

## PRESENCE DECENTRED OR UNFINALIZABLE? UTIBE

### HANSON'S *UNNOTICED PRESENCE OF THINGS*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In this article, I interrogate the construction of presence in Utibe Hanson's award-winning debut collection, *Unnoticed Presence of Things*. This poetry volume impels a sort of scepticism about whether the notion of presence is materially unnoticed, politically rife, decentred or interminable. Hence, I probe the context, image, text, and notions of the unnoticed presence inscribed in the volume, as Hanson seems to negate his noticed presence by the title, cover, and poems that make up his collection. A close reading of the poems drawn from the theoretical insights of Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and Mikhail Bakhtin highlights the politics of presence and counters the logic of unnoticed presence linked to the unspecified or nothingness in Hanson's poetry. By engaging with deconstructive frames of Heidegger's subject and predication, Derrida's aporia and difference, and Bakhtin's unfinalizability, I produce a detailed decentring of presence and nothingness in relation to Hanson's poetic manifesto of unnoticed presence, recurring as the unspecified or nothingness, and variously constituted in the poems. This study, at some strategic points, identifies signs, deconstructs, and complicates the notion of nothingness as revealed in the poems. Following the deconstructive analysis of poems in this article, Hanson's poetry appears to bear the dodgy phrase: unnoticed presence of things.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Poetry; Utibe Hanson; *Unnoticed Presence of Things*; aporia; difference.

## ¿PRESENCIA DESCENTRADA O INTERMINABLE? *LA*

### *INADVERTIDA PRESENCIA DE LAS COSAS DE UTIBE HANSON*

**Resumen:** En este artículo, estudio la construcción de presencia en la premiada colección debutante de Utibe Hanson *Unnoticed Presence of Things* o *La Inadvertida Presencia de las Cosas*. Este volumen de poesía mueve cierto escepticismo tanto si la noción de presencia es materialmente inadvertida, políticamente extensa, descentrada o interminable. Así pues, pruebo el contexto, imagen, texto y las nociones de presencia que el volumen encierra pues Hanson parece negar su notoria presencia por el título, portadas y poemas que componen esta colección. Esta investigación sugiere que Hanson embellece la presencia con tropos, haciendo parecer que su virtuosidad poética pasa inadvertida. Un

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análisis minucioso de los poemas sacados de las nociones teóricas de Jacques Derrida y Martin Heidegger postula la política de la presencia a la par que se opone a la lógica de presencia inadvertida o nada en la poesía de Hanson. A través de conceptos específicos como lo son el sujeto y la predicación de Heidegger; la aporía y diferencia con Derrida y lo interminable de Mikhail Bakhtin, produzco una detallada descentralización de presencia y nada en relación al manifiesto poético de la no-presencia, que se presenta como su patrón recurrente y constituye de forma variada en los poemas analizados. Este estudio identifica y señala signos en algunos puntos estratégicos cuidadosamente, los sobreescribe o deconstruye a la par que complica la noción de Nada tal y como es revelada en los poemas que se examinan. Consecuentemente, la colección parece albergar la arriesgada frase: presencia inadvertida de las cosas.

Palabras clave: Poesía Nigeriana; Utibe Hanson; *Unnoticed Presence of Things*; aporía; diferencia

## 1. INTRODUCTION: REMAPPING THE NOTION OF PRESENCE

Presence is a word that attracts a vast array of meanings, for its meanings cut across layers and discourses depending on the specific usage. In its psychological context, Charlie Huntington notes that presence “is the awareness of what is happening around you and inside you” (Huntington n.p.). Examining presence further in its linguistic dimensions and discursive transformations suggests similar and related meanings to Huntington’s definition. “Presence” as defined and described by Douglas Harper in the Online Etymology Dictionary makes more expansive sense in the way one can trace and distil the meaning of the word.

