

Mxolisi Nyezwa's Poetry of No Sure Place

Abstract

A change in direction of the journal New Coin during the 1990s saw the emergence of a diverse group of poets who had previously struggled for publication. This article recognises this often overlooked collective and argues that they quickly established their own style of 'poetry of no sure place', which expresses a malaise of sadness within South Africa that is popularly felt but rarely articulated. By focusing on three collections of poetry by Mxolisi Nyezwa it is shown how this group's work rests on a permanent - and possibly worsening - sense of imbalance. The article explores how Nyezwa attempts to reconcile a felt public and private need to write, struggles to find a source of connection, and questions the permanence of social change in South Africa. Nyezwa epitomises the marginalisation, apprehension, and uncertainty of New Coin's Poetry of No Sure Place.

Keywords: Nyezwa, uncertainty, apprehension, poetry of no sure place, New Coin

In 1989 Robert Berold became editor of *New Coin*, a small poetry journal published out of Rhodes University in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Describing himself in interview (2012) as only fifth choice for the position, not the most popular candidate for those within the University's English Department, and faced with a falling audience like most South African literary magazines in the 1990s, Berold's task was not set to be easy. His solution was to radically alter *New Coin's* direction. At the risk of further alienating those loyal to the style Guy Butler had previously established for the magazine that relied on poems saturated in landscape and was focused on a school of liberal white poets who worked amongst a conflicted settler presence, Berold was committed to pursuing a different path, seeking out and mentoring groundbreaking new poetry. He no longer wanted to publish "dry, ironical white stuff" (Berold 2012). Instead, he embarked upon a bold path that sought to "traverse the physical and psychological boundaries of our wounded country" (Nyezwa 2015). The new *New Coin* was to be based on a more risk taking and more marginal content.

From the outset Berold's editorial decisions became an ideological battle poem by poem. He wanted unique pieces that chimed with his longstanding interest in the experimental work of British artist Tom Pickard and a collection of American poetry, *America, a Prophecy*. This 1974 text, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and George Quasha, published previously unrecognised poets and texts, including sermons, oral testimonies and gospel music often deemed to be outside official literatures. Berold was likewise looking and finding new poets outside the traditional mould. Consequently, *New Coin* became increasingly experimental and was not necessarily governed by reputation. The result was a conversation between styles, forms and races that "saw the whole thing start vibrating" (Berold 2012).

The Poets of No Sure Place

New Coin's flexible platform throughout the 1990s benefited from the Eastern Cape's literary scene that, through Grahamstown's National Arts Festival, a series of Wordfests and two performance festivals organised by Berold in 1998 and 1999, grew to become a vibrant focal point for South Africa's creative arts. Poet Chris Mann (2003, 90) reporting on a Grahamstown Wordfest saw fit to praise

the passionate intensity of the Eastern Cape [...] as well as the range of subject matters and genres – elegies, exhortations, songs and hymns, praises, religious poems, lyrics about older and younger family members.

Such variation became evident in *New Coin* as Berold searched amongst these new faces and combined their work with that from more established names. Poets writing from within the academy were positioned alongside those from Eastern Cape townships; performance and spoken word poetry was juxtaposed with heavily crafted textual pieces; writing with a fierce South African locale appeared with work that reflected an abundance of global influences and concerns. The result -- as can now be seen in the anthology *It All Begins* -- was an “energetic labour of love” (Metelerkamp 2002, 4) that, although limited by its Rhodes home that represented a remote publishing world for many South African poets, Berold was undoubtedly successful in creating a “far more comprehensive, reflective [...] productively blurred sense of poetry” than previously existed (Lewis 2003, n.pag).

New Coin quickly established a refreshing and innovative ensemble of poetry that included Jeremy Cronin, Lesego Rampolokeng, Seitlhamo Motsapi, Joan Metelerkamp, and Mxolisi Nyezwa. And though these names were not necessarily unknown, their poetry was arguably losing traction elsewhere. It either did not fit the “clean polished” tradition favoured by white liberal publishers and magazines such as *New Contrast* or fell foul of the “struggle politics” and “rehearsed sentiments” favoured in publications released by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (Nyezwa 2015). Each poet featured in *New Coin* was “stylistically unique” (Sole 2014, 57) but, though varied in style and form, they were united in their difference. In the words of Vonani Bila (2013, 3):

[Berold] chose unintimidated poets, poets who come to terms with the human condition through celebrating its resilience, whether in love, inner turmoil, or as witnesses to history [...] poets who speak freely about the excesses in our society, without holding back, without aestheticizing [who] describe crisis and resilience, love’s heartache and pain.

These poets defied labels and explored the period’s political crosscurrents. They exposed the false narrative of solidarity literature penned by previous laureates -- Mongane Serote being one example (Chapman 2009) -- and recognised the gap that was beginning to “yawn open between an imagined, ideal future and the bitter social problems remaining on the ground” (Sole 2014, 56).

Thus, unified in message and similarly searching for a new aesthetic that grappled with the uncertain and precarious nature of intense social change, *New Coin*’s poetry can be considered a loose literary movement, which I term the Poets of No Sure Place. This label represents the “sense of imbalance and infinite disquiet in their poems” (Nyezwa 2015) while simultaneously speaking of their innovation and different backgrounds. There is a united sense of apprehension and instability; a feeling that each poet is refusing to be publicly subservient while simultaneously working through their own personal dilemmas and grievances; a message of radical insecurity coupled with a call to rediscover the “simple values” (Ramakuela 1997, 34) of life and in ourselves as individuals. Indeed, *New Coin* provided room for poets to explore and come to terms with their own deep-rooted individual fears against the backdrop of South Africa’s often turbulent and contested socio-political public arena. *New Coin* became established as an almost cathartic space of expression in a country where everything else often appeared controversial and dramatic. Therefore by giving voice to universal experiences and by depicting the political concerns and anxieties that, though shared by the majority of the South African population, had rarely been articulated before, the

Poets of No Sure Place represents a voice that, while being the voice of the people, is not the popular voice. Their voice resonates with many yet appears to be enunciated by few.¹ It is one that echoes the malaise of sadness and uncertainty that lurks in the consciousness of the new South Africa but has so far been marginalised and not found adequate expression. However, this voice demands critical confrontation. The unease and instability present in *New Coin* introduced to South African literature a necessary attempt at exploring the contradictions and confusions of daily life in the country today.

The Poets of No Sure Place do form a distinct literary movement with the flexibility that such a label allows. However, it is necessary to heed Nyezwa's warning against harnessing these writers within a fixed '*New Coin* Collective'. Nyezwa's (2015) reasoning deals with South Africa's past and present racial divisions and the associated quality of life and education that mean, for him, "our lives were too far apart to be a collective except in the aesthetic sense". The contributors were constrained by "contrasting histories [of] and visions [for]" South Africa. Moreover, by considering the actual physical performance of Poetry of No Sure Place, the necessity of a looser formation increases. As aforementioned, *New Coin* benefited from the local vibrancy of the Eastern Cape. While most of the magazine's contributors spoke publicly at Grahamstown Wordfests and other literary festivals -- indeed, as friends, they frequently travelled together (Botha 2003, 95) -- not all did. Neither were they presented as a collective. Nyezwa (2015), for example, constantly attempted to avoid Grahamstown Wordfests. He was concerned by their Guy Butler legacy and "pretentious" attempts to accommodate black artists. Meanwhile, Lesego Rampolokeng (2014, 111), disagreeing with how the "discussion itself is framed, its jump off points", declined to participate in a symposium on the state of South African poetry which was organised by *New Coin* as part of its fiftieth anniversary celebrations and saw contributions from most of the regular names. Thus, despite their influences upon each other and their desire to open new conversations, there remains a determination to follow their own paths. Poetry of No Sure Place is not a bound collective but a movement of individuals "forging a new poetry or, more accurately, new poetries" (Alvarez 2006, n.pag). Given their desire to break with longstanding literary traditions and offer a refreshing, challenging and diverse palliative any recourse to a fixed body would arguably risk lessening such diversity and suggest the creation of a new confined tradition.

