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Back to the future

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was’. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’

Overview

This chapter introduces the central issues that have preoccupied postcolonial poets in English across the twentieth century—language, history, locality, and displacement—through a reading of three volumes published during the period 1989–2002. Recent poetry is used as a vantage point from which to begin mapping the contours of the large and variegated territory of poetic concerns addressed in Parts II and III. Each volume undertakes a radical revision of the poet’s relation to her own historicity in poems of striking force, precision, and originality. Such writing demonstrates the responsibility undertaken by poets towards the practice of a vocation that is energized rather than disabled by the traumas of a colonial past.

2.1 English as a ‘foreign anguish’: Nourbese Philip

I did not go to Africa looking for my ‘roots’. These are very deeply embedded in the black earth of the West Indies. But my much maligned ancestors came from Africa. I wanted to stand where they might have stood. I did.

Claire Harris, *Fables from the Women’s Quarter*

Marlene Nourbese Philip (b. 1947) writes poems, plays, and fiction. She was born in Tobago, and lives in Canada, where she studied and

practised law before becoming a full-time writer. She has published four volumes of poetry from Canada: *Thorns* (1980), *Salmon Courage* (1983), *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), and *Looking for Livingstone* (1991); a fifth, *Zong!*, is forthcoming. The early poem 'Sprung Rhythm' recognizes the power of syncopated rhythms to both split and bridge verse lines: 'kneading, distorting, enhancing | a foreign language' (1980: n.p.). The short poem 'No More' gathers its power from a simple inversion of syntax, beginning with 'Don' feel like a woman | no more', and ending 'like a woman | no more | goin' feel' (1980: 11).

The cohesion of Philip's writing is based on recurrent concerns: the indelible impression left on people of African descent by colonial history; the pain to be met, overcome, and accepted in using language (which resembles the pain of giving birth); the closeness of language to the physicality of blood and the body; the enormity of the silence breached by poetry. Of the colonial relation, Philip writes in the essay 'Managing the Unmanageable', 'The African's encounter with the New World was catastrophic and chaotic: how does one and how ought one to manage such an experience in poetry or in writing? How does one make readable what has been an unreadable experience?' (1990: 298). She answers the question by exploring history as the geography of silence.

She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks (1989/1993) consists of nine sections, followed by a prose essay on 'The absence of writing'. The first section, 'And Over Every Land and Sea', begins with a contemporary adaptation of Ovid's account of how Proserpine was abducted by Hades from her mother Ceres. The poem offers a poignant rendering of the loss inherent to diasporic scattering:

Where she, where she, where she
 be, where she gone?
 [. . .]
 She gone—gone to where and don't know
 looking for me looking for she;
 is pinch somebody pinch and tell me,
 up where north marry cold I could find she –
 Stateside, England, Canada – somewhere about . . .

(1993: 2, 4)

Girl separated from mother, mother searching for girl, become emblems for what has been lost or taken. The broken syntax explores the expressive function of linguistic opacity. The poet reacts against the colonial imperative of 'You better know your place' by making her language 'unmanageable,' 'giving in to the urge to interrupt the text' (1990: 298). Tremulous hesitancy becomes expressive almost despite itself. The Caribbean migrant making a new home in the northern cold of Canada is lit by the classical myth of a girl picking flowers, whose bond to the underworld provides a poetic account of the seasonal change to winter. The story of the mother who served as wet-nurse to a King's child, where she turned a Prince into a lizard with a grim look, is transposed to the new life in which 'lizard headed | I suckle her | sucking me' (6). The cold is her Hades, the birth into new being 'a blooded hibiscus' (7).

The second section commemorates the 'Cyclamen Girl,' 'black girl white dress' (12), who is evoked from a photograph circa 1960, hailed through the ancestral presences of Aphrodite, Mary, Atebey, Orehu, Yemoja, Oshun (17), initiated into adulthood by menstrual blood, 'my badge of fertility,' 'my badge of futility' (18), dropped into life by a 'stone-bird mother,' like 'Pebbles of blood and stone' (19). The genealogical succession from mother to daughter, each crossing the threshold of her own pain, links the first two sections, myth narrowed to focus on personal history, personal recollection resonating with myth to include 'all cyclamen girls' (18).

