetry first came to prominence during the socio-politico-economic context of the 1990s. Mentioning that their poetry emerged in publications during the period of transition is not to say that their writing is purely that of the transitional period, as all of them started to write before the fall of apartheid, and they were heavily shaped as well by experiences under apartheid; they consequently possessed an awareness that conditions of socio-economic precarity persisted beyond the fall of apartheid, with many socio-economic gaps increasing. Nyezwa’s poem, “things change”, was first published in *New Coin*, 25 (2), 1989, almost word for word the same poem that would appear in his collection *Song Trials* (1999), and potentially may be

interpreted as a poem that is specifically speaking about the transition of the 1990s (Meyer, 2017).<sup>2</sup> The poem strongly sums up important points, and can be classed as a highly prophetic work:

things change

*for Malope*

at least then, it won't be like this  
it will be a totally new suffering  
like when a baby sucks his thumb.

it will be a totally new experience  
(for God and history has provided)  
we won't have to blow our minds  
about it.

it will be like a fresh song  
from a sparkling songbird  
it will be like that for us, as an old  
woman sits neglected  
on the chair of her memories  
it will be fresher, more vital  
for us... at least it won't be like death.

and like death we die

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<sup>2</sup> Lesego Rampolokeng vehemently refutes the idea that Nyezwa and others of his generation should be classified as post 94 writers, most notably in "Decline to participate", published in *New Coin* December 2014:

Of my own generation.[:] If one can call it that, Mxolisi Nyezwa and Seithlamo Motsapi, without a doubt the finest poets experimenting with both form and language, did not start publishing their poetry post-94. Even Khulile Nxumalo was writing long before then. I do not see how the '94 line of distinction got drawn. I do understand the politics of it all, of course. (p.111)

every moment of our lives  
it will be a totally new suffering  
it will be like a song sung free  
from a careless heart...

(our failure will have its dignity.)

The poem speaks of “a totally new suffering”, fully aware that historical changes and the ends of certain epochs do not abruptly end all modes or forms of suffering. It speaks of the fresh songbird (rhetoric of a new era) and contrasts it effectively with the image of “as an old/ woman sits neglected/ on the chair of her memories”, symbolising the official insistence on a new era, whereas for the ordinary people, things remain unchanged in the present, and they are stuck with the spectre of history, remaining seated, not able to move, which is the deeper insinuation and ironic connotation of the slightly ambiguous title that asks, do things change?; and to what extent do people have the capacity to be agents of change themselves? On the surface, yes, there are transformations such as the singing bird, and the mention of “at least it won’t be like death”, but again immediately in the next lines, the recurring slow death and precarity of life is foregrounded: “and like the death we die/ every moment of our lives/ it will be a totally new suffering”, followed by the lyrical beauty but ironic implication of the lines “it will be like a song sung free/ from a careless heart.../ / (our failure will have its dignity)”. The early line comparing the “new suffering” to a “baby sucking its thumb” points effectively to the precarity of those who experience this suffering – a feeling of being silenced, of inability to express – and also to the mundanity of everyday experience, locating existential angst in the everydayness of a baby sucking its thumb. The key definition of the transitional period and our contemporary society can be found in the paralleling of the lines “...at least it won’t be like death./ / and like death we die”, pointing to forms of death being overthrown through the coming of democracy, yet other forms of death remain in the climate of enduring politically induced precarity. Clearly though, in this poem, the strongest ray of hope comes through the language; a language of lyrical beauty and startling clarity, which, while not able to answer all questions a reader may ask, nevertheless effectively states the key questions of the time and clearly evokes their importance.

The four poets exemplify similar attitudes towards poetics, with writing that boldly pushes the use of language and form, and transcends simple classification as “political” literature or other popular simplistic definitions of post-apartheid literature. They possess a keen eye for the actual, being able to look beneath hype and slogans and the clichéd, writing poetry influenced by the work that came before them, and at the same time wanting to fill a vacuum in contemporary South African writing which they felt existed. Their poetry contains converging aesthetic and political outlooks and an embrace of innovation. Kelwyn Sole, in his review of Nyezwa’s first book, *Song Trials* (1999), describes him as possessing “an ability and facility to mould English into a language that better suits his needs” (Sole, 2000, n.pag), and compares him to writers such as Motsapi and Rampolokeng who have done the same. An examination of the poetry of Muila and Dladla reveals that they also remould English in diverse ways; Muila through using process poetry, tsotsi taal rhythms, and incorporating a diversity of South African languages by the use of tsotsi taal/ *isicamtho* phrases to disrupt English dominance; and Dladla through a focus on dislocating syntax, and using a narrative style which foregrounds imagery, shifting unexpectedly between juxtaposed descriptions and startling impressions. These styles of writing are not simply the result of the naiveté of second language speakers unaware of English language conventions, but involve an intentional deconstruction and reconstruction of language by skilled poetic craftworkers. This aesthetic is captured in Dladla’s poem, “the building, the weapon, and the way” (2001, p.79), where the poet warns of the need for new structures to produce new and diverse philosophies:

the building you occupy, belonged to the enemy  
that’s where he wrote tragedies and farces for our people.  
his thought forms have formed you into his twin. (2004, p.79)

These poets combine aesthetic integrity and political engagement, in a carefully articulated poetry which is deeply in touch with society and all its vulnerability, unpredictability and potential ambiguity, and thematically connecting to the core concept of precarity. The use of form is integral to their political commentary. Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila challenge the

conventional modes of narration and structure frequent in South African English poetry, producing work that is highly dialogic, transcending the conventional singular voice of English lyrical poetry, and offering structural deviations. Meyer (2017) writes about them and three of their contemporaries, Ari Sitas, Lesego Rampolokeng and Vonani Bila, calling them:

distinct in South Africa's literary history. This is insofar as their work can be distinguished from the private and inward looking nature of South Africa's English lyric tradition and the strident, sometimes simplistic, style of solidarity art championed by organisations such as the United Democratic Front. These poets are united in rejecting the boundary between formally complex and political art. Indeed, for all of these writers, it is precisely through formal play that a politics is enunciated. Aesthetic virtuosity is able to challenge anodyne and corporate styles of utterance, providing an alternative to the oversimplified messages of media, government and the capitalist world. (p.9)

Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla, Muila and the other poets of their generation received support by having their poems regularly featured in *New Coin* poetry magazine in the 1990s, under the editorship of Robert Berold, and have been described as "the poets of no certain place" by Tom Penfold (2015), an apt description, applying to their sense of uncertainty and scepticism about rhetoric of contemporary South African society, their awareness of the insecurity and precariousness of their lives, added to the fact that their work cannot be easily categorised.

Thus, unified in message and similarly searching for a new aesthetic that grappled with the uncertain and precarious nature of intense social change, *New Coin's* poetry can be considered a loose literary movement, which I term the Poets of No Sure Place. This label represents the "sense of imbalance and infinite disquiet in their poems" (Nyezwa 2015) while simultaneously speaking of their innovation and different backgrounds. There is a united sense of apprehension and instability; a feeling that each poet is refusing to be publicly subservient while simultaneously working through their own personal dilemmas and grievances; a message of radical insecurity coupled with a call to

rediscover the “simple values” (Ramakuela,1997) of life and in ourselves as individuals. (Penfold, 2015, p.505)

Berold came with a more open minded approach and actively searched for work which was innovative and challenged preconceptions of what poetry could be in South Africa.

Berold was committed to pursuing a different path, seeking out and mentoring groundbreaking new poetry. He no longer wanted to publish “dry, ironical white stuff” (Berold, 2012). Instead, he embarked upon a bold path that sought to “traverse the physical and psychological boundaries of our wounded country” (Nyezwa, 2015). The new *New Coin* was to be based on a more risk taking and more marginal content. (Penfold, 2015, p.504)

The four publications I have chosen are spread across the first two decades of democracy, but are united by common attitudes and an ability to engage with social issues, as well as be aesthetically radical. The spread of dates enables an effective sense of commentary on the state, or even ‘stasis’ of the nation, the enduring precarity of the socio-economic reality over these years, commentary written by four authors rooted in the same aesthetic context.

Motsapi’s volume was published in 1995, a year after the first democratic elections, and poses questions and points out contradictions and uncertainties and precarious spaces in early post-apartheid South Africa. *The girl who then feared to sleep* (2001) and *Gova* (2004), were published between Mbeki’s first and second terms, and continued to push some of the same questions and share similar themes, while using slightly different poetic techniques. *Malikhanye*, published in 2011, is actually the third volume of poetry by Nyezwa. His first two books, *Song Trials* (1999), and *New Country* (2008), share similar concerns as the other poets’ volumes and *Malikhanye*; however, I have chosen *Malikhanye* specifically as it bears witness to a South Africa well into democracy, yet still beset with precarity, the slow death of individual hopes and a continued reality of deferred possibility. It reveals a poet who is not lifted by any false hopes,



and describes the precarious terrain of the actual as a painful space traversed by an interstice of personal loss and politically induced precarity.

Nyezwa, Dladla and Muila continue to write and publish; Motsapi stopped publishing work in book form after his only volume of poetry, in 1995. The four publications I have chosen are spread across the first two decades of democracy, but are united by common attitudes and an ability to engage with social issues, as well as be aesthetically radical. They evoke an effective sense of commentary on the state, or even “stasis” of the nation, and reveal the South African contemporary moment as resonant with both possibility and failure. The four poets also share in common a precarious situation in the context of South African literature, being under-appreciated or ignored by literary criticism.

The four poets to be studied in this dissertation draw inspiration from a diverse background of poets and thinkers, but also share some common sources of inspiration. In South Africa, they mention poetic influences such as Mafika Gwala and Wopko Jensma, attracted to the ability of those poets to convey their subject matter through vivid imagery and a keen sense of the actual. Internationally, Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila were influenced by the likes of Spanish-language poets Federico Garcia Lorca, Cesar Vallejo and Pablo Neruda, whose style of poetry offered something direct and potently focused on the everyday, something that the poets struggled to find in 20<sup>th</sup> century English-language poetry. The Spanish-language poets described a world simultaneously beautiful and terrifying, magical and tragic, promising and violent, spiritual and physical, and excelled in transformations of language use and technique, a style of writing which could connect to the essence of things. And it is through a direct confrontation and dialogue with actuality that a transformation may come about, as opposed to a mere restating of the blatantly obvious in lyrical language and form. Meyer (2017) writes:

Confronted with the over-simplification of information in an epoch of late-capitalism, the poets in this thesis seek to invigorate language in order to fashion new perceptions of the world in which they live. (p.13)

## A brief background to precarity

The key terms in a discussion of precarity are “precarity”, “precariousness”, “the precariat”, “precariousness”, and “precarisation”. Judith Butler (2004, 2009) distinguishes between “precariousness” and “precarity”. Precariousness is the vulnerability that all living things possess (2004, 2009). All life by nature is vulnerable to death, injury, illness, and natural disasters. Precarity however is defined as something increased by political factors, resulting in people being exposed to risk, suffering and death unequally (p.ii, 2009). Social value may be ascribed to some but not to others. Different groups might be treated unequally. Some individuals are protected and others are not. Groups of people who are marginalised and in poverty will be exposed to poorer living conditions, fewer opportunities, more violence, and general instability and risk.

The development of post-Fordist capitalism, contemporary neo-liberalist policies and globalisation has led to changes in economic policies and a growing emphasis on austerity, with subsequent cut downs in expenditure for social welfare, public expenditure and services. There has been a growing rise recently in politics that seeks stability and power for select groups – a growing nationalism in Europe and the demagoguery of many leaders, an example being Donald Trump in America – and growing privatisation and financialisation of life across the world. In the global south, precarity has been experienced strongly as a result of colonisation and post-colonial bondage through economic debt. Opposed to this, Judith Butler pleads for a type of politics that embraces an egalitarian precariousness for all (2009, p.13).

Precarity as a concept was first highlighted by philosophers such as Pierre Bourdieu in the 1990s, who noted its dominance and commented on the changing political and economic landscape stating “precarity is everywhere now” (1998, n.p.). The concept gained more attention after further popularisation by philosophers, in particular Judith Butler (a key text being *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, 2004), who crucially differentiated precariousness and precarity, as explained earlier. Guy Standing contributed *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), a much debated work which focused on the precariat as a separate class made of

sub-classes. Franco Berardi (2010) in *Precarious Rhapsody* is able to locate precarity as a state of existence within the broader context of semio-capitalism, as well as explaining ways in which power is held by “imaginational machines”, and how the creative cognitariat may potentially become autonomous. Achille Mbembe through his writings on bio-power and necropolitics (2003) has touched on many aspects of precarity locally. In “Necropolitics” (2003) Achille Mbembe conveys the sense of necropolitics being a space of death or living death, a precarious state of existence for citizens that is induced by socio-politico-economic factors.

Socially, the concept gained credence during May Day solidarity protests, where Italian workers created the figure of “San Precario” (Tari and Vanni, 2005), recontextualising the Roman Catholic tradition of creating patron saints for certain causes. Whereas the typical patron saint is a real person who is then chosen by religious authorities to be the patron saint of a particular cause, San Precario is a fictional creation representing the masses, a symbol for all citizen workers in precarity. San Precario is of no specific gender, has no fixed identity, and transcends race and old notions of class. San Precario’s interchangeable identity enables the development of a united cause against precarity, incorporating workers from various precarious backgrounds, and not favouring one form of precarity over another. San Precario is not a saint imposed by hierarchy, but a spontaneous expression in reaction to precarity, defined by Bianca Elzenbaumer (2014) on the site “Designing economic cultures” as “a creation of a precarious intelligence, a free and independent expression that does not refer to any party or union”(n.p.).

Slow death, cruel optimism, hauntology/the spectral, the unlanguage and necropolitics are concepts closely related to precarity. I will briefly introduce some of these concepts in this chapter, showing ways in which they connect to each other, and then connect them in more detail while discussing the texts of the individual poets during the course of my following chapters.

Those living in precarity are victims of a steady everyday violence. The concept of slow death has been defined by Lauren Berlant (2007) as follows:

The phrase *slow death* refers to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence. (p.95)

This phrasing foregrounds the violence that is experienced through everyday traumatic experiences, things or events that may be perceived as mundane, that lead to the precarisation of individuals. Berlant builds from the work of Mbembe (2003) and Michel Foucault (1980) on the concept of bio-power, applying some of their insights and adapting others in the concept of slow death.

Related strongly to “slow death” is the concept of “slow violence” as articulated by Rob Nixon in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011).

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. (p.2)

This type of violence is not spectacular, but “incremental and accretive” and acting across a variety of temporal scales and social zones.

Precarity does not only apply to those who work in temporary jobs, but even a permanent job is often a form of precarity, to the extent to which it leads to the ‘financialisation’ of life, with people trapped in unpleasant working conditions, and forced to view this not as precarisation, but as being relatively privileged. Precarity is an existential state of mind, with economic conditions a major causative factor, but not the only focus of research. “Precarious is a person who is able to know nothing about one’s own future (Berardi, 2010). [...] [I]t is an existential condition linked to the possibility of constructing a personal narrative” (Lorusso, 2017, n.pag). People in precarity may actually have jobs, but are haunted by the permanent possibility of those jobs being lost at any unknown time in the future due to retrenchments or restructuring. People who have what are

classed as “stable” jobs are placed under pressure, often made to work beyond what they should be required to work, constantly being reminded by society how fortunate they are to have a job compared to the unemployed, and doing whatever it takes to keep that job. They can still neither predict their future career trajectory, nor the future conditions of their employment, which can be abruptly changed due to external circumstances. Companies can restructure their requirements, resulting in a worker who has fulfilled his/her role for years suddenly being fired for poor performance. As a result, the precariat is a term that transcends class, and applies to the existential condition of those who live their lives under politically induced precarity. It is an entire existential state of uncertainty, the growing experience of people through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a time of great politically induced precarity. Guy Standing (2011), in addition to discussing the precariat as a class, emphasises the emotional and personal dimension of being in precarity: “The precariat consists of those who feel their lives and identities are made up of disjointed bits” (p.3). Precarity is here revealed as an existential state of mind, with economic conditions a major causative factor but not the only focus of research.

Precarity is an anxious condition, an attempt to transition into a future society and create a new language and meaning while aware of the vulnerability of the individual to powers beyond control, and to the trace of history on the psyche of a wounded society. Mark Fisher in “What is hauntology?” (2013) has defined hauntology as the haunting of contemporary society by “lost futures” (2013), specifically a lost future of modernity which is seen as postponed or cancelled by post modernism, Neo-Fordist capitalism and neo-liberalism, a “pining for a future that never arrived” (2013). Hauntology as a theory derives its inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1993), where Derrida discusses how the spectres of ideas, past events and the spectral influences of major thinkers live on long after they have been seemingly relegated to history, with Colin Davis (2005) describing it as replacing “the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive”.

Fisher focuses his discussion on music, and analyses the way in which electronic music moved from having a futuristic focus, to being “ghostly” and a “confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future” (Fisher, 2013). Silvio Lorusso (2017) writes:

The precarious condition is driven by some sort of virtuality, a future that might take place or not, yet it conditions the present – one might say that it actually erases it – and the past, since it gives meaning to it. This is why I believe that the Derridean concept of “hauntology” is useful to develop a deeper understanding of precarity. (n.pag)

This links the concept of hauntology effectively to “slow death”, “cruel optimism” and “precarity”. “Slow death” (Berlant, 2007) has been defined as the “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (p.95), which captures accurately the notion that trauma and the precarity of subjects is not so much the result of events or crises, but the everyday, the mundane, the repetitious. In “Thinking about feeling historical” (2010), Berlant writes:

Being forced to think these things [...] as part of an unfolding historic moment exemplifies the affective experience not of a break or a traumatic present, but of crisis lived within ordinariness. Amidst the rise and fall of quotidian intensities a situation arises that provokes the need to think and adjust, to slow things down and to gather things up, to find things out and to wonder and ponder. What’s going on? As Kathleen Stewart would phrase it, why do things feel on the verge of something (dissolving, snapping, wearing out, overwhelming, underwhelming, or just unpredictably different)? (p.5)

“Cruel optimism” (2011) is defined by Berlant in the following way: “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to you flourishing” (p.1, Introduction). People are encouraged to pursue fantasies of a good life that cannot be achieved under contemporary political and economic circumstances. This false promise leads people further into precarity, through encouraging people to acquire items and live an unsustainable lifestyle which traps them in debt and dead end jobs, or placing faith in government institutions and democratic processes which fail to alleviate precarity and often end up favouring the socio-economically advantaged.

Awareness of the local context and its particular issues of vulnerability and socio-economic induced precarity comes through keenly in theoretical insights gained from Mbembe and Pumla Dineo Gqola. Mbembe (2001, 2003) places a salient focus on sovereignty and bio-power, which interlocks with the understanding of precarity. Gqola (2001) offers insights towards understanding the nature of power and the layers of meaning articulated in everyday South African discourse. In “Defining people: analysing power, language and representation in metaphors of the new South Africa”, aware like Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila of the inherent contradictions in post-democratic South Africa, she portrays and analyses the nature of power and the ways in which language and symbol are used in this context. Gqola (2001) in the paper:

Analyses the dominant ways in which South Africans are defined/ define ourselves through a stress on national unity, investigates the different accents placed on the vocabulary used to construct and reinforce ideas about the new nation, and scrutinises the languages through which these processes are achieved. I choose to access this space partly through an examination of metaphors that have become foregrounded in the South African imaginary, analysing some of the implications for power ushered in by these definitions. (p.94)

## Representations of precarity

A concise analysis of a stanza from Nyezwa's *Malikhanye* (2011) is revealing in the way in which the concepts of "slow death", "cruel optimism", "hauntology/the spectral", and the "unlanguaged" connect. The book, which includes a sequence of poems dedicated to his son Malikhanye, who passed away in a fire aged two, simultaneously expresses a sense of grieving and disquiet about personal loss, and insinuates broader political failure and stasis in the nation. In the poem entitled "walking the earth" (p.21), he describes South African society:

all I can make of my country  
is a sulphurous compound  
a black room with two gigantic stars  
as thoroughly silent as corpses

Connecting strongly to this above stanza is Unathi Slasha's article, "Much with the dead, mum with the dying" (2018). He discusses at thorough length the concept of the "unlanguaged",<sup>3</sup> calling for something which explores more deeply beneath the everyday, using the sense of George Perec's term, the infra-ordinary (1973).

Perec urges us to transcend the surface, go behind the scene and zoom in and focus and engage the supposedly insignificant details behind the event, the explosion, the essential, the true scandal – to give attention to the habitual which we have ceased to question due to either our overfamiliarity with, or repugnance to, its presence. (Slasha, 2018, n.pag)

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<sup>3</sup> He also discusses "the unlanguaged" in a 2017 article in the *New Orleans Review*, and also briefly refers to this concept as something that he is still in the process of theorising in more depth:

I'm still trying to theorise the "Unlanguaged World", it's an ongoing interrogation, not necessarily trying to find explanations but trying to write about it in a very descriptive way. Basically it's trying to find a language that matches the experience... that captures the possibility of it.

Taken from an interview with *Grocotts Mail* (26 February 2018)



The imagery of the above stanza of Nyezwa is definitely not that of the everyday real, but is more an exposition of the infra-ordinary. It burns with an almost fantastical atmosphere, driving two messages home simultaneously – that underneath the veneer of rationality in contemporary South African society is a space, a nightmarish landscape beset with madness and terror for those in precarity – and that to describe this kind of society, a special type of description and mode of narration is needed, visionary and capable of breaking open the code of the everyday in conversation. The space described suffers from a form of slow death, an existence sustained by a continual cruel optimism. The words “sulphurous compound” bring to mind the country’s historical legacy of inequality, symbolised particularly by the mining industry. Sulphur is a spectral smell, something which remains in a room for a long time after its initial release. And so with history – long after apartheid, the sulphurous smell of history remains in the room of the nation.

The stanza of Nyezwa is both adamant with protest, and yet simultaneously foregrounds the power of the silent – “a black room with two gigantic stars / as thoroughly silent as corpses” – and by its implication of silence, it offers its most articulate protest, essentially refusing to dialogue with the structure of modern rationality, which is often largely a rationalisation of modes of power. The unlanguage becomes necessary as a way of speaking because everyday rationality has failed to make sense of inequality and politically induced suffering. Living seems absurd.

The unlanguage is in many ways another expression of an experiencing of precarity, linked up as well with slow death and cruel optimism. The unlanguage possesses a state of loss and simultaneously of rebirth. Populations are “worn out” by expectations of a better future that are not met. The poets exist driven by the realisation that the future itself is precarious, a precarity driven by politics largely beyond changing.

To experience precarity in the South African context, for these poets, involves an experiencing then of cruel optimism, slow death, and the haunting meaning of history, which continues its

spectral existence in continued economic inequality. However, it is not simply a one-sided experiencing of suffering. The poets offer strong creative reactions to precarity and the related concepts through their use of language. This language does not simply protest or witness, but remoulds the poets' relationship to reality. The remoulding of language involves a remoulding of the perception of experience. It enables the poet to come to better terms with reality, and to recreate its meaning, redefining his relationship to history and the present. Phaswane Mpe, in his review of Dladla's *The girl who then feared to sleep*, discusses the poem titled "exposure". In this poem, the poet has a vision of his stepfather coming into his bedroom in ghostlike form. This apparition has come to apologise to the poet. The apparition leaves after realising the poet holds no grudge. When the poet shares his vision with his wife in the morning, he relates: "she gawked at me and chuckled: / poets are dreamers". Mpe writes:

The poignancy of the wife's words issues from the fact that, indeed the speaker could be said to have been dreaming. However, the notion of dream could be extended to embrace the idea of imagination, that is, knowing her husband to be a poet, she assumes – that he is imagining – not merely dreaming – things into reality. Nevertheless, the dream helps the speaker not only to think through, once again and perhaps in a kinder light, his relationship with his stepfather. (2003, p.78)

This is a perfect example of how these poets are able to remould their understanding of life and reality, not by simply forgetting past trauma or denying the terror of the present, but by engaging with it and then finding new meaning and being able to envision new possibilities. It does not deny precarity and the precariousness of life, nor does it deny history's spectre – but it enables a transcending of the present precarious moment. This has profound strategical implications for dealing with politically induced precarity.

Silvio Lorusso writes in a recent article on the site "Entreprecariat" (2017):

The precarious condition is rooted in a series of virtualities that acquire more relevance than actuality. A plausible future and a romanticised past become more real than the lived present. The virtual dominates the real. If precarity is a ghost, a presage, an absence, or a void, maybe the way to break its spell is by *reactualising* the present, by giving substance to the “here and now”. (n.p)

It is useful to note that the technical term “foregrounding” originates from the Czech word, *aktualisace* (literally “to actualise”), which derived from the Prague school of literary critics (Procházka, 2010.). In being able to foreground/reactualise the present through skillful use of language, the burden and trap of history may be transcended.

Standing, in discussing the concept of the precariat, writes: “The precariat consists of those who feel their lives and identities are made up of disjointed bits” (2011). Muila in his use of *isicamtho* and poetic technique traverses these disjointed bits of lives and identities in South African society. He treats a diverse range of subjects. In a protest piece such as “cain cain”, he connects the deaths of miners to the Biblical resonance of Cain, invoking the themes of “livability” (Butler, 2004) and the “grievable life” (2004). In “blomer”, he describes impressionistically the everyday life of a blomer, a person who will hang around on street corners “blomming” and socialise with other people and chat, while casually observing reality. Muila does not so much offer poetry as a witness to society, but as a passionate participation in society, with a strong emphasis on happenings and the active world, drawing out images from the spiritual and the historical to reference the present. The blomer of his poem is not a character uninterested in the world around him, but a passionate observer and partaker, a talkative verbal magician, participating comically in life’s rituals in the lines:

jy moen onthou  
skyf is a process  
whereby cigarettes  
passes from the owner to the parasite (p.23)

Muila describes contemporary society with vivid wordplay and strong contrasts. Motsapi in “river robert” articulates a South Africa of both hope and despair, describing polarities of experience and remaining open eyed to precarity and the wound of history:

we are at peace here  
even while our lungs are full  
of secret wars  
and primordial fears bruise our suns  
we are at peace here robert (p.81)

Precarity is described in a series of vivid images, which are counterpoised with hopeful images. The poem derives its strength from the compact tightness between which these poles of experience conjoin:

i have one eye full of dreams and hintentions  
the other is full of broken mirrors  
and cracked churchbells

History is not denied here, nor the urge to dream and hope for a better society. One can look back on the past in the “broken mirrors”, which reveal part of the truth. The two eyes possess different images, showing that truth is not one single view, but a series of simultaneous perceptions, two truths unfolding at once, a kind of parallax view.

we bless the inscrutable darkness  
where our names are rent into spirit  
we bless the splinters and the air  
full of asphyxiations and amnesia  
we bless our lacerations and deformities

This almost mystical invocation of imagery enables a transcending of wounding and oppression, because the word is ultimately located at a deeper place than simple everyday logic and reason. A state of precarity is recognised, and yet traversed; names and titles are “rent into spirit; new possibilities for the text of the everyday are made possible.

## **Review of literature**

The primary sources for my research are four texts: *Malikhanye* (Nyezwa, 2012), *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (Motsapi, 1995), *The girl who then feared to sleep* (Dladla, 2004), and *Gova* (Muila, 2004).

The general corpus of criticism written directly about the four poets is relatively small. Predominant is Kelwyn Sole (1996; 2000; 2005; 2008; 2014; 2016), who has written extensively in favour of the claims of some of these poets to be recognised and appreciated. He has pleaded for a South African criticism which does not divide formal and sociological concerns, arguing that in these writers, the two are firmly intertwined. He has also been skilful at identifying the unique sensibilities and aesthetic outlooks of these poets. Recently Alice Meyer submitted a thesis titled “Poetry and politics in post-apartheid South Africa” to the University of Cambridge which covered, among many other writers, Nyezwa, Motsapi and Dladla, but not Muila. Her analytical work follows strongly on from Sole. She explores the “ability of poetry to articulate political critique in post-apartheid South Africa” (2017), focusing on “poets who represent the innovative and politically charged character of post-apartheid poetry” (p.1). There are a few other reviews and shorter articles by various critics which discuss the four poets, including more notably by Tom Penfold, (2013, 2015). He has written extensively, particularly on Nyezwa. His 2015 thesis, “Black consciousness and the politics of writing the nation in South Africa”, discusses Motsapi, Nyezwa and Dladla under the chapter “The new black poets: the ignored voices of South Africa’s bleak transition”, poignantly hinting at both the precarity of life for a majority in the country, as well the precarious state of recognition of their poetry in the South

African context. On a positive note, these poets possess the “new aesthetic of the elusive image” (Berold in Penfold, 2013), an ability to transcend monopolistic discourses and definitions using language strategies that foreground their subject matter, and lay the foundation for a challenge to the status quo by challenging the structures of power and discourse through their poetic innovation.

