

Of Solitude, Non-Places, and Mutations, in/ and Lesego Rampolokeng's Poetry of the Nineties¹

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Abstract

Mixing creative non-fiction and literary criticism, the present article offers a reflection on Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry of the nineties. It combines an account of a personal visit to Solitude Palace near Stuttgart, where Rampolokeng spent some time in the late nineties as a writer in residence at Solitude Academy, and the analysis of selected poems, claiming that aspects of solitude and the solitary subject are a golden thread in Rampolokeng's work. I see in Rampolokeng's poetry a harsh but intimate engagement with South Africa's (post)apartheid conditions, where the violence and brutality become a means of rendering the lyrical I's un-ease and dis-comfort with South Africa's rainbow nation.

Keywords: Lesego Rampolokeng, Solitude Palace, Solitude Academy, rainbow nation, rainbow narrative, post-apartheid literature, poetry, (post) apartheid conditions, fetish

Prologue

This is not a piece about the COVID-19 pandemic, and yet it is where the story of my engagement with Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry originates. I began reading and thinking about the work of this South African poet, novelist, and playwright at the beginning of the lockdown in Switzerland,

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where I live and work as an English teacher.

On Friday, 13 March 2020, the Federal Council prohibited events with more than one hundred people, limited the number of guests that could be entertained at restaurants, bars and clubs to fifty people, and closed public schools for three weeks. After the press conference, my work colleagues and I went for a much-needed glass or two (or three) of wine at the Italian restaurant next to the school's campus to drown our initial shock about the decision that was to change all our lives. Little did we know that we would return to face-to-face teaching only in early June.

On 16 March, the Federal Council declared the pandemic an 'extraordinary situation' and introduced further measures, closing all shops, except for grocery stores, and suspending the entertainment and leisure industry. Public life in Switzerland, like in many countries around Europe and the world, had come to a halt, and with this enforced cessation came a shake-up of people's private lives.

Families found themselves cooped up within their four walls for the foreseeable future, doing their bit in sitting out the invisible danger called corona. Thousands of homes expanded into part-classroom, -office, and -leisure centre overnight, a multi-functionality that was to put many a family to the test. Latent tensions rose and many an existing strife escalated. Public life had infringed upon people's private spheres. Our homes no longer were our homes, at least not entirely.

It was during this time of drastic change that I started to engage with Lesego Rampolokeng's work and write an article on *blue v's* (1998), Rampolokeng's fourth collection of poems. And indeed, the pandemic and its constraints opened up a pathway to Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry for me. Maybe it was the irritation and frustration that grew as I kept following the latest developments in Switzerland and abroad that allowed me to tap into the anger and disappointment in his poetry. Maybe it was the pandemic that made me realise what home means and made me more aware of the prevalence of the home (and its loss) as a theme in Rampolokeng's poetry. Or maybe it was the lyrical I's solitude that spoke to me as I was confined to my home, longing to meet friends and family in as carefree a fashion as before corona. Most likely, though, it was a combination of the three.

This anger, the frustration, and the lyrical I's solitude are prevalent in the short poem 'to the thought control tower' (Rampolokeng 1998:104), for example.

to the thought control tower

please let
let me out

i'm trapped
inside
your heads

The title is a clear allusion to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the novel's dystopian world of total surveillance, where free thought is forbidden. What counts is orthodoxy to the Party's ideals of uniformity. Dissidents are unwanted.

I see a similar double perversion at play in the poem. The lyrical I suffers from a mental confinement – not a physical one. Other people's mindsets and continuing exclusionary beliefs result in the lyrical I's point-blank rejection, and it is this unacceptance that is so torturous.

The poem's criticism is directed at (post)apartheid South Africa's rainbow narrative of healing and redemption. This process was one of the main aims of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which held hearings all over South Africa between 1996 and 1998 in order to uncover human rights violations that happened during apartheid. The TRC has been criticized for its focus on an overarching narrative of truth and reconciliation, thereby marginalizing more critical aspects of the African National Congress' (ANC) wrongdoings during apartheid. The ANC's armed struggle, for instance, was 'taboo' during the TRC hearings. Several testimonies speaking to the abuse at Quatro were dismissed as beyond the scope of the hearings. Quatro was a training camp of the ANC's armed wing in Angola, established in 1978 and later used as a detention centre. Quatro was notorious for its beatings and the use of torture in order to obtain coerced confessions of alleged traitors of the anti-apartheid movement (see e.g. Cleveland 2005).

It stretches somewhat beyond the poem's original context, but 'to the thought control tower' seems oddly pertinent a response to all COVID sceptics and anti-vaxxers. In the German-speaking parts of Europe, where the immunization rate temporarily stagnated and the vaccine mandate stirred up heated debates, frustration levels were at times high. Protest votes against the continuous corona measures grew louder, but the crisis was far from being averted. Corona keeps (and will keep) hitting, wave after wave.

