

THE THIRD VOICE: THE BORN FREE GENERATION AND THE AFTERLIFE OF PROTEST IN SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY

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Abstract

This paper is the sequel to an earlier comparative study which established an essential unity between apartheid and post apartheid poetry in South Africa and argued that the racial logic of the old order had not ended but had mutated into a class logic administered by a black political elite (Oluwatoyin, 2026). The present study carries that argument into the generation born at or after the political transition, the cohort popularly described as born free, and asks what becomes of protest when the poet has no direct memory of the regime against which protest was first devised. Retaining the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx as its theoretical spine, and reading it alongside Frantz Fanon on the pitfalls of national consciousness and Njabulo Ndebele on the rediscovery of the ordinary, the study extends the two phase comparison of the antecedent paper into a three phase one. Oswald Mtshali and Vonani Bila are read forward into the work of Koleka Putuma and Vangile Gantsho, poets whose collections *Collective Amnesia* and *Red Cotton* have shaped the poetic idiom of the second democratic decade. The instrument of the study remains sustained comparison, supported by close reading and qualitative content analysis of theme, address, and rhetorical device. The analysis finds that the grievance of the three generations is materially continuous while the structure of address is sharply discontinuous. Mtshali speaks outward to a white regime and a watching world, Bila speaks inward to a liberation movement that has become a governing class, and the third voice speaks neither to the oppressor nor to the movement but to memory itself, to the body, and to an inheritance the poet did not choose. Protest does not disappear in the third phase; it is relocated from the street to the archive and from the crowd to the person. The paper concludes that the essential unity established in the antecedent study survives the arrival of the new generation, and that the born free poets should be read as the continuation of the South African protest tradition rather than as its abandonment.

Keywords: Born free generation; Structure of address; Memory; Post apartheid poetry; Comparative literature; Protest tradition

1. Introduction

An earlier study in this journal compared the poetry of the apartheid era with that of the era which followed it and concluded that the two bodies of work share an essential unity of source, influence, subject matter, and revolutionary purpose, differing chiefly in the identity of the oppressor they confront (Oluwatoyin, 2026). That argument was built on a reading of Oswald Mtshali against Vonani Bila and on the Marxian proposition that a society divided by the ownership of property will reproduce that division whatever the complexion of the people who govern it. The present paper is the sequel to that study. It accepts the earlier finding and then presses it with a question the earlier study could not answer within its own frame, namely what happens to the protest tradition when the poet writing it has no personal memory of the system that produced it.

The question is not idle. Mtshali and Bila were both eyewitnesses to institutionalised apartheid, and the antecedent paper made that biographical fact the ground of its comparison. A South African who reached maturity in the second democratic decade stands in a different relation to the same history. The archive of apartheid reaches such a writer through the testimony of parents, through the ceremonies of the state, through the school syllabus, and through the commemorative habits of a nation that has made reconciliation a founding narrative. The material grievance is unchanged, since the inequality that the earlier paper documented has not been dissolved by the passage of another decade. What has changed is the poet's access to the injury and, with it, the whole rhetorical situation of the poem.

This study therefore extends the two phase comparison into a three phase one, adding to Mtshali and Bila the work of Koleka Putuma and Vangile Gantscho. It argues that the extension does not overturn the earlier finding but confirms and refines it. The unity of the tradition holds, because the material antagonism that Marx described continues to supply the subject matter of all three generations. What alters across the phases is the structure of address, that is, the identity of the party to whom the poem is spoken and from whom a response is demanded. The analytical model that organises the comparison is set out in Figure 1, and the chronological placement of the three generations is mapped in Figure 2.

1.1 From Two Phases to Three

The periodisation adopted here follows the standard chronology of South African literary history and adds a third division within the post apartheid phase itself. The first phase runs from the legislation of apartheid in 1948 to the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, and its dominant mode is protest addressed outward. The second runs from the first democratic election of 1994 into the first fifteen years of majority rule, and its dominant mode is reproach addressed inward to the movement that had become the government. The third emerges in the years around and after the student mobilisations of 2015 and 2016, and its dominant mode is an interrogation of inheritance addressed to memory itself. The boundaries are permeable, as literary boundaries always are. Bila continued to publish into the third period and Mongane Wally Serote wrote across the first and the second. The divisions are offered as an analytical convenience rather than as a claim about

sealed compartments.

