

## War Poetry of the Angolan/Namibian Border War: Re-membering Poetic Bodies through Textual Limbs

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This article argues for a conceptualisation of war poetry as a corporeal re-membering that encapsulates trauma as literary theme through the ‘poetic bodies’ construct. The ‘poetic bodies’ concept implies that literary language, the physical and psychological body, and the environment interact to create ontological meaning through poetry. Therefore, the discussion takes place within a ‘poetic bodies’ epistemological framework, as it resonates with a South African Defence Force soldier’s (Dawid) poetry of the Angolan/Namibian Border War (1966–1989) within the larger body of Border War poetry. The article also indicates how Dawid’s biographical memory, as captured in a life story is manifested in his poetic expression of psychological re-membering and ‘sense-making’ of wartime experience. Therefore, it reveals how his poems or ‘poetic bodies’ re-member war through word-traces and symbols of physical and psychological trauma, which was triggered by environmental stressors during the Angolan/Namibian Border War.

**Keywords:** Angolan/Namibian Border War poetry; war literature; poetic bodies; post-traumatic stress

### Introduction: Dissecting Poetic Bodies

This article indicates that the ‘poetic bodies’<sup>1</sup> construct can be applied in literary analysis by conceptualising the Angolan/Namibian Border War (*c.* 1966–1989) poems written by Dawid as bodies with textual limbs. These textual poetic limbs form part of the larger body of war poetry and are re-membered or reassembled through three interlacing acts of meaning making. These include a consideration of poetic language and form, which contain literary traces of inter-generational memory construction of war trauma within specific historical, social and cultural environments (Genis 2020, 2019). Within and through these ‘poetic bodies’, language, the physical and psychological body, and the environment act together to create ontological meaning through poetry. Dawid’s poetry comprises word-traces of his posttraumatic experiences on the ‘Border’ or frontline during the 1980s. The Border War, which culminated in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola in the late 1980s, was apartheid South Africa’s last colonial war (Dosman 2008: 207–26).

The symbiotic interaction between the language of war literature, and war trauma and post-traumatic stress has been conceptualised by Hunt (2010: 161):

The use of literature (novels, poetry) can both support the psychological evidence we obtain regarding the impact of war, and, in some circumstances, help to develop our understanding [of war trauma].

Literary language, with its penchant for figurative language, serves as a conduit for expressing and negotiating war trauma. Foley (2015: 132) holds that ‘the use of metaphor has proven effective [...] to treating military service-related PTSD.’<sup>2</sup> Narrative integration therapy through

metaphor consciously incorporates traumatic life events into the veteran's life story and allows for meaning making of this experience to take place (Foley 2015: 132, 135, 136). As poetry is a genre that ideally drives metaphor, it is included as a therapeutic and expressive writing tool to treat trauma survivors, who include veterans suffering from PTSD (Deshpande 2010: 240–1). Shafi's (2010: 88) research supports the restorative quality of reading and writing poetry in bringing about 'psychological awareness, creativity, and personal meaning' and it is therefore included in clinical interventions. Furthermore, Jeffs and Pepper (2005: 91–2) attest that poetry links the individual to a collective and restorative unconscious or a common humanity by 'giv[ing] meaning where meaning cannot be found', as 'works of the imagination can help calm, and draw together, the disparate threads emotional pain creates.' Importantly, poetry writing's structuring and organisation of rhythm, rhyme, symbols, figures of speech and metaphors provide for a conscious ordering and representation of scattered, traumatised and schizophrenic thought processes (Shafi 2010: 89). Shafi (2010) indicates that metaphor and figurative language have both a physiological foundation – word-images are physically written down as poetry, and a neurological basis – language is formed in the brain. Subsequently, poetry therapy and writing facilitate a physical and psychological embodiment or re-membering of traumatic experience through creative and imaginative language.

Not only poetry writing in general, but also war poetry specifically is employed to re-member trauma. Christie (2007: 237) indicates that war poetry is a remembering and 're-membering of body parts.' Both the physical body, which is missing in action or has lost limbs, and the fractured psychological body are reconstituted through poetic language. Hodge (1998: 32, 36, 38) refers to this remembering and re-membering of the body through memory and language construction as the process of 'writing the body'. Batley (2008, 2007), in her seminal studies of South African Border War poetry, declares that the righting of the psychological body and the remembering of the fractured physical body may be achieved through writing war literature, including poetry:

It allows for the expression of trauma that could not be negotiated at the time of the experience described. Writing 'documents of life' or talking about such events should be viewed as an act of catharsis, of retrospectively making sense of experiences that were not necessarily understood when they occurred. (Batley 2008: 175)

Dawid's poetic bodies or 'documents of life' are brutally honest accounts of his experiences as a soldier in what Doherty (2015) refers to as an illegal race and immoral apartheid-era war. The apartheid National Party government constructed a communist total-onslaught narrative to justify its oppression of liberation movements in South Africa and its wars against independent African countries on its borders during the Cold War of the 1970s and 1980s. This served as rationalisation to use Namibia<sup>3</sup> as a base from which to invade Angola. Dawid and many other soldier poets acknowledge their physical and psychological immersion and accountability in this war (Lotter 2015).

