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## **Licking the Stage Clean or Hauling Down the Sky?: The Profile of the Poet and the Politics of Poetry in Contemporary South Africa**

Kelwyn Sole

### **Poetry and Political Issues after 1994**

It is easy to presume that literature plays something of a minor public role in a postcolonial context such as South Africa, and thereafter to assume that, within the domain of literature, the importance afforded poetry must be marginal. This has a degree of accuracy. In a relatively undeveloped publishing and reviewing environment, there is certainly a socially less "well-defined marginal position ... (and) clear space" from which poets write than exists in metropolitan countries; a fact that causes local poets some despondency.<sup>1</sup> However, it can be suggested that one of the paradoxical consequences of this has been that poets regularly take on a social position that would be regarded as unusual in those developed countries where the relative autonomy of the "poetic space" is circumscribed by the expectations and pressures of the literature industry, which has in effect acted to limit the scope of poets' role as active and meaningful social agents.

One of the most puzzling, if compelling, aspects of recent poetry in English in South Africa has been the way in which it has engaged with, reflected upon, and tried to influence ongoing processes in the country's wider sociocultural and political life. Since liberation, it is apparent that private spaces have become more porous: and the traditional dividing line in South African poetry between private and public expression has been brought increasingly into question.<sup>2</sup> This has affected not only the nature of political poetry, but of less public genres as well.

Poets continue to involve themselves in public affairs, as they did before liberation. Many stalwarts of the ruling party, the African National Congress

(ANC), continue to act in the service of the state, and the policies of the party and its partners. Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele, Minister of Housing from 1999-2003, has agonized over the work expected of her as a “soldier-poet”; poet Vusi Mavimbela (a long-time loyalist and confidant of former President Mbeki), appointed Director-General of the National Intelligence Agency in 1999, spoke out in the late 1990s in support of instituting economic policies for South Africa based on the model of the “Asian Tigers”; the current Treasurer of the ANC, Matthews Phosa, has published a book of Afrikaans poetry; ANC members Jeremy Cronin and Mongane Serote both served spells as Members of Parliament; Lindiwe Mabuza continues to write poetry even as she serves as a diplomat for the government in a variety of geographical locations, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Even among the younger poets this is the case, although the frequency seems to be diminishing. For instance, both Seithlamo Motsapi and Lisa Combrink served as speech-writers for the Mbeki presidency, while Lance Mgorosi Nawa has spent time as the mayor of Mamelodi.

Examples of poetry’s reach abound. The first general elections served as a basis for many poems. So did the workings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), with Ingrid de Kok in particular employing it as an enduring theme in her work. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) solved the dilemma of having only 20 minutes to put forward their perspective concerning the complicity of big business in apartheid at the TRC by using a poet, Nise Malange; and the most revered and emulated poet of the 1980s, ANC-aligned Mzwakhe Mbuli — later jailed for armed robbery — was praise singer at Nelson Mandela’s 1994 presidential inauguration, Master of Ceremonies at the re-launch of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in 1995, the “singing spokesman” for the national railways for a period in the 1990s, and did a half-time show at the match at which the South African national soccer team became African Champions in 1996.<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s there was a flurry of publishing activity around poetry. A celebratory anthology of poetry and prose was issued at the presidential inauguration of Thabo Mbeki, and anthologies on matters of concern such as AIDS, women’s issues, poverty, and homelessness, or in praise of Nelson Mandela, saw the light of day.

To a limited extent, some of these visible effects can be attributed to the more public role afforded certain genres of poetry in African public life from pre-colonial times onwards. The traditional genre of *izibongo/lithoko* (praise singing) has taken on a new vitality. Yet especially noticeable at present is the manner in which the figure of “the poet” has become infused with huge ethical and ideological weight and potential. Among practitioners and audiences alike, poetry is repeatedly regarded as allowing access to a more

sublime or insightful “truth” than political discourse, or even social analysis. Es’kia Mphahlele has argued that the African poet had come to function over the years as a prophetic figure; and this function appears to intermingle with congruent assumptions from the European Romantic tradition inherited through colonialism. Poetry is seen as an incisive discourse, potentially free of cant and deceit; while the figure of the poet is presented as a unique purveyor of authenticity; a visionary and purveyor of a “truth” — including social truths — invisible to others.<sup>5</sup> This assumption has become as prevalent in advertising and the media as in poetic circles.

This phenomenon occurs among public figures as well. Speaker for the House of Parliament and — more recently — Deputy President of the ANC Baleka Mbete opines that the “best compliment you can give me ... is to tell me that I am a poet”; businessman Hermann Mashaba, winner of the 2004 Free Market Award, argues that the entrepreneur is “the poet of the private sector”; while a Premier of the Western Cape, bemoaning the lack of racial unity and interaction in his province, has recently suggested that “if we want the Western Cape to be a home for all, maybe we must ask our poets to pick up where we couldn’t. We need to usher in an era of our poets again.”<sup>6</sup> The list that could be made of such utterances is lengthy. Poets who otherwise position themselves in the body politic very differently have joined in the chorus. For instance, Pan-Africanist Motsapi proclaims that, in contradistinction to poetry, contemporary “politics, journalism, and advertising (are) ... driven by passion for illusion, talent for obfuscation and predisposition to ostentation”; liberal poet Chris Mann believes the purpose of poetry is “to shake by the scruff of the neck all jargon, cant and doublespeak ... the lie private, commercial or political”; while Lebogang Mashile, possibly the most popular of the younger generation of poets, says that poetry “demands my honesty. I cannot lie in a poem.”<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless on closer scrutiny there is less agreement on the role of poetry than at first appears. On the one hand, a group of poets has, since 1994, become deeply involved in the enterprise of writing about, and encouraging, national reconstruction and nation-building in both articles and poems, and has seen this as best advanced through support of the ANC. In an article published on the ANC website, for instance, Nawa calls for the party to oversee the building of what he calls a “national patriotic culture” as a priority, and urges that such cultural planning should seek to ensure that all South Africans have access to cultural expression and activity *via* local government rather than treating culture “as a concurrent competence between national and provincial governments.”<sup>8</sup> Yet even among such poets close to the ruling bloc, there is by no means consensus about political, economic, and social issues, either in their pronouncements or in their poetry. Serote,

### 138 Kelwyn Sole

for example, has adopted a consistently Africanist position and used his poetry to inveigh against the role he has had to play in government institutions promoting “reconciliation.” In his epic poem “Freedom, Lament and Song” he laments his position:

at the big house  
at this HQ of God, Cape Town  
I listen, I look, I touch  
there are liars  
cheats and betrayers  
they manoeuvre  
they are like vacuum cleaners  
like hyenas  
in their speeches<sup>9</sup>

Other poets within the Government alliance, most notably the South African Communist Party member Jeremy Cronin, have involved themselves in economic debate and critique; Cronin emerging as a vocal, and often critical, presence in the ANC-led alliance. He has written voluminously inter alia on the policies of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and South African Reserve Bank; on the South African State’s post-1996 Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) economic policy; on the socialist pedigree of privatization policies in China; on the role of the new black middle class; and he has raised concern over the “ZANUfication” of the ANC and involved himself in many debates about strategy. He has also managed to be a loyal supporter of both Mbeki and, more recently, Jacob Zuma.<sup>10</sup> Similar critiques, from positions both to the right and left of Cronin, have been articulated in the period under discussion.<sup>11</sup>

Since the early 1990s there has been a movement among some poets away from any notion that poetry should be functional to politicians and their agendas. On returning from exile, Keorapetse Kgositsile (the present poet laureate) stressed that, while he still saw writing as a political activity, he was opposed to politicians determining what artists should produce; while later Lesego Rampolokeng voiced a similar sentiment when he suggested that the era of the “bring-on-the-poet-to-lick-the-stage-clean-for-the-politicians thing” had ended.<sup>12</sup> However, it is easy to become too optimistic about this development. The urge to use poetry merely to praise power has not vanished in the nearly two decades since liberation. Mabuza’s poetry in particular is in essence a paean of praise to party personalities, policy, and ideals, and the role of praise poetry in particular is open to becoming a

