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Reading emotion, reading joy: South Africa's literary non-scenes

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ABSTRACT

#Fallism has taken South African literature to a precipice. A growing mistrust in the country's postcolonial politics and the continuing physical and economic oppression of black bodies – captured in the spirit of #RhodesMustFall – has led to a questioning of the rational desire to 'put into words'. The radical social and political change required, critics imply, can no longer be adequately understood through the certainty of the written form: The path to a true decolonial future is in live art. This paper uses these suggestions as a springboard but refuses to accept the 'death of the text' that is implied. Rather I utilise interventions from the 1980s to once again encourage the academy to recognise the power of 'literary non-scenes' where the performed and the written interact. Moreover, I argue that scholars should begin to read for emotion and, in so doing, open the space for the expression of Black joy.

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The death of the text

*Today i am not dressed for the funeral i wear
the yellow dress & laugh with all my teeth
(‘self-portrait with yellow dress’ by Safia Elhillo, 2015)*

South African poetry, and the country's written literature more generally, has long been politicized. When referring specifically to Black writing during the apartheid years but making a point that remains pertinent for other forms, acclaimed poet Serote (2000, p. 149) is perhaps right to say that 'everything we did [had to be] highly politicized'. However, Patel (1990, p. 192) has also observed how Serote's own work was marked by a 'double commitment' to political expression *and* aesthetic value. Meanwhile, I have previously warned of the need to look within South African texts for expressions of an author's private emotions alongside their political angst (Penfold, 2016). There is a clear problem, I argue, when politics is all that we are tempted to read in a piece of literature.

This point is, of course, nothing new. It has been debated multiple times before and applies to many other countries across the African continent and its diaspora (see Gates, 1985; Obioma, 2016; Wastberg, 1968). We just need reminding occasionally because, in

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a country which boasts of a history as turbulent, and as all-consuming as South Africa's, it is understandable that those separate threads – the political and the literary – often run so close together as to be almost indistinguishable. Moreover, it should hardly be a surprise when at those knottier moments of historical significance everything gets increasingly entwined. Moments of political contestation become easily appropriated into moments of literary importance: they occasion new publications or pieces of criticism that spark intense debate and offer the potential to change fundamentally the direction of the nation's literary canon. The most famous occurred on the cusp of South Africa's democratic transition when Sachs (1991, p. 187) highlighted the need for a new literature which embraced ambiguity and contradiction and corrected the prevailing tendency to focus solely on 'fists and spears and guns'. For some, this was much needed; for others, it contributed 'immensely to the destruction of a very interesting cultural undertaking' (Horn, 2000, p. 38). More recently, we can consider the wider debate sparked by the publication of J.M. Coetzee's (1999) *Disgrace*. This was a novel that first reflected the slow demise of the reconciliatory politics of the new Rainbow Nation, replaced towards the end of the 1990s by a growing sense of frustration and dissatisfaction.

A similar degree of political and literary knottiness is evident today. In the wake of the #RhodesMustFall student protests, State Capture, and COVID-19 restrictions that arguably exacerbated racial inequality, a new corpus of 'post-rainbow' literature has emerged in the political sciences that depicts the start of a certain revisionism: one that disputes the usually stark divisions drawn between the apartheid past and post-apartheid present. Freidman (2021) and Mpfu-Walsh (2021) have, independently, traced the numerous ways that the technologies of apartheid remain present. Both suggest that the limits of South Africa's democratic transition have been reached and that a new 'dialectic of change' (Freidman, 2021, p. 152) is required if South Africa is to realise the free and equal society promised in 1994. Indeed, Mpfu-Walsh (2021, p. 160) calls for 'a new republic altogether [. . .] a radical reformation of South Africa's very constitutional foundations'. He continues to declare:

Grand policy shifts are not enough. Nor can new political parties turn the new apartheid's tides. Protest is insufficient, even if it spans the length and breadth of the country. The new apartheid will also be impervious to constitutional tinkering. Before South Africa can eradicate the new apartheid, it must reconstitute itself. (Mpfu-Walsh, 2021, p. 160)

In simpler terms, the existing means of conducting political change has proved ineffective. A new political vocabulary is required.