Of the four poets, the most scholarship and information is available on Nyezwa, followed by Motsapi and Dladla. There is next to nothing on Muila, barring a few reviews and brief references. As such, there is a great gap needing to be filled.

A majority of South African and international articles and essays that foreground or focus on discussions of precarity discuss novels and novelists, which I think also points to another way in which precarity is represented strongly in my dissertation – poetry is itself in a precarious position compared to other branches of literature. However, there are a number of useful works which discuss precarity and poetry, and are of relevance to this dissertation. *Poetics and Precarity* (edited by Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller, 2018) features a broad variety of essays by a diversity of poets and critics. These contributors contend that “language has the potential to address this increasing level of discord and precarity” in contemporary society. A key essay in this collection is by the American poet, Nathaniel Mackay, who describes the role “breath” played in American poetry in the tense political and historical climate in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as discussing the “radical pneumatism” found in black American music and poetry. Mackay links the preoccupation with breath in these creatives to a societal and personal anxiety induced by precarity. A related work that is of relevance is Ashon Crawley’s *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Crawley, 2016), which opens with the statement, “I can’t breathe”, which were also the last words of Eric Garner, a resident of Staten Island, United States of America, who died on the 17 July 2014 after an encounter with plainclothes officer Daniel Pantaleo. The feeling of being unable to breathe and hence unable to exist, succinctly expresses politically induced precarity. This work connects strongly to similar statements on and connotations of breath which appear in the poetry of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila. Breath and the feeling of precarity plays a role in shaping lines, themes and imagery

throughout their poems. In Nyezwa, there are lines such as: “i forget to breathe” (*Malikhanye*, p.13 ), “segments of breath” (*Malikhanye*, p.52), and frequent references to sulphur and smells: in Motsapi, constant connotations of painful inhaling and exhaling; “our wounds sigh so” (*earthstepper*, p.77), “our lungs are full of secret wars” (*earthstepper*, p.81), “the air full of asphyxiations” (*earthstepper* p.82); in Dladla, the continual references to bodies (which are human beings bereft of breath, as well as lines such as “stench of breath/ foreign to the living”), connotations of suspension of breath (in the poem “the intangible” (p14), “holy men and women/ in black or white/ taking rhetoric dives and blobs/ in the watery realm/ in search of a vocal mirage/ which becomes an echo/ the nearer they advance”); and in Muila, poems such as “stomach ulcer complications” (p.2), and “my death – to cesar vallejo” (p.24); the former a piece dedicated to fellow poet and personal friend, Isabella Motadinyane, mentioning her health issues and in which he writes “something is running from her stomach to her throat and choking her making it difficult to breathe”; the second poem focusing on several near death experiences, including a blackout and near drowning. All four poets also make frequent references to “spirit” and spiritual essences, with spirit connoting breath.

In South Africa, Stacy Hardy’s recent essay, featured in *English in Africa* 45(2), “Indecent exposure – writing violence and resistance today” (2018), covers a variety of international and South African writers (including Nyezwa), while also skilfully contextualising their work within the context of the precarity they experience. The essay asks:

How do we draw from our history of writing as protest and invent in the present to interrogate, reject, embrace, deface and bear out, on the page, our current pain and anger and to transcend the intimate and public wreckages of our present moment? (2018, p.52)

The majority of literature used in the research process is from South African/African authors and critics, and the various international authors are used with a keen awareness of the local context in developing the unique insights that will be gained from this dissertation.

As the literature written directly on these poets is relatively small, this research will crucially fill a gap in literary criticism and academic writing on South African poetry. It will shed more light on the importance and status of the poets within the broader body of South African literature.

### **Structure of chapters**

In Chapter 1, I discuss Nyezwa's ability to capture images of South Africa in poetry of stunning lyrical beauty, portraying the abrupt shifts of mood that mark the nation's consciousness and character. It is a poetry far away from newspaper analyses of the state of the nation, capturing vivid portraits of human precarity through its imagery and its subjects, often invoking simple imagery of the everyday in original juxtapositions, creating a potent awareness of reality. It is a poetry that is both socially and ecologically aware, an acknowledgement of existence that is not restricted by simple categorisations and binaries of rational/non-rational, spiritual/physical, human/animal, but embraces the fluidity of existence. Nyezwa focalises the personal experience and the political situation within each poem. His sequence of poems, "Malikhanye" (Part 3 of the book *Malikhanye*), written about the loss of his son, Malikhanye Nyezwa, expresses personal grief as well as a deeper sense of disquiet about the state of the nation. It invokes life's precariousness and the precarity of contemporary existence. The sense of disquiet features throughout the book. His frequent use of images involving sea and sky and a variety of finite substances links strongly to an evocation of the terror and suffering of the political landscape. In a recent conversation with Nyezwa (12 January 2019, Grahamstown), he described himself and his role as a poet to be "a witness to everything", suggesting an encompassing and empathetic artistic vision.

In Chapter 2 I look at Seithamo Motsapi's only book of poetry, *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*. The poems featured abound in imagery of wounding and trauma, simultaneous with vivid visionary passages invoking healing, resistance, creative reintegration and revitalisation. It is a poetry that is aware that language is rent and laden with the burdens of history and meaning, possessing memories of violence, yet also containing redemptive possibilities. Transformations of meanings come about through the remoulding of language, along with an ability to intricately



tie together the particular and the universal in each line of poetry. History is explored in a way that brings to the reader's mind that time is not linear, but cyclical, folding back into itself.

In Chapter 3 I discuss Angifi Dladla. The poet has the ability to perceive reality through startlingly revelatory dreams and visions which transcend the commonplace meaning of 'dream' in the South African context. He engages with precarity and human vulnerability, while also deeply aware of all the tangled contingencies of human existence. I discuss Dladla's ability to subvert the commonplace and surface reality, to reveal a deeper order of things. It insists on foregrounding the relevance of different perceptions of everyday reality, views which are often marginalised and rendered precarious in the post-modern capitalist ethos. His poetry deals with human subjects as beings who are simultaneously physical and spiritual, in a world where the physical is measured in terms of economic productivity and the spiritual is commercialised or turned into a terrain of performativity and detached ritual fetish.

Chapter 4 looks at representations of precarity in Muila's poetry. His poems are highly aware of human vulnerability and the precarity of existence, particularly in a South African context. Muila uses the creative possibilities of *isicamtho*,<sup>4</sup> and effective use of poetic techniques such as syntactic deviation (largely enabled as a consequence of *isicamtho* language use) in his poetry. This enables stylistic defamiliarisation, which is complemented by the use of thematic and modal defamiliarisation (he defamiliarises perceptions of reality through startling juxtapositions of the physical/ spiritual and the serious/ grotesque in his poems). This combination of techniques and strategies provides an effective countering strategy to precarisation. His vibrant poetry is an expressive antidote to the monotonal threnody of Post-Fordist capitalism, mass media and consumerism. His poetic currency, by celebrating diversity of language and refusing to settle for simplistic meanings, runs counter to the globalisation and financialisation of life into a single

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<sup>4</sup> *Isicamtho* is a dialect made up of a slang mixture of vernacular languages with elements and grammar of English included.

The word is variously spelt "*iscamtho*", "*scamtho*" and "*isicamtho*". Allan Kolski-Horwitz refers to it as "*isicamtho*" in the introduction to *Gova*. Muila in his poem, "Buddy scamtho" (*Gova*, 2004, pg 7), calls it "*scamtho*" in the heading but in the poem itself writes: "the so called tsotsitaal isicamtho lingo alive". Scholarly articles also differ on the spelling.

bland currency. Muila defies the momentary, in poetry shifting across uncertain times and spaces, finding a living space resonant with possibility and the unexpected through language use.

In my concluding chapter I sum up my findings, and offer a prognosis for the future possibilities that can emerge out of an appreciation of these writers, as well as a valid understanding of the the implications of their creative reaction to precarity.

## Chapter 1.

### All I can see of my country: representations of precarity in selected poems of Mxolisi

Nyezwa

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I identify and analyse representations of precarity in selected poetry of Mxolisi Nyezwa, with a focus on his 2012 book, *Malikhanye*. I discuss the background of the poet and the formative influences on his poetry. I then apply textual analysis to the selected poems, examining key themes and issues, clarifying in detail the innovative use of various poetic techniques and devices, and foregrounding through my arguments the representations of precarity in his poetry in these selected poems.

Nyezwa's poems strongly portray the nature of precarity in the South African context. They foreground representations of precarity that have been experienced through socio-politico-economic factors, including the often neglected factor of environmental degradation. The poems, particularly in the "Malikhanye" (pp.51-66) sequence emphasise the process(es) of grieving, the concept of grievability, and notions of healing in times of painful personal loss, while connecting this personal loss within the context of the book and his poetic oeuvre to the greater context of societal precarity. The sequence contemplates livability and embraces egalitarian precariousness and an imaginative planetarity.

I will also explain through my analysis how Nyezwa not only represents precarity and portrays its manifestations, but is also an activist against socio-economically induced precarity in his poetry and via its technical and narrative frames contests the status quo, and how exactly he is able to embrace an egalitarian human precariousness, particularly in the "Malikhanye" sequence of poems at the end of *Malikhanye* (2012).

Mxolisi Nyezwa was born in 1967 and grew up in the New Brighton township, Port Elizabeth. He has stayed in that area his entire life. The area features strongly in a lot of his poetry, with township life a stark reminder of everyday precarity, and the nearby sea is also a strong influence on his poetry. He “founded the English/ IsiXhosa arts journal *Kotaz* in 1998, which accepts poetry, prose, interviews and reviews in any South African language and aims to foster the development of local writing” (Meyer, 2017, p.102). He also teaches and “lectures creative writing at Rhodes University in Grahamstown and runs skills training courses for unemployed youth from an old steel container in Motherwell” (Meyer, 2017, p.102). His poetic influences are diverse, including Spanish-language writers such as Federico Garcia Lorca, Cesar Vallejo and Pablo Neruda (Nyezwa in Cummiskey, 2012, n.pag).

In a 1999 review, Sole commends Nyezwa’s technical ability, describing him as working “through an associative poetry, juxtaposing macro- and microcosm, the familiar and the surreal, the local and the universal; often jumping between the five senses”(1999, n.pag). Sole compares Nyezwa in his use of parallelism as a technical device which both connects and reveals disjunctions and apertures to the isiXhosa izibongo and Cesar Vallejo. He notes how Nyezwa’s:

associations serve to evoke a vision which is deeply, but never merely, personal, and which paradoxically weaves a web of wide-ranging, objective patterns. At the same time, the interplay and disjunctures between the images used, and the contexts and emotions these evoke, demand constant reader participation and openness. (1999, n.pag)

Sole also notes “the sense of dispossession and violation” in the poems, as well as “a struggle to sing, to celebrate, through trying to understand a world that conspires to deny this possibility” (1999, n.pag).

In this early review, one finds two aspects of Nyezwa’s style and concerns elucidated. One is the absolute search and willingness to encounter experience as it is, and not draw away from it however unflattering it is. Secondly, one sees a desire to create and express beauty, in a “world

that conspires to deny this possibility”. In “song of beauty”, a poem taken from *Song trials* (1999), this is captured:

song of beauty

*for Sindiswa*

now listen to me, no almonds grow in spring  
and there is no moon, no one star  
nor baby cry disturbs the silence.

everyday we sing of dying  
everyday the sea will wash our blood to claim us  
and no one will know.

but if you have to know  
last night I didn't sleep, i dreamt of dying  
i went out into the night and planted seedlings  
and the night was diseased  
all pitiful and dreadful ailments yelled at me.

but for me it is enough to say i'm no longer dead, but live!  
it suffices to say the universe also sprouts its tentacles of blood  
even the rich man charts a clear path, from the river to the sea  
even today my ulcers burn.

for now I'm no longer dead but live in the soil's core  
the mist of the land covers my sins...

now listen to me, for there's no one outside.

The poem talks about dying, the night being diseased, and pitiful and dreadful ailments yelling at the poet. The sea represents immense forces beyond the poet's control – and yet, in stanza four, he writes; “but for me it is enough to say I'm no longer dead, but live!”, an ecstatic declaration of life and belief. But this revitalisation of life needs to be carefully contextualised – it is not a simple return to life, but comes about through the processes of death and loss and negation, and by accepting a close relationship with the finiteness of life. New life comes through the poet acknowledging his imperfect state and embracing his imperfection, while understanding how his existence is tied into the world around him. Identity in this poem is resolved by saying “now listen to me, for there's no one outside”; identity is dispersed, the poetic voice is the centre, constantly expanding into unexpected perceptions. This is a frequent motif in Nyezwa's poetry and points to his embrace of a fluid identity, as opposed to formal rationalist and capitalist views of identity with bounded and strictly enforceable spatial and geographical markers. This poem also refuses to embrace simplistic victim motifs, and does not idealise the world it describes. The universe “sprouts tentacles of blood”, a jarring image, capturing the way life emerges out of the universe's existence, but also the possibility of violence and chaos.

Sole, near the end of his 1999 review of *Song trials*, suggests:

This collection extends and invigorates the concerns of the South African lyric in new and breathtaking directions, and I do not believe that tired old genre will ever be the same again. (n.pag)

Despite this glowing commendation, Nyezwa's recognition did not leap up to the forefront of South African literature. He seemed to continue to exist on the margins, with the 2000s marking a strong growth in the spoken word movement, and poets who caught the public eye were those who seemed to be in accord with that particular *Zeitgeist*. In the decade of the 2000s, performance poetry and slam poetry grew in popularity, with the focus on poets who were able to capture the public eye not always so much through the quality of their words as through the strength or eye catchingness of their performances and stage personas. Nyezwa's poetry by

contrast is a poetry which destabilises the self, as opposed to building a brand or identity that can be effectively marketed. In 2008 he published his second book, *A New Country*. It won a SALA Award for poetry, and continued many of his themes from his previous book.

In 2011 Nyezwa released his third book of poetry, *Malikhanye*. The book consisted of three sections of poems – two sections of individual poems, and the third a sequence of short poems dedicated to his son, Malikhanye Liyema Nyezwa, who “died on 2 August 2007 aged 3 months”. As was the case with his previous two volumes, it attracted attention from a few reviewers and critics. Nyezwa, like the other three poets (Motsapi, Muila and Dladla) that are discussed in this dissertation, suffers from the precarity of not obtaining the recognition he deserves, and yet ironically, has probably gained the most attention among the poets covered in this dissertation. Tom Penfold, who subsequently wrote several articles mentioning or discussing Nyezwa, discusses coming across Nyezwa for the first time while doing his doctoral thesis:

I discovered Nyezwa almost by accident during my PhD fieldwork in Johannesburg and immediately wanted to write about his poetry. His verse is little known in South Africa and it's exceedingly bleak – a despairing political prophecy. (2014, n.pag)

Elsewhere, in an interview with Clare Trevien (2016), Robert Berold laments the lack of recognition that poets such as Nyezwa have received, noting “academics are still seeing black South African poets in generic political/ anthropological terms rather than looking at the poetics involved”(2016, n.pag).

This ironically sounds much like an echo of the poem “things change”, which I discussed in the introduction chapter, an ironic and ambiguous poem about change published in *Song Trials* in 1999, but originally published in draft form in almost exactly the same form as far back as 1989 in *New Coin*. Not much has changed, not much is changing and not much looks set to change, an indication of the precarity in which these poets find themselves, as well as the acknowledgment of their work and aesthetics. The poets are included in some anthologies, an often tokenistic

recognition of their work, but they are not critically engaged with by critics, academics and the large part of the public, in terms of any analysis of their formal and stylistic devices.

This chapter is called, “All I can see of my country”. The line is taken from a stanza in “walking the earth” (p.21), quoted in the Introduction chapter. Seeing is a symbolic motif, related to witnessing. In the Introduction I emphasised the role that bearing witness plays in the aesthetics of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila, and highlighted a conversation with Nyezwa (11 January 2019) in which he described the role of his poetry to be “a witness to everything”. His attitude is that of open minded and open eyed witness to a society in precarity.

In a 2012 interview with South African poet and independent publisher Gary Cummiskey, Nyezwa was asked about the bleakness of his poetry and replied:

I like to think of my poetry as reflecting the dismal nature of politics and individual existence in the modern society, a reflection on greed and how capitalism and the financial system have devastated people’s lives and cultures without shame. Poetry that identifies this kind of aggression, which is really driven by financial interests as the basis for corruption against human beings, must necessarily be bleak. The poetry must in turn invoke its unique form, impact the usual language extraordinarily, enmeshing flowers, human lives and global manifestations. In so many ways poets are writing to change the world. (Nyezwa in Cummiskey, 2012, n.pag)

Nyezwa recognises the cruel optimism of living in neo-liberal democracy, a state of life where one lives in “undefeated despair” (2012), a society where formal rationalism and neo-Fordist capitalism and neo-imperialistic forces have succeeded in creating a heavily boundaried and striated society, and where identity is constricted and the spectacular is fetishised.

The division of society by power is alluded to in “heavens prisons” (pp. 40-41):



the universe is divided  
and subdivided  
like the shelves  
of an empty cupboard  
heckled into parties  
and jail terms  
like eden  
one free band  
of mourning marchers  
called heaven (p.40)

The universe Nyezwa describes is the everyday world, divided and sub-divided into categories, the “empty cupboard” symbolising the barrenness of this everyday life for ordinary citizens and their precarity. This society is further divided by capitalism into groups and parties and classes, groupings that fetishise and further obfuscate the major cause of social ills. The law is capable of using violence – “prison terms” to maintain order, and often this order is biased in favour of powerful groupings and the wealthy. Simultaneously justice is often slower for the marginalised, or permanently delayed. One has only to witness the slow movement of justice against big corporations, organisations and political parties and institutions that abuse people, and the often swift action taken against people who might protest against these big entities, and the rapidity with which police action escalates violently to protect the powerful.

The prison is also something that is reproduced throughout society, with the maintenance and use of time as a method of control and incapacitating dissidence and the surveillance of people being prevalent throughout capitalist society. The “free band/ of mourning marchers” could very well symbolise writers and activists. In our society we are classed as free, having freedom of speech and a theoretical complete freedom of movement, but our social reality means that we are actually very limited in possibility and movement through our precaritised lives. We are a “free band”, but one that marches in mourning. And in considering the implications and tone of the previous lines, as well as the society we live in, the “free band” is highly ironic and oxymoronic.

Nyezwa's use of technique in *Malikhanye* is key, enabling the personal and political to be connected. He incorporates surrealism and juxtaposes images and symbols provocatively. In my 2012 review of *Malikhanye* I write:

Everyday experiences and things become intensely real in these poems, rendered brutally potent by his use of images and symbols. His steel container in Motherwell where he operates his business becomes a "blue ship" on a shallow sea, symbolising the uncertainty and hardship of poetic explorations into meaning and experience, as well as a sense of alienation and existential solitude. You get compelling pictures of a landscape, one of pain and beauty and intense reality. Mxolisi proclaims: "i'm a shadow/ geometrical/ in a blue ship/ freezing/ or boiling" And elsewhere: "my house is built of sharp stones/ and red quills/ from a hornet's wings", evoking in startling terms the real nature of the personal and its relation to being. (2012, n.p).

In Tom Penfold's "Black consciousness and the politics of writing the nation in South Africa" (2013), the chapter on Mxolisi Nyezwa is titled "Precise pain". The use of the word "precise" is probably inspired by the preciseness of Nyezwa's imagery, for though he uses surreal and stark juxtapositions, his imagery has a striking quality and an exactness about it. He is able to express notions of his precarious existence, relating suffering, grieving, and the cruel optimism of hope, with "an enduringly stunning beauty and poignancy" (Penfold, 2013, p.234). Nyezwa uses the everyday to articulate representations of precarity.

In my 2012 review, I connect Nyezwa on several levels to Lorca and Vallejo, comparing his style and attitude favourably to them, and hinting at the connection of Lorca's theory of duende with Nyezwa's aesthetic outlook:

He possesses duende, the potent creative spirit that confronts death and life face to face and sings with desperate intensity. (2012, n.p)

Christopher Maurer, in his book *In Search of Duende* (1998) discusses Lorca's theory of duende (pp. ix-xx) and identifies four aspects to the duende: irrationality, an intense awareness of death, earthiness, and an awareness of the spiritual even in a diabolical manner. Lorca in his 1933 lecture differentiates it from simple technical skill or virtuosity (the angel) or the classical sense of form (the conventional sense of a muse in European culture). In South African literary culture, the angel and the muse can be likened to poetry that is focused on technical skill or that is strongly focused on form as a driving motivation. It is a poetry whose language has failed to connect its root strongly to the realm of the everyday in all its manifestations, and has proved incapable of reactualising the everyday and its perceptions through language transformation.

Large parts of *Malikhanye* read like an evocation of duende, and there is a connection from duende to precarity and precariousness. In many ways, the heightened awareness of death found in the spirit of duende is a heightened awareness of human precariousness. Duende accepts human vulnerability. It could be argued that the conventional "angel" and "muse" offer false comfort and solace, and try to fence off life's precariousness. The duende acknowledges the precariousness of all life directly, embracing Butler's egalitarianism. And in social issues, poetry influenced by the spirit of duende cuts straight through to the bare matter of things. It describes, as Nyezwa says, "a world simple and hard".

Duende has been described as being heavily influenced by an awareness of the spiritual and the diabolical, connected to the keen awareness of death. It is here that it connects to hauntology, as duende is strongly aware of the presence of the spectral, and its power over the present, its simultaneous absence/presence. Duende embraces what is seen as irrational, and rejects the false supremacy of formal rationalism. It embraces a prophetic spirit that is capable of simultaneously looking back into the past as well as being able to see the future through its insights into human vulnerability and the burden of history. Nyezwa's poems move through landscapes of precaritised existence, landscapes where past, present and future intermingle in situations of cruel optimism and slow death.

Duende foregrounds precariousness through its invocation of sharp objects, violence, unpredictable objects, death. Nyezwa in his poetry frequently refers to sharp objects or connotes them: “a sharp sword” (“from a blue container in Motherwell”, p.14), “breaks savagely/ with an axe/ a citizen’s skull” (“letters of demand”, p.18), and “my house is built of sharp stones/ and red quills/ from a hornet’s wings” (“after your love”, p.31).

The duende has also been described as possessing a type of earthiness. In Nyezwa and Lorca’s poetry, the lyrical matter and imagery are drawn from the terrain of the actual – and this is what makes the surreal images often found in their work believable, in that they have some aspect of their images connected in the everyday. Lorca and Vallejo foreshadow and foreground the everyday through their use of surrealism and language dislocation, and Nyezwa continues this legacy, with a poetry heavily grounded in imagery of the everyday, from natural images (seas, skies, earth, forests, rain) to images of human habitats (cities, streets, taverns, rooms) to the personal (bodies, arms, legs, eyes). All these help to manifest a poetry that possesses a distinctive earthiness. This also assists him in emphasising Georges Perec’s (1973) concept of the infra-ordinary in his poetry, by portraying the many aspects of the everyday through precise imagery.

Nyezwa applies a deftness of touch to the images that makes “things become intensely real [and] rendered brutally potent” (Allan, 2012). Their presentation is rarely linear and at times surrealist. In what Berold termed the “new aesthetic of the elusive image”, a single image is briefly presented before another is immediately conjured. This lack of progression and completeness creates an instability and uncertainty that reflects Nyezwa’s personal apprehension. (Penfold, 2013, p.124)

The viscerality of Nyezwa’s poetry is vivid. Stacy Hardy (2019) compares him in an article to Raul Zurita, the Chilean poet tortured after Allende’s overthrow in the Pinochet coup.

Zurita's poetry is drowning in the horrors of history, yet it is alive, filled with the breath of life, breathing new life into dead things, into the murdered and disappeared, into the oceans and deserts that hold them. (p.56)

Nyezwa, like Zurita, writes a poetry heavily tinged by the "horrors of history", and like Zurita, his work is filled with "the breath of life", witnessing strongly to everything that happens under precarity.

Hardy wrote her article partly in response to Achille Mbembe's criticism of the student movements across South Africa as being too focused on spectacle and the visceral and suggested:

embracing a "politics of viscosity", that he claims curtails criticality and delimits the possibilities of intersubjectivity. I answer Mbembe's critique with a poetics of viscosity. (p.52)

Hardy shares examples of poets and other writers across the world who deal with violence and politically induced precarity by their creative practices, enabling a transcending of the precarious moment through visceral poetics. Nyezwa's poetry is visceral yet elusive, defying simple signification, thereby evoking the uncertainty of being. In that way he confirms the power of a "poetics of viscosity", yet transcends its potential limitations by constantly redefining the self and acknowledging self as a changing and fluid entity, offering a poetics that acknowledges no conventional borders, where "being flows" (Allan, 2012). The "viscosity" of Nyezwa's poetry expresses the shifting borders of being.

### **A world simple and hard**

Nyezwa in *Song trials* (1999) writes "i describe a world simple and hard". Throughout his poetic oeuvre, he describes the world using often simple elements with deeper symbolic meanings.

Precarity in Nyezwa's *Malikhanye* is frequently symbolised or connoted through words which represent elements, ranging from more dense elements: stones, rock, basalt; to the more liquid; seas, water, rain; to the more ephemeral, such as breath, light, air. Landscapes of varying sizes and perspectives are also referred to, representing aspects of existence, from the macro-spatial to the micro-spatial: deserts, streets, store rooms, harbours, cupboards. Nyezwa displays a keen awareness of the symbolisms of spaces. These words that are chosen as symbols play a double role, standing for the substantial as well as the potentially transient, for potentially static meanings as well as change and permeability. They are often contrasted with unexpected pairings, such as "volcanic school" and "basalt leaves" ("songs from the earth", p.13) (which are also two very good examples of dense elements in his poetry). Pairings like these intensify the meanings of the spaces or objects, and heighten an awareness of precarity. His word pairings and poetic sentences thus transcend the real and everyday notions of reality, and are far from a dry realism; I find the "actual" a better term for the terrain of the real that he describes, as it encompasses dreams, visions, everyday occurrences, the fantastical, the artistic imaginary that bridges meaning across temporal spaces, all conveyed within the unity of a poem. The poem is a space resonant with these objects and their continual existence, and their impact on their environments/gestalts. It is a dynamic and not static space.

"Stone" and "rock", as well as objects made of rock, are often used to connote feelings of pain and suffering. In "i forget to breathe" (p.13):

i forget to pee  
to remember my books and my instruments  
which are hard to assemble  
which break easily into animals  
and stones

The poet and his craft are precarious, vulnerable to being broken and dehumanised. In "songs from the earth", the poet tells us "a heavy stone/ thunders in my forehead" (p.17), capturing the weight and violence of precarity; in "the sleepless world", he laments "this heart of mine/ that is

heavy/ that sinks into the water/ like a stone” (p.26); “in every house”, he describes a precarious life where “men hang their misery on the wall” (p.29), and in “KZN village”, “the cacophony of sullen poems/ and discarded minerals” (p.43) captures an image of a world weighted by wastage and pessimism.

Liquid elements, as mentioned, are named or implied by words such as “the sea”, “water”, “rain”. The sea is referred to in many poems, a shifting symbol, often representing diverse meanings depending on the particular poem and context. In some places the liquid and the solid are purposely confused, creating a poetics of uncertainty; “the world is shallow” and “a stony sea” (“from a blue container in Motherwell”, p.15). Penfold describes the sea as “a constant companion in both his life and his poetry” (p.234), informing “a sense of man’s powerlessness and his blindness towards it (p.234). He also mentions Gabeba Baderoon (2009), who describes the sea “acting as a portrayal of memory’s heavy and intimate presence within us because of the oppressive weight and force of rolling waves that control our movements” (Penfold, 2013, p. 234).

