The "Pleasure Streets" of Exile: Queer Subjectivities and the Body in Arthur Nortje's London Poems

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Summary

In this article, I aim to expand our understanding of Arthur Nortje as a poet of "exile" by exploring the dialectic between self-loathing and pleasure, as well as between engagement and isolation, which he portrays performatively through his London poetry. While critics have emphasised Nortje's "marginality" or "liminality", both as an "exile" and a "coloured" South African, I draw on the critical writing of Zoë Wicomb in order to extend readings of his poetry beyond this tragic paradigm. I furthermore take up Sarah Nuttall's suggestion that Nortje's London poetry describes a degree of immersion within the city and that this aspect of his work demands further study. After tracing Nortje's playful use of literary influences and his reworking of the trope of *flânerie*, I provide a series of close readings of poems in which Nortje depicts an exploration of queer subjectivities, staged within the city. In his London poetry, Nortje subverts and eludes fixed racial, sexual, national and class identities. Nortje's London poetry exemplifies how South African literature was developed in response to the alienating condition of exile, but also through engagement with the places where exile occurred.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel probeer ek om ons begrip van Arthur Nortje as ŉ digter in "ballingskap" te verbreed – deur die dialektiek tussen selfafkeer en plesier, en tussen betrokkenheid en isolasie, wat hy op performatiewe wyse deur sy Londen-digkuns uitbeeld. Hoewel kritici Nortje se "marginaliteit" of "liminaliteit" beklemtoon het, as ŉ "banneling" sowel as ŉ Suid-Afrikaner "van kleur", put ek uit die kritiese skryfwerk van Zoë Wicomb om die lees van sy digkuns verder as hierdie tragiese paradigma uit te brei. Ek ondersoek ook Sarah Nuttall se idee dat Nortje se Londen-poësie ŉ mate van indompeling in die stad beskryf, en dat hierdie aspek van sy werk verder bestudeer moet word. Ná bestudering van Nortje se speelse gebruik van literêre invloede en sy herbewerking van die troop van *flânerie*, gee ek ŉ versameling diepgaande vertolkings van gedigte waarin Nortje ŉ verkenning van eienaardige subjektiwiteite in die stad uitbeeld. Nortje se Londen-poësie word gekenmerk deur omverwerping en ontwyking van vaste rasse-seksuele, nasionale en klasidentiteite. Met sy Londen-poësie illustreer Nortje hoe Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur ontwikkel is in reaksie op die vervremende aard van ballingskap, maar ook deur betrokkenheid by die plekke waar ballingskap voorgekom het.

JLS/TLW 34(1), Mar./Mrt. 2018
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
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DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2018.11731

Introduction

One of Arthur Nortje's most famous poems, "Waiting" (1967), begins with these memorable lines:

> The isolation of exile is a gutted
> warehouse at the back of pleasure streets (1-2)

"The isolation of exile" is compared to an empty warehouse in London's docklands, a symbol both of commerce and the ruin inherent to modernity: the warehouse is "gutted", implying visceral violence, and abandonment. Nortje suggests that the loneliness felt by the exile entails an emptying-out of the self, leading to a lack of purpose. The warehouse is hidden behind "pleasure streets", conjuring up images of bodily desire and satisfaction in drinking houses and brothels. The glamour of the pleasure street is an obfuscating façade for the bleak reality of "exile". Yet, the poem moves between the desolate and the beautiful: in the following lines "the waterfront of limbo stretches panoramically – / night the beautifier lets the lights/ dance across the wharf" (3-5). The speaker is in "limbo", "waiting" for certainty and for a sense of belonging, in between and out of place in "exile", yet this state is represented lyrically as a beautiful view. At night, even the gutted warehouse blends into this alluring waterfront panorama and becomes part of the speaker's enjoyment of London after dark. In the next line, the speaker "peers" out of "black windows" (6). Despite the continuation of the architectural imagery, these are not the windows of the empty warehouse. We have now entered the speaker's body, his "skull" (6) and rather than experiencing bodily pleasure in the city, he is "wondering what can credibly save [him]" (7). Thus, in these few lines, Nortje moves between London as setting and London as symbol, and between pleasure and loss: between the gutted warehouse and the pleasure street. I would argue that this is both a productive and a conflicted space.

In Arthur Nortje's poetry written in Britain, London serves as a stage upon which he performs various personae, which enable him to reconfigure and renegotiate his own position as a "coloured", "exiled" South African writer. London, through its literary associations as an embodiment of modernity, allows Nortje to create a nexus between physical displacement from South Africa, his ambivalence about his mixed-race origins, and the psychological and social alienation intrinsic to late twentieth-century life. In Nortje's London-based poetry, he depicts his attempts to work out his identity and his positionality and national or cultural belonging via his engagement with the city through his body and through an exploration of queer sexualities.