### Licking the Stage or Hauling Down the Sky? 139

vehicle for sycophancy. In a 2005 article, Limpopo activist and poet Vonani Bila speaks of

poets who are invited to most government and corporate functions. I’ve heard rumours they are paid extremely well. These poets, by nature, are opportunists. As long as they get paid and receive sufficient media coverage in the colours of the rainbow nation or Coca-Cola or Vodacom on Bafana Bafana, they are willing to suffocate the real voices within. You can call these clowns anything, but certainly not poets. The kind of content that characterizes their scribbling is inept human rights rhetoric, slogans about non-existent transformation and change, blind celebration of NEPAD and African Renaissance, and self-praise. Often they write about sex and are known for shouting women’s power. They call Biko, Hani and Sobukwe’s names without having read enough of the doctrines these fighters pursued in their lifetime.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence of this kind of lip service to past ideals and the struggle against poverty among poets who in fact are aligning themselves with South Africa’s present pro-corporate and wealth-friendly reality is noticeable. Indeed, the amount of poets willing to occupy this space has, arguably, grown apace in the new century — an issue which will be discussed later.

Throughout the period since liberation there have been poets, on the other hand, who have seen their utterances as fulfilling a critical purpose at odds with state or ruling party debates and policies. A number of prominent poets distance themselves from current government positions, most often on the left. Dennis Brutus, for example, an ongoing and vociferous critic of the role of the IMF and World Bank in global politics and of South Africa’s economic policies since liberation, inveighs against the new black elite who are

frustrating any efforts to achieve the kind of just society that they spoke about and if that’s not bad enough, worse is the fact that while they can see people living in poverty, near starvation, sickness without medical care, homelessness — they can live in disgusting affluence without a sense of guilt.<sup>14</sup>

Using a rather different conceptual approach and discourse, there are also poets (especially among the young) who have reacted with suspicion to what Ntone Edjabe, editor of the journal *Chimurenga*, describes as the puritanical culture of “don’ts” in some of Africa’s newly independent countries that are

involved in “the dull enterprise of nation-building.”<sup>15</sup> Sharp criticism is, on occasion, aired as regards some of the most hallowed institutions of post-apartheid South Africa, including what Lesego Rampolokeng calls South Africa’s “malice-in-wonderland” Constitution (“Rap-Ranting”).

Since liberation a chorus of poems have emerged critical, at times harshly so, of the new generation of politicians, and the corruption and nepotism that has attended them. In the face of a media obsessed with icons and role-models, the trope of the “hero” has been subjected to scrutiny. In some cases, such as Chris Mann’s poem “Where is the Freedom For Which They Died?” the names of heroes and martyrs of the anti-apartheid struggle are used as a comparative counterpoint to shame other South Africans involved in internecine conflict, family abuse and violence. In others — such as Karen Press’ “Tiresias in the City of Heroes” and Bila’s “Mandela, Have You Ever Wondered?” — heroes are shown to have feet of clay. These poems highlight the degree to which a country awash with nationalist rhetoric has accepted old habits that do not challenge people’s preconceptions of, or responses to, structures of power.

Any perusal of the poetry of Mbongeni Khumalo, Press, Motsapi, Bila, Rampolokeng, and many others shows a radical, critical spirit of enquiry at work. From this perspective, the duty of poetry is, according to Bila, “to ask embarrassing questions”; an attitude increasingly removed from the poets of the ruling order.<sup>16</sup> As Sipiwe ka Ngwenya states in “Killjoy”:

i see nothing fine  
when the sun shines  
i mock the poet singing praise in parliament  
i cause a predicament  
reveal poverty  
in our liberty  
I am killjoy  
I am killjoy

#### Healing: Utopia and Reality

In the early years of his editorship, Robert Berold (editor of the poetry journal *New Coin* between 1989-1999) speaks of receiving poems demonstrating “fragments of psyches ... together presenting a picture of a traumatised disturbed society. ... I began to realise that in a society like ours it is extremely difficult to distinguish between psychological and social manifestations.”<sup>17</sup> It is little wonder, therefore, that after liberation the poetry’s potential for exploring and processing psychological anguish has

manifested itself, in terms that vary from the young poet Kabomo’s belief that he could “let the bullshit out on paper ... (and) be more honest on paper than with my mother, my girlfriend, my best friend and even myself” to Berold’s more expansive belief that “writers who can bring the different fragments of reality together will have an important healing function.”<sup>18</sup>

A supplement to this desire for succor in writing or reading poetry is the fact that liberation in South Africa occasioned expectations that the future would be immeasurably better than the past. In a 1995 interview, Serote noted that “for a long time the two opposites, the ideal world and the real world, are going to form the basis of a very strong articulation on the part of writers”; while three years later Cronin suggested that “a relevant South African poetry should force the actual and the desirable into the same aesthetic, linguistic and subjective space,” adding that political themes in post-liberation poetry have turned to “grappling with the shortfall between post-apartheid aspirations and actual realities on the ground.”<sup>19</sup> In another version of this utopian urge, Bila called for “a new world of understanding and love” which, from his perspective, would be forged by “taking a journey through African mythology ... crossing borders of cultural traditionalism and conditioning.”<sup>20</sup> For the last decade and a half, as a consequence, cheek-by-jowl with the optimism of government media statements (most immediately discernible in such tropes as the “rainbow nation” and “African Renaissance”) a series of poetic perceptions of the contemporary state of the country have emerged which claim to be closer to social reality, and which are a great deal darker. In Rustum Kozain’s “February Moon: Cape Town,” for example:

My land’s an expanse of rubble  
and slogans, charters, accords.  
Handshakes commit chattering guns  
to obscenity and soap operas.  
Every day, violence kitsches itself  
onto front pages ... .

Clearly, any closer analysis of how life is experienced in South Africa at present will magnify the huge discrepancies of wealth, education, and access to resources. Pertinent is the need to recognize a

lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism ... the social relations of space are

experienced differently, and variously interpreted, by those holding different positions as part of it.<sup>21</sup>

For some poets, a particular focus on the quotidian both highlights the lack of political change and contains a longing for the desired transition to a better country. At its most extreme, this can be seen, for instance, in Tatamkhulu Afrika's narrative poems of first-person liminal encounters and transactions with the social outcasts of Cape Town in minutely-drawn, deprived, and detritus-strewn inner cityscapes. Critics have regarded his work as a commentary on the Others of wealth and privilege, enacting "engagements with everyday existence ... illuminating encounters that are rendered concretely and exactly while pointing to an unknown beyond themselves of which they may be said to be the astonished trace."<sup>22</sup>

Politics also has a habit of irrupting into daily life through the ways in which the political and economic choices made by the political leadership limit and shape the boundaries of experienced life. In essence, to conceive of South Africa as a "normal" society now is as far-fetched as the prior pre-liberation dogma of apartheid's supporters. One of the most enduring qualities at present seems to be an ambience of insecurity and instability. Kgositsile spoke on his return from exile of "a level of decay in the moral fibre of our society which, until now, could not have vaguely formed part of even my most bizarre nightmares."<sup>23</sup> Press, in turn, notes:

Every map is out of date.  
The roads go to unbuilt houses.

... Everyone gets a star.  
Soon there'll be none left.  
You have to eat it; they aren't for planting.

Put up a mirror where you are  
and make yourself at home in your familiar eyes.  
Outside the wind blew it all away.