The next two sections consist of single poems inspired by specific artifacts. The third derives its elegiac inspiration from a collection of African sculpture donated to the Art Gallery of Ontario by a Canadian benefactor in 1981. The poet broods on the fact that so-called 'primitive' African art provided part of the impetus for Modernist art such as that of Braque, Picasso, and Brancusi. She finds it ironic that an African culture rich in the concrete was mined by artists from another culture for its 'abstraction' (punning on 'making abstract,' 'abstracted, as in distracted,' and 'pulling out'), giving us the bland cosmopolitanism of 'you plus I equals we' (22). The fourth section takes a slightly different angle on the ambivalence of the contemporary by asking a question that applies to many kinds of heterogeneity and hybridity:

In whose language
Am I

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Am I not
Am I I am yours
Am I not I am yours
Am I I am

If not in yours
In whose
In whose language
Am I
If not in yours
Beautiful

(27)

The struggle over language becomes the dominant theme through the remainder of the volume. ‘Discourse on the Logic of Language’ is a *tour de force* which juxtaposes four parallel texts. The first runs vertically down the left margin, so that one has to hold the book sideways in order to read it. The oblique relation of this discourse to the rest is signaled visually. It describes a mother who has given birth to a girl. She first licks the afterbirth, then opens her mouth, touches tongue to tongue, and blows the words she has inherited from all the mothers before her into the child’s mouth. The passing on of the mother tongue is thus enacted in a literal ritual. In the next text, printed ‘normally’, (we infer) the daughter speaks, and what she utters is ‘the foreign anguish’ of speaking in ‘english’, which is not her mother tongue (32).

The two remaining texts act as marginalia and gloss respectively, each adopting a different register. The third provides a pair of edicts used in the Caribbean by slave owners who adopted the policy of mixing slaves from different language groups in order to minimize the likelihood of rebellion, and forbade the use of the mother tongue by a slave under threat of having the tongue removed from the mouth by force. The fourth gives a formal anatomical description of the regions of the human brain that are responsible for language, followed by a description of the human tongue as an organ of taste and speech, and ‘the principal organ of oppression and exploitation’ (33). Mother, child, slaver, and anatomist are thus used to assemble a stylistic collage, in which the complexity of language is captured within four vectors of force.

The sixth section, ‘Universal Grammar’, adopts a similar strategy of textual juxtapositions. Disparate registers bear upon the complexity

of grammar, first to show how language can be broken down to its constituent elements, and then to exemplify significance built up from those elements, as in ‘The tall, blond, blue-eyed, white-skinned man is shooting’ (37, 39), cited in several European languages. The poem as visual performance is arranged as two sets of text facing one another. The left-hand side analyses words in terms of grammar and diction, dramatizing a form of knowing that is inert to the feeling that accompanies utterances like these: ‘The smallest cell remembers O’ (36), or ‘fragments tremble ex man again’ (38). The right-hand side provides the affect absent from analytic discourse.

The entire collage subjects the context-free conventions of analysis to a form of painful irony, which is mindful of the colonial residue that the postcolonial struggles to put together. The routine activity of ‘parsing’ is transformed into ‘the exercise of dis-membering language into fragmentary cells that forget to re-member’ (40). The words used to illustrate language also highlight gender, and the physicality of words: thus ‘raped’ (40) illustrates active and passive voice, and the actions of ‘Suck Slide Play Caress Blow’ (41) illustrate the role of the tongue in utterance. Making a language one’s own becomes, figuratively speaking, one of ‘Mother’s Recipes’ for ‘How Not to Get Raped’ (41).

The next section reinforces the connection between language and power: language poses a question; power is the answer. The vowel sounds of English are exemplified by a loaded selection of words: ‘lose, look, boat, brawn, lot, shroud, coin’ (44). Each is placed in a sentence touching upon some aspect of the life of Caribbean slaves. The facing page highlights their history in terms of the question ‘how did they “lose” a language’, and the answer: ‘the word | that in the beginning was |—not his’, used to ‘smash | the in-the-beginning word | centre’ (45). The exhortation ‘Make it New’, associated with the American poet William Carlos Williams, has an uncertain application in a predicament ‘floundering in the old’ (45). The poet alludes to the marginal or secondary nature to which the postcolonial is consigned, still smeared with the anxiety that produces the wrong emphases, limited to the kind of recognition conferred by

this chattel language
babu english
slave idiom

nigger vernacular
 coolie pidgin
 wog pronunciation

(47)

How words collect historical responses is borne out by speculations about the experience of the Middle Passage: ‘By holding on to the meaning of life, did the slaves unconsciously limit it—or merely the word?’ (48). The banishment and death of the Word, as in the Red Queen ordering heads to be chopped off in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), prepares for it to rise and live again.

The antepenultimate section consists of a single poem in six parts, ‘Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue’. The first part unleashes ‘the promise || in ugly’ (52). How people are described is determined by the connotations accumulated in a language by a people using them to describe others. The African has been imaged as having kinky hair, a flattened nose, thick lips, prognathous jaws, and a shrunken brain (52). The point made by the poem is that such imaging is an attribute of language use. The physical traits bespeak the culture they come from, not the culture they profess to describe. ‘From whose perspective’, the poet asks later, ‘are the lips of the African thick or her hair kinky? Certainly not from the African’s perspective’ (86). The second part of the poem invites the reader to inhabit ‘the beyond of pale’, to ‘touch tongue to tongue’ (53). The third part laments that the English language wraps, squeezes the mind ‘round | and around’:

this/
 fuck-mother motherfuckin-
 this/
 holy-white-father-in-heaven-
 this/
 ai! ai!
 tongue