At times, people's complaints in Switzerland made me mad. Yes, we had a lockdown. Yes, the virus hit us hard, but it hit other parts of the world much harder. In South Africa, the lockdown and restrictions were much stricter than in Switzerland, what with the curfews and the ban on cigarettes and alcohol. Social distancing is a measure for the privileged, but it often is among the privileged that one finds the most selfish and ignorant people.

All the more appropriate seems thus the German word of the year 2021: '*Wellenbrecher*', i.e. wave breaker (*Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache*). For me, the choice by the Association for the German Language serves as a clear reminder of everyone's responsibility to contribute to the fight against the pandemic. Our frustration levels will keep fluctuating, the way they have over the last two years. Our patience will be tried, again and again, but hopefully it will also grow. I choose to keep my optimism and enjoy the little things in life, such as my visit to Solitude Palace, just outside of Stuttgart, on July 17 2021.

On the Trail of Lesego Rampolokeng

It was on that overcast Saturday that I set off to Stuttgart with Danyela and Helton to trace Lesego Rampolokeng's steps. Rampolokeng had been a resident at the Solitude Palace Academy from September 1997 to February 1998 as the recipient of one of the academy's fellowships; a residency that resulted in the publication of *blue v's* (1998). The collection was published by Edition Solitude and contains German translations of the thirty poems by Thomas Brückner, twenty-one of which Rampolokeng performs on the accompanying CD. Rampolokeng's time at Solitude Palace finds expression in *Head on Fire* (2012:12-13):

(i've been witness in european castles tranquil enough
hear schiller-ghost
striding down history-hallway seen birds so cultured
they wouldn't sing/distract
artistic inspiration: nature art-sensitive there solitude's a palace...
poet's king for more than a day till fail to sing remote artistic)

I picture Rampolokeng, notepad on his lap and pen in hand, sitting on one of the benches in the castle garden, contemplating the place's magnanimity – a

crude contrast to the hectic commotion, common in Johannesburg. I picture Rampolokeng, cigarette dangling from his lips, jotting down his impressions in reaction to the almost scary silence in a place where even the birds are in awe, so much so that they don't dare to chirp, don't dare to disturb a poet's musings.

I also picture Rampolokeng, a smile flickering across his face, soon recovering his sharp tongue, unimpressed by Europe's (literary) history, feverishly scribbling away at what was to become *blue v's*, making the most of his time at the 'Schloss'.

We'd all heard of Solitude Palace, of course, knew of Rampolokeng's connection to it, saw photographs. But it took us what felt like an eternity to finally implement our travel plans to Stuttgart. The COVID-19 pandemic had repeatedly thwarted Danyela's visit to Europe and forced us to postpone our plan. In July 2020, finally, Danyela was in Switzerland for a long-awaited reunion – we hadn't seen each other in almost two and a half years. We were all the more determined to make the most of our visit to the palace now that we could crawl out of our snail shells of solitude following the lockdown and quasi standstill of public life.

The changeable weather on that Saturday of our outing ought to give two literary scholars, supposedly well-acquainted with pathetic fallacy, due warning. However, our excitement and anticipation must have suspended our literary training. And anyone knows that the real world does not, of course, work like a novel.

Sometimes it does.

The weather forecast had announced a grey but mostly dry day, but barely had we buckled our seatbelts and left before it started raining. At least it was not a downpour, more of a light sprinkle, pitter-pattering on the roof of our car in a regular rhythm. Soon our animated chattering drowned out the tapping rain, accompanying us all the way to Solitude Palace. Our cheerfulness, however, was tempered as the satnav decided to send us on an involuntary detour through the Black Forest.

And it got worse.

We got stuck behind a truck winding its way through the narrow streets with no possibility of overtaking. We made it back onto the motorway eventually and were well on our way to Stuttgart again. Until we hit a traffic jam shortly after Sindelfingen, about twenty minutes outside of Stuttgart – under normal circumstances. Someone's ancestors did not want us to visit that palace. It took us another hour and fifteen to reach Solitude Palace.

Well past midday, we parked the car with rumbling stomachs and a sigh of relief to have made it to our destination. On the plus side, the rain had stopped. The ancestors meant well by us after all and, spurred by new excitement, we marched towards the palace.

Solitude Palace thrones on a lush hill in the western outskirts of Stuttgart, an emerald carpet of trees stretching northwards from the palace all the way to Ludwigsburg. Built between 1764 and 1768 at the behest of Duke Carl Eugen of Württemberg, the palace is a prime example of late Rococo and early Neoclassical architecture. It consists of a lavish centre building and two protracted, more modest annexes. The main building is dominated by a green dome, which hosts the palace's ceremonial hall. The so-called White Hall is coated with richly ornamented stucco marble. The highlight is the ceiling fresco, an emblematic illustration of Baden-Württemberg's wealth and prosperity at the time of the Duke's reign, and we were about to immerse ourself in the charm and magic of this grand reception and ballroom.