I have so far sought to define the poets that emerged through Berold's *New Coin* as a flexible community. Their fundamental similarities and links were complicated by a diversity of style, approach and vision. Consequently it would be amiss of me to continue to provide a broad overview of the movement. Such an approach neglects the complexities of both the whole and the individuals. Rather I focus the rest of the discussion on Mxolisi Nyezwa's poetry supplemented by brief mention of other poets. This approach illustrates the conversation Berold set out to achieve and, also, the many "shared concerns" (Alvarez 2006, n.pag) held by the poets who published in *New Coin*. The other poets I allude to include Kelwyn Sole, one of the more widely known and popular poets who appeared in *New Coin*, and one of the few people to critically discuss this group; Angifi Dlalda, an East Rand Zulu teacher and playwright whose poetry is brave and energetic and speaks to environment, economic, and political concerns on a global scale; Seithlamo Motsapi, an erudite and experimental poet who embraces word play and complex conceits to make scathing attacks on neo-colonialism; and Joan

Metelerkamp who, like Nyezwa, writes highly personal poetry with a strong sense of place.

Nyezwa's voice articulates a unique take on the apprehensions felt by many South Africans and refuses to be publicly subservient. His poetry also suggests the layering and connections between public and private, interior and exterior that, for Desiree Lewis (2003), were central to the new direction Berold sought for *New Coin* and are at the heart of Poetry of No Sure Place. Nyezwa's poetry is intensely personal and private but it cannot be divorced from socio-political commentary as some critics have suggested (Cornwell 2015). Instead, it speaks to Kelwyn Sole's (2005) attempts to more critically explore the political nature of the private space. While I do not wish to suggest that Nyezwa's work, or Black writing as a whole, is unable to simply be about private devastation or that all emotions expressed within it can only be public, I do wish to draw attention to the fact that, even in the South African situation where it is resisted by many commentators, the private can also be recognised as a "political domain" (Sole 2005, 193). This article aims to show how any binary constructions in this regard are impossible. Much of Nyezwa's poetry is undoubtedly personal, a comment on his own private thoughts, however, following Edward Said (2005, 19), such a view is inescapably complex. The challenge for any writer to be non-political has become almost impossible. The very act of writing, regardless of its explicit political focus, has recently accrued a "symbolic role" that means writers "experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global [and national] discursive agenda". The result, Said argues, has been an increasing blurring of the boundaries between public act and political intervention.

Interestingly, Nyezwa -- who has also edited his own literary journal, *Kotaz*, since 1997 -- further complicates the relationship between the personal and political by having two different voices: the personal voice in his poetry and an explicitly political voice through his public role as an editor. These often compete in their range of affect. While the below close readings most often depict an intricate and subtle voice -- indeed, he must "avoid 'directness' [in his poetry] at all costs" (Nyezwa 2012) -- Nyezwa's views on society as shown in his editorial statements and in interviews are rarely anything except direct. *Kotaz* was born at a time when Nyezwa (2008) felt "all human life was a big mistake". It was a time where little could be believed, including poetry that was being manipulated by the government's "insincere" (Nyezwa 2012) attitude towards it. *Kotaz* offered relief and a new purpose, a chance to promote life's absurdities and find "light where [he] sensed darkness" (Nyezwa 2012). Speaking explicitly of the "dismal nature of politics and individual existence" (Nyezwa 2012), Nyezwa has long articulated his "vague belief that all is not lost, that poetry can save me" (Nyezwa 2015). Thus, as his poetry allows him an opportunity to wrestle with the despair he expresses as an editor, he begins to epitomise the uncertain malaise of the Poets of No Sure Place. He creates a permanent feeling of imbalance that reflects a radical sense of insecurity. He is what Karen Press (2003, 19) has termed a poet "on the edge of the falling of the world".

Mxolisi Nyezwa

Born in 1976 in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth where he has lived ever since, Mxolisi Nyezwa published thirteen poems under the title 'To Have No Art' in the *Essential Things* anthology edited by Andries Oliphant and COSAW in 1992 before going on to publish in *New Coin* and releasing three further collections of his poetry -- *Song Trials* (2000), *New Country* (2008a), and *Malikhanye* (2011). *Song Trials*'s blurb praises Nyezwa's ability to

shift African lyrical poetry into powerful and strange landscapes. [Poems] move rapidly through multiple dimensions. They encompass the spiritual, political and bleakness of the everyday with a fluency of language and compelling deftness of image.

By analysing a number of direct extracts this article illustrates the accuracy of these statements. It is through this non-linear style and his use of allusive image that Nyezwa's bleak view of South Africa appears. As suggested above, he has previously spoken of his belief that "reality is a big lie" (Nyezwa 2008, 20) and of being unsure about life. This is represented in the frequent sense of movement that pervades his poems in a form reminiscent of the 'leaping poetry' advocated by Robert Bly (Berold 2012). Nyezwa's work is marked by imaginative leaps from the conscious to the unconscious, which re-affirm the instability and uncertainty that mirrors his own apprehensions for the new South Africa; a challenge to obvious associations that he believes mislead and give the wrong answers.

These similarities to Bly are expected given how both were influenced by Latin American poetry. Nyezwa (2015) has spoken of how he immediately recognised the fire and anger evident in both Pablo Neruda and Cesar Vallejo. Their different ways of expressing anger are evident in the changing nature of Nyezwa's own leaping poetry. Vallejo's anger was a more raging and uncontrolled fire that is akin to Nyezwa's earlier poems. The poem 'Sky' in *New Country*, for example, showcases Nyezwa's experimentation and desperate search for meaning. In one stanza he writes:

the sky is a vast creature
which fumes at night
as men walk
unaccompanied and sad,
in the streets,
or toward the blinding alley.
like hobos
or gypsies without food (Nyezwa 2008, 14).

Here, the imaginative leaps are fast and expansive and depict an all-encompassing ire; his writing experience is almost overwhelmingly "taking [him] everywhere" (Nyezwa 2012). On the other hand, his most recent collection *Malikhanye* offers smaller, slower leaps from the conscious to unconscious. The pain represented is much more pronounced and specific; it echoes Neruda's fire that "burns crisply".

malikhanye, the spaces where you last slept
in the hidden corner-room in kwetyana
call you, your name
that is now full of secrets
and still refuses to slip away (Nyezwa 2011, 59).

Yet still there is hurt, movement and instability, a poetry that "leaps in quanta, packed as ferocious tiny bundles of energy to fire the cold rooms of the heart" (Nyezwa 2015).

This international influence is synthesised with one more local. The ability to hone in on the local as done by Mongane Serote and Can Themba, whose writings Nyezwa discovered in the late 1970s and early 1980s, perhaps explain the importance

of home to his work. Meanwhile Esk'ia Mphahlele has also been a strong influence (Nyezwa 2012). Yet, for my purposes, Nyezwa's relation to Njabulo Ndebele deserves attention. Explicitly, Nyezwa picked up on the burdens of hardship and betrayal that the characters in *Fools and Other Stories* carry while, more implicitly, Ndebele's notions of the ordinary are unmistakable. Writing through the transition from apartheid, Ndebele outlined the need for South African literature to step away from the simplifications of surface symbolism and, by drawing on Herbert Marcuse, instead advocated that writing should direct itself towards interiority and rationality.² Rather than explicitly political literature that relied on simple binary constructions, including good versus evil, the challenge was to render texts that displayed the complexity of universal experiences and the flux of the emotions: doubt, fear, happiness, anxiety. Writers needed to step back and change discourse from "the rhetoric of oppression to that of process and exploration" (Ndebele 1994, 73). Consequently there would be an embrace of the quotidian; a move towards self-discovery and introspection; an attempt at understanding how interiority could illuminate the whole. For some critics, this intervention established new binaries because it suggested the focus on the interior and ordinary should be at the complete expense of politics. Yet Sole (2005) has challenged such ideas by illustrating how macro-political issues still continue to dominate and structure much local everyday life. The "political lurks in the everyday" (Sole 2005, 185) and this view is unmistakable in Nyezwa's verse.