(53)

The fourth part declares that the poet would like to pull out the tongue (the English tongue, the tongue using English): it is like a Gorgon head full of snakes. The fifth offers a more constructive alternative: to feed these snakes ‘milk | from black breasts | (stroke and caress into | lactate)’ (54–5), to breed a new ‘warrior race | of words’ (55). The

sexual and the maternal are always latent within the aggressive–defensive dimension of experience, just as language is never free of the ethnicity and gender of its user. The poem ends with the heroic image of a black female Perseus, who has mastered the snaking Medusa of English, cohabited with this strange ‘father’s tongue’ in order ‘to revenge the self | broken | upon the word’. Philip thus joins the host of writers from Britain’s former colonies who mix metaphors of revenge with incest, grapple with its power of paternity over their creations in order to ‘engender by some alchemical practice a metamorphosis within the language from father tongue to mother tongue’ (90).

The title sequence invokes the idea of metamorphosis from Ovid. The poet is ‘loosed from the catapult pronged double with history’ into ‘a future biblical with anticipation’ (58). As elsewhere in the volume, the sequence alternates between the registers of verse and prose. Two ideas—the poem as the poet’s utterance, the poem as built, magpie-like, from aptly chosen quotations—make two texts resonate in unison. The prose quotation comments abstractly on issues handled more personally by the verse, as in advice on horticulture (‘transplanting is always a painful process’, 59), or a description of the human limbic system (‘Memory is essential to human survival’, 61). Forgetting and remembering are like uprooting and replanting, both linked to the specificity of languages, sharing the common ground where one utterance meets its sibling.

One of the most powerful effects in Philip’s work is her ability to break language down to its bare elements, and use these with a musicality and rhythmic propulsion that does away with many conventions of syntax. Such poetry does more than allude to performance: it jumps off the page, the printed word asking to be heard as sound and pulse. Broken syntax doubles other kinds of breakdown: between thought and feeling, feeling and word, word and sense, sense and memory. At the same time, the bruised language becomes in itself a new expressive device, at once injury and anodyne. That is how ‘the harsh husk of a future-present begins’ (62), as in the partial overlap in the following series of nouns from alternate verse lines:

oath moan mutter chant
 [...]
 babble curse chortle sing
 [...]

praise-song poem ululation utterance

(64)

The sequence shifts focus to the African in a colonial environment. The verse dramatizes alternate bouts of self-loathing and resentment as the Afro-Caribbean descendants of slaves struggle to reconcile the loss of native cultural values with the acculturation into a European religion and language. Their roots feel like the 'blackened stump of a tongue' (66). They are like a child touched by a stranger who the mother will therefore not suckle (67). The proselytizing power of Christianity sits uncomfortably on the Afro-Caribbean. On the one hand, it merges with the paternal aspect of English as a 'father tongue', teaching the colonized a form of self-abnegation that persists into postcolonial times: '*I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table*' (68). On the other hand, it leaves the formerly colonized wondering, 'Is it in the nature of God to forgive himself' (69).

Philip foregrounds the debilitating effect of words severed from their source (70). Poetry and history share one burden: memory. Just as there can be no history without memory (71), poetry can come into being only when it remembers that languages have been lost, taken, and forgotten. Therefore, if the poet is to sing again, like Philomela, she must undergo the metamorphosis that changed the raped woman without a tongue into a nightingale (72). If the pool is to be replenished with fish for the coming winter, the skeleton of the season's first salmon must be put back ritually into the water (73). In the re-remembered death of an ineluctable past, the present begins to realize its future.

The final section of the book consists of a prose essay, which reiterates and expands on the ideas, feelings, and arguments suggested by the preceding poems. Philip coins the term 'i-mage making' (79) to refer to the power of the imagination to create powerful image-symbols in words. In the Caribbean, the autonomy of this power was withheld from slaves and their descendants during the colonial era. Later, it found expression in vigorous forms of popular culture such as calypso and reggae. Its 'Afro-centric' potential has a very brief history. However, the essay ends on a note of careful optimism. In contemporary times, the poet notes, the 'experience

of the African in the Caribbean and the New World' is 'as much a part of the English collective experience as England is part, for better or worse, of the African experience' (86).

The same concerns animate *Looking for Livingstone* (1991). Its mixture of prose and verse narrates a symbolic voyage in which the poet's persona voyages to meet Dr Livingstone, and realizes that the explorer discovered not a continent but the continent's silence: 'discovered it, owned it, possessed it, like it was never possessed before' (1991: 20). Meanwhile, the traveller makes her own discovery: 'your word—engorging itself on my many, yet one, silence' (27). The process of going back in time to meet and confront 'Dr. Livingstone—I presume' becomes an allegory for re-discovering the ability to articulate the silence of a fictive origin. Silence is that which the European snatched from the African, and replaced with the power of his word. Speech and silence are complicit with power and desire: 'HIS WORD SLIPPING IN AND OUT OF THE WET MOIST SPACES OF MY SILENCE' (25).