1.2 Putuma and Gantscho as Representatives of the Third Phase

The antecedent study justified its choice of poets by showing that each was a faithful representative of his literary moment, and the same standard is applied here. Koleka Putuma, born in 1993 in the Eastern Cape, published *Collective Amnesia* in 2017 with the independent press uHlanga. The collection moved quickly beyond the small readership that South African poetry usually commands, went through repeated printings, entered the school and university syllabus, and was translated into several languages. Its concerns are the ones that define the phase: what a nation chooses to remember, what black women are permitted to say about their own bodies, what the liturgy of reconciliation conceals, and what it costs to inherit a settlement one was too young to negotiate. Vangile Gantscho, a poet and publisher associated with *impepho* press, brought out *Red Cotton* in 2018 after an earlier collection in 2015. Her work turns the political grievance inward through the idiom of healing, kinship, and the female body, and her role as a publisher of other black women poets makes her representative of the institutional as well as the aesthetic character of the phase.

Neither poet is a solitary case. Lesego Rampolokeng had already carried a ferocious performance idiom out of the apartheid years and into democracy, Gabeba Baderoon had made the archive itself a poetic subject, and Ingrid de Kok had written the moral difficulty of the truth commission into lyric form. The third phase inherits all of this. What distinguishes Putuma and Gantscho is that they write from within the settlement rather than at its threshold, and that distinction is what the present comparison is designed to test.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Literary Generation

A literary generation is not a birth cohort. It is a group of writers whose formative experience of public life was sufficiently similar to give their work a recognisable set of preoccupations and a shared sense of what may be taken for granted in a reader. On this understanding the poets of the third phase constitute a generation because they share a decisive negative experience, namely the absence of a personal memory of apartheid combined with the daily presence of its consequences. The category is used here in that restricted sense and carries no suggestion that the poets form a school or subscribe to a programme.

2.2 Structure of Address

Every poem constructs an addressee, and the identity of that addressee is a formal fact about the poem as much as its metre or its imagery. The concept is used in this paper to name the party whom the poem holds accountable and from whom it demands a response, whether or not that party is invoked by name. The structure of address is analytically distinct from theme. Two poems may share a theme of poverty and yet differ absolutely in whether the poverty is laid at the door of a foreign regime, of a domestic elite, or of a history that the reader is invited to acknowledge as their own. It is precisely this distinction that allows the present study to register continuity and change simultaneously.

2.3 Memory, Amnesia and the Archive

Memory in this study means public and collective memory rather than the private faculty of recollection. A nation that has emerged from a negotiated settlement makes decisions about what its citizens will be asked to remember, and those decisions are inscribed in monuments, commemorative days, textbooks, and the proceedings of commissions. Amnesia, correspondingly, is not simple forgetting but an organised silence that serves a political purpose. Ndebele (2007) argues that a democracy is obliged to examine itself critically and to accept ethical responsibility for what it prefers not to see, and it is against that standard that the third phase measures the official memory of the transition.

2.4 The Intimate as a Political Category

The third phase makes the private body a site of public argument. This is not a retreat from politics into personal expression, as an older protest criticism might have judged it. Gqola (2015) demonstrates that violence against women in South Africa is structurally continuous with the other violences of the society rather than incidental to them, and poetry that treats the body as evidence is therefore engaged in the same analysis of power that the earlier phases conducted through the figures of the police cell and the parliament. The intimate register is a change of instrument, not a change of subject.

3. Brief Scholarly Review

Criticism of South African writing after 1994 has been preoccupied with the question of what a literature of resistance becomes once the object of resistance has formally dissolved. Barnard (2006) reads the persistence of place and dispossession in writing that no longer has a censor to defy. Chapman (2003) situates the protest generation within a longer regional history and warns against reading it as a single undifferentiated gesture. Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) propose the term post transitional to describe writing that has ceased to organise itself around the transition as its central event, a formulation of direct relevance to the third phase examined here, since these poets neither celebrate the transition nor mourn it but treat it as a condition they have inherited.