In “a burning sea” (p.47), the sea is something immense, and representing more than just a sea. It is a sea that overflows and represents the failures and desires of our lives:

theres a world of beginnings  
and a world of endings  
and for everyone else  
a burning sea

the wine in the glass fills up and slowly spills over  
suddenly everything falls into place  
all my aching agonies  
hurry up to nothing (p.47)

The poem drops a hint of “things change” in its opening lines, and the poem “it all begins”. This suggests that for the poet, and for the majority of people in the country, there are no simple beginnings or endings to suffering or existential crisis. They are in the “burning sea” (p.47). The wine in the glass suggests the possibility of plenty that absurdly fills up and spills over and is lost and wasted, the differences between the wealthy and the poor, as well as possibly invoking Georges Bataille’s notion of death as a form of excess (1949). “all my aching agonies/ hurry up to nothing” (p.47) evoke an experiencing of cruel optimism. Penfold suggests “the sea symbolises solitude and alienation. It is a tool to discuss the depths of the human condition and of society” (p.235). Nyezwa comments on the superficiality and lack of change:

now i understand the world  
i know the world is shallow  
with its own fine sea  
with its water and minerals  
and so little has changed (p.14).

Lines like these reiterate the notion of “absent change” (Penfold, 2013, p.235), where the everyday state of life for people is stuck between extreme states of existence.

The poet also writes in “my story” (p.11) “i live east of the city/ near the violent sea”, and there are references to boats in the poems, such as “i’m a shadow/ geometrical/ in a blue ship/ freezing/ or boiling” (from a blue container in Motherwell, p.14). In “heavens prisons” (pp.40-41), “there is a silent world/ in the hungry sea”. In “to know you” (pp.32-37) water is mentioned; “i want to find you in running water/ the way the poor drink cholera”; a startling image which describes both a strong love, as well as focalises the daily experienced precarity of poor people, who even in their need and right to basics such as running water, encounter struggle.

The ephemeral and airy substances in his poems which connote breathing, such as air, wind and breathing/breath are able to link to existential evocations of precarity and precariousness. In *Poetics and Precarity* (Mi Kim, M., and Miller, C., 2018) the various contributors contend that



“language has the potential to address this increasing level of discord and precarity” in contemporary society, and discuss among other topics, the role “breath” played in American poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, and the “radical pneumatism” found in black American music and poetry, connecting a preoccupation with breathing and breath to a socially induced feeling of anxiety and precarity.

In Nyezwa, there are lines such as; “i forget to breathe” (p.13), “segments of breath” (p.52), and frequent references to sulphur (in poems like “the road ahead” and “walking this earth”) and smells. In “i forget to breathe” (p.13) he emphasises that he “forgets to breathe” and in the same poem reiterates that he “forgets to breathe new air”. The division of the lines in his poetry throughout the book and most of his published poetry into predominantly short breath-like units also strongly indicates the urgency, directness, and breathlessness of his expression.

Breathing is an essential part of living, and precarity is shown in Nyezwa’s poetry to be manifest across all aspects of contemporary existence. Alice Meyer discusses his poetry in connection with post-apartheid ecology, mentioning that South Africa was “ranked 128 out of 132 countries” (Meyer, 2018, p.132) in a 2012 Environmental Performance Index by Yale University. The slow violence of accumulated environmental pollution and degradation combined with other forms of socio-economic induced precarity leaves individuals with a literal and metaphoric poor quality of air, struggling to breathe in this polluted environment. This form of socio-economic precarity does not come about through dramatic events, but in the slow and attritional violence of everyday accumulations. Rob Nixon explains the nature of this violence:

Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to

engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. (Nixon, 2011, p.2)

In the Introduction, I discussed how a concise analysis of a stanza from “walking the earth” (p.21) from Nyezwa’s *Malikhanye* is revealing in the way in which the concepts of “slow death”, “cruel optimism”, “hauntology/the spectral”, and the “unlanguaged” connect. In the stanza he describes South African society:

all I can make of my country  
is a sulphurous compound  
a black room with two gigantic stars  
as thoroughly silent as corpses (p.21)

The stanza also reveals an ecological dimension, as Alice Meyer points out (2017). She quotes the above lines, and remarks:

Knowledge of Nyezwa’s background [living in the Port Elizabeth area] provides inspiration for interpreting the image. The reference to sulphur surely connects to the fact that one of the most harmful effects of Coega is an unhealthy emission of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere. The poetic decision to compare an entire country to “a sulphurous compound” harnesses the Coega development as a symbol for capitalism’s violent contamination of nature. (p.108)

Meyer (2017) further observes:

His lyric voice complicates the sacrosanct nature of human subjectivity and pioneers an enlightened optic on the imbrication of humanity and ecology. (p.103)

Ecosystems and people living in marginal communities are more vulnerable because they are often outside the spotlight, and actions against them are accretions, slow but cumulative acts of violence which don't make headlines. To expose this vulnerability requires a special type of writing and poetry, which can engage in depth with actuality and convey messages effectively and succinctly, while avoiding a mere descriptive superficiality. Nyezwa in his poetry follows the dictums of Georges Perec, as quoted by Slasha:

Perec urges us to transcend the surface, go behind the scene and zoom in and focus and engage the supposedly insignificant details behind the event, the explosion, the essential, the true scandal – to give attention to the habitual which we have ceased to question due to either our overfamiliarity with, or repugnance to, its presence. (Slasha, 2018, n.p)

“walking the earth” (p.21) exhibits a space suffering from slow death, sustained by cruel optimism. The sulphurous compound symbolically brings to mind historical inequality and power structures, symbolising the mining industry in particular. What is significant as well is that sulphur is a spectral smell, which remains in an area for a while afterwards. In my review of *Malikhanye* I suggested:

Those lines sum up many things in a devastating manner through their use of overwhelming symbols. The apathy of power, and the meaningless polarised public sense of identity and sense of reality, silent and irrelevant to the real context, its everyday existence and suffering. The gross inequality and division in our country between have and have-nots. The polarisation of public discourse into meaningless violence. The failure of dialogue between different groups. The discrepancy between experience and reality, and promises and betrayal. The images presented in those lines are both frightening and terrifyingly beautiful, compelling one into a potent experience of the reality. (2012, n.p)

While offering protest through its words, the stanza also foregrounds silence: “a black room with two gigantic stars/ as thoroughly silent as corpses”. This rejection of speech in favour of silence is a form of protest against the structures of modern rationality and discourse.

Stars however give light, and symbolise light and hope. In the poem, they are “two gigantic stars/ as thoroughly silent as corpses”. Berlant (2011) in *Cruel Optimism* in Chapter 7 which is entitled “On the desire for the political”, writes:

All politically performative acts of vocal negation are pedagogical, singular moments inflated to embody something generally awry in the social. (p.231)

The silence of the stars, as well as their comparison to corpses (dead bodies, or dead bodies politic?) strongly implies that things are very wrong in the social milieu of South Africa. However, while the stars may be silent and cannot communicate through sound, they are definitely visible and can thereby communicate the “unlanguaged” (Slasha, 2018) through their light, their form and their essence. Nyezwa is likewise able to make the unseen become visible through his language strategies.

Nyezwa in this poem “engage(s) the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence” (Nixon, 2011, p.2), foregrounded in phrases such as “all I can see of my country”. Seeing requires the ability to look deep into the reality of a situation and its causes and hegemonies. Further in the poem “walking the earth”, Nyezwa writes:

and during the many storms in my life  
what happened?  
what really happened?  
during those nights  
what did I really see? (p.21)

Questions are a common feature in Nyezwa's poetry, reflecting a belief that knowledge is not something fixed and certain, and that we live in a world of frequently unstable meanings. He is still trying to define the precise nature of the crises that have happened to him, and poetry is proving one way to near the answers – by asking the most crucial questions. “during those nights/ what did i really see” (p.21) which foregrounds the act of seeing. On the one hand it is more difficult to see at night with physical eyes, and yet on the other hand, night is often seen as a time of spiritual insight, and it is also is the only time the stars are clear enough to see. It takes a state of existential awareness and honest engagement with reality to truly “see”, and thereafter to effectively articulate this reality through the use of poetic devices and techniques.

Meyer argues that Nyezwa's lyric approach is embedded in an awareness and connection to eco-historical surrounds, with a use of technical devices such as parallelism being key to revealing this awareness (p.109). She contrasts Nyezwa's approach to that of capitalism and the mode of the “capitalocene” (p.109), which “has drawn upon the powers of art, literature and science to portray nature as an external object” “to be mapped, quantified, and regulated” in order to meet its own accumulative urges” (pp.109-110). In defiance of such logic, Nyezwa fashions a world-view that reveals the “material and ecological qualities of intellectual creativity” (p.110). He blurs boundaries and synthesises and connects elements, with his use of devices such as synaesthesia proving particularly effective, breaking down the categories and abilities of the various senses. This blurring:

stands in contradistinction to the logic of capitalism, which seeks to divide, compartmentalise and isolate diverse elements of human existence. In Nyezwa's poetry, one cannot rigidly separate the human senses from each other and the external world they inhabit. (Meyer, 2017, p.110)

Drawing further on the insight that Nyezwa's poetry defies the desire to treat nature and his surroundings as an object to be named, controlled, mapped and defined within strict boundaries, is a realisation that Nyezwa embraces the knowledge that in his poetry he represents the

unrepresentable. Butler in *Precarious Life* argues that the “Levinasian face” does not represent the human directly, but actually represents the unrepresentable.

For Levinas, then, the human is not represented by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but must show its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. (2004, p.144)

In essence, it is the very uncertainty of ultimate knowledge of the other, and uncertainty about the other, that defines our relationship to the other, and our relationship to any form of the other. It is in uncertainty and an embrace of this uncertainty that our relational ethics is framed. This transcends identity politics and fixed identities. It is a philosophy and ethics that involves an embrace of risk. Poetry succeeds well in conveying this, as poetry involves a continual encounter with risk and the uncertain.

In this insight, the face of the other becomes more and more encompassing – and in Nyezwa’s poetry, boundaries between the human and non-human, animate and inanimate are blurred, transcending simple personification through the lens of human subjectivity, and escaping a monolithic definition of essence, to revealing humans and all representations of the “face” having fluid boundaries. They are not antagonistic boundaries, but fluid connections in a malleable concept field.

### **To know you**

“to know you” (pp.32-37) is one of the most lyrically effusive poems in the book. The imagery is wildly embracing, inclusive as opposed to exclusive. It abounds in descriptions and images from

everyday living, including a diversity of natural images, juxtaposed in startling contrasts or unexpected relations. The poem is a prime example where:

Being flows in his poetry, boundaries are not distinguished, but shown to be flowing on to one another. (Allan, 2012, n.p)

It continues to display a world without categorisation or binaries:

i want to know you like a flurry of white stones  
like a father  
or a mother  
who keeps looking  
and doesn't see (p.32)

The first line starts with movement and intense activity, describing a “flurry of white stones”. The next two lines deny binary choices or preferences – it is implied the poet wants to and is willing to know the person without restricting knowledge perceptions to previously defined masculine or feminine frameworks, and is prepared to know the person without prejudgment. The lines “who keeps looking/ and doesn't see” offer interesting interpretations. The lines could be an acknowledgement that very often we look, without truly seeing, or perhaps a way of saying that there are aspects of knowledge that seeing does not reveal. To know a person requires empathy, requiring a type of perception that transcends the visual. This requires you to surrender your own preconceptions, as well as interpretations on what form truth should take.

Martin Hall (2016) discusses an essay by South African scholar Minesh Dass (2015) titled “Making room for the unexpected: the university and the ethical imperative of unconditional hospitality”. Dass arrived at Rhodes University to lecture English and was “advised” to attend morning departmental teas. Despite being “rituals of hospitality”, he actually felt “alienated and anxious” by the subtle coercion. “His new colleagues were exemplary in their politeness; he was,

they were saying, free to become like them. He felt more excluded with every new welcoming gesture.” (2016, n.p). Dass suggests “conditional hospitality” is a way of enforcing conformity, and is a microcosm of a university that is “closed to new ideas and possibilities” (2016, n.p) and thereby resists transformation(s).

“to know you” is a poem comfortable and prepared to embrace transformation. It is willing to embrace the precariousness of risk. It does not have fixed markers of identity or being; things and reality are shown to be fluid. It “knows” unconditionally. Hall continues:

In a characteristic mind experiment, Derrida asks that we imagine a situation in which we “give place” without any constraints or expectation of reciprocity, perhaps without knowing a person’s name, or asking who they are. This requires, Dass notes, that we “respect the infinite unknowability of the other, at the cost of any sense of our home as comfortable, sage or inviolable”. (Hall, 2016, n.p)

Nyezwa challenges conceptions and hierarchies of power and respects the unknowability of the other:

like an ant  
who sits and thinks  
like a city  
with no mayor (p.32)

Here Nyezwa privileges one of the smaller representatives of the animal world, and not a mammal, but an insect, describing it as possessing the consciousness to sit and think. It creates a strong mental image, reconceptualising the notion of a “thinker”, famously visually represented by Rodin’s sculpture *The Thinker*. This ant also symbolises the precarious, the working classes, the marginalised, thinking and attempting to come to terms about their own conditions. In relation to “thinking” it foregrounds a deprivileging of knowledge processes and decentralising



philosophy from elite circles to the masses (“ants”). “like a city/ with no mayor” hints at the removal of hegemonies and structures in society. In empathy, there is no dominant force, no overpowering reason. Precarity can be combatted by an attitude of openness and by refusing to privilege only certain aspects of experience, certain sectors of society, and certain ways of “knowing”.

The world of the poem “to know you” is inclusive, with images such as: “a doll with no figure/ a flurry of rocks/ a valley of stones”; “dying dynasties/ fuming insects/ unforgettable malls”. It is a completely non-judgmental and empathetic world. “a doll with no figure” is a challenging image because dolls are totemic toys, created in the form of human figures, often ideologically loaded by the cultural messages of hegemonies. But Nyezwa’s doll is like the God without name, the “I am that I am”, as it has “no figure”, only continual becoming. The use of repetition in several places of the word “stones” (a flurry of white stones...a flurry of rocks...a valley of stones) calls to mind as well the Revelations 2:17 verse about the new name that will be given to believers, written on a white stone. The new names of Nyezwa’s poetic subjects are encoded on the stones, and their name is becoming, flux, possibility. They are an antidote to precarity which gains its power through the categorisation and division of people, animals, organic life, and the non-organic world into places, territories, assets, species, and hierarchies, all methods and techniques of control.

The poem challenges contemporary claims to knowledge that have been claimed through the rationalisation and categorisation of things. “to know you” ultimately posits a radically different “knowing” to conventional understandings of the term. The “knowing” of the text is that of ultimately unknowable person(s) or object(s), where knowing requires an openness in the everyday encountering of the person, as well as a decentring of contemporary notions of the “other”, with the other continually being an existence which transforms and changes. It is the total opposite of a colonised or controlled object. Butler writes:

If I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you,” by trying

to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (2004, p.49)

The poem contains numerous images of vulnerability. Most of them are prefaced by “i want to know you”. Others are prefaced by “i want to see you” or “i want to hear you”. The phrase “i want to” hints at a desire that may not be fulfilled. The poem is also one example of Levinas’s view of relational ethics being the first philosophy, laying the foundations for ontology and epistemology. The poem’s sense of ontology is informed by the direct sense of relations or desire to “know” the essence of objects by a direct and passionate knowing.

Fatefulness and connotations of myth feature strongly in the poem, and lead to deeper understandings of precarity and the cruel optimism of existence.

i want to know you like a woman of many beautiful lines  
and wide seas  
an animal  
which seeks light  
and dies instantly (p.35)

This is a fateful example of cruel optimism, and further on follows another image laden with both vulnerability and beauty:

i want to know you like the vulnerable egg  
of a female spider  
a broken myth  
a tiny legend (p.35)

The spider is a symbol of artifice, the egg a symbol of the precariousness of the future and the precarious future of artistic creations. An emphasis is placed on the micro-social and the quotidian, by the oxymoronic “a tiny legend”.

A will to hope often appears in the poems, amidst the despair. In “after your love”:

after your eyes  
i go on discovering new countries (p.30)

This image suggests renewal of hope after loss, or an ability to transcend the experiencing of the world through only one set of eyes or one way of seeing. The phrase “new countries” echoes the title of his previous book, *New Country* (2008). However, the poem moves into a boldly imaginative territory, transcending everyday notions of hope or despair and suggests the power of creativity as a reaction to oppression and restriction:

i walk on leaves or on water  
with no heroes  
celebrating my endearing childhood  
i walk on leaves  
or stones (p.30)

The poem rejects heroes and easy beliefs, and by choosing to walk on natural objects such as leaves, water and stones is able to connect to the organic world. He celebrates “endearing childhood”, endearing being very close in sound to the word “enduring”. Another implication of walking on leaves, stones or water is that he rejects the easy everyday paths of life, both in everyday living and as a metaphor for the choice of language use. He takes a harder and more unexpected path. It is precisely this type of path that enables him to see the world differently, and begin to build up resistance to its hegemonies through language resistance. The “endearing childhood” is a symbolic inner being that can always be renewed, even in the most jaded of

beings, an essence that is revitalised when the human being is connected to the organic world.

The poem ends dramatically:

my house is in the black township  
where nuptial flowers pursue the rain  
where the blue sea disappears  
my house is built of sharp stones  
and red quills  
from a hornets wings (p.31)

A hornet is an insect that when disturbed, strikes rapidly and at a speed that is not expected from any whom have observed it merely a moment before and come too close to it. This is also apt as a description of the poetry, for the poetry reserves for itself unpredictability, a refusal to be summed up in any trite definition, striking rapidly out at predefinitions.

“to know you” is definitely one of the more optimistic poems in the collection. “after your love” presents something more in-between. Poems such as “walking the earth” and “the burning sea” portray strongly feelings of passionate despair. In the 2015 interview with Penfold, Nyezwa expresses this despair:

There’s greater confusion in the world than was the case a decade ago. And the trend is that the situation will only worsen. Nobody is safe in the world. (2015, p.6)

The phrase, “nobody is safe in the world”, is far from being a simple truism expressed by the poet, but an expression of directly painful experience. As mentioned previously, in 2008 Nyezwa lost his son, Malikhanye Liyema Nyezwa, at the age of three months.

## Malikhanye – grieving, grievability, and life’s precariousness

I have a feeling that the more direct my poems become, the greater are the chances that they will lose their power. I must avoid “directness” at all costs as the approach goes against my understanding of how life manifests ordinarily. Life works the same way as death works, applying its innuendos and subtlety. I think the obvious misleads, gives the wrong answers. What becomes crucial is finding new paths, discovering for ourselves new rhythms, new nuances. That becomes important. [...] *Malikhanye* was driven by the intense feeling of loss. Everything was out in the open. A mad nanny had left the boy alone to die. There was nothing philosophical about that. The truth was out in the open. (Nyezwa in Cummiskey, 2012)

The final sentence quoted from the Nyezwa interview is a pointed confession of life’s precarity and the precariousness of being. Life, as Nyezwa himself said, “complicates and yet simplifies”. And this is at the heart in many ways of what Penfold describes as “the new aesthetic of the elusive image” (2015). This aesthetic acknowledges the complexity of life, and conveys the difficulty that language faces in representing reality, yet simultaneously abounds in moments of revelation that come about through the seemingly simple, pared down and well directed use of imagery. It is a compassionately ethical and aesthetic attitude, which enables the writer to see all around him, unblinkered by the urge to divide or the categorisation of formal rationalism. A knowledge that understands that knowledge itself is elusive because truth is a continual process of becoming, and any attempt to describe the truth of things will indicate the actual elusiveness of the world; “even as we begin to think we understand, everything around us explodes or diminishes – all understanding, every organic leaf, every rock, like rain patterns against the sea” (Nyezwa in Cummiskey, 2012, n.pag).

Meyer mentions “Nyezwa’s use of surrealism to interpret and portray the strangeness of lived reality” (2017, p.9). This surrealism in the more political or directly social poems serves to undermine accepted understandings and narrations of reality and power. In the more personal poems (which nevertheless still serve to offer strong comment on the state of existence in

society), the surrealism enables Nyezwa to experience loss and try come to terms with loss outside of conventional frames of understanding, to experience the grief in its painful and unknowable essence, far from false comforts, projections and retroreflections.

When discussing the section of the book specifically dedicated to Malikhanye, a good starting point is the beginning of Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) where Butler looks at the American reaction to the September 11 attacks and suggests alternative responses that could have been made. "*Precarious Life* approaches the question of a non-violent ethics, one that is based upon an understanding of how easily human life is annulled" (Butler, 2004, p.xvii).

She suggests instead of kneejerk rage and retroreflection of emotional pain into abstract nationalism, it could have resulted in a deeper understanding of the overall precariousness of life, and an attempt to reduce socio-economic inequality and precarity.

Nyezwa engages immediately with one possible response to grief in the first short poem:

i want nothing on earth  
for seven days in the evening  
i rubbed my hands together  
where there was no water  
and it began to rain  
you see, son, I want to hide behind bars  
and fight forever (p.51)

The seeming futility and emptiness of grieving is emphasised – the days are not described, but their evenings are foregrounded, the evenings symbolising the end and the emptiness of day. Seven days is immediately reminiscent of the Genesis story of creation. Here, this creator makes rain through the rubbing of his hands, a rain connoting both tears of grieving and the first hints of

healing in grief. The poet expresses tension between what he does: giving life with his hands, continuing the process of living and watering the future; and a desire to “hide behind bars/ and fight forever”. This is particularly resonant in the South African context, an image that calls to mind the freedom struggle against apartheid. Deeper than this particular grief, it also is a metaphor for the choice that one is faced with in dealing with precarity – adopt struggles of antagonism and endless bitterness, or find ways to create new life and spaces of resistance that are not merely usurpations of the hegemonic terrain, but offer society new forms of life within “post-capitalist ruins” (Tsing, 2015).

Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) suggests that grieving is often deferred for revenge, which does not bring about closure. She discusses how the grief of those who lost loved ones in the September 11 attacks was hijacked and turned into a cause for vengeance. In the process, the right to grieve was taken away from those who lost loved ones, as their individual grief became an American grief, a discourse of grieving they had little control over. The grief was backgrounded and vengeance was foregrounded – the victims put in the background and the perpetrators emphasised. It brings to mind Nyezwa’s words at the beginning of this section, when talking about the loss of his son. “Everything was in the open...there was nothing philosophical about that. The truth was out in the open”. These words are devastating in their simplicity, yet by contrast to the reaction to September 11, where grief got buried by vengeance, the key phrase, “out in the open”, offers the possibility of recognition and dealing with a situation. I comment on a similar strand in my review:

His humanism is a desperate and potent awareness of life contrasted with its ephemerality and the often incomprehensible course of events. (2012, n.p)

As mentioned earlier, while Nyezwa may be grieving over the loss of his son, throughout the sequence, there is also another type of grief and sense of disquiet being expressed. It is a grief driven by frustrations and a sense of life deferred, or cruel optimism. He also addresses the spectral in several forms – the spectral failure of the past, and his son as the spectral,

simultaneously there yet also absent, his absence being the cause for pain. And yet the uncanny sense of presence offers both inspiration and guidance.

The beauty of the everyday and the precariousness of life are captured in lines like:

now that you're not here  
to live with us  
you're going to be something other than  
the stars once more  
you will be water  
you will be birds (p.52)

Notice as well the continued effective use of line endings – the first two lines end with “not here” and “with us”, foregrounding the contrast between absence/presence throughout this poem, as well as actually being confessions of acceptance. The plural “birds” is also not accidental, but implies a transition from individual to a plural existence, transcending the everyday notion of self. Other substances are mentioned and absence/presence continually connoted:

you're not here  
to live with us  
where trees go  
and segments of breath  
hurtle like raindrops  
from the sky  
to toil forever  
you will survive like day  
to embrace all things  
  
your spirit will be earth



final as silence  
you will see (p.52)

The clipped lines are stripped and economical, their energy focused on their basic statements and the tight underlying currents of their meanings.

Instead of trying to find false security, Nyezwa acknowledges life's precariousness, and that there will always be a permeability and vulnerability to injury and loss:

i cannot understand  
why man exists  
and why things happen

on the stairs I see  
someone is whispering  
the house is saying something (p.57)

In my 2012 review, I wrote:

There are no false consolations, nor easy cynicisms. There is no mannerism. One is overcome by the sheer courage of his words, the candid images which step forward asking for no pity but powerfully resonant. (2012, n.p)

Attempts to find final rational answers do not bring closure – rather, it is a whole-hearted willingness to be a witness to everything in all its actuality, which heightens the awareness of meaning. Meaning is never a fixed or final thing in Nyezwa's poetry, motivating the frequent choice of images of "sky", "breath", "water" in his poems, representing elements which are in constant transformation or movement. This ability to live in direct relationship to actuality gives

him freedom from ideology or theology, and enables him to grieve loss without retroflection or illusion, without facile mannerisms or projecting pain into an outward abstract cause.

Extreme emotional states such as “desire, intimacy and sexuality [...] challenge our aspirations of autonomy [and] grief often results – at least momentarily – in the utter dissolution of the self” Mari Ruti (2018, p.99) writes. There is an inability to find simple answers in Nyezwa’s poetry and the acceptance that there might be no meaning, except the meaning found in embracing human precariousness and a dependent connectedness to the world and others. This experience is gained through a journey that shatters stable selfhood. Loss makes “a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Ruti, 2018, p.100). Lorca’s lecture on *duende* explains that this journey is not simple:

Seeking the *duende*, there is neither map nor discipline. We only know it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand, that it shatters styles. (1933)

This *duende* “rejects... geometry” and “shatters styles”, lines that can be embraced by a master dislocator of language. Nyezwa in a poem from the first section of the book *Malikhanye* entitled “a burning sea” embraces these possibilities:

theres an invisible line which crosses  
from universe to universe  
like a circular river, a broad unending space (p.47)

Geometries are fluid here; space is a position of flux and possibility. The line is invisible, somewhat paradoxical because a line generally needs to be seen in order to be identified as a line. A line is able to potentially demarcate borders and divisions. It crosses “universe to universe” but in the next line Nyezwa talks of “a broad unending space”, which may ambiguously refer to the line or to the universes. Either way, his metaphysics is one that does not restrict essences or word definitions, but is prepared for alternate perceptions of reality. This

leads on to an acknowledgement of precariousness, for his metaphysics enables him to accept risk and human vulnerability, instead of trying to view the world through a dogmatic formal rationalist lens which attempts to deny this vulnerability. Human experience is enigmatic, and the poet renders its enigmatic nature effectively.

In the second to last stanza of the final poem of the *Malikhanye* sequence at the end of *Malikhanye*, Nyezwa writes:

i want to remember you forever  
and not desire more happiness  
than this simple outline of the star  
which coalesces love (p.66)

In a society sustained by cruel optimism, perhaps desiring happiness is in itself a dead end. The “simple outline of the star”, a part of the world of existence which Nyezwa describes “simple and hard”, reminds the reader of earlier stars in the book; in the dramatic poem, “walking the earth” (p.21) there are the two giant stars symbolising polarities and failures and slow death. This star however coalesces love. There is also a remarkable line in the first stanza of “walking the earth” (p.21) which can be connected to this poem by the association of symbols, and points to the organic unity within the entire volume:

i am walking the earth  
like a man who has just awoken  
like an idle boat drifting by  
something less crystalline  
*than a distant star* (walking the earth, p.21, my italics)

In his grief, Nyezwa does not stop loving. He refuses to forget the child he has lost. His grieving, a painful process, leads him more strongly towards the world and its pluralities, an open-hearted

grieving that while mourning, also opens him up to the finite beauty and imperfect nature of change in the world.

listen, for once from a distance  
this blue earth sings its guilt to a silent storm  
this guilty earth resounds its depleted conscience  
to the raging eye of the desert (p.66)

Observing the world around him and detailing its beauty is completely connected to remembering the child, for Nyezwa is a man who does not believe in hegemonic category constructions. The human being, nature, and the inorganic world are strongly connected, and existence is defined through these connections as opposed to their separations. Being indivisible from nature gives the poet sustenance, and the urge to continue searching for meaning. These lines also continue the subtle ecological themes in his poetry. Water is strongly connoted by the “blue earth”, and it is worth while noting that the human body is mostly made up of water, and water is an element of cleansing and purification. The silent storm can offer rain. It can also offer the illuminating rage of lightning. It will not offer the everyday language of clichés and slogans and easy solutions. It is a silent storm, moving in the grammar of the unlanguage. The “blue earth sings its guilt” to this silent storm. The tempest of emotional turmoil that struggles to find expression in language is also symbolised by this storm, a turmoil that once passed through leads to purification. Nyezwa’s poetry, even in modes of despair, embraces an ecstatic attitude. Butler suggests that vulnerability itself can lead to the ecstatic. Moya Lloyd (2015) discusses Butler:

Being “undone” or dispossessed by another is not just a source of “anguish”, however; potentially at least, it is “also a chance” of transformation, “our chance of becoming human” [...]. [I]t is precisely corporeal vulnerability that makes possible ecstatic relationality, and thence ethics and politics.” (p.213)

Nyezwa reiterates this in the interview with Gary Cummiskey (2012):

For a fuller representation of loss in *Malikhanye* I had the sudden revelation that life complicates and yet simplifies. That even as we begin to think we understand, everything around us explodes or diminishes – all understanding, every organic leaf, every rock, like rain patterns against the sea. (n.p)

The ecstatic is strongly related to both political resistance and personal expression. It pushes and bursts against attempts to confine or define the nature of the individual or everyday human being. It is a radical and highly charged emotional and often spiritual expression of being, the true sense of being more than oneself, of being outside oneself.