Livingstone pursued Africa, and Stanley pursued Livingstone. In the poem, both are taught in poetic hindsight, 'while you thought you were discovering Africa, it was Africa that was discovering you' (62). Silence is both noun and verb, a sentence that cannot be appealed but must be broken (70–1). To split silence is to release the enormous energy held captive within. Philip's gendered fiction of a voyage to an ancestral home far back in time and space shows how the poetic resource of the symbolic voyage, first explored by older poets from the Caribbean, continues to serve later generations.

2.2 'no darkie baby in this house': Jackie Kay

Now
what could consonance or assonance or
even rhyme do to something like that?

William Wantling, 'Poetry'

The title-sequence of Jackie Kay's first volume of poetry (after *Four Black Women Poets*, 1984), *The Adoption Papers* (1991), is described on the cover as telling 'the story of a black girl's adoption by a white Scottish couple—from three different viewpoints: the mother, the birth mother and the daughter'. The sequence is a remarkable

achievement in a number of ways. It foregrounds the tension between ties of blood and those of upbringing through what we might describe as the principle of plural empathy. It makes room for what the two very different mothers are imagined to feel, at different times of the adopted child's conception and growth, while also leaving room for what the poet shows the daughter (the poet's persona) to learn about herself in relation to her two mothers. The time of writing is thus laden with the other viewpoints and lives that contributed to the daughter's (and poet's) growth into self-awareness. In this volume, to be 'postcolonial' is to be born to one race, but call another 'mother'.

The sequence foregrounds what we might call the principle of polyphonic cohesion. The daughter's development is traced through an alternation of three voices. The technique has a literary antecedent in 'Three Women' (1962), a poem by Sylvia Plath, in which the experience of giving birth is refracted through three perspectives: a woman who has a normal delivery, another who has either a miscarriage or an abortion, and a third woman who delivers an unwanted child. In both sequences, 'telling' is renovated by 'showing'. Verse autobiography is not restricted to a single narrative viewpoint. The use of fragmentary dramatic monologue frees the sequence from the limits of the lyric genre; at the same time, the assimilation of alternating voices into a complex polyphony enables the sequence to sustain the unity of consciousness that is central to the lyric genre.

The sequence also foregrounds the tension of the inter-racial by focusing on the social unit of the adoptive family. The relation between mother and child becomes a concrete instance that proves the capacity of need, care, and love to accept and transcend racial distinctions without recourse to the sentimental or the platitudinous. The daughter's circumstances illustrate how migration from former colonies has brought contemporary Britain to a forced negotiation with the possibility of a multi-racial society. The sequence transforms familial identification from an abstract notion about ethnicity to a demonstration that bonds developed through association and nurture can heal the damage caused by the severance of the bonds of nature.

The demonstration has implications for a society in which prejudice based on skin colour and ethnic origin is often at conflict with the weak liberalism of 'live and let live'. The idea of multiculturalism often appears too frail to sustain more than the semblance of uneasy

neighbourliness, but in the sequence, the relation between black child and white parent gives sturdy proof that a much greater degree of closeness is possible insofar as the unit of the family can predicate a society that can deal robustly with issues of racial difference. It is worth noting that Kay's book is dedicated to Helen Kay, the adoptive mother, and the old lady who began her acquaintance with her new granddaughter with the remark, 'There'll be no darkie baby in this house', is given eventual recognition by the child as 'My Grandmother' (1998b: Track 1).

The persona of the birth mother develops in alternation with that of the adoptive mother. Neither is given a full poem to herself. This produces a composite effect. Motherhood and femininity are a series of often divergent frames of mind. The first poem shows the effectiveness of a technique based on an alternation of voices. The woman who gets pregnant cannot get over the surprise of how easily it happened, how unexpected it was, and by implication, how unprepared she finds herself to deal with what has happened. In contrast, the woman who will later adopt the child is shown as urgent to inhabit the role of motherhood, keen for her body to go through all the physical experiences of pregnancy. Five years of failure to conceive have prepared her for all the feelings that a birth mother might go through. The antiphonal structure of the poem is able to enact a simple and powerful recognition: the double irony of a woman who conceives without being ready for the role, and a woman ready for the role, but unable to conceive. The child is conceived in the gap between a body that wants, and another that does not want, a baby.

The sequence is arranged to resemble a narrative in three parts, the first covering the period from before conception to early childhood, the second taking up the story of the girl's life between age six and eighteen, the third bringing the narrative to the point at which the poet-persona begins writing the sequence. The daughter makes her entry in the second poem, where she is at the centre of a complex irony. The girl wants to secure a copy of the original birth certificate. Who one is depends on one's textual history. Whatever she may have thought she was, up to that point, will have to be revised depending on what the document reveals about her birth and origin.