("Reclaiming Our Land")

Rather than the triumphal march into the future beloved by nationalist discourse, time is at worst experienced by many South Africans as circular, as promises made never seem to be carried further and — on a national level — social betterment is painfully slow, and experienced by some — especially the poorest and most marginalized — as non-existent. Promises

about bread rarely turn into bread. Conversely, therefore, "Things stand still here, / where everything is always / moving ... / There is no place for history. / We are glutted with words" (Ian Tromp, "Durban"). What is equally clear, though, is that the changed political landscape has made the desire for "normalcy" a site of undeniable, potentially explosive, demand.<sup>24</sup> Mxolisi Nyezwa, poet and editor of the literary magazine *Kotaz*, suggests:

writing must remember that something always happens. All the time.  
... A poem tries to capture a watery history — a transient memory.  
What makes the load heavy for many is this seamless vacuity, the emptiness of life — and the ceaseless lies. Literature grounds down this vacuous history to manageable forms. Something that even the guy in the street can dig and begin to understand.<sup>25</sup>

In a historical scenario where being black (in particular) has previously been experienced as a regimented, cramped, and policed experience — not only politically but spatially — a re-examination of local quotidian experience remains important: especially in terms which can gauge the degree to which this has changed, if at all. Some poets focus on the disconnected reality in which most South Africans live, where "it's a civil struggle / to make sense of it" (Joan Metelerkamp, "Mother"); others seek to defamiliarize the everyday, as a means to revolutionize subjectivities that have become oppressed by the familiar and humdrum. This is certainly the case for a number of female poets. Implicitly, the task of the poet is to try and stay true to the ideal, even whilst focusing on its opposite: thereby seeking out and uttering what is at present obscured by the deceptive surface and self-interest of official public pronouncements. As Motsapi puts it:

all day  
I sit under my armpit  
& break stones

all day i sit  
& break stones  
with my teeth

all day i sit  
 & break stones  
 so that songs  
 may haul down  
 the sky

(“seben”)

### The Tasks Given Subjectivity

There can be no doubt that colonialism and apartheid in South Africa significantly stunted the full expression of humanity among both black and white. There can be little doubt either that liberation in South Africa has shifted the borders of what is acceptable and possible, in explorations of the self in relation to society. Many writers, including poets, took Albie Sachs’ 1989 attack on “solidarity literature” as a signal for a fresh approach.<sup>26</sup> At best, this allowed poetry to deal with personal issues in ways which challenge existing societal norms and open up fresh spheres of contemplation and, perhaps, activism, as can be seen in a recent poem by Hale Tsehlena:

I write to untie the knots  
 that lump my throat  
 and turn into splitting headaches  
 when I could simply say fuck off but can’t  
 because I am an African woman  
 and my mouth must not be foul.  
 I write to wipe the tears  
 as the pages of pain  
 scroll from my thumbs  
 smudging my mascara.  
 I write myself into time.  
 I write that they may know  
 I became even stronger  
 when my heart was broken  
 by culture, church,  
 civilization  
 even  
 syphilization.

I write to share with you the quiet  
 revolution raging inside my brain ...

(“I write to ...”)

However, it is unclear the degree to which the emphasis on subjectivity in contemporary South African literature has widened the parameters of personal expression; when, in some instances, there is an inclination to use literature to refurbish traditional notions of “the individual” and compartmentalize subjective experience into emotional and social categories divorced from the social.

Liberation saw a reiteration, among more conservative and liberal poets, of the model of the discrete individual of liberal theorizing. This was combined with a notion that poetry should act as a bulwark against political, or public, demands. The Johannesburg poet Lionel Abrahams praised the vision of those white liberals of the past who “chose a solution that relied on gradual moral and philosophical transformation within the will of individuals.”<sup>27</sup> From this viewpoint, the individual poet should eschew what Cape Town poet Stephen Watson calls “any position of subservience to history.”<sup>28</sup> The poet is seen as a watchdog against “social engineering” or any invasion of politics or public discourse into personal space. In such a view poetry, especially lyric poetry, is a means of preserving and expressing a non-reducible “inner life,” and sensitizing individuals through acts of communication between writer and reader.<sup>29</sup> Poetry is perceived as indirectly serving the same mooted cause as liberal politics; to “serve the well-being of one’s fellow creatures” based on the grounds of one’s own “artistic integrity.” Abrahams is a remarkably candid example of the contradictions of contemporary South African liberals’ self-image: a self-abnegation hand in hand with a somewhat patronizing certainty in the ultimate rectitude of their ideological position. He makes clear the role each liberal follower — including each writer — bears in this:

The more developed — that is to say the more individualised the identity, the more significant the identification. ... [S]olidarity on the one hand and the imaginative act of human identification on the other requires entirely different things of the self ... . This difference accounts for the human and aesthetic poverty of so much political writing: it addresses itself not outwards to the unpredictable heart of the stranger who is your other self ... . But there is the other side. The opening of our society lends a new urgency to the maintenance

of our standards as individuals and as bearers of our inherited culture ... . We have to guard our own, not *against* others but, in the first place, *for ourselves*, and, in the second place, *for* others, our compatriots, against the time when, if ever, they may choose to share it, for the future of the land.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the emphasis on poetry as a means of communication and shared empathy between the “human natures” of individual addresser and addressee is nothing new: and, in the absence of any questioning of the terms employed, bids fair to end as merely an acknowledgment of the astonishing diversity of a mildly differentiated humanity. Nowadays, the type of lyrical poetry favored by the white academy in South Africa in the past — marked by a rather defensive and inward-looking response to social issues — is taking a great deal of strain, and is tending to demonstrate this in themes of avoidance, violation, and fear. It is by no means clear how this kind of subjectivity can act as a point of reference and model for the wider social canvas of South Africa.

A number of South Africa’s presently most highly regarded poets outside the liberal paradigm are nonetheless now seen by reviewers in similar terms to what has been outlined above; and this, it can be argued, is a reductive commentary on the salience of their work. For example, Shaun de Waal, long-standing books editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, describes one of de Kok’s volumes as follows:

Empathy and compassion are the keynotes in poems such as these, in which the poem is a way of meeting, treating, and in some way internalising the words and worlds of others ... one that speaks to and of common humanity ...<sup>31</sup>

A number of poets — including some of the more fêted younger poets — have made similar pronouncements about the *modus operandi* of their work. “When I stand on the stage I see you on the page, I write on you, I write on your heart, on your spirit, on your ear” remarks Lebo Mashile, speaking of the manner in which she sees her relationship to members of her audience; while Gabeba Baderoon’s perception are similar. As an interviewer reports:

Readings, she says, teach her about her own poems, a quest for an intimate and “naked” exchange. After a poem is published, Baderoon says, “I learn it for the first time by how it feels reflected on someone else’s eyes.”<sup>32</sup>

As it is safe to say that published poetry at least in South Africa is still the domain of better-educated and middle-class individuals, the “human” concerns of their poems tend to be inflected with unconscious expressions and perceptions of privilege and class. Whether defined socially, politically or psychologically, the viewpoints of the socially marginalized are in danger of either being patronized or ignored. The poet Dineo Mosiane confronts this conundrum when she says, “the deep thoughts the one ‘in need’ falls into are much deeper than of those who have all they want”,<sup>33</sup> while Nyezwa (some-what idealistically) exhibits a similar belief, suggesting that the “most afflicted people will always hold the dearest poetry. There’s a ... relationship between affliction and the ability to speak the truth.”<sup>34</sup>

Allan Kolski Horwitz of the Johannesburg poetry group the Botsotso Jesters was less sanguine in a 1998 interview, observing that “it’s a time of individualism, a time when people are out for themselves ... . It’s a corporate world now.”<sup>35</sup> From this perspective, as private life becomes more and more regulated and fashioned by the economic forces of late capitalism, “innerness” bids fair to become a commodity to be solicited and sold like any other. This is equally true of displays of “innerness” and uniqueness in poets’ self-fashioning. In such a scenario, Berold believes that the “struggle now is to tell the truth, to resist being turned from human beings into consumers”; while Cronin insists that “in poetry, the construction of the ‘I’ is part of the political argument.”<sup>36</sup>

### Subjectivity and the Yearning to Belong

If there is one theme that seems to unite many poets of different persuasions at present, it is that of the individual in search of his or her putative identity. Historically, both apartheid and its opponents came to reduce the diversity of South African population into the confines of four essential races (or “four nations”), even as apartheid, for its own purposes, both emphasized and fossilized Africans’ division into separate ethnic groups. Mirroring debates in a wider South African intellectual context, expressions of identity among poets tend to vacillate wildly between those intent on stressing the hybrid nature of South Africans, and those who articulate their essential sense of belonging inside a group, however this is defined. Some poets can be seen to imbricate these potentially contradictory urges within a sense of personal identity.