Instructive to the critical apprehension of meaning in this article is that presence, generally seen, means the “fact of being present, state of being in a certain place and not some other” (Harper n.p.). Other meanings around presence evolve in different ways in the development of the word. Within this construction of presence, I examine how and to what degree Utibe Hanson’s *Unnoticed Presence of Things* hints at that which is present but is unnoticed. Thus, this politicizing of presence by the poet, highlights its ambivalence – dubbed “unnoticed” but gained some “presence” – as it won the coveted national prize for poetry, the Association of Nigerian Authors’ Prize for Poetry, in 2023. Hanson is a Nigerian poet, editor, and literary critic, who earned his Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of Uyo Nigeria, and Master of Arts in English (Literature) at the University of Ibadan. He is a poet of two worlds, forged in the Niger Delta part of Nigeria, and by creative formation and fascination, has been primed in the English poetry of old. It is curious to see that Hanson is not invested in the Niger Delta oft-related oil politics and poetics layered in environmental despoliation and ecological activism.

One readily discerns that Hanson invests his craft in Western tropes and patterns of poetics deeply connected to such poets as Andrew Marvell, T.S. Eliot, John Donne, Robert Frost, and Derek Walcott. Thus, as a Nigerian poet, the foreign climate of Hanson's poetry is self-revealing in a certain kind of difference, even if he sometimes layers the poetic sign with political matters and themes. Hanson's debut collection produces the paradoxical imagination that has often been associated with foreign poetic models, which influenced the first generation of Nigerian poets, whom some critics, the examples of Ibekwe Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike charged with obscurantism and private esotericism.<sup>2</sup> Hence, Nigerian critics commonly observe that the poetry of Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Michael Echeruo, and other early Independence poets, or those categorised as first-generation writers, imitated the Euromodernism of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ezra Pound, and other foreign poets in that category. Following the critical works and subsequent appearances of other poets with revolutionary styles, scholarly writings on generational mapping of Nigerian poetry emerged and became hotly debated by many literary critics. One essay that considers the train of thought and charts a different path to the vexing topic of periodisation came from the scholar-critic and poet, Harry Garuba.<sup>3</sup> However, Hanson is a new poet on the horizon, and as earlier suggested, his poetry tended to look back to the English Euromodernist poets for stylistic inspiration.

Noting that Hanson unconsciously or consciously persists with the idea of nothingness or unnoticed presence invites some inquisition that compels a deconstructive reading of the collection. Peter Barry argues that a deconstructive reading attempts to reveal "the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text, all the things which its overt textuality glosses over or fails to recognize" (Barry 54). It does then suggest that examining the unnoticed presence as a recurring motif perhaps follows what might result in "plurality of meanings" (Dobie 155). The manifesto of the poet asks questions on the interminable poetics of the unspecified or unnoticed presence, which marks the central argument around Hanson's posturing in the poetics of nothingness.

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<sup>2</sup> For an extensive reading of the subject, see Ibekwe Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike. *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> A compelling angle to the politics of periodisation debate is that it is complicated and often fails to fit in all categories of themes and chronological boundaries. This is the frame of logic that Harry Garuba offers in his essay. Garuba's thoughts on construction and messiness of periodisation in the trajectory of Nigerian poetry are insightful in the essay, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Re-figuring Trends in Recent Nigerian Poetry," which appeared in *English in Africa* (vol. 32, no. 1, 2005).

## 2. WHAT IS PRESENCE AS CONSTRUCTED IN *UNNOTICED PRESENCE OF THINGS*?

Presence as a constructed idea cannot attract a simple answer. The poetic deconstruction of Hanson's trope of presence in his poetry relates to how he conceives his mandate in the introit: "My subject is nothingness. Its intrigue—a signification of relation. A noticed absence or an unnoticed presence, the beginning of everything and the end" (Hanson 9). Thus, it makes sense that a deconstructive reading can uncover presence as a poetic capital that is constituted in the paradigmatic cluster of poetic lines and self-erasure politics. I argue, therefore, that individual poems in the *Unnoticed Presence of Things* are thematically diverse, well-strung in slippery styles, and revolve around the theme of Hanson's politicised non-presence.