At this point, the poet slips back into the past, into the mind of the girl who managed to get pregnant at nineteen, and now feels the

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stitches of what must have been a difficult and unwanted birth. Calmly, the poet's persona surveys the involuntary mother's options:

I'll suffocate her with a feather pillow
Bury her under a weeping willow
Or take her far out to sea

(13)

By the third night, the birth mother's attitude undergoes a change, she now wills the frail child to live. Meanwhile, the woman who cannot conceive turns to adoption agencies for an alternative way of becoming a mother. At the fifth port of call, when she declares that they do not mind the colour, a solution is at hand. The reader shares in the daughter's first discovery of her birth mother: age, height, place of work. The poet carries the reader through a series of intersections between three separate chronotopes—Mikhail Bakhtin's term for a unique conjunction of a specific 'here and now' (1981: 250).

Up to this point in the sequence, the language used by the poet, on the printed page, is colloquial Standard English. The poet distinguishes between the several voices of the poem by using different fonts for the daughter, the adoptive mother, and the birth mother. The Scottish accent and intonation that we encounter immediately when we listen to the poet reading her work enters the printed page as local variations of diction and rhythm characterizing the adoptive mother's speech as she prepares the house to receive the child:

I thought I'd hid everything
that there wasnie wan
giveaway sign left

(14)

The sense of who one is, as reflected in how one's speech derives from a specific place, time, and community, makes its own oblique but firm affirmation of belongingness. The adoptive mother is eager to welcome the child, and works hard to make the house look suitable as a home for a baby. The social worker is won over by evidence that the childless couple is active in causes like a nuclear-free world.

The birth mother makes her train journey back to Aberdeen, rationalizing the giving up of her baby to adoption. The adoptive mother has to wait anxiously for the baby to show signs of good health before the papers can be signed. The frailty of the newborn

child is an issue that concerns more than physical health. The child lives without the physical closeness of the birth mother, without a home or a family that will claim her as theirs. The pathos of a plight that the daughter is too young to be aware of is thus dramatized by the poet as shareable, in retrospect, with the reader. The couple is pleased and proud after visiting the baby in an Edinburgh hospital, a ‘darling’ even before she can be legally claimed. The birth mother signs away her right to the baby, it passes the health requirement, and the adoptive parents now have two days in which to ready themselves for their responsibility: less time, but more readiness than what the birth mother received and found within her.

As for the birth mother, the waitress who returns to her solitary home in Aberdeen, the kissing and saying sorry that works in novels will not do for her. She is as empty as winter air. Once home, she conducts an odd and painful burial: the clothes she had bought for the baby are buried in the back garden in a ritual of farewell, grief, shame, and self-recrimination. At night, she dreams:

she came in by the window,
my baby Lazarus
and suckled at my breast.

(18)

The directness and plausibility with which the poet ventriloquizes every detail of either mother’s frame of mind at a time when she, the daughter, was too young to know, makes the poem intuitive and humane in its emotional impact. The Wordsworthian sentiment that the child is the true parent, and binds the family in a form of natural piety, is realized in Kay’s sequence by the compassion shown by the child towards either mother. The daughter proceeds with her search for the birth mother. Meanwhile, as if in a dream, the adoptive mother imagines a visit from the birth mother: the visitor appears as a spitting image of the baby, dressed oddly in tweed, and white in appearance, like lightening, or a ghost.

Part Two moves forward to when the daughter is six:

She says my real mammy is away far away
Mammy why aren’t you and me the same colour
But I love my mammy whether she’s real or no

(21)

The daughter is scared for a while that this mother will disappear or disintegrate, but soon forgets the fear amidst childhood routines. What is less easily forgotten or dealt with is the racism of children her age. To them, she is ‘*Sambo*’ and ‘*Dirty Darkie*’ (24). The daughter is pugnacious and fights back. The adoptive mother is firm in her affirmation that colour and ‘racialism’ can be resisted, just as she is firm in her dismissal of the notion that a child must have a umbilical connection with the mother for the relation to be real.

Clichés about blood and race recur throughout school life. The daughter is assumed to be able to dance the Cha Cha and the Black Bottom because ‘you people had it in your blood’ (25). The media proffer white figures from the world of music and cinema that the girl cannot hope to imitate. The birth mother re-enters the sequence with a recollection of the peat-coloured man who was the father. His name was Olubayo, and he never saw his daughter, although she would like to imagine his eyes looking back at her through the eyes of the baby in her hospital cot. Meanwhile the growing daughter takes up ‘FREE ANGELA DAVIS’ (27) as a slogan. We can interpret the slogan to have an application closer to home, while it grounds the cause of the radical Black American activist in the mundane racism of children at school and play.