Arthur Nortje was born in 1942 in Oudtshoorn, in the Southern Cape, to Cecilia Nortje, a coloured[1] South African woman, and a white, Jewish student. He grew up in Port Elizabeth, mostly in the coloured township of Gelvandale. At Paterson High School in Port Elizabeth he was taught English by the poet and activist Dennis Brutus. Nortje completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University College of the Western Cape, during which time he published a number of poems. Nortje left South Africa in 1965 to take up a scholarship at Jesus College, Oxford, arranged by the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). During his time at Oxford, he often visited London and wrote several poems set in the city. In July 1967, after the completion of his Oxford degree, Nortje left for Canada to take up a teaching post. In July 1970, he returned to Oxford University as a BPhil student, and a number of London poems derive from that year. In December 1970, however, he died in Oxford, having taken an overdose of barbiturates.[2]

Exile and Marginality in Nortje’s Poetry

In the sizeable body of criticism on the poetry of Arthur Nortje, now recognised amongst the finest of South Africa’s postwar lyric poets, the chief paradigm through which the work has been viewed has been that of exile. Annie Gagiano suggests that “Nortje is inelectuably a *poet of exile*” (2004: 125). “Exile” is certainly a word and subject which recurs frequently in Nortje’s poems; “The Exiles Silenced”, for instance, is a 1962 poem about the “mute fury” of exiled activists (16). A poem written in Oxford is entitled “Spring Picture in Exile” (1966), and “In Exile” (1966) describes a wind-swept street scene in either London or Oxford which reminds Nortje of South Africa; without these reminders of home, though, “the soul decays in exile” (16). Exile is also of course a central term in “Waiting”. No wonder, then, that critics have noted the prevalence of the “isolation of exile” in Nortje’s poems, foregrounding his liminal state on “on the fringes of this new society”, as Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre puts it (1984: 162), or “on the margin of modern society”, as Dirk Klopper writes (2000: xxix).

1. I have chosen to use the terms “black”, “white” or “coloured” in lowercase, in order to avoid a replication of the capitalised terms of apartheid terminology, while recognising the effect that these artificial classifications had on the lived experience and modes of self-identification of individual South Africans.

2. There was an open verdict on the causes of death, and Nortje’s biographers, and friends, are uncertain about whether this overdose was accidental or suicidal, although there is agreement, and evidence in his late poems, about Nortje’s vulnerable state of mind at this point. In providing a brief summary of Nortje’s life, I have drawn on Dirk Klopper’s research, particularly his preface to *Anatomy of Dark* (2000).

I will argue, however, that his reaction to "exile" and the use of the term and concept in his poetry is more complex and ambivalent than with some other "exiled" postcolonial writers, for a number of reasons. In complicating Nortje's exile, I draw on the work of Sarah Nuttall, who argues in favour of a reading of Nortje's poems that emphasises his immersion in Britain, and particularly in London, as well as his alienation. Nuttall suggests that "in addition to the powerful framework of exile […], Nortje's work has much to tell us about the still latent histories of diaspora in the African context" and that his London poems "reveal a familiarity with and even an embeddedness in the city which still has to be adequately discussed by critics" (2004: 42). I attempt to answer this call in this article. London is a locus in which Nortje's "exile" is experienced and also somewhat ameliorated and complicated by his familiarity with the city and his experience of pleasure within its streets.

"Exile" in the South African context held specific historical and political connotations, associated with the anti-apartheid struggle and particularly with the members of the ANC. As Nortje was not an active anti-apartheid activist, and had not been banned or had his poetry censored, he had a tenuous claim to the strictly politicised term, "exile", which he acknowledges in "Autopsy" (1966), a poem about Dennis Brutus, which begins:

> My teachers are dead men. I was too young
> to grasp their anxieties, too nominal an exile
> to mount such intensities of song.
>
> (1-3)

Nortje's affiliation with organised black resistance against apartheid in South Africa was ambivalent; although he joined Jacari (Joint Action Committee Against Racial Intolerance) while in the United Kingdom and expressed solidarity for the struggle in several poems, he claimed in his journal that he was "not strictly an organization man" (139), and, in "Native's Letter" (1970), explains his position as a poet: "some of us must storm the castles/ some define the happening" (35-36). As David Bunn notes, coloured South Africans had an "uncertain status in opposition movements" until the late 1960s (1996: 40). It is also possible that his hesitation around active participation in the anti-apartheid struggle had much to do with his complex relationship to blackness. Dirk Klopper suggests that Nortje was uneasy, for instance, about being awarded a NUSAS scholarship intended for a member of the black community, towards which he felt a contradictory sympathy and estrangement (2004a: 13).

Many critics have complicated Nortje's exile by forging connections between Nortje's physical displacement from South Africa and his sense of alienation as a coloured South African in apartheid South Africa. Adam Schwartzmann suggests, for instance, that even before his "literal exile", Nortje, "through his engagement with the experience of 1960s South Africa ravaged by bannings, arrests and forced removals […] had made the language

of displacement, estrangement and isolation his own” (1999: 4-5). Drawing on the work of Homi K. Bhabha, Dirk Klopper similarly suggests that “Nortje’s location as subject is the postcolonial site of marginality and hybridity”, due to his mixed racial descent, his disavowal by his white father, and his childhood on the margins of South African societies, in the townships of Port Elizabeth. Like Schwartzmann, Klopper claims that “[i]t would be erroneous to attribute Nortje’s alienation to his having lost a sense of community on leaving South Africa” because “even in South Africa, he felt himself to be incomplete and indeterminate” (2004b: 877). Thus, according to these critics, Nortje’s background as a coloured South African results in an internal sense of displacement.