Nyezwa's oeuvre shuttles between the personal and the political as he attempts to reconcile both his own personal power and powerlessness as a poet and his own wider feelings of hope and hopelessness towards South Africa -- to "come to terms with death and destruction, alongside an urge to keep faith in the promises and gains of a new society" (Sole 1996, 28). Unfortunately this reconciliation and desired belief in the lasting positive effects of transition is shown to be increasingly difficult. It is, I argue, harder to imagine in *Malikhanye* than *Song Trails*. This contention is perhaps unsurprising given a recent assertion:

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

The following pages provide evidence for this contention by tracing three themes through Nyezwa's three most recent collections. These strands are usefully introduced in the first poem of *Song Trails*, 'I cannot think of all the pains', that with its "almost despairing urge to cry" (Nyezwa 2000) sets the tone for the rest of the collection. My first argument rests on Metelerkamp's (2001, 124) observation about Nyezwa's use of irony in the poem and the fact he "can and does 'think of all the pains' even if the simultaneous physical constriction that results urges him not to". Thus, though the collection as a whole is not one of inherent irony, the poem establishes a tension between the need to act and the knowledge of the difficulties and pain that action brings. This tension lingers throughout his work and is most often discussed through the act of writing. I argue that Nyezwa increasingly questions the act of writing: it becomes increasingly hard for him to reconcile his painful political belief that "nobody is safe in the world" with his "vague [personal] belief that all is not lost, that poetry can save [him]" (Nyezwa 2015).

Secondly, Metelerkamp (2001, 124) also suggests “[‘I cannot think of all the pains’] is all about contradiction and balance [...] Acknowledging his feeling of disconnection so powerfully paradoxically connects him more firmly with the earth, with what is before and under his feet”. Comfort is only found when the speaker is lying or sitting:

i cannot think of the soil without lying down
i cannot think of tears, lonely geographies
and the third world, without the urge to cry or to sit down

Conversely, movement is something that offers no relief:

i run around in circles, like sprinkling water,
i can't have true relief, swearing out load
[...]
i can't run out old, like a joyful child (Nyezwa 2000, 13).

This uncertainty in movement is foregrounded elsewhere through the repeated juxtaposition of earthly images -- something known and allowing connection -- and those of the sea -- a symbol of uncertainty. Again, as his collections progress, this sense of connection gives way to a growing imbalance that maps the fluctuations in his feelings of hope and hopelessness for the new South Africa.

Finally, ‘I cannot think of all the pains’ subtly introduces ideas of renewal. For example, Nyezwa (2000, 13) writes of “a sky pregnant with pain, or with turbulent rain”. Here such renewal, yet one that is painful, reinforces Nyezwa’s feelings towards change in South Africa that may not deliver on its promises and is not certain to become a harmonious place for future generations.

The purpose of writing

South African poetry stands on a precipice of sorts. It has historically been used publicly for political purposes where it is feted as “allowing access to a more sublime or insightful ‘truth’” (Sole 2007, n.pag). However, despite such a privileged position, its purpose is increasingly questioned. Many question whether it should continue to be “functional to politicians and their agendas” (Sole 2007, n.pag). There is limited agreement on poetry’s role: should it be a poetry of the masters that praises political power or should it be a poetry of the margins that speaks up for those marginalised in society and represents the ordinary daily lives of the youth, the destitute, those in townships, and those in rural settlements? The poetry published in Berold’s *New Coin* arguably supports the latter, with Nyezwa (2014, 25) suggesting that any “poetry that is not restless, that doesn’t reflect the streets and the urban poor [...] must be strung of air and suffocate”. This view confirms the Poets of No Sure Place’s position as the voice of the people but not the popular voice; speaking for those on the margins but not achieving the acknowledgement afforded to those who write poems for the masters.

There appears to be a paradox around marginality. Poetry can be used as a way of giving society’s marginalised a voice but, by speaking the unspoken, there is a risk of falling foul of a literary establishment that frequently does service to the state. The result has been limited publishing opportunities -- almost a marginalisation of the poetry itself -- which has caused some poets “despondency” (Sole 2007, n.pag). Clearly, the apparent binary construction of who to write for that appears to govern South African literature places poets in an unsure place. It means that, though the

expression of public marginalisation can be facilitated through poetry, this act of writing sees a confrontation with a more private marginalisation, a questioning of your own actions and poetry's purpose. These concerns are a central feature of Nyezwa's work. He continually attempts to reconcile this paradox and overcome public and private forms of marginalisation in order to find stable footing on an uncertain terrain.

This said, echoing back to the irony in 'I cannot think of all the pains', Nyezwa does seem to suggest the importance of writing despite the risks it brings. He is, at least in *Song Trails*, able to reconcile the public and private. Consider, for example, 'The poet's failure' where Nyezwa reflects on the suffering caused by the cold hearted acts of apartheid oppression and rues the lack of self-confidence that caused the African population's silence:

we smelled like starved rogues, we stank
like dying corpses
sailing the warm winds of our silence,
searching in reckless shelters to cool our lips

we struggled begging conciliation
down the trodden tracks of cold hurricanes.
seeking out lost igloos,
we had words within these day-long blues –

driven by cold emotions into the shades and shadows
of a dying land, we had words that choked to be said –
and we never said them (Nyezwa 2000, 27).

Nyezwa is calling for poetry that speaks openly. He advocates challenge in order to prevent a repeat of history and new forms of oppression that could similarly become so dominant as to deny the marginalised their voice. The poem, by allowing the legitimacy of expressing anger and dissatisfaction, acts as a warning against staying quiet in today's society despite the dilemma of keeping faith whilst admitting to failures.

This support for a public voice is echoed in the collection by Nyezwa's own personal need to write, a need to confront any doubts he has about his poetry. *Song Trails* is heavy in expressing Nyezwa's dislocation from the world. As Gary Cummisky (2012) observes, there is "a sense of bleakness: there are references to night, darkness, rain, birds, thunder. There seems an atmosphere of desolation and isolation". But within this mood, poetry allows Nyezwa's to escape and find purpose. This is suggested in 'simple poems':

today i walked on top of a hill like Moses,
and i felt alone, like someone locked alone in a prison.

today i had no idea of time, of human hands
and i could not breathe, nothing at all was happening.

today i committed myself wholeheartedly to the finest things
in life, to write the simple poems

and to sing line by line
the cry of geese (Nyezwa 2000, 53)

The reference to Moses juxtaposes Nyezwa's public view of South Africa with his private beliefs about poetry.³ If we take the first part of the Moses story, the poem connotes the conditions of oppression Nyezwa suggests still engulf his people -- the township poor -- and the need for their demands to be openly discussed. Poetry would allow such expression. Meanwhile, if the interpretation is based on Moses' second journey, a view that is enhanced by the lines 'i had no idea of time' and 'line by line', the poem works to emphasise Nyezwa's beliefs that poetry offers direction and salvation. As Nyezwa (2012) has suggested elsewhere, a view clearly supported in this poem, it is through poetry that he is able to unpack the innuendos and complexities of life and uncover the simple 'truths' that society should but, currently, does not subscribe to.