Meanwhile, if we turn our gaze from the political to the cultural, we see how Mpfu-Walsh's conclusions are echoed almost exactly. Catherine Boulle's and Jay Pather's recent edited collection *Acts of Transgression* offers a study of live art in contemporary South Africa. Their introduction seeks to explain the proliferation of performance within the #RhodesMustFall movement and suggests the radical social change called for in the protests marries with the 'urgent, risky, edgy, provocative' (Boulle & Pather, 2019, p. 9) nature of live art. They observe, in the current political moment, a need for emotion to 'spill out beyond the confines of "rational" response, rupturing attempts of the kind that have become synonymous with South Africa's transitional reconciliation period, to neutralise expressions of pain or to silence outpourings of anger' (Boulle & Pather, 2019, p. 2). Much as Mpfu-Walsh demands a new political vocabulary, so too Boulle and Pather

(2019, p. 2) demand a new cultural language, a 'corporeal vocabulary of seepage and excess' that will cut through the layers of obfuscation characterizing South Africa's post-colonial situation to date.

But, if these demands for a new vocabulary are credible and if Boulle and Pather (2019, p. 2) are correct in asserting that 'talking has proven ineffectual', what does that mean for the future of written literature in South Africa? How do we overcome the current 'backlash against the rationalist imperative to "put into words"' (Boulle & Pather, 2019, p. 2)? This article will attempt to answer these questions and provide some tentative conclusions. In so doing, I will offer an implicit critique of the current situation in English literary studies. I will challenge the academy to recognise informal spaces of literary production – so-called 'literary non-scenes' (Kyle Allen, personal communication, 2020) – and to, once again, overcome the tendency to read solely the political.

Lessons from the past

A prominent literary critic lamented recently during an online discussion that the South African academy was guilty of frequently remaking points and claiming them anew. While I do not intend to appraise the merits of this viewpoint here – this article does, indeed, exemplify the occasional need to 'remake' – the claim does offer a useful lesson. When confronted with important new interventions it is worthwhile considering them critically: Just how important are they? Where do they sit alongside histories past? By doing so, we do not necessarily undermine the validity of the intervention being made but can perhaps supplement it with new understandings. Such was the case with Sachs's (1991) earlier cited pronouncement. In many ways it said little demonstrably different to Njabulo Ndebele's (1986) previous encouragement for Black South African writers to rediscover the ordinary. However, when aligned with Ndebele, a certain level of nuance becomes discernible. Sachs was never advocating the total removal of politics from art, as many of his detractors claimed, but rather suggesting we embrace protest literature as one form amongst many (Penfold, 2017). Ndebele's emphasis on the imagination and the quotidian provides one additional possibility.

A similar approach is useful when responding to Boulle's and Pather's claims about contemporary South African culture. On the surface their claims seem to question the place of written literature as a form that can depict reliably current South African reality. However, if we view this through a Janus-faced lens, the answer is rather more complex. Indeed, I argue that Boulle and Pather should not be interpreted as signalling the death of the text. Rather, when considered with an eye on the past, what they reveal is a need for the academy to recognise that there is a new cultural struggle enfolding. In response, the literary establishment must alter its approach to South African writing and recognise new cultural archives.

Such a questioning of written literature is not without precedent. In Nigeria, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* famously reveals his mistrust of overt protest in literature while, closer to home and even more explicitly, we can see how a series of such proclamations occurred throughout South Africa's apartheid period. One noteworthy example occurred following the demise of Black Consciousness in the late 1970s. If Soweto Poetry had been there to present a political challenge, then one could reasonably question its utility given Alvarez-Pereyre's (1984) rather blunt appraisal: 'one

has to be frank: South African committed poetry [of the 1970s] has no more effect on the life or death of the South African government than pinpricks on a hippopotamus's hide' (p. 264). Meanwhile, the most explicit pondering of the death of the text occurred a few years later as South Africa's writers struggled to do justice to the violent States of Emergency of 1985 and 1986.¹ It was suggested at the Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa, held in Johannesburg between 4–6 September 1986, that writers in South Africa should, for the time being, remain silent. Indeed, Chapman (1988) subsequently went as far as to cite some credible possibilities: He criticizes Fugard's (1978) production *A Place with the Pigs* for a prevailing sense of universalism and Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* (Gordimer, 1987) for its self-indulgence.