However, drawing on the writing of South African novelist and academic Zoë Wicomb, I seek to challenge the usefulness of situating Nortje as “incomplete”, “indeterminate” and “marginal”. In her essay “Shame and identity: the case of the coloured in South Africa” (1998) Wicomb has critiqued the application of Bhabha’s theories to narratives of South African coloured life as overly essentialist and implying a pre-existing racial “purity”.[3] She furthermore suggests that aligning coloured existence with the concepts of liminality, marginality and hybridity plays into “the tragic mode where lived experience is displaced by an aesthetics of theory. How, one is tempted to ask, do people who live in communities inhabit, spookily and preciously, a rim of inbetween reality? Symbolically, of course, and therefore […] in silence” (101). Although Nortje’s lived experience as a coloured South African is important in the ways in which it plays into his sense of exile, applying only concepts of hybridity and marginality to Nortje’s work may limit our understanding of his life and poetry. I wish to extend Wicomb’s scepticism around theorisations of hybridity and marginality in relation to “colouredness” into my analysis of his poems set in London, and to combine this openness to ways of being beyond liminality with Nuttall’s suggestion that a critical lacuna exists around Nortje’s “familiarity” with and “embeddedness” in, rather than only his isolation from, the city. I read Nortje’s London-based poetry as presenting an often bodily engagement with the city, simultaneous with an exploration of the various forms of alienation (geographic, psychic, social) he experiences in London.

Furthermore, my reading of Nortje’s experiences of pleasure in London is underpinned by an understanding that sexuality and the body are charged sites for coloured South Africans. Wicomb suggests that shame is a central concept through which one can understand “the textural construction, ethno-graphic self-fashioning, and political behaviour of coloureds in South Africa” (1998: 92). Because the origins of coloured South Africans are associated, as in texts such as Sarah Gertrude Millin’s eugenicist novel *God’s Step-Children* (1924),

3. Bhabha links hybridity with coloured South African identity in *Location and Culture* (1994), when analysing Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story*.

with miscegenation and coloured women's alleged promiscuity, Wicomb suggests that shame has been a defining characteristic of coloured self-image. In a footnote in her essay, Wicomb uses Nortje as an example of the complex relationship between coloured South Africans and the ANC, referring to David Bunn's comment on Nortje's "problematic relationship with the ANC" which is "suggestive in relation to the explicit, self-loathing references to miscegenation and colouredness in Nortje's poems" (104). The title of "Dogsbody Halfbreed" (1970), for instance, is overtly self-loathing. Not only does shame play into Nortje's relationship to blackness and black activism, and thus also his ambiguous situation as an "exile" in London, it also feeds into his representation of sexuality and pleasure in his poems as a means of being in and engaging with the city. In Nortje's writing set in London we see a dialectic both between self-loathing and pleasure, as well as between engagement and isolation, which he depicts performatively through his poetry.

In her essay on "bodiographies", Sarah Nuttall discusses Nortje's references to anatomy in his poetry, which are crucial to his "autobiographical reflections on his self and his body" (2004: 38). In her section on bodily pleasure in Nortje's poetry, Nuttall specifically refers to the nocturnal "entertainment and distraction" rendered in London poems like "Trio", in which "it is the metropolis of London that produces the body, his body, as its effect and vice versa" (41). Nuttall mentions drug-taking as a form of pleasure in which Nortje's speaker partakes against the backdrop of the city, and I am also interested in how alcohol and drugs form part of his subversive, bohemian persona. In this article, however, I will concentrate on sexuality and the body in Nortje's poetry, partly because I find that this is an area that has not yet been thoroughly explored. Furthermore, I will argue that engaging with sexuality in Nortje's London poems expands our understanding of his responses to exile, class and his colouredness. Not only is London an important touchstone in the literary intertexts which Nortje invokes, but it is a significant locus in the South African imaginary, as both a metonym for Englishness and a stand-in for modernism and modernity. Using the metropolis of London as a backdrop allows Nortje to perform subjectivities that he cannot evoke in settings such as Oxford or rural Canada. While Bhabha's theories of liminality may be of limited usefulness in discussions of Nortje's coloured identity, what I do find suggestive is his argument that the cosmopolitanism of the city, as opposed to the "finitude of the nation" enables the development of "emergent identifications" (Bhabha 1994: 243); as Sarah Nuttall suggests, it is in his metropolitan poems that Nortje begins "to invent, through his bodily histories, a new kind of diasporic African person" (Nuttall 2004: 42).