Nyezwa ends with a stanza of questions:

i want to know how the sea flows  
how the winds blow  
and how love is abandoned  
why things have to happen like this  
oh! So over and over again. (p.66)

He ends with a partial willingness to accept that some things cannot be simply understood (elusive meanings that relate to the poetry of the elusive image) – but at the same time, it is not a shallow acceptance. He ends with questions, not questions that fix notions in static time or space, but questions that are also confessions of life and state the courage to live in acceptance of existence and its precarious beauty.

These are lines that acknowledge that there are no final answers. Nevertheless, in an embrace of totalising experience, as a witness to everything the poet experiences, through a painful and immersing empathy with life, meaning itself is advanced through the courage of speaking, asking, and witnessing, and a sense of healing is found in the reality that the poet is a part of this

greater process of life. This is a vulnerable individual, in a world of ecstatic pain and beauty, who embraces human precariousness. Penfold (2013) sums up *Malikhanye* in the following words:

*Malikhanye* is inescapably haunting: a collection of foreboding, despair, and affliction; it is similarly powerfully poignant and evocative. It combines political comment with deeply personal grief whilst featuring both introspective, ordinary values alongside the universal. [...] [to] simultaneously appeal to the political and spiritual; to both poles of previously accepted binaries. Therefore he liberates language from the constraints of labelling and achieves a poetic freedom so ironically juxtaposed against the confined and oppressive social reality he depicts. (p.237)

Mxolisi Nyezwa is a witness to the world around him: “walking the earth” (p.21) he escapes the simple limitations of the contemporary and “achieves a poetic freedom”. His words burn through reality, the visionary optic of someone “beginning to see/ how to live like fire or air” (p.39).

## Chapter 2.

### The rent language of razors: representations of precarity in selected poems of Seithlamo Motsapi

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I identify and analyse representations of precarity in Seithlamo Motsapi's poetry, focusing on poems from his solo collection of poetry, *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (1995). I explain how his poetry refuses easy signification and obvious meaning, and as a result, his engagement with the nature of precarity is complex and creative, challenging the status quo.

I start with an introduction of Motsapi and some of his techniques and aesthetic attitudes. I analyse the key role music plays in his poetry and his ability to witness to the everyday and reveal occluded acts of oppression. I discuss role nature plays in his poems leading to broader notions of what it means to exist as a human being. I consider his ability to expand upon the Levinasian concept of the face and engage with human precariousness while never forgetting to differentiate precariousness from socio-economic induced precarity. I close with a final analysis of techniques and examine the nuanced ways in which he presents precarity as a contemporary and historical experience.

Grappling with the turbulent period of the early to mid-90s, which incorporated the end of apartheid and the immediate aftermath of the transition, Motsapi's poetry in *earthstepper* is "a very far cry from official New South African pietistic discourse of reconciliation, and brilliantly "fuses pan-Africanist militancy, romantic spirituality, and [is a] scathing attack on neo-colonialism in its global and local forms" (Chrisman, 1996, p.60). His work questions the common assumptions of the time, challenging the then dominant view of the 1990s as a complete transition and change of life for all inhabitants of South Africa, and it also serves as a witness and complex, articulate challenge to those who chose to overlook the structural inequalities and precarity experienced by a large majority of the population. While the predominant focus of

mass media and many creatives in the transition period was on celebrating the symbolism of the rainbow nation, he critiques this one sided focus, either directly critiquing the easy symbolism, or representing the complexity and complicit entanglement of a world where rainbows and death coexist. He writes in “goseame” (p.80) that “we ask for bread/ we ask for rainbows/ & we ask for a lamp” thereby articulating a need for reconciliation and the celebration of diversity to be paired with social upliftment (bread) and an increased fight for justice and truth (a lamp).

Motsapi’s poems express the challenges and the precarity that the marginalised live under. He represents precarity caused and sustained by broad socio-politico-economic circumstances, using often brutal imagery, frequently in juxtaposition with unexpected symbolism, creating a more vivid awareness of the disparity within society through the jarring of everyday perceptions. A key role is played by his use of technical devices such as synesthesia, which enables him to blur the senses and sensory perceptions, challenging the Western mode of perception and interpretation which is dominated by the blatantly visual and the logical. His poetic strategy breaks up notions of the individual self, as articulated by the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am”. The self is presented with fluidity in his poetry, and in frenzied shamanic states the poet expresses the potential connection between different aspects of life, while also acknowledging the existing fractures in social and ecological spheres. Motsapi foregrounds prophecy and the effects of prophecy within the contemporary moment, as something that can possibly effect change and liberation, and he muses on the enigmatic nature of time and the repetition of history. His imagery discloses the spiritual as manifesting within the physical world. Words are revealed to be entities capable of transformation and also suture, entities whose meanings are broken up on the page and within sentence lines, their meanings filled with both uncertainty and possibility. Laura Chrisman in her 1996 review of *earthstepper* comments:

The political urgency is never here compromised by empty rhetorical posturing, aesthetic banality: this is a rich, experimental poetry, raining down fresh imagery, complex conceits, carefully patterned to produce a volume of striking originality and stylistic rigour. (p.33)



Motsapi was born in 1966 in Bela-Bela in the Limpopo province. He is described by Tom Penfold in the following terms: “widely read and erudite, he was previously a university lecturer and member of the President’s Office before releasing his debut collection of poetry, *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*, in 1995”. Meyer in her chapter on Motsapi adds:

His biography is coloured by scepticism for the integrity of the word and continual objection to corrupt modes of articulation. The writer lost faith in the relevance of poetry and somewhat dramatically retired at the launch of his only published collection. Apart from a handful of occasional poems, he has stayed true to his word and eschewed the literary front ever since. [...]At present, Motsapi has removed himself from public life altogether with few details being known of his whereabouts or occupation. The motivation behind Motsapi’s decision to isolate himself is a radical commitment to Christianity and the concomitant desire to attain spiritual peace. (pp.47-48)

This “desire to attain spiritual peace” is reflected early in *earthstepper* by the poem “the man” (p.2):

an almost forgotten acquaintance  
was in town recently  
i noticed that it started raining  
just as he ambled in

i remember him as a simple man  
growing up, we all wanted  
to be doctors, lawyers and teachers  
so the blood could ebb out of the village

my friend had much more sober dreams  
he asked the heavens to grant him

the imposing peace of the blue-gum in his backyard

Here Motsapi celebrates quieter spiritual values and human dignity, and rejects the modern materialistic capitalist society. Capitalism adds up to an espousal of production; everything becomes involved in production, even human life, with the voyage of young people out of the village to become doctors, lawyers and teachers resembling an assembly line at a production facility. The village to capitalism only exists as a raw resource to be exploited, and not as a zone of independent meaning or spiritual enlightenment. The man of this poem however rejects this assembly line, and refuses to leave the village, instead embracing the ecological ramifications of existence and the parochial universality of his home. He thereby rejects as well notions of the rural as backward or villages as places of lack, rather discerning alternate forms of knowledge and enlightenment in the simple ability to remain connected to the beingness or *Dasein* of a place. The “backyard” is celebrated, a far cry from the “backyard” being a symbol for what is uncelebrated or ordinary and out of focus. The “whole forests that invade his dreams at night” are an evocative rebellion against a capitalism that treats forests as resources to be controlled, contained and consumed; here the forests actually enlarge his notion of consciousness and what it means to be human, with the role and power of nature being acknowledged. The forests crowd his dreams, making the human not self centred, but ecologically connected.

Silence and the defiance of everyday language conventions plays a role in creating a radicalised language that is effectively empowered and situated to challenge the status quo. Even the title of his book is an example of his refusal to give simple meanings. As opposed to a single phrase or word as a title, the poet gives the book two titles; “earthstepper” and “the ocean is very shallow”; separated by a slash. They could be read alternately as poetic line breaks, or as two categories/concepts partly divided by the slash. The first title invokes earth and the physical, as well as journeying/pilgrimage, the second title references the liquid, as well as alluding to the depth or possible lack of depth of substances such as water. The phrase “the ocean is very shallow” may also connote that there is something transcending the essence of water.

The willingness to challenge the simple meanings and complicate the relationships between different ideas, substances and words is seen in a poem like “sol/o” (p.1-2):

sol/o

my love

there are no accidents

in war – no kisses

on the belligerent lips of crocodiles

no loves greener than

the dancing hearts of children

no reveller jollier than the worm

in columbus’s boiling head

there are no songs beautifuller

than the stern indifference of the hills

there are no flowers more clamorous

than the seas of children

home in my little heart

i tell u this

as the sun recedes

into the quaking pinstripe

of my warriors

grinning & vulgar in their muddied dreams

of power

i tell u this love

because the roads

have become hostile (pp.1-2)

This poem, like many of the poems in the book, immediately subverts the prevalent discourse of its time. Aware of the precarity of the moment, it is a far cry from the contemporary domination of the contemporary discourses by concepts of freedom that are defined by neo-liberalism along with its glittering promises, the euphoric celebration of the fall of apartheid, and the embrace of rainbow nationalism, and it warns us of the spectral presence of history: “there are no accidents/ in war – no kisses/ on the belligerent lips of crocodiles” calling to mind former apartheid era State President, P. W. Botha, known as “die groot krokodil” (the big crocodile), and also hinting at the hazards that freedom fighters faced crossing the Limpopo river between South Africa and Zimbabwe, many perishing to crocodiles. The poem continues to warn of the danger of the present: “the roads/ have become hostile”: it warns us of leaders, former revolutionaries and freedom fighters who have already become complacent and comfortable in their stations of power; “my warriors/ grinning & vulgar in their muddied dreams/ of power”: it encourages insurrection and rebellion against established orders and hierarchies, which is represented symbolically by Columbus, the “discoverer” of America: “no reveller jollier than the worm/ in columbus’s boiling head”, thereby inverting the hierarchy of European reason and the power of discoverers and the namers of geographical spaces. In contrast to rainbow nation euphoria, it tells us: there are no songs “beautifuler/ than the stern indifference of the hills”, foregrounding as well a contrast between the contemporary and the lasting. Its imagery subverts expectations, with flowers being “clamorous”, then being linked to “seas of children”, thereby consecutively breaking down barriers between colour and sound (flowers are synaesthetically being described in terms of sound), the plant world and the human world, the earth and the sea, within only a few words. By subverting conventional symbolism and form, he:

questions post-apartheid national discourses that enshrine individualistic models of liberated black subjectivity. Through deploying dissonant aesthetic forms, Motsapi disrupts the fluency of historic racist ideology and new national platitudes of individual freedom. [and...] [r]etreats from the realm of representation altogether in a powerful form of protest against political dispensations he cannot condone. (Meyer, 2017, p.47).

The title of the poem “sol/o” is in itself a disruption of dominant discourses centred on individuality: solo becomes sol/o, the English language is deconstructed and the notion of the self is challenged. The self that is presented thus is instead a fractured self, fractured by precarity and producing a language of fractures, a cutting and penetrating discourse of wounds and realisations that expose everyday reality, “the rent language of razors” (p.7). Fiona Micheala Johnson Chalamanda in her thesis “Interpretations in transition: Literature and political transition in Malawi and South Africa in the 1990s” (2002) comments further:

Reading the title as a complete word, it suggests a solitary state, though whether this is a lonely, destitute solo, a comforting solace, or one that involves heroism and stardom, remains ambiguous. The word is interrupted, fractured visually in two parts. It is intriguing to surmise why the poet has placed the forward slash in the position he has, rather than in the more obvious, symmetrical so/lo, which invokes a kind of depressive critique (so low). Does Motsapi consciously wish to avoid the equal weighting that so/lo suggests? What are the possibilities of a reading of sol/o? My own response was shaped when I arrived at the line “as the sun recedes”, for at this point the sol took on a reference to the sun, which was placed in a binary relationship with emptiness and nothingness, signified by the lone “o”. The trajectory of the poem moves from an edenic regenerative post-conflict condition populated by possibilities of hope in the dancing hearts of children, flowers and beautiful songs to a grim and disturbing vision of post-colonial corruption and greed. This trajectory appears to be enacted in the fragmented sol/o, from light and hope to zero and the despairing ejaculative o! Yet read in conjunction with the poem “shak-shak”, [...] with its repeated references to soul, the connotations of sol/o multiply further and elude any singular definition. New meanings thus emerge from the crevice of the fractured word. (p.92)

To this I could add that the zero is not necessarily always a symbol of negation and nothingness, but often the very symbol of new possibility. The sol/o relationship may be more than binary, but also signify co-relationship, two symbols of creativity, the sol (sun) as one energy of creation, and the o (zero) as another energy of creation, an equation of knowledge that transcends the

categories of formal rationalism. South African singer-songwriter Simphiwe Dana in the song “Tribe” from her debut 2004 album *Zandisile* sings about “the void that will overcome”. On the one hand, zero implies the possibility of restarting, renaming, new beginning and rebirth. Reading the “o” as an ejaculative expression, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the “oh!” at the end of Mxolisi Nyezwa’s *Malikhanye* sequence in *Malikhanye* (2012), an expression that emotions and apprehension of existence may at times be beyond the stratified norms of language. This reading of the “o” leads strongly to the references of “soul”. (The word “solo” also points to one of the major preoccupations of Motsapi in his poetry, the motif of music and music creation serving as a metaphor for cultural critique and world making, which I analyse in more detail later in this chapter.)

This poem and its title exemplify Motsapi’s poetic strategy which involves rejecting simple representation. Motsapi is aware that “formal ingenuity can be a way of countering power” (Meyer, 2017, p.13) and his disruption of the expected flow of language enables him to “decry obscene symbolic systems. [...] critically interrogating the linguistic structures of the coloniser” (2017, p.50).

### **The slow death of the everyday**

Motsapi is at home with what Unathi Slasha calls “the world of the unlanguage” (2018), a mode of perception, interpretation and articulation which becomes necessary because of the failure of everyday rationality to do so. It is a mode of expression that exists in reaction to the uncertainty and virtuality of contemporary life. This answers the dehumanising effect of everyday crises that Lauren Berlant discusses in “Thinking about feeling”:

[U]nder the pressure of an intensified, elongated present moment where affective, experiential and empirical knowledge norms seem in disarray there develop states of sociopathic disavowal and ordinary compartmentalization. See the sub-prime banking or “climate change” crises, for example. See systemic racialized, gendered, sexual and

regional class inequalities whose evidence in ordinary subjectivity shifts between foreground and background. Being overwhelmed by knowledge and life produces all kinds of neutralizing affect management, coasting, skimming, browsing, distraction, apathy, coolness, counter-absorption, assessments of scale, picking one's fights, and so on. (2010, p.5)

Instead of producing work which deals with issues superficially or with a lack of creative engagement, a poet like Motsapi challenges and jars readers out of expectations. He takes stock of the contemporary in lines like:

i erred, i erred,  
as you can see my ears are scarred  
from the discord cut out of my plunders  
as you can see my ease escapes me  
into the rent language of razors (soro, p.7)

He plays with punning and elements of rhyme; ears/ ease/ erred, erred/ scarred/ discord, jarring punning and half-rhymes that lead to the arresting image of "rent language of razors". Elsewhere in the poem further arresting and challenging lines: "my clouds sneered the greens their dew/ as over my head dances coagulated into deserts" and "my name forgets me". Language is dissonant to the self.

At a time when the dominant phrases in national discourse were reconciliation and rainbow nation, Motsapi is a chronicler of the ignored actuality, proclaiming that precarity remains real for many:

i write from beneath the foot  
of time's perforated stagger

& as these scrawls or scrolls  
hasten into their air or earth  
slaves pile into the sky  
up & beyond the sun  
our spears call for surer rends  
fire calls out for other roars  
besides handshake  
storms cry out for other songs  
besides repose (fayam, p.6)

Motsapi represents time itself as a mode of oppression in the slow death of everyday lives – time is “perforated”, and “stagger(s)”. He writes from under the “foot” of this oppression. The scene he describes depicts the people who are being exposed to risk, suffering and death unequally (Butler, 2009, p.ii). He is uncertain at times of the word’s power, describing it as “scrawls or scrolls”, that “hasten into their air or earth”, an evocative image that indicates both the possible decay and finitude of words, as well as their connection to the organic world as opposed to the super rational or world of ideology and dubious absolutes. “slaves pile into the sky”, a graphic hyperbolic image conveys the size of neo-capitalist oppression, describing what is hard to visualise, and rendering it into a graphic image reminiscent of a skyscraper. In the new neo-liberalist slave trade, the slaves are no longer thrown overboard into the ocean while on the trans-Atlantic trip, but are symbolically piled into the building of the neo-liberalist neo-capitalist global society, represented poignantly by the building of towers and skyscrapers, where power is maintained from offices. As the slaves in ancient Egypt built the pyramids through their labour, the modern slaves are used in the construction of the unequal society. At the same time, this image is powerfully two edged, suggesting a possible revolutionary form of liberation being obtainable by the slaves, as they “pile into the sky/ up and beyond the sun”, with the sun standing for a primal energy of life both prior to and post conventional knowledge systems, and “up and beyond the sun” suggesting a possible transcendence of oppression, as well as linking strongly back to a poem like “sol/o”, which centred in its title on the notions of self (solo) and sun (sol). The phrase, “up and beyond the sun”, here implies a transcending of the worship of the sun, and



literally a willingness to transcend belief systems which focalise on a single point or foreground the individual as someone separate from the organic and inorganic world. The sun is a symbol for alternative worship, away from man-centred worship of western theologies. The last lines invoke a kind of militancy, calling “for other roars/ besides handshakes”.

All these lines gain added poignancy by the earlier parts of the poem “fayam” (p.6). The poem narrates impressionistically in its first section the journeys across the Limpopo, of freedom fighters and possibly also the poet retracing their steps, either literally or through the channel of a storytelling griot. David Motsamai is also referred to in the poem, which was the name of a Johannesburg bootlegger in the 1950s, as well as a false identity which Nelson Mandela went by when he was in hiding in the early 1960s while on the run from the apartheid government. The poem thereby locates the contemporary moment as a journey with its roots in the past, as well as foregrounding cycles of resistance.

## **Music**

Art implies a perforation of the aesthetics of taste. (Steinweg, 2013, n.pag)

“fayam” (p.6), while lamenting the loss of ideals and possibilities, also urges that “storms cry out for other songs/ beside repose”. Motsapi challenges the view of music or any form of art as simply an entertainment or diversion. All art has a crucial role to play in a struggle against politically induced precarity. As such, depictions of music and musical creation, the influence of certain artists, and the use and representation of breath in poems, as pointed out in the Introduction, is more than simply a technical device or decorative measure to Motsapi. It is linked firmly to an experiencing of precarity and precariousness. Breath is expressed as a unit of resistance as well as a substance laden with painful inhaling/ exhaling in his poems: “who are wasted into a sigh” (“aambl”, p.13), “finally panted to a stupor” (“moksa”, p.28), “the lungs of dungeons will suddenly burst/ into breezes that remember our wounds” (“andif”, p.59), “our

wounds sigh so” (p.77) “our lungs are full of secret wars” (p.81), and “the air full of asphyxiations” (p.82).

Breath as expression or life force links strongly as well to the musical themes in Motsapi’s poems, as music invokes breath through singing, wind instruments, any instruments requiring breath, as well as the very structure of music, which imitates patterns of breath and the pulse in its rhythms and syncopations. These themes have been discussed effectively by critics such as Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack in “The mangled flesh in our griots: music in the verse of Seithlamo Motsapi” (2004). They discuss his diverse influences and the role music plays in his aesthetic responses:

Motsapi constructs a complex response to the culture of repetition and commodification that defines capitalist modernity, as well as the afflictions of [black] subordination that mark its emergence. [...] [H]is commitment to the dissonance of free jazz specifically and his more general resistance to the popular music industry indicates a particular mode of ideological critique based in reclaiming the freedom to deny and defy. (p.58)

Motsapi’s interest in music goes beyond being simply a celebration or meditation on breath, as “Noise and instrumental experimentation inspire the poet’s rejection of capitalist modernity” (Meyer, 2017, p. 49). Laura Chrisman (1996) notes Motsapi’s preoccupation with “African musical violence” and “the ‘musical dissonance’ of jazz” as “a necessary violence, a refusal of social resolution” (p.49).

Motsapi explores the precarity of artists through several poems which contain musicians as their subjects, or even refer to musicians. The musical breath of musicians is seen as being key in a struggle against precarity. In “solo/together” (pp 45-48), Motsapi references one of the innovative legends of jazz music, John Coltrane:

trane rolls off my walls at night

& dreamily nirvanas the ancient wells  
of my heart that dreams of hills  
into whirls of hypertenors (p.48)

It may be coincidental, but it is worth noting that the nickname for legendary jazz musician John Coltrane; “trane” (that evokes the word “train” in English) in Afrikaans means tears. It wouldn’t be surprising if on at least a sub-conscious level, Motsapi was thinking of the pun between trane in Afrikaans and trane, as Motsapi like most South African inhabitants of his generation, would have been exposed to Afrikaans, wilfully or unwillingly, and as the line makes sense both ways – it could be the music of Coltrane rolling off the walls, or tears rolling off the walls, tears of human feeling. The notion of it being tears is also suggested by the next line referencing “ancient wells” and it is the double probability of both Coltrane’s music and the tears bought about by an encounter with art, that water these “ancient wells of my heart” of human feeling. Coltrane’s music is linked to an organic experiencing of life and nature – it causes the heart to dream of hills, and the vivid image of “whirls of hypertenors”, an image suggesting movement and heightened musicality.

The naturalness of this image is contrasted to other depictions of music and musicians. Elsewhere, in solo/together, the vitriolic:

my son’s synthesiser  
spat blue red venomous disco/dant  
skewed maasai jump dancity (p.45)

The synthesiser spits “blue red venomous disco/dant”, a pun on discordant, and possibly a hint at decadent. Tradition or the rooted is twisted, symbolised by “skewed maasai jump dancity”, dancity a word that carries an air of the superficial with it, a sense of travesty. Motsapi sees danger in the shallow appropriation of music and artist’s creativity by the structures of power. Penfold writes how Motsapi’s poems contain multiple references to a diversity of musical

traditions, especially centred on the African diaspora, and how the poet laments at “their loss in favour of artificial sound and the consumer marketplace” (2013, p.223).

This sense of disillusionment ironically parallels the disillusionment hinted at in Mark Fisher’s writings on electronic music, which I discussed briefly in the Introduction. Fisher (2013) observed how electronic music went from being futuristic to becoming a form which was an echo of lost futures. Motsapi is probably more scathing of the genre of electronic music however, and might be accused of being slightly naïve by creating a romanticised binary between different genres of music, positing jazz and other semi-traditional forms as organic and revolutionary, and electronic music as superficial. However a careful examination of music proves that the dividing lines are not so easily drawn. Nevertheless, the use of music as a motif in his work is effective as an extended metaphor lamenting the dominance of superficial modes of living and expressing in everyday life.

In “djeni” (p.29), Motsapi criticises what he views as superficial music, and takes a swipe at symbols of Western charity, such as Sir Bob Geldof and the 80s Live Aid concerts.

they the world  
as sah Geldof shuttles out  
of the sand of the tv crew  
in addis

“they the world” is an inversion of “we are the world, we are the children”, the chorus of the famous 1985 song *We are the World*, featuring many of the first world’s top artists in the temporary collective “United Support of Artists (USA) for Africa”. It challenges the right of those of the first world/ global north to claim unity or solidarity with the struggles of those of the third world/ global south. Here their pretension is reversed and revealed as hollow – the sufferers of famines have no real connection with those of the first world who claim to be part of that “world”, and cannot define normality, and are retitled as “they the world”; the first world which

lives on the resources and debt of the third world. “sah Geldof shuttles out”, as he is able to leave the everyday experience of those who live in “the sand”, and go back to being part of “the world”. Sir Bob Geldof is ridiculed by being named “sah”, as well as by the pointed irony of those of the first world gaining honours within the hierarchies of power through their attempts and interventions into third world issues. Motsapi ridicules the power of the spectacle as the image of the falsely real. The most real part of this passage is the reality conveyed by the word “sand”. Once “sah Geldof” and the TV crew have left, the sand will still be there. The poem’s title as well hints at the contention between being connected and being isolated, between genuine human connection and human relationships dictated by hegemonies.

For Motsapi, a true resistance against socio-politically induced suffering will not come about through the simple written rendering of surface protest. Such resistance fails to adequately address the question of how mainstream/ mass media aesthetics (pop music) can be ruptured as a means of political protest. “The poetry’s resistance towards signification operates as political critique insofar as it subverts dehumanising discourses of colonialism, apartheid, and neo-apartheid.” (Meyer, 2017, p.48)

The old conceptions of action must be disrupted and new forms of mobilisation created. Pumla Dineo Gqola warns how:

Systems of dominance inscribe themselves primarily through language. Thus, engagement with identity requires several practices of formation where systems of power are constructed, resisted, subverted and mediated in and through linguistic agency (Kadali 1995, Mbembe 2000, Wicomb 1998). (Gqola, 1998, p.95)

Prophecy and prophesying are also referenced in various forms in the book. The purpose of prophecy is not simply to reveal the future, but actually to reveal the partially occluded oppression of the now. Rob Nixon (2011) emphasises this when he writes:

A quarter century ago, Raymond Williams called for more novels that attend to the “close living substance” of the local while simultaneously tracing the “occluded relationships” – the vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics – that invisibly shape the local. To hazard such novels poses imaginative challenges of a kind that writers content to create what Williams termed “enclosed fictions” need never face, among them the challenge of rendering visible occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness. In our age of expanding and accelerating globalisation, this particular imaginative difficulty has been cast primarily in spatial terms, as exemplified by John Berger’s pronouncement, famously cited in Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies*: “Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the world in all their inequality.” (p.45)

Motsapi’s poems are also very aware of the close but occluded relationships between “vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics” and the local. His prophesying is of social justice, a contemporary prophet, whose prime intention is to reveal spatial and social occlusions. Geographies are narrated through descriptions of zones or in the narrations of journeys, some of them with historico-geographical dimensions. Poems are narrated in relation to places or journeys, or the internal/external: “we are at peace *here*”; “we crossed *the river* this morning”; “*between* him and high”; “& so/ I finally arrived/ *at the mouth of the hole*”. The poet privileges the micro-spatial and challenges the globalist consumer culture which turns individual sites into “non-places” (Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 1995), and instead invests sites with meaning and resistance/ liberatory potential. These sites are also filled with pain and trauma that include that of slow death, cruel optimism of the deferred hope, history’s spectral burden, and contemporary capitalist socio-economic-politically induced precarity.