Chapman's playful suggestions aside, however, neither of these moments resulted in the death of the text or serious consideration that should be the case. And it also must be remembered that much like the contemporary situation referenced by Boulle and Pather, these examples occurred during the 1980s, a decade that was itself a time of heightened performance (Penfold, 2015). However, I make these reflections not to dismiss the questions raised by Boulle and Pather but rather because the responses made following the 1986 Jubilee Conference hold valuable lessons in how we can respond to the current backlash against the writer's desire to put into words. First, they prompt us to challenge how we view the written text. Second, they force us our to reconsider how we read literary texts.

Challenging the written text

An assumed binary can perhaps be detected in my commentary so far. On the one hand we witness the transgressive and spontaneous nature of live art and other non-scripted performance genres; on the other, the considered rationality of written texts. Such a dichotomy has long held sway in discussions of African literature but, as Barber (2005) notes, it fails to adequately capture the true dynamics of the continent's culture. Indeed, within South African literature, attempts to reconcile these forms as one are longstanding. We see in Black South African poetry, for example, a consistent embrace of the oral tradition. Mzamane (1984) and Finnegan (2012) are just two critics who highlight the presence of the *izibongo* tradition while Gunner (1989) went as far as to observe a new genre of 'print performance' (p.49) in the poetry of Alfred Qabula and other worker poets in the 1980s. South African theatre, meanwhile, has long moved closer to live art than scripted performance given its embrace of spontaneity and audience participation (Coplan, 1986; Peterson, 1990). Even short story writers have attempted to capture the unwritten with Chris MacKenzie (2002, p. 347) reminding us of the 'oral-styled' work of Bessie Head and the 'oral-derived' nature of stories by AC Jordan and Mtutuzeli Matshoba.

It is this relationship between the written and performative that Cronin (1988) reminded us in the wake of the 1986 Jubilee Conference. While Cronin was not responding directly to the debates held at the conference itself, it is obvious from the outset that his intervention is motivated by a discomfort with the conventional academic practice that appears to be represented at the conference. This is a practice that appears to consider literature and, in Cronin's specific case, poetry, as a purely written form. However, it is simultaneously a practice that proved 'more or less entirely inappropriate

to deal with much contemporary black poetry in South Africa [during the 1980s]' (Cronin, 1988, p. 12). He validates his assertion by demonstrating how written collections, 'the book and the small magazine [while] perhaps not entirely insignificant modes of presentation and reception for this poetry [...] are mostly secondary and exceptional' (Cronin, 1988, p. 12). Instead, poetry can only be understood fully when considered within the context of its primary modes of reception and analysed 'in its relationship to a range of traditional and contemporary oral and verbal practices' (Cronin, 1988, p. 12). To quote at length:

To talk about this poetry, written over the last two or three years, we must contextualize it within the rolling wave of semi-insurrectionary uprisings, mass stayaways, political strikes, consumer boycotts, huge political funerals (involving anything up to seventy thousand mourner a time), factory occupations, rent boycotts, school and university boycotts, mass rallies, and physical confrontation over barricades with security forces. (Cronin, 1988, p. 12)

It is within these spaces, where the division between written and performative is understood merely as a 'scholastic point' (Cronin, 1988, p. 22), that we see the enduring utility of poetry at a time of political crisis. Indeed, as Cronin observes, the poetry produced in these spaces succeeded in meeting the objectives of the day: 'In short, through it all, liberated zones are being opened up in industrial ghettos and rural locations, where the people are beginning tenuously it is true – to govern themselves in this land of their birth' (Cronin, 1988, p. 22). However, this utility risked being overlooked by the academy because of its insistence on convention and its failure to adequately recognise the informal spaces of poetry production and expression which Cronin highlights – what I term here the 'literary non-scenes' that lie outside the usual domain of formal academic criticism.²