Through this poem Nyezwa resonates again with Ndebele's project on the ordinary. There is an almost overpowering return to interiority, for example through the second and third lines. It is only through this suffocating confrontation of the self with itself that Nyezwa is able to understand and make sense. It is only after the wholehearted exploration of the individual, which Nyezwa evokes here, that meanings can be found that can perhaps be used to decipher and find connection in the outside. Clearly, in both 'simple poems' and 'the poet's failure', Nyezwa is expressing a need to confront marginalisation through poetry, despite the hardships that result. Nyezwa appears to find balance, to express public marginalisation without causing his own and questioning the act of writing.

This need to write is continued into *New Country*. But here the relationship between the public and private is complicated. There still appears a certainty that Nyezwa needs to use poetry as a means of expressing hardship. For instance, in a poem of the same title, Nyezwa (2008a, 8) writes "i have to be serious about many things" and continues to list his growing despair -- "i feel inconsolable disaster / murder moans in these city streets". After all, according to both his public statements in interviews and reinforced in *Song Trials*, it is through writing that Nyezwa is able to come to terms with the evil he feels in the world. But in *New Country* an element of doubt becomes apparent. Nyezwa begins to question poetry's worth. In 'I have to be serious about many things' he speaks of "my poems which make no meaning" and of "typewritten letters and confessions, / wailing inauspicious conjunctions and obscurities". Perhaps he can no longer find truth through poetry.

'For days I looked for my poems' is open to similar interpretation:

for days i looked for my poems in the streets,
and since i could not find them,
light fell like a flower on the lonely square

the light sounded the drum of a thud
beauty came grovelling forward
begging,
and children went for days
without food (Nyezwa 2008a, 1).

There is a desire to write that is expressed in the act of searching. Meanwhile the references to both light and beauty suggest the purity and serenity poetry can offer as

relief against current reality. But, because the poems have not been found, its calming effect is lost. The dull phonology of ‘drum of a thud’ directly opposes the serenity connoted by the presence of light, while the oxymoronic structure of beauty grovelling forward compounds an idea of increasing ugliness. Though poetry is still initially desired, these examples begin to question its purpose and its success in speaking up for and benefiting the marginalised.

This view is, however, not consistent throughout the collection. Whereas in *Song Trails* Nyezwa was able to embrace poetry to both express collective ideas of marginalisation and his own personal marginalisation, in *New Country* the questioning of purpose that surrounds his public intervention does not apply to his own personal need to write. Though dislocation, loneliness and the process of interiority is just as marked there is a calmer reflection, an almost comforting inspiration found in the act of writing at its most personal:

i write my poems at night
when the night fails to see
the quiet movements of the sea
coming like the wind
from distant skies
now falling helplessly
like many shooting stars
from the heavens above (Nyezwa 2008a, 48).

The scene depicted is more peaceful than elsewhere. Though the imagery provides an infinite sense of distance he still finds in poetry the possibility of inspiration and hope eventually reaching him. In the poem a sense of silence dominates over the possibility of human voices while the imagery’s focus on the sky and sea suggests a return to powerful vistas unconquerably by human activity. It is within this void of human interference that his poetry comes from the heavens -- which connote an ultimate and final destination -- in a manner that has purpose and transcends the turbulence of the world. Thus ‘I write my poems at night’ can be read in this way as affirming Nyezwa’s (2015) belief that “poetry should be the final voice, it must take precedence over all over human voices and any other human concerns. In its silence poetry always speaks to and for everyone”.

In *Song Trials* and *New Country*, Nyezwa mixes his poems between those that offer a more explicitly political social critique and those that turn towards interiority and calm reflection. By following these themes it can be seen how Nyezwa becomes increasingly off-balance in his explicit poems; he finds it increasingly hard to confront marginalisation without doubting his own successes in articulating the marginalised situation and engendering any meaningful public impact. On the other hand in those personal poems that return to the private sphere, he has a more secure footing and maintains a sense of purpose and hope. However, his latest collection *Malikhanye* is less assured. For Liesl Jobson (qtd. Crystal Warren 2009, 6. My emphasis), these poems present “a timely expression of discontent and betrayal at a personal *and* political level”. While the poems maintain the same balance between violence and tenderness and while the “rich and detailed imagery” (Warren 2009, 6) remains, Nyezwa seems unable to overcome feelings of marginalisation in either sphere.

From the start of the collection Nyezwa offers an increasingly direct approach. He is prepared to abandon interiority and asserts in ‘the road ahead’, “don’t ask me about any of my poems / for i will tell you that people are murdered in my country”

(Nyezwa 2011, 12). There is an apparent turn away from the search for complexity that Ndebele advocated and Nyezwa followed previously. This about-turn is matched by his assertion that when writing *Malikhanye*, “everything was out in the open [...] There was nothing philosophical about that. The truth was out in the open” (Nyezwa 2012). Indeed ‘the road ahead’, perhaps speaking to the prevalence of the HIV/Aids epidemic in the country, continues:

and their deaths arrive slowly as an illness
as a desolate knock
on a blank sky

There is a foreboding submission to the creeping inevitability of death and an almost quiet acceptance that everything has been emptied of meaning, nothing much is being done. This is enhanced by the repetition of “what has become of us?” in the last two lines of the poem. Moreover, Nyezwa speaks of “fruit that gives golden or red sulphur”. This sulphurous image foreshadows the later poem ‘Walking the earth’, which violently underscores the excesses of continued marginalisation in South Africa. Kyle Allen (2012, n.pag) observes at some length,

[‘Walking the earth’] challenges the clichéd perceptions of the South African landscape. [Nyezwa] says in the following haunted lines: “all i can make of my country / is a sulphurous compound / a black room with two gigantic stars / as thoroughly silent as corpses”.

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

Nyezwa’s own personal questions about poetry relate fundamentally to the need in the current literary landscape to write within a binary and distinguish between a poetry that serves the masters and one that serves those on the margins. In many ways this choice reflects the dilemma in South Africa between keeping faith in the dream of a new country and celebrating its successes against a need to confront the failings. Initially, Nyezwa traversed these choices by accepting a need for interiority and attention to complexity and ambiguity. He suffered the possible marginalisation of his poetry in order to illustrate the experiences of those marginalised in society because there remained hope that their situation may still be improved. However, Allen’s analysis shows how the picture has changed in the decade between *Song Trials* and *Malikhanye*. Nyezwa’s poetry now makes explicit and direct attacks on contemporary South Africa because, having lost hope, he no longer sees the need to search for deeper meanings that all too obviously have been lost. And, as a consequence of the changing style of his poetry, it is also necessary to consider his views on the changing role of poetry. What is its purpose when the divisions in society are too extreme to be bridged?

The answer in *Malikhanye* appears to be a complete questioning of poetry's value. Poetry is unable to offer him balance in an increasingly unstable world and is incapable of preventing his own marginalisation or that of the oppressed demographics he speaks for. In 'in every house' Nyezwa admits to the irrelevance of his poetry by observing, of those who live "in devastation / at every turn they ask me / 'what do your poems speak to us?'" (Nyezwa 2011, 29. Original emphasis). Indeed, Nyezwa is tapping in to popular thought and the disillusionment with words that, exemplified by the increasing amount of protests in South Africa, characterises people's relationship to the government. It appears that patience has finally worn thin with rhetoric and unfulfilled promises. Many are beginning to recognise there is an alternative to the currently divided society but this remains ominous. There is an inability to articulate a more hopeful alternative:

there is a silent world
in the hungry sea
where you came from
dragging along
your melancholy spirit
in the bluest lakes
where a group of men
watch in silence
a daunting sky (Nyezwa 2011, 41).

