

Mimetic Presuppositions: On the Epitextual Responses to Two Poems in English by Marlene van Niekerk

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Summary

In this article, I consider two fairly recent English poems by Marlene van Niekerk: “Mud school” (2013) and “Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi)” (2018). Specifically, I explore the context surrounding the production of these poems, and what we can possibly glean from their limited (and not exclusively literary) reception in order to understand how this part of Van Niekerk’s (English) authorship has thus far been read in more limited ways by critics and scholars. By focusing on the epitextual responses surrounding these poems, I show how they are symptomatic of what Jahan Ramazani calls the “mimetic presuppositions” that often take shape in critical readings of postcolonial literature (2004). Considering the especially politically engaged nature of Van Niekerk’s novels in particular, I argue that the oversight of Van Niekerk’s poetry, both residing in the dearth of translation of her poetry and in the critical blind spot writ large in studies of her work in English, comes as a result of what Emma Bird (2018) calls poetry’s “distinctly peripheral position” in postcolonial literary studies – a critical lens that has in various ways directed readings of Van Niekerk’s English work.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word “Mud school” (2013) en “Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi)” (2018), twee onlangse Engelstalige gedigte deur Marlene van Niekerk, onder die loep geneem. Ek verken spesifiek die konteks rondom die skepping van dié gedigte, en wat daar moontlik afgelei kan word van hul beperkte (en nie uitsluitlik literêre) resepsie ten einde te verstaan hoe hierdie afdeling van Van Niekerk se (Engelstalige) oeuvre met ’n nouer aanslag deur kritici benader is. Deur te fokus op die epitekstuele response op hierdie gedigte toon ek aan hoe hulle kenmerkend is van wat Jahan Ramazani die “mimetic presuppositions”, oftewel mimetiese vooronderstellings, noem wat dikwels in ontledings van postkoloniale literatuur (2004) aangetref word. Met die besondere betrokke aard van Van Niekerk se romans in gedagte voer ek aan dat die afskeping van haar poësie – in terme van sowel die gebrek aan voldoende (Engelse) vertalings as die ooglopende kritiese blindokol in ondersoek oor haar werk in Engels – te wyte is aan wat Emma Bird noem die “distinctly peripheral position” van poësie as ’n genre binne die kader van die postkoloniale literatuurstudie, wat ’n kritiese lens is waardeur Van Niekerk se werk dikwels gelees word.

Introduction

In this article, I consider two fairly recent English poems by Van Niekerk: “Mud school” (2013) and “Fallist art (in memory of Bongani Mayosi)” (2018).¹ Specifically, I explore the context surrounding the production of these poems, and what we can possibly glean from their limited (and not exclusively literary) reception in order to understand how this part of Van Niekerk’s (English) authorship has thus far been read in more limited ways by critics and scholars. By focusing on the epitextual responses surrounding these poems, I show how they are symptomatic of what Jahan Ramazani calls the “mimetic presuppositions” that often take shape in critical readings of postcolonial literature (2004: 1) – a way of reading that approaches literature as imitative of the real world.

The English translations of Marlene van Niekerk’s prose works, particularly the novels *Triomf* (1999) and *Agaat* (2006), have received broad acclaim, both locally and internationally.² Not only have they been discussed in glowing terms by the likes of Toni Morrison, who called *Agaat* “absolutely the most extraordinary book that [she has] read in a long, long time,” (in Morrison, Van Niekerk & Appiah 2010) and Rob Nixon (2004), who referred to *Triomf* as “South Africa’s only world-class tragicomic novel”, but the novels have also garnered a number of prestigious awards.³ Within the South African English literary system, Van Niekerk is best known as – sometimes exclusively – a novelist (Fourie 2020). In the Afrikaans literary system, however, the conceptualisation of her authorship is far more diverse (ibid.). Van Niekerk debuted as a poet with the volume *Sprokkelster* (1977) and has subsequently penned four more Afrikaans poetry collections, in addition to publishing short stories and authoring a stage play as well. Though her poetry collections have not all been translated into English, the poet has over a number of years translated a few of her poems for some poetry websites and anthologies. She has also written poetry in English, though this and her self-translated works have received little critical attention to date.