The first lesson we can draw from the past, therefore, and apply to the contemporary state of crisis is to refuse the distinction between the written and performative. Instead, if we are to successfully refute the claim made by Boule and Pather, we must first broaden our gaze and pay attention to those informal spaces of crossover where the forms two co-exist. I think, for example, of poetry slams, Open-Mic nights, and social media streams alongside the rallies and protest marches Cronin describes. Unfortunately, however, there remains a stubborn refusal to give these literary non-scenes the widespread attention they deserve within the academy and the literary establishment aligned with it. This is the situation in both teaching and research. For example, a quick review of the undergraduate curriculum published online at 11 of South Africa's leading universities reveals little content dedicated to live poetry. Indeed, the poet and academic Kobus Moolman observed that not only is live poetry neglected in taught material, but contemporary South African poetry is more generally (personal communication, 2021). The traditional Anglophone canon remains prominent, thus continuing the enduring parallels between the South African university model and the British university model, recently critiqued by Phillips (2022), which arguably sparked today's current moment of decolonial crisis.³ Within research a similar picture emerges though one that is slightly more nuanced. In South Africa, as well as Africa more broadly, there is some light being shed on live poetry and literary non-spaces characterised by Ashley Harris's special issue of *English Studies in Africa* (2018) and interventions by critics including Mirjam de Bruijn and Loes Oudenhuisen (2021). What remains characteristic of many of these studies, though, is

a continued embrace of the term 'performance poetry' which not only exacerbates the binary construction between the written and performative but led to its invalidation as a form worthy of study and continues an instance of 'epistemic violence' which as Raphael d'Abdon (d'Abdon, 2018, p. 49) observes,

unfolds through the racial micro-invalidations which are produced each time academia and media use the terms 'performance poet' and 'performance poetry' in relation to black poets and their work, without being aware of the negative implications of this. This pernicious ignorance is exposed and addressed, and so too is the conceptual system underscoring an approach that sees poetry as synonymous with the written word and which privileges the written over the oral, thereby relegating 'performance poetry' to an indefinite space, existing somewhere outside the national written traditions.

What I want to underline is not just that the distinction between written and performative which the academy frequently perpetuates is at best mistaken and at worst pernicious. Many published poets, with admitted exceptions, are also live artists while many poets who practice the live form also aspire to the written but are held back by economic constraints or the changing culture of literary institutions. The crucial point, however, is that we must be open to viewing the written word as at once performative: it is the spaces where those forms co-exist and merge to which I draw our attention. For it is here, at the moment of performance, where it is possible to see the emotion, the unpredictability, and the radical process of release that might disrupt 'narratives of certainty' and answer Boule's and Pather's call to engage 'with the political ferment of the time' (Boule & Pather, 2019, p. 2).

Something in-creation

It is not enough to legitimate the continued use of written literature in today's moment of decolonial crisis based on its possible performance. Rather, we need to explore how that status becomes effective. What do we do with our presence within those literary non-scenes? The answer again lies in past interventions from similar moments of crisis and in Michael Chapman's response to the 1986 Jubilee Conference in particular. Here, in his article 'The Liberated Zone' (Chapman, 1988) he challenges us not solely on what to read, but how.

Writing, as I mention above, during the heights of militarised apartheid in the late 1980s, Chapman reflects on an increasingly dichotomised view of South African writing that was highlighted by a debate being had between the poets Lionel Abrahams and Jeremy Cronin. Conducted in the pages of the *Weekly Mail* during 1987, we see, on the one hand, a view (Abrahams') where the aesthetic and imaginative should remain dominant; on the other, a perspective (Cronin's) which finds merit in 'in acts of opposition, in symbols of oppositional culture, in confrontational performance, in the affirmation of mimesis where images are related directly to life and, therefore, have narrative power in the real social world' (Chapman, 1988, p. 27). Chapman is not, however, explicitly drawn to one side of the debate or the other, beyond warning the reader against simply following the prevailing 'intolerance of any opposition to current oppositional images' (Chapman, 1988, p. 41). Instead, what I find notable, is that in seeking to understand the role culture should play within the struggle politics of the

time, Chapman's focus is not so much on what the writer writes, but in how the reader reads. And crucially, this is an act which should be constantly alive to different imaginative possibilities; reading texts as a process and not an 'archived product'; reading in a way that does not presuppose answers.