Approaching one of the four semi-circular, spacious stairs reaching from the ground like tentacles, we watched a wedding party making their way to the top to join the bride and groom already on the balcony. Somewhat flabbergasted, we scanned the surroundings, which was when we spotted another young woman in an opulent blue dress with her spruce spouse-to-be. The two were also on their way towards the main building, their wedding party emerging from behind the corner of the one outbuilding. At the far end of the palace square, an old-timer cabriolet with a third wedding couple was parking, the bride's voluminous white dress invading the space of the front seats occupied by the driver and the groom. And then we saw the sign at the side entrance:

WEDDING CEREMONIES IN PROGRESS.

MAIN BUILDING CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC.

The day we finally made it to Solitude Palace had to be one of its busy wedding Saturdays. In fairness, the location does lend itself to weddings and we knew that the palace was a popular wedding location, but nowhere on the webpage did it say that on this particular Saturday the palace was going to be closed to the public.

Damn the wedding industry!

Despite our initial frustration, or maybe because of it, we burst out laughing, reminded of Lesego Rampolokeng's repeated criticism of capitalism in his poetry, such as in 'johannesburg' in *Talking Rain* (1993:10).

johannesburg

johannesburg my city
paved
with judas gold
deceptions and lies
dreams come here to die
traffic flows in the sick
vein of life as we tick
with the eternal time-bomb
of our own extinction
the walk of uncertainty
swaggering to disguise
our staggering heart-treads
we're all recession whipped
into the repression machine
mirrored in the glass-towers
the green pastures of wealth
are vaults of death
nothing is secure
neither politics nor prayer
can guarantee the future
jo'burg my city
here our birth is a lie
we just rush to die
without living
just existing
to keep the money belt spinning
only the wise come out winning
& the rest
feet first
as pawns
of evil hand or ogre eye

or else
on the fringe
of our own insanity

In this poem, the city of Johannesburg – South Africa’s biggest ‘urban edgy metropolis’ and ‘economic powerhouse’ (Stiebel 2013:227) – serves as palimpsest of the country’s painful history, which is inextricably linked to capitalism’s machinery. It was with the gold rush in the late nineteenth century that Johannesburg became a bustling metropole, and the mining hub was a magnet for the less fortunate in search of work in the city. The mainly black workforce, however, served as little more than cheap labour, ‘existing to keep the money belt spinning’ (Rampolokeng 1993:10). One of the apartheid regime’s aims was to remove the black population from the city centre, which was reserved for the city’s wealthy white population. The remnants of these economic disparities are still visible today, not only in the city’s geography, but also in the continuing discrepancy in the distribution of wealth between the country’s black and white population.

Even though the poem is critical of apartheid and (post)apartheid South Africa, it seems just as fitting for the wedding machinery on display that day at Solitude Palace. While the palace’s architecture reflects the splendour and magnificence of its bygone representative purpose, not to say it exhibitionism and boastfulness, I would argue that weddings also display mechanisms of ostentation, not least in relation to the location for the ceremony and the following festivities. The fairy-tale element of an extravagant wedding ceremony furthermore reminds of Johannesburg as the seeming fairy-tale city of economic prosperity and happiness. I am thinking of the so-called ‘Jim comes to Joburg’ genre here. In variations, these stories relate the fate of black migrants from the country’s rural areas who, full of hope for a better future, move to Johannesburg where they live a life in disillusion and, more often than not, meet their untimely deaths. Peter Abrahams’s *Mine Boy* (1946) and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) are two prominent examples.

The fact that Solitude Palace, a formerly exclusive aristocratic residence, now houses its own Academy, is open to the public as a museum, and is used as a wedding venue, can be seen, at least partially, as a subversion of former power structures. Both illustrations of a capitalist fairy tales, the city of Johannesburg and Solitude Palace, as improbable as it may seem, thus do have something in common.

However, there is a bitter-sweet irony to the fact that *blue v's* (1999) came into being at Solitude Palace. Designed as a so-called '*Lustschloss*' – a *maison de plaisance*, i.e. a house of pleasure and leisure – the palace's name says it all. The solitude pursued here was one by choice: a retirement from public life in search of privacy, peace, and quiet, but also recreational activities that included hunting and illustrious gatherings. Pomp was programme, and Duke Carl Eugen of Württemberg gave many a ball and held many a banquet at Solitude Palace to showcase his state's success and affluence.