Whereas Van Niekerk’s longer prose texts were translated, her earlier short fiction remains untranslated along with her first two volumes of poetry – at least into English. *Kaar*, her first volume of poetry since 1983, appeared in 2013 and was critically very well received. Van Niekerk herself has made an

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1. The poems are available online at <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-05-17-00-motshekgas-name-is-mud/> and <https://www.litnet.co.za/fallist-art-in-memory-of-bongani-mayosi/>. I refer to the second poem by the shortened title of “Fallist art” hereafter.
 2. The original Afrikaans novels appeared in 1994 (*Triomf*) and 2004 (*Agaat*).
 3. Amongst these is the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 2007 for the translation of *Agaat* (2006).

interesting observation regarding her return to poetry. In an interview with Jan Steyn, Van Niekerk has mentioned that, despite the positive positioning of reviews later being confirmed with the awarding of several esteemed Afrikaans literary prizes to *Kaar*, the “literary establishment” thereafter “met [*Kaar*] with a huge critical silence” (Van Niekerk in Steyn 2016). The author mentions that the reason for this might be related to “some influential Afrikaans fellow poets [thinking] the collection is rubbish for various reasons” (ibid.). She contrasts the reception of her prose and poetry, both nationally and internationally: “I think there might be a problem on home turf (let alone in the Anglophone world) to align the literary judgement of the novels with the verdict on the poems.” With this, Van Niekerk does seemingly wish to draw attention to a certain critical disparity that has come to dominate the reception of different genres of literature worldwide – a disparity that has also affected her reception as a poet.

In an interview with Rosie Goldsmith, Van Niekerk gives some indication as to why there has not been more extensive translation of her Afrikaans poetry into English:

I write in Afrikaans because it’s the only language that I feel I have enough of a command of in order to mess in it. When I write English, I can’t mess in it, because I’m not so comfortable in it. So I write only in Afrikaans and then sometimes I dare to translate something, or I ask a friend or a colleague to help me with English translations in order to reach a broader audience.

(Van Niekerk in Goldsmith 2015)

The poet has made several attempts in recent years towards translating her own poetry into English – seven of her poems, for instance, appear in the anthology *In a Burning Sea: Contemporary Afrikaans Poetry in Translation* (2014), edited by Marlise Joubert and with an introduction by André Brink.⁴ In the preface, Joubert explains that the book is explicitly aimed at “address[ing] a long-standing need to introduce Afrikaans poetry to a local as well as international audience” (2014: 13). She further expresses the hope that the publication of these translations will encourage further publication of Afrikaans poetry – both older and more recent.⁵

4. Some further English translations of Van Niekerk’s poetry have appeared on the websites Poetry International Web (<https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net>), SLiP (www.slipnet.co.za), as well as in the anthologies *Letter to South Africa. Poets Calling the State to Order* (2011), *In the Heat of Shadows: South African Poetry 1996-2013* (2014), *Afrikaans Poems with English Translations* (2018), and *The New Century of South African Poetry* (2018, 3rd edition).

5. I have noted elsewhere the importance of the publication of translations of Afrikaans poetry if it is to reach a broader audience and perhaps feature more prominently in comparative studies (Fourie 2019).

In his introduction to *In a Burning Sea*, Brink observes the following about Marlene van Niekerk:

[She] draws on a broad historical and cultural canvas where the sacramental is intimately linked to the mundane; in her rhythms the psalmodic carries overtones of honkytonk; often, the political and the philosophical, the sardonic and the deeply serious are engaged in a constant dialogue, charging her poetry with pyromanic intensity.