The second lesson we can learn from the past, therefore, is that, during a time of decolonial emergency when the cultural situation is caught in an increasingly intense binary, the focus needs to be on the reader; our ability to stay alive to something fluid within the texts we consume, something perpetually in-creation. And, though the terms of the debate have somewhat changed, today's literary environment does risk echoing the polarisation of the 1980s. To the right, there is the view that values commercial success and the conglomeration of marketable themes. We witness this, for example, in the steady loss of progressive publishers, the unabated rise of corporate publishing houses, and the dominance of genre fictions such as romance and crime. While this is not unexpected and is undoubtedly associated with the prevailing neo-liberal orientation of the South African economy since the transition of apartheid, it was neatly summed up in 2013 when Paul Mashatile, South Africa's then Minister of Arts and Culture, 'introduced the notion of the economic importance of culture, as a source of employment and development' (Sachs, 2021, p. 61). Meanwhile, to the left, we have the view that culture should take on the form of what Nomusa Makhubu calls "'art-rage", a play on the word "outrage"' (qtd. eAfrika, 2021, p. 108). It should depict the fury towards the corruption of those in power and the continued marginalisation and devaluing of working-class Black bodies that has characterised the mindset of South Africa's younger population since the Marikana Massacre of 2012 and the #Fallist protests three years. It is this latter view that resonates with the radical and irrational outputs advocated by Boule and Pather, and once again underscores how to understand the present we should turn to the past.

Positing the future

The preceding sections of this article have, I hoped, succeeded in demonstrating the parallels between today's decolonial crisis, occasioned by the #RhodesMustFall movement of 2015, and earlier episodes of the anti-apartheid struggle, the 1980s' States of Emergency in particular. When faced with a cultural turning point, as we are with the current choice between continuing with the rational written content that has proven itself to have limited political impact or embracing the irrationality and spontaneity of live art, it is worth analysing how a previous generation of writers and critics responded to similar dilemmas. In doing so, two valuable lessons become apparent. First, the answer is not to shun one form or another but rather to recognise their moments of oneness; in this instance, those times when the written word is performed. Second, that readers must refuse fixed readings and instead approach texts in a way that is 'open to anything in the event of its happening' (Chapman, 1988, p. 41). Thus, the second part of this article seeks to demonstrate how we can apply these insights and, in so doing, propose a substantial realignment to how South African and, by extension, African literature more broadly is consumed.

The first lesson is perhaps the easiest to implement. I described above the limited value placed on literary non-scenes by the academy and literary establishment. That, however, should not deny the proliferation of these very same spaces where the written and

performed do co-exist. Live poetry represents an integral part of South Africa's cultural fabric. To briefly survey Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town – three of the country's main cultural hubs – is to encounter regular live poetry sessions and events.⁴ Pretoria, for example, sees the No Camp Chairs Poetry Picnic held on the second Sunday of every month at the Union Buildings while its organiser, Vangi Gantsh, also arranges similar sessions on an ad-hoc basis outside the South African State Theatre. Bashonga's (2015) research, meanwhile, notes Spoken Sessions' regular open mic events in Hatfield, though their activity has receded in recent years. Similarly, the Brave Spoken Youth project was launched in 2021 to help bridge the gap between spoken word and Johannesburg's teenage population. Indeed, despite being known as the most political and aggressive location for live poetry, Johannesburg's scene has been responsible for the emergence of notable live poets such as Lebo Mashile, Natalia Molbats, Myesha Jenkins, and Philippa Yaa de Villiers (Bashonga, 2015, p. 53). De Villiers has also heavily promoted the ZAPP Poetry Foundation which has worked to transform poetry education in local schools through an understanding of performance poetry as an indigenous knowledge system. Its activities have been replicated in the Cape Town area by Pieter Odendaal's inZync organisation. Finally, across the country, Word 'n' Sound arrange regular poetry slams either online, using Facebook live, or at numerous physical venues: The annual Slam For Your Life competition is its headline event.

