

# Writing as a Journey of Experience: Mocking Intellectual Narrative Expectations and the Notion of Narrative “Spectacles” Beyond Language and Syntax: A Review of my Perspective

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## Abstract

It is my view that our experiences as writers are embedded in what we write. Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker and Audre Loudre are three authors whose works differ on many levels than one – they differ beyond language and syntax– beyond space and time, because they tell stories of different people in uniquely various ways. They all stem from a variety of experiences – as experienced by the authors themselves or the characters they write about. They also stem from different fragments of forms, styles, and experiences that each author has chosen to experiment with in their works – and they are all valid. For me, these works don’t get their validation because the authors have decided to employ some what good English or follow a dominant pattern and form of writing – or because they use fancy vocabulary and imageries that are out of this world – no. These works for me are valid because each one of them paints a picture of an experience in its own unique way.

Sinyavsky’s words to describe the role of a writer by stating that, a writer’s life is a journey and that it has to be a journey and it has fate. In addition to this, Marechera also discusses ‘fantastic realism’ using Sinyavsky’s definition. Both these writers view realism as a convention and an artificial form. Marechera suggests that realism pretends to be able to say the truth about life. Sinyavsky further alludes that, while he is not against the idea of the truth, he believes that it can be sought and achieved in different ways [1].

“Deliver me from writers who say the way they live doesn't matter. I'm not sure a bad person can write a good book.”  
Alice Walker

“I write for young girls of color, for girls who don’t even exist yet, so that there is something there for them when they arrive. I can only change how they live, not how they think.”  
Ntozake Shange

“If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.” Audre Loudre

## Literature Review

Kathy Acker says this about narration: stories are about something [...] and that a story has got something to do with realism [2]. What Acker is sharing here is the idea that people have about writing stories – that stories need to represent and mirror what happens in our lives [2]. But what she later ventures into is something I find very interesting particularly in the context of this essay. She talks about a genre of writing that Julio Cortázar calls the “fantastic genre”. This style of writing as both writers argue, is opposed to that of false realism which consists of the belief that everything can be described and explained. Acker then suggests that realism is reductive and that it is a controlled method. She further suggests that, realism does not want to negotiate, open into, or even know chaos or the body of death due to its reductive nature [2]. She raises a concern by asking; why must writers bother themselves by making themselves miserable and so reductive when one can play? – which is to be fantastic. In her conclusion of discussing the fantastic genre, Acker argues that,

**Keywords:** Narrative; Language; Syntax

## Introduction

Dambudzo Marechera writes that, he views literature as a unique universe with no internal divisions [1]. Marechera further expresses the idea that he does not pin or pigeon-hole literature by race or language nor by nation [1]. Furthermore, he suggests that within the field of literature, there is a healthy interchange of techniques and themes – and the fact that Europe is said to have a head start in written literature can be seen as an advantage for the African writer [1]. This is due to the fact that, the African writer does not have to worry herself with the problem of structure – as they have already been solved for her [1]. Again, it is Marechera who argues that, beneath reality, there is always fantasy and that it is the writer’s task to reveal and to experience it [1]. Marechera uses

to play in structure and in content, is to desire to live in wonder [2].

It is Tasiye Selasi who writes about what it means for different writers to be an “African writer” or from which position of interests various writers initiate their writings from. Selasi warns against the grouping of “African writers” together, stating that the warning does not stem from a lack of pride in the continent’s literal tradition – but rather from the Western tradition of essentialising African subjects [3], an issue Selasi is very conscious of. Selasi reiterates Evan Mwangi’s words when stating that, artists or writers who resist being put into categories do so because they do not want to be vacuum-packed as ethnic writers in the metropolitan academy, which has perfected these tendencies whenever it encounters writing that is not white [3].

Selasi also supports Chinua Achebe’s sentiments in stating that, what has been seen as a task of trying to define what “African literature” is, has been met with difficulty and failure [3]. According to Achebe, it is not about what characteristics “African literature” ought to have, whether it is literature that is produced in Africa or about Africa, or literature that features African subjects or perhaps literature that has an African theme. What Selasi thereafter argues for, is the freedom that the writer needs to be granted with when writing their stories. The freedom to feel and say things without being put into certain categories is one that writers need to often strive for – as being boxed into categories can at times be limiting to the writer.