Dawid is still taking responsibility for his role in these conflicts by counselling veterans who suffer from PTSD and trauma. This act refers to the establishment of 'horizontal bonds' of mutual psychological support and witness bearing among ex-combatants (Gear 2008: 259). Another form of witness bearing is Dawid's life story or his 'confession' as narrated in an interview with the authors. Confession and autobiographical memory (Baines 2019) are linked to the 'poetic bodies' conceptualisation. The oral interview conducted with Dawid embodies his historical memory of the context during which his war poems are and were conceived. The findings of this interview are included here not to prove the historical veracity of Dawid's recollections but serve as another metaphorical limb of his wartime experience. Therefore, his narration

forms part of the establishment of ‘horizontal bond[s]’ (Gear 2008: 259) in re-membering his ‘poetic bodies’. Consequently, Dawid’s witness bearing through counselling, his life story, and writing poetry connects various literary, physical and psychological bodies. His life story serves as starting point to illustrate this process of connecting intergenerational experience, language, memory and trauma.

### **Dawid’s Poetic Body: A Biographical Life Story**

Dawid (62 years) was born in a mining community in the Northwest Province of South Africa. His father was a miner and his mother unemployed. He is the eldest of three brothers. Dawid mentioned that his father was an alcoholic, who would often physically assault his mother. During tumultuous times, his father would insist that Dawid and his mother leave the house. Subsequently, he had a strained relationship with his father, but was very close to his mother. She instilled his love for poetry and writing from an early age. His first-grade teacher also encouraged him to develop his language skills, especially in poetry. Dawid worked at a bookshop when he was in primary school. School was not a happy space for Dawid as he was often bullied because of his small stature.

Due to the unstable economic nature of the mining sector, Dawid’s family often had to move to find suitable job opportunities for his father. This resulted in him attending six different primary schools. Dawid and one of his brothers currently live with their mother. Dawid is a self-described loner, who seldom leaves his home, a caravan next to his mother’s house.

His career in the military started at age eighteen. One evening he noted a military train pass through town. This image was very attractive to him and he decided to join the army. He captured his enlisting experience in the poetry volume, *Wondgom (Wound Glue)*:

‘Bagasie’

[...]

En ‘n paar ander

Elk met treinkaartjie

Minute vantevore

Op die platform

Net uitgespoeg

So half verlore

[...]

(*Wondgom*, 2)

[‘Baggage’: And a few of us/ Each with a train ticket/ Minutes before/ On the platform/ Spitted out/ Half lost]

He initially joined the Horse Mounted Infantry. He mentioned that he was disillusioned by the army system early on due to his experience of immoral conduct by petty officers. In 1977, he attended an officers’ course and later on obtained a PhD. His first experience on the battlefield was at age 23, with 35 Battalion of the South African Defence Force (SADF). At 25, he became the commander of De Brug Retraining Base. Here, National Servicemen,<sup>4</sup> who committed offences including absence without leave (AWOL), drug abuse and the misuse of alcohol had to undergo extra days’ military service. This experience increased Dawid’s empathy for these men. He wrote a strongly worded letter to the military authorities that resulted in the disbandment of the base. At 27, Dawid was a captain in 1 South African Infantry Battalion (ISAI). At the end of 1983, ISAI prepared for Operation Askari. It was a large-scale cross-border operation into Angola. Its main aims were to prevent the South West Africa People’s Organisation’s

(SWAPO) cross-border operations from Angola into South West Africa and to destroy it (Scholtz 2013: 164–5). This battle inspired his book *Spine of Delta, Reflections on Operation Askari*.<sup>5</sup>

As part of Operation Askari, Dawid took part in the Cuvelai battle on 31 December 1983. The opponents of the SADF were the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) and the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) that put up a fierce fight (Scholtz 2013: 171–7). Dawid stated that this battle was extremely traumatic to him. To this day, he remembers the severed limbs and bodies of dead enemy soldiers littering the battlefields of Cuvelai (1983/4) and Lomba (1987). After Cuvelai, Dawid displayed the first symptoms of PTSD. He vividly remembered an incident during a visit to his family during which he had a heated argument with his brother and nearly shot him. After the battle of Cuvelai, he often felt 'on edge'. He stated that he did not want to see the military psychologist as this could have resulted in limiting career opportunities.