At present there are powerful discourses at work, disseminated most obviously through the commercial and state media, which emphasize explorations of the self in search of a “true” identity (generally marshaled racially). It is clear that in the topography of South African identity formation

there are many — and this is not simply related to those who agree with state and media discourse on the subject — who wish to use notions of authenticity and cultural or racial knowledge. Some poets (Dikobe wa Mogale is an early example) stress the politics of their art as a response to an ongoing racial divide between white and black based on privilege and access to resources. For Mogale, the “slogan that ‘art is a weapon of struggle’ will be valid and sound as long as there are still two contending cultures, namely the cultures of the oppressor and oppressed”; while more recently Bila among others has insisted that the black/white divide remains strong, while refuting any suggestion that whites or blacks are a homogeneous group.<sup>37</sup> Some poets — Mzi Mahhola is the most vocal of these — are concerned about the loss of traditional and indigenous forms of knowledge and expression in a rapidly modernizing nation, and the implications this holds for the future.<sup>38</sup>

Mahola’s poetry gives space to themes surrounding growing up in a rural community in the Eastern Cape. Other poets have involved themselves in a searching for “roots” through poetry, reaching back to what they believe will be a more authentic identity based on the retrieval of value systems ravaged by colonialism. This kind of poetry tends to combine castigations of present global and local inequalities with invocations of iconic figures from the history of the colonized, in poems which vary from superficial hagiography to insightful analyses of the connection of past injustices to present inequalities.

In her “A Poem for Sarah Baartman,” Diana Ferrus (who claims Khoisan descent) addresses the slave woman taken from the Cape and exhibited as a “freak” and “scientific curiosity” in Europe two hundred years ago because of her steatopygia. The poem, recited at the time of the return of Baartman’s remains from a European museum and their reburial in the Eastern Cape, can be found on official websites, as well as those promoting tourism.<sup>39</sup> In many ways it is exemplary of South African official ideology in its current phase: natural landscape (symbolically deployed and romantically depicted) is linked to identity, and identity seen in terms of images of origin and the legitimacy of one’s possession of “the land.” The last line of the poem is remarkably candid in demonstrating that what is finally at stake, in poems such as this, is the usage to which they are put in journeys of self-fashioning and self-discovery:

I’ve come to take you home -  
home, remember the veld?  
The lush green grass beneath the big oak trees  
... I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,

your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,  
the proteas stand in yellow and white  
and the water in the stream chuckles sing-songs  
as it hobbles along over little stones.

I have come to wrench you away -  
away from the poking eyes  
of the man-made monster  
who lives in the dark  
with his clutches of imperialism  
who dissects your body bit by bit

... I offer my bosom to your weary soul  
I will cover your face with the palm of my hands  
I will run my lips over lines in your neck  
I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you ...  
I have come to take you home  
where I will sing for you  
for you have brought me peace.

There are other voices that explore similar terrain, but use markedly different modes of perception and utterance. The work of Motsapi, for instance, mobilizes and employs a range of references embodying exemplary values seen to inhere in symbolic polities or figures (such as pre-colonial African kingdoms and contemporary African-American jazz musicians) in order to make statements about contemporary African realities. Through these means he constructs a poetry that “resists a global network of oppression involving the whole range of Euro-American epistemological and physical domination of the globe stretching from Columbus’s voyages to the I.M.F.,”<sup>40</sup> simultaneously making ironic commentary — often through neologisms and portmanteau words — about those elements of African and diasporic black culture and behavior he believes have become prey to an anaesthetizing global culture of consumerism and consequent inauthentic notions of self:

what shad / what shadow  
takes over the land so

... i’ve known you so  
with receding suns & invading sands  
no calm but the ominous violin  
of incessant flies

your history a knot of storms  
 reprobate seers & hip healers  
 the speak / speed of yr drums  
 now drowned to a croak  
 by the convenient noises  
 of popular music

i've known you so  
 seed left too long  
 in the sun  
 an eventual death  
 in the refugee camps  
 cos we sd no  
 to the scum of politricks

... only de poor suffer  
 only de poor suffer.

(“drum intervention”)

At worst, the poetry of identity formation can be said to have become pronouncedly fashionable, and this tendency does have its critics. Press observes:

The interface between people's psychological collaboration in identities and the fact that identities are created by social means, is not innate. ... I don't pretend for a moment that they don't exist in the daily texture of people's lives. But they are not the defining moments of reality for people: I think poverty, hunger, loneliness are just as strong ...<sup>41</sup>

while Ari Sitas voices a determination to struggle against the false “new tribalisms (that) are being remembered and reinvented.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, there are poets who question any easy correlation made between race and class. Even as he gives expression to a political poetry highlighting the inequalities surrounding race under global capitalism, Rampolokeng, for one, notes that “one weakness of our past political engagements was the way apartheid made us posit everything on a racial basis — when everyone knows that the class thing was lurking there and was far more threatening.”<sup>43</sup>

In such a complex scenario, it is premature to claim that

the advent of majority rule produced a cultural situation in which the divided aesthetics of the past were rendered obsolete ... narratives of the racial Other, which inform colonial writing, or of the oppressed Self in the writing of the colonised, are no longer possible in stories of social actuality.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, many contemporary poets, both white and black, have sought to explore new and interstitial spaces of identity, and express experiences more hybrid than has traditionally been allowed for. Goodenough Mashego, for instance, sees the challenge for South African poets as finding ways “to position themselves to a point where they cannot be black/white/coloured or Indian but poets.”<sup>45</sup> The result has been, at best, poetry of a rich complexity. One of the most delightful examples is Johannesburg poet Immanuel Suttner's appropriation of rastafarian discourse to comment on his white, Jewish roots:

Um yisrael wen 'cross to babylon  
 started callin hisself irwin cohn  
 writin for de newspaper in washinton  
 bin nice n pleasant to everyone

or got hasidic in ol new york  
 bowin to de hot air in de rabbi's talk  
 dancin to de beet of de fals messiah stalk  
 dey say he gonna come if we stay away from pork

me i say me eyes is full o sand  
 i gotta smash de idols bilt by de fader's hand  
 like trotsky done or like avram's stand  
 and bild mehself meh own promise land

(“De tetrach hammer”)

### Democracy and the “Rainbow Nation”

Since liberation, South Africa has been configured in media and politicians' pronouncements as a “rainbow nation”: a conglomeration of different races, cultures and persuasions living in harmony and equality. In concord with this, a multiplicity of voices, interpretations and “stories” are now celebrated in literary forums. Yet the social reality is less ideal. What is less scrutinized is the manner in which this diversity relates to harder political questions,

where the challenge facing South Africans remains, in Cronin's words, "how to forge some kind of national unity, shared space ... and yet sustain plurality, diversity, debate."<sup>46</sup>

At the moment, such celebration is almost always linked with a promotion of political pluralism, conceived to work in much the same style as it has always functioned in the capitalist state. If taken into the realm of identity and culture, such pluralism is often idealistically portrayed, as in Mabuza's "Today You Are Not Well":

We must also borrow  
From the rainbow  
Such heat, such energy such cleansing water  
And judge just so much that we may  
Fuse them into finest colours  
And splash them across the sky