Similar doubts and questions are posed in the final sequence of *Malikhanye* where Nyezwa explores "the landscape of the personal and personal loss" (Allen 2012, n.pag). These poems, which won the Thomas Pringle Award for Poetry in 2009 and reflect the pronounced influence of Lorca and Vallejo, are a tribute to Nyezwa's late son, Malikhanye Nyezwa, who died in a house fire aged only three months. They conjure the voice of the Poets of No Sure Place in a very unique way. They depict Nyezwa's devastation but simultaneously the re-evocation of his loss has a profoundly cathartic effect as he seeks not pity but confrontation and acceptance (Allen 2012, n.pag). This process, this exploration of his own loss and sudden dislocation from the world continues to be framed by the act of writing. The third poem of the section presents an inability to write. And, while his own personal grief is obviously motivation enough for his words it is also possible to see the shadow of wider macro-political questions (see Sole 2005), such as his implicit criticism of social expectations and stereotypes in South Africa:

i want to write
about how difficult it is
to lose you
but i'm a man
and it is not right (Nyezwa 2011, 53).

This constraint is removed in the following poem that instead presents acceptance. Nyezwa admits his loss, that his son was part of him -- "i was with you when you were born / i carried you" -- and is prepared to admit to his grief and confront his pain that, owing to the use of startling and intense leaping imagery, is portrayed as all encompassing.

but since i am not afraid of anything
i will write about you
because i know
i must repay your blood
with seventy million flowers
i will smoke out all the light
and walk deliberately
in harm's way
to reach your heart's tendril (Nyezwa 2011, 54).

Reminiscent of Nyezwa's intentions in *Song Trials* there is a brave desire to write and confront pain. However, unlike in these earlier poems, this desire does not find a clear realisation. Nyezwa clearly recognises his pain and his need to probe and reflect on it but, crucially, this is cast as the first step on a long journey -- "from the colourful starts i hear a rainbow / beginning its long journey across the sky" (Nyezwa 2011, 56). There is limited certainty as to the journey's results and the changes it will bring. Indeed, despite his determination to find words, Nyezwa seems to suggest these remain too vague, too quiet to discern. He can write of pain yet the result is not hopeful; rather a suggested presence with no life blood, a hollow shell where meaning is lacking. Consider, for example, these lines from two poems towards the end of the sequence:

on the stairs i see
someone is whispering
the house is saying something

on the stairs
next to the wall
something is written –
someone is saying something (Nyezwa 2011, 57).

Followed by:

today i want to write something
the bird on the walk was here, something

today there is no vein and there are no arteries
the bird was here, on the walk, she passed by here

[...]

outside it is raining, outside guilt like hell, listen –
the fire, something
and there's no one inside these walls, i want to say (Nyezwa 2011, 58).

Despite, the clear private capacity of Nyezwa's work, a more political aspect including poetry's purpose and the act of writing remain pervading concerns in *Song Trials*, *New Country*, and *Malikhanye*. Beginning with a need to dispense with poetry that praises political elites, Nyezwa like the other Poets of No Sure Place has penned work that speaks to and of those on the margins. It is prepared to criticise the new South

Africa's failings. Moreover, in ways reminiscent of Ndebele's project on the ordinary, Nyezwa is prepared to implicate himself within this wider framework by exploring his own personal marginalisation and his own personal need for poetry. Unfortunately as these collections progress, Nyezwa cuts an increasingly despondent figure. Whereas in *Song Trials* he confirmed the value of his work in exploring feelings of marginalisation, this ability is cast into doubt in *New Country*. Here, he still feels a need to write -- and it does remain a way of him personally finding balance in the world -- but he is increasingly left in an unsure place within the paradox of purpose, doubting poetry's use in the public sphere. Finally, *Malikhanye* presents the bleakest picture yet. Nyezwa experiences complete disillusionment. The poems become increasingly direct -- more in tune with his interview pronouncements -- and look less at reconciling complexities. Rather there seems an acceptance of a simpler truth: namely, that there is no truth, there is limited chance of reaching salvation through poetry. For both himself and for wider South Africa's wider situation he can find limited purchase in a dark and unstable landscape: "In the empty memory of lost time / my feet tumble against cold hope" (Nyezwa 2011, 60). There is a growing feeling that Nyezwa has moved closer to slipping off the edge of the world.

Places of (in)security

"My feet tumble against cold hope" (Nyezwa 2011, 60) is typically representative of Nyezwa's search for balance in the way it situates a sense of the physical or corporeal immediately alongside one of the individual spirit. Indeed, Nyezwa's poems are characterised by a desire for physical connection that will offset his individual unrest. This is often achieved by recourse to images of the earth and the evocation of place. Jeanette Eve (2003, 82) observes of the *Song Trials* collection:

In *Song Trails* specific places are mentioned only occasionally [...] They are points of reference not portrayed in any detail [...] At the same time, place is connected to everything else.

Eve continues to observe how Nyezwa's poetry sees "a gathering of the exterior world into the self – 'the fruits of the universe in my hands' – and the self is incorporated into that world physically and emotionally". Hence, the individual and exterior world become inextricably bound together and, with the self thus affected by a much wider system, renders the experience of Nyezwa's poetry a very humbling one.

Nowhere are these points more evident than the poems 'I believe' and 'song of beauty' that are placed together in *Song Trails*. The latter speaks to nature's humbling power as Nyezwa (2000, 37) observes "everyday the sea will wash our blood to claim us / and no one will know" and also depicts the merger of the individual into the world's wider geography, "for now i'm no longer dead but live in the soil's core / the mist of the land covers my sins –". These lines hint towards a possible wider reading of the poem and Nyezwa's (2015) expressed call for "all humankind to see the evil that we have done, the man-made devil that we have managed to engineer into our ecosystem". Indeed, Nyezwa begins "now listen to me" and goes on to speak of the value of the land, of the hope and potential that lies within whilst also depicting the horrors above the earth within the darkness and the universe.

but if you have to know
last night i didn't sleep, i dreamt of dying.
i went out into the night and planted seedlings

and the night was diseased,
all pitiful and dreadful ailments yelled at me.

but for me its enough to say i'm no longer dead, but live.
it suffices to say the universe also sprouts its tentacles of blood,
and there's a rich flower from my shoulder to my hand,
in what was beautiful, in what was growing impossibly thin.

We live and can grow but as we do so a process of corruption begins, the potential within the land is lost to increasing suffering. This message replicates that of the previous poem in the collection, 'I believe'. Again, in a poem that reaches across continents and thus refuses a specificity of place while creating a united humanity, Nyezwa situates comfort and potential within the earth and working the land:

i believe man is born free
i believe man is born spiritual and clean –
presentiments, conflicts with family and cigarette smokes
intensify man's visions of suicide.

i believe the man in Siberia somehow relates
and is related to the man in Rwanda, in Afrika,
and both men will sometimes pick up the hoe and in the soil
plant: beans, onions, oranges and the cocoa tree (Nyezwa 2000, 36).

The first stanza acts as an intensification of the wider message. There is initially an optimistic tone, a vision of clarity and freedom that yields to ideas of death brought about by human attitudes and actions. The ground offers balance against the world's instability but modern humanity has instead stepped away from the land and constructed its own suffering for "one reason or another" (Nyezwa 2000, 36).

'I believe', therefore, acts as a veiled criticism on contemporary social pressures and society's materialistic outlook. This, I argue, is a view widely shared by the Poets of No Sure Place. In particular, Motsapi views the human space as something confined by materialism. His hope in the human spirit and the restorative power of nature is shattered by a world that "worships money, trivialises poverty and fails to see its wrongs" (Ramakuella 1997, 34). Kelwyn Sole's *Absent Tongues* (2012), meanwhile, also shares a similar perspective. This is arguably exemplified in the poem 'Land', particularly the first and last stanzas:

To be frank we're all a little bit lost
with varying degrees of certainty

now that profit builds its newness
Everywhere, insists this
is our heritage.

