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This collection, then, brings together two concepts, namely place and identity, with an attempt to explore the influence of place on identity. The concept of place has been divided into three environmental contexts, namely the rural context, the township, and the urban context. These three environmental contexts make up the three chapters of this collection. There are several South African poets who have written extensively about each of these environmental contexts explored in this collection. When one thinks of the township, for example, a contemporary poet like Mxolisi Nyezwa comes to mind; when one thinks of the rural context, the likes of Vonani Bila and Thabo Jijana come to mind. One can also include Mzi Mahola into the latter group, whom Sole notes that “his poetry gives space to themes surrounding growing up in a rural community in the Eastern Cape” (148). It is therefore indisputable that South African poetry does examine place. The difference with this collection is that it makes a conscious effort to explore the dynamics of different environmental contexts simultaneously. When embarking on the creative journey of putting together this collection, I was not aware of any contemporary South African poetry



collection that had observed the rural, the township and the urban contexts simultaneously, exploring how each influence the way people identify themselves, as well as the intricacies of their everyday lives.

Puttic defines identity as a “fluid, manifold construct which is both social and personal” (1). This idea of identity as fluid is taken into consideration in this collection, calling for poetry to move freely between these environmental contexts. As people move from one environmental context to the other, it is natural to assume that their identities will be shaped by this movement. In a country with a political history of deliberately isolating Black people from economic hubs, the migration of people from rural areas and townships to cities in search of jobs is one of the themes that has dominated South African literature from J.J.R. Jolobe’s epic poem, “The Making of a Servant” (circa 1930s) to Peter Abrahams’ novel *Mine Boy* (1946) and onwards.

Thus, environmental contexts are not explored discreetly or in complete isolation from one another because movement makes them permeable, resulting in a speaker’s ability to reflect on one environmental context while occupying the other. In the poem entitled “First day back from the township”, for example, which falls under the chapter named “Rural”, the speaker reflects about his experiences while visiting the township. This reflection occurs in the rural context, where the speaker must “kneel over a basin and scoop up water with [his] hands”. The similar reflection is observed in the poem entitled “All the places”, where the speaker now inhabiting the urban context, reflects back on his experience of the rural context. He is confronted by the contrast of sitting around a long shiny table in a hotel with his colleagues and the background of once gathering around the huge bowl of maas with his cousins and digging in with his bare hands while visiting his father’s birthplace. The other environmental context that is brought up in this poem is

the township where the speaker grew up; he is worried about fitting in the urban space where he finds himself with colleagues who overlook his township English.

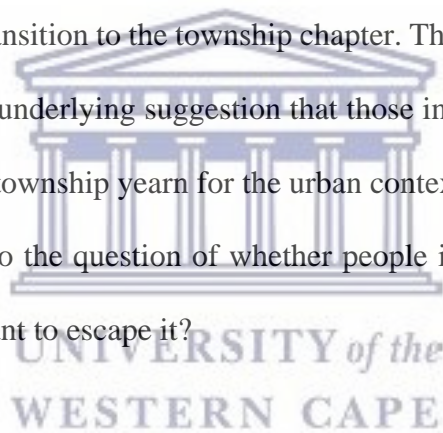
There is a sense here that the background is inescapable— a sense that no matter where the speaker goes the township is with him, it lives in him. If places influence our identities, and identities form part of who we are, can we ever escape the places we have been into? Can we ever escape ourselves? These are some of the crucial questions raised by this collection.

## **Rural**

Mohan Gopaul argues that “South African rural societies remain some of the most impoverished societies in the world, and access to employment, education, land, housing, health services and other essential resources still divide them from their urban neighbours” (1). The poverty that people living in the rural areas are confronted with dominates the poetry written about the rural context. The lack of basic services such as running water and electricity is observable in such poems. One sees this in “The Room of Rural Teaching”, a poem written by Kobus Moolman, from his collection *A Book of Rooms*, when the speaker mentions the youngest daughter who “walks every day with her squeaking wheelbarrow and her plastic drum to fetch water for him from the Ngwenya river” (30). In the poem entitled “Habeni”, included in my collection, “streams are running taps where a cow and a boy might come to drink at the same time”.

Noticeably there is brokenness running through many of the poems occupying this chapter. Windows and doors are broken. Walls are cracking. Houses are “eaten away by heavy rains”. All this relates to the poverty, because brokenness and poverty are inseparable. But there is also a sense of hope in this chapter, as one sees in the “A school visit” poem, that in the face of all this brokenness there is aspiration. The child in the poem dreams of becoming a doctor. This

is important because it shows that people can hold dreams bigger than the places they live in. I made a conscious effort to write poems about hope and love to challenge the stereotypical idea that rural life is all about struggling. Even though in “Song in my heart”, lovers fight over bathing in a dish when one of them spills water all over the floor, their love is strong enough to see one partner taking a three-hour journey on a taxi to visit the other. I strategically put the poem “First day back from the township” at the end of the chapter to allow a smooth transition to the next chapter dedicated to the township. In this poem, the speaker yearns for the township, an environmental context which appears better and more developed. This yearning comes after they had visited the township and seen how much better it was from where they live. I felt that this yearning was the best way to transition to the township chapter. This yearning runs through all the chapters. There seems to be an underlying suggestion that those in the rural context yearn for the township, and that those in the township yearn for the urban context. And so I ask, what does this particular yearning contribute to the question of whether people identify with their places? Can you call a place home if you want to escape it?



### **Township**

Nyezwa’s call for poetry to be representative of the lives of ordinary citizens and not overlook the streets, the urban poor and rural settlements, is justified in his poetry, which depicts the ordinary day-to-day life shaped by the township. Nyezwa grew up in New Brighton, a township located in Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape Province. His poetry paints a picture of a man who identifies with the township but is aware of its ills. Violence and other social ills are part of the challenges faced by people living in the township. One could argue that violence is to the township what

poverty is to the rural context. Although, of course, this would not be to suggest that poverty does not exist in the township, because it clearly does.

There is a recurrent theme of township violence in South African literature. In his latest collection of poems, entitled *Malikhanye*, Nyezwa writes that the “the township lays its violent streets before us” (62). He writes extensively about the gruesomeness of the township streets. In his poem the “Sleepless world”, “the street refuses to calm down” and it “has many murders” (25). In my collection, I wrote about Nyanga, the township in the Western Cape that is infamous for being the murder capital of the country. I had heard a lot about Nyanga before moving to Cape Town, and was curious about what it looked like, about whether it bore any resemblance to the township I grew up in. In one of my trips to Cape Town, I decided to drive to Nyanga to indulge my curiosity. I was struck by how close the township is to the airport; it is literally in the airport’s backyard, a five-minute drive away. Cape Town, I soon realized, is a city of dualities, where poverty and wealth, blackness and whiteness, violence and peace, are in one’s face, clearer than in any other place in the country. My writing process of this poem included making references to the Zulu meanings of the word “Nyanga”. In IsiZulu, (i)nyanga is a traditional healer. I was fascinated by the irony that the very same township called Nyanga, with a name associated to healing, would be notorious for murder, the ultimate opposite of healing. I referred to this in the poem, suggesting that the township holds its name as a disguise. After completing this poem, I also realized that it was the first time in my writing career that I had ever borrowed meaning from my home language in the process of writing a poem. There was, for the first time, the coming together of IsiZulu and English.

There is a preoccupation with violence that runs through many of the poems in this chapter. But there is also a theme of poverty. In these poems, towels are torn; roofs are leaking; beds have

spikes, and windows have holes. It is important to note that the township is symbolic of economic exclusion. People living in townships know the painful history of being denied economic freedom. This past, this dark history, always catches up with us. When reflecting on the poems that I wrote about the township, I was touched by the darkness running through all of them. I could not write a happy poem. I could not find anything happy to write about. How do people see themselves living in a place plagued by violence and poverty? How does a place like this shape a person's identity? Douglas Kaze notes that "without economic 'attachment', or with economic deprivation, it becomes rather difficult to hold on to place" (3). Do people find any attachment to the township? Perhaps my failure to find anything positive to write about the township is suggestive of the fact that I do not identify with the place, even though I have lived most of my life there. In these poems there is a sense that the township is a place that one survives—a sense that it is a place to escape.

## Urban

But where do people escape to? The city, of course. The urban life pulls them like moths to a light. There are job opportunities in the urban context, which explains the influx of people from rural areas and townships. I started off this chapter with a poem where the speaker is on a plane to Cape Town to start a new job at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I felt that this was a good way to begin a chapter about the urban context, since urban life is synonymous with a quest for opportunities and success. Again, one is confronted by the inescapable political history of exclusion in this chapter. Gabeba Baderoon writes about Cape Town in her latest collection, *The History of Intimacy*, as the city that was declared white when her parents married:

The city was declared white  
in the year he and my mother married

and they were removed  
to a place you cannot trace from here

(44).

There is a poem in my collection written about UCT, the oldest university in the country that has always been a home for whiteness. The university is currently negotiating itself into transformation. There is a sense that Black students and academics currently do not feel at home there, so it was important for me to write about these racial dynamics. The interesting thing about the ongoing dialogue of transformation at UCT is that it was only initiated more than two decades into democracy. This makes it easy to assume that there is resistance. It was interesting to note this conflict between place and identity; the idea that some identities are not welcomed by some spaces, as Douglas Kaze argues: “the city has a life, a rhythm of its own from which the poor are excluded”

(3).

Nick Mulgrew is one of the poets who has heeded Nyezwa’s call and written about the “urban poor”. One sees this in his poem entitled “Barrier”:

this morning I saw a man  
rattling about in my garbage  
and I took umbrage at him  
and I felt odd about it  
he was probably looking for food.

(20)

I wrote a poem like this one, in which a boy asks for food. This poem, entitled “Outside KFC”, depicts the everyday life of those who cannot keep up with the rhythm of the city; those who end up begging for food. It seems that poverty is inescapable. One finds it in the urban context as well, perhaps at its most brutal here since it shares the space with wealth. And it is this wealth that inevitably magnifies it.

## **Conclusion**

In seeking identity through poetry by navigating different environmental contexts, I was struck by how similar different places are. Themes of poverty and love and yearning were observable throughout all these environmental contexts. Even though there was a sense that these themes did not manifest in the same way, there was undeniable evidence that they were present in all these environmental contexts. And so one of the burning questions propelling this collection was what happens when people hailing from different contexts meet at the same table? Do their different backgrounds stand between them, or are they able to find common ground? I have found that these environmental contexts are more similar than different. The differences lie more in the observable, the physical, the infrastructures: buildings and highways. But they all embody the same experiences of human life. And it is these experiences that shape us, that build our identities. This is the greatest discovery that writing this collection has led me to. The quest for identity cannot be limited to place. There is something about human nature that cannot be divided by place. People will love no matter where they are. They will yearn for something better no matter where they are. They will feel empty no matter where they are. They will find greatness in themselves no matter where they are. The viewing of self can rise above the place in which that self occurs. Identity can escape place.

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