Yet what precisely this "rainbow" consists of, or should consist of, remains open to disagreement. Chris Mann, Grahamstown poet and stated opponent of South Africa's "endemic yobbo and shebeen cultures," uses up one whole book explicitly trying to embody the "rainbow nation." In a series of poems collected together in *South Africans: A Set of Portrait Poems*, individual (and, presumably, exemplary) individuals from different origins and backgrounds are described against the social backdrop of the country around the time of the first elections. Thus, according to its blurb, the book provides a "series of portraits of people as individuals and in groups of individuals ... a glimpse of the astonishing diversity of the people who are South Africans."<sup>47</sup> The work is strongly imbued with — and the individuals who are subjects of poems tested against — liberal values. For Mann:

Business and political leaders in the new South Africa are living in an intellectual climate not unlike that of the Renaissance. The Medicis were part of a rising business class that cast aside the despotism of the medieval church and rediscovered their potential as humans. Many new South Africans, both black and white, are thrusting aside the despotism of apartheid, tribalism and Marxism and finding fresh creative energies.<sup>48</sup>

While intellectuals honor the emergence of hybrid subjectivity, the advertising of South Africa as a "rainbow nation" (with its overtones of mutual acceptance and accommodation) gives a falsely optimistic picture of how differences are experienced and negotiated — or not negotiated — on the

ground, in a scenario where disparities of wealth and competition over limited resources can become, literally, deathly. Horwitz notes that, as far as the rainbow nation is concerned, "in the absence of broader political direction it is left to advertising literally to create the new culture ... it's going to be a disaster because it's superficial."<sup>49</sup> Often a facile pluralism is assumed, where the individuals who emerge from different languages and cultures are regarded as now meeting on an equal footing, with scant regard for past or present inequalities. The individual is unproblematically placed within a "race" or "culture"; and literature is assumed to act out an embodiment, in diverse forms, of communication between individuals thus placed. This is in sharp contrast to poets like Rampolokeng or Motsapi, who illustrate how the "human" is a space intersected by material constraints and subject to the manipulations of the powerful: a world which, according to Rampolokeng, makes "humanity a stool / between parted buttocks of international conspiracy" ("Broederbondage"); where "death is the coldest currency / ... it foreign exchanges in the silence of finance's terms / dictates of THE NEW VAMPIRES" ("the tosh song trilogy").

Thus, while it is apposite to say that current struggles in South Africa are "emblematic of broader human issues," as Cronin does, his proviso that "we live in a world dominated by (capitalism) and far from solving the universal human problem, it is deeply aggravating them" is equally important.<sup>50</sup> At the moment, the individual's ability to find fulfillment or to act in any fully human way is curtailed by social and economic forces outside his or her control, and often globally distant. As Roshila Nair notes:

love still finds me here  
in the post-colonial hour,  
here  
among the politics of viruses  
and neo-liberal economic policies,  
here among the grand things  
that have curled around us  
and sprouted wings  
like god's heavenly creatures  
vainly trying to transport us to paradise

here in Fanon's no-man's land  
 we are beginning to learn  
 how to make everything  
 out of nothing again.

(“Fanon's land”)

### The New Century: Poetry as State Asset

In the last two decades, youth culture in South Africa is being reformulated in ways that are at times difficult for older generations (including older generations of writers and poets) to understand or evaluate.<sup>51</sup> In a recent article on youth culture in contemporary Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall tries to follow through some of the borrowings, interstices and intersections of the “loxion culcha” (location culture) of trendy black youth, through expressive and aesthetic choices such as fashion, music, magazines, and argot. With clear allegiances to musical forms such as rap, she suggests that this culture has a simultaneously admiring and parodic stance vis-à-vis African-American culture, where a “cut-and-paste appropriation of American music, language, and cultural practices is simultaneously deployed and refuted.”<sup>52</sup>

As has happened in the U.S. and Europe — and, indeed, is happening elsewhere in Africa — the intermingling of poetry and musical forms and lyrics has resulted in an upsurge of “spoken word” and slam poetry, as well as poetry associated with hip-hop artists and their music. Garvey Ite notes:

Call it celestial intervention or the need to add more spiritual aspects to entertainment, or something more tangible, like hip-hop trying to retrace its steps. Whatever the case, poets are crawling out of every corner of urban landscapes, holding phallic pens to challenge sky-scrapers. ... Jazz joints, college campuses, art galleries and quaint restaurants have been invaded. Those left out of the loop are scrambling to be invaded. It has become survival of the fittest — even for the word.<sup>53</sup>

Concomitant to this is a growing use of technology in poetry, both in performance and via the use of the internet, even among those poets — such as Nyezwa, Rampolokeng and Motsapi — who have on occasion criticized its dominance. The seminal importance of the “Word of Mouth” radio program initially hosted by Mvulane Mnisi (a.k.a. Rudeboy Paul) on Yfm Radio in spreading access to, and popularizing, poetry since 2003 is noteworthy.<sup>54</sup>

In such a scenario, there has been a certain amount of concern expressed — inter alia among older poets, writers, and cultural critics — about the American influence visible in this culture, as well as the seeming loss of political awareness or interest among the youth.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, it may be true that a type of youth culture and a constituent layer of younger poets have emerged unconcerned with politics in any form, as Nuttall indicates. This is however not borne out by the evidence in any general sense. Generalizations such as Matthew Krouse's that “gone is the poetry of political opposition. More and more writers tend towards a poetry of personal mystery” are exaggerated; for there is still a widespread belief, as the younger Gauteng poet Maakomele Manaka points out, that “we all have a message to do.”<sup>56</sup> Many, like Manaka, still hold fast to the possibility that they speak for a wider constituency.

It is daunting to try and delineate the contradictory aspects of current social and political awareness among poets. Mashile, presenter of the television program *L'attitude* and the first South African poet to win the Noma Award since Serote in 1993, says “The poet serves struggle to the minds of the people / Like fresh fruit to their mouths / Where poetry is sustenance / We grow strong” (“Poetry Africa, 2004”). Nevertheless, as in the past, there are divergent conceptions of what “sustenance” — or, indeed, “struggle” — in the present South African context means. Mashile herself observes that growing up as the child of exile parents in Providence means that she now has to negotiate “being too African for America, being too American for Africa.”<sup>57</sup> An iconic figure for a younger generation of urban, self-assertive, upwardly-mobile black women, Mashile constantly voices a poetry that demands gender and racial equality and awareness, and has not been reticent in appearing on public and institutional platforms. She has performed at the inauguration of President Thabo Mbeki, been a guest speaker on MTV Base alongside Tony Blair, and has been named one of South Africa's “most awesome women” by the South African edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its socially-minded impetus, at worst some of the poetry emerging from this trend approaches social and, specifically, women's issues through a rubric of slogans, clichés and a discourse of self-improvement not unlike that of Oprah- and *Cosmo*-speak. One need only quote from Mashile's “Sisters”:

I see the wisdom of eternities  
 In ample thighs  
 Belying their presence as adornments  
 To the temples of my sisters  
 Old souls breathe

156 Kelwyn Sole

In the comfort of chocolate thickness  
That suffocates Africa's angels  
Who dance to the rhythm  
Of the universe's womb  
Though they cannot feel  
Its origins in their veins

... I pray to the voices  
That whisper in my soft curves  
For the lionesses of my blood  
To hear the songs of the cool reeds

It is unclear the extent to which "loxion culcha" emanates from actual townships or "locations." There are indications even in Nuttall that it is more often than not the creation of a better-educated urban stratum who are striving to establish and authenticate a new, self-knowingly hybrid, version of African identity. At the same time, it is clear that certain forms of identity are regarded as more authentic than others, with "Africa" an enduring lodestone of values. Thus Kgafela oa Magogodi, in his poem "bohemia," excoriates the kind of person who

somersaults  
in its mother's womb  
pops out feet first  
no labour pains  
... it skips the nappy  
for a pair of jeans  
it suckles  
from a pint of beer  
... it is zimzim come to jozi  
... it is chasing fame  
in rocky street  
it is not foolish  
just learnt  
to speak pure english  
thru blocked nose<sup>59</sup>

To some extent, the fascination with fashion, technology, and other alluring forms of expression leads to some peculiar results, such as the appearance in a magazine fashion shoot of the politically-outspoken poet Righteous the Common Man.<sup>60</sup> In the face of this, it is sometimes hard to

Licking the Stage or Hauling Down the Sky? 157

register or understand all the different qualities the profile of "the poet" may signify to its users. Suffice it to say that this type of positioning by poets has brought a degree of criticism, even from their peers: Mbongeni Khumalo, for one, ironically comments: "I pay tribute to the writers / For misleading the people / Into fantasies" ("Tribute").