Much of the material performed at these events is, in the first instance, written. Moreover, and despite acknowledging Kyle Allen's remarks (personal communication, 2020) that many of the poets he has worked with have never performed their work, the desired outcome for many of the live poets who perform at them is to appear in print. The fact that much of the material published in smaller literary journals, such as *New Coin*, and by independent presses including Deep South and uHlanga had its origins in performance, adds credence to this point.⁵ Thus, the 'scholastic' division between written and performed that Cronin (1988, p. 22) observed in the 1980s remains just as relevant today. To truly understand much of the written literature we encounter once again requires us to contextualise it within what remains its primary, needless to say performative, mode of reception. The problem, it would seem, remains with the academy and not necessarily literature. As uHlanga Press's Nick Mulgrew underlined, these performative 'non-scenes' – poetry slams, open mic nights, social media events etc. – still dominate; they 'need to be studied, and the gap in academic understanding needs to be filled with urgency' (personal communication, 2021). If we, as an academy and literary establishment, heed this advice, we will open-up the possibility of the written form co-existing with, and not being replaced by, Pather and Boule's advocacy of the live, its spontaneity and unpredictability.

As I suggest above, however, it is not enough to merely acknowledge the enduring importance of these performative non-scenes. The second lesson we learn from Chapman is that, within these spaces, we must understand the texts we encounter as being in a perpetual sense of 'in-creation' and read them as such. Indeed, Pather and Boule are not merely advocating for forms of literary production that embrace the irrational but, by extension, call into question today's primary mode of literary consumption: reading. How we read is itself a rational act, exemplified by Evenson's (2004, p. 96) assertion that to have an 'unmediated experience' when reading is impossible because 'we read from contexts, from positions, and as we read we consider books we've read before, books we've heard about, movies, classes we've taken, people around us, the dog down the street, etc'. And

while it is perhaps too far to suggest a form of reading that operates totally outside this wider frame of reference, it is apparent that within the performative space expressions of the irrational do become more prevalent. As Brodie (2020, p. 407) writes in relation to stand-up comedy, but equally applicable to the performance of live poetry:

The audience's reactions to the performance on stage comprise part of the overall stand-up comedy event. The text produced is collaborative, immersive, and ephemeral. It is dialogic, both in the narrow sense of two speakers, the stand-up and the audience, in a complementary dyad, and in the Bakhtinian sense of multiple voices. The audience is also audience to the others in the audience, and reactions build on each other, contrast, and further shape the text in ever increasingly complex ways.

Part of the performance, therefore, and part of its reception, are both outside of one's control, irrational. The act is a discursive one operating on various levels between performer and audience. As such, we see how affect responds to affect and, therefore, opens the possibility of 'reading for emotion' which, as Parkinson (2015, p. 168) notes, involves attempting to decipher 'the ambiguous, even ambivalent emotional politics of texts', and recognising the emotional state of the writer, their interaction with the reader, and the complex structure of affective response occurring amongst us as an audience. But what does this new way of reading let us gain? Why is it so vital to enact today given the current decolonial crisis in which South Africa finds itself?

Reading for emotion, reading for joy

Boule and Pather's advocacy of live art rests on the urgency, spontaneity, and unpredictability it offers as a form. It is such a restless dynamism, they argue, in excess of the cold rationality of the written word, which is required to constitute the new cultural language of the post-rainbow South African nation. However, by reading for emotion, these requirements are likewise met in a way that does not require the death of the text. Much as live art is 'open to anything in the event of its happening' (Boule & Pather, 2019, p. 9), so too reading for emotion opens the possibility to approach written texts in ways that do not prescribe 'what we "expect" to see' (Parkinson, 2015, p. 4). Though the words stay the same across performances, and while the emotion staged in the text remains present, by centering a reading practice that relies on *networks* of affective response, the effect of that emotion will differ from scene to scene. With changing audiences, and with emotions acting as 'socio-political markers' (Parkinson, 2015, p. 17) of each particular 'community', so too the layers of emotional meaning to be found within each recital will vary. We can, for example, witness how a performance within the political hotbed of Johannesburg's live poetry scene will read very differently from the more laid back, experimental scenes of Pretoria (Bashonga, 2015). Furthermore, and here again I refer to Brodie's understandings of stand-up, the alternate readings of these texts can themselves effect the composition of individual pieces as the '[artist] evaluates the audience's contributive evaluation for immediate improvisatory adaptation' (Brodie, 2020, p. 409). Indeed, while attending a series of events in Johannesburg in 2022, I was struck by how subtle variations in tone, emphasis, pace, and pitch, occasioned by the changing emotions of individual

audiences, would combine to alter the tenor of any one poem: ensuring it remains a text written yet in-creation.