According to Dawid, SADF soldiers were not provided the opportunity to deal with battlefield trauma. Dawid mentioned that he had visited a private psychologist once, but decided the person did not understand the intricate psyche of a soldier. Gear (2008: 254) refers to 'transition stress', which is 'The difficulty of making sense of oneself in relation to changed roles and broader societal processes', as wartime camaraderie gives way to individualistic and capitalistic civilian life (Gear 2008: 254–55). The fact that Dawid still empathises like a father with the men who served under him and that he lives in a trailer in his mother's back yard are examples of transition stress. The loss of perceived status, relevant roles, comradeship, identity, masculinity and purpose in society are common among black and white South African soldiers trying to come to terms with their previous roles of resistance fighters or ex-soldiers, whose sacrifices have been forgotten or vilified (Gear 2008: 254–7).

When Dawid was promoted to major, he was attached to 61 Mechanised Battalion (61 Mech). He was commander of a battle group during Operation Moduler in September 1987. This battle group fell under the command of 61 Mech. The aim was for the SADF to lend support to its ally, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) at Mavinga and to force the pro-communist MPLA government in Angola to make peace with UNITA (Scholtz 2013: 256–7). Dawid's battle group was ordered to retrieve military vehicles. His young troops found themselves in the middle of combat that lasted for more than three hours, and into the night. He described this experience as the most traumatic experience of his life. He was confronted by his own mortality and realised that this battle could be his last. After this experience, his negative feelings towards the military grew exponentially. From 13 September to 1 December 1987, Dawid's battle group took part in various skirmishes. These intensified his symptoms of PTSD. Afterwards, the troops attended a special camp to diffuse possible traumatic combat experiences. They were asked to discuss their feelings in groups that lasted only a few minutes. Dawid mentioned that the rest of the time at camp was spent drinking and lounging around. Gear (2008: 258) observes that there was a lack of de-briefing opportunities for resistance and SADF soldiers in South Africa during this period.

After the battle, Dawid was transferred to 2SAI in Walvis Bay. He felt that this transfer was an insult, as this battalion was not an elite group in his opinion. He was AWOL for four weeks but later returned to his unit. He described his general mood at that time as murderously angry.

Dawid became an instructor at the Military College in Pretoria, but soon afterwards asked to be detached to 60 Brigade on the Angolan border. After only two weeks on the border, he suffered psychological breakdown. He became irate and continuously asked to return to the battlefield. He was delusional and had to be sedated and was subsequently admitted to a military hospital in 1988. He was left on his own in the psychiatric ward for eight days. Dawid stated that during his time in hospital, he did not receive any therapy or treatment for his symptoms of PTSD. He mentioned that he could not sleep for more than two hours at night.

After his psychological breakdown, he returned to the training college, but he had two psychological relapses that resulted in hospitalisation. He was diagnosed with major depression. The second relapse resulted in Dawid physically assaulting a fellow soldier. He resigned from the army and worked in the corporate sector for a number of years. He stated that he moved from one position to the other but could not settle down. He admitted that he struggled to interact socially with people. He also battled with aggression and road rage. A number of courses he had attended on psychological wellbeing assisted him in dealing with some of his psychological challenges. More than thirty years after leaving the military, Dawid still takes medication for anxiety and PTSD, and has developed arthritis. He writes poetry on the military and the Border War for a living.

Dawid mentioned that he writes poetry to assist fellow veterans, who experienced similar trauma. He regards his poetry as deeply personal and therapeutic. ‘Verkrag’ (‘Rape’) relates to his own experience of guilt. In the poem, he describes his utter helplessness in not being able to assist a young soldier who was gang raped by other soldiers:

‘Verkrag’

Was ek die slagoffer of die medepligtige  
Of dalk blatant die skuldige  
En dalk het ek dit verdien  
Myself toe nie as sterk genoeg gesien.

[...]

(*Wondgom*, 42)

[‘Raped’: Was I the victim or accomplice/ Or perhaps blatantly the guilty one/ And maybe I deserved this/ Did not see myself as strong enough then.]

To this day, Dawid struggles with the fact that thousands of troops were sent into battle in a war that had no clear advantage to the country. He often contemplates the reason for accepting the war as necessary and not questioning his and others’ actions in the military. Although he has these negative feelings, he still longs back to his days in the army. He enjoyed the experience and feels that as a soldier he had a purpose in life, a sentiment that many volunteers share as part of the band-of-brothers’ ethos:

‘Herinneringe’

My Bosoorlog jaar het  
Stadig  
Snel  
Verbygegaan  
Na baie jare en dekades  
Mis ek steeds iets  
Maar het vergeet  
Wat presies  
Dit was.

(*Wondgom*, 148)

[‘Memories’: My bush war year was/ Slow/ Fast/ Then over/ After many years and decades/ I still miss something/But I forgot/ What exactly/ It was.]

The next section considers the major themes and forms of Dawid’s war poetry. This discussion takes place within the larger context of Dawid’ life story, and war and Border War poetry.