(Brink 2014: 19)

The observant reader who is familiar with Van Niekerk's greater oeuvre will immediately see in Brink's words the thematic and technical links between her prose and poetry to which he subtly draws attention here. History, culture and the intimacies (some would say sacraments) of the Afrikaner family are all woven, explored and exploited in *Triomf* and *Agaat* – and even, to some extent, in her other novel, *Memorandum* (2006). So-called high culture and the (often faux) gravity of the bible and classical music are undermined, reshaped, and juxtaposed against popular culture, again especially so in Van Niekerk's first two novels, which offer explorations of philosophy and politics that, to re-use Brink's phrasing, burn "with pyromanic intensity".⁶

Marlene van Niekerk as Postcolonial English Poet

Considering the politically engaged nature⁷ of Van Niekerk's novels *Triomf* and *Agaat*, I argue that the oversight of Van Niekerk's poetry, both residing in the dearth of translation of her poetry and in the critical blind spot writ large in studies of her work in English, comes as a result of what Emma Bird calls poetry's "distinctly peripheral position" in postcolonial literary studies (2018: 125) – a critical lens that has in various ways directed readings of Van Niekerk's English work.

There is of course then the question of whether Van Niekerk's poetry can be considered to fall within the ambit of postcolonial poetry. The novels *Triomf* and *Agaat* certainly engage in what Elleke Boehmer identifies as postcolonial literature's imperative to "critically or subversively [scrutinize] the colonial relationship" as they "[set] out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives," which requires a "symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings" by "undercut[ting] thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization – the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination" (2005: 3). Beyond the thematic concerns identified

6. Brink made the final selections of the poems included in *In a Burning Sea*.

7. By this I refer to the notion of *littérature engagée*, as both texts engage with the socio-politics of South Africa's colonial history.

by Boehmer that could be utilised to typify a considerable number of Afrikaans literary texts as postcolonial, brief attention should be paid to the case of Afrikaans literature overall and how it stands in relation to postcolonial concerns. Louise Viljoen (1996b) argues that Afrikaans literature presents an unusual case in terms of how it can be situated within discourses of colonial and postcolonial literature. The complexity of the political history of the language and its speakers is a main factor in these considerations, as are the historical positionings (and self-positionings) of texts produced in the language. Viljoen argues that Afrikaans literature can be read as that which Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge refer to as “fused postcolonialism”, by which they mean a kind of postcolonialism wherein both the oppositional (striving towards autonomy and independence from the colonial power) and the complicit (the constant drive towards subversion implicit in any literature that has been subject to a process of cultural imperialism) are imbricated (Mishra & Hodge 1993: 284-290 in Viljoen 1996b: 4). Viljoen observes that Afrikaans as a language has a long history in both furthering colonialism in South Africa (most obviously, but not exclusively, during formal apartheid) and opposing it (both during formal apartheid, but also prior to that, when Afrikaner communities felt themselves colonised and oppressed by the British). Similarly, its diverse literature has both been complicit in the designs of the oppression of the majority of the country’s population by a minority, while at the same time, it became a medium of opposition to these oppressive forces. Considering how much Van Niekerk’s prose engages with past and present aspects of South Africa as a former colonised country, I argue that it would not be unjustified to consider her a postcolonial author, a point that has been made by a number of other scholars (Viljoen 1996a; Carvalho & Van Vuuren 2009; Fourie 2011, 2016; Olausson 2017). Van Niekerk’s poetry output over the course of the last decade, as I have written elsewhere, “is multifaceted and wrought through the socio-political, socio-economic, socio-cultural, ethical and artistic tensions of an increasingly globalised-yet-unequal world” (Fourie 2020: 146). As a result, her poetry can indeed be seen as a “postcolonial *Umwelt* cabinet” (Viljoen 2017: 134) – a positioning which, according to Viljoen, evidences an attempt to understand the complex network of relationships between history, culture, colonialism, and white privilege in postcolonial South Africa today (2017: 150-151).