Reading for emotion, though, does not just maintain the relevance of written texts within today's literary climate. It fundamentally alters how we understand the Black literary canon which, throughout history, has been interpreted predominately through a lens of struggle.⁶ This has, after all, arguably reached a zenith today with Mbembe (2017) criticizing the contemporary decolonial struggle for an over reliance on what he calls the 'politics of viscosity'; a belief that protesters place the body at the forefront of their radicalism. However, in response to Mbembe's criticisms – founded on the belief that an emphasis on the body delineates 'the terms for imagining and articulating possibilities of intersubjectivity and the terms of decolonization more broadly' (Hardy, 2018, p. 54) – the South African writer Hardy (2018) has sought to propose a new 'poetics of viscosity'. This, quite apart from reducing depictions of struggle within the canon, is instead a genre committed to adequately coming to terms with the inescapable violence and desperation of the current struggle moment; something much current struggle content fails to do. She writes:

The question for me, the one I've been wrestling with, is: can we find a way to write that is equal to this moment – a writing that can capture and confront the present, with its forms of violence, including violence done to the body and to language? Language has the amazing capacity to ingest the violence it encounters and, rather than merely document it, expel it sonically and viscerally. How do we harness this? How do we push the limits of representation so as to interrogate, admit complicity, reject, embrace, deface; bear out, on the page, our pain and anger and at the same time to transcend the intimate and public wreckages of our present moment? (Hardy, 2018, p. 54)

Eerily reminiscent of Boule and Pather's own observations, examples of current South African writing that embraces such a visceral poetics are few and far between. Slasha (2018, n.pag) has, for example, bemoaned, the 'pervasive robotism' of South African writing that is fixated on the 'demon called Reason'. This picture, though, can begin to change by reading for emotion. As a practice which foregrounds the direct nature of affect over the indirect grammar of the text itself, we encounter a sense of 'immediate, open suffering' which is otherwise not available; an open suffering that is 'shy, restrained, taciturn' (Parkinson, 2015, p. 7). These are the qualities that perhaps best speak to what Hardy is searching for in her poetics of viscosity when she heralds the work of Mxolisi Nyezwa.

The sparse, bare lines and naked language of Nyezwa's poetry, and the whitespace surrounding and separating the poems, give us room to breathe, to raise ribs, dilate the chest and expand the lungs, to draw in the air from the mouth to the lung. Yet the silences embodied in his broken lines encapsulate violence and loss in ways other forms cannot. These are poems that comes from the gut and they punch us there. (Hardy, 2018, p. 56)

Nyezwa is remarkable for the affective nature of his work, despite being a poet who writes but rarely performs. However, this affective response is something we can survey elsewhere within the South African canon by being prepared to read for emotion and focus our attention more readily on literary non-scenes and the power of texts in creation.⁷

I dwell on Nyezwa here for one final reason which I gestured towards at the outset of this essay: the prevailing tendency to read only the political. To move through Nyezwa's

three collections of poetry is to read unavoidably his public reflections on South Africa's struggle to become a new country. But, as I have documented elsewhere (Penfold, 2016), that is not all. His poetry is not just one of struggle and despair. Within the same collections and, more specifically, within the same poem these emotions co-exist with celebration, hope, love, and joy to name but a few. Indeed, I label Nyezwa a Poet of No Sure Place for the very reason that Nyezwa's emotions, like that of the post-apartheid South Africa he depicts, are not straightforward (Penfold, 2016). And it is this range of feeling which extends beyond struggle and the visceral that reading for emotion and reading for a sense of in-creation help us identify. There is no one individual emotional reaction to a text with the space of performance and the affective responses of audience and performer forever in flux. So too, there is no one emotion that represents the South African experience, especially that of Black South Africa. When Peter Hofstätter writing on post-war Germany concluded that 'there is simply no individual feeling that could satisfactorily correspond to constantly considering the annihilation of a million people' (qtd. Parkinson, 2015, p. 164), he made a point that applies similarly to a post-Rainbow South Africa where events such as the Marikana Massacre demonstrate the limited value that continues to be placed on Black bodies. This is not to deny the struggle that exists, and needs to be depicted, but to acknowledge that within the same moment there are complex layers of competing emotions that need to be teased out.