Many of those who journey are crippled individuals, “solitaries who limp back/ from the deserts emaciating genialities” (“leaven”, p.72). We see again the complexity of the poetic lines – and

the multiplicity of simultaneous meanings. The desert is not portrayed as a terrible place entirely. It is ambiguously rendered as having “emaciating genialities”. This could be seen as dark understated humour about the desert causing starvation. Or it could be seen as meaning the desert liberates spiritually by purifying the individual and releasing him from the clutter and distraction of the post-capitalist world, the “roars of dravel and trudgel” (“morivah”, p.74), returning him to “the root/ of those who thought” (p.74), perhaps a pre-Aristotelean knowledge and wisdom, or a nod perhaps to Egypt, or even a return to an examination of traditional knowledge systems. The “solitaries who limp back” are either wounded prior to their journey into exile/enlightenment, or were possibly crippled in an encounter with the divine or with the actuality of existence, some kind of spiritual and physical encounter reminiscent of Jacob wrestling with the angel in the desert. This in itself reminds us of Lorca’s words on the duende and the wrestling it involves to create an art that conveys the reality of existence.

This existence is filled with wounding and elements which are both helpful and dangerous. Chrisman writes:

This is an intensely physical writing in which the human body works with and against the elements, a world in which oppressors feature as crocodiles, alligators and worms, working with fangs and razors, mauling, mangling, stabbing, bruising, lacerating, perforating [...] throats, lungs, bellies and intestines. (1996, p.60)

This is a violent life. Motsapi foregrounds everyday trauma with the keen eye of a witness and expands on their dimensions to reveal their innate violence, exposing the shape of the local and all its “occluded relationships” (Nixon, 2011, p.45). The democratic South Africa is a violent place, and rainbow “pietiest” (Chrisman, 1996, p.60) discourse serves to obscure the violent natures and intentions of many. Former structures of oppression rebrand themselves to be part of the new democratic dispensation. The new economic colonialism of the Western world has as its underside violence and death. Cuadrado-Fernandez in “Irrationality and the monstrous in globalisation: opening spaces of solidarity in contemporary Anglophone poetry” explains it thus:

The project of western, instrumental and administrative rationality generates “a peculiar terror formation:” the state of exception, where death and massive killing is rationalised. The state of exception operates through the division of space in compartments where the rule of law is suspended and arbitrariness rules. The “prison-like” spaces of South African townships are examples of what Enzo Traverso defines as the culmination of a long process of dehumanizing and industrializing death, one of the original features of which was to integrate instrumental rationality with the productive and instrumental rationality of the modern Western world (the factory, the bureaucracy, the prison, the army). (p.112)

Cuadrado examines the poem “brotha saul” (p.26) and explains how “imagery appears as a metonymic collage of the South African social reality of street violence. [...] [T]he reader accesses the geographical mental space of South African violent streets” (2013, pp. 118-119).

lissen ras  
i write u so short  
as outside fire mounts up de road  
des a firebomb shattering  
brotha’s skull goes a-cracking  
while de blinking on/off blue light  
& de noising pierce of siren scream  
confuse de night (p.26)

The reality of South Africa is cumulatively that of acts of spectacular violence, which may be more easily noticed, in conjunction with the less visible trauma, that of slow death and slow violence. This is a realm ruled by necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003). To challenge necropolitics, which derives its power from spatial and categorical divisions, one needs to write a poetry which



challenges these divisions. Necropolitics involves spaces of living death; a poetics that challenges this must invoke spaces of effusive life, textual narrations which defy everyday definitions and refuse singular readings, and challenge the reader's assumptions daring the reader to consider alternative world orders and meaning formations. Notions of perception must be defied, as they are the ontological foundations upon which precarity-inducing world orders are constructed.

Motsapi strongly distrusts rationalism, and is firm in his rejection of the supremacy of the enlightenment and his embrace of spiritually influenced imagery. In "leaven" (p.72), in between the complex imagery the refrain is the repetitive, "let us pray to God". In "tariqa" (p.71), "my hands are finally red/ from the tremors of silence/ not fed enough respect". Words and argumentative discourse are distrusted – silence is seen as more revelatory. Throughout the book, all five senses are foregrounded, as opposed to the dominance of the visual in much twentieth century poetry, where the "seen" was perceived as the way to understand the real. Motsapi undermines the conventional sense of the "real", through his insistence on spiritual dimensions to life, his rejection of the purely rational, and his embrace of all senses whereby his "poetry constantly conflates visual, oral, olfactory, tactile and aural sensations in a frenzy of synaesthesia, and breaks down boundaries of liquid and solid" (Chrisman, 1996, p.34)

### **My talkative mirrors flower into foam**

Motsapi's ability to "conflate" and foreground the full diversity of senses, a strategic device ahead of its time, answers Rob Nixon's questions:

But what happens when we are unsighted, when what extends before us—in the space and time that we most deeply inhabit – remains invisible? How, indeed, are we to act ethically toward human and biotic communities that lie beyond our sensory ken? What then, in the fullest sense of the phrase, is the place of seeing in the world that we now

inhabit? What, moreover, is the place of the other senses? How do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible? (2011, pp.14-15)

Furthermore, this strategy leads to an embrace of a planetary consciousness. Visible in early poems such as “the man” (p.2), elements of this planetarity are visible up until the very final poem, “river robert” (p.81). Planetary consciousness enables the writer to reveal a whole array of oppressive structures and oppressive normativities, thereby:

linking questions of power and perspective, keeping front and centre the often latent, often invisible violence in the view. Who gets to see, and from where? When and how does such empowered seeing become normative? And what perspectives – not least those of the poor or women or the colonised – do hegemonic sight conventions of visibility obscure? (Nixon, 2011, p.15)

The imagery of the natural world in Motsapi’s poetry goes beyond simply being a form of symbolism for societal conditions of freedom or lack of freedom, but seeks to inform us of the role the environment plays in the human condition. The environment is often the very aspect that is deeply obscured in most political or socially conscious poetry, and until recently, the struggles of women and other groups were marginalised in many struggle narratives. The environment remains the most visually occluded part of many forms of struggle literature, with the natural world often only a backdrop to political struggle or used as symbols in poetic rhetoric without any definite attaching to the environment. There is a definite urge towards a form of “planetarity” that may be the strongest holistic response to socio-economic-politico induced precarity, as precarity gains its power and credence from the neo-capitalist ideology which divides, defines and categorises objects and substances, and creates rank orders of importance, simultaneously transforming the environment into a raw product meant for consumption and production. This has intense ramifications for the precarious individuals, as the steady destruction of the environment tends to marginalise the poor more than the well off, and the precarious are themselves absorbed as another raw resource of the environment. The same technique of absorbing the environment is applied to human populations, and just as the

environment is carved up into zones, human beings are carved up into settlements that are easy to govern and maintain power over through various techniques. In this way, the nature of power is heavily occluded, and a writer like Motsapi, by bringing to view the natural world and challenging the perceptions of the everyday, helps to resist precarity.

In the following stanza from the poem “moni” (p.51), many things are revealed. Ecological ramifications are subtly suggested, capitalism’s seductive call versus the need for a more spiritually centred life:

& so the new blackses arrive  
all scent and drape to their clamour  
head & heart the liquid odour  
of roads that defy oceans

The imagery breaks down the boundaries of liquid and solid, and creates a turbulent picture of contemporary society and the globalized economy whose “roads [...] defy oceans”.

Environmental destruction and social oppression through the legacy of mining is hinted at in “tariqa” (p.71); “the sulphurous palpitations/ grew ever demonic”. Sulphur connotes mining, the buried, the submerged, that which has been dug up, as well as it being a spectral smell. This features in a poem filled with images like “to add enough stir in their sugars”. Here the traditional order is reversed – what is important is the stir of sugar, not the spoonful – suggesting that Motsapi wishes us to look at the actual essence of something, as an action, as opposed to the substances it is made out of. We are also possibly warned of the many “roads/ that slink across the river” although they are not entirely condemned, as they have “bridges of ancient green/sprouting out of their eyes” suggesting that even in the chaos of capitalism, something organic may emerge, a form of life in “post-capitalism’s ruins” (2012), to rephrase Anna Loewenhaupt Tsing’s title.

Throughout the poems, the natural elements also serve as focal points of revolt against enforced identity and the precarity of the contemporary moment. Natural elements, such as earth, fire, and particularly water, are repeated. In “samaki” (p.75), water offers sustenance (both as a literal substance, and through its connotations of fluidity, healing, and the ability to move and adjust according to situations). Water as a substance is life giving, and in many cultures and beliefs has a great spiritual value. The wholeness and open minded welcoming of water in the poem is contrasted to the “fretting incompletions [...] lost pilgrims[...] amputated hand/shakes [...] quakes running out of the bone”(p.75).

The hospitality of nature and natural things, and the way in which the spiritual exists as a consequence of the natural, are key aspects in many of Motsapi’s poems, and a strong reaction against politically induced precarity. Water operates as a metaphor for a future where identity can be re-imagined and reformulated without being heavily defined by the trauma and pain of history, and also symbolises modes of interpretation and relationship that are not categorised by Western binaries. Water also enables cleansing, rebirth and is a place where life gathers.

Elsewhere in “samaki” (p.75) Motsapi writes “welcome to bird’s vocabulary”. In this line, the singing of birds is likened to vocabulary and foregrounded, suggesting a contrast to human language(s). The variety of life expressed here is inclusive and not exclusive, embracing otherness in all its finite and precarious beauty. In this spiritual dispensation, there is room for multiple identities, and there are no trite hierarchies. The almost paradisaal place of water is a place of inclusivity and offers a simulacrum of the universe and its pluralities of being. The potentially abstract is transformed into a new form and possibility of fluidity that transcends language and a dependence on the visible for knowledge: “while my talkative mirrors/ flower into foam” (“samaki”, p.75).

Motsapi continually looks to transcend preoccupations on the visual and the textual, instinctively perhaps understanding that oppression can be found in an overdependence on either of these. The visual at its most oppressive is dominated by the “spectacle and the spectacular”, the “hyper real”

and by advertising. The textual at its worst can be self-referential and leading to cliché, sloganeering and academic insiderness. To live as a fully existing human being requires an empathetic and open connection to reality and a relationship to existence using all the senses and aspects of being human. His religious attitude is decisively pantheist. Chrisman discusses his use of lone males:

as emblematic vehicles of spiritual and humanistic values, whose fate is to survive attempts at extermination; their irrepressibility is imaged in strikingly elemental terms:

so while the forests refuse to speak  
& his name cannot be found  
in the mouths of drums  
he remains a naked knot, a kneeling bleed  
in the dust (“duija”, p.60)

so they bled him  
to a smudge on the skyline

& as the last stab scuttles out  
his mangled roar hollers  
to its root in the foaming shore

profesea comes to pass

& the reckless waves return inward (“bo jili”, p.11)

(1996. p.62)

He portrays amongst these “lone males” humble characters who manage to transcend socio-politically induced precarity through embracing non-materialistic lifestyles. I believe symbolically, these “lone males” occupy a similar role in the poetics of Motsapi to the role that San Precario plays in the politics of precarity resistance. San Precario is a figurehead around

which resistance to precarity gathers, a welcoming symbol. The key difference is that San Precario is of no definite gender. However, the “lone males” of Motsapi’s poems are challenging individuals, who do not fit simply into contemporary masculinities, many of them defying the ethos and contemporary expectations of their time. Many of them border on feminist attitudes through their attitude. Motsapi also pays tribute to icons like Bob Marley and Marvin Gaye, whose music articulated social concerns, both musicians who were lost to the world in the 1980s – Marley to cancer, and Gaye shot by his own father. This foregrounds them as not only musicians, but victims of the precariousness of life and violence.

The male archetypes strongly challenge simple definitions of manhood, being described as idiosyncratic and often deeply flawed characters, aware of or face-to-face with their flaws. Much like San Precario, the individuals portrayed reject hierarchies, and fulfil the words of Elzenbaumer, who defines San Precario as “a creation of a precarious intelligence, a free and independent expression that does not refer to any party or union” (2014, n.pag). In “atoo” (p.10), Motsapi plays with words creating a challenging picture of a spiritual individual:

messem meekedly kneeling his bruise  
at the foot of the heal or hymn  
his scar or star breezing  
into rocky mists of Kilimanjaro  
skinned to a whited peni –  
  
tent, his contrited roar rises  
over the stern elefangs of atonement (p.30)

Bruises and scars and imperfections become part of the passage to atonement and redemption and transcendence. Scar and star are purposively matched, connecting the everyday wounding of a human being to the cosmic level of power. The meaning and connotations of penitent are played with, as well as concepts of masculinity and spiritual power. The dividing of penitent into

peni – tent bring to mind the words penis and tent, penis symbolising male phallic power and in religious histories tents being the residences of many religious figures in a majority of religions. It casts doubt over the alleged purity of these leaders and foregrounds their humanity and vulnerability as men, as well as their potential to sexualise power and the spiritual.

Though Motsapi gives an empathetic and nuanced critique of the type of individuals that features in a poem like “atooon” (p.10), he is critical towards established religions that follow or impose mainstream doctrines, with Chrismann noting:

Neither the hierarchies of [Christian] messianism nor the alleged anaesthetic mysticism of Eastern religions is found capable of emancipatory energy, while historical Islam is represented as a murderous invasion by “Arab hordes”. (Chrismann, 1996, p.34)

### **The face**

Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004) discusses the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, acknowledging the shared vulnerability and entanglement of human lives. In many of the first poems in *earthstepper*, Motsapi recognises the humanity of individual human beings. These individuals are described with a sense of grace and an acknowledgement of their frailty and precarity. He lyrically expresses a yearning to know them, and an embrace of the relationality between things, combined with a realisation that “knowing” is a process hard to define. “tenda” (p.3) and “dawn” (p.9) do this effectively. “tenda” astutely references the motif of journeying, and suggests that pilgrimages and journeys and even artistic journeys of expression and discovery are meaningless if they do not end with an empathetic encounter with the “other” of the human face; “i will always remember you/ and your face that is the end of all roads/ poetry will never travel” (p.3).

Other figures are represented in different ways. In “dreams of sun and wood” (p.54), a messianic figure is portrayed, whose wounding “wd lead/ to the sun”, and is presented as a very human figure, whose precariousness is prefigured by “frail fiery skele/ tone in the thunder/ of

injunctions to light/supplications to the Father”. His precariousness is juxtaposed to his passion “fiery”, a passion that is one of the greatest sources of religious strength. Skeleton is emphasised by its division into two lines and its misspelling, highlighting the sound effects and the word “tone”, telling us that the spiritual is based and starts its existence in the tone of the physical.

“brotha moses” (p.55) and “the house” (p.57) focus on humble individuals with an awareness and embrace of life’s precariousness and finiteness. Both poems reference walls, and they capture freedom through engaging directly with life’s precarity, embracing vulnerability and risk in a display of spiritual triumph.

“dawn” (p.9), with its frequent invocation of “face”, brings keenly to mind Emmanuel Levinas’s concept of “the face”, as explained by Butler (2004). The seemingly infinite and joyful possibilities of “the other” are captured compactly in:

i see you  
and again I don’t see you  
often I lose myself  
only to be found in you

What is also revealed in the poem is the difficulty of defining or categorising the other:

again I want to see you  
so in the end you are not there  
and you are there

This acceptance of the impossibility of knowing the other, as well as an acceptance of the boundarilessness of being, leads to ecstatic revelation:



to lose yourself in distances  
so in the end you attain immensity yourself –  
this crowds into my dreams

Unconditional acceptance and embrace of the “other” leads to a further understanding of what it means to be human. The ontology of knowing is based on an ethical and emotionally engaged involvement with “the other”. The poem uses the form of a love poem addressed to a subject of affection or esteem. The poem reverses processes of coloniality by having its narrator being influenced by the other. If the poem is written within the framework of a traditional address from a man to a woman, then it represents a demasculisation of power. The jungle is also invoked; “i’m closing in sister/ to lose oneself in the trackless jungles of the heart/ like this” (dawn, p.9) a far cry from the frequent depictions in literature of the jungle as a place of wilderness, exoticism and danger. Here it becomes a zone of spiritual enlightenment and empathetic connection to life.

All these poems wrestle with the difficulty of representation. “tenda” (p.3) mentions that the figure of praise is like “all the mountains I have never embraced”. The figure in “the house” is faintly drawn, and remains resistant to easy interpretation.

### **The journey ends; not**

Chrisman ends her detailed review by discussing the poems “rasula” (p.77) and “river robert” (p.81), noting the “certitude” (p.36) of “rasula”.

we have arrived  
& the spirits of the land  
hymn us inwards over our fragmentations

She then compares it to the “unfinished and divided nature of a regenerative condition” (p.36) in “river robert” (p.81). Meyer discusses the surreal imagery, which seemingly depicts:

a poetic persona who does not so much have his own identity as act as a reflection and a vessel for other systems of meaning. Thus, her or his eyes are seen to hold ‘cracked churchbells’, ‘rivers & welcomes’, ‘flickers & fades’. Similarly, the speaker’s memory spills over with ‘paths & anointings’ while her or his mouth is filled with ‘ripe infant suns’ and ‘seven legs for the dancing river & the clement abyss’. On the literal level, no human subject could represent or resemble this array of physical objects, natural forces and emotional states. The persona becomes a receptacle for the material and spiritual aura of its surrounds, which has the effect of emptying out personal identity. [...] [T]he notion of ‘seven legs’ at the brink of an abyss is entirely obtuse and its meaning cannot be unveiled. One might guess that the speaker is a magical creature with multiple limbs. The effect of this startling imagery is to de-humanise and de-individualise a persona who refuses to take on a one-dimensional identity. Meaning is never conveyed in a commonsensical fashion and the identity of the persona and his or her surrounds remains veiled in silence. This speaker is defined by ‘hintentions’. The neologism clearly expresses that the poem’s content and intent will only be known through ‘hint’ and gesture. (2017, p.70)

Motsapi refuses to represent identity in simple terms. He is able to almost magically draw together through language the existence of wounds/discord and the potency of creation within a single poem, using language as an answer to “the traces of demiurgic surgery” (Mbembe, 2003) within the South African body politic. Surreal images give him the ability to answer and transform existence, reactualising the everyday, in ways formal rationalism would be unable to. To transcend the wounding caused by socio-political induced precarity requires a transcending of the patterns of discourse. Shamanic and trans-human/non-human entities play a role in overcoming the world of capitalism and its oppression, capitalism whose world views are designed with a focus on the individual. The Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” is refuted by the

magical persona which transcends patterns of the rational, who cannot be defined by any simple sentence, but defies expectation.

“river robert” (p.81) is simultaneously a poem that references history while also observing strongly the present and its futures, which have potential to be revitalisations or new “lost futures” (Fisher, 2013). The poet is simultaneously “at home” and yet in his imagery connotes a sense of displacement. The “lungs are full” (p.81), which is a hopeful image in a world of precarious breath, suggesting the strength and spiritual reserves to resist and revolt against precarity.

“river robert” (p.81) captures a parallax view, where two futures are simultaneously unfolding. As mentioned in the Introduction, past, present and future are not concepts divided by a linear notion of time; rather, they are concepts that fold into each other and at times occur simultaneously. The spectral presence of the past is present in the contemporary moment, while the active potential of the word starts to bring the future to its unexpected birth and existence. The word is liberatory, incandescent, incantatory, magic almost, where “talkative mirrors/ flower into foam” (“samaki”, p.75), and everywhere blurring the senses and challenging the oppressive meanings of the present moment and its weight of cruel optimism. Not finding salvation in neo-liberal ethos and capitalism, the poet is equally sceptical of a naïve pan-Africanism or simple revolutionary sentiment or easy religious or ideological solutions. Motsapi is aware that capitalism is more than a simple economic system, but is an ideologically complex world view which exists in various forms. But what the poet reveals is the power of language to start altering the frames of being.

If precarity is a ghost, a presage, an absence, or a void, maybe the way to break its spell is by *reactualising* the present, by giving substance to the “here and now”. (Lorusso, 2018, n.pag)

Motsapi hints at the potentially hopeful symbolism of rainbows; “a sole rainbow pillar/ protrudes from the earth, full/ of promise and solace”. However, Motsapi’s rainbow avoids being abstract or a cliché, as it is grounded – it is foregrounded as something that “protrudes” from the earth. The poem is also challenging for many readers who are hoping to find answers. Far from giving answers, the poet writes:

as we learn the painful lessons of love  
as we learn to respect the night's sovereignty  
and the slow stern wisdom of the desert  
we bless the mysteries and the silence

Motsapi is sceptical about the power of words or written statements as answers to give precarious beings peace and a sense of humanity. Rather, silence is prescribed as being a source of power, as a source from which knowledge comes. This challenges not only the ethos of the 1990s, but also strongly rejects the contemporary social media ethos, where there is an overload of words and statements and a bombardment of hashtags. One feels the poet almost prophetically sensed this oncoming world and chose to withdraw himself from the contemporary moment and the false illusions of relevance.

Motsapi’s only volume of poetry definitely does not give the reader easy solutions. Nevertheless, it does one very important thing; it shows that the solutions are rooted within a re-perception and remoulding of the everyday. By creating awareness of the occluded spaces, and by articulating them, and by defying the categorisations and binaries of neo-liberalism, Motsapi shows the power of language to build resistance to the oppressive structures of the contemporary and to socio-politically induced precarity. The strongest part of his work is that he does not resist through clichés or simplistic ideas or even through the abstract dominance of ideas and absolutes, but produces a body of work that challenges even the notions of self, society and the primacy of ideas, and expresses a humanity that is deeply connected to nature and the universe, flawed and yet intensely spiritual. His approach embraces the dictum of Marcus Steinweg, “Art

is the risk to commit oneself to a motion that opens the subject to the *Nicht-Sinn* (non-signification)” (Steinweg, Geometries of indeterminacy, 2013, n.pag).

This evokes a humanity that cannot be represented through categorisation or identity politics, or viewed through a materialistic lens, but a humanity that is multi-faceted and embraces the precariousness of being while resisting induced precarity in language that is fractured, varied and cutting, “the rent language of razors” (“soro”, p.7). The wounding and fragmentation in Motsapi’s poetry embraces the precariousness and unknowability of being. It replaces an easy quest for meaning with a willingness to embrace and explore the uncertainties and indeterminacies of reality with a courageous existentialism.

Despite his own withdrawal from the world of literature, the writing Motsapi leaves us does not flee from literary possibilities. Rather, it optimistically configures new ways of seeing and witnessing, and shows a pathway for writers and critics to follow, enabling representations of precarity while also invoking that other world that becomes possible through language. To the writers who have followed in his footsteps, *earthstepper* is an exciting and challenging work which dares its readers to reimagine the contemporary moment. It challenges the limitations placed upon the imagination, and in “the infinite bifurcations” (Berardi, 2010, p.1) of this contemporary moment urges us to reconsider the power of language for liberation. Motsapi’s aesthetic ontology is not just an act of creative and linguistically expressive subversion offering spontaneous rebellion, but breaks open new ground through its capacity for human experiencing and creative notions of the human-political self.

## Chapter 3.

### Poets are dreamers: representations of precarity in selected poems of Angifi Dladla

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse and discuss representations of precarity in selected poems of Angifi Dladla, showing the way in which his poetry both reveals precarity and reacts effectively against it. I start by introducing Angifi Dladla, his writings and his background. I take a look at some of his key techniques and influences. I then discuss and analyse representations of precarity in selected poems from his 2004 book, *the girl who then feared to sleep*.

The publication of this first collection of poetry came after an extensive background in community theatre and writing (Meyer, 2017). In the aftermath of 1994, Dladla's poetry points poignantly to the precarity of the many forgotten figures of history, neglected ideas and thought patterns, and foregrounds the ordinary and human existences that have been truncated or destabilised by trauma and violence. His poetry does not, however, simply reveal the surface of things, but consists of "a sense of depth" (Penfold, 2013, p.230), and the poet "believes in the healing power of literature and feels "poetry demands a search for the essence of things" " (p.230). His poetic voice is distinctive. The poems in *the girl who then feared to sleep* may include "poems written from the perspective of a first person lyric 'I' but [...] this is not a voice that relishes in private reflection or the confession of personal emotion" (Meyer, 2017, p.158). The poet focuses more on connecting the self to the outer world and making piercing objective observations about the nature of society, and thereby escaping "the pitfalls of individualism in South Africa's post-millennial environ" (p.158). Meyer explains his rejection of individualism:

In political terms, one might read Dladla's reticence to inhabit a personal voice as a response to the tainted profile of black individuality in a post-apartheid era that has seen an elite profit at the expense of national good. (2017, p.158)

His poems came to the attention of the literary public at a similar period to the other writers covered in this dissertation, and like them, his work conveys evocatively the nature of precarity and life's precariousness. He is able to do this through poetry that is ideologically radical and aesthetically radical, following his own dictum in the poem "the building, the way and the weapon".

the building you occupy, belonged to the enemy  
that's where he wrote tragedies and farces for our people.  
his thought forms have formed you into his twin.

the weapon you inherited, carries his impressions  
like a dog used to sodomy, always it will  
drive you to inhuman action

the way you are, is the way he was  
growing blindly without shame;  
ignoring the rumbling under his feet (p.79)

This poem is reminiscent of the Biblical saying of Jesus from Mark 2:22: "no new wine can be kept in old wine skins". This saying is relevant to any society trying to recreate itself out of the trauma, slow violence and ruins of post-capitalism. The ideological edifice of this society needs to be reconstructed, its language and its way of viewing society, its entire ontology, or else it replicates violence in numerous forms and categories. This poem warns writers against viewing political activism in poetry as being something that merely involves the mentioning of political causes or the telling of the narratives of the precarious. These stories need to be told in a way that

actually reveals the occluded sights and the roots of every injustice, and using the liberatory potentials of form and language usage. Previous aesthetic strategies are linked heavily to the capitalistic structures and strategies of categorisation, materialism, the one-sided focus on the individual, and are likened to sodomy, portrayed as exploitative as opposed to liberatory. The illusion of growth fostered by capitalism, where growth is equated with productivity, is revealed to be at the cost of the loss of awareness for the actuality of things on the ground, and of the environment. It involves the individual “ignoring the rumbling under his feet”. The rumbling is the inevitable collapse of security for the precarious, symbolised by the later falling tower in “grannys last lectures; on hell” (p.73) where:

hear! echoing a storied –  
building, heroes, child  
of my child, implode.  
but dust, oh child  
of my child, explodes  
for all the world to see...

Dladla uses a variety of techniques, including the key techniques of foregrounding and defamiliarisation.

Foregrounding is the opposite of automatisisation, that is, the deautomatisation of an act; the more an act is automatised, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. Objectively speaking: automatisisation schematises an event; foregrounding means the violation of the scheme. (Mukarovsky, 1964, p.19)

Poets who use foregrounding and defamiliarisation effectively are able to draw the reader’s attention to unnoticed or unseen details in the everyday. Dladla foregrounds the body and bodily



experience, but not in a materialistic way, instead offering an analysis and exposition that challenges conventional praxis, and renders the spiritual, emotional and creative aspects of human existence, simultaneously placing a heavy focus on the vulnerability of bodies. These bodies are also described through their dislocation, whether a forceful dislocation or trauma caused by their experiences, or the writer's ability to dislocate limiting liminalities of the self and create a greater awareness of the possibilities of human experience and non-normative bodies. He also foregrounds the violence of the everyday.

In "peace initiatives" (p.45), a disco scene is described in a way that captures a sense of nightmare:

swift.  
nightmare things  
pounce here  
and melt there  
as whirling rays  
and crystals.  
hi-tech hell of peace... (p.45)

Clearly, light is not to be simply trusted. Spectacles hide the monstrous reality of things. The poem works on breathless line units. The disco lights are revealed as solid and yet not solid; like nightmare substances, they "pounce here/ and melt there" showing a lack of consistency. The poem is followed by a description of parachutists:

heavenly.  
nightmare things  
in white feathers  
of doves hover (p.45)

This poem challenges the cosmology of western belief systems, where white feathers and doves are associated with peace, purity, and positive things. Here however, these white feathered things on closer examination are seen to be wings connected by “the cords of spiders” that are “peace capsules of hell”. The parachutes are symbolic of a false state of peace, where society is actually in a state of war due to the precarious lives of citizens, but on the surface and in the spectacular, peace and liberty are falsely vocalised. Dladla penetrates and uncovers “the political clichés and media portrayals of new utopian success” (Sole, 2003, p.227).