[...]

Thank God at last
a bird starts to warble
its sweet nonsense

somewhere

beyond my vision (Sole 2012, 22).

The rest of poem develops Sole's criticisms of consumerism, commercial culture and the proliferation of identity politics that continue "myths about identity [...] that subduing of women men / choose to label culture". Sole thus echoes Nyezwa's belief that by living in this way humankind has lost sight of its situation within a wider geography that ultimately has a fundamental power that cannot be controlled. Our attitudes to life have seen us become embroiled in "the conceit that one can own / the land". The only relief can be found in a final return to nature and natural patterns of life.

This recourse to general evocations of the land without a fierce sense of specificity allows both Nyezwa and Sole to comment on wider human geographies. However, Nyezwa's poetry successfully implicates himself in these wider networks, channelling his own spirit alongside that of the exterior world. Thus, there is a consistent awareness of the local in his work. For Eve (2003, 82), "overall, Nyezwa's poems create an awareness of the milieu of PE's [Port Elizabeth's] townships". His home New Brighton is a common reference point and though never idealised, it is one place that does suggest comfort and allows Nyezwa to find some sense of balance. While New Brighton "bred me its scars", it also "taught me to love my neighbours" (Nyezwa 2015). Indeed, Nyezwa (2015) has admitted to the almost spiritual safety he attaches to his home, which he traces to an incident in his childhood:

[New Brighton] is very important to my work. I always want to go back to New Brighton, even when I'm away, especially Madala Street, where our parents raised us and looked after us. When the soldiers came one night to our home in Madala Street to take us away, the spirit of Madala Street somehow thwarted them. The soldiers left, brandishing their fine armoury.

This safety is replicated in both *Song Trials* and *New Country*. In the second collection 'home' speaks of a place "where no one suffers / where nothing weeps" (Nyezwa 2008a, 35). Meanwhile, in the first, the poem 'quiet place' gestures towards the sense of refuge Nyezwa finds at home:

and it seems that i live in a quiet place
at the end of time
with a blowing universe behind me

i remain aware of the long-suffering of things
i remain aware with a simple truth
of how the planet eventually crumbles (Nyezwa 2000, 43).

Re-invoking the turmoil of the wider world through the image of a blowing universe, Nyezwa finds quiet re-assurance in the township's familiar surrounds, emphasised by the fact "there is always the spaza shop at the end of the street". Suffering and hardship exits in the world and there is a common destiny that will see "the planet eventually crumble", but this is overshadowed by the connotations of comfort and peace. Home provides a sense of balance where he is able to accept, reflect, and have no desire to fight this simple truth.

However, echoing the pattern that became evident when considering the act of writing, it is again possible to trace an increasing instability and a lessening sense of connection through his depictions of place. Whereas both *Song Trials* and *New Country* established disillusionment with modern society that was balanced out by a return to nature and land, in *Malikhanye* the ability to find comfort in the poems is reduced. Interestingly, throughout this latest collection there appears to be a more specific sense of place and an enhanced sketching of the local area Nyezwa calls home, which perhaps suggests a more intense need to return to what is known and to feel the spiritual safety offered by Madala Street and New Brighton. In ‘Songs from the earth’, for example, the reader is quickly immersed into the immediate surroundings of his home. Nyezwa (2011, 17) writes:

i live in a township
in a small red house
next to a shebeen
and a volcanic school

But his childhood sense of security is now missing. Where before there was an acceptance and the blowing universe was behind him, Nyezwa is now very much engulfed physically and emotionally by urgent despair and pain that, in departure from the previous poems discussed above, is now both above and below, in the earth and the sky:

while a heavy stone
thunders in my forehead
and from every tree
and every branch
dismal songs from the earth
cries of tormented deaths
flash violently
in the sky (Nyezwa 2011, 17).

This lack of contentment at home is replicated in ‘KZN village’. Admittedly it is not possible to speak of this as Nyezwa’s home with the first line emphasising “in your streets i saw” (Nyezwa 2011, 43), but there is a specificity of place that suggests a familiarity and a unity with the people and their locale. And, again, Nyezwa is seen as part of and surrounded by an environment of violence and noise:

in your streets i saw
the gushing of blood along the railway line
the sudden spilling of petroleum
the cacophony of sullen poems

[...]

the houses were raucous with drunken men

Much as in ‘Songs from the earth’, home is no longer a refuge from these dynamic experiences. Perhaps most tellingly, while *New Country* depicted an already quiet place with trouble behind him, here Nyezwa is making his observations in the midst of

turmoil and there is only a “longing for silence”. *Malikhanye* portrays a growing discontent that is almost overwhelming and has seen Nyezwa lose the sense of connection he usually felt to the earth through his depictions of place and home.

The importance Nyezwa attaches to his home is also important because of New Brighton’s coastal location. The sea has consistently been a major focus of his work and works to dramatise the imbalance evident in Nyezwa’s collections that see him on the edge of falling off the world. Where the earth allows connection, the sea is frequently a symbol of uncertainty, of a spirit adrift. In his earliest work the sea worked to inform a sense of man’s powerlessness and his blindness towards it.⁴ Gabeda Baderoon (2009, 62) notes its use in portraying memory’s heavy and intimate presence within us,

the sea is so heavy inside us
and i won’t sleep tonight
i have buckets of memory in a jar
that i keep for nights like these.

But it is in *Malikhanye* when the sea is used to sharply emphasise Nyezwa’s lack of connection. Indeed, in this collection’s first poem, ‘Story’, the ocean is immediately figured as a “violent sea” (Nyezwa 2011, 11) and elsewhere as uncontrollable and uncertain -- “the unstable dark sea, furious” (Nyezwa 2011, 18). Moreover, within *Malikhanye* the sea is dealt with in a way that increasingly questions the purpose of existence. This reaffirms how Nyezwa has begun to lose a sense of direction and is more readily questioning purpose than before. In the *Malikhanye* sequence of poems dedicated to his son, the sea metaphor is established as suggesting the unending movements of the tides and is evoked in the questioning of life:

i want to know how the sea flows
how the winds blow
and how love is abandoned
why things have to happen like this
oh! so over and over again (Nyezwa 2011, 66).

Nyezwa doubts his own individual purpose in a world where things repeatedly happen over which he has no control and no true comprehension of their meaning. These poems serve to exemplify Nyezwa’s (2012) belief while writing *Malikhanye* that “even as begin to think we understand, everything around us explodes or diminishes – all understanding, every organic leaf, every rock, like rain patterns against the sea”. Moreover in ‘From a blue container in Motherwell’ the sea is figured as representing the landscape of his life and allows Nyezwa to doubt the purpose of his poetry. Allen (2012, n.pag) observes:

His steel container in Motherwell where he operates his business becomes a ‘blue ship’ on a shallow sea, symbolising the uncertainty and hardship of poetic explorations into meaning and experience, as well as a sense of alienation and existential solitude. You get compelling pictures of a landscape, one of pain and beauty and intense reality. Mxolisi proclaims: ‘i’m a shadow / geometrical / in a blue ship / freezing / or boiling’ [...]

evoking in startling terms the real nature of the personal and its relation to being.