When presenting an initial version of this paper in 2021, one respondent asked: Where is Black joy? Reading for emotion and approaching texts in a way that is 'open to anything in the event of its happening' (Chapman, 1988, p. 41) shows us where the joy may reside. For, as there can be pain or relief, there too can be joy in feeling a shared trauma being expressed aloud or in the music behind the lyrics. Such emotional complexity is to be human; such emotional complexity is required if we are to do fulfil the demands of the current moment. Boule and Pather are correct to note that today's decolonial moment in South Africa requires a literature that is alive to the spontaneous and the unpredictable, and rejects the fixed rigidities of rational response. However, I hope to have demonstrated that this should not necessarily mean the death of the text. Rather, by learning lessons from the past, we see how written literature offers us the means to do exactly this, if only we are prepared to alter where we look and embrace new cultural archives. To focus on the nexus of the performed and written we must begin to recognise the importance of literary non-scenes. In so doing, we will be able to overcome the tendency to read the political because, though South Africa's current reality is complex, where there is struggle there can also be hope. Reading for emotion is the surest way to access this complexity. And while I began with an epigraph that quoted Safia Elhillo's (2015) poem 'Self-Portrait with Yellow Dress', it is to the same performance that I will end:

I will not believe
that to be housed in a body that is black
is to be always dressed in black for the funeral

Even when we die
we live forever sometimes
our mouths open & a song falls out thick
with a saxophone's syrup

Notes

1. The first State of Emergency was declared by PW Botha's government on 20 July 1985. It covered 36 districts in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging area and what is now the Eastern Cape. In 1986, with unrest continuing unabated, a subsequent second State of Emergency was introduced nationally that lasted until 7 June 1990.
2. There is a field of scholarship, emerging in the late 1980s at a similar time to Cronin's paper, that attempts to wrestle with this academic lacuna and recognise more informal spaces of production. I have summarised much of this material elsewhere (Penfold, 2015).
3. There are a range of reasons why exact parallels cannot be drawn, which are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. This situation does, however, appeared to be shared with other institutions of higher education in Africa. Meanwhile, in the UK there also seems to be a similar reluctance to teach live poetry due in part to its perceived 'amateurishness' and embrace of everyday language. The few exceptions include Lucy English's performance poetry module taught at Bath Spa University. This was the first of its kind when introduced in 2004.
4. As noted by Bashonga (2015, p. 44), the difference between a 'session' and an 'event' may seem minimal but is worth underlining. Sessions are informal gatherings, largely held in open or public places. They can be pre-planned or spontaneous and remain receptive to other spoken work forms besides poetry. Events, meanwhile, are pre-announced, advertised, and held in hired locations. As more formal gatherings, a small entry fee is often charged and a set list is usually followed.
5. It is interesting that those poets Allen references often admit to the extra visibility performing their work would bring. They reject the opportunity in order to avoid some of the negative connotations that can come with being seen as a 'performance poet'.
6. The Black South African literary canon is the one most closely associated with live poetry, given Bashonga's observation that this scene is disproportionately Black dominated. I acknowledge the presence of white performers but, even then, would contest similar motifs remain present. This is arguably so given the proliferation of racial co-operation that was present within the #RhodesMustFall movement and that is documented in several chapters of Boulle and Pather's collection.
7. It is no coincidence that Lesego Rampolokeng is the other poet Hardy celebrates for displaying a poetics of viscosity. Rampolokeng is frequently anthologised and his published material is widely celebrated (Penfold, 2017). He remains a live poet first and foremost, however.

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