A second strand of scholarship attends to the truth commission and its literary consequences. Krog (1998) produced the most widely discussed account of the hearings and demonstrated how a documentary occasion could be made to yield a poetics. Ndebele (2007) presses the argument further by insisting that the moral work of the commission remains unfinished so long as material redress is deferred. Work on Bila by Mogane (2018) and Msila (2024) has established the continuity of resistance poetics into the democratic period, and Meyer (2026) documents the institutional labour of the Timbila project through which Bila sustained a publishing platform for poets outside the metropolitan centres.

The comparative method itself has a settled warrant. Praver (1973) locates the comparatist at the point where themes, ideas, and sentiments pass between bodies of writing, and Maduka (1982) confirms that such an exchange may be traced within a single country as readily as across national frontiers, a position that Remak (1973) frames broadly enough to admit comparison across periods and movements within one tradition. Bodunde (1994) illustrates the intranational application of the method in an African setting, and Apronti (2020) shows that South African writing

rewards attention to the artistic consciousness of time rather than to the mere recitation of political background. Barnabas (2014) demonstrates the same method across national frontiers in a comparison of Nigerian and Senegalese prose, and Kapur (2020) shows how identity and the collision of cultural worlds may be made the axis of a comparative reading. The present study stands in that line and applies the method to a third generation within one national literature.

The scholarship on the newest generation is at an earlier stage, as one would expect of work published within the past decade, and it has so far tended to treat the poets singly rather than comparatively. The present study proposes that they are best understood through comparison with the two phases that precede them, and it thereby carries the intranational comparative method of the antecedent paper forward by one generation. This is the specific contribution offered here.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical spine of the antecedent study is retained without alteration. Marx holds that history is a sequence of struggles between classes, that the division of society into a dominant class controlling the means of production and a subordinate class controlling nothing is the engine of that history, and that literature registers the antagonism. Dialectical materialism supplied the earlier paper with its explanation of why the formal end of apartheid did not end the pattern of domination, since the transfer of political office left the ownership of productive property substantially undisturbed. That explanation remains the foundation of the present analysis.

Two supplementary positions are added because the third phase raises questions the Marxian frame answers only in outline. Fanon (1963) describes how a national bourgeoisie, having inherited the state from the departing coloniser, converts the language of liberation into an instrument of its own accumulation, and how the generation that follows independence is left to contend with a rhetoric it can neither believe nor discard. This is the precise predicament of the third phase, and it explains why these poets direct their scepticism at the vocabulary of the settlement rather than at any single office holder. Ndebele (2007), writing from within the society rather than about decolonisation in general, argues that the ordinary and the intimate are proper objects of serious literary attention and that a literature confined to spectacle will fail to describe the texture of ordinary domination. Read together, the two positions account for what the Marxian frame predicts but does not itself specify, namely why the continuing class antagonism should find expression in the register of memory and the body rather than in direct invective.

4.1 Relevance of the Framework

The framework is relevant on three counts. It explains the continuity of subject matter across all three phases, since the material antagonism persists and continues to furnish the poets with their material. It explains the shift of address, since the class that occupies the dominant position has changed twice, first from a racial oligarchy to a national bourgeoisie and then from that bourgeoisie to a settled establishment whose legitimacy rests on a history the young are asked to honour. And it explains why the third phase treats memory as contested ground, since the

management of public memory is one of the means by which an established class secures consent.

5. Method

The instrument of the study is sustained comparison, as in the antecedent paper. Four texts anchor the analysis. Mtshali's *Nightfall in Soweto* and *Boy on the Swing*, from *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, represent the first phase. Bila's *Comrades Don't We Delude Ourselves* represents the second. Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*, and in particular the sequence organised around water, baptism, and the sea, together with the kinship and healing sequences of Gantsho's *Red Cotton*, represent the third. The reading proceeds by close analysis of theme, addressee, and rhetorical device, supported by qualitative content analysis in which each text is coded for its dominant and secondary structures of address and for the prominence of five expressive modes. The coding is the author's own and is reported in Figures 3 and 4 and in Tables 1 and 2. No human participants were involved and no primary data were collected.