An overview of the concerns addressed in at least some of her English-language poems indicates an awareness of and engagement with current affairs in post-apartheid South Africa. If Van Niekerk’s poetry, like her prose, can then be considered to be engaged with postcolonial concerns, why is it an aspect of her English oeuvre that has received so little attention? To understand why poetry, and postcolonial poetry specifically, receives far less critical consideration than works of prose, Bird (2018) refers to the considerable commercial success of prose authors – a level of achievement usually not met by poets. She mentions, for instance, the popularity of authors

such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, whose international acclaim and sales are unmatched by any poet who likewise writes from or about India (Bird 2018: 126). In similar fashion, South African English literature boasts many names that have received both international critical acclaim and enjoy global commercial success: Zakes Mda, Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, Imraan Coovadia, André Brink, Sindiwe Magona, Antjie Krog, and of course, Marlene van Niekerk. Though these authors have not all published only prose, they are mostly known for their prose, even though Mda and Brink have also penned dramas, Krog has a large poetic output (in both English and Afrikaans), while Van Niekerk has produced poetry and drama. There is of course an evident connection between the mimetic ways of reading prose and the genre's commercial success. However, to lay the critical prose-poetry disparity at the feet of postcolonialism as a dominant critical and discursive lens through which these authors' works are often read would not be entirely accurate. The unequal popularity and sales of the genres of poetry (and drama texts) as opposed to those of prose are far more complex and are influenced by many other factors beyond the analytical discourses wielded by critics and scholars. What I would like to explore here, then, is more focussed: Could there be some practices of scholarly reception that have contributed to the lack of critical attention Van Niekerk's English poetry has received? How has some of Van Niekerk's poetry in English been received, and how does this invite us to reflect on further expeditions into her poetic output? To respond to these questions, my argument below engages with the discursive practices around postcolonial poetry, and the epitextual responses to the poems "Mud school" (2013) and "Fallist art" (2018).⁸

Similar to the way in which Leon de Kock, English translator of *Triomf*, imagined the translation of Afrikaans texts to enrich and transcode "registers of an ever so slightly *transformed* English" (2012: 751, my emphasis), Jahan Ramazani draws our attention to how English-language poetry has been transformed by its increasing production in Britain's former colonies. Using the evocative image of the mythical muses, Ramazani gestures towards how the Western canon of English literature is being reshaped by postcolonial authors wielding the English language: "[A] rich and vibrant poetry has issued from the hybridization of the English muse with the long-resident muses of Africa, India, the Caribbean, and other decolonizing territories of the British empire" (2001: 1). He sees this as a process of expansion of English-language poetry, now infused "with indigenous metaphors and rhythms, creoles and genres" (ibid.). Like Michiel Heyns, the English-language translator of *Agaat*, who describes translation as a tense process that oscillates between domesticating and foreignising a text (2009: 127), Ramazani views postcolonial poetry in English as a "remaking" of literary language. Through the metaphor

8. On 12 July 2018, the poem "On 'Young man at home 1972'" by Van Niekerk was also published on *LitNet*, in memory of photographer David Goldblatt.

of travel, while showing an awareness of the processes and power structures imposed by colonialism, he notes that “postcolonial poets indigenize the Western and anglicize the native to create exciting new possibilities for English-language poetry” (Ramazani 2001: 2). One could view this process of travel – or cultural journey – as a kind of entanglement between the so-called Western and native, as Ramazani calls them, which highlights the ways in which the native registers transform those of English.

Ramazani acknowledges that critical interest in the genre of poetry has been on the decline in recent decades (2001:4) and views this as a problem that is compounded, rather than alleviated, by the advancement of postcolonial studies, due to this kind of criticism being founded in what he calls “mimetic presuppositions about literature” (ibid.) However, he continues to say that the very nature of poetry as a form of expression challenges this view:

[S]ince poetry mediates experience through a language of exceptional figural and formal density, it is a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies; it is less favorable [sic] than other genres for curricular expeditions into the social history of the Third World; and, consequently, it is harder to annex as textual synecdoche for the social world of [former British colonies].

(ibid.)

Ramazani therefore strongly advocates for the study of postcolonial poetry through the critical approaches of poetics (and by implication, the aesthetic aspects of poetry), as this can “reveal the literary energies of these texts, which aesthetically embody the postcolonial condition in particular linguistic and formal structures” (ibid.). Bird similarly writes that simply examining poetry “insofar as it engages with certain themes is to perpetuate a narrow and limiting focus on the text” (2018: 126). Therefore, she argues, we need to consider “how the poem can exceed the very terms and vocabularies of postcolonial analysis” – in other words, how literary texts are not read only for how they illustrate or explore certain thematic concerns, but also for how they can inform and broaden our very critical approaches.