### **Revealing the intangible**

call me between your tears and eyes;  
i'm the shadow, i won't drown.  
draw me between your pain and faith;  
i'm the shadow that leads.  
will me within your heart of hearts;  
i'm the energy that's divine.  
hug me with the arm of your heart;  
i'm reality, i am love ...  
listen to the silence in silence –  
the dream materialising ... (“song of a fertility doll”, p.11)

The above piece which is opening poem of *the girl who then feared to sleep* (2001) has been described by Penfold as:

[A]n expression of the innate power within all humans as individuals that remains with them throughout life's journey and drives emotions: “i'm the shadow, I won't drown [...]

i'm the shadow that leads". Possibly read as an allusion to Psalm 23, the shadow acts as a reassuring, safe presence and also drives connotations of hope and life: there is only shadow where there is light. Furthermore, the unspectacular nature of this essence, its quietness, is reinforced by the sibilance in the superlative phrase "silence of silence" whilst the use of ellipses in ending the poem underscores its indistinguishable quality. Occurring at the start of the collection when images of fertility are conjured, Dladla returns to this essence in the collection's final utterance. When evoking the finality of death in 'song of the aged' the gaze is turned inward to that inexhausted light, "but a bright star i hear far, far... / within". (Penfold, 2013, p.230)

Dladla encompasses two poles of precarity in the beginning and ending poem – "the fertility doll" representing birth and the beginning of life, and the "song of the aged" representing approaching death or also, potentially rebirth. Both the unborn/newly born and the aged are vulnerable groups. But within these vulnerable groups, he captures a sense of possibility.

The early poems in the book swiftly establish key themes: the power of the seemingly intangible, the occluded, and the spectral. They focus on personal relationships and personal experiences, leading later to the intense socio-political analysis and historical scrutinising of the later poems. "exposure" (p.12) deals with the poet encountering the ghost of his stepfather. When he tells his wife in the morning, she chuckles and says "poets are dreamers" an ambiguous line which could be positive or negative: positive in the sense that it suggests poets have the power to see deeper into the everyday and visualise things, and in a negative sense, in the context of the chuckle from the wife which precedes the quote, suggesting there will be disbelief from others about the powers of the poet to see into reality and its permutations. In "exposure", face is given to the spiritual world, as well as succeeding in being an acknowledgement of the spectral power of past lives through their absence/presence influencing the strata of the present. The sub-audible thrum of the spectral is acknowledged. The ghost is the representation of the past, demanding and unapologetically expectant. Dladla is able to acknowledge the spectral without being overpowered by it, and certainly does not deny it or reduce it to the category of non-being.

“the intangible” (p.14) deals with the spiritual beliefs of people in its two stanzas drawing a quick picture of the neighbourhood, evoking imagery of water through “the reedy swamp/ of katlehong/ and vosloorus” and building up to the fantastic and complex image of:

holy men and women  
in blue or white  
taking rhetorical dives and blobs  
in the watery realm  
in search of a vocal mirage  
which becomes an echo  
the nearer they advance

These lines cast scepticism on their religion, suggesting that it is an echo of their own desires and rhetoric. The closer they approach the intangible object or inexpressible void of their desire, the more it is revealed as simply an echo, “a vocal mirage”.

In “dreaming” (p.17) the poet has a nightmare vision of a place that turns into a “field of red butchery [...]. a red swamp” and where he writes “nothing I saw but the bloodied shoes and/ shreds of flesh on the razor fence”. Concerned, he goes to the sangoma, who reassures him that he is growing. He ironically replies to the sangoma the same reply his wife gave in an earlier poem, and tells the sangoma she is dreaming. However, as he walks out, he can’t hear birdsong, but hears the “voice of my sangoma/ ‘you are growing, you are growing...’ ”. This remarkable poem suggests that the poet’s growth leads to him being able to see the true nature of things around him and realise that the world is violent. He is no longer distracted by the false promises or alluring songs of the post-democratic dream, represented by bird song. It is this ability now to see into the true nature of things that permeates the majority of the following poems in the book. The poet moves to a heavy socio-political focus, through his poems which study and portray

human precariousness and the effects of precarity on everyday individuals. Dladla is aware of the power of writing to “challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and brings into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration” (Nixon, 2011, p.15). Furthermore:

In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanising drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. [...]. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (Nixon, 2011, p.15)

Witnessing means more than just invoking or describing the surface of the real; it means being able to witness even to the “sights unseen”, revealing the unapparent, and to “challenge perceptual habits”. Angifi Dladla in *the girl who then feared to sleep* (2004) is able to witness in this manner. In an age dominated by images of spectacular violence and disaster, emotional images that are easily transmitted by the visual means of mass media, Dladla answers through his aesthetic strategies the following questions:

[H]ow can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (Nixon, 2011, p.3)

In “the stubborn death (to the grandchildren of this youth)” (p.15) and “confession” (p.16) Dladla foregrounds the precarious existences of forgotten soldiers and individuals who are still weighed

down by the long suffering burden of past traumas. They are figures described in terms that invoke both life and death. The grandfather in the first poem can be heard by his grandchildren to “scream and plead for death” reliving past traumas. He “hears the unheard –/ the screaming flames;/ the groaning smoke”; he “feels the unfelt –/ his dancing self/ around screams and groans”; he “sees the unseen –/ the wriggling bodies/ with bellies distending/ into gargantuan black bubbles/ which just erupt”; he “smells the unsmelt –/ the charcoal of faeces/ protruding like stumpy tails”. The poem ends with an alarming image; “do you know he was a match –/ stick, he was!” which suggests he was also burned. There is even a case that could be made that he is actually not alive, that the grandchildren actually hear his spectral cries reaching them; or if he is alive, he is literally one of the living dead, heavily damaged by trauma.

In “confession” (p.16), a mysterious “hairy man” shuffles and limps towards a “faith healer”.

torn, muddy and helpless  
as if fished out  
from the phlegmside  
of a volcano, he  
stretched his feeble arm  
crying or praying  
for forgiveness:  
“i was just a soldier”  
his quondam chest  
burst into catacombs...

The poem does not state whom or what he was fighting for, but the poem foregrounds the violence which has marked and scarred his life and still dismembers him, even in times of peace. It captures a cumulative and slow violence.

The section of the book subtitled “the sacrifice” allows apprehension, bringing together perception, emotion and action. The first poem in that section, entitled “deception” (p.21) gets straight to the point. While orators speak fine words, “down here – protracted/ pain and suffering”.

“impression” (p.22) is symbolic, both for its content and title, because much of Dladla’s poetry is a critique of the spectacle and the spectacular, and all the false paraphernalia of post-Fordist capitalism and the global system. It takes an “impression”, and goes deeper.

off i flinched  
drained  
dizzy and dazed.  
behind; outsize  
black wound  
in the earth  
where the tyre has nailed him.  
human gravy in the sun...

The poem moves through a rapid series of “impressions”, evocative brief descriptions of an “I” that flinches and is “drained/ dizzy and dazed”. Then an “outsize (a surprising way of describing something, as opposed to oversized) black wound” is described, as being the impression of where a “tyre has nailed him”. The poem thus moves rapidly between an “I” that narrates, and another person who is “nailed” (an ironic evocation of crucifixion), that is notable by his silence and erasure.

Dladla’s poetry strongly foregrounds necropolitics (Mbembe and Meintjes, 2003) and articulates slow death (Berlant, 2011). Not only does the victim die, but even in death itself, suffering is partly postponed, partly suspended in slow motion. Individuals are portrayed “whose bodily

integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close” (Mbembe, 2003, p.35). The severing is not simply a literal severing of body parts, but a suspension of hope and life for everyday people, who are symbolized by the “black wound” crushed by the traffic of capitalism. And even in death, the body is described as “human gravy”, suggesting that in death, the body can be consumed in various ways, as spectacle, as the vector of an aggrieved cause, as tonight’s brief news headlines, all quickly forgotten.

Media will exploit death, using sensational images and violence as the selling point of newspapers, without going in depth into issues once the human gravy has been consumed, and only an absence is left, leading us to another key poem, “vacancy” (p.33).

red  
shoe on the railway  
licks shuddering wounds, and  
wails like a cheated  
coffin

Red is foregrounded in the poem, in contrast to a world where blood is easily swept away from the headlines, and death and violence euphemised or made into meaningless spectacles. The shoe may be literally a red shoe, with red poignantly representing the life blood of a person, or the shoe may be red from the blood of the person killed on the railway.

In capitalist parlance, vacancy is a key word. It can stand for a position that needs to be occupied in a company or corporation. Vacancy is also what lies behind the spectacle. This vacancy can be a void with various possibilities; it may be a void of potential resurgency and creative reaction, as Simphiwe Dana suggests in “Tribe” from her 2004 album *Zandisile*, “the void will overflow”; or it could be a zone of continually deferred promises, suspended hopes, and empty dreams. In the poem “vacancy”, it could also be the absence of a person, where he/she should have been



existing. Someone is killed on the train lines; whether the death is caused by suicide, accident or murder is uncertain, but the crucial fact is that their death has occurred there. This is poignant considering that the trains used to take men to the mines and away from their families, leaving a vacancy in their homes while filling a vacancy in the mines. Capitalism creates vacancies in areas where it takes from in order to fill vacancies elsewhere. Capitalism exploits the environment in order to obtain resources to fuel economic growth but as a consequence leads to socio-environmental-economic precarity. Capitalism divides people up to make systems easier to manage and breaks up families. For every void that capitalism tries to fill with its actions and processes, another void is created elsewhere. The train is symbolic of a ride to hopeful prosperity. Mixing two key terms from two poems: human gravy, and the train; we see the price for capitalism's gravy train. The gravy is made out of humans, exploited and precaritized people who leave a vacancy, a spectral void.

“so turned a taxi” (p.32) mixes the mythical with the everyday to foreground the violent event:

so turned a taxi  
into a lightning bird  
warming up  
but whirled in volume flames  
for failing to fly.

we would later encounter  
an unidentified object;  
fused iron and bones.

“for failing to fly” does not only describe the taxi and its accident, but invokes the process of capitalism, which encourages speed, rapid progress, and taking shortcuts. When this mindset and its policies go wrong, it leaves a society of “fused iron and bones”. Dladla is able to give a highly

original and evocative description of an accident while also pointedly critiquing society. This description brings to mind Achille Mbembe's words on massacres:

In the case of massacres in particular, lifeless bodies are quickly reduced to the status of simple skeletons. Their morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor. In the case of the Rwandan genocide – in which a number of skeletons were at least preserved in a visible state, if not exhumed – what is striking is the tension between the petrification of the bones and their strange coolness on one hand, and on the other, their stubborn will to mean, to signify something. (2003, p.35)

Massacres are not simply spectacular catastrophic events in certain countries, but the constant brutalisation of existence under the everyday violence of capitalism. The “fused iron and bones” in Dladla's poem testify to the violence of capitalism. In “tomorrow” (p.40) Dladla litanises a variety of forms of violence and oppression that escape the media's glance:

i'll tell about people owning more than one palace  
while small men live or die in the parks, pavements and holes

Dladla lists a series of injustices, and at one stage uses a repetitive “I'll tell about the real funder...” to structure a list of key injustices perpetrated by powerful hegemonies, locally and overseas. The poem keenly exposes injustice and inequality.

The third section of the book, “exhibits”, follows on from the recognition of the suffering and losses that human bodies experience (sacrifice) and looks at a variety of “exhibits”. This again builds on the theme of spectacle, as many of these exhibits act in spectacular though questionable ways; others are objects revealed as either superficial or even dangerous; or these are spectacles

of human precariousness at the hands of more powerful forces, which can subjugate beauty and individuality mercilessly.

In “peace initiatives (night shift) and (day shift)” (p.45), as discussed earlier in this chapter, Dladla takes the everyday and reveals terror and dissonance; the ordinariness of partying is envisioned into something hellish and the arrival of parachutists diving from the sky foregrounds the appearance of nightmares within the day.

Everyday symbols of globalised society and consumerism and liberal democracy are frequently destabilised and revealed as the outer edges of the darkness and precarity of existence. The line between happiness and disaster is precarious, liable to puncture like the skin of a balloon, a symbol resonant with fragility and unpredictable signification, referred to in the poem entitled “balloons” (p.55).

balloons  
are toys to these cherubic children  
in the glittering morning  
on the pavement

mucous hands of pastime,  
silvery faces of slime  
curse my loving wife  
roundly

little legs of children – needles  
of sewing machines,  
scuttled...

Balloons, symbols of childhood and parties in the contemporary global ethos, are depicted in the poem as possessing a messy physicality, with insides that are sustained by vacuous air. Balloons can symbolise organs and the human capacity to hold breath, breath by connotation being a fragile quality, held only in place by the skin. The poem also points to the vacuousness of contemporary society, as something easily punctured, something built on human organs and organisms for its organisation, but messy. Food and the consumable are foregrounded in the poem. They are “messy like mangoes”, more than simply a great sound effect, but a heavy invocation of the carnality of society, as mangoes are extremely fleshy fruit, which make the eater messy and more complicit in the eating of them.

at the malls,  
eastgate, westgate,  
northgate, southgate, and  
all the gates,  
even the imposing ones

This poem titled “from sunrise” (p.44) by Angifi Dladla powerfully reimagines the meaning of a mall, removing it from its everyday perception as a modern day carnival, to something where words like ‘gates’, “bunkers” and “phantasmagoria” are foregrounded. He describes “mazy bunkers/ where escalators show/ phantasmagoria”, a darker vision of malldom. He reveals how consumer society essentially animalises precarious individuals by economic division, with references to the oppressed, who “with their paws/ carry blood and/ curses”. While it must be noted that this poem featured in a book published in 2004, and malls in general feature now a more inclusive set of consumers, what has not changed for many is the reality in the second stanza. A visit to a mall will often end in a return to a more sober reality. In addition, the spectacle of the mall is the superficial cover of the slow violence and economic precarity that is involved in sustaining capitalist society. The mall is essentially the temple of contemporary society, a holy place which implicitly denies the suffering of outside and sustains cruel optimism.

The naming of these poems as “exhibits” suggests the building up of a case by the poet that the actual state of society is a state of war. The festivities and spectacles and malls offering false promises of plenty serve only to obfuscate the true nature of society. For those living in precarity, life is a war zone, the everyday is resonant with slow death, slow violence, and their bodies are on siege in various forms.

Debord defines spectacle as “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord, 2012, p.12). As such, it is through the power of a spectacle that meanings are transferred between people in a society. Dladla in his poems works to disorientate readers from the everyday schematising of these spectacles, to focus more clearly by foregrounding dissonant features within these spectacles, revealing the nature of power and precarity in the everyday.

The process of death and levelling occur frequently throughout the poems. In “granny’s last lectures: on hell” (p.73), the reader was made alert to the collapse of a building and the reality of imploding dust. This building is noticed as a result of its spectacular collapse. It is often a challenge for people to perceive slow violence in its many forms and micro-social manifestations. Nixon laments how:

Efforts to make forms of slow violence more urgently visible suffered a setback in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, which reinforced a spectacular, immediately sensational, and instantly hyper-visible image of what constitutes a violent threat. The fiery spectacle of the collapsing towers was burned into the national psyche as the definitive image of violence, setting back by years attempts to rally public sentiment against climate change, a threat that is incremental, exponential, and far less sensorially visible. (Nixon, p.13)

Dladla on the contrary foregrounds the minute particulars of the everyday violence; the towers explode in “dust for all to see”. The key event is not the collapse: but the revelation of the dust that makes up the towers. It is in fact the revelation of the previously unseen and the seemingly immaterial that is arguably the revelation; that within the body of the building, within the quotidian grains of dust there lies a deeper truth.

The poem purposely blurs lines between buildings and heroes, as both become iconic presences whose stable presence often serves to act as a mediator not of liberation and creativity, but control. The poem compares heroes to a collapsing building, while simultaneously creating awareness that the building that is described collapsing seems to have another life and symbolism of its own, away from that of heroes. The tall storied building stands for hierarchies and hegemonies of power, a building both storied in height and arguably storied in the marginalised truths behind its rise to power. The implosion of the building and its shattering into dust is a levelling of life and reveals the absence/presence of death. It also can lead ironically to a possible situation where a new building could be created, much as is urged in “the building, the weapon and the way” (p.79).

Dladla’s poems show a world where wrongs might not be restituted, but they are always eventually punished, and those who do evil suffer consequences in various ways. They are not dehumanised or caricatured either, but revealed as intensely human, such as the defeated Koekemoer, in “a voice white as a ghost” (p.28) who confesses his defeat at the hands of toddlers, women and witchdoctors:

you ramokonopi toddlers, triers of catapults and squirt guns on us  
you phola park women, snatchers of our helmets for chamberpots,  
you kathorus witchdoctors, cutters of our testicles for self-santification,  
you katlehong fowls, playing hyeanas to the dogs over us  
yerrr... who told you we are black meat, who told you, eh?

i am koekemoer veteran of angola  
katlehong peace maker by day  
these are my hardened men, boers of cuito cuanavale

It is interesting also to observe the relevance of Koekemoer's defeat by women, toddlers, witchdoctors and fowls. This essentially overturns the Western/Calvinist sense of hierarchy that informed apartheid thinking, with white maleness at the top of a pyramid, followed by white women, then other races, then animals, as well as the overturning of ideology and oppression based on claims of reason and science.

What is remarkable as well about the poem is the degree to which it gives a "face" to Koekemoer and his fellow veterans. In the poem, Koekemoer confesses to his defeat, along with his fellow veterans. It is a strong imaginative achievement by Dladla, to the extent which he is able to make hardened oppressors the focus of the poem, and humanise them in the process, reminiscent of the words of Judith Butler near the end of *Precarious Life* (2004):

The face of the Other comes to me from outside, and interrupts that narcissistic circuit. The face of the Other calls me out of narcissism towards something finally more important. Levinas writes:

The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill. I can wish. And yet this power is quite the contrary of power. The triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill realises itself, the other has escaped me.... I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered his face. The temptation of total negation.... This is the presence of the face. To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse. (p.138)

Dladla reveals the “face” and human vulnerability of someone like Koekemoer and transcends thoughts of vengeance. Koekemoer and his men are defeated, and bodies are foregrounded – their defeat results in their commander in chief coming to fetch “their remains”. Fetch is the unsaid but implied action, twinning this poem with the poem on the very next page, “fetching” (p.29). This is not unexpected considering that many of the poems in the volume were initially written as sequences.

The being “unable to kill” is also a metaphor for refusing to deny reality in its various permutations. It is why Dladla is open to different manifestations of experience. He perceives the “face” of the “other” through open-minded perception, refusing to kill its essence by denying its existence. This is the core of all his relationships in the poems. Metaphorically, he does not and cannot kill the ghost of the step father in the earlier poem “exposure” as to kill it, would be to negate the essence of human relationships.

Dladla’s poem “how close we are” (p.71) approaches its subject with satirical intent. It foregrounds division and retarded relationships in a comical way. It portrays life in the suburbs; people detached from each other’s existence. What is fascinating is that two key words are not mentioned: walls and fences, even though the implication is that this is a heavily walled and fenced world that he is describing. This is not accidental; it serves to foreground the way in which fences and walls, far from being seen as extraordinary or unusual, have actually become part of the daily unrecognised background of suburban life, so taken for granted that they are not really seen. However, Dladla testifies to their effects: neighbours cannot hear neighbours dance, but can “hear birdsong”, children don’t play in the street, but isolate themselves in “English bedrooms”. This foregrounds the fact that what we take for granted in the structure of a house, is actually more of a Western concept, with other cultures having different ways of dividing or not dividing a house up. The Western house reflects capitalism, with clearly demarcated zones for production, communication, leisure, and rest. Neighbours here do not see all children of the community as their own children, but are “our own graves”. The poem ends with the poet reciting a poem at a function where members of the Harambee-Masakhane community attend. He experiences a sense of solidarity and community, stronger than in his permanent community,



from this temporary community. By contrast, the suburb with its ideology of division and enforced spatialisation is a form of psychological denial that Nixon discusses:

Neoliberalism's proliferating walls concretise a short-term psychology of denial: the delusion that we can survive long term in a world whose resources are increasingly unshared. The wall, read in terms of neoliberalism and environmental slow violence, materialises temporal as well as spatial denial through a literal concretising of out of sight out of mind. (2011, p.20)

In "images from mam yang-chaza's tavern" (pp.50-54), and "in this world" (pp.75-76), Dladla takes aim at superficiality of the society of spectacle and global culture:

it looks innocent  
like the fire of the firefly,  
this bottle  
whose spirit now  
plays on the organ,  
ah, the spirit,  
combustible and so serendipitous,  
plays on!

The spectacle is engaged; it "looks innocent". The poet then draws it in its fullness. It is a bottle he describes, and not only its physical contours, but its consequences. It is not painted as something limp and materialistic. It is an alcoholic spirit, which "plays on the organ". Which organ is implied is left ambiguous; perhaps the human organs which are influenced by the spirit of alcohol, or music that is influenced (a keyboard organ). What is also incredible about this portrait is that it does not simply demonise alcohol; rather it draws a descriptive and evocative portrait, following the classic writer's dictum, to describe before prescribing.

In the following two stanzas, the bottle continues to receive ironic praises, with the poem then shifting to several stanzas portraying the people dancing at the tavern. Sensual dancing and kissing is also described, overladen with aspects of capitalist exchange, where “fans toss money into the circle” where the dancer dances. The poem ends with what appears to be a description of a man arriving back home just before dawn and trying to kiss his spouse:

from the tavern, he brings kisses –  
fresh offensive of fummy breath  
before dawn. for this,  
a gasmask she wears.

such act he condones; but asks,  
as man is all bad breath, after all, for all  
other parts intact. for this  
a woman sized, masked doll that lolls  
takes over.

The “bad breath” is simultaneously is an ironic reference to man as a spiritual being, but here a being that acts in bad faith or “bad breath”. The final three lines carry a remarkable image, hard to explain but probably representing the sham of the relationship, where the woman has been reduced in his eyes to a doll-like figure which wears a mask in a world of sham and pretense. In the poem titled “in this world” (pp.75-77), Dladla comments on the pretense within the realm of the intimate:

in this world, dear  
life in the womb  
you’ll notice cartoon like smiles

and bedroom eyes  
cajole you to sneak  
into someone else's bedroom

Pierre Bourdieu in *Acts of Resistance* (1998) warns against the many ways in which freedom becomes eroded, when:

[C]onquests of freedom are sometimes threatened, and not only by colonels, dictators and mafias. They are threatened by more insidious forces, those of the market, but transfigured, reincarnated in models that seduce one group or another: for some, it is the figure of the economist armed with mathematical formalism, who describes the evolution of the “globalised” economy as a destiny; for others, the figure of the international star of rock, pop or rap, presenting a lifestyle that is both chic and facile (for the first time in history, the seductions of snobbery have become attached to practices and products typical of mass consumption, such as denim, T-shirts and Coca-Cola); for others a “campus radicalism” labelled postmodern and offering the seductive glamour of seemingly revolutionary celebration of cultural pick-and-mix, and so on. (1998, p.76)

This superficial society categorises the dead as non-existent and views absence merely as nullity. This builds a world which is based on notions of consumption without recycling or working together with the external world in all its manifestations. John Berger explains this:

The living reduce the dead to those who have lived; yet the dead already include the living in their own great collective. [...]. Until the dehumanisation of society by capitalism, all the living awaited the experience of the dead. It was their ultimate future. By themselves the living were incomplete. Thus living and dead were interdependent. Always. Only a uniquely modern form of egoism has broken this interdependence. With

disastrous results for the living, who now think of the dead as the eliminated. (2007, pp.4-5)

Dladla combats this in his poetry, with poems that reveal the actuality of things, as opposed to a dry literal realism which restricts things to the physical or the present. It understands that presence itself is a complicated mode of reality, with the spectral being a presence that works through its seeming absence. He foregrounds here the living death of the precarious in “the dead” (p.68):

raggedly brown  
and pitifully dry;  
the dead, exhumed  
for re-burial, are not  
a curiosity.  
i say this in passing:  
our city has a daring collection.  
our hunt, eat, drink and  
ask extempore – but the mayor  
buries them from visitors.

This poem works on several layers. On the one hand it is a depiction of beggars that “the mayor/ hides... from visitors”. On another level, it replicates the reality of capitalism, which relies on the raw resources of the poor as forms of exploitable labour which are recycled again and again, only for the purpose of maximum exploitation, in effect a living dead who have been turned into zombies for the post-capitalist machine. They have to be constantly bought to life purely for exploitation, but they are hidden away from visitors. The spectacular city that tourists will enjoy is maintained as a spectacle by masses of exploited workers who live in parts of the city the tourists would never see. The spectacular city is not possible without the exploitation of the masses.

The poem is also an examination of our relationship to death and our denial of it, both as an eventual outcome of our lives, and as an essence within us. Anything that reminds us of death or degradation or bodily failure is “burie[d] from visitors”. Dladla’s poetry involves interrupting the established visual fields of our perception. Butler writes near the end of *Precarious Lives* (2004):

In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of children burning and dying from napalm that bought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse and grief. They were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself. Despite their graphic effectivity, the images pointed somewhere else, beyond themselves, to a life and precariousness they could not themselves show. (p.150)

Human vulnerability to death is engaged with openly in Dladla’s poetry. His poetry also displays an awareness of the difficulty of representation. In the poem “the girl who then feared to sleep” (pp.69-70), death is presaged through all the external actions of the girl: her fear of sleep as a symbolic forerunner of death, and when she “rattled her exoskeleton”, a powerful image suggesting the frailty of the human body and its component parts. The poem also challenges the purely physical based depiction of illness, with the girl not fearing the physical ailment and its symptoms, but being fearful of death, the unrepresentable and unknown reality. In the end, she can only “hear its steps” and shake and rattle as death approaches. It’s also another example of a poem where key meanings and visually intangible substances are denoted by synesthesia. In “homecoming” (p.66), Dladla laments at the absence of former acquaintances who have never returned home from exile and writes “you all melted away/ like dumb farts/– / only the smell/ remained...” lines whereby the “farts” fill in the gap of missing people. In the final poem, “song of the aged” (p.80) Dladla tells the reader about “a distant star? I hear within” and thereby mixes the visual and the aural. This use of synesthesia is an excellent strategy to “disrupt the hegemonic fields of representation” (Butler, 2004, p.150) and dislocate any perceptions of reality

which categorise knowledge divisively according to individual senses, and foregrounds the emotionally sensitive qualities of human experience.

In “missing (for matthew goniwe)” (p.74), Dladla writes about a “naked hand” that is all that remains of a person. He reveals the voice and humanity that was connected to that hand and pleads:

lonely hand  
without a voice  
without a friend  
tell us, tell  
your epic

Mbembe and Meintjes concept of necropolitics (2003) explains the ways in which in contemporary society:

[W]eapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. (p.40)

Dladla writes about the living and the dead in his poems; and yet even the dead are marked by their sense of presence, and by being given a voice through his poetry. Dladla combats the creation of death-worlds in his poems and challenges the delusion of the spectacle, challenging “the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life” (Debord, 2012, p.79), resisting the “separation and estrangement between man and man” (p.79).

Dladla aims at the enrichment and liberation of human lives, and at recognising all the aspects of human existence. His poetry acknowledges human precariousness and finds solace in a transcendent awareness of the self, as something that is rooted in the bodily, but expands its consciousness through spiritual openness, historical awareness, and an optimism in the power of human creativity to reinvent the world. The reader is soberly warned in “the building, the weapon, and the way” of the negative impacts of failing to change the world through new ways of thinking and unharnessed imagination.