Part Three catches up with the decade that brings us to the poet’s present. The birth mother is imagined as living in desolation, never forgetting the child she gave up. Voices from her past echo like a pneumatic drill in her head. She reckons that her daughter must now be nineteen, the same age at which she arrived at her involuntary motherhood. Meanwhile, the daughter grows up, having to face the fact that her adoptive parents are not ‘of the same tree’ (29), that she has no direct knowledge of her blood relations, no tie between her own body and the blood of her ancestors. The poem alternates between the voice of the mother who cannot imagine what her girl looks like, and the voice of the daughter who wishes desperately that she could have a sense of the birth mother’s physical presence, just as she has the sense of Scotland as ‘the soil in my blood’ (29).

Finally, efforts to bring daughter and birth mother together begin moving to a climax. The sequence ends with their meeting. Each is slightly surprised that the other is slightly different from how she had

been imagined. Each recognizes an inevitable anticlimax to the long-awaited reunion:

One dream cuts another open like a gutted fish
 nothing is what it was;
 she is too many imaginings to be flesh and blood.
 There is nothing left to say.
 Neither of us mentions meeting again.

(33)

The fictive self conjured by each for the other in the twenty-six years of separation is too powerful to be displaced by a meeting with the person of flesh and blood. Absence has bred a reality of the mind that we the readers participate in through the poem. This reality of imagined encounters and experiences has become more ‘real’ to mother and daughter than the desolation they have lived in the other’s absence. Their actual encounter only brings them closer to the desolation of lives not lived together, not liveable together. It is time to move on, time to begin again.

Like every ritual of initiation, and every *bildungsroman* that surveys the past from a point of vantage that also shows the path toward a future, the sequence marks a turning from (though not, by any means, a turning away from) the tie of nature to the tie of nurture. Without every getting didactic or preachy, the sequence manages to imply a lesson that we can adduce from Paul Gilroy when he writes of the need, in our times, for ‘conviviality’, which makes nonsense of ‘closed, fixed, and reified identity and turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification’ (2004: xi). The sequence lays a strong foundation—not for ethnic identity—but for identifications based on family and community. It empowers the poet to tackle race relations in contemporary Britain (and from the past, as in a poem that voices the feelings of the Hottentot Venus exhibited all over Europe in the nineteenth century) with a combination of passion and compassion. Above all, it enables Kay, in the other poems from this volume, and in *Other Lovers* (1993) and *Off Colour* (1998), to show how conviviality can be sustained in contemporary society without losing sight of the need for justice tempered with empathy. It makes for a poetry that is alert to avoid and expose blandness, hypocrisy, and bad faith.

2.3 'the invisible mending of the heart': Ingrid de Kok

Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon.

Geoffrey Hill, 'Ovid in the Third Reich'

From 1948, South Africa institutionalized the extreme form of racism known as apartheid, which lasted until 1994. The political and ethical fallout from apartheid continues to affect contemporary poets in South Africa, where the racial dimension of violence has tended to blur the distinction between colonial and postcolonial predicaments. The 1970s were the heyday of protest against apartheid. The black South African poet James Matthews (b. 1929) declared that the function of poetry was to 'record the anguish of the persecuted' (Bunn 1989: 53). From neighbouring Zimbabwe, Chenjerai Hove (b. 1956) invoked the English poet Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), who had reacted to the carnage of World War I, in which he lost his life, with the maxim 'The poetry is in the pity' (Wild 1988: 36). By 1990, in South Africa and neighbouring countries, the cost of pity was reckoned as too high. The white poet Stephen Watson (b. 1954) remarked of 'Soweto poetry' that 'Like the photograph of the girl in Philip Larkin's poem, the poetry itself grows smaller and clearer as the years go by' (1990: 82–3). He argued that the notion of a 'black aesthetic' remained as remote and unformulated in the 1980s as in the 1970s. Some of these issues are developed further in Chapters 5 and 6, which give a fuller account of the impact of apartheid on poets from black Africa and African settler communities respectively.

Watson wrote at a time when young poets like Lesego Rampolokeng (b. 1965) and Seithlamo Motsapi (b. 1966) had not yet made their impact. White poets in the 1990s continued to face the difficulty of dealing with violence as a theme for acknowledgement, responsibility, complicity, guilt, and reconciliation, while having to avoid the appearance of indifference, blandness, or hypocrisy. In 1988, Ingrid de Kok (b. 1951) expressed the view that the tradition of the personal and relatively private lyric as derived from Europe was 'beleaguered' in South Africa (Bunn 1989: 55). She suggested that white poets could learn to adapt their practices to the performative modes opened up by protest writing, but worried that protest can neglect artistic rigour. How does a poet keep the edge of protest alive, without letting poetry succumb to considerations that dismiss or marginalize the aesthetic

dimension? We will return to this question in Chapter 5. In South Africa, the challenge continues to preoccupy black poets, as in 'Lines for Vincent', in which Rampolokeng broods over the death of a cousin who was savagely tortured, and reiterates the responsibility of language to suffering:

i know i might encounter the death
of speech
but it's said memory is a long road
made worse by the heavy load
of violence

(1999: 13)