Perhaps the dearth of scholarship on Van Niekerk’s English poetry is a reflection of how the dominant position of theory in the humanities has come to dictate strongly the kinds of texts we analyse in literary studies, and the ways in which we analyse them. What Ramazani refers to as the “mimetic presuppositions” of postcolonial studies is indicative of approaches shared more broadly with other critical theories that have their roots (or were reinvigorated) in the ethical turn in the humanities that began during the latter part of the 1980s and early years of the 1990s: queer and gender theory, feminism, ecocriticism, etc.⁹ To a large extent, an overview of research into Van Niekerk’s work bears this out: her prose texts are read insofar as they

9. Robert Doran explores this extensively in *The Ethics of Theory* (2017).

reflect, explore, undermine, question and challenge South African society, cultures, histories, and practices.

“Mud School” (2013)

Though I draw two of Van Niekerk’s poems into my discussion, I will not be analysing the poems “Mud school” (2013) or “Fallist art” (2018) in and of themselves. Rather, I want to consider how we might read these poems within the broader South African English literary system through a consideration of a number of epitexts.¹⁰

The notion of the *epitext* forms part of what Gerard Genette (1997) has conceptualised as the paratext. In particular, the epitext is any paratextual element that does not materially form part of the text, and, as such, exists outside of the physical text (Genette, 1997: 344). The publisher creates a part of the epitext surrounding a text through marketing campaigns, while the media and the academe further contribute to the epitext through book reviews (in print and online), author interviews, lectures, academic articles, papers, opinion pieces, discussions and colloquia.

Under the title “Motshekga’s name is mud”, the poem “Mud school” appeared as part of a letter which Van Niekerk (2013b) addresses directly to the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper. In what could be considered an unusual move, the poet contextualises the poem for the reader in her letter that precedes the poem:

Minister Angie Motshekga, two weeks ago writer Njabulo Ndebele told me that some of the members of a delegation to the Eastern Cape wept when confronted with conditions in some of the mud schools there.

In the *Sunday Independent* of May 12, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church, Thabo Makgoba, who was part of this delegation, urged members of the public to keep up the pressure on you and your squad in the department of education, who seem to have lost the plot. The archbishop said: “Let us bombard her with letters, pleas, prayers, even poems. Hold the government to account. Demand urgent action.”

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10. Both of these poems were written in reaction to specific events, though this is not an unusual approach for Van Niekerk. In this regard, one could also single out Afrikaans poems from *Kaar* such as “Nagwaak vir Andries Tatane, Stellenbosch, Pase 2011” (2013a: 163), about the death of Andries Tatane who was shot and killed by police in a protest in 2011, as well as “Augustus is die wreedste maand” (2013a: 172), which is dedicated to the victims of the Marikana massacre, in which 34 miners were killed by police during a labour protest. It would thus be incorrect to imply that poems composed in this way, i.e., the poet reflecting on specific real-world events, cannot be read as representative in some way of Van Niekerk’s poetry in a broader sense (should one choose to do so).

So here is my poem. Maybe, as a result of some miracle, it might also reach some children in schools without proper infrastructure, books or decent teachers. They might have some fun with it. It includes instructions. I will see to it that it gets translated into isiXhosa.¹¹

The opening lines of the poem are indicative of poem's overall satirical tone:

Minister Motshekga, your name is mud. Let's see
what we can do with you. We can fire you and make
of you a brick, and add you to our school, maybe
as the corner stone. In rain you'll turn into a turd.