It is the element of retreat, rather than the aspect of spectacle, that offers a link to Rampolokeng's work. In an interview from 1993, Rampolokeng states:

I've always thought that creative activity springs out of solitude [...]. And I must admit [...] I could only fully create or be able to put out words within me ONLY in solitude and ONLY if I was removed from everybody and anybody's vision (2003:30).

In view of his need for solitude in order to write, Rampolokeng's residency at Solitude Palace appears all the more relevant. Yet, what seems to be a mere comment on his writing process at first proves to be of much greater importance. In fact, I would claim that aspects of solitude and the solitary subject are a golden thread in Rampolokeng's poetry and possibly in his entire *oeuvre*.

The solitude Rampolokeng found himself in at the palace, though, is not altogether a chosen one and, given the subject matter of his poetry, not at all one in pursuit of pleasure and leisure. His poetry of the nineties offers a rigorous and unflattering critique of (post)apartheid South Africa, a topical focus that stands in stark contrast to the palace's splendour and pomposity.

Speaking of pomp, it seems somehow fitting that our luncheon would turn out differently than what we had imagined. The palace restaurant remained closed – probably due to the pandemic, maybe because of one of the weddings. We made our way to the quaint café instead. To our surprise, the café sold coffee and cake only, so we each had a generous piece of cake and a hot coffee. If there are no sandwiches, let them have cake! After all, there is nothing like going out in style.

Critical Voices

Rampolokeng spent most of his early writing career travelling and working outside of South Africa. Asked about the degree of appreciation with regard to his work in South Africa, he says in an interview from 1999: ‘I have to go to the extent of whoring, of prostituting myself elsewhere’ (Rampolokeng and Muila 2003:140). I am not sticking my neck out by saying that South Africa was not ready for Rampolokeng’s work that is so critical of the rainbow nation at the time. Suffice it to say that the 1990s were dominated by the TRC, mentioned above, and the ‘spectacle’ surrounding the TRC hearings (Frenkel & McKenzie 2010:4). The proceedings and the overarching rainbow nation narrative of healing and redemption – not least with the intention of re-integrating South Africa into the arena of global politics and commerce – attracted enormous international attention.

There have been direct counter narratives to the proceedings of the TRC, such as Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000). The novel circles, as the title suggests, around David Dirkse, a former member of the anti-apartheid movement who goes in search of his past. This is when he finds out that he is on a hit list, which forces him to renegotiate his role in the resistance. The story, however, is just as much about David as it is about the women that surround him and their stories. Told from David’s point of view, the novel is thus adamant about the necessity to include marginal(ised) histories but less obviously critical of the status quo.

Overt criticism of the (post)apartheid government and (post)apartheid politics had no place in the rainbow narrative and thus neither did Rampolokeng’s poetry. I am particularly thinking of ‘dusk around my head’ from *blue v’s* as an example here (Rampolokeng 1998:72 - 75).

dusk around my head

got spiders crawling around
my mind
listen to the options of scorpions
in my sub-conscious
& i sit drink try
not to think
let alone see or hear
the night

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creeping into my beer...
but it treads around
in my head
(illumination. sights of light.
mental power cut. castration.)

caught in visions of hysterics...
been hoping
for a sun & moon fusion
revolution
explosion
of pigmentation
but that makes up
(racial) romantics

& of the race casualty generation
sitting amid noises
of obscenity's twilight
& a liberation of perversity
disease violence death
on silence's own feet
murderous intent flashing out
in flameblades
of my own darkness' eye

the glitter of my blackness
cuts up the light
descends
& strikes to the heart
of the night

but my cigarette

is left
unlit

The poem bespeaks the trajectory of the lyrical I's development from initial hope and a potential belief in the country's new dispensation to a more

sombre reality in which the rainbow nation's non-racialist ideals have to be considered a failure. This loss amounts to nothing less than the lyrical I's 'castration' as he/she is left behind in solitude because of his/her refusal to join the hysteria of the rainbow nation narrative. Its pessimistic perception and conception of the new South Africa are not welcome.

The lyrical I's ensuing (mental) agony due to this rift is manifest from the outset. Tormented by dark – not to say poisonous – thoughts, he/she is torn between his/her personal beliefs and the rainbow nation's euphoria. This opposition is reflected in the repetition of the letter 't' throughout the poem. The soundscape that this repetition creates imitates the chopping sound of a knife, a tonal accentuation of the 'cut[ting]' in the act of 'castration'.

Interestingly, Rampolokeng only performs the poem's last eight lines on the CD that accompanies the book. The omission of the rest of the poem amounts to a castration of his own poem. It is also striking how Rampolokeng, in his performance, stresses the 't' in 'night', 'cigarette', 'left', and 'unlit', almost as if they were meant as a disapproving tut-tut, not only towards the hysteria surrounding the rainbow nation, but also the hysterics' blindness to the limitations and faultiness of the rainbow nation narrative. At the same time, the tut-tut can be seen as an act of defiance on the part of the lyrical I to feign indifference towards the ostracism he/she is facing.