My interest when it comes to writing has always come from things I could relate with – or things I could relate to. I write about the way I see myself as I occupy the world. It is Adrienne Rich who tells us that in her writing, she expects the reader to ask: “but what does this [the text] have to do with me? Do I exist in this poem?” [4], – because by putting myself and embedding my experiences in my writing, I want a reader who shares the same experiences as mine, to see themselves in my work. Rich’s point tells us that in most cases, readers are looking for texts that can speak to them – work that they can find useful – the kind that represents their thoughts and experiences. This is the very same attitude that I try to employ in my own work – to let it mirror my life in ways that make sense to me. Rich further argues; we often go to poetry because we believe that poetry has something to do with us [4]. This is to say – we as writers, need to write about our own lives and experiences in ways that will make our readers relate to us. But I need to state that, even if readers don’t relate to what we write about, this does not mean that our work is not valid.”

Talking of experience and experiment is Ann Lauterbach who uses Charles Bernstein in describing the word ‘experimental’. They both agree that to be experimental in poetry means to take an aversion to form, rather than an aversion to conformity [5]. That is to say – the author has to decide to create something new instead of following the order that already exists in the realm of poetry. This formation – of a something new is what I am interested in, rather than being limited to follow a style of a certain generation. Though this

too in its nature is not incorrect, the warning I would give is for writers to guard against staying rigid and not opening up to exploring new forms. While we may borrow from other generations the way we approach form and style, it is imperative however that the way of imagining – the way of experiencing as evident in my writing – that – I want it to be mine. Of course old forms may give us a point of reference and departure in terms of our writings, but the creation of a something new rests up on us as the new generation of young writers.”

Lauterbach further states that; between promise and fact, between known and unknown, lies the experimental, because the experiment is always in-between the things (between the unknown and the known) and it stays there like a hinge [5]. She further puts a nail on this view by stating that; the risk involved in taking a new form, is that you may not make it to the other side – across the suspension, but the willingness to risk failure – to make mistakes, seems essential to turning promises into facts [5]. This means in order to make it to the other side – where our writing will and can become successful – however we may define success – we must be willing to take the risks and not just operate within the borders – by following orders – and by following a certain narrative convention that has been set for us – we ought to break boundaries.

Once more, Lauterbach links the task of experimenting with experience. This she does beautifully as she states that; those who view form as static and reified are doomed to repetition, historical and personal [5]. Lauterbach sees the pressure and the attention that we give to experience as what leads us to the real – the real that is authentic [5]. In turn, the real that is authentic according to her is the process of experimentation which she views as the willingness to adapt to contexts, in order to derive not so much new meanings as new ways of interpreting the unpredictable [5]. This is to say – the process of experimentation is not so much concerned with the action of being able to offer new meanings that are embedded in the texts we produce, but rather, this process allows us to find new ways of interpreting things that are unpredictable – as they are a part of our lives and lived experiences.

I must also state that, while I am interested in writing about things that speak to me, I am also interested in what lies in-between the real and the unreal – that for me is something I am willing to explore beyond my own limits and beyond what I am familiar with. Thus for me; writing is a journey of finding myself in places where I thought I would not find myself – this has also offered me with an opportunity to be able to write about myself in ways that are different from what I am used to – to find myself in-between the usual and the unusual – the known and the unknown – to be there, and have a voice of my own – however it resonates with the other [the reader] – that lies with them. Though I have a strong tie and interest with the realist movement, the surrealist one has offered me with new ways of looking at life and the things I am interested in writing about. This way – as not only to look at what is in the surface – but to scratch beyond it, to navigate the spaces where confusion and conflict often occur, to navigate amongst the grey areas of experience – is one way which I find resonates

with me as a writer. Therefore, as a result, I am looking at ways in which I can navigate between these two worlds and applying their influence in my writing. I am interested in the space that lies in-between things – things that are in paradox – things that lie in juxtaposing ends. This perhaps stems from my own experiences as a person and as a writer and perhaps in my role as a teacher. I have always found myself in situations and positions where the absolute is not so clear. Where the line between the known and the unknown is always blurry – where the question of whether one is a man or a woman seems to have an easy answer – yet it remains a complex issue. This grey area is what interests me and I am keen to see what lies in those spaces that people and even writers rarely dig deep into – spaces of gayness and darkness. Sometimes I am interested in writing about light and hope – and at times I am not moved – but that too – which I write about – hope – is also a valid experience. My interest and curiosity of finding new ways of telling and new ways of making – new ways of experiencing and experimenting are an effort of generating new ideas – about myself and whichever that I may find myself writing about. Lauterbach reminds us yet again, that the fragments among which we live should cause for a celebration rather than lament, so that inclusion and exclusion are in a flux [5]."