Hanson's intriguing ambivalent introit can suffice as one relayed where he posts a particular suspicion on the idea of nothingness. In this notion of nothingness, he inadvertently produces the exclusionary poststructuralist tension in his unnoticed presence that I see as a defamiliarising introit, "proem." Aporia,<sup>4</sup> a deconstructive term, which revolves around "hesitant," "blind spot" and "contradiction," (Allen Graham n.p.) as popularised by Jacques Derrida, is urgent in proem. Hanson, to be sure, forges his trope that gestures to aporia in the "difference": "proem." Proem, this way, blends presence with nothingness and, through the disjunction, alters the horizontal semantic inclusion of noticed "things." Therefore, nothingness inscribes a sort of difference between "proem" and the standard lexical correlation, "poem." The persona further states that "the poems in this collection appear as a panoptic survey, unspecific and detached, an invitation to the reader to see and decide" (Hanson 9).

Does it mean that this book is not unnoticed and that it alludes to some incipient presence, in other words, it admits to a presence that goes under the radar as lingering absence, what is unspecific? This refiguring motif of presence demands a decentring suspicion in Hanson's sign-relation. As a marker for a deconstructive interpretation, it begs the question: what things are absent—not minding their abundant iterations of signs and yet they are not present—in such constructed materiality in the life of a text, which, to structuralist thinkers, is a chain of sign-relations and to the poststructuralist, shifting or decentred? Hanson's Presence, here, suggests a rupture of meaning in the sign, so that it is possible to take on the entire discourse rather than becoming a centric part of the

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<sup>4</sup> For more elaboration of the concept see Allen, Graham. "Aporia." *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 2005.

totality. This meaning is influenced by the Derridean discourse on sign when he discourages the dualities of sign and signified. This construction of presence, as Hanson does, raises some scepticism in the philosophical inquiry around metaphysics of presence—in terms of what might be concretely or materially apprehensible or abstractly or non-materially existent or deemed present. It also probes if the presence is mired in any political materiality. Therefore, Hanson opens his poetic text to the scepticism of a persona that shuffles between the dualities of presence and the unspecific nothingness.

Even if in Heideggerian sense or Nietzschean notion, truths are constructed and there is no eternal truth by the view of Western metaphysics of presence, Hanson confounds with evasive absence in the “unspecified,” which, as we might assume, is stoically present, but is seen as unnoticed. That schema of presence, also, might be seen as some constructed absence, something disguised as nothingness, where presence is a floating sign. Hanson might be intentionally or unconsciously not focused on the sign disruption of the poetic text that now lends itself to a deconstructionist reading. Derrida tries to disrupt the traditionally held assumption on structure, which holds that the centre is within the text and outside it. He posits, therefore, that the centre is inscribed as the totality of the structure, and as the centre is not part of the totality, the totality has its centre elsewhere. This relocation of the centric discourse is a Derridean way of dislodging the thought around dualities. He produces in this sense the idea of rupture or decentring, pointing to the deconstructive statement that, with nothing in the centre or beginning, subsumes as discourse (Derrida 247) or a network of discursive engagement. This serves to suggest that meaning is never present outside a relation of differences (Derrida 247). Perhaps, this is in line with the articulation of decentred meanings of some oft-cited binaries: presence and absence. But how then do we approach the idea of visibility or presence in Hanson’s *Unnoticed Presence of Things*? I might now associate some political obscurity with what had been supposedly absent to the poet-persona. This notion of political obscurity, as I intend to pursue in the analytical section of the essay, raises the question of (in)visibility or if as it might appear, the non-presence in literary production, which can be relatively political in two ways.