The pain, however, runs deep as the lyrical I's castration consequently leaves him/ her 'unhomed'. Homi Bhabha has argued that the postcolonial subject is characterised by a cultural precariousness and displacement (1994:9). In this condition, its personal history – often heavily marked by colonialism – and its existence within the larger postcolonial context become increasingly entangled (11). This certainly holds true for the lyrical I in Rampolokeng's poetry, where the lyrical I's home (country), taken over by the rainbow narrative and the hysteria surrounding him/her, no longer feels like a home.

From Achille Mbembe we furthermore know that the postcolony is characterised by a 'banality of power' where 'a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery [...] constitute a distinct regime of violence' (2001:102). The violence Mbembe refers to here is not necessarily of a physical nature. Rather, authority in the postcolony is achieved by institutionalising a fetish, i.e. 'an object that aspires to be made sacred; it demands power and seeks to maintain a close, intimate relationship with

those who carry it' (111). In the South African context, the TRC and the rainbow nation narrative can be seen as part of a (post)apartheid – and thus postcolonial – fetish. The ANC's armed struggle, as mentioned above, was taboo during the TRC hearings. The hearings' envisioned narrative of healing and redemption did not allow for unbecoming witness statements bespeaking corruption and violence within the ANC's own ranks, which is why that part of the ANC's apartheid history was kept under wraps. This act of marginalisation, not to say silencing, is a clear example of the (post) apartheid's public discourse, as established and maintained by the TRC and South Africa's political apparatus, exercising its fetishistic power.

Caught in the maelstrom of the (post)apartheid state's fetish of the rainbow narrative and the fetishistic power exerted by public institutions in order to uphold said narrative, the lyrical I finds himself/ herself in a dilemma. This dilemma is addressed in 'letter', the opening poem in *Horns for Hondo* (1990:2 - 3), Lesego Rampolokeng's first collection of poems.

The poem is a letter from an imaginary audience to 'lesego' (2), the implied author. It essentially consists of a list of dos and don'ts the implied author is probed to follow should he wish to retain his audience, fame, and payment. At the same time, the poem is once more a critique of the capitalist system, a system where even poetry and critical/free thought are commodified and submitted to the free market economy, where 'dance action more than dense thought/ is what is more often bought'. What is in demand is mind candy 'with bucketsful of dallas soap'. This is why the implied author should 'strive to entertain' and 'stop trying to enlighten'. The broad masses do not want political thought and a critical assessment of the status quo, 'if you don't mind'.

Only, 'lesego' does mind!

letter

dear lesego
if you want us to give you an ear
tell us something we want to hear
make the deed supercede the motive
our applause will be explosive
dance action more than dense thought
is what is more often bought
make our minds drown

our hands will give you a crown
nothing that lingers in the mind
is what we flock behind
replace your pocketsful of hope
with bucketsful of dallas soap
ag man polemics is mos nie poetry
give our minds toiletry
look at the way of james hadley chase
now that is a sure-fire base
strive to entertain
we've had enough of '76
make the poetry and stop the politics
all your talk about war
is really quite a bore
your talk of revolution
is no original revelation
how then can you be so brash
when your song is not even fresh
come come sir
this is unfair
this your song of trade unions
is a grade A smell of onions
you've overworked us with workers
& bosses like double-deckers
take my advice
a winner is one who makes virtue vice
give us sugar-coated lies
& put stars in our eyes
that's when we'll say
ah give the good man his pay
wishing you masego
unsigned
if you don't mind

He minds 'giv[ing] us sugar-coated lies'. He minds 'put[ting] stars in our eyes'. And he minds the partial historic depletion of the (post)apartheid present by the rainbow narrative. '76', a clear reference to the Soweto Uprising on 16 June 1976, where between 10,000 and 20,000

black high school students took to the streets to protest against Afrikaans as a classroom language, becomes a placeholder for the apartheid past at large. According to 'Isego'/the lyrical I, the apartheid past still matters and cannot be discarded whenever said past turns out to be disadvantageous to the rainbow narrative. 'Letter' thus can be seen as a manifesto of Rampolokeng's poetry, offering an outline of its fundamental investment in offering a constant reminder of the continuing effect of the apartheid past on the (post)apartheid present.