The final poem, “song of the aged” (p.80), represents in many ways a full circle from the first poem, “song of a fertility doll”. The first poem hints more at the beginning of processes of life, through fertility, invocation and energy. The last poem is the song of someone close to the end of their life. And yet the conclusion of that poem points back to the promise of the first:

i've got nothing left now  
but a bright star i hear far far...  
within

The first poem does not mention light, but its last lines say “listen to the silent within silence –a/ the dream materialising”. In this poem something positive is materialising out of the silence and the unseen. The bright star could echo the fertility doll. The old person is precarious, having “nothing” and yet is able to connect to cosmic powers within themselves through an acceptance of precariousness. This again reveals that while Dladla reacts against socially induced precarity, he embraces the innate precariousness and vulnerability of life. On a symbolic level, the journey starting with the “fertility doll” and ending with the “song of the aged” is a journey through personhood and different experiences of what it means to be a “body”, a journey fraught as well with socio-economic and political violence. This journey narrates different experiences of the body, from embodiment, disembodiment, uncertainty, disfigurement. A doll can also symbolise the human body. The doll represents the life force within the human body. The fertility doll is also a metaphor for poems, which operate as channels of life enabling the transfer of energy units

of language, offering renewal. The poems thereby replicate the role of the fertility doll, and the closing line about “a bright, bright star? I hear within” replicates the role of language. The liminal border between the external/internal is broken down, placing a star “within” the human individual, as opposed to being out there in the external cosmos. The line also suggests the light of the star can be heard. This suggests the power of writing to illuminate and elucidate the contemporary moment, with the word being a light to the uncertain path of the precarious.

It is also useful in closing to have a look at Dladla’s depiction of the body. Dladla frequently makes reference to or foregrounds particular parts of the body, with “hands”, “legs” “feet” all being foregrounded at different points. In poems featuring wounding or severing, the body parts are foregrounded or fused with other elements or with the supernatural. Elsewhere, the poet frequently portrays bodies that are not simple everyday human bodies. Kobus Moolman in “Whose body is it” (2019), discusses the “non-normative body”, proposing “not only a movement of disability from the margin to the centre, but moreover a radical challenge to notions of the normative and alterity” (p.80).

He questions conventional notions of selfhood and poetics and concludes:

This unidentified man [...] is someone made up, a fiction basically; but made up out of my bones and nerves in order specifically to dislocate what we all think of as the Real and Factual, in the interests of the bigger story. He is the lie that tells a deeper truth about the body’s private experience when it utters the word “I”. (p.80)

Dladla’s poetry in its dealing with “bodies” in precarity, focalises as well an uncertainty about borders and selfhood, dislocating prior conceptions of the body, and when dealing with forced dislocations, represents the violence of the capitalist society on the human body. His bodies are humanistic as well as expanding notions of the human, exploring terrains of absence and presence effectively in his narrations of the missing, the departed, the ghostly, the mad, the



wounded, and the forgotten. He also suggests a sense of uncertainty over what is “human”, a preference to start from the foundations of the body, much like Moolman’s “bones and nerves” and not assuming anything further, a sceptical view but one which defends the writer from false hopes and illusions. It is also a compassionate view, which understands that everything human is rooted in the bodily, even the experiencing of the spiritual. It is a far cry from the Enlightenment ethos of rational knowledge or Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am”. Here the body is a place of potentially uncertain experiencing, subject to potential assault and victimisation, a precarious vector of life. The discussion of the non-normative body thus links perfectly to an understanding of the precariousness of the other.

Throughout Dladla’s poetry there is an attempt to penetrate through to the actuality of things (what Moolman refers to as “the Real and Factual” (2019, p.80)), and not only to articulate it, but to portray it in a broader context of being and feeling. This also stops his writing from being a simple reiteration and exploitation of trauma, spectacle and suffering. Though on the surface his poetry seemingly shares “the passion for the real” (Žižek, 2002) and abounds in spectacles, it is a real that is thoroughly interrogated and spectacles that are inverted and refocalised. His goal is humane and integrative of the broadness of experience, using the vectors of body as sites of transcending the obvious and blatant. Poetry is a channel of recreation and reconstruction of sites of self in precarious zones.

Dladla’s poetry is intensely focused on the multifaceted experiencing of existence. Escaping limiting categories of class or race, it builds its ontology on an experiencing and acknowledgement of the vulnerability of human bodies, but also a belief in their abilities to transcend the contemporary moment and go beyond the spectacular, the superficial or the mundane. It uses an interrogation of the spectacular and the everyday, displaying an ability to refocus its poetic lenses on the occluded spaces of society and the violence beneath the surface to represent effectively the nature of precarity in South Africa.

## Chapter 4.

### Bringing together a new language: representations of precarity in selected poems of Ike Mboneni Muila

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I identify and analyse representations of precarity in selected poems from Ike Mboneni Muila's 2004 book of poetry, *Gova*. I discuss his background and the influences on his poetry, in particular his effective use of *isicamtho* as a strategy of language enrichment and expressive diversity. I apply textual analysis to the poems discussed in this chapter, examining key themes and issues in his poems and clarifying in detail his innovative use of various poetic techniques as well as how they foreground precarity.

While identifying and revealing his representations of precarity, I will reveal the complexity of his form and use of poetic innovations and language deviation. This helps to expose the glittering façade of contemporary neo-liberalism and post-Fordist capitalism with keen irony, while also celebrating the possibilities of life. He embraces the innate precariousness of human existence, distinguishing in the process the difference between this innate precariousness and politically induced precarity. He is able to piece together the scattered pieces of meaning in precarious society that Standing writes about in *The Precariat* (2011): "The precariat consists of those who feel their lives and identities are made up of disjointed bits" (p.3).

Ike Mboneni Muila arguably occupies the most precarious position of all four poets who are analysed in this dissertation. Two of the major sources for this dissertation, the theses by Alice Meyer and Tom Penfold, as well as Penfold's shorter pieces, do not mention Muila. Penfold discusses Mxolisi Nyezwa predominantly in his articles, with a few mentions of Angifi Dladla and Seitlhamo Motsapi. In Meyer's thesis, she discusses Nyezwa, Dladla and Motsapi in separate

chapters. Muila is mentioned mostly in passing in a few essays, and there has been little attempt to engage with his poetry. He is probably the most underrated out of the four poets whose precarious oeuvres are featured in this dissertation.

Muila is very effective at critiquing contemporary society through his poetic style, allowing a reactualisation of scenes, attention to the everyday, and an acknowledgement of the “unlanguaged”, and strategically embracing key techniques such as foregrounding and defamiliarisation. His use of technique brings to reference concepts of Guy Debord such as *détournement* (discussed in *The Society of Spectacle*. 2012, originally published in 1967), the *dérive* (1958), and general insights from *The Society of Spectacle* (2012). In this chapter I explain the relationship between these concepts and the other related concepts of slow death, cruel optimism, necropolitics and the unlanguaged, and how they lead to an overall understanding of the representation of precarity in Muila’s poetry.

His style of writing gives him an opportunity to capture and describe the diverse nature of society, democratically combining the grotesque and the serious, the physical and the spiritual, the blasphemous/iconoclastic and the iconic, the internal and the external. Each poem is a space where languages and ideas and experiences jostle and charge each other in highly restless contexts, without a sense of preordained hierarchy. It is not so much an embracing of the biblical “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Matthew 20 v 16), but a belief that there is no first or last, or at least these categories are irrelevant.

my narrative oral mix is in eleven  
languages spoken in south africa  
by and bye trapped in one poem  
the so called tsotsi taal isicamtho lingo alive  
and kicking sense of humour in you and me  
mixing of languages into a witty lingo (“buddy scamtho”, p.7)

Muila was born in 1956. He became a member of the Johannesburg based poetry collective, The Botsotso Jesters, established in the mid-90s, which consisted of various members, but with regulars including Muila, Allan Kolski Horwitz, Isabella Motadinyane, Anna Varney and Siphwe ka Ngwenya. Muila still writes and performs poetry.

Muila was inspired by poets such as the legendary Black Consciousness writer Ingoapele Madingoane, whom he mentions in a 1999 *New Coin* interview:

“Africa my beginning” was *it* for me. I celebrated that piece, and I celebrate Ingoapele Madingoane today. I think that guy held spirit and injected spirit into the stagnation that had taken over. And also gave some direction, of course, to a whole lot of other people and influenced other people and inspired other people to do that [...] Ingoapele Madingoane’s poems went across lines, they just sought to sound a wake-up call, to conscientise people across the board and get people to realise that they were not the slaves that they were made out to be. (pp.38-39)

Muila as a thinker and writer is politically conscious but in a non-conformist manner. This stance becomes evocatively expressed through an embrace of diverse and expressive language resources, including the use of *isicamtho*. Muila explained the value of *isicamtho* to *New Coin*:

*Isicamtho* is a rich kind of language. It’s all over – in Louis Trichardt, you find that they use a different *tsotsitaal*, which is different from the one we’re using in Mofolo, which is different from the one being used in Hillbrow, or in Cape Flats, you see. And each poet has got his own way of commanding the language. It’s not just throwing in phrases and then it’s finished and klaar. It’s a cultural exchange, maybe that one from Giyani will make us feel the way they communicate around Elim. (p.40)

In the same interview (1999), his close contemporary, poet Lesego Rampolokeng explains the birth of *isicamtho*:

*Isicamtho* came spreading out of influx control laws. People came from all sorts of different comers, not only South Africa, but beyond, and they had to somehow find a way of breaking through and across language barriers, which was different from what was happening on the mines, that was a baas to boy situation. People had to find a way of merging the Zulu and the Sotho and the Tswana with Afrikaans and English and all sorts of things – they tried to create and breed anew some kind of communication, and that's what it came out of. You've got to find a way of saying whatever it is you want to say, articulating your concerns. (pp.40-41)

Rampolokeng in this passage quickly differentiates “tsotsitaal” and “*isicamtho*” from “baas to boy situations”, which bred “fanagalo”, a dialect which used a few key phrases but the structure of which was built around English language conventions and was a language dialect created to enforce hegemonies. *Isicamtho* is a way of communicating between equals, a dialect with a working class bent. It is a creative channel of expression for the precarious, enabling them to react against their precarity with liveliness, verve, humour and a tender vein of irony. It could be likened to the role that Yiddish played within Jewish culture in Europe, giving writers strong and resonant idiomatic speech patterns to tell lively narratives with.

Muila is able to embrace the parochialism of places, as opposed to the liberal view of universality as defined by certain norms. Identity is not monolithic. To Muila, being is something that can be fleetingly grasped at and poignantly released in language. He effectively utilises defamiliarisation, defamiliarising readers not only through his unexpected use of language and the deviations from conventional syntax, but also through juxtaposition. The physical and the spiritual, the grotesque and the serious constantly interweave. His poetry resists easy readings of the contemporary moment, suggesting a history that lingers, and a future that is likely to be unpredictable. Muila reconstructs language to find a way to articulate precariousness and the

precarity of life. The technical is not simply the formalistic framing of words, but a key way in which we frame how we represent suffering and address precariousness and precarity. Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2009) encourages readers to “try to install new frames” that would enable them to transcend limited perceptions of life’s precariousness.

A change in frames enables resistance towards the purely spectacular or superficial, enabling representation of that which is left out of the normal frames of reference. The “spectre that gnaws at the norms of recognition” (Butler, 2009, p.12) is ably represented by Muila’s poetry. His writing and use of dialect and English language subversion enables him to represent the occluded and the unrecognised existences and spectral stories. He brings marginalised languages and experiences together in his writing, drawing his narrations under “new frames of recognition” thereby “exposing the orchestrating design of the authority who sought to control the frame” (2009, p.12).

In “greetings emsawawa” (p.1), the opening poem of the book, Muila starts with greetings and introductions to the reader in several languages and cultural/spiritual salutations. The poem then playfully moves in an unexpected direction, appearing to drift, but actually pointing out from the first poem the social preoccupations of the poet, as he starts to address the realities of political power with a few subtle pokes:

hasalaam alaikum  
malaikum salaam...  
goodlord gordsave the queen  
the one en only queen like candle in the wind

“gordsave” mimics the accents of some British people, as well as mocking and diminishing the power of the religious vindication of colonial power. “the one and only queen” is subtly mocking, as there are actually many other queens, particularly within Africa. The poem subtly plays with dominant narratives, key symbols of post-colonial power and motifs of contemporary

global culture. “Candle in the wind” references the Elton John song “Candle in the wind”, originally recorded in 1973 but which became a key tribute to Princess Diana after her death in a car accident in 1997. But Muila doesn’t lose focus in his analysis by becoming enamoured with the glossy or mythical side of power and royalty, as symbolised by Princess Diana and the media’s obsession with her life. Muila continues:

for insinuating a war monger beast  
in that bush of united states of america  
both americans juju monkey do monkey see

This links up the USA and Great Britain as post-colonial powers who inflict precarity upon world populations through their various exercises of power, including the specific “war on terror”. There is a pun on the name of President George W Bush Jr, with America thereby likened to a bush, with their policies blindly following on from the old world legacy of “gods save the queen”, which symbolises the power of colonialism. The Queen herself is more than a simple superficial symbol of British power: as Queen of England, she is the inheritor of all that colonial violence gained for Britain, from the jewels on her crown (taken from colonies such as India and South Africa) to the existence of Britain as a world power, created by the exploitation of resources, and including its status as a First World power sustained in large parts by contemporary corporate colonialism. It is an Empire gained by direct conquest, economic means, or internal manipulation. She is the polite and sage face that distracts from the brute side of the neo-colonial order.

Muila moves direction again, engaging with his strategic power of resistance to all the forces of oppression and violence by declaring:

now lord a poem  
after the myth  
inside of me

By penetrating the glossy myths of power which conceal violent savagery (for example the “war monger beast [...] bush” (p.1) representing President Bush and his violent war on terror as well as representing the bush as a place of potential danger) the poet here invokes his ability to remake the world, starting with telling the history of the precarious individual, telling his/her story from within. The constant use of lower case also serves to highlight the poet’s sense of vulnerability, as well as to undermine hegemonies, especially through violating the roles of capitalisation in proper nouns that are political powers or institutions.

### **Autobiography and precarity**

In his autobiographical poem “to nazim hikmet, side a (i)” (p.10), Muila explores the personal experience of precarity and human precariousness, and writes:

i was born in nineteen ou dubula madzedze  
in the year of bad bucks bloody suckers days  
at a mofolo village house in Soweto  
out of embarrassment for others I lied too

The poem is interesting, as an autobiographical poem often foregrounds disclosure and certainty about personal experiences. Here the writer sheds light on his own uncertainty and the levels of uncertainty and discomfort concerning his own experience and narrative. Kobus Moolman in the essay “Whose body is it” (2019) writes about offering through poetry:

A pluralisation of identity, one which refracts and destabilises experience and biography in terms of flux and ambiguity. This gives rise to what Juliana Spahr has termed ‘an autobiography of multiplicity’ and it aids further in problematising the assumed



resemblance between the textual subject and myself as author. In so doing, possibilities are opened in the text, not just for alternate, but also more complex and deeper ways of reading and understanding. (p.74)

Muila intentionally unsettles the narrative pattern, foregrounding narrations as uncertain renderings of experience, often perforated with omissions, exaggerations, biased points of view. “to nizam hikmet” (p.10) challenges conventional modes of knowledge, particularly formal rationalism, and also challenges everyday English syntax.

Muila’s own encounters with suffering have conditioned him to be aware and open about the precariousness of existence and the precarious nature of truth. The naming of the poem “to nazim hikmet” also foregrounds precariousness and the socio-economically induced precarity, as Nazim Hikmet was a 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkish poet who dedicated his life to social struggles and described himself as a “romantic communist” (Goksu and Timms, 1999) and “romantic revolutionary”(1999). This fits in with Muila’s own political outlook, with an idealistic but not necessarily unfounded focus on human beings as sources of possible societal transformation, as well as his determination to remain grounded in witnessing everyday suffering as the basis of his aesthetic ontology. Hikmet was also influenced by a diversity of cultures, and was of Turkish, German, Polish, and Georgian descent. One of Nazim Hikmet’s well known poems was the autobiographical poem “Autobiography”. Muila pays tribute to the style and tenor and attitude of the original piece, while adding his own unique aesthetic approach and language use. Both poems embrace a diversity of experience and are a litany of various places and experiences by the poets. Both poems also feature the following lines:

out of embarrassment for others i lied  
i lied so as not to hurt someone else

Muila arguably follows the conventions of folk artistic practices, which draw from older traditions and in poetry and song use refrains and phrases from older work as part of the building

blocks of art. He applies these forms and uses relevant phrases, also invoking the techniques of collage makers who create new art out of putting together fragments of other works. Muila is thereby making effective use of *détournement*. *Détournement* is defined by Guy Debord as:

The opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation – a fragment torn from its own context and development, and ultimately from the general framework of its period and from the particular option (appropriate or erroneous) that it represented within that framework. *Détournement* is the flexible language of anti-ideology. (*Society of the Spectacle*, 2012, p.76)

*Gova* also utilises artwork throughout the pages. The artwork ranges from collage style pieces to drawings to renderings of patterns. Overall however, there is no single simple style, nor theme, and the whole collection of drawings and art gives the impression of a collage series. The collage style of art employed in *Gova* embraces *détournement*. The artwork is made of everyday images and objects, often reinvigorated through unexpected juxtapositions. Some images combine the human and the non-human, the human and the animal, the human and the commercial. In this way, the images echo his poetry.

Muila's poetry is a vivid and creative form of anti-ideology. He does not embrace any "definite certainty". It breaks with previous traditions, and works on a strategy of "internal coherence and practical effectiveness". Guy Debord explains further:

*Détournement* reradicalises previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies. (1967, p.75)

"african dustbin caring a tree of liberty" from the poem "jack in a bootleg" (p.9) is an example of a phrase taking on some aspects of a linguistic *détournement*. Expectations are subverted, and

multiple subversive meanings are possible in this simple line. The word “caring” is ambiguous. Conventionally, the word would be “carrying”, as the dustbin appears to be carrying the tree. However the word also literally means “caring”, as in nurturing. It could be that the tree of liberty is only able to grow within the dustbin, the zone of the precarious, as those who are more privileged will never understand the full nature and implications of freedom and liberty. Future liberty and liberation comes from those who see the spectacle for what it is, a zone of death and violence.

Muila shares the odyssey of his life journey in the poem. The historical is foregrounded through the personal experience and the role of language highlighted as a source of power and potential oppression. The local is also celebrated and revealed through his narration, local places that are often part of the “occluded spaces” (2011) Nixon refers to.

i went to the northern province of limpopo vanda  
where my roots came from via the zambezi river  
from the forced removal of sophiatown  
in 1955 my parents settled at a mofolo village house  
in soweto where i was born  
ike is my vanda name colonised and sodomised  
by the anglo-sex language (to nazim hikmet, side a (i), p.10)

The English language is ridiculed by being called “anglo-sex” as opposed to Anglo-Saxon. This ties in the use of the term “sodomised” with the language being likened to a sexual oppressor that violates the integrity of the individual. The use of lower case also serves to diminish the power and status of the word. Naming English the “anglo-sex” language also foregrounds English as born from dialects and multiple languages, and undermines its authority. In contrast, Muila is now able to use the oppressive structures of language, as well as the everyday weight of precarity and creatively subvert and reinvent meaning through seemingly accidental and coincidental word play and juxtaposition:

in 1985 i suffered a multiple failer while in a  
vista university dlamini soweto campus  
attempting a b. a. ed in teaching  
i also attended masichaba high open ended  
university of experience  
i am now into creative writing (to nazim hikmet, side a (i), p.9)

Formal education and institutional structures fail to give the poet the power to transform his life or view it differently; however, through creative writing, he finds a sense of liberation in both the purposeful and accidental:

as an artist performer  
who believes in so much that  
i for one flies in one's dreams  
when my flight dreams came true (to nazim hikmet, side a (i), p.9)

The literal and the metaphoric are intentionally confused, and the grotesque and the ecstatic intertwined in the story of the poet who “literally/ shit in the air”, as he simultaneously celebrates the gift of flight and its connotations of borderless being and freedom, while not denying the body and its reality, in an image that strongly grounds the ethereal. This also links strongly to the Nazim Hikmet poem “autobiography” which makes multiple references to planes and also Berlin, including lines such as “even today in Berlin I’m croaking of grief”.

## **To stare in wonder: imaginative reactions to the controls of precarity**

Muila in his poetry shows a constant will to be non-conformist, to encourage diversity, the unexpected. In *Critique of Creativity* (Raunig, G., Ray, G., and Wuggenig, U., 2011), in the essay “Culture industry and the administration of terror”, Gene Ray writes:

Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Adorno came to see “administration” and “integration” as the decisive immanent tendencies of late capitalism. Both, it will be shown, are inseparably bound up with the category of terror, which has to be a part of any adequate account of the global social process that dominates life today. (p.168)

Administration as terror is an administration of meaning, the administration of accepted hegemonies, which can take place through legal or state mechanisms, or more subtly or indirectly through cultural administration, through the dominant perspectives of mass media or patterns of behaviour in social media and social discourse. Muila does this from his very first poem, hinting that the real terror was the manipulation of power by the global powers attempting to enforce conformity.

Integration as terror is refused and continually refuted by Muila, whose use of diverse languages refuses to conform or integrate simply into either one or another category. It also reveals an individual who prides himself on his non-conformity, celebrating his life and turning modes of recognition upside down. He refuses to be part of pietist discourse or simple rainbow nation rhetoric. Muila rejects performativity scripts. His writing disorders and rearranges all sense of code and expectation. He rejects a conditioning of life and turns frameworks on their heads. Mythologies are reimagined in potent ways, and meaning in vibrant re-envisionings. This can be contrasted strongly with much contemporary hashtag / slogan / rhetoric driven poetics of contemporary time.

Muila as an aesthetic visionary foregrounds encounter with “being”. He describes a way of communicating and coming to an understanding of actuality through “blomming”, “hanging out...at street corners”, and “just flowering”. It is a playful way of creating language that builds on a tactile awareness of the potentiality and actuality of one’s surroundings. Muila and Rampolokeng explain in their interview with *New Coin*: “[h]anging out, at the street corner, at the shops or whatever. What is a blom, it is a flower. Basically what you're doing is setting your roots on there, and you’re just flowering” (p.41).

There is a connection to be made between “blomming” and the concept of the “*dérive*”, as articulated by Guy Debord:

One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive* (literally: “drifting”), a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. *Dérives* involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho-geographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psycho-geographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. (1958, p.1)

The *dérive* becomes an effective artistic mechanism for combatting necropolitics and the spatialisation of capitalism, and disrupting the vortexes of power in their geographical manifestations. Language defies and renames places, and plays with authority and the hegemonies through undermining conventional language, and drawing the grotesque and the everyday together. Something as insignificant seeming as the exchange between two individuals in “blomer” (p.23) over a cigarette begins to have deeper overtones, as a symbolic exchange of human encounter within the context of particular psycho-geographical affects.

Muila explores the meaning of “blomming” and the “blomer” in the poem “blomer” (p.23):

blomer	hang around
blomer madala	hang around old buddy of mine
ek is 'n ou taxin terries	i am an old texas town
binne in die toene	inside my toes
change deurdlana	changing door to door
op en af	up and down

The poem disrupts the vortexes of power by suspending and disrupting perceptions and spatial-geographical relations. The poet is “an old texas town”, a surreal image which also mocks globalisation while reversing the conventional metonymy of the USA with the parochialism and particularity of “an old texas town”. “inside my toes/ changing door to door” conveys an image of a person who is changed or affected by experiencing different psycho-geographical contours and affects, with “inside my toes” reinforcing the particularity of that experience, as well as the need for the poet to literally step from place to place in order to experience the *Dasein* of the contemporary moment. The local is referred to in a repetitive chant like line:

blomer madala	hang around buddy of mine
blomer jozi	hang around jozi
blomer joburg	hang around city of johannesburg

Muila’s writing requires an attentive reader, one who is prepared to read it open to new perceptions and revelations, and who is prepared to be challenged as well. This calls to mind the exhortation of Catherine Belsey, who urges the critic “to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of possible meanings, its incompleteness [...] and above all, its contradictions” (1980, p.108). Muila uses effective word juxtaposition and works through omissions of syntax, rejecting or subverting through poetic *détournement* the ideological

landscape of contemporary capitalism/the consumer world, combined with effective use of the *dérive* in order to live in a world that is often portrayed as being post-ideological, but is an intensely fought battleground of ideological supremacy, where values and meaning are pushed through the cultural weapons of mass media, popular culture and commercial agendas. At different times of contemporary history, different ideas will dominate. In the 1990s, it was the ideal of the rainbow nation and superficial nation building, which involved tokenistic relationships between images and ideas, and a lack of realisation of the power of fetishised commodities within culture. This superficiality is criticised in depth by Pumla Dineo Gqola (1998) who laments “pseudo-Africanisation” and acts of renaming that neglects to take the South African socio-historical context fully into account.

In contrast to superficiality, Muila seeks to build organic relationships and connections in his poetry between place and self, ideas and the outside world, dreams and the physical. Further developing the technique of the *dérive* and effective *détournement* enables him to strategically repulse superficiality and instead build “the myth/ inside of me”, an alternative way of living and being. Rejecting the values of capitalism which builds on exploitation and production, Muila exalts “blomers” and the quiet abilities to daydream and observe reality. These are things viewed as “idleness” by capitalism, with health often being no more than a synonym for the ability to be productive to an economy. However, idleness is a vital part of existence, as contemplation cannot occur without being able to be free and unconcerned for moments of time about work or production. In “i stare in wonder” (p.15), Muila rejects a busy life of work and replaces it with an observer who on the surface appears to be idling and daydreaming, but through his willingness to be open to experience, embracing to a great degree what John Keats referred to as “a negative capability” (1818) is able to critically engage with the world around him, fragments of disruptive socio-political critique entwined with vivid processes of imagination, reminding the reader that no critique is possible without a willingness to be open to alterity and a keen imaginative insight. He also rejects the Western “gaze” of power, a gaze that in the hands of science and political manifestations, becomes an expression of spatial-geographical-political categorisation and occupation. Objects in the Western gaze are aggressively named and classified and restricted; apartheid was the ultimate expression of this. Muila meanders through a landscape which is



diverse, neither simply physical nor spiritual, as his mind wanders, imaginatively connecting these planes and aspects of existence, open to different forms of experience, knowing that:

It is only on the condition that we accept the other's alterity that we might actually experience something we could not predict in advance, something outside our frame of reference and, thus, revolutionary. (Dass in Martin Hall, 2016, n.p)

Muila's poetry constantly acknowledges the alterity of the other, and is open to a world where things transcend the categorisation of formal rationalisation. He recognises the fascinating entanglement of things and ideas, their contradictions and paradoxes, their beauty and mundanity:

i stare in wonder  
stockings kilo meter bum jive grand  
party house management pulling out  
stinking boots en knicker bondage of the country  
socks enticed by naked future feminique (i stare in wonder, p. 15)

He very firmly picks up the role ideas play in building up desire, sexuality and identity. Here in the poem he names the fetishised objects or mental constructs: as opposed to saying perhaps, man enticed by naked female, he says, "socks enticed by naked future feminique". Future feminique foregrounds femininity as an abstract quality, and future emphasises a future wish fulfilment. All this serves to suggest desire is not simply the wanting of an object, but a fascination with its mystique, and the rituals of undressing (socks are "enticed" (p.15)) and being held captive by desire ("knicker bondage of the country" (p.15)). This is the power of capitalism, as it continually builds up its own sense of myth and mystique around spectacular objects and the attractiveness of the visual, images and myths mediated through advertising, film and social media. Adverts will posit the attractive as opposed to the real; for example, alcohol adverts

always show sober people drinking: film is steering more and more towards fantasy genres such as superhero films: fantasy as opposed to the engagement with the real; social media is dominated by the urge to trend, be relevant, look beautiful, as opposed to an in-depth and interlocking interpersonal engagement between people.

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a *means of unification*. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is *separate*, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation. (Debord, 1967, p.10)

“i stare in wonder”, while appearing to be a series of idle musings to the surface reader, is in fact a careful description of the parts and pieces of the capitalist imaginary, while also darting in and out through this world with defiant and challenging observations and implicit reminders of the spiritual and the unpredictability of actuality. The initial play with words and surface manifestations of desire and identity move onto political meditations:

sinking no strings attached  
to love fencing spear head tumbler (p.15)

Carrying on with the extended metaphor of sexuality/desire, the poem evokes clothing through the mention of strings followed by the word love, and the connotations of sex or encounter between individuals through the line “love fencing spear head tumbler”, which connects a phallic image of “spear” with “head tumbler” invoking human fallibility.