5.1 The Coding Scheme

Two coding frames are applied. The first records the structure of address and assigns to each text a value on three axes, namely address outward to the oppressor, address inward to the movement, and address toward memory and the body, with each axis scored as marked, strong, or dominant according to the proportion of the text given over to it and the position of that material within the argument of the poem. The second records the prominence of five expressive modes, namely the page lyric, performance and orality, documentary and archival citation, the intimate and autobiographical, and direct political invective, each scored as absent, occasional, marked, or central. The frames are deliberately coarse. Their purpose is not to quantify literary value, which they could not do, but to make explicit and inspectable the judgements that a close reading ordinarily leaves implicit, so that a reader who disagrees with a conclusion can identify the specific assignment on which the disagreement rests.

Analytical Model: One Grammar of Grievance, Three Structures of Address

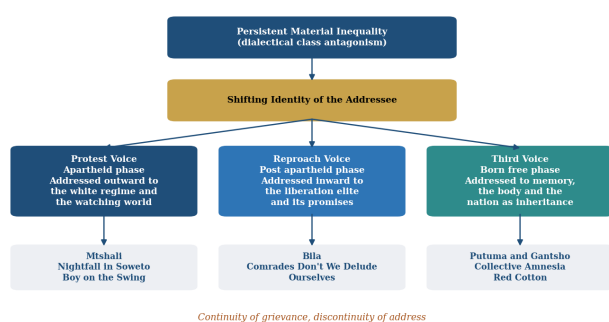


Figure 1: Analytical model showing one continuing grammar of grievance distributed across three structures of address.

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

6. Comparative Study of the Extended Corpus

6.1 The Inherited Grammar

The antecedent study showed that Mtshali and Bila write from a single grammar of grievance. In *Nightfall in Soweto* the township evening, which ought to bring rest after labour, arrives instead as a predator, and the black resident is figured as quarry with no refuge

even within his own walls. In *Boy on the Swing* a child's questions to his mother expose the arrangement of a whole society, and the discovery that his father is in prison converts a domestic scene into a political indictment. In *Comrades Don't We Delude Ourselves* the same grammar is turned against a new addressee: the poem reminds those who once opposed white minority rule that inequality, corruption, and a racial logic of privilege have survived the change of government, and that the leaders now enjoy an imported comfort amid a deprivation they were elected to abolish.

The third phase inherits this grammar entire. It inherits the conviction that poetry is an instrument of conscientisation rather than an ornament, the readiness to name the beneficiary of an injustice, and the assumption that the poem is a public utterance with a public obligation. What it does not inherit is a clear addressee. Mtshali could name the regime and Bila could name the comrades. The poet of the third phase confronts a dispensation in which the responsible party is diffused through a history rather than concentrated in an office, and the formal problem of the phase is how to write an accusation when the accused is a settlement rather than a person.

6.2 Collective Amnesia and the Interrogation of Memory

Putuma's response to that problem is to make the act of remembering the subject of the poem. *Collective Amnesia* takes the water of the middle passage, the water of colonial arrival, the water of baptism, and the water of the recreational beach, and shows that a single element carries incompatible meanings for the descendants of the enslaved and for those who now invite them to swim. The poem does not accuse a named ruler. It accuses an arrangement of memory in which black grief is expected to be brief, decorous, and concluded, while the leisure of the beneficiaries proceeds undisturbed. This is protest, but its object is the licence that a society grants itself to forget.

The continuity with the earlier phases is exact at the level of analysis. Mtshali showed that the black body was rendered worthless by a classification imposed upon it. Bila showed that the classification survived under a new management. Putuma shows that the classification is now defended by the arrangement of national memory itself, by the insistence that the injury belongs to a closed past and that continued reference to it is a failure of gratitude. The oppressor of the first phase was a police force, that of the second a comprador elite, and that of the third an official amnesia that keeps both of them safe from examination.

The collection also turns the earlier tradition upon itself, and this is its sharpest gesture. The liberation movement is treated not as an ally that has lapsed, which is Bila's treatment of it, but as a patrimony delivered to the young with the expectation of reverence. The demand for reverence is examined and found to contain an instruction to be silent, particularly for black women, whose place within the liberation narrative is honoured in ceremony and disregarded in practice. The poem therefore performs a double refusal, declining both the settlement and the terms on which the settlement is to be praised.