I follow Derek Hook by putting the 'post' of (post)apartheid in brackets. Based on Sigmund Freud, Hook calls the condition of the apartheid past's lasting infringement on the present 'apartheid belatedness' (2013:185). According to him, South Africa's present can be seen as haunted by its apartheid past, which renders the present a precarious one at best. This precariousness harbours both chances and risks. On the one hand, the enduring presence of the apartheid past in the present offers the possibility of re-visiting and re-gauging said past in favour of a better present and future. On the other, the continuing re-evaluation of the apartheid past bears the risk of turning into a 'future-past' (185). In its ill-favoured form, such a future past might manifest in the form of restorative nostalgia, i.e. a form of nostalgia that pursues a return to a lost home (and past) and the wish of its re-creation (Boym 2001:xviii, 41).

Putting the 'post' of (post)apartheid in brackets thus highlights the importance of apartheid belatedness in Rampolokeng's poetry. Though invested in highlighting the importance of apartheid belatedness, Rampolokeng's poetry is never at risk of engaging in restorative nostalgia. Quite the contrary. 'Often obsessed with the past and its accumulated injustices', as Andries Oliphant writes in his introduction to *Horns for Hondo* (1990), 'his poetry is nevertheless forward looking. At heart of his strident denouncements a sigh, a longing, a desire for a healed, harmonious life rises' (iii).

Finding a Place in Supermodernity

The lyrical I's impasse, i.e. his/her nonconformist stance in direct contradiction to the rainbow nation fetish and his/her resulting solitary existence, in fact also places Rampolokeng's poetry at the centre of (re-)negotiating the lyrical I's position within (super)modernity at large. Doreen Massey, in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), describes how the twentieth century can be

seen as characterised by a rapid succession of profound transformations, typically subsumed in a unifying, and thus necessarily simplistic, grand narrative of globalisation and/or progress. Examples Massey mentions are the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism or the one from modernism to postmodernism. The transition from the apartheid to the (post)apartheid era can be seen another significant example from the South African context. The recurring use of the prefix 'post' in the terms coined to account for the ceaseless succession of changes throughout the twentieth century, Massey argues, thereby signposts 'the prevailing uncertainty about the positive shape of the new' (157).

For the French anthropologist and ethnologist Marc Augé, '[t]he problem is the overabundance of events' in today's world, which he labels as the era of 'supermodernity' (1995:28). He posits that the increasingly rapid succession of incidents around the world, which results in a seeming 'acceleration of history', has not only changed our conception of time, but also asks for 'an explicit and intense daily need to give [the world] meaning' (26, 29). To make sense of the present and the world, however, has become increasingly difficult as,

never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by the collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable (Augé 1995:37).

In light of the growing sense of disorientation that supermodernity may trigger in individuals, it does not come as a surprise, I think, that home or the 'home-place', to borrow Massey's term, constitutes a fundamental counterweight to 'the new complexities of the geography of social relations' and the growing sense of 'fear and anxiety' these changes trigger (1994:172). However, what if the rapid succession of changes within the supermodern world do not only result in a sense of disorientation? What if they also entail a sense of loss? What if the home-place does no longer feel like home, if the home-place no longer evokes feelings of comfort, security, and stability?

These are question which, for me, are addressed in 'end-beginnings', the closing poem of *Horns for Hondo* (1990:95).

end-beginnings

cock crows & owl goes to sleep. kings sprout where slaves

take root. apocalypse is genesis. sun a black glob of ice
spurts impotence into earth's barren womb. blacks it's
said were oversexed whites eunuch & the issue castrated
by virtue of birth. black gods were dead & archangel gabriel
still-born choked by condom. shaka was cannibal & the pope
had abortions for supper. black tits & bums of a nation of
strippers & exhibitionists made jesus die of masturbation.
nonqauza preached genocide & mary mother of heaven was a
prostitute. it's said now the end is the beginning africa
was so gomorra it died of gonorrhea. the weakest inherit
the earth. truth is treason now liars rule the world.

The poem, which has stream of consciousness character, is replete with oxymoronic images, starting with its title. Once more a clear reference to the transition from the apartheid to the (post)apartheid era, it expresses more of an end than a beginning for the lyrical I. The poem may start with a positive image, the rooster marking the beginning of a new day, symbolising hope and pride, taking over for the owl, which, particularly within (South) African spirituality, is a bad omen, a sign of illness and/ or death. Despite the optimistic beginning, dark and negative images prevail. Images of fecundity, birth, and piety are opposed by images of infertility, demise, and disbelief, the new beginning turning into an 'apocalypse' rather than a 'genesis'. These negative images are, in my opinion, an expression of the lyrical I's dis-ease, his/her malaise and dis-comfort, with South Africa's new dispensation – a place that no longer feels like home, that has become a non-place.