Yang Wan-Li alluded in his writing that a poet must work like an artist that is painting a picture using a brush and paper when she is creating a poem. Furthermore, Wan-Li suggests that, though this can or might be a process in which the poet engages in when creating a piece of work, it is not what makes a poet. Wan-Li suggests that a man doesn't go in search of a poem, but the poem comes in search of him. Though Wan-Li said these words a long time ago, and speaking from a different background and cultural context, the words remain true even today.

Many people whose literary works came in a form of spoken literary words like praise poetry, believe that a poet does not create her poems, but rather, the poem makes its way to the poet. The poet in this instance is seen as some kind of vessel through which the message that lies in the poem is being transferred to the people. In human culture, the praise poet is seen as someone who has been sent to speak of social ills that a specific group or community of people is faced with. Then the poet, is someone who, through her own work, aims to warn that particular community about something that might be of danger to them. Because in many parts of the world – dead bodies are believed to possess the ability to speak through bodies of the living. Therefore, could this be seen as being real or fictional? I don't know – because that too – is an experience of all poets – and it too – is valid and worth investigating.

Mxolisi Nyezwa agrees slightly with the point made above in his discussion of the poetry embedded in Maskandi music. Just like the poet has social and communal responsibility to warn the people of dangers that might affect them, Maskandi music, as created by the artist, carries in it the souls of social minorities [6]. Nyezwa further argues that, Maskandi artists have developed a deceptively simple style of singing that is

both original and very innovative in execution [6]. It is this originality, a sort of creation of a new language, way of writing, way of telling and re-telling stories that I was interested in implementing in my own approach when it comes to writing – the idea of navigating between the real and the unreal using language that best describes my own experiences. May be a question might arise as to, why should this way be seen as a useful way of writing? It is Nyezwa again, who states that; this innovative way of writing – this technique – is able to blend specific and often contrasting attitudes and views of black culture, religion and language together [6]. The very same juxtaposing issues I mentioned in the beginning. Maskandi music does this in a way that often crafts and bends the vernacular languages – it is this crafting and bending that often lends the poetry to music [6]. Nyezwa, views this, as an extraordinary skill and technique he finds useful for his own writing of IsiXhosa poetry. It is this form, and technique which I was interested in, though I aim to make it unique to myself, by adding my own experiences and those of others.

The above mentioned view is somehow different but related to the way of writing which is proposed and discussed by Marina Tsvetaeva. Tsvetaeva argues that, the basis of every theory is experience. This kind of theory is the way through which one, as a writer, is able to use and becomes conscious of things that speak to them or move them. To be precise and use Tsvetaeva's exact words, the theory in this case is "the verification [and], the intelligence of the ear, [a process] of merely becoming – conscious of one's hearing". The similarities in these theories or techniques if author may call them that, are in their acknowledgement of experience as the bases from which the poet is writing from – while on the other hand, Tsvetaeva's approach is more Western, and by that I mean individualistic, the approach as evident in Maskandi and oral traditional literature – is more communal in nature – and all different forms are valid. As Nyezwa points out that; the choruses of Maskandi music are far from monolithic – and that very often, they praise both the young and the old, the powerful and powerless – they are for the community – for a people that will be able to find themselves in the works of these poets [6].

While writing from personal and communal experiences is something which is viewed as useful by the authors discussed above. It does not come without its own struggles. Bell Hooks talks about the struggle she faces as a writer who writes about or from personal experiences or the collective experiences of black people. She states that; whenever she begins to write a new piece, she is confronted with the extreme dread that, her subjectivity which she fought so hard to claim will not assert itself [7]. She alludes that, she is often faced with the fear of not being able to find words that fully articulate her experiences or even the collective reality of struggling black people and this makes her want to remain silent [7]. The exclaim Hooks is making stems from the fact that, writing from one's experiences is not an easy task at all. Many times, it is very difficult to distinguish between what should be told and what should not be told, at the very same time, finding effective words and ways through which to tell and write that reality remains a struggle. And also the fact that when she

writes about such experiences, they are often discouraged as they are seen as those that are playing the narrative spectacle game.