The South African government reacted swiftly to the criticisms levelled against it by NGOs, religious leaders, and the poet. David Hlabane of the Department of Basic Education's Communications Unit responded directly to Van Niekerk's poem, calling it a "cynical rant" (2013). He further describes Van Niekerk's poem as condescending, contemptuous, arrogant, with "a self-righteous tone not unlike that of the erstwhile colonial writers". This follows on an introduction in which Hlabane's response seems to imply that the poem is an utterance of racism that "masquerades as poetry". As his letter also makes clear, he reads the poem more as a letter, to be understood in a most basic, literal sense, rather than a far more layered piece of literary satire, and so it is read as a personal attack on Angie Motshekga and then-president, Jacob Zuma.

What one could read into "Mud school" and the swift and angry response to the poem from the Department of Basic Education is a level of intolerance with a democratic process wherein all citizens, including creative writers, can engage with and criticise government's actions (or lack thereof). Interesting to note is how the vehement contempt a government department directs at criticism that is articulated in a certain form – here, a satirical poem – betrays an unwillingness to admit any fault or failure. This is especially so considering that only two years prior, Van Niekerk was awarded the National Order of Ikhamanga in Silver by President Zuma "[f]or her outstanding intellectual contribution to the literary arts and culture field through poetry, literature and philosophical works" (Presidency 2011: 31). The commendatio presented at the award ceremony further reads:

In particular the novel, *Triomf*, translated by Leon de Kock, reflects on the post-colonial [sic] South Africa, showing how apartheid failed to benefit even those it was also designed to serve, namely the white population We are proud to honour Ms Marlene van Niekerk with the Order of Ikhamanga in

11. At a march led by Equal Education, "Mud school" was read, with the permission of the poet, in both English and isiXhosa (Equal Education 2013).

Silver for her outstanding contribution to the development of South Africa's inclusive literary culture

(ibid.)

In addition to this, President Jacob Zuma's cabinet on 15 April 2015 extended its congratulations to Van Niekerk "for becoming the first South African to be shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize," again reiterating her "outstanding lifetime achievements in fiction, including works like *Triomf* and *Agaat*" (GCIS, 2015).

It is in some ways interesting and valuable in itself that those outside of traditional centres of literary reception engage with works of literature with such intensity, thereby setting in motion important conversations both within and outside of these centres. Although, to suggest that an author receiving honours and congratulations from her government would make her future utterances and writings immune to criticism is not what I am arguing here. Rather, it is telling that Van Niekerk's critical authorial gaze and its reflections on a postcolonial South Africa are formally welcomed and honoured in one instance and officially abjured and rejected entirely in another – with the discourse of the latter wholly undercutting that of the former. Of course, it would be overly simplistic to suggest that there was a sort of absolute centralisation in the South African government in the period spanning from 2011 (the awarding of the Order of Ikhamanga to Van Niekerk) to 2013 (the publication of "Mud school" and the Department of Basic Education's response to the poem). I rather wish to draw attention to the differing discourses surrounding a sense of national pride (the awarding of national honours to artists) on the one hand, and, simultaneously, if not necessarily directly related, on the other hand, a problematic and scathing response to the critical work of an author by agents of the state. While literature is in one instance being celebrated for its very political engagement, it is in another criticised for further attempts at such engagement. What is happening here, then, to slightly rephrase what has been said by Bird (2018: 136), is that poetry is being reduced to politics, thereby denying "the complex relationship between aesthetics and politics," negating the myriad ways in which texts can operate. In a sense, then, the utterances and actions of the state have played a role in shaping Van Niekerk in the English literary system, as a poet whose work should apparently be read literally, shorn of the literariness that readings of the genre demand.

At the time, Van Niekerk did not respond directly to the criticism levelled at her by government. Two years later, in an interview with Rosie Goldsmith, she did address the issue when answering a question relating to what South African authors write about and to an author's participation in public debates (Van Niekerk in Goldsmith 2015). Goldsmith refers to Van Niekerk as "one of a quite small group of South African writers who are [...] very public, very prominent, who chart the changes of this very changing and complicated

country”, whereafter she explicitly asks the author why she “choose[s] to go public”. Van Niekerk responds with humour, but also reveals something about a distinction between an author’s writing (read: their creative texts) and their opinions (read: that which can be directly ascribed to the author):

It’s, it’s always a difficult thing for me to decide whether to take part, and to what extent, in public debates. [...] I recently wrote a poem about the question of education in the Eastern Cape [...] and I got a vehement reaction from government, in which I was called, um, the worst of a certain type of patronising colonialist writer. This, after the president had given me the national order a few years ago. So, what I’m saying is if one chooses to go public with one’s writing and one’s opinions, one must have quite a thick skin, and even the fact of participating [...] is contested in South African letters at the moment.