Non-places, according to Augé, are a distinct product of super-modernity. Non-places are places of transit, places people frequent for a particular purpose, where they stay only temporarily, where they do not create personal attachments. The airport, the train station and the train, the hospital, or cinemas and theatres are examples. They are non-places because they 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' (1995:77-78). While Augé is particularly interested in real non-places, he adds that '[c]ertain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places [...]. Here the word [...] creates the image, produces the myth and at the same stroke makes it work' (95). It is this more abstract notion of a non-place, in my opinion, that allows a link back to the lyrical I's predicament in relation to the rainbow nation narrative. At odds with the myth or, as elaborated above, the fetish that surrounds the

rainbow narrative, the lyrical I finds himself/herself confronted with a non-place – the discourse established to support the transition from the apartheid to the (post)apartheid era, a discourse that has taken over his/her home country, thus turning the lyrical I's home-place into a non-place of sorts. The problem, Augé argues, is that,

... [t]here is no room [in non-places] for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle [...]. What rains there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment (Augé 1995:103-104).

It is precisely this lack of history or, as mentioned before, the (partial) depletion of history, together with the narrative's sensational constituent, the lyrical I takes issue with. While non-places 'create a solitary contractuality' (94), the individual is '[a]lone, but one of many' (101). In the lyrical I's case, however, his/her fundamental disagreement with the discourse leads to a breach of this contractuality that results in a very different type of solitariness – one where the lyrical I is left behind in solitude as a dissident. The lyrical I, and in this case the author himself too, can only find a home within the lineage of dissident poets, such as James Matthews.²

This is where the anger and violence in Rampolokeng's poetry come into play. Khwezi Mkhize convincingly argues that Rampolokeng's poetry is replete with images of 'the maimed body, the dismembered body', a body 'that is constituted out of acts of violence' (2011:197). This leads him to consider Rampolokeng's poetry as 'a poetry of doubt and mourning' devoted to 'a poetics of disgust' that is able to 'dissociate us from the familiar' and 'challenges our standards of acceptance' (186).

While Mkhize is primarily invested in an analysis of the aesthetics at play in Rampolokeng's poetry, his argument can be extended to a more general contribution of Rampolokeng's work to the debate of the (post)apartheid conditions. In my opinion, the violence in Rampolokeng's poetry can also be seen as a distinct means to convey the lyrical I's pain. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain* (1985), shows how '[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves it through its unsharability, and it ensures this

² In *Word down the Line* (2014), Rampolokeng interviews a number of so-called Black Consciousness poets, tracing his own literary lineage back to and within the movement. See also the film *Diaries of a Dissident Poet*, a 2014 documentary on James Matthews.

unsharability through resistance to language' (4). A person who is in pain has a very limited range of vocabulary to 'translate' their felt experience into words for others. According to Scarry, the verbalisation of pain is restricted to a limited number of adjectives – many of them related to the sensory experience of pain, which can be subdivided into a 'temporal' (e.g. a pulsing pain), a 'thermal' (e.g. a burning pain), and a 'constrictive' (e.g. a gnawing pain) component (7-8).

Due to the restrictedness of the repertoire of adjectives at hand, sufferers are soon forced to revert to 'as if-structures' that are, in turn, limited to two metaphors: 'The first', Scarry (1985:15) posits,

specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies the bodily damage that is pictured accompanying the pain.

An example of such an 'as if-structure' would be: 'It feels as if someone was repeatedly stabbing me with a knife.' On a side note, it is worth mentioning here that the word castration has been traced back to *castrum, meaning 'knife, instrument that cuts', which in turn is believed to stem from the Proto-Indo-European root *kes-, meaning 'to cut' (*Online Etymology Dictionary* 2022, knife entry). The castration in 'dusk around my head' thus becomes a distinct verbalisation of the lyrical I's pain that seems to say that his/her pain feels like a castration and hence follows the pattern of 'translating' pain into an 'as if-pattern.'

For me, the violence in Rampolokeng's poetry of the nineties is thus a means to articulate the lyrical I's pain arising from an intellectual un-ease with the rainbow nation romantics and a dis-comfort with his/her home country, South Africa, that no longer feels like home. It is a way to express the lyrical I's direct opposition to the rainbow nation fetish and its propaganda machinery. Raping and ranting – the two appear again and again in the title's of Rampolokeng's poems – become a way of inscribing the lyrical I into the supermodernity of the new South Africa, a way of highlighting the continuing significance of the apartheid past in the (post)apartheid present.

Epilogue

It seems strangely fitting that many pieces with regards to Lesego Rampolo-

keng's poetry of the nineties fell into place for me with our visit to Solitude Palace, the historic sight (and tourist attraction) being one of the quintessential instances of a non-place. A remnant of a bygone time, visitors find themselves in a bizarre, asynchronous spatio-temporal nexus, where past and present overlap in a place that both is and is not part of the supermodern world. At Solitude Palace I had, as Augé (1995:87) describes,

the particular experience of a form of solitude and [...] of 'taking up a position': the experience of someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating.