### Connecting Dawid's Poetry with PTSD and War

Dawid situates his poetry firmly in the tradition of western war poetry. His first collection of war poetry (2014) starts with 'Suicide in the trenches' (1918) by Siegfried Sassoon. He incorporated Afrikaans translations of war poetry in his 2017 volume. These include war poems by American (e.g. Walt Whitman, 1819–1892), British (e.g. Wilfred Owen, 1893–1918) and German (e.g. August Stramm, 1874–1915) poets and extracts from Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The first section of his edited Border War poetry anthology, *Nubes Belli* (2015) is dedicated to nineteenth-century and first-half-of-the-twentieth-century Afrikaans and English war poetry. Dawid's poetry is influenced by the style and the suffering-soldier trope of many of these literary texts. These poetic forms include nature lyrics, ballad stanzas, couplets, elegies, sonnets, barrack-room ballades and free verse.

Dawid's poetry shares the thematic concerns of Afrikaans war poetry of the Angolan Border War, which Van Rensburg (1994a) refers to as 'doodspoësie' or death poetics. Tropes in this poetry include fear of the alien enemy territory, war guilt, the pathetic irony of civilians' hero worship of the dead soldier, the dehumanisation of the body as and through destructive weapons, trauma, the corpse as battlefield leftover, war as sexual act, the animality of conflict, loss of innocence, and an uncaring civilian population (Batley 2008; Lotter 2015; Van Rensburg 1994a: 73–96). Therefore, Dawid's embodiment of war poetry falls within a specific literary tradition and gives voice to the intergenerational trauma of conflict.

His poetic form, however, generally differs from the Afrikaans 'stellingspoësie' or Border War poetry as personal statement through prose poetry; his structured versification of rhyme and rhythm corresponds more with the earlier Afrikaans 'beeldingpoësie' or image poetry (Van Rensburg 1994b). 'Stellingspoësie' is more prose than poetry, lacks rhyme and rhythm, and includes more free verse (Van Rensburg 1994b: 63–4). However, similar to the 'stellingspoësie' (Van Rensburg 1994b: 55), Dawid employs the refrain device in his poetry, and his poems serve as both reportage of the conflict and as expressions of his personal solidarity with comrades.

Dawid's preference for the more structured rhythms of rhyming stanzas, quatrains and couplets represents not only a stylistic proclivity but also a psychological coping-mechanism. In the poem 'Verkrag' (*Wondgom*, 47), he refers to wartime rape as 'n Skandvlek sonder rym' (a blemish/damned spot without rhyme). His rhyme gives order and a more natural rhythm to the cacophony of war trauma. This tightly organised verse with strict rhyme patterns gives structure and meaning to the concrete suffering and trauma of war. His 2016 collection is titled *Wondgom* (*Wound Glue*). The lines and stanzas serve as psychological adhesives that link diverse and fractured war traumas, and more logically organise the schizophrenic and surreal experiences of conflict; the rhythm, rhyme, symbols and metaphors in the poems serve as cohesive devices that mirror or give meaning through the symbolic ordering of PTSD triggers:

'Angs Insek'

Want as jy daaraan karring en tob  
Daaraan krap en vryf sonder stop  
Dan word vrees 'n bose sweer  
Wat jou dink vergiftig en beheer  
(*Wondgom*, 54)

[ 'Fear Insect': Because if you rip it by fidgeting/ Scratch and rub without ending/ Then fear becomes an evil sore/ Which your thoughts poison and tore]

The ordered rhythm, rhyme and metaphorising of Dawid's poetry echo the soldier poet's efforts to give meaning and structure to the concrete and schizophrenic trauma of war (Genis 2018; Saks 2008). Many war poets of the twentieth century suffered from Concrete Symmetry because of war trauma, which triggers the paranoid-schizoid and anxiety-laden psychosomatic symptoms of PTSD (Genis 2018: 6–19). Initially, the horror of war lies beyond the world of language and symbols. However, these concrete and unprocessed traumatic experiences can be symbolised through poetic language (Saks 2008). Angela Connolly (2011) has investigated the effects of intergenerational trauma and found that symbolism or metaphor is crucial for psychological healing; she links artistic expression to the act of coming to terms with 'inherited' trauma. Batley (2008: 175, 192) refers to the war narratives of the Border War veterans, which include artistic poetic expressions, as 'documents of life'. These texts serve a life giving or rather an emotional resuscitating purpose, as the concrete reality of battlefield fear and trauma is symbolised as a meaningful or fathomable concept or construct that can be processed:

'Vrees as 'n Begrip'  
 'Ek is nie bang nie'  
 Vereis van die brein  
 Om eers die gevoel  
 Van bang te omskep  
 In 'n begrip  
 (*Wondgom*, 62)

['Fear as a Concept': 'I am not scared'/ Requires the brain/ To change the feeling/ Of being fearful/  
 Into a concept]

The 'poetic bodies' contained in Dawid's three collections of poetry (Lotter 2014, 2016, 2017) give voice to the suffering of his comrades. He poetically remembers his and their personal wartime experiences. His poetry and re-membering are interwoven with those of soldier poets from the past and those of his fellow combatants. Saks (2008: iii, 162–5) indicates that poetry allowed soldier poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon to process and symbolically share their traumatic experiences, which are prerequisites for psychological healing, and subsequently serve as therapy. The narration of combat experience with other walking-wounded minds can lessen the fear of wartime and post-war isolation. It also allows veterans to share their experiences with non-combatants and family members, who do not fully comprehend the impact of war (Saks 2008). Dawid's poetic sense-making or re-membered 'poetic bodies' reveal two main themes, which include the figurative and physical landscape and border, and the soldier's frail body.