(ibid.)

This contested participation in public debates by academics and authors is something that Van Niekerk also addressed in a long essay on the Fees Must Fall and #OpenStellenbosch protests that occurred in 2015 and 2016 (Van Niekerk 2016). In this piece, the author openly admits to avoiding participating in the debates of the time out of a fear “of being misunderstood or wilfully misconstrued”. Referring to David Hlabane calling her an “arrogant colonialist writer” for writing “Mud school”, she says that

[i]t takes a lot of courage for even mildly experimental or oppositional writers to remain steadfast in a country where racist nationalist regimes seem to succeed each other ad infinitum and where everything from free-wheeling exploration to engaged literature to political critique elicits contestation by some or other offended party.

(ibid.)

Again, I do not want to enter the debates about what Van Niekerk’s position on either the state of basic or higher education in South Africa might be. I am more interested in locating how the author, in this case also an academic, positions her poetry, as this too might provide further insight into the practices of reception surrounding the two poems discussed in this article.

“Fallist Art” (2018)

Following the suicide of renowned South African medical academic and Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Cape Town, Professor Bongani Mayosi, Van Niekerk penned a poem in memory of him for the literature and arts website *LitNet*. Its opening lines show that the poem, titled “Fallist art,” firstly responds to the death of the academic, but it also engages other debates that surrounded or were reignited in the wake of his passing:

Bongani's soul, his sister said,
was vandalised, the insults
(sell-out, coconut)
cut him to the core, he changed,
withdrew, spoke less and less
and killed himself. He suffered
from depression, known
locally as punctured heart.

Helen Moffet, a former academic, now literary editor and poet, wrote a response to the poem, based on what she understood to be an attack on the academics Achille Mbembe and Premesh Lalu, who are named in the poem (Moffet 2018). To briefly contextualise: Van Niekerk's poem reads the death of Mayosi within the broader crisis of higher education in South Africa. It draws on various urgent issues: the Fees Must Fall movement and protests, debates about the medium of instruction at South African universities (which key into much larger debates about language rights in the country), freedom of speech, as well as conversations and processes regarding the decolonising of university syllabi and academic spaces. The mention of Mbembe and Lalu is a direct reference to a speaking engagement on 26 May 2016 in which these scholars participated, along with Judith Butler, Wendy Brown and David Theo Goldberg. The event had been disrupted by protesting students.¹²

Moffet frames her criticism as a defence of Mbembe and Lalu, expressing herself as being "dismayed" to read that in the poem they are "associate[d] [...] with the more extreme and problematic elements of the Fallist movement" (2018). The lines in question read:

Is that why you can gaily hack
the Heines, Bachs and Becketts from
curricula – wait for the Mbembes,
Butlers, Lalus – as though they are
makwerekwere, best to be macheted
out of town? Not that the parallel
will strike you as significant in your
fully junked up state of gown.

Not only does Moffet interpret the poem to portray Mbembe and Lalu as "waiting to crowd forward and replace the colonial syllabus, [...] their work seized upon to replace elements of the Western canon" but also that it implies both of them to be "beneficiaries of the 'hack[ing]' and the 'machete[s]'" (ibid.). For Moffet, this becomes "taint by proximity", which she calls "deeply unfair and distasteful". In the conclusion of Moffet's piece, she quotes two academics from the University of the Western Cape (UWC), who laid the

12. A video of the event is available at
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s07xFdD-ivQ/>>.

responsibility for Mayosi's death before "[h]is colleagues, the Fallists, the University of Cape Town, even those of us at other South African universities", and then refers to the poem as a "lash[ing] out" with "[w]ords [that] hurt" that she views as contrary to a "kindness" that should accompany expressions of "our feelings and our intellects".