Three Generations of South African Poetic Address, 1948 to the Present

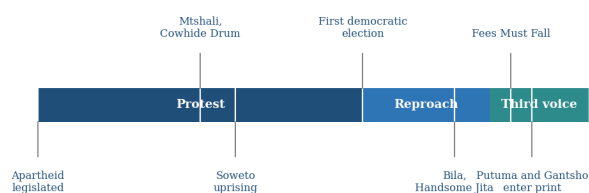


Figure 2: Chronological map of the three generations of South African poetic address, with the anchoring publications and political events of each phase.

Source: Author's synthesis of standard literary chronologies.

Structure of Address Across the Extended Corpus

	Dominant	Marked	Marked
Nightfall in Soweto	Dominant	Marked	Marked
Boy on the Swing	Dominant	Marked	Strong
Comrades Don't We Delude Ourselves	Marked	Dominant	Marked
Water	Marked	Strong	Dominant
Red Cotton sequence	Marked	Marked	Dominant
	Outward to the oppressor	Inward to the movement	Toward memory and the body

Figure 3: Coded structure of address across the extended corpus of five works.

Source: Author's content analysis.

6.3 Red Cotton and the Intimate Register

Gantscho works the same ground from a different position. Red Cotton assembles a poetics out of kinship, ancestry, illness, and healing, and it treats the female body as an archive in which a national history is physically recorded. Where Mtshali's black man is hunted through the streets and Bila's poor are consumed by their own representatives, Gantscho's speaker carries the injury inside a household and a lineage. The political content is not diminished by that relocation. The household is shown to be the place where the consequences of a national arrangement are finally paid, and the labour of healing is shown to be work that the state has declined to perform.

The Marxian reading holds here with particular clarity. The class that owns nothing is the class that absorbs the costs of the settlement in its own body, and the poem records that absorption in the only place it is directly observable, which is the person. Ndebele's argument about the ordinary is vindicated by this poetry, since the spectacle of confrontation, which the first phase necessarily favoured because confrontation was the daily fact of life, has given way to the description of an ordinary suffering that is no less structural for being undramatic.

There is also a formal continuity worth noting. Mtshali's rhetorical question, which the antecedent study identified as his characteristic device for protesting injustice, reappears in the third phase as a sustained interrogative posture. The child on the swing asks his mother where he came from and why his father was jailed. The poets of the third phase ask a nation the same order of question and receive the same order of evasive answer. The device has been

enlarged from a moment within a poem into the organising principle of a collection.

6.4 Form, Publication, and the Question of Audience

The third phase differs from its predecessors in the material conditions of its production, and these conditions have shaped its form. The apartheid generation published under censorship and often in exile, and its distribution problem was political. The second generation published into a liberalised but commercially indifferent market, and Bila's founding of a publishing and festival platform was itself a response to that indifference, as Meyer (2026) records. The third generation has been formed by the performance venue, the recorded reading, and the independent press, and its work is composed for the ear as much as for the page. The line lengths, the repetitions, and the direct second person address of this poetry are the marks of a form that expects to be heard in a room.

This has an important consequence for the argument of the antecedent study. That paper found that the poetry of both earlier phases was revolutionary in the specific sense that it aimed at liberation through conscientisation. The third phase pursues the same aim through a different circuit. The apartheid poem sought to inform a world that was not watching closely enough. The post apartheid poem sought to shame a leadership that had stopped listening. The third voice seeks to assemble an audience that will recognise its own experience in the poem and will decline, collectively, to accept the official account of it. The mechanism is recognition rather than exposure, and the audience is the constituency rather than the antagonist. The modal differences that follow from this are set out in Figure 4.

6.5 Rhetorical Strategy

The antecedent study found that Bila favours metaphor while Mtshali leans on irony, simile, and repetition, and that both are critical in tone and both call for revolutionary change. The third phase redistributes these resources. Irony remains central, but it is now directed at the language of the settlement itself, at the vocabulary of rainbow, reconciliation, and forgiveness, whose respectability is turned against it by simple exposure to the facts it is used to cover. Repetition, which Mtshali used to enforce the helplessness of the hunted man, becomes in the third phase a liturgical device, a deliberate imitation of the cadences of prayer and of the commemorative speech, so that the borrowed solemnity of the state is made to indict itself.