### **Mythical, Metaphysical and Metaphorical Landscape and Border**

The following two poems encapsulate Dawid's ambivalence about the nature of war:



‘A Legend of a Special Kind’  
 [...]
 Was Omuthiya in Ovamboland<sup>6</sup>  
 Where a special breed of knights  
 Forged ahead to great heights

A conquering hero for many years  
 The cause and reason for enemy fears  
 Among Russian, Angolan or Cuban  
 And perceived as super human

[...]
 Listen then all future generations  
 The historians of all nations  
 Let’s not forget the 61 story [61  
 Mechanised Battalion Group]  
 The courage and the glory  
 Never to fade  
 [...]
 (*Kleurskakerings*, 75–6)

‘Kaplyn’  
 Dis die vrees wat ek beleef  
 Wat elke oomblik my omgeef  
 As sappeur op die kaplyn  
 Soekend na daardie myn

Om hom te lig  
 Dit is my plig  
 Maar vrese op die kaplyn  
 Net my geheim

(*Kleurskakerings*, 132)  
 [‘Border’: It is the fear that I meet/ That plays around my feet/  
 As engineer on the border/ Blindly feeling for the landmine/  
 To lift him up/ Is my duty/ But fears on the border/ Remains  
 my burden]

The border is both a place of heroic sacrifice and ignoble mechanised death. Dawid’s poetry falls within the context of the exploration of the military border between Namibia and Angola (or ‘Kaplyn’) as mythical landscape in the popular culture of movies and magazines since the 1970s and in Border War fiction and poetry. The conceptualisation of the border or *Kaplyn* as a heroic space represents a quest narrative; it is where the soldier undergoes a rite of passage into manhood, shares adventures with his machismo comrades, and to which he always longs back (the good old days) after demobilisation (Baines 2003: 191; Batley 2008: 185–90; Conway 2008: 77–9). This quest took place in an environment or border area, which Baines (2003: 172) indicates was both a spatial and metaphorical construct: it was a physical and psychological embodiment of war experience that was remembered and re-remembered in the literature and memoirs of the war. Barnes (2003: 8) indicates that the word ‘border’ ‘evokes a whole world of experiences, feelings and symbols,’ it is ‘semantically loaded’:

Words and images referring to past wars in South Africa are significant markers of an entire field of emotions, histories and symbolism. By evoking these images and concepts related to the Anglo-Boer War, and other wars, writers have forged links between different generations that create a living inter-textual framework for new narratives. (2003: 8–9)

By including Anglo-American and European war poetry and Afrikaans poetry on the clashes with Africans and the British Empire in his poetry volumes and anthology, Dawid inter-generationally connects his verse to these poetic traditions. Furthermore, his poetry is firmly ensconced in the Border War imagery and themes, and their psychological impact on the soldier. His literary embodiments or textual limbs are therefore firmly entrenched in the border landscape of wartime loss, which saturates his memory of trauma.

The border or ‘Kaplyn’ represents an analogous metaphysical space and intergenerational link with the trenches of the First World War in which South Africans were similarly physically and psychologically immersed. During the First World War, the trenches of the Western Front in Europe represented the archetype of where masculine white or Springbok<sup>7</sup> poetic heroism was bled (Genis 2018: 71–96). It is similar to what Conway (2008: 76) claims for the Namibian-Angolan ‘border’, which is a far-off, romanticised-mythical and heroic space in apartheid South Africa’s popular memory. The border has parallels with Delville Wood (July 1916), in a



poetic iconography of bloody homoerotic sacrifice and noble quest: a hellish no-man's-land of destruction, where the inevitable victory of the forces of good is never questioned (Genis 2018: 58–96). The First World War was seen as a battle against the devilish 'Hun' in Britain and her colonies. Similarly, defending the 'border' was viewed by apartheid South Africa as a quest to protect Christian values and civilisation against communist barbarism (Conway 2008: 77). Dawid also depicts the war as a noble quest by 'a special breed of knights' (*Kleurskakerings*, 75), who lay down their lives for the greater good. However, Dawid also questions the just cause of a war fought by young men who invade someone else's country:

'Ek Wonder Nog steeds'

[...]

Waarom dan in 'n ander man se land?

[...]