Moffet's response to "Fallist art" is not as vehement as was the response to "Mud school" by the Department of Basic Education. What is more, it is necessary to note that Hlabane's response to "Mud school" was to a great extent an exercise in public relations, whereas Moffet's opinion piece on "Fallist art" is a response by a literary scholar. I wish to place the focus on what is similar in these respective responses to these very socio-politically engaged poems. That is, the way in which the poems are viewed primarily as the opinions of the author, to be read literally, in many respects discounting (or denying) the aesthetic complexities of the genre and the layered perspectives that the poems accommodate – nuances of meaning that a deeper analysis might reveal.

Within a day of Moffet's opinion piece appearing on *LitNet*, Van Niekerk penned a response in the comments section of the article (Van Niekerk in Moffet 2018). Therein, she reiterates her respect for the academics, Mbembe, Lalu, and Butler. Van Niekerk further explains that the reference to them was inspired by the (abovementioned) event during the Fees Must Fall protests where a panel discussion between these three eminent figures was cut short due to a protest by students. In what can be considered an unusual move, the poet then proceeds to contextualise the events that inspired her poem. She indicates that Moffet must have misread the poem to have interpreted it as she had, as is also pointed out in comments on Moffet's piece by translator Michiel Heyns and poet Kelwyn Sole. Van Niekerk writes:

Maybe the syntax in the poem is not clear at this point. The poem suggests that the subtle, complex and penetrating thought of the intellectuals mentioned [...] might one day suffer the same fate as the subtle, complex and penetrating work of many Western authors and composers who are likely to be cut/have already been cut from curricula in the course of the decolonisation of the curriculum. At the protest at UWC referred to in the links above the complaint of the students apparently was that the speakers on the panel were "elitist".

(Van Niekerk in Moffet 2018)

Van Niekerk expresses her disapproval not just of the cost of higher education in South Africa, but also the commodification of education. At the same time, she then speaks out directly against "the labelling, the name calling and the violence and destruction that characterised the protests," stating that she "also find[s] deplorable the polarisation and suspicion in academic circles that in some cases ensued". I do not want to dwell on further details of her argument here, but what is clear is that she is aware that she is now interpreting the

poem for the reader, as she ends the piece with “This is the point of the poem. Time will tell.”

Conclusion

If we consider a postcolonial poem to be, as Bird (2018: 133) describes it, “a palimpsest, shaped by the simultaneous accumulation of regional, colonial and world histories”, would these two poems by Van Niekerk not be considered such, both in content and in the responses that they elicited (and continue to elicit)? After all, they draw on not only the concerns of South Africa’s long colonial history, but also on the lingering oppression and failures this history has wrought on the country; an overlap of the political (failures of government and governance, the democratic and constitutional rights of citizens), the socio-economic (access to education, the inequalities on basis of race and gender) and the cultural (language). As a result of its concentrated form, poetry often evidences a perhaps more complicated and layered engagement with certain socio-political, socio-economical or socio-cultural issues than the easily drawn supposals that direct our readings of prose when viewed through a postcolonial lens. However, this is then a reminder of the value of poetry in broadening our understanding of post-colonial worlds. This places a particular onus on readers, critics and scholars to read poems such as the two discussed in this article (and others similarly situated) with at least some attention paid to the aesthetic elements, and to not limit such readings to easy themes of mimesis that come about through surface reading. The postcolonial poem is, to quote Bird, “a formal mani-festation of the historical forces and effects of colonialism, decolonization and globalization [sic]” and “in its themes, language and form [...] thus provides insight into the changes occurring in the wider social, economic and political sphere” (2018: 134). As my discussion of the epitexts around “Mud school” and “Fallist art” bears out, there is a complexity to Van Niekerk’s poetry that evidently offers fertile soil for further study and interrogation, despite the ways of reading to date that have not quite interpreted these poems as multi-faceted texts that deserve engagement beyond literal and superficial levels of meaning.

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