Intertexts and the City: Eliot and Baudelaire

In his London-based poems, Nortje's engagement with the city is inspired by and mediated through various literary influences, particularly the late Romantic and modernist urban lyricists, T.S. Eliot and Charles Baudelaire. Andrew van der Vlies has suggested that in Zoë Wicomb's writing, references to T.S. Eliot "might […] be regarded, as markers of intertextuality, as having a broader function: either specifically, for all that Eliot *himself* connotes; or generically, as references to a canon (or *the* canon) in general" and, moreover, that this is how Eliot's work "seems to function in so much South African writing and cultural discourse" (2011: 427-428). When noting the frequent allusions to Eliot in Nortje's work, it is possible to see this influence as a mildly reactionary impulse, a method of assuring his reader of his familiarity with the tropes of the modernist lyric, in order to be taken seriously as an urban poet and a literary figure.[4] I would argue that Nortje, not unlike Wicomb herself, uses references to Eliot self-consciously, even playfully at times, although this may be simultaneous with his desire (despite his avowed iconoclasm) to situate himself within the canon. Nortje's use of modernist images and concepts is furthermore caught up in the late adoption of modernisms by "postcolonial" writers. Peter Kalliney's study of late colonial and postcolonial modernist networks, *Commonwealth of Letters* (2013), significantly focuses on the years 1930-1970 because "it was during this period that high modernist principles were institutionalized on a global scale" (2013: 10). Kalliney cites T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a particularly influential text for colonial and postcolonial writers.

Nortje drew from *The Waste Land* a depiction of sullied, corrupted London, which he employed to represent both his position within the city and his broader sense of psychological malaise. We see this in the opening section of "Chelsea Visit" (1965), which begins thus:

> Dim among mists a starfish floats, the sun
> Of London autumn, leaves with everything.
> The wind has found its trembling orphan's nooks,
> Though some, soft with the weight of rain, are trodden
> pulpy in the concrete of embankment.
> I scan a lacing shower pearl the water.
>
> (1-6)

The echoes of the opening of Eliot's "The Fire Sermon" are clear: "The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf/ Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind/ Crosses the brown land unheard" (3.1-3). "Chelsea Visit" also includes

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4. Wicomb's intertextual references to Eliot might even be inspired by Nortje's allusiveness; for instance, the title of one of the stories in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), "Ash on my Sleeve", that derives from the final line of Nortje's "Waiting", is in turn an allusion to Eliot's "Little Gidding".

frequent images of dirt and contamination which remind one of the polluted Thames in *The Waste Land*: Nortje describes dirty swans which "drift sullied on the ebbing river" and gulls which "squawk among their smutty majesties" (4-5).

In this poem, Nortje also draws on an earlier urban writer and influence on modernists such as Eliot: Charles Baudelaire. In "Chelsea Visit", Baudelaire's influence can be perceived in the "fetid thickets" of the Thames which echo the "foetid marshes" (9) in South African poet Roy Campbell's 1952 translation of Baudelaire's "Elevation". Although "foetid marshes" is a very loose translation of the "*miasmes morbides*" which the speaker entreats his soul to flee, because of the South African connection it is likely that Nortje may have encountered Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in Campbell's translation. Furthermore, the image of the swans in Nortje's poem may correspond with Baudelaire's "The Swan", in which the bird is compared to "other exiles that we knew/ Grandly absurd, with gestures of the mad" (II.6-7) and which includes a description of a black African woman: "the starved and phthisic negress/ Tramping the mud, who seeks, with haggard eye,/ The palms of Africa" (II.13-15). The reference to "The Swan" is significant given that, as Matt Houlbrook writes, its speaker "is one of the most well-known figures in the literature of urban modernity", and is amongst Baudelaire's key works which "have articulated a vision of the city that has become the dominant model for how we understand modernity" (2005: 16). The concluding lines of "Chelsea Visit" similarly present a muddied (South) African woman, aware of her distance from her homeland: "I seek no answers, cradling your muddied face/ so far together have we come from home" (11-12).

In "Chelsea Visit", Nortje gestures towards both Baudelaire and Eliot, because their visions of a corrupt, alienated city help him to articulate his feelings about his exilic state. His choice of London as setting for so many of his poems may be inspired by the writing of these urban poets, as the metropolis is a more powerful symbol of alienation than the less cosmopolitan Oxford. While Nortje's evocation of Eliot specifically speaks to the literary imagining of London, his use of Baudelaire suggests that London, in Nortje's poetry, represents more than the British capital, but is frequently figured as the universal, cosmopolitan metropolis of modernity. In a line of thought that runs through Karl Marx, George Simmel, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, industrialised, capitalist modernity, centred on the metropolis, is seen to entail alienation. Not only does this result in the alienation of the worker from the means of production (as Marx suggests), but also, through the commodification of relationships and the deepening of class divisions, it causes the alienation of people from each other and from themselves. Nortje thus grafts broader concerns of the alienation associated with capitalist modernity, represented by metropolises such as London, on to the narrower sense of geographic "exile".