Two devices are largely new. The first is documentary citation, in which the poem incorporates the language of a syllabus, a hymn, a commission transcript, or a public ceremony, and lets the discrepancy between that language and lived experience do the work that direct denunciation performed in the first phase. The second is the catalogue of the body, in which anatomical particulars are enumerated as evidence, a device with no close precedent in Mtshali and only a distant one in Bila's image of starving bellies set against a somnolent parliament. Both devices serve the same end as the older invective. They make an accusation that the reader cannot decline to hear, and they do so in a register the state has not learned to answer.

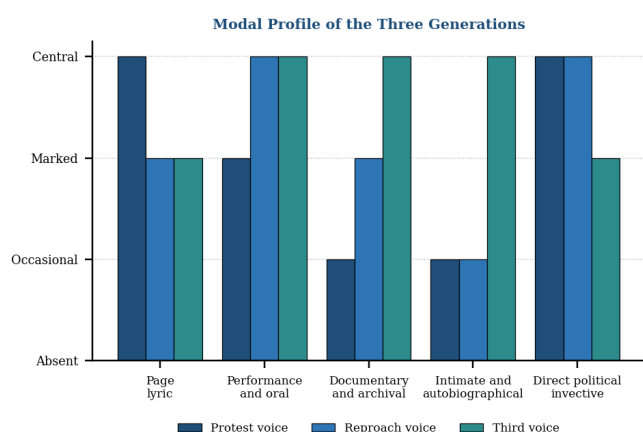


Figure 4: Modal profile of the three generations derived from close reading and qualitative content analysis.

Source: Author's content analysis.

6.6 An Objection Considered

An objection may be raised against the reading offered here. It could be argued that the third phase is not a continuation of the protest tradition at all but a departure from it, on the ground that protest properly so called requires an identifiable adversary with the power to concede, and that a poetry addressed to memory addresses no one who can grant anything. The objection has force and deserves an answer rather than a dismissal.

The answer is that the criterion of an identifiable adversary is drawn from the conditions of the first phase and cannot be generalised without begging the question. Under apartheid the adversary was identifiable because domination was legislated and therefore visible in statute. Once domination is secured by ownership rather than by statute it becomes correspondingly harder to name, and a poetry that continues to describe it accurately must become correspondingly less direct. On this understanding the indirection of the third phase is evidence of fidelity to the object rather than of retreat from it. Fanon (1963) anticipates precisely this difficulty when he observes that the national bourgeoisie governs in the name of the people it dispossesses, so that the vocabulary of liberation and the machinery of exploitation come to occupy the same mouth.

A second consideration supports the same conclusion. The purposes that the antecedent study identified as constitutive of the tradition, namely the exposure of an unjust arrangement and the conscientisation of those who suffer under it, are both discharged by the third phase. What has altered is only the route by which conscientisation is attempted. Where the earlier poets proceeded by informing and by shaming, the third voice proceeds by refusing an offered account of the past and inviting the reader to refuse it as well. The refusal is a political act with a determinate object, and it is therefore protest in the sense that matters.

7. Summary of the Comparative Findings

The comparison yields a single principal finding with three components. The grievance is continuous, the addressee is discontinuous, and the purpose is constant. Table 1 sets the three phases against one another on the dimensions used in the antecedent study, extended by the addition of the third column. Table 2 records the specific inheritance and departure of the third phase relative to each of its predecessors.

Table 1. The Three Phases of South African Poetic Address Compared

Dimension	Protest voice (Mtshali)	Reproach voice (Bila)	Third voice (Putuma, Gantsho)
Oppressor named	White minority regime and its police	Black political elite and comprador class	Official memory and an inherited settlement
Addressee	The regime and the watching world	The liberation movement in office	Memory, the body, and the constituency
Dominant mood	Terror, anger, protest	Disillusionment, betrayal, anger	Scepticism, grief, refusal
Site of the injury	Street, township, prison cell	Village, hospital, parliament	Archive, classroom, household, body
Function of poetry	Protest and conscientisation	Exposure and renewed resistance	Recognition and the recovery of memory
Characteristic device	Irony, simile, repetition, rhetorical question	Metaphor, animal ridicule, juxtaposition	Documentary citation, liturgical repetition, catalogue of the body
Theoretical anchor	Dialectical class antagonism	Dialectical class antagonism	Dialectical class antagonism

Source: Author's comparative synthesis, extending the framework of Oluwatoyin (2026).