Jou vrae oor reg

Of verkeerd

Laat my steeds wonder

(*Wondgom*, 13–14)

[‘I Still Wonder’: Why then in another man’s country?/ Your questions of right/ Or wrong/ Still makes me wonder]

His poetry encapsulates this ambivalent experience of war, as a crossing of multiple borders. The poetry consists of ‘the struggles, the joys, the sadness, the excitement, the longing and much more emotions that were part of being a soldier.’<sup>8</sup> (*Kleurskakerings*, v). This intense oscillation between different emotions led to psychological breakdown. Dawid metamorphoses the triggered PTSD symptoms of the soldier as a border between sanity and madness:

'Woede'

Met opwellings van woede intens –  
 onderdruk, kruip ek nader aan my grens  
 wat my soos 'n waas omhul,  
 my met ongerigte haat vervul.

Die slag van Ebo het daarna gevolg

wat my sou meesleur in 'n golf.

(*Die Môre Kom*, 56)

[‘Anger’: With fits of hate intense –/ stifled, do I crawl nearer to my border/ which shrouds me like a haze,/ fills me with a hate ablaze./ The battle of Ebo would follow later/ in whose deluge I would falter.]

Consequently, the soldier's traumatic memories are embedded in the border area:

'Terug Flitse'

In my keel proe ek Angola stof

Betreur ek lewens lank reeds verdof

In my onthoutog

(*Kleurskakerings*, 151)

[‘Flashbacks’: Angolan dust scratches my throat/ As I grieve lives long snuffed out/ On my remembrance march]

The border represents an abject space of death and dying: ‘Lowergroen digte bos voor ons soos ‘n muur / [...] Elke nuwe boskol – moontlik is die vyand daar’ (‘Afmars’; *Die Môre Kom*, 100). Nature becomes a sinister force. The enemy constantly lurks in this alien, uncannily green and seemingly impenetrable Angolan bush. This deep green (‘lowergroen’) wall (‘muur’) or border serves as both a physical and psychological barrier: ‘Die bosse gifgroen’ (‘the bushes poison green’; ‘Metamorfose’; *Kleurskakerings*, 23). In Dawid’s poetry and in Border War literature, the invisible enemy inhabits this dark and poisonous bush-heart (‘boskol’) and prowls in the obscurity of the operational area (Baines 2003: 185–6). Fear of death was fed fat in this unreal environment: ‘Dis die vrees wat ek beleef’ (‘It is the fear that I meet’; ‘Kaplyn’; *Kleurskakerings*, 132). Dawid’s ‘Angola stof’ (‘Angolan dust’; ‘Terug Flitse’; *Kleurskakerings*, 151) resonates in South African war poets’ and writers’ depiction of the ‘border’ as a hellish no-man’s-land of desert, white heat and destruction, and, similarly, in which hides an elusive enemy, who inflicts physical and emotional death (Batley 2008: 175–85). The border is a place of entrapment and illogical circumstances that lead to trauma.

The religious apartheid propaganda of the period that expounded the views that ‘God is on our side’ and that the war was a crusade or holy war – similar to the Battle of Delville (or Devils’) Wood – against the spread of communism quickly lost its appeal in the face of the breakdown of moral order on the alien battlefield (Batley 2008). Consequently, some of the writing and poetry of this period subvert the social and religious propaganda of the day. Dawid’s poetry (2014, 2016, 2017) reserves particular scorn for the faceless headquarters staff, the ‘gemors’ (rubbish) corporal or drilling instructor, apartheid politicians and the church selling-out veterans, an uninforming and uncaring civil population, and the abject failure of psychologists to help those suffering from PTSD:

‘Hulpkreet na Begrip’

Seer is seer

Keer op keer

Weer en weer

En geeneen wat verstaan

Waaroor die seer gaan.

(*Kleurskakerings*, 130)

[‘Cry for Understanding’: Pain is pain/ Time and again/ Again and again/ And no one understands/ Suffering’s painful cause.]

This connection between place (the border) and psychological breakdown is made by South African war poets and writers. Closely connected with the theme of psychological breakdown was that of the ‘heart of darkness’, or the darkness within. This theme is represented by the sub-themes of PTSD and flashbacks, an uncaring civilian population, feelings of guilt and isolation, and fearful respect for the mythical Cuban and Russian soldier (Batley 2007: 22–5; Batley 2008). Dawid’s poetic re-membering also explores these topoi.

Especially, the Cubans and Russians were dreaded; they were an unknown white enemy from beyond the African continent with considerable military capabilities (Baines 2003: 187). Conversely, SWAPO was dehumanised by many SADF soldiers and in the literature; they played the ‘clown role’ and were portrayed as the enemy of God (Batley 2007). Dawid’s poetry has no hate reserved for the SADF’s opponents on the battlefield: SWAPO, FAPLA, the Cubans and Russians all earn his respect as ‘goeie vyande’ (good/worthy enemies) (*Die Môre Kom*, 93).

Dawid’s ‘poetic bodies’, therefore, integrate the embodiment of psychological experience of the Border War through poetic (metaphorical and symbolic) language and form. In the South

African war poetry, and in Dawid's poetry, the bodies of soldiers become sites of literary, psychological and political embodiment and disembodiment.