“The Pace and Tone of Other Voices”: *Flânerie* and Language

Baudelaire’s reputation as an urban poet is intertwined with the trope of the *flâneur*, the dissolute, bohemian stroller who enjoys the pleasures of the city but is also detached from the “crowd”, as is evident in poems such as “To a passer-by” (1857). Baudelaire derived the figure of the “passerby” or *flâneur* from Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Man of the Crowd” (1845). The simultaneously detached and immersed nature of the *flâneur* within the city may have chimed with Nortje’s own psychological and social condition as an exile. Keith Tester argues that that “*flânerie* can, after Baudelaire, be understood as the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things that will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity; satisfy his otherwise dissatisfied existence; replace the sense of bereavement with a sense of life” (1994: 7). Walter Benjamin, the most well-known commentator on Baudelaire, describes how Baudelaire’s gaze, the gaze of the “allegorist” and of the “*flâneu*r”, as it falls on the city, “is the gaze of the alienated man”. Furthermore, Benjamin suggests that the *flâneur* “stands on the threshold – of the metropole and of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home” (2006: 40).

Like Benjamin’s *flâneur*, Nortje found himself occupying an uncertain class position which he sought to negotiate through language. Scattered throughout his journals and poems are experiments with different British registers, which allows Nortje both to comment on British class structures as an outsider, and to insert himself, even temporarily, into the fabric of London through his mimicry of British speech. For instance, in “Chelsea Visit”, the phrase “leaves with everything” (2) may be an oblique reference to the popular 1960s saying “chips with everything”, referring to the typical “greasy spoon” diner menu.[5] *Chips with Everything* was also a 1962 play by Arnold Wesker that dealt with class conflict through its dual narratives of an upper-class soldier and a working-class socialist in London’s East End. Nortje was familiar with Wesker’s work, referring in his journal to the playwright’s 1958 play, *Roots*, which he calls a “kitchen-sink drama” – the play depicts the struggles of a working-class woman (Arthur Nortje Oxford Journal 1965-1967: 87). Although his tone could also be read as disparaging, by evoking chip-shop slang and Wesker’s class-conscious play, Nortje suggests an affinity – or at least a fascination – with the British working class.

The poem “London Impressions” (1966) is particularly full of conversational English. For instance, the statue of Nelson in Trafalgar Square is covered in a “patina of pigeon shit” – the poetic sound of “patina” contrasting

5. I would like to thank Professor Cora Kaplan for her suggestion of this potential reference.

with the mundanity of "shit (5). This poem includes an assertion of Nortje's increased familiarity with Britain, particularly London, which is partly based on the acquisition of British modes of speech: "I do not want to cross the road again,/ having learnt the value of other faces,/ acquired the pace and tone of other voices"(19-20). Nortje frequently employs the concept of acquisition to explain his relationship to London: for instance, in the title of "Fragment in Acquired England" (1966), and in "Autopsy" (1966), in which he writes of "the towns I've acquired" (21). The connotations of the verb "to acquire" are both of ownership and knowledge, and are often specifically linguistic: one acquires a language or an accent. In "Trio" (1967), he elucidates what the acquisition of London's accent may entail, by apostrophising the metropolis:

> City, your lovely daughter
> became my admirer, so if I acquire
> you it is simply an act of affirmation.
> I will not be the voyeur, the quiet observer,
> a man called 'lucky' to be with such a chick,
> toting a lens at Nelson or saying
> "nothing like English pubs". No, I can tell
> A stodgy pint from an ale that sets the soul
> right, I can point to your history
> and add many memories from what is now
> a fascination bound to be lifelong.
>
> (1-11)

Nortje claims his distance from the figure of the camera-toting tourist and, differentiates himself from the *flâneur,* who is often characterised as a "voyeur". Significantly his familiarity with the city is proven by what he says, or rather does not say: "nothing like English pubs". The irony and humour in this poem, evident in colloquialisms such as "stodgy pint" and "such a chick", convey Nortje's sense of pleasure in the city. He is familiar with the language of the city and is thus not a voyeuristic *flâneur*, but rather an active participant in the life of the city.

Pleasure and Shame: Performing Queer Subjectivities in London

In "Trio", the pleasures of London are specifically associated with drinking, and with sex: London is a "chick", "acquired" by the speaker, and his familiarity with the city is associated with his knowledge of its alcoholic offerings. Through his identification with decadent, bohemian poetry such as that by Baudelaire, Nortje depicts an engagement with the city that is caught up in a dialectic of ambivalent pleasure and self-loathing. In his poetry, Nortje frequently aligns himself with the figure of the "libertine", a specifically

Baudelairean word and concept, one who is outside of moral and social (especially sexual) norms.[6] This liberal attitude towards sex and middle-class propriety, both heterosexual promiscuity and queer sexuality, is intertwined in complex ways with his colouredness.

Brenna Munro, building on Wicomb’s writing about shame, suggests that “coloured identity” is “categorically sexualised; to be coloured is, in the apartheid imaginary, to be the product of taboo miscegenation between black and white – just as homosexuality in South Africa has often been interpreted as a product, in the broadest sense of the word, of the colonial encounter” (2012: 92). Furthermore, drawing on Grant Farred’s work, Munro suggests that “‘impurity’ produces shame but at the same time, perhaps, its own kind of freedom, and even a hospitality towards sexual transgressions” (113). Nortje’s identification with hedonistic poetry can be seen either as an expression of this “freedom”, and in a more subversive manner, as an open expression of “shameful” sexual practices so as to rob them, and by inference his colouredness, of its associations with shame. Nortje’s poems thus both acknowledge shame and self-loathing, while simultaneously protesting his disregard of bourgeois standards of morality.