Nevertheless, in all forms of poetry there are those who continue to express themselves critically and openly about the social ills of South Africa, and the complacency among some of the youth. This can be seen not only on the printed page but among some of those who span the gap between poetry and hip-hop culture and music. Marlon Burgess, for example, also works as M.C. CaCo; and his poetry provides incisive commentary on sociopolitical issues, consumer culture, and the emergent political leadership:

We were in bondage  
now we are worse than we ever were.  
We keep ourselves afloat on a very thin dream  
Celebrating ten years of de"mock"racy  
And we thought our liberation was from racism?  
We're all in a cell we can't see  
As *Isidingo* snatches at *Generations* of those who owned the  
mines  
Wah wah revolution  
Wah wah revolution  
It must be *kak* confusing  
From being abused to doing the abusing.<sup>61</sup>

Some hip-hop groups and artists, such as Tumi and the Volume, Hymphatic Tabs, and the all-women group Goddessa, also strike similar attitudes.<sup>62</sup> Protests at social conditions frequently segue into entreaties towards the need for activism. Cape Town poet Khadija Heeger urges:

can you ask why we sit around clamouring to be just like the  
picture of whitey  
I'm talking about material economy and how it's used you see  
... I just keep hearing, what's that you're saying, "it's because I'm  
black you see!"  
no I don't  
ah but that's the famous copout for the dropout for the victim  
and though its true  
there is still no excuse for you to think that makes up for exemption  
from your own redemption

... are you ready to ask why, why not,  
 why you why me  
 why not change why not change ...

(“Black label”)<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, there is evidence that poetry is increasingly being viewed as a useful medium by both state and big business. Some of the older poets who emerged just before or just after liberation have alluded to this new trend in less than flattering terms: Rampolokeng, for example, is somewhat testy about its consequences (“now poetry is beauty pageant / jump the class fence & land in affluence / but what lies beyond the prettiness of the performance / when gangrene sets in after the applause?” [“Talking prose”]). Poetry is being put to use to attract a younger generation of South Africans to support and participate in business ventures. For example, oil company SASOL’s 10 percent equity ownership transaction *Inzalo*, which offered 19 million ordinary shares in SASOL to black people, featured prominent poets as part of their promotion drive. The SASOL group brand manager explains:

The team ... looked for a contemporary, powerful way to engage people emotionally .... The result was a campaign that relied on spoken word poetry and poster artwork. Designed to look nothing like traditional advertising, the theme of “a new beginning” was expressed using poetry and art from local poets Don Mattera, Lebo Mashile and Mac Manaka. Each poet recited their poetry in ten second television commercials and radio spots.<sup>64</sup>

The view that poetry is a tool to bring about political effects endures. The Lentswe Poetry Project, an initiative launched in 2005 with the assistance and backing of the television channel SABC2 as well as a number of poets such as Antjie Krog and Masoja Msiza, is an example of a poetry mobilized to underwrite versions of citizenship in congruence with the present government’s version of national identity and priorities. Set up, according to Msiza, because “in order for us to be successful as a nation, we need to know who we are as a people. We must learn about our heroes,” poetry was chosen as a medium especially suited to the purpose, because it is “the only form of art that is so easy, because you can do it as an individual.”<sup>65</sup> Lentswe has run competitions and workshops, poetry cafes, roadshows for poetry competitions, television platform, and prizes. Aimed, in the words of the television sponsor, to “stimulate the nation’s poetic side,” one of the earliest

competitions challenged poets to write poems on the theme of national holidays:

As a proud supporter of the arts, SABC2 seeks to stimulate the nation using this fresh, interactive development. Creative Africans with a penchant for dabbling in words are encouraged to submit their poems, which will be broadcast on the channel. ... The channel believes that through the Lentswe Poetry Project, we can build a more inspired, motivated and culturally aware nation.<sup>66</sup>

Generally speaking, nowadays a plethora of festivals and prizes has emerged aimed at rewarding the utterance of poets, and poetry is a presence on radio and television. The question one must ask of this is (as it always is) what kinds of utterances are rewarded. There is a discernible tendency by organs of the state and big business to turn to poetry in order to communicate marketing and political messages, as well as helping shape the subjectivity of the “ideal individual” required by the nation state and by capitalism.

The lyric poem in particular can be a powerful tool for implicitly modeling and shaping individual subjectivity, and hence social behavior. The crucial question, consequently, is the relation of this desired subjectivity to social issues in the country. In such an ambience, poetry may serve to play out versions of the “model citizen” required by the State in its current phase of transition and change; a transition that needs to build willing participants who know not only what should be changed, but what should not: in other words, encourage a literature which will foreground some social and individual desires and concerns, and be silent about others. This builds on the conviction, visible for much of South African history — especially the history of people striving for education and betterment — that literature (“the book”) is a considerable tool for self-improvement. Even Kgositsile, who had on his return from exile distanced himself from the notion that poetry should be functional to politics, is prepared to urge audiences in specific instances to “buy this book if you want to become a better person.”<sup>67</sup> In addition, this exemplary function seems to have occasioned an increasing emphasis on more traditional forms of lyrical poetry, as against the formal explorations of the 1990s. As early as 1993 Donald Parenzee warned that “Someone’s cutting off the rough edges of the struggle, / making a smoothly sinuous public edifice / ... Soon we’ll be able to visit the gallery / And pour our anger into erudite forms ...” (“Artifice”), and this tendency is becoming more apparent in the ways in which current poetry is being evaluated and reviewed.

## 160 Kelwyn Sole

The issue here could be put more starkly: poetry is being imbued with demands which are simply new versions of the “solidarity literature” regarded as outdated after liberation, albeit in a less obvious form.<sup>68</sup> As Sandile Ngidi notes in his poem “But Nations Love Their Poets”:

freedom has come my friend  
you are now truly free  
to write and sing as your heart pleases  
now pursue art for art’s sake

... it’s that age for your rage to be tamed  
your tongue can do with some English manners  
we no longer need your song friend  
your slogans have no place in freedom square  
... discard nostalgic fantasies about beloved Africa  
now the future is oily bright and as shiny as gold

... no! my friend, no shouting now  
for God’s sake be reasonable now  
no! you can’t jump the queue  
send me a proposal first  
but my hands are tied ... .

Reading contemporary South African poetry, one is left with a vertiginous sense of the contradictions of a country which is — to use the words of Achille Mbembe in a different context — “constructing itself out of heterogeneous fragments and fortuitous juxtapositions of images, memories, citations, and allusions drawn from its splintered histories.”<sup>69</sup> The problem, of course, is that the ideological and expressive baggage residing in these “splintered histories” does not seem to want to go away; certainly not merely through the promptings of imaginative literature written or otherwise disseminated by an educated stratum.