### **Soldiers' Bodies – The Re-membered Corpse**

The body is the main waste product of war. The body's frailty, pathos, heroism, youth and beauty are extolled in war poetry and memoirs of the Border War, as a psychological coping mechanism to combat the corpse's abjection (Batley 2008: 188–92; Lotter 2015). The eroticised 'troopies', 'buddies', 'boys', 'Our Boys', 'Our Brothers' and the 'sons of South Africa' of the Border War celebrated in popular 'troopie' songs, the media and in the poetry (Conway 2008: 78; Lotter 2015) are the archetypal flip-sides of 'our splendid boys', 'Our boys' and 'sons' of Africa in the First and Second World War poetic imagery (Genis 2018: 45; Stallworthy 1993: xxviii–xxx). Significantly, both the late twentieth-century 'troopies' and earlier twentieth-century 'boys' were mythical and legendary figures. These terms carried homoerotic significance in all these conflicts (Conway 2008: 78–80; Genis 2018: 44–8; Stallworthy 1993: xxix–xxx); to a lesser extent, however, during the Second World War (Ullyatt 1990: 69–70). The heroic knight of the First World War metamorphosed into the 'grensvogter' or border warrior of the Border War. During these wars, this image was underscored by a 'women ethos', in which men were heralded as heroes of the nation and defenders of their women (Conway 2008: 79–80; Drewett 2008: 94; Genis 2018: 44–8).

The abject corpse was spoken of more clearly in the Border War (Lotter 2015) and Second World War poetry (Adey 1981: 24–37) than in the First World War verse (Genis 2018: 6–19). Baines (2019: 518) states that 'War is visceral and physical'. This is especially true of the experiences and literature of the Vietnam War (1955–1975), whose iconography and symbolism had a marked influence on the literature of the Border War (Baines 2003). Ullyatt (1990: 72) indicates that:

In this war [Vietnam], so vastly different from almost all other conflicts, there can be no heroes, no glory, no exhortations; only the terrible burden of the unspeakable.

Modern war is the embodiment *par excellence* of accelerated traumatic experience. The corpse is a horrifying abjection that violently defies representation (Blanchot 1981; Kristeva 1982). One of the main features of modern war poetry is to remember and re-member the 'unspeakable' corpse as a re-fleshed semantic space with limbs of literary meaning. Dawid's poetic bodies are entrapped in this ambivalent semiotic space between the sacred and profane in war. Firstly, his poetry celebrates the band-of-brother ethos, the suffering and beautiful young soldier trope, which is a common conceit of twentieth-century war poetry. Christie (2007: 104–219) refers to this erotic image of the soldier in the poetry of the Great War as 'Death Erotics', or the metaphysical sexualisation of the dead comrade as a suffering Christ (Genis 2018: 9–10, 58–96). The nearness of male bodies in combat stimulates strong emotional bonds between men, especially in suffering and death (Bourke 1999: 133–7). Although Bourke specifically refers to the First World War, this is true of most twentieth-century conflicts (Baines 2019: 521; Stallworthy 1993: xxix–xxx). This physical and emotional nearness among comrades is emphasised in Dawid's three poetry volumes. The following poem encapsulates this erotic embodiment of the soldier's body as a whole and integrated construct:

'Tamboekiegras'  
So was dit lankal terug betaal.  
Tussen 'n plaat tamboekiegras,

verflou die son se laaste straal,  
jou dooie liggaam teen my vas.

'n Jaar of wat verby,  
ons geboortekraal verlaat.  
net ek en jy,  
as vegters vir ons saak.

In die basiskamp saam opgelei,  
het ons altyd bymekaar gebly.  
sy aan sy,  
net ek en jy.

Tamboekiegras wat ons omring,  
bloeiend uitmekaargeskiet.  
sy aan sy,  
net ek en jy.

Donker nag wat naderkruip.  
Die kille dood wat ons omsluit.  
Sy aan sy,  
Net ek en jy.  
(*Wondgom*, 106)

[‘Tamboekie Grass’: Thus, it was settled long ago./ Within a tamboekie field of grass,/ where dies the sun’s final glow,/ your dead body pressed against me so./ A year at least ago,/ we left our birthing kraal./ just you and I./ as fighters for our cause./ Together, put through the paces,/ we stayed together always./ side by side,/ just you and I./ Tamboekie grass enveloped,/ where bleeding bodies rent to pieces./ side by side,/ just you and I./ Dark night creeping closer./ Entombing us in cold embrace./ Side by side./ Just you and I.]