In 1976, de Kok left South Africa for Canada, from where she wrote, 'South African writers with rare exceptions and regardless of whether they were politically engaged or not, lost sense of a wider context of artistic engagement. In formal terms poetry stultified, xenophobia reigned' (1997b: online). She returned to her birthplace in 1984, determined to put in practice what she had learnt from poets like Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and Seamus Heaney about her interest in 'the formal representations of the furies, of grief, violence and anger and how they play themselves out, are reordered, in the delicacies and constraints of quite formal work' (1997b: online). 'Mending', from her second volume, *Transfer* (1997), shows how poetry can negotiate between form and the furies. The poem implies a domestic context of feminine suffering, in which the mundane activity of needlework acquires larger resonance, stanzaic neatness holding together a passion that aspires to healing:

The woman plies her ancient art,
Her needle sutures as it darts,
scoring, scripting, scarring, stitching,
the invisible mending of the heart.

(1997a: 35)

The need to heal suffering without ignoring any part of violence becomes the central preoccupation of her third volume, *Terrestrial Things* (2002). The title alludes to 'The Darkling Thrush', a poem written by Thomas Hardy (1840–1928) from England during the gloomy days of the Boer War. Simon Lewis remarks of the allusion that the 'ecstatic caroling' of the 'blast-beruffled' thrush becomes a

token for Hardy, and by implication for de Kok, ‘that despite all the evidence “written on terrestrial things” there might still be “some blessed hope” ’ (2003: online). In the 1980s, the black intellectual Njabulo Ndebele (b. 1948) called upon South African writers to avoid the ‘spectacular’ for the ‘ordinary’. Maya Jaggi, in her review of Ndebele’s *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), reminds us that from exile, Ndebele ‘called for intimacy and introspection to be restored to a literature dominated, in his view, by the spectacular and exterior, by heroic contests between the powerless and the powerful’ (2004: online). One of the chief merits of de Kok’s volume is that in South Africa after apartheid, she manages the difficult feat of balancing the impulses toward the spectacular and the ordinary.

Terrestrial Things comprises four sections, of which I shall allude only to the dozen poems from the second in any detail. The first comprises poems from a visit to Europe, the third and fourth evoke childhood memories. The first explores a wider world seen through eyes overshadowed by what has been learnt and experienced back home. Childhood memories embed the familial in the social. The sensory realm of unforgotten sights, sounds, smells, and sensations is combined with recollection of persons, events, and modes of thought and feeling that are too exact to become sentimental, too sharp to serve as mere anecdotal social history. The volume is at its most resilient in tackling ‘the spectacular’ through a series of intense but modulated responses to the public drama of hearings, trials, and inquiries into human rights violations. One decade after the end of apartheid, the South African legacy of injustice remains both irresistible and problematic, asking for past suffering to be given present hearing, as the nation begins the tentative effort of reconciliation and a new beginning. De Kok described the poets’ dilemma in a 1997 interview:

I don’t know how you can write in South Africa and not reference this major revelatory complex mixture of truth and lying in some way. Yet it also seems impossible, invasive, to do so. The only way I can is to acknowledge the moral torment involved, and then set it aside, or inside.

(1997b: online)

‘Parts of Speech’, from *Terrestrial Things*, gives testimony to the humility and care with which the poet approaches her contemporary reckoning with violence: ‘at this stained place words | are scraped

from resinous tongues' (21). The 'stained place' can be read as a punning reference to the courtrooms where public inquiry into past crimes is recorded, and the spaces of art in which pain, suffering, and silence are to be inscribed. The poet practises self-abnegation. Can anyone dare to suppose that language will be adequate for what is now being revealed as an inquiry into the 'truth' of what happened to those who were killed, tortured, brutalized, and forgotten in the recent South African past?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:
the flame splutter of consonants,
deep sea anemone vowels,
birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,
and verbs, verbs that move mountains?

(21)

In 'How to mourn in a room full of questions', the language is diffident about what it can hope to do, but forceful in how its metaphors wrestle with the emotional force of what is being recounted:

Old sorrow holds down anger like a plug.
And juridical questions swab the brains and blood off the floor.

(23)

The gap between the conventions of courtroom ritual and the kind of speech that suffering permits is starkly pointed up:

'Do you promise to tell the truth,
the whole truth and nothing but the truth?'
[...]
The gull drags its wings to the lighthouse steps.
'That's the truth. So help. Whole. To tell.'

(24)

The poem 'what kind of man are you?' focuses on the question addressed to an officer who was responsible for various acts of brutality, such as mounting a woman to suffocate her with a wet bag, and roasting meat while a man burned on a pyre near by. The officer merely echoes the question back: 'I ask myself the same question.' The poet reflects on the wider implications of the question he evades:

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This kind, we will possibly answer,
(pointing straight, sideways,
upwards, down, inside out),
this kind.