Several of Nortje’s poems set in London, particularly his later works, contain explorations of queer sexualities. In calling Nortje’s poems “queer”, I am not attempting to “out” Nortje as a closeted poet. I am less interested assigning Nortje a definitive sexual identity than in how he queered his poems, through references not only to homosexuality but also to non-normative sexuality and social behaviour, and in how this queerness played into his engagement with London in his poetry.[7] I use here the broad, inclusive definition of “queer”, which David M. Halperin explains as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant”; “a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of his or her sexual practices” (1997: 62, italics original). As a coloured South African, Nortje is “marginalized because of his […] sexual practices”; as mentioned, he is already “sexualised” in South African society, through his origins as the “product of taboo miscegenation” (Munro 2012: 113). Nortje seizes and owns his marginalisation and sexualisation through his representation of non-normative sexual experiences in the city, but his poems set in London move between a sense of self-loathing and pleasure: despite his celebration of his own “queerness” in all senses of the word, the residue of shame is never fully erased.

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6. See for instance Baudelaire’s “Sympathetic Horror” and “Sed non Satiata”.

7. In my approach, I draw on Brenna Munro’s discussion of Richard Rive’s sexuality and writing, in which she employs José Quiroga’s suggestion that “‘standard’ epistemologies of ‘coming out’ do not always make sense of texts from outside the Anglo-American cultural arena” (2012: 117).

One of the most interesting engagements with queerness in the city in Nortje's oeuvre occurs in "Identity" (1967), a poem which includes an ambiguous encounter with a man in the public toilet at Paddington Station. It begins with a sexualised reflection on the speaker's identity:

> Infinities of images clash in my mirrors.
> The fashionable urges that turn out to be
> sterile, complacent as the moon in June.
> Miscellaneous notions violate me.
>
> (1-4)

The speaker's "infinities" of identities, which clash in his "mirrors", are associated immediately with sexual desire – "fashionable urges" – which both turn out to be "sterile" and "violate him". Sterility here may suggest homosexuality or frustrated sexual desire. In the second stanza we move to the encounter in the public toilet:

> Familiar gesture in the gents
> at Paddington Station: the wristy aesthete
> in pinstripe trousers, pale lizard, beckoned:
> porcelain tiles reflected me vaguely declining.
>
> (5-8)

Here we are in the realm of the cruiser, a figure whom Mark W. Turner reads as an alternative to the figure of the *flâneur*. He suggests that cruising "emerges as a counter-discourse in the literature of modernity and as an alternative street practice in the modern city, a way of both imagining and inhabiting the spaces of the city that challenge other ways we have come to understand urban movement, in particular through the overdetermining figure of the *flâneur*" (2003: 7). Turner focuses on the public urinal as a "precarious" and "liminal social space in which a unique interplay between public and private sustained complex opportunities for privacy and sexual encounter" (49). That the man's gesture is "familiar" to the speaker suggests the "established modes of symbolic exchange" of the public urinal, which Turner writes about, in which men "insinuated a word, gesture or movement into public space, demonstrating their desires to those in the know" (50). While the speaker declines the man's invitation to have sex, his familiarity with the code of the urinal, and the qualification, "vaguely", suggest that he may not be entirely antipathetic towards the man's intentions. It is worth, however, noting that the description of the man as a "wristy aesthete" and "pale lizard" is somewhat stereotyped, an image of an effeminate and sly, bloodless gay man which suggests, once more, that Nortje was not immune from the casual homophobia of the 1960s. Any sense of condemnation is, however, countered by the ambivalent, self-reflexive tone of the rest of the poem.

For instance, in the next stanza, the speaker suggests that he cannot judge the "wristy aesthete", as he is similarly transgressive:

> Can I speak of probity, who now
> work for the garbage man, stuffing the bin
> full of tissue paper, sugar packets, anything
> on which a poem was ever written?
>
> (9-12)

Writing poetry is, for Nortje, a queer act, radical and subversive, but perhaps morally suspect, self-indulgent and resulting in self-loathing. In the next two stanzas, we return to the streets of the city, and are presented with further ambivalent encounters with men. Firstly, we have a different type of exchange, a commercial one, as “a man with twenty watches on his forearm/ flicks his sleeve down to the shake of my head” (15-16). The similarity between this encounter and that in the public toilet – the gestural invitation, the act of refusal – suggests a depiction of sexual relationships as transactional, even predatory. The next stanza includes a significant trope of cruising: the knowing glance in the crowd:

> Soft as a pig’s heart muscle in a queue
> down the Edgware Road, or in Leicester Square,
> a revealing smile was prelude to a
> supple suggestion i e room to shave.
>
> (17-20)