This kind of fear, argues Hooks, has aroused in her a sense of awareness that; wounds that are inflicted by oppressive structures mark us all [7]. In addition, she says it has also made her aware of the fact that, while political self-discovery and the development of revolutionary consciousness may be able to heal us, they do not erase the experiences we gained from oppressive structures of racism, class exploitation and sexist dominations which mark who we are or who we have become [7].

It is Njabulo Ndebele who reminds us that; literature cannot give us lessons, but it can only provide a compelling context through which we can be able to examine a number of ethical issues which have a bearing on the sensitisation of people towards the entire range of a culture [8].

In his own words, Ndebele talks about the use of the 'ordinary' and spectacle which are often found in certain kinds of literature, particularly, protest literature. The theories of 'ordinary' and spectacle are useful to discuss in my essay as they point out to how some authors depict or experiment with both black social contexts and experiences in their writings. For Ndebele, to create a narrative spectacle is to invoke in the reader, an inward experience of delightful thrill at the spectacle of suffering, defeat or even injustice [8]. That is to say, to create a spectacle is to dramatize a particular social issue which forms part of the social lives, social experiences and even social context(s) of the character(s) in question. Ndebele warns that the over dramatization of social experience, may affect the way in which writers depict the experiences they often write about.

To further prove the ideology that writing is a subjective process mirroring the experiences of the writer or those of his/her community, Phillip Zhuwao's recorded interview with Alan Finlay which was published in the Bleksem publication in 2006 stands as proof to this claim. In this interview, Zhuwao talks about his influences which fuel how he approaches the writing process. Besides being highly influenced by the work of Dambudzo Marechera in the way he writes, Zhuwao asserts that the position and point of departure from which he writes from is his own experience [9]. He further states that he writes about what he has seen, what he has felt and about the relationships he has with the people that he loves [9]. This further proves that, many writers have paid significant attention to the things around them – which shape who they are as individuals, and that it is these social experiences which they then use as a point of departure and reference in their writings.

Like Ndebele, Adrienne Rich also warns against narrative spectacles when she states that; in a political culture that is characterised by managed spectacles, poetry appears as a rift – what she calls a peculiar lapse which appears in the prevailing mode [4].

Robert Creeley discusses how he views writing from his own terms of experience. He asserts that, poetry obtains itself from

an unequivocal order [10]. By this, Creeley means that poetry ascribes itself to some rather plain order – where there are certain things that one is limited to do or not to do. He then goes further to say, while this might be the state in which poetry finds itself in or the space in which it operates, what he refuses to accept is the assumption that this order in which poetry is subjected to, can be acknowledged or gained by intellectual assertion and will [10]. Again, here we see how the author views writing as an openness of experiences – where a writer's credibility or that of his/her work, is not only be limited to the intellectual capacity of the writer.

Creeley goes further to point out that, this beliefs that poetry's order can be achieved through intellectual assertion is like an intension that seeks to shape language to a specific purpose which the literal act of writing does not itself cover [10]. I therefore suggest that, as we deal with the issue of writing, we must not only look at writing as a process that is fixed in a specific space – specific time – with a specific order – for a specific purpose. But to view writing as an experience and an experiment – where the possibilities of reforming and reshaping language always exists – to view it as a process where the telling of experiences is not fixed to a certain style or form – but where the writer feels comfortable to utilise whatever mode of writing which suits his own way of telling – and where such experiences will not be reduced to spectacles and intellectual expectations of the audiences.

## Discussion

Writing for me, is an experience the writer experiments with – using rather a different language through which they are able to express their own feelings – language which they are able to use in telling their own experiences in their own ways – to tell their own truths. It is employing a new tool – not a conventional one but rather a fluid one which allows the writer to be able to play.

I do agree that what writing has to give – it has to give it through language and voice [5]. But there are various ways through which language can be used in order to achieve whatever goals the author had in mind from the first instance. And also the reader of poetry or any kind of genre for that matter, needs to project him/herself into the background of the text, and to read the works with an awareness of the limits of available idiom [11]. This is to say that, readers cannot pretend that texts exist outside experiences of the writer, therefore to simply ignore that, is to deprive themselves of finding an effective way of engaging with the text beyond the meaning of words.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I see it befitting to use Lauterbach's words when she says; for as long as we long for syntheses, master narratives, complete views, we will be unable to imagine how to shape institutions which have a potential to override greed, self-interest, and cruelty, all of which are ready to assert their prerogatives, at the expense of the experimental (Lauterbach, 2005).

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