### Conclusion: W(h)ither South African Poetry?

In South Africa poetry has become a minor, but illustrative, site of disagreement over political, social, and psychological issues, as well as aesthetic and evaluative criteria. A potent ideological function still resides in the country’s poetry after liberation: and the ceaseless reiteration of “rainbow nation” clichés and celebrations of expressive freedom by critics mask the fact that there are powerful forces at work seeking to utilize the medium for a new

## Licking the Stage or Hauling Down the Sky? 161

hegemony in favor of the present ruling classes and their sanitized versions of individual subjectivity and cultural, as well as national, identity. It is possible to see contemporary events in poetry in optimistic terms, and stress its burgeoning use, and the many different interest groups and taste cultures that have been drawn to it. Some critics and poets — Baderoon would be the most vocal of these — are consistently optimistic about the current expansion of South African poetry in English, articulating a sense of energy and confidence in the burgeoning of the medium, while nevertheless pointing out some of its problems.<sup>70</sup> Others, though, inject a warning, at times pessimistic, note. Rampolokeng caustically wonders whether “we’re once more doing a monkey dance for colonialism”;<sup>71</sup> while Horwitz suggests that in South Africa

poetry won’t ever die but at the moment we don’t live in a time when there’s clarity, when there is a clear direction. It’s a time of individualism ... the sense of solidarity has broken down completely. There always were opportunists, but now it’s very open and unashamed. ... No doubt our arts will reflect that... .<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps the clearest reflection of this kind of anxiety is present in Sitas’ bitter prose poem “Lament for the dying of the word,” which describes the funeral of “a poetess who died”: someone who seems to symbolize literary and political values which the poet suggests are under threat in contemporary South Africa:

Her latest poetry book reviews itself. It is a hesitant and reflective account of recent declarations from critics who own the means of persuasion: apparently they had persuaded somebody, somewhere, that work like hers was out of joint with these times.

... One hundred cellphones ring in tandem. They all echo, like some epiphany, the voice of Mzwakhe Mbuli singing about peace in KwaZulu Natal.

... An imbongi bursts through the crowds orating in a language no one remembers.

... A slogan sings itself. To infinity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Poetry anthologist Denis Hirson qtd. in Robert Berold, "Interview: Denis Hirson," *South African Poets on Poetry*, ed. Robert Berold (Pietermaritzburg, Gecko, 2003) 79.
- <sup>2</sup> Andries Oliphant, "Inside Out: Spatial Retracings in Some Recent South African Poetry," *Sulfur* 44 (1999): 225-26.
- <sup>3</sup> Mark Gevisser, "The Poet with a Politician's Instincts," *Mail & Guardian* 20-26 Jan. 1995; Howard Barrell, "Thabo's Man to Debug the NIA," *Mail & Guardian* 29 Oct.-4 Nov. 1999; see also Mavimbela, "An African Renaissance Could Be Far More than a Dream," *Sunday Independent* 15 June 1997.
- <sup>4</sup> See Jeremy Cronin, "The Oral and Contemporary South African Poetry," New Spaces in South African Poetry Conference, Poetry International, Rotterdam, Oct. 1998, 2.
- <sup>5</sup> See Es'kia Mphahlele, "The Voice of Prophecy in African Poetry," *English in Africa* 6.1 (1979) 33-45, as well as remarks made by traditional *izimbongi* (praise poets) in Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983) 65, 76, 81. The syncretic nature of "Romantic" attitudes to literature in South African history is further discussed in my "John Higgins and the Pitfalls of Underdetermination," *Litnet* 2009 <[http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause\\_dir\\_news\\_item&news\\_id=63563&cause\\_id=1270](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&news_id=63563&cause_id=1270)>.
- <sup>6</sup> Sandile Dikeni, "Poetic Justice for Beautiful Baleka," *Cape Times* 12 Feb. 2001; Hermann Mashaba, "Entrepreneurs, Poets of the Private Sector, Can Flesh Out Freedom," *Cape Times* 19 July 2004; Babalo Ndenze, "Era of Poets Needed – Rasool," *Cape Times* 25 Sept. 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Motsapi, "Black Foam & Babble," *Mail & Guardian* 2-8 Nov. 2001; Chris Mann, "Towards a Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *English Academy Review* 12 (1995): 113; Prudence Chauke, "Lebo Mashile: Wordsmith Extraordinaire" <<http://www.jamati.com/online/books/lebo-mashile-wordsmith-extraordinaire/>>.
- <sup>8</sup> Lance Mogorosi Nawa, "Towards a National Patriotic Culture," *African National Congress* 2004, 15 May 2009 <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo21/patriotic.html>>.
- <sup>9</sup> Poetry sources are listed at the end of the article.
- <sup>10</sup> A few examples: Cronin, "The Boat, the Tap and the Leipzig Way," *African Communist* 130 (1992): 41-54; Cronin, "Mbeki Sets Off on Long Walk to the Future," *Sunday Independent* 13 Dec. 1998; Cronin, "Learning from the Dragon," *Sunday Times* 2 Dec. 2001; Helena Sheehan, "Interview with Jeremy Cronin," 24 Jan. 2002 <<http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehan/za/cronin02.htm>>; Cronin, "Freedom Has Brought a Frantic Scramble for a Slice of the Boardroom Cake," *Cape Times* 3 Oct. 2006; Anon., "Zuma plans to 'decentralise' power," *Mail & Guardian* 25-31 July 2008; Cronin, "'Prudent' Economic Policies Need to Change," *Cape Times* 19 Nov. 2008.

<sup>11</sup> I discuss poets' reactions to post-liberation economic policy more fully in my "The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculation, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa," *New Formations* 45 (2001/2002): 24-53.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Lesego Rampolokeng & Ike Mboneni Muila" in Berold, *South African Poets* 138; Heather Robertson, "Talented Kgositsile Back from Obscurity," *South* 4-10 Oct. 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Vonani Bila, "The Irrelevance of Prizes to Poetry," *New Coin* 41.2 (2005): 8. It could be argued that this relates to the prevalence of a wider official discourse and "multi-theorized rhetoric" which (in poet Mark Espin's words) "suggests radical argument, but which ultimately evades the dilemmas which confront us"; see Espin, "Ubuntu Bourgeoisie is Bogus," *Mail & Guardian* 9-15 May 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Johan van Wyk, "Interview with Dennis Brutus," *Alternation* 8.2 (2001): 213.

<sup>15</sup> Edjabe, citing Rajat Neogy in "The Dour Rhetoric and the Don'ts of Nation-building and the Hungry Eye of the Poet Revolutionaries," *Rhodes Journalism Review* 24 (2004): 60-61.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Vonani Bila" in Berold, *South African Poets* 156.

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Mike Alfred, "Writer Who Opened Up Galaxies for Others Moves On to More Prosaic Concerns," *Sunday Independent* 12 Sept. 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Berold qtd. in Andrew Johnson, "Young Poets Brush Aside Poverty to Give Language a Shot of Something Stimulating," *Sunday Independent* 7 Nov. 1997. Kabomo qtd. in Nadine Botha, "In a Word," *Mail & Guardian* 30 July-5 Aug. 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Rolf Solberg, "Interview: Mongane Wally Serote," *Reflections: Perspectives on Writing in Post-apartheid South Africa*, ed. Rolf Solberg and Malcolm Hacksley (Grahamstown: NELM, 1996) 65-66; see Cronin's remarks in Robert Berold, "Interview: Jeremy Cronin" in Berold, *South African Poets* 128, 133-34.

<sup>20</sup> Bila, "This Poetry You Must Understand," *No Free Sleeping*, ed. Donald Parenzee, Fred Vonani Bila, and Alan Finlay (Johannesburg: Botsotso, 1998) 43.

<sup>21</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994) 3.

<sup>22</sup> Dirk Klopper, "Review of *The Lemon Tree & Other Poems and Flesh and the Flame*," *New Coin* 31.2 (1995): 76.

<sup>23</sup> Keorapetse Kgositsile, "Crossing Borders Without Leaving" *Staffrider* 9.4 (1991): 7.