(27)

In studied understatement, the poem extends the indictment to include us all. What turns our stomach, what turns our sense of involvement or responsibility inside out, is the recognition that no part of humanity is free of complicity in such guilt, especially when individuals like Captain Benzien either do not know, or will not say, what made them act as they did. The effectiveness of the poem is paradoxical in nature. To show why it is difficult to do justice to a sense of outrage that acknowledges general responsibility is to do what the poet also implies cannot be done adequately. The effectiveness of de Kok's undertaking requires a combination of empathy and resistance. Poetry accedes to the impulse to respond to violence, but not without recognizing that its moral imperatives must be addressed by the rhetoric of language as form. An ethical compulsion must become aesthetically binding, as in the rhetoric of the following type of question from 'Revenge of the imagination':

Which one, like Isaac,
his head on a rocky altar,
will we sacrifice in mind
to our dazed and shadowy
reverie of revenge and recovery?

(29)

The alliteration twins words that refer to notions we might think separated by a wide difference: revenge and recovery; the need for rough justice and the need to move on. The illusory difference between these opposed concepts, and the manner in which human agency soils both, are precisely underlined.

De Kok presents the ritual act of public inquiry as a form of communal self-appeasement. This ritual is based on the guilt of having allowed all this brutality to be repressed, ignored, or forgotten during the decades of apartheid. The question raised by her poems is not whether bringing up past atrocities for present inscription can be adequate witness to a forgetting from which there is no satisfactory retrieval, but the question of whether language can ever be adequate

to the responsibility of bearing witness. A transcriber at the ‘Truth Commission’ asks, in a dramatic monologue:

But how to transcribe silence from tape?
Is weeping a pause or a word?
What written sign for a strangled throat?

(32)

Like radio, poetry is supposed to edit, connect, broadcast. The medium of radio points up the breakdown of the communicative function, because the turnover rate during the hearings is highest among reporters for radio: the job most frequently quit during the hearings was that of radio reporter. The act of broadcasting guilt is too painful to continue with for long:

Listen, cut; comma, cut;
stammer, cut;
edit, pain; connect, pain; broadcast, pain;
listen, cut; comma, cut.
Bind grammar to horror . . .

(33)

The poem slows down the act of mediation, forces attention to note the conjunction of the grammar of pain and the grammar of language. The narrative of exposure acknowledges the need for justice, punishment, truth, witness, and healing. However, in ‘Today, again’, the poet wonders if that will suffice for the task of reparation to begin:

If we go on like this, everyone
will know somebody this week dead,
watch somebody die, kill somebody
or film it, write about it

(35)

Or read about it. The complicity stretches wide. The poem points to the need to halt, to turn, and to begin afresh.

Seithlamo Motsapi’s *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (1995/2003) provides a radical alternative. Despite misgivings, de Kok falls back on the tradition of the European or Anglo-American lyric. In sharp contrast, Motsapi invents an exuberant and uniquely personal style that derives inspiration from the extrovert energies of African song. His idiom is equally hospitable to metaphor, slang, and cliché.

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Experience is tackled at a level that expands the personal to represent the communal. The verse line is economical in rendering metonymic details as laden with symbolic intent. These features are exemplified at their most effective in ‘earth’, whose lower case format and minimal respect for punctuation and grammar is part of a larger rhetoric of resistance. The first and third stanzas lament the fate of those led on by the allure of gain into a contemporary wilderness:

to say bread
we tamed mountains
assaulted distances
noses stuck out & up
for the shallow odour
of silver
[...]
but now you see me
all earthscent & skewed skunk
pulp in the rot to a fetter
now you see me
a bruising stagger
hammered to hell
& screwed to a grovel by capital

(2003: 15)

The freshness of effect produced by such poems thrives on the improvisatory quality of phrases and metaphors swept along by an energetic rhythm. ‘to say bread’ compacts a narrative of want in which great toil had to be undergone before the utterance of the word could correspond to the availability of the food. ‘noses stuck out and up’ is comic about pretensions that became overextended, and ‘the shallow odour | of silver’ is cheerily blithe in the synaesthesia of its mixed metaphors. ‘skewed skunk’ is vigorously self-deprecatory, ‘a bruising stagger’ is a novel way of evoking the stagger produced by bruises. ‘hammered to hell’ is close to cliché, but the demotic effect gains novelty with ‘screwed to a grovel’. Being exploited can hardly be phrased with more vitality. The style provides the clue to how the predicament it addresses is to be overturned. Where de Kok is defensive and expiatory, such writing is affirmative. Her sense of form leans towards containment, precision, the linguistic understatement of the emotively hyperbolic. Motsapi’s spills over into profusion and excess, words exhilarating by their own flair, as in these lines from ‘river

robert', the final poem in a book that serves the function for contemporary South Africa that was served for American poetry in its time by Whitman's continually revised *Leaves of Grass*:

i have one eye full of dreams & hintentions
the other is full of broken mirrors
& cracked churchbells
[...]
i have
a memory full of paths & anointings
a mouth full of ripe infant suns
seven legs for the dancing river & the clement abyss
& a hope that corrodes the convulsions

(2003: 84)