One of the ways to interrogate the construction of political non-presence is to sceptically view Hanson’s poetry collection, as it relates to prominent invisibility for the textual work in the larger public arena. This prominent invisibility emerges because of fascination with what I track as “the poetics of the recluse,” meaning a writer’s habitus in

writing behind the shutters and not sharing one's work to the public or only sharing works in closed groups (friends and classmates). The poetics of the recluse allows for creative tensions or doubts of presence or absence in the writer's mind. In this idea of minus or plus presence, there is space allotted to absence as a given materiality, existent even without a body. It follows then that there is a poet without a book, as one may now argue that the proof of authorship, being published as a text, is what separates the writer from a poet with no material trail of authoring a book. Even if there are contestations or scepticisms around published poets whose limited circulation of their books still puts the veil of obscurity around them, my argument recognises the way obscurity can be politically constructed and defined but would not stretch it.

The second pointer to (in)visibility refers to a writer's state of having produced so much work that has not gained a print life but occupies some digital public spaces, although contrived nothingness is fluid. This is because the digital space, such as Facebook and Instagram, provides presence for creatives, but invisibility ensues when not getting the works shared to the close-knit community of literati, where the critical feedback is higher, and chances of obscurity are limited. The collection, *Unnoticed Presence of Things*, attempts to mask absence or decentre the idea of the unspecific; this sign-erasure is the politics of non-presence. To undertake some deconstructive reading of the claim to absence by the phrase "unnoticed," one must invoke some initial scepticism in the construction of meaning that flags Hanson's poetics of modesty. The recurring lexemes "unnoticed" and "presence" complicate a unity of ideation, pointing to how objective reality might be viewed with a subjective or objective lens. Finding the midpoint between the neuter sign and the implicated other sign, perhaps, is the political mask of absence that the collection wears. The frames of absence constituted in the subjectivity that the poet enacted in the entire collection link up with the notion of visibility, a way of eviscerating the bold poetic presence in the collection.

What results in both notions of presence and absence can frame (in)visibility as reality to Hanson's trajectory in writing, and that has perhaps guided the title politics of his first book of poetry. I use Hanson's framing of presence, which indicates and also draws upon the dictionary meaning, as earlier given by Harper: "fact of being present, state of being in a certain place and not some other" (n.p.), to critique a selection of his poems that challenge and nullify the idea of unnoticed presence of things in his collection of poems. I engage with specific concepts: subject and predication from Heidegger;

“aporia”, “difference” from Derrida; and then with “unfinalizability,” complemented by Bakhtin. Bakhtin explores the notion of “unfinalizability,” where he proposes that human life is “an open-ended dialogue” (Bakhtin 243). He argues further that “the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future” (Bakhtin 166). In other words, this critical terminology relates to the open field of meaning, the futurity of things lacking closure or fostering interminable meaning relations. Presence, for a poet, perhaps defies or complicates the specificity of time even though its construction might be obvious in its tangible or material existence. I specifically offer a detailed decentering of presence and nothingness in relation to Hanson’s poetic manifesto of sign-meaning relations. By doing so, I claim that the poetics of nothingness or the unspecified is built around unnoticed presence and variously constituted in the analysed poems.

On winning the national prize for poetry, there is now the suggestion that the ice has dissolved on Hanson’s poetry, and he is probably on a processional pilgrimage for prominent visibility, even if his poetry had been a “noticed absence” in the close-knit forums of readers before gaining its open public textual life in 2022. This Hansonian noticed absence is inverted, so that I contemplate how Hanson maps hidden meanings that had not been absent, like the poetry of the shadows or closet poems. By closet poems, I refer to poetry that might never be born, yet present and active in other places, even though it is unavailable to the reading public. This critical exercise ties with Roland Barthes notion on the Death of the Author, where he posits that “a conception suits criticism . . . task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ - victory to the critic” (Barthes 147). Thinking from the perspective of Barthes, the critical negotiation, here, assumes a search for inscriptions of presence or absence through tropes and signs interrogating the unnoticed provided by the author.

Reading Hanson means tracking this constructed absence by certain signs that make the presence unnoticed. It might suffice to ask: Has Hanson constructed some absence that confronts the truth of his presence, or has he veiled it by the horizontal system of signs in his poems? How do we interpret the subject and its predication of his unnoticed presence? In Hanson’s debut poetry, one is curious to inquire if