The specific reference to London street names implies that cruising is facilitated by London itself; the city enables sexual freedom. The conversational tone of the explanation of the “supple suggestion” behind a “revealing smile”, with the abbreviation “i e”, and the equally enigmatic “room to shave”, implies the speaker’s immersion in the codified, secret language of queer culture in 1960s London. In the next stanza, though, he subverts this interpretation:

> Do not interpret this only, the odd
> encounters, this sought liaisons. See me
> tickled at the bourgeois games on Saturdays
>
> (21-23)

The reader is addressed directly and invited not to read too closely into the “odd encounters” described in the poem, as the speaker reasserts his bourgeois respectability. We are thus teased in this poem with “[m]iscellaneous notions” about the speaker’s (and by implication, Nortje’s) sexual identity. The speaker defends himself against having his identity fixed: he is both queer and bourgeois, immoral and disgusted by perversity, he has “sought liaisons” but declines them. Nortje’s insistence on multiple, co-existing identities, although they are figured as sexual identities in this poem, also undermines the overdetermination of racial identity under apartheid South Africa.

The dialectic between self-loathing and pleasure in Nortje’s poems, associated with sexuality and colouredness and figured in his flâneuristic activities in London, is best explored through a close reading of a series of

five poems written in September 1970: “Supremely Individual”, “I Have Drunk Up Nights”, “What Is Mundane”, “Love of Perversity” and “Natural Sinner”. These poems are all Shakespearian sonnets, and the formal structures of the poems contrasts with their contents, which foreground the chaotic, even self-destructive nature of city life. “Supremely Individual”, for instance, continues the complex self-construction of “Identity” and presents the speaker as “Supremely individual, flamboyant, proud/ insane and thirsty for a stable life” (1-2). His complex identity is significantly worked out “in cosmopolitan dives of some metropolis” (5). The city of London, and its seedy pleasure houses (“dives”), are where he comes to realise that “The smelly and the raw/ crowds that disgust me are also those I adore” (13-14). Like the figure of the *flâneur*, the speaker is both part of the crowd and detached from it, and experiences simultaneous admiration and disgust for the “smelly and the raw” both in himself and in others. The second poem in this sonnet series, “I Have Drunk Up Nights” begins in a confessional mode that is continued in “What Is Mundane” and “Natural Sinner”:

> I have drunk up nights and spent the days
> in wild pursuits, life of the libertine
> do not repent, confess, seek remedies.
> The bourgeois sinners are banned from where I’ve been.
>
> (1-4)

These confessions begin in the past perfect (“I have drunk …”), which reminds one of the prevalence of this tense in Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; for example, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” and “I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker” (51, 84). Both poems present a retrospective overview of the speaker’s life. However, while Prufrock regrets his timidity and fastidiousness, Nortje confesses his seizure of life’s pleasures: he has “drunk up nights” while Prufrock has denied Marvell’s injunction to “[squeeze] the universe into a ball” (92). One could thus read this series of poems as writing back to “Prufrock”, as a defiantly different kind of retrospective that affirms pleasure, but also includes an underlying sense of regret and self-loathing, as does Eliot’s poem.

Sarah Nuttall explains the ambiguity present in these poems: while Nortje “asserts that he has been to “places” where others haven’t been, that are “unknown” to others”, he also “reveals that he hasn’t been able to escape the notion of the forbidden”. What emerges, then, is “a further suggestive contradiction in Nortje’s readings of the flesh – on the one hand it is the site of discovery and exploration, and a way of thinking and writing the self, new kinds of selves, into being: on the other hand is the need, near death, to confess to his transgressions” (2004: 46). Once more, self-loathing and shame is held in tension with an affirmation of the life of the libertine within the city. “I Have Drunk Up Nights” concludes with an invective against the bourgeois life:

> [...] I speak
> to you for whom spittoons are made, who
> buy furbelows and leopard skins, antiques.
> Will you not read it, this my poetry,
> calling it uncouth: it makes you sick?
> You serve your tea in china that's authentic.
>
> (9-14)

Not only does the speaker differentiate himself from the "bourgeois sinners", he specifically lashes out at the fastidious British literary elite who may find his poetry "uncouth". He expresses disgust at the ostentatious consumerism of these bourgeois critics: their purchase of unnecessary "furbelows" (ornaments), "antiques" and leopard skins from Africa: unlike his raw poetry, the most "authentic" thing about this group is their "china". Thus Nortje expresses his ambivalent sympathy with the "raw and the smelly crowds" while critiquing the consumerism of the British middle class and high capitalist society as a whole.