The night serves as pall for the broken body and wholeness is achieved in the comrade’s loving embrace. The dead live on in the memory of the living, and Memory is a space where the dead are remembered and re-remembered by the poet. The wetland grass serves as a tomb in which the dead rest. Night arriving to hide the abject face of death and the use of nature metaphors to coffin the corps from full view are common deceits in war poetry (Genis 2018). However, Dawid also remembers the corpse in its grotesque physicality:

‘Net Drie Sekondes’  
[...]  
Wit lig wat my omvou  
Soos ek verbrokkel in fragmente  
Tussen ander se vlees en ligamente  
‘n Drom vol vlees om te onthou  
Soos ek wegsweef oor army tente  
(*Wondgom*, 37)

[‘Just Three Seconds’: White light envelops me/ As I disintegrate in fragments/ Immersed in the other’s flesh and ligaments/ A drum filled with gore to remember/ As I drift over army tents]

These ‘poetic bodies’ invoke all the senses in their expression of loss:

‘Reserwe’  
 [...]
 ‘n Ratel nog kokend  
 ‘n Gat aan beide kant  
 Die reuk van verskroeiende vlees  
 Die reuk van vrees  
 Ingebrand na jare in my gees  
 [...]
 Dat ek sal onthou jaar vir jaar  
 Brommers wat op lyke vergaar  
 [...]
 Het ek geleer verstaan

Hoe vrees ruik  
 Vanuit ‘n Ratel luik

Hoe vrees voel  
 In die pad van ‘n koeël

Hoe vrees smaak  
 Met die dood as sy taak

Hoe vrees klink  
 As die slag jou verblind

Hoe vrees lyk  
 As jy jouself bekyk  
 (*Kleurskakerings*, 12–13)

[‘Reserve’: A Ratel<sup>9</sup> boiling/ A hole on both sides/ The sick of smouldering flesh/ The smell of fear/  
 Into my soul perpetually sear/ Which I shall remember yearly/ Flies feeding on corpses eagerly/ I  
 learnt to understand/ How fear smells/ From a Ratel turret/ How fear feels/ In the bullet’s trails/  
 How fear tastes/ As death’s minions/ How fear sounds/ When the impact blinds/ How fear  
 appears/ When your soul self-searches]

The tactile, aural, olfactory, and visual senses are integrated as a multimodal kaleidoscope of emotions that are experienced on the battlefield. South African war poetry of the twentieth century employs all the multi-modes to express experience (Genis 2021), and remembers the ‘bones, blood and flesh’ of limbs in endeavouring to re-member the abject ‘things’ and ‘half-things’ of war (15). War becomes a physical reaction to trauma even long after its end. It is the ‘In my keel proe ek Angola stof’ (‘Angolan dust scratches my throat’) in the poem ‘Terug Flitse’ (‘Flashbacks’; *Kleurskakerings*, 151), and the caustic sore in ‘Angs Insek’ (‘Fear Insect’; *Wondgom*, 54). Significantly, these ‘poetic bodies’ and textual limbs carry the physical and psychological scars and traces of their traumatic experiences.

## Conclusion

We suggest that the ‘poetic bodies’ construct can be used as a conceptual framework to study the intersection of language, war, and historical trauma in war poetry and literature. Dawid’s traumatic recollections of violence and war are re-membered in his ‘poetic bodies’ through the creation of textual limbs. His tightly woven rhythmic and rhyming verse contains textual traces of the

PTSD triggers of his wartime experience. The disciplined and visually symmetrical structuring of lines and stanzas represents his efforts to process his fractured and amorphous trauma. Similar to other twentieth-century war poets, Dawid metaphorises to come to terms with the abject destruction of the physical and psychological body on the battlefield. The literary symbols contain nurture and nature metaphors, which include the archetypal suffering Christ-like soldier, the loving comrade, nature as pall and the multi-sensory experiencing of war. Dawid's traumatic life story of experiencing violence as a child and soldier is interwoven and re-membered in his poetic texts.

Caring for his men as part of the eroticised 'band-of-brothers' ethos, may also be a psychological reaction to the abuse he suffered at the hands of his father. Dawid's three collections of poetry include the theme of the soldier's nurturing women and loving home. This may relate to his mother's unconditional love for him, as opposed to his father's rejection. Importantly, his mother and female first-grade teacher encouraged his poetry writing. It may conceivably follow that Dawid's 'poetic body/ies' are 'feminine' responses to or sensitive re-memberings of the brutality of a masculine war-and-violence construct; the archetypal Mars is re-membered in a more psychologically approachable guise by evoking the Muse of poetry.

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### Notes

1. The writers translated the Afrikaans poems. The translators endeavoured to capture the central themes and style of the originals. Therefore, Dawid's preference for rhyme has been mirrored in the translations as far as possible, as this stylistic quality forms part of the ontological meaning of his poetry. The article, with translations, was also read and approved by Dawid.
2. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.
3. After the First World War, South Africa administered South West Africa, the former German colony. The name was changed to Namibia on its independence in 1990.
4. White South African men had to undergo compulsory military service in the SADF during the 1970s and 1980s.
5. Available at: <https://www.warbooks.co.za/products/spine-of-delta-reflections-on-operation-askari-1983-84?variant=1044786419>
6. In northern Namibia.
7. The pseudonym for white South African masculinity.
8. Translated from Afrikaans.
9. An armoured troop carrier used by the SADF.

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