This poem, I argue, also allows the sea to be understood as a poetic vehicle for driving Nyezwa's criticisms over the extent of social change in South Africa. Though the country boasts one of the most liberal and forward thinking constitutions in the world (Comaroff 2005, 299), it is questionable as to whether these codified notions of equality have, in reality, been delivered on the ground. I (2012; 2015) have contended elsewhere that this official rhetoric only veils continued patterns of inequality and oppression. It is possible to suggest there is little concrete meaning to these words, that there is limited depth to the suggested changes in society. Thus, Nyezwa's use of the sea when understood alongside his belief that "in many ways the situation even today has not changed that much" (Nyezwa 2015) since his childhood in apartheid South Africa make it possible to read Nyezwa's poetry as one that criticises the lack of depth and impermanence of social change since transition. Indeed, 'From a blue container in Motherwell' contains the lines:

now i understand the world
i know the world is shallow
with its own fine sea
with its water and minerals
and so little has changed (2011, 14).

There has only been limited change. This has not been enough for Nyezwa to find purpose and attachment to the new South Africa. There is still exclusion and pain with the rolling of the sea allowing us to doubt when something "seeks its beginning / or ends without an utterance". As the poem concludes,

every time something begins
[...]
there is something immense
solid to the eye –
anguish, more anguish.

Hopeful and hopeless futures

Nyezwa's poetry sketches his lessening ability to find balance and connection to the new South Africa where suffering and pain continues. The hoped for improvements promised at transition have slowly been revealed to have not been fully realised. This again traps South Africans in an uncertain place within the binary of keeping faith and admitting failings (Sole 1996). This post-apartheid dilemma finds resonance in the Poetry of No Sure Place and perhaps one of its central tenets has become a preparedness to criticise, of being forward looking without unwarranted reification or idealism (Lewis 2003, n.pag). Motsapi's use of word play has consistently revealed his attitude towards the incumbent government when in *Earthstepper / the ocean is very shallow* (2003) he speaks of "politricks" and "politshams" (2003, 27; 35). Meanwhile Rampolokeng (2010) has gone so far as to suggest his poetry is a warning to "not let people lie to you about this new South African Rainbow crap". This is an opinion he directly corroborates in his poem 'Welcome to the new consciousness':

WELCOME to the new consciousness

of derearranged senses
we utilise everyone (2003, 4)

In this extract, which provides a telling synopsis of the wider piece, Rampolokeng challenges the delusional myth of the rainbow nation through a telling use of linguistic experimentalism. The new consciousness is portrayed as a reversion to the previous where the rearrangement that took place after transition has been undone. Moreover, with the temptation to read 'deranged' not 'derearranged', the post-apartheid state becomes tinged with connotations of confusion, even insanity.

Similarly, Angifi Dladla (2001, 79) suggests in 'The building, the weapon, the way' that the new politics has merely been a direct continuation of the old.

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

[...]

the way you are, is the way he is
growing blindly without shame;
ignoring the rumbling under his feet.

Here, the first line opens up the competing interpretations of change in South Africa by suggesting the powerful symbolism available to those who govern with the democratic mandate occupying the same buildings as those who presided over white minority rule. Yet, this is offset because the line simultaneously connotes that, as Sole (2005) notes, there has been a continuation in many of the macro-political structures of governance and oppression. These have arguably been conceived by a shared outlook and an inability to completely shed the psychological affects of apartheid rule. Thus Dladla is perhaps advocating for a necessary revival of consciousness. This critical stanza is then followed by an unveiled warning to those in power that they need to stop, listen and observe the growing discontent amongst the vast majority. If they do not, like a volcano rumbling below ground, these mounting grievances will erupt.

Rampolokeng and Dladla's warning are perhaps some of the starkest criticisms of and warnings about the current South African situation to be found amongst the Poets of No Sure Place. However, by returning to Nyezwa's work -- who does share similar sentiments -- it is possible to see a more nuanced analysis. His work offers a more complex exploration of his unsure place within the aforementioned binary and takes on his own personal battles to accept and believe in society's gains and not just admit to its failures. There is a desire to confront the complexities of realism over the simplifications of idealism. Growing feelings of imbalance and apprehension are unmistakable but these are the emotions of an ordinary man -- as Ndebele suggested was necessary -- whose sense of hopelessness is paradoxically never fully devoid of hope. There may be a private sense of dislocation from the world and a growing public agitation towards the impermanence of political change yet, as Michael Chapman (2009, 178) summarises Jeremy Cronin's view of poetry, Nyezwa's verse remains firmly about the "possibility" not the "impossibility" of love. There is the realistic recognition that it is only through pain that "we know and understand love" (Ramakuela 1997, 39).

'Things change' in *Song Trials* is a calm reflection on change, which "won't have to blow our minds" (Nyezwa 2000, 14) and thus emphasis its simple human aspect over any abrupt unexpected events. By comparing the reception of change alongside the processes of ageing, Nyezwa is able to unpack the inability of the new situation to be all things to all people. For the younger generation marked by innocence it is a necessary change that will realise an idealised future. Meanwhile, the older population are left to question the hardships and, possibly, the worth of adjusting to change which, viewed with more life experience, is not the simple panacea of a "fresh song / from a sparking songbird". Thus Nyezwa juxtaposes the idealistic enduring belief in the possibility of change alongside a need to recognise "the mature acceptance of failure, weakness and limitation" (Ndebele 1994, 50) that characterises a more realistic view, which is prepared to admit a troubling uncertainty about the outcome. The poem includes the prophecy that "it will be a totally new experience / it will be a totally new suffering" (Nyezwa 2000, 14). It is this tension that allows much of the poetry's poignancy. Nyezwa evokes deep pathos by writing of the new suffering as failure but one born from hope and the youthful innocence of misplaced optimism:

it will be like a song sung free
from a careless heart
(our failure will have its dignity) (Nyezwa 2000, 14).

The following poem in the collection allows the reader to move from what was imagined to what materialised. 'It all begins' records the stages to the new dispensation in a manner that suggests an increasing permanence. The lyric progresses from the brevity of "thunder in the middle of the road" to the indelible permanence of "the scratch of one pen" (Nyezwa 2000, 15). Yet Nyezwa's complex relationship with hope and hopelessness remains. He writes of an ordinary person's fluctuating emotions of belief, cynical doubt and, underlying both, realism: "it begins with the promise of peace / in the avalanche of lies / and it could be all these things". He then ends with the lines "and it all begins / and it will never cease" (Nyezwa 2000, 15). Thus Nyezwa observes change's cyclical nature and his own acceptance that nothing is permanent and his own personal relationship to hope and despair will remain in flux.

This conversation between hope and despair allows parallels to be drawn to Motsapi, another Poet of No Sure Place, whose work constantly "embraces the struggle of self-creation [and] political solidarity" by viewing these as "under construction" and in flux rather than with "essence" (Chrisman 196, 34). The best example comes in the *Earthstepper* collection's final poem, 'river robert', where Motsapi warns the "struggle to re-create is never simple" (Ramakuela 1997, 38). Ramakuela summarises how

[Motsapi] is hopeful that despite all the problems 'we are at peace here'. Here the struggle to be hopeful and the impossibilities thereof are expressed in the sentences 'we are at peace here / even while our lungs are full / of secret wars / & primordial fears bruise our suns / we are at peace here robert'.

Motsapi recognises humanity's fallibility and limitations and therefore, reminiscent of Nyezwa, suggests hope can only be found in allowing the continual possibility of despair. All will not necessarily be well. Indeed, 'river robert' warns against idealism and dreaming. Dreams are sketched as having the possibility to both give and take:

i have one eye full of dreams & hintentions

the other is full of broken mirrors
& cracked churchbells

i have one eye full of rivers & welcomes
the other is full of flickers & fades (Motsapi 2003, 84).

Utopian South Africa remains possible but just as likely is history repeating. This is suggested by the broken mirror that does not stop reflecting but rather presents distorted images with cracks in new places. Similarly, Nyezwa warns that new divides may appear in society and further complicate the imperfect balance between hope and hopelessness. 'Reconciliation' plots the journey from enemy to brother and illustrates that, though there is reconciliation, it is not an easy peace. The poem reveals tensions and aggravations remaining on either side. Nyezwa (2000, 55) ends with declarative certainty:

and you're still my friend, nowhere
where i hurt you
and you hurt me.