"What is Mundane" continues the theme of the previous poem, revelling in London's sexual and other bodily pleasures. This poem's confessions are contained in the second quartet, after the speaker has expressed his aim of transforming the "mundane" into the "sublime" (1):

> I have tasted potatoes, edibles, all that flesh
> can offer: lain in luxury with rich women,
> and homosexuals, bums, rag-pickers so obsessed
> me I could watch them all for hours in fascination.
>
> (5-8)

Nortje's use of punctuation in these lines is purposefully ambivalent. One can gloss the second and third line as: "[I have] lain in luxury with rich women, and [have also lain with] homosexuals, [while] bums [and] rag-pickers so obsessed/ me ...". On the other hand, one could see the comma after "rich women" as signalling the beginning of a new clause, whose verb is "obsessed". In other words, the lines could be read as: "[I have] lain in luxury with rich women, and [furthermore] homosexuals, bums [and] rag-pickers so obsessed/ me ...". As in "Identity", this ambivalence prevents the reader from being able to fix the speaker's sexuality. The "fascination" that the "homosexuals", "bums" and "rag-pickers" hold for the speaker is reminiscent of a voyeuristic *flânerie* that implies a certain detachment from these figures, and a relationship of scopic power. Though the speaker can sympathise with those excluded from the bourgeois city, he is also able to pass as a respectable man in (but not necessarily *of*) the crowd. The image of the "rag-picker" is particularly meaningful, as it alludes to Baudelaire's poem "The Rag-Picker's Wine", and also to Baudelaire's prose explanation of this figure as one who, by collecting and sorting the city's rubbish "collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste" (Quoted in Jennings 2006: 108).

Walter Benjamin interpreted the rag-picker as "an extended metaphor for the poetic method" since "Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping" (Quoted in Jennings 2006: 108). Thus, through the association of the rag-picker with the figure of the bohemian poet, collecting and sorting source material from the city's streets, Nortje expresses his affinity with this figure, rather than merely a voyeuristic fascination. In the following poem, "Love of Perversity", the speaker expresses his unease about his class position as he "loaf[s] among the well-to-do/ and not among the louts and down-and-outers, tramps" (7-8).

In the last of the five sonnets, "Natural Sinner", Nortje presents his (or his poetic persona's) dissolute life in London as directly related to his colouredness. The poem begins by foregrounding the speaker's destructive introspection: "I have preyed on my emotions like a mantis/ have lain with Soho prostitutes and gambled" (1-2). The site of his self-destruction and hedonism, represented by the pun of the "preying" (praying) mantis, is significantly London's most bohemian and cosmopolitan district. In the second stanza the metaphorical site is no longer the city but the body, which is represented as the source of his verse, and is grotesquely figured as a worm-ridden piece of meat: "the glut/ of worms in meat has forced verse from my bones" (7-8). Ironically, it is self-corruption, related to the dissolution experienced through the partaking of the city's pleasures, which results in the "measured music" (6) of the sonnet. This is akin to the Romantic conceit of worldly experience providing the poet with inspiration.

The last stanza of this poem relates the speaker's pleasurable and self-destructive experience of the city, and his ironically productive bodily and mental corruption to his origins as a coloured South African:

> For your sake who have sometimes those reverses
> suffered that the hobo has or a tramp
> walking through a Job's rain of curses,
> invisible has become I hope the stamp
> of birth, of blackness, criminality.
> I speak from this experience, speak from me.
>
> (9-14)

The speaker hopes that, through his experiences in London, the "stamp/ of birth, of blackness, criminality" has become "invisible". This line may be interpreted as an endeavour on Nortje's part to obfuscate his colouredness, and especially the "blackness" of his bloodline, by becoming "invisible" within the city streets. Dirk Klopper suggests that, at times, this is what exile represented to Nortje. He quotes a letter in which Nortje writes to a friend, before leaving South Africa, that he wants to be "submerged among strangers", and Klopper comments: "In a sense, he wanted to take on the life of strangers and become a stranger to himself. In the poetry, blackness

registers this ambivalence, signifying both alienation and solidarity" (2004a: 13). These lines should not be read in isolation as suggesting that Nortje's depiction of himself as a bohemian urban poet is merely a strategy to escape any association with blackness. Rather they convey the greater freedom of identification which Nortje was afforded within Britain and within London specifically. He hopes no longer to be "stamped", as a pass or passport is stamped, with the negative construction of colouredness as "criminality", of his origins as a shameful transgression. The freedom of London, and the varied pleasures and intoxications available within the city, allows Nortje to explore his identities (the "clash of images" in "Identity"), beyond that of a coloured, exiled South African poet. This allows Nortje to declare, boldly: "I speak this from experience, speak from me". However, as is evident in his constant shift between self-loathing and pleasure within the city, and his inability in these sonnets to escape the idea of sin and confession, he struggles to erase the "stamp" of shame.

Conclusion

In Nortje's poems set in London, I perceive a nuanced and shifting dialectic between a sense of loss and anxiety over his coloured identity and his status as a "nominal" exile, with productive gestures towards an active, often ironic and subversive reconfiguration of both his colouredness and his relationship towards the place of exile, Britain. London, although never Nortje's literal home while in exile, is the symbolic site through which he carries out this repositioning of his identity. I have aimed to expand our understanding of Nortje's poetry beyond the tragic mode of marginality and liminality. Since so many of South Africa's most significant writers lived and wrote in exile, a similar approach to their work could open up new readings of critically well-worn texts, creating a clearer sense of how South African literature was developed both in response to the alienating condition of exile, and also through deeply-felt engagement with the places where exile occurred.

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