It is an experience any traveller is bound to have, an experience that Lesego Rampolokeng must have had in an extended form during his residency at Solitude Academy, an experience that the lyrical I in Rompolokeng's poetry seems to share and that finds expression in the deliberations on South Africa's (post)apartheid conditions.

It seems even more fitting that South Africa's (post)apartheid conditions were to resurface in Maxwell Mutanda's installation at the Solitude Academy's exhibition 'Mutations'. We visited the exhibition, which was on display from 18 June – 1 August 2021 (Akademie Schloss Solitude), as a small compensation for the denied access to the palace's main building. Mutanda's installation, titled 'Deliverance', consisted of oversize semi-transparent panels hanging from the ceiling, one of them listing segregationist laws from different repressive regimes, among them an enumeration of the infamous apartheid laws. Mutanda's work focuses on the 'morphological scars' of colonial times in urban centres, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe, Harare (Berlanda et al. 2021:101).

Mutanda was one of seven fellows of the Solitude Academy in 2021. 'Mutations' was the 2021 residency programme's overarching theme. Elke aus dem Moore, in the third volume of the *Solitude Journal*, defines a mutation as 'an abrupt, often necessary change in circumstances, a radical departure from the norm and an unpredictable transformation' (2021:4). Danyela Leykam, in the same publication, supplements that '[m]utations have the potential to generate a simultaneous mix of unease and optimism, particularly in the context of concomitant social structural change' (2021:6). The residency programme took the term's 'original' meaning, which refers to a modification in the DNA, as a starting point and from there the fellows

branched out in search of possible redefinitions and alternative uses of the term beyond biology (Field 2020:8).

In its broader understanding, as suggested by Aus dem Moore and Leykam, the mutation becomes a powerful metaphor for the scrutiny of social change at large, and it is the overlap and coexistence of discomfort and positivity in connection to mutations that offers a link to (post)apartheid South Africa and Rampolokeng's poetry of the nineties. As such, Rampolokeng's poetry of the nineties reflects the clash between a mutating South Africa – a country in transition, the term usually used for the first decade of the country's new dispensation (see e.g. Frenkel and MacKenzie 2010) – and a lyrical I's discomfort with the rainbow euphoria that sweeps anything potentially 'contaminating' its narrative under the carpet. An overly critical voice, the lyrical I becomes a mutant, a 'foreign body' within his/her home country that is marginalised, incompatible with, or contrary to, (post)apartheid South Africa's self-propagated elation. The resulting bitterness and violence (in tone and content) on the lyrical I's part conveys yet another component of mutation where the violated, or rather mutated, body becomes a metaphor for the difficulties and the pain related to change in general and to the historical changeover within the (post)apartheid context in the early nineties as well as its aftermath more specifically. Together with its derivatives – such as the permutation, transmutation or the commutation – mutations might thus offer yet another way to re-read and re-think Lesego Rampolokeng's work at large.

It was thus with a smile on our faces that we left the exhibition at the Solitude Academy. The ancestors wanted us to discover the exhibition rather than the pompous palace, giving us food for thought for the weeks to come, the visit to the 'Mutations' exhibition a cosmic sign. What are the odds to end up at an exhibition on mutations during a worldwide pandemic, during a time when the news are saturated with that very same topic, only in its more original sense?

In an interview with Ana María Gómez López, another 2021 fellow of the Solitude Academy, Luis Campos, professor in history of science, comments on the media's preference for the term 'variations' instead of mutations, assuming that the choice results from the fact that '[i]n a post-Chernobyl age' the term mutation may remind too much of 'something uncontrolled or uncontrollable, fearful, and dangerous, bringing to mind cancer or other concerning conditions' (2021:16). Maybe 'variations' might be a more positive term to think through (post)apartheid socio-political

realities. Maybe a more positively connotated terminology might allow to overcome discursive oppositions, might allow to create a more inclusive terminology. This would certainly be in the spirit of Achille Mbembe's 'time of entanglement' and his call for a multi-linear conception of time in the recording and outlining of postcolonial subjectivity, avoiding all-encompassing grand narratives in appreciation of the multitude of coexisting histories within the postcolonial world (2001:14-17)³.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us of something, it is humanity's transience, and in many it has fanned the fear of the unknown. Under governmental order, people all around the globe have been hiding from an unknown danger for the past two years. That the relaxation of the restrictions in some parts of the world of late are met with a queasy feeling is only understandable. While a choice of words – like the media's preference of variation over mutation – might not be the world, it is a start. And, as Lesego Rampolokeng's poetry of the nineties shows, every cloud has a silver lining.

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³ Sarah Nuttall, in her book *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (2009: 29 - 30), makes a similar call for new terminology and tools in the analysis of South Africa (post)apartheid conditions.

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