Typical of *Song Trials* as a whole Nyezwa continues a policy of complication. Just as Ndebele recognised the binary constructions of good versus evil were too reductive for true understanding and lasting change prior to transition so too Nyezwa argues subservient utopian visions are now. Nyezwa accepts a profoundly imperfect change where tension and difference linger. And, moreover, he has done this calmly: "i have stopped making demands / upon the world. [...] i am no longer bereaved / i have found myself" (Nyezwa 2000, 85).

This acceptance is replicated early in *New Country* where Nyezwa speaks of defiance and hope. He gestures towards the freedoms now offered.

constantly you hide your soul
like an embarrassment
let nothing escape you.
in prison we ate with our hands
tied simultaneously behind,
like mad creatures.
listen if you're conscious and your spirit in awe,
i say live to hide your sorrow (Nyezwa 2008a, 7).

Though fear and sorrow continues, this poem -- with some of the hallmarks of 'the poet's failure' discussed above -- acts as a plea for South Africans to grasp some of the opportunities now on offer and to speak openly about what confronts them. Furthermore, elsewhere in the earlier pages of this collection this need for the public to embrace their passions and find their voice is united with an appeal towards reconciliation and a view towards the larger unconquerable hardships of the world. In 'There's a greater suffering between friends', Nyezwa writes:

there's nothing between us – no enemies,
yet we fight and swear constantly.
there's greater suffering between friends,

more than between lovers.

break your silence, forget that you live,
for already something is burning. (Nyezwa 2008a, 21).

Though never idealised these poems do inspire hope in the new country the collection's title references. However, the ironic tone of the collection's title poem offsets such optimism and alludes to new divides and disjunctures. Nyezwa (2008a, 56) speaks to those "men and women with money" in the new dispensation and reminds them to not simply "leave us alone as fallen heroes and comrades" those who are not so fortunate. 'New country' concludes with a stark warning. If there is an abandoning of the people then change will not be natural or cyclical. It will be forced:

the revolution will begin
and the fathers and teachers
follow like funerals in the wake.

new country
the struggle continues
revolutions never end (Nyezwa 2008a, 56).

The shift that occurs within *New Country* from hope to hopelessness is matched by a shift in the poetry's focus. As argued above, the poetry's physicality and clear vision of the land is replaced by increased ruminations on the sea and a more spiritual focus, by which I do not mean the spiritual to be seen as synonymous with religion but rather as a "symbol of self and presence" (Metelerkamp 2001, 123). 'San people' the last poem in *New Country* hints towards this new focus with the lines "and the truth must be the truth / inside our bodies" (Nyezwa 2008a, 69). The *Malikhanye* collection that follows proceeds to revolve around this new truth. At this point, Nyezwa begins to depart from Ndebele's project on the ordinary. Nyezwa's original search for complication and complexity corresponded with Ndebele's refusal of simplification that he felt represented the "emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs" (Ndebele 1994, 42). However, *Malikhanye* almost seems to progress past Ndebele. Following his realisation that "life complicates yet simplifies" (Nyezwa 2012), Nyezwa has concluded that for all his searching and contemplation there remain unavoidable truths that cannot be complicated and demand simple statement. But it is important to remember that this return to stating obvious truths does not represent a return to what Ndebele previously dismissed as sloganeering. Instead it is a step beyond because it remains the latest stage of an evolving process of thought.

Nyezwa's introspective glance and emptying out of complexity is coupled with a profound solitude, a complete absence of hope, an emptying out of himself. Nowhere is it better epitomised than in 'From a blue container in motherwell' where he describes himself as "a shadow / geometrical / in a blue ship" cast away on the large, relentless "stony sea" (Nyezwa 2011, 14). Similarly, the tendency to meditate on disillusion and a sense of being cast adrift continues in 'Walking the earth'. Here, Nyezwa speaks directly of his sudden revelation and consequent lost hope and connection:

i am walking the earth
like a man who has just awoken
like an idle boat drifting by

Furthermore, the sheer oppressive weight of life is underscored alongside a deep questioning of his own significance:

i have been thinking of my life
as a man who is busy drowning
with no hope of martyrdom
or staying alive

[...]

and during the many storms in my life
what happened?
what really happened? (Nyezwa 2011, 21).

There is a return to simplification. There is a tendency for matt, voiceless images without detail -- for example “my country / is a sulphurous compound [...] as thoroughly silent as corpses” -- while Nyezwa, neither dying nor living but continually struggling and unsure of meaning or purpose, creates a poem with a permanent sense of uncertainty where there is no resolution. This imbalance reflects Nyezwa’s personal apprehension and places him as a poet on the edge of falling off the world.

Conclusion

First appearing in *New Coin* during the 1990s a new aesthetic was introduced to South African literature. These were the Poets of No Sure Place, a label that succinctly captures the flexible nature of this particular poetic community and the highly experimental style of their work (Sole 2003, 229), which was used to challenge the rhetoric of the political elites and those who sang their praises and instead present a poetry aligned with those who continued to suffer and are marginalised by society. Furthermore, this label represents their own apprehensions and fears as poets and citizens in South Africa, their “quarrel with themselves and with the enormously complicated country they inhabit” (Alvarez 2006, n.pag). But at its starkest it represents the uncertain place within the established binaries that seem to govern South African politics and literature: public or private, hopeful or not, on the margins or with the masters. And it is to this latter representation that Mxolisi Nyezwa’s work speaks most directly. A poet whose work epitomised the movement’s desire to “order a chaos which is both internal and external, private and public” (Bethlehem 1998, 66), this article has concentrated on Nyezwa’s three poetry collections and traced three leading themes through them. By exploring the purpose of writing, the role of place and landscape, and a broader complex sense of hope and hopelessness for the new South Africa alongside Ndebele’s theoretical project on the ordinary, I have shown how Nyezwa’s poetry reflects a poet with increasing fears for the future. He struggles to survive in an unsure place between extremes and wrestles with a permanent sense of instability that has slowly seen him become a man on the edge of falling off the world. His poems have acted as a cathartic expression of sadness as he sought refuge in writing and interiority to explain the complications and tensions that surround him. However, his latest collection *Malikhanye* has offered a starker, more simple truth where perhaps poetry cannot save him and where a hopeful future is unachievable. *Song Trials*, *New Country*, and *Malikhanye* each represent an increasingly difficult battle to find true connection in a country where all seems lost. It is a poetry, and Nyezwa a poet of no sure place.

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Notes

¹ There is undoubtedly critical literature outside of poetry. However, the view stated here does resonate with a recent Pew Research Centre study that found a third of South Africans feel it is wrong to publically criticise the government (“Only” 2015).

² These essays included “Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction” (1984) and “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” (1984). These have been collated into one collection, *South African Literature and Culture* (1994), cited here.

³ According to the Book of Exodus, Moses fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian slavemaster. On Mount Herod he then encountered God who ordered him to return to Egypt and demand the release from slavery of the Israelites. Feeling he was not eloquent or articulate enough to make such demand, God agreed that Moses’ brother, Aaron, could become his spokesperson. Moses then stayed in Egypt until after the Ten Plagues where he again fled and, crossing the Red Sea, led the Israelites out of the country to Mount Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments from God. It is said how Moses spent so long alone on the mountain, his followers feared he had died and instead began to worship false idols.

⁴ Nyezwa (2015) noted how his initially ambiguous use of the sea as a metaphor first brought his work to Robert Berold’s attention. It was “one poem [he wrote] of the New Brighton beach that first fascinated and intrigued Robert”.

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