Far from simply being a reiteration however of the nature of precarity and the rhetoric of suffering, Muila narrates and transforms our understanding and perception in his humanely critical but vividly imaginative focus. It is not a social criticism involving abstract concepts and phrases and slogans. Attempts at finding easy meaning and definite boundaries are shattered in

poems like “i stare in wonder”, and the poetry remains firmly grounded in physical experience, with a Rabelaisian edge, with a carnivalesque atmosphere in the poems that presents dialogic writing in poetry. This in itself is crucial towards a representation of precarity, as it shows precarity as being induced not by the clichéd and fallacious metaphor of a chain of causality, but rather several chains or webs of causes, the beginnings and endings of which are not easily defined. It reveals human complicity as well as victimhood. It also reveals how one can define oneself and refuse to be rendered into a simple monologic meaning, to challenge contemporary capitalist modalities of thinking, and avoid the pitfalls of an either/or approach. Rather, Muila’s poetics is a case of either/and or not/is simultaneously. Words will often shift in meaning, a form of resistance against an attempt to enforce monologic meanings, or an intentional misspelling to create another meaning, and the attitudes in lines will shift between various modes, being neither explicitly spiritual or physical, skilfully dancing between a sense of humour and exaggerated narrations, from the seemingly imaginative to the bluntly literal. A variety of images constantly foregrounds themselves and prevents an easy imaginative visualisation or synthesis from coalescing. Many of these images are tinged with the surreal, potentially a questionable practice, if not for the fact that arguably the very nature of capitalist society hinges on the obscene and surreal. Surrealism is also an effective way to break up hegemonies of formal rationalism:

i stare in wonder  
looking at mukhavha-tsindi camp  
nearby makonde mountain range  
when it dawned on my mind  
that a mother insectivorous plant does exist  
which preys on anything alive even human beings  
who dare go near the tree  
no wonder it is believed  
you could only escape mutavhatsindi catch  
if and only if you go nearby naked to the tree (i stare in wonder, p.15)

By describing the landscape in such unexpected terms, Muila rejects the role of the human being as the easy arbiter and categoriser of nature. The complexity of the landscape is embraced, a far cry from landscape poetry which might portray the rural regions as barren and void, or urban areas as places of tired rationalism and banality. Rural urban interfaces are blurred – existences take a shape of their own, the monstrous possesses its own sublimity. It's a very small step from the monstrous to the sublime. What does the surrealistic image “that a mother insectivorous plant does exist/ which preys on anything alive even human beings” mean? What it does show us is the poet refusing to be simply categorised, and defying the hegemony of formal rationalism.

i stare in wonder  
failing to escape the loudness in my mind  
my in-law mulamu and i turned to listen  
with all that funny feelings jogging in my mind  
to bob marleys reggae music in the car  
music with the philosophy of generations yet  
to come by and ponder about war in the middle  
east of nation war against nation (i stare in wonder, p.15)

The phrase, “i stare in wonder”, suggests a willingness to gaze at something, without preconceptions, and allow thoughts and perceptions to develop upon “gazing” at something non-judgementally. The mind can drift off in extended contemplation, much like ekphrasis. However, here conventional ekphrasis or idle fantasy is denied. The poem ends on this note:

malondi and takalani in the back seat of a car  
singing a venda version  
of one of bob marleys songs  
indeed...,  
vha na gonova vha tshikhalani                      those who are weak and lazy are no where  
(i stare in wonder, p.15)

Muila's poetry escapes being whimsical through its continual use of images which strongly describe the actual, or expressions and phrases and snatches of conversation grainy with everyday life. The narrator of the poems often engages in a form of "*derive*" (Debord, 1958), and either wanders through a landscape, or his mind wanders through mental-socio-geographic landscapes of memory, coming across revelations and understandings about this entangled and problematic yet emphatically real society.

In "i stare in wonder", the narrator keeps lapsing between musings and daydreams, to keen descriptions of the everyday and everyday landscapes. He observes everyday symbols of capitalist consumer culture, idiosyncratic ways of life, and the potency and potentially darker sides of nature and the spiritual. He gazes at the countryside in part of his narration, an eye far from indulging in simple bucolic meditations, but aware of the reality of all places. The musings and descriptions are both rural and urban, appearing not to actively discriminate or favour either, and as such, break down rural/ urban dichotomies common in South African literature.

"cain cain" (p.21) tells the story of a mining disaster, a frequent occurrence in South African history, and betrayal of humanity is foregrounded through the narrator's repetition of "cain cain":

cain cain...  
come over  
here  
cain cain...  
your brother  
muddy  
puppet ground  
do you remember  
kinross mining  
disaster

people died  
cain cain...

The book of Genesis from the Bible tells the story of how Cain murdered his brother Abel. In contemporary society, under capitalism, the working class and precarious Abel are murdered daily, either in more spectacular incidents of death like mining disasters, or in “quasi-events”, slow violence and slow death, the everyday violence of living in precarity. After murdering his brother, Cain was asked by God, “where is your brother?”, and Cain answered, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis, Chapter 4, verse 10) The implication in this poem is that by refusing to be our brother’s/sister’s keeper, and by placing profit and material things above human life, we have betrayed the one thing that may be essential about being human – the obligation towards the other, the unknowable other. It is the responsibility of individuals, as Judith Butler (2004) suggests, to be in good relationship with the “other”, as well as to refrain from being destructive or causing harm to the other willingly.

### **Ecstasy and cruel optimisms**

Isabella Motadinyane was a founding member of the Botsoto jesters, and one of Muila’s best friends. Her passing away in 2003 of “stomach ulcer complications” (p.2) led him to write the poem of the same title (pp.2-5). It is one of the most personally addressed and open poems in the book, addressed to Motadinyane after her early passing. It celebrates their bond and some of their experiences as poets, as well as listing some of the challenges and precarious circumstances they faced. Motadinyane remains one of the most underappreciated poets of contemporary time. Her writing:

Repudiates fixed notions of a sense of presence, self and identity and narrows the boundary between being and non-being, past and present and myth and reality. (wa Bofelo, 2008, n.p).

Muila follows similar creative practices. Presence is more fluid than in conventional first person lyric depictions. The sense of “I” is dissolved, offering “a radical challenge to notions of the normative and alterity” (Moolman, 2018) and understanding that:

This unidentified man [...] [i]s someone made up, a fiction basically; but made up out of my bones and nerves in order specifically to dislocate what we all think of as the Real and Factual, in the interests of the bigger story. He is the lie that tells a deeper truth about the body’s private experience when it utters the word “I”. (p.80)

Through dislocation of conventional meanings and structures, and using creative narrations and the positing of language around the body’s vector, Muila is able to challenge precarity as well as expose its many forms. He also narrows “the boundary between being and non-being” effectively.

In “my death – to cesar vallejo” (p.24), Muila showcases his ability as a master dislocator of language and of perspectives. Much like the legendary Peruvian poet, Cesar Vallejo, Muila is jarring and disconcerting in his ability to focalise unexpected connections between images strongly and thereby confront notions of life, death and fate in the poem. References in the poem connect to death and life’s transience in many ways. There is the playful reference to the 80s hit “Wake me up, before you go-go” by Wham: “a song wake me up before you go..., go/ by george micheal”, a line which has become more poignant since the singer’s death on 25 December 2016, (as well as the fact that he died on Christmas day, bringing to mind his hit with Wham, “Last Christmas”). This more playful reference is followed by a series of intense images:

i wish i could die a clean person black out without  
even to remember i once lived on earth  
a team of doctors once woke me up

in a hillbrow hospital  
i was brought up to the hospital unknown  
all of a sudden in a black out  
my main memory switch fell black out in a jeppe street jozi  
raindrops drizzling seven thirty pm jumpers (my death – to cesar vallejo, p.24)

The poet writes that “many a times a dream drowning/ which is not a happy experience at all”.

He continues:

i sometimes dream dying in those severe wars  
people trampling all over me awake (p.24)

Ironic words, for these are exactly the experiences of those trapped within zones of living death and slow death; a feeling of being simultaneously awake and asleep, and being trampled all over, a living person within a literal warzone. He repeats, “it’s never a happy experience”:

at the age of eleven  
i literally threw myself into an open field public pool  
watching my late brother david swimming  
i was fascinated gazing at the water  
in turn attracted me to a sudden dive  
in which my late brother rescue  
saved my life from drowning (p.24)

It feels somehow the brother more than literally saved his life from drowning, but in some symbolic way saved his spirit from drowning and being drawn into death, represented by the ambiguous potential of water. Ironically it is the same brother who “rescue/ saved” his life from drowning, who is now “late”. Aware of the inability to anticipate or control the future, the poem



moves on elusive impressions of some of the dangers and near death experiences the poet experienced. A sense of catharsis comes about through the telling of this story made up of the coordinates of extreme emotional states.

“bekkersdal marathon” (p.68) does more than simply paraphrase or pay tribute to the famous Herman Charles Bosman story. It revisits the story, foregrounding a life trapped in moments of infinite repetition and ritual, as well as placing the focus on three native convicts who take over the turning of the organ handle. These three represent the unseen or occluded members of capitalist society. The story told here focalises the sensation of being oppressed within space and time. The characters cannot escape.

three burly convicts in red stripes jerseys  
overtake the handle from koster claasen and the  
assistant verger singing as usual  
bekkersdal ikhaya lethu  
esil., thandayo..,

These are ironic hymns, with the hints of mutiny submerged beneath the words. They are subject to authority which goes in and out of trances. The words of the biblical verse are themselves largely symbolic for the absolute authority of the hegemony running this small part of society. The three native convicts are foregrounded, singing their hymn, threatening mutiny, but in reality, in this world that Muila narrates, nothing ever happens. Leadership has no power over itself. The followers do not rebel. They follow the dictates of everyday word and ritual. Everything is caught in repetition and stasis. Cruel optimism is the state of believing that in this version of the story, the Dominee, who represents authority, will one day snap out of his trance. But in reality, everything will remain arrested, as if in slow motion. The characters, most especially the three convicts, have no power over their life or death. Their existence is suspended in a state between life and death. They sing hymns, an invocation to a higher power which does not intercede in this parody of Western religious formal rationalism and theology gone badly

wrong. Time has ceased to function. There is only the continually simultaneous moment. The poem ends:

all three burly native convicts in red stripes jerseys  
and in the bakhatla tongue threatening mutiny amen  
singing as usual  
bekkersdal ikhaya lethu...,  
bekkersdal ikhaya lethu...,  
esil..., thandayo...

The subjects here are trapped within the oppressive structures of society. They have the power to voice and express themselves, but that is a heavily censored and conditioned form of expression. Religion and spiritual expression here do not bring about relief or liberation, but are part of an eternally repeating circle of oppression.

Muila in the 1999 *New Coin* interview affirms his motivation to write, while outlining the precarious state of being a human being and writer in contemporary society:

I do this thing, this isicamtho, for self-fulfilment. If I created this isicamtho with the audience in mind, to worry how they're going to follow my stuff, it will will be like I'm killing myself. I do it to fulfil myself and I mix with them, and the way we communicate, it's never the same, even though we are talking tsotsitaal, it's never the same way. I've got to be fulfilled inside, whether I get bread or no bread it's all the same, my only bread is my fulfilment. It shouldn't be stagnant political comments always – zabalazo, struggle, struggle. We've got to be creative, we've got to go with the times. There are a lot of pressures that we get, some people who appreciate and others who don't actually have that positive approach. You get the attention of publishers more when you die. But I want to say – here's my anthology – do something with it, and then you don't have to wait until I pass away. I want to show my kids that, hey, your father was great when he was alive. I

want it now so that when I die I die a happy person. I shouldn't have to wait for my brother to pass away to create a poem for him. This is my brother's poem, I create it while he is still there, and then he appreciates it. Or he takes it and puts it at the backseat of the toilet, it's OK. (p.43)

Muila emphasises that his poetry transcends “stagnant political comments”. Once the poem has been written and published, it is up to the reader to decide whether to appreciate it or not. He writes the following in “buddy scamtho” (p.7) while explaining a song that formed a previous part of the poem:

a song matakadza mbilu is a folk song by  
the malende dance culture which says what brings  
happiness to the heart is a child  
in this instance  
the ultimate child  
in my case  
is isicamtho

His poetry is a child that brings “happiness to the heart”. Muila is able to “transcend the intimate and public wreckages of our present moment” (Hardy, 2018, p.58), through his ability to create “a new language” that not only influences through innovative poetry, but also sets a marker and a possible direction which influences other writers and thinkers to look more critically and creatively at language. This language remarkably is a space for a full gamut of emotions, experiences and possibilities, and traverses categories with ease. He expresses a similar hopeful tone in the *New Coin* interview:

Muila: I do have some hope. Even if I can pass away now, I will die with the hope that in the coming generation in South Africa, a new language will be born. When one has a positive approach one can see that with *isicamtho* a new language *will* be born. Even

though I can resign and say I want to resign, and no more writing and sit and start enjoying vetcakes, somebody will take my lines and appreciate that positively, and then that will help to bring together a new language. (pp. 44-45)

In “after the myth” he writes on language, hope and liveability:

close quote

unquote

(after all is said and done)

after the myth

....

across the church yard

in a countrys dirty laundry

we buried our differences

singing hambakahle

singing go well

lalahahle

sleep well

emhlabeni

on earth

sikohlela

we clear

sigwinye (p.47)

our throats and swallow

The poet references the past history of trauma and violence, while also hinting at the continued state of inequality and precarity. Nevertheless, there is an ability to find a sense of peace and connection to the present moment and space, enabling the poet to transcend the limitations of his time and nation. The notion of clearing the throat and swallowing connotes the feeling of living under precarity, the general precarious state of breathlessness mentioned several times in this dissertation. However, Muila in *Gova* has more than cleared his throat and swallowed; the poet has cleared his throat and has spoken something fresh, vital, something of crucial relevance years after initial publication. From this type of intricate work that engages so skilfully with the nature of precarity and human precariousness, a “new language will be born”.

## **Conclusion: new “technics of value”**

### **“A cockroach eye view” into the state of things**

I have discussed representations of precarity in selected poems of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila and analysed the techniques that enable them to effectively represent precarity, and revealed the ways in which their writing forms a creative reaction to precarity. In the Conclusion, I sum up my arguments and summarise my analyses and my insights into the representations of precarity. I give a brief contextual analysis of the state of poetry in South Africa. I sum up the relevance and the possibilities that their poetry brings, whereby innovations in language (what Neilson and Rossiter call new “technics of value” (2005)) lead to a possible change of values and an embrace of planetarity, precariousness and egalitarianism, and connote an in-depth rejection of socio-economic precarity through the poet achieving creative autonomy.

I have based my analysis in this dissertation on close textual reading, in combination with awareness of the socio-politico-economic factors impacting on the lives of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila. My research has been dually productive, with the insights gained from textual analysis leading to more fluent understandings of precarity, and simultaneously precarity and other related concepts guiding me towards a better textual understanding of their poetry, giving a kind of “cockroach eye view” (Slasha, 2018, n.pag) into the texts.

Precarity as a theoretical outlook transcends immobilisations of critical understandings in socio-political hegemonies of identity or class politics, as precarity recognises the fluidity of oppressive systems and the various modes of suffering within the capitalist ethos. Precarity also recognises that healing and change for society can only come about through a complete mindset change, not an exchanging of one system of fetishised values for another.

The previous four chapters have strongly argued the effectiveness, depth and diversity of the representations of precarity in the selected poems. They have also presented a strong case that Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila are able to react convincingly to precarity, with their language use leading towards liberatory potential.

In Chapter 1, I revealed that Nyezwa is able to effectively represent precarity through his command of technique and his awareness of the vulnerability of human beings and the ecosystem, while also critiquing precarity and its causes, through a language use that shows ways in which revitalisation of language can react to and transcend precarity, enabling a society based on recognition of the other, acknowledging human grievability and embracing planetarity.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Motsapi and his unique way of disrupting dominant discourses, and how he is able to represent precarity effectively through his use of innovative and diverse poetic techniques. He not only represents its presence but is also able to analyse its form and processes, displaying awareness congruent to a mobilisation of language as a force of resistance against socio-economic structures of oppression in their diverse manifestations.

I discussed Dladla in Chapter 3 and clarified how he represents the society of the spectacle, and thereby is able to represent precarity and express an understanding of human precariousness, while also differentiating between precarity and precariousness. He skilfully reveals the ways in which everyday violence is occluded, and hints that human beings are able to live a more meaningful existence by transcending the ideological limitations of capitalist thinking.

Muila, whom I discussed in Chapter 4, is one of the most under-acknowledged poets in South African literature, yet his oeuvre gives the reader an opportunity to engage with precarity in vivid and unexpected ways, and his use of technical devices and deviations from Standard English foregrounds him as a poet able to capably resist precarity.

## The precarious state of poetry

In 2019, the situation for poetry in South Africa remains arguably precarious. In a majority of literature festivals, poetry slots are minimal. Many festivals feature poetry predominantly as entertainment or with a focus on readings, but even that featuring takes up only a small segment of line ups, and there is a serious lack of panel discussions or talks on poetry. Poets are often celebrated or discussed without any real in-depth engagement, with Slasha observing what he calls “a celebration of mediocrity without any real critical engagement, a camaraderie criticism” (2018, n.pag).

However, not being invited to literary festivals or not being placed within a literary spotlight, does not stop the four poets from making a creative and subversive impact. Aside from their writings, they have been active in many other literary related ways. Dladla has run writing workshops at prisons and produced community theatre. Muila has been a part of the Botsotso collective for years, their ability to embrace multiple languages and cultural perspectives and bend genres having a strong impact and influencing many who have seen, heard or read their work. Nyezwa has played a role in encouraging new writers and new perspectives through initiatives such as *Kotaz* magazine and his more recent role in the Nelson Mandela Book Fair. Motsapi has withdrawn from public life after an earlier career as a speechwriter, but nevertheless his book remains an inspiration to those poets who search for a poetry that transcends a superficial reiteration of the everyday. The four poets have embraced their role as social critics who are connected to the everyday precarity of people. Nyezwa proudly states:

I am drawn to poets of struggle and hard utterances, poets who struggle for air in their lungs. My problems stay with poets who live behind windows, and watch the birds even when morning comes to earth to remind the dissidents of another war. I walk the earth reading only poems. (2019, n.pag)

The works of Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla, and Muila do not offer solutions for society in any direct sense, and yet a reader who reads their works with understanding will find solutions. The solutions are not policies or mandates, but rather the reader is urged to approach existence with a different attitude. While language use may be a small step in resistance towards precarity, nevertheless it is a key step, with a reinivogation of language leading to a reinivogation of thought and perception.

### **Why they matter: a change of values**

The poets that I have analysed and discussed in this dissertation emphasise the “uncertainties of economic and ontological life” (Neilson and Rossiter, n.pag), moving away in their value systems from the contemporary hegemony of capitalism and neo-liberalism which has only resulted in sustained or increased precarity. They defy the ontological boundaries set by capitalism, embracing instead planetarity and egalitarianism and a world of fluid possibilities. They acknowledge the vulnerability of life, and recognise that an acknowledgement of this precariousness actually enables a deepening of ontological perspectives. Moya Lloyd writes:

Butler’s reconceptualisation of the body also rests on the idea of vulnerability; indeed, it is precisely corporeal vulnerability that makes possible ecstatic relationality, and thence ethics and politics. Butler is usually read by critics as equating vulnerability primarily, even exclusively, with susceptibility to harm or injury. (2011, p.213)

The four poets recognise the body “as an entity [...] vulnerable to injury and suffering” (2011, p.213). They embrace a sense of existential uncertainty, with their poetry asking questions as the poets travel through the violence of existence, as testified in poem like “walking the earth”:

and during the many storms in my life



what happened?  
what really happened?  
during those nights  
what did i really see? (Nyezwa, 2012, p.21)

This type of poetry refocuses our attention on the uncertainty of life, re-examining reality and asking “what did I really see?”. What can writing reveal of the occluded spaces of human suffering? Further to that however, seeing is not simply an act of witnessing but witnessing necessitates reaction. The poets move away from seeing themselves as poetic members of the capitalist ideology, which would require them to simply aesthetically decorate and rationalise capitalist tenets through the nuances of words. Instead, they reject capitalism strongly and realise that artists are members of the cognitariat (Berardi, 2010). And by a change of aesthetic policy, they are in fact enabled to witness even more effectively. Their creative labour involves:

[A] shifting of values and rhetoric away from an emphasis on the exploitation of intellectual property (and thus labour power) and reinstating or inventing technics of value that address the uncertainties of economic and ontological life. (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005, n.p)

A keyword in the above passage is “inventing”. This implies that writers may have to create new “technics of value”, technics (to be distinguished from the word techniques) that are operational systems of creativity, involving new uses of formal devices, new ways of perceiving and narrating reality, new outcomes. The term “technics” sees them as a counter-force in the post-capitalist economy, a force of production which however defies the contemporary rules of production, which is focused on consumption, exploitation, rapid production. These technics of value for radical aesthetics involve a greater openness to reality, an ability to witness effectively and reveal the occlusions and the infra-ordinary and the quasi-events within the quotidian, and an acknowledgement of human vulnerability as a central fact of their writing approach. Transcending contemporary obsessions with the momentary trending or the seemingly relevant,

they strategically represent and “Convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world” (Nixon, 2011, p.3). These slow disasters of socio-economic induced precarity are almost ghostlike. Silvio Lorusso writes:

The precarious condition is rooted in a series of virtualities that acquired more relevance than actuality. A plausible future and a romanticised past become more real than the lived present. The virtual dominates the real. If precarity is a ghost, a presage, an absence, or a void, maybe the way to break its spell is by *reactualising* the present, by giving substance to the “here and now”. (2017, n.p)

To reactualise the present is to foreground it and its essence effectively. Ghosts, precarious situations and violent experiences cannot be wished away, but the relationship with them can be re-articulated and re-envisioned. From Dladla’s ghostly step-father in “exposure” (2004, p.3) to Motsapi’s “one eye full of dreams and hintentions/ the other is full of broken mirrors” (river robert, 1995, p.80), to Nyezwa’s image of the “sulphurous compound” (“walking the earth”, p.21) and the loss of his son, to Muila drawing a picture of current landscapes and of dialoging with the past with an awareness of the duplicity of memory in poems like “I stare in wonder” (p.21) the four poets in different ways reactualise the contemporary. They reframe experience, allowing “other possibilities for apprehension [to] emerge” (Butler 2009, p.12). The reactualisation of language becomes the foundation for a broader perception and ability to transform reality. I would argue that solutions cannot be created without a reactualisation of the fabric of society through dissecting and recreating the somatic structures of language. An understanding of precarity as articulated in these poet’s works shows us that future society depends heavily on acknowledging that the essence of human individuality and relationships cannot be ascertained or known by rationalism. Mbembe (2003) writes:

[C]ontemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity. Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death. (p.14)

Twenty-first century revolutionary movements and insurgencies, in order to be effective, must be directed against the very impersonal nature of economy. Furthermore, different understandings and conceptualisations of precarity need to be connected and considered together for a more in-depth understanding of precarious lives. As Susan Banki recommends:

efforts to bring together the conceptual understandings of precarity – the existential, the labour-related, and precarity of place – would be most welcome in providing future theoretical avenues to grasp the difficulties of instability, uncertainty, and insecurity. (Banki, 2013, p.463)

The poets have succeeded in drawing together different conceptual understandings of precarity. This is largely owing to their ability not only to tackle the lives of precarious individuals, but to actually understand and effectively represent the entanglements and occluded relationships whereby precarity operates. Their work is heavily rooted in the experiencing of the bodily, and thereby they are able to fight against the machinations of socio-economic induced precarity. An emphasis on the tactile and visceral is key in reacting to precarity, for precarity is suffered at the hands of what can be described as “machines” which leads to a “break between language and affectivity” (Berardi, 2010, p.9). The poets return language to its roots. They return poetry to the streets, to nature, and ensure it is vital and flowing. The four poets I have discussed essentially offer within their harsh critiques of the dystopian nature of contemporary society, and their representations of precarity, the stirrings of utopian visions, possibilities that are available within the creative imaginary. This leads to a form of creative autonomy.

## **Creative autonomy**

Only the autonomy of mental labor from economic rule can deactivate the suicidal mechanism of war and the obsession with growth that devastates the planet. Cognitive, networked, precarious labor is the transversal function capable of recombining the social elements in perennial mutation according to a non-accumulative, non-competitive and non-aggressive principle. (Berardi, 2010, p.9)

This passage suggests that poets are among those members of the cognitariat (Berardi, 2010) who actually hold the key and the code to changing society: denying everyday linguistic patterns and refusing to fit easily into literary fashions, their outspokenly original writings evoke and celebrate a better more egalitarian life that embraces planetarity and that are in line with the possibilities of a “non-accumulative, non-competitive and non-aggressive principle”. Transformations of language invoke the cognitive and offer “the transversal function” which can “recombine[s] the social elements in perennial mutation”. Language enables regeneration in precarious circumstances, as Motsapi suggests:

we bless the inscrutable darkness  
where our names are rent into spirit  
we bless the splinters & the air  
full of asphyxiations & amnesia  
we bless our lacerations & our deformities ( “river robert”, p.81)

This regeneration does not ignore human vulnerability and imperfection, but works through it, transforming and transcending limitation and connecting the human subject to the world in a cohesive and organic manner. It testifies strongly to all the wounding, while revealing that

through “the inscrutable darkness...our names are rent into spirit”. Elsewhere Muila writes in the last poem of *Gova*:

gova is a language movement (“extract from a muvenda journal seventy six”, p.70)

This affirms language as something that can potentially transform an entire society. And Dladla likewise continually reiterates the positive power of language to recreate the contemporary moment, with language starting from silence, as testified by a poem such as “song of a fertility doll”:

hug me with the arm of your heart;  
i am reality, i am love...  
listen to the silence in silence –  
the dream materialising (2004, p.11)

From this silence, from the ability to reconfigure world views and language structures, can come about change. It is from this potential, this at times “inscrutable darkness” (p.82) that words develop transformative powers. Neilson and Rossiter remind us that:

Potentiality itself is an uncertain force – a precarious resource common to labour and life – and as such, is the basis for innovation from which new forms of organisation and life may become instituted. (2005, n.p)

The poets experience pain and grieving, but instead of embracing violence or the superficial as methods of dealing with suffering, they open themselves up to experience and allow themselves to be transported beyond the contemporary moment and its limitations. They follow Butler’s understanding of “ecstasy or ek-stasis, which she construes as ‘to be transported beyond oneself

by a passion' or to be "*beside oneself*" (Lloyd, 2015). This type of transformation or revolution has the potential to be more lasting as it breaks open old moulds and creates opportunities for new social spheres in language. This type of revolution knows transformation is not about a simple political change:

Revolution is not about the collapse of the state. The best way to define the new rebellion is the Deleuzian concept of line of flight: exodus from the kingdom of exploitation and the creation of a new social sphere, which has nothing to do with power, labor or the market. (Berardi, 2010, p.25)

Writers like Nyezwa, Motsapi, Dladla and Muila continue to write and testify and punch small holes in the perceptions of the everyday and the occluded shapes of power, weaving between the pressures and attacks of hegemonic systems:

Years ago at the movies I watched Bruce Lee, *Enter the Dragon*. Watching Bruce Lee and his elegant kung fu movements on the bleary movie screens in New Brighton, taught me the lessons of poetry. I saw words and roads in front of me. I learnt from Bruce Lee to escape meaningless words and their airy rhetoric. Like a drunk man I now follow the many roads of the world, zigzagging, poem after poem. (Nyezwa, 2019, n.p)

Escaping the meaningless words and airy rhetoric enable the writer to witness effectively, and not only witness, but find their way forward and continue journeying. It enables the "new rebellion" (Berardi, 2010), an "escape from the kingdom of exploitation and the creation of a new social sphere, which has nothing to do with power, labour or market". The choice of Bruce Lee as an example for a poet to look up to, and the constant mention of "roads", highlighted finally by "follow the many roads of the world", suggest that for Nyezwa there is always a possibility when writers are prepared to boldly engage with the actuality of existence. These roads lead to a greater understanding of humanity, and are not finite journeys. Like "the face" in

“tenda” (p.3) of Motsapi, it is constant willingness to engage with reality and the alterity of others. These poets and their work travel a road that is ongoing: their message is relevant in the contemporary moment. The poets strongly represent and react to precarity, acknowledge life’s precariousness and are witnesses to everything through their poetry.

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