**Sarah Nuttall**

**Dark Anatomies in Arthur Nortje’s Poetry**

Black residue…night thing!
— Arthur Nortje, “Transition,” 1965

Shields of bone, the moist glands, membranes,
bulbs of flesh and hair roots breed again,
propagate themselves, protect, renew…
— Arthur Nortje, “Memory Merchant,” 1966

The body is our general medium for having a world.
— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

UNTIL RECENTLY, much work on the postcolonial body has focused on what could be called macro-processes of the embodied self: the body of the self in relation to the body of the Other, the body of exile, and the body as a site of multiple political and social inscriptions.¹ Important as this work has been, it has often left aside those textual

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markings of the body as lived flesh in its fully anatomical dimensions – as a body in parts, made up of sensory organs. It has left aside the body as flesh and bones, as soft and hard, as surface and volume; the body as densely packed interior – liver, kidneys, heart, cavities, vessels, fluids – and as breath, odour-like, beyond the material, the anatomical. It has left aside such a body in parts with its eery, individuated agencies and its imagined loci of self-knowledge when in fact a number of writers and poets (in particular the work of Sony Labou Tansi and Dambudzo Marechera) have inscribed such a body in their work. In this essay it is this body, this anatomical and material body, its parts, potentialities, territories, limits – that I would like to consider as a means of elaborating less well traced fields of cultural enquiry. I do so by discussing the poetry of the South African poet Arthur Nortje (1942–1970), who died of an overdose at the age of twenty-eight in Oxford – and left behind an œuvre of over 400 poems. These poems are largely autobiographical reflections on his self and his body. They offer us a comparative commentary on a Foucauldian process of “self stylization,” of work performed by the self on the self. Increasingly, as his œuvre grows, Nortje’s is a body in parts, a site of individuated organs which take on complex valencies across his work. His complete work has recently been published for the first time in Anatomy of Dark: Collected Poems of Arthur Nortje (2000), edited by Dirk Klopper. The title, which is also a line from “Midnight and After,” offers a compelling frame for Nortje’s preoccupations, though critics have yet to take up the fully anatomical or fleshly dimensions of his work. Nortje, as the title intimates,

and the Allure of Race (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000) critiques race, a central tenet of postcolonial criticism.

2 An interesting exception is the work of Achille Mbembe in On the Postcolony (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), in particular his essay “The Thing and Its Doubles.” In this essay the political body of the autocrat is brought back, re-harnessed, into the realm of the ordinary body – in order to ask questions of its power. In Mbembe’s work, there is a double movement in relation to the body and power: there is the profanation of the absolutism of power as represented by the body of the autocrat, a body that denies its own anatomical formations (a body without anatomy) and the dethroning of such a body through its own vulgarity, the vulgar body itself, representative of the vulgarity of power.


5 In Arthur Nortje, Anatomy of Dark, 42.