<sup>24</sup> Including the "struggle" poet Siphos Sepamla, who in 1993 opined that South Africa "will still be concerned with politics for a while. But later on, one hopes, we shall become a normal society, in which writers will be concerned with values of human justice and freedom applicable all over the world"; see Thengani Ngwenya, "Interview with Siphos Sepamla: 2 Sept. 1993," *English Academy Review* 11 (1994): 81.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Finlay, "Kotaz Interview – Mxolisi Nyezwa," *New Coin* 44.1 (2008): 24.

<sup>26</sup> See Albie Sachs, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," *Exchanges*, ed. Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk (Pietermaritzburg, U of Natal P, 1991) 117-125.

<sup>27</sup> Lionel Abrahams, *The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1996) 11.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Watson, "Stephen Watson" in Brown and van Dyk 89.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of this formulation in South African poetry reviewing are overwhelming. For an illustrative example, see Nicholas Meihuizen, "'Shaping Lines': New South African Poetry 1994 -1995," *English Academy Review* 12 (1995): 87-88.

<sup>30</sup> Abrahams, *The Democratic Chorus and Individual Choice* 26 (emphasis in original).

<sup>31</sup> Shaun de Waal, "Poetry: Cycles of Life," *Mail & Guardian* 2-8 Feb. 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Mashile and Baderoon qtd. in Brent Meersman, "Stage versus page," *Mail & Guardian* 29 June-5 July 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Joanna Hemsley and Roy Blumenthal, ed., *Of Money, Mandarins and Peasants* (Johannesburg: Homeless Talk, 2000) 89.

<sup>34</sup> Finlay, "'Kotaz Interview'" 25.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters" in Berold, *South African Poets* 124-25.

<sup>36</sup> Berold qtd. in Marita Kritzing, "Open to the World," *Mail & Guardian* 20-26 June 2003. For Cronin, see the debate between Cronin and Breyten Breytenbach in *Sunday Independent* 9 Aug. and 23 Aug. 1998. Perhaps the most articulate analysis of the relationship between personal experience and what she calls "structural reality" is to be found in Press. See her remarks in Vicki Bertram, "Karen Press in Conversation," *PN Review* 22.1 (2000): 46.

<sup>37</sup> Mogale qtd. in Brown and van Dyk *Exchanges* 46; for Bila, see Berold, "Interview: Vonani Bila" 155.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Mzi Mahola" in Berold, *South African Poets* 52.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *SouthAfrica.info*, Published for Brand South Africa by Big Media Publishers <<http://www.southafrica.info>>, and *ZAR.co.za*, ed. CoZania, Jan. 2007 <<http://www.zar.co.za>>.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Lewis, "'This Land South Africa': Rewriting Time and Space in Postapartheid Poetry and Property," *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001): 2100.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Karen Press" in Berold, *South African Poets* 20.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Berold, "Interview: Ari Sitas" in Berold, *South African Poets* 70.

<sup>43</sup> Qtd. in Gwen Ansell, "A slice of revolution and of revolution betrayed," *Cue* 29 June 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Andries Oliphant, introduction, *At the Rendezvous of Victory & Other Stories*, ed. Andries Oliphant (Cape Town: Kwela, 1999) 8.

<sup>45</sup> Qtd. in Goodenough Mashego, "About Goodenough Mashego," *Timbila* 4 (2003): 76.

<sup>46</sup> Cronin, "The oral and contemporary" 1.

<sup>47</sup> Back cover blurb of Chris Mann, *South Africans: a set of portrait-poems* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Mann, "Without Patrons, Malls Will Be Our Monuments," *Business Day* 6 Jan. 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters" 125.

<sup>50</sup> Qtd. in Charlotte Bauer, "Poet with a Talent for Propaganda," *Weekly Mail* 26 Oct.-1 Nov. 1990.

<sup>51</sup> As the Comaroffs aver: "youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, unchartered borderlands along which the global meets the local. This is often made manifest in the elaboration of creolized argots, of street-speak and cybertalk, that give voice to imaginative worlds very different from those of the parental generation"; see Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 18.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 442.

<sup>53</sup> Garvey Ite, "Talk about it," *Sunday Times* 20 July 2003. Napo Masheane, a member of the poetry group Feelah Sistah, puts this more cynically: "We're living in a society where everyone with dreadlocks or an Eryka Badhu headpiece calls themselves poets," qtd. in Botha, "In a Word."

<sup>54</sup> See Dikato Mametse, "Voice of Azania," *Mail & Guardian* 11-17 July 2003; Janine Walker, "I see, I hear, I say what I like," *Mail & Guardian* 19-25 Sept. 2003.

<sup>55</sup> See Krouse, "SA's changing culture," *Mail & Guardian* 5-11 Jan. 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew Krouse, "Talkin' loud," *Mail & Guardian* 14-20 June 2002. Nuttall makes much of an informant who says, "We understand where we come from, but I am not interested in politics and about what happened in the 80s because I wasn't there. And even if I was, I live for the future." She believes his words "mark him as a public representative of 'the now' in South Africa," but her drawing of general conclusions from one interview is clearly unwarranted; see Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self" 439; Maakomele Manaka, interview, *Take Five*, SATV1, 18 July 2003. In the same interview, Manaka states, without irony, "I speak what the people speak."

<sup>57</sup> Lebo Mashile, interview, *Curious Culture*, SATV2, 5 Mar. 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Chauke, "Lebo Mashile."

<sup>59</sup> "Zim-zim" is a term of abuse originally meaning "cannibal"; "jozi" is Johannesburg. Rocky Street is a main thoroughfare in Yeoville, Johannesburg; a suburb is regarded as a trendy synecdoche for the spirit of the "new South Africa" in the first few years after liberation.

<sup>60</sup> See "Fashion: Threads Wrap da Poets' *Y Mag* 44 (Apr.-May 2003): 83.

<sup>61</sup> Qtd. in Suzy Bell, "Spoken Word Festival Mixes Rap, Poetry and Politics," *Cape Times* 3 Aug. 2004. "Kak" is an Afrikaans word meaning "shit"; "Generations" and "Isidingo" are popular television soap operas that have somewhat different weightings in the racial composition of their audiences.

<sup>62</sup> For further discussion, see Adam Haupt, *Stealing Empire* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2008) 142-215.

<sup>63</sup> Khadija Heeger, "Black Label," *Pambazuka News Weekly Forum for Social Justice in Africa* 292 (2007) <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/books/39934>>. Thanks to Lee-Ann Pilleggi for drawing this poet to my attention.

<sup>64</sup> "SASOL's Inzalo campaign is pure poetry" *Marketing Mix* <<http://www.marketingmix.co.za/pebble.asp?relid=2720>>.

<sup>65</sup> Qtd. in Riekje Pelgrim "Turn Up the Vocals," *Mail & Guardian* 13-19 Jan. 2006.

<sup>66</sup> "SABC Looking for Poets," 6 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.represent.co.za/sabc-2-looking-for-poets.htm>>. National holidays targeted include Heritage Day, AIDS Day and Valentine's Day.

<sup>67</sup> Kgositsile, address, release of Gabeba Baderoon's *The Dream in the Next Body*, The Boekehuis, Johannesburg, 20 Apr. 2005.

<sup>68</sup> See endnote 28.

<sup>69</sup> Mbembe is talking about the spatial and stylistic architecture of post-liberation Johannesburg; see Mbembe, "The Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture* 16.3 (2004): 399.

<sup>70</sup> For example, see Amatoritsero Ede, "Interview: Beauty in the harsh lines," *Sentinel Poetry (Online)* 37 (2005) <<http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/1205/interview.htm>>; and Baderoon, "The State of Verse," *Mail & Guardian* 29 June-5 July 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Lesego Rampolokeng, "Interview," *The h.a.l.f. ranthology*, Ambush-street Corner Mixes, Mehlo-Maya, 2002.

<sup>72</sup> Berold, "Interview: Botsotso Jesters" 124-26.