Table 2. Inheritance and Departure in the Third Phase

Relation	What is inherited	What departs
From the protest voice	Public obligation of the poem; the rhetorical question; naming of the beneficiary	The single identifiable oppressor; the outward address
From the reproach voice	Suspicion of the liberation vocabulary; attention to class beneath race	The assumption of shared movement membership
Shared with both	Marxian account of a divided society; conscientisation as purpose	Spectacle as the privileged mode of representation

Source: Author's comparative synthesis.

Read together, the two tables show that the unity established in the antecedent study is not weakened by the arrival of the third generation. Every dimension on which Mtshali and Bila were found to agree remains a dimension on which all three phases agree. The dimensions on which the phases diverge are those governing the direction of the utterance rather than its cause. A tradition whose grievance is constant and whose addressee changes is a tradition undergoing development, not dissolution.

8. Implications for Comparative Literature

The antecedent study offered itself as a reference point for scholars undertaking comparison within a single national literature, and the present extension allows that offer to be stated more precisely. Three methodological observations follow from the exercise.

The first concerns the unit of comparison. Where a comparison across national borders can normally take the nation as its unit, an intranational comparison must find some other principle of division, and the present study suggests that a shift in the structure of address is a more reliable principle than a change of theme. Theme is continuous across the three phases and therefore cannot distinguish them; address is discontinuous and therefore can. The

second concerns the treatment of continuity. A comparison that seeks only differences will misdescribe a tradition in which the differences are real but subordinate, and the discipline of asking first what is shared and only then what diverges has proved necessary in both studies. The third concerns generational reading. A generation is worth constituting as an object of study only where its members can be shown to face a common formal problem, and in the present case that problem, namely how to accuse a settlement rather than a person, is specific enough to make the category do analytical work.

These observations are offered in the same spirit as the earlier paper, that is, as a usable procedure rather than as a theory. Scholars working on other national literatures whose liberation settlements have produced a similar sequence of phases may find the procedure transferable, and comparison of that transfer across literatures would in turn constitute the international study that the present paper deliberately declines to undertake.

9. Conclusion

This sequel has extended the comparative reading of South African poetry from two phases to three by placing Koleka Putuma and Vangile Gantsho alongside Oswald Mtshali and Vonani Bila. It has argued that the essential unity established in the antecedent study survives the extension, since the material antagonism described by dialectical materialism continues to supply the subject matter of all three generations, and since all three treat the poem as an instrument of conscientisation directed at an unjust distribution of power. It has argued further that the significant variable across the phases is the structure of address, which moves outward to a racial regime in the first phase, inward to a governing movement in the second, and toward memory, the body, and the inheriting constituency in the third.

The finding has a consequence for the criticism of the newest South African poetry. Work that turns to the intimate and the commemorative is sometimes received as a withdrawal from the political commitments of the protest tradition. The comparison conducted here indicates the contrary. The third voice performs the same analysis of power as its predecessors and reaches the same verdict on the society that produced it, and it does so with devices adapted to an antagonist that is no longer concentrated in a regime or a cabinet but dispersed through the memory practices of a nation. Protest has not been abandoned; it has been relocated.

The paper accordingly concludes, with the study that precedes it, that true equality has not been achieved in South Africa, and it adds that the generation with no memory of apartheid has become the most exacting witness to its continuation. Two lines of further work suggest themselves. The first is a comparative extension across national borders, setting the South African third voice against the corresponding generation in other African literatures whose independence settlements are older. The second is a study of the institutions of the third phase, that is, the independent presses, the performance platforms, and the digital circuits through which this poetry reaches its readers, since the antecedent study and the present one have both shown that the conditions of publication shape the form of the protest that is possible.

Declarations

The author declares no conflict of interest. No external funding was received for the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript. The study is a qualitative literary analysis based on close reading of published texts and critical engagement with existing scholarship, and it did not involve human participants or primary data collection. This article is a sequel to Oluwatoyin (2026), published in the same volume of this journal, and the relationship between the two studies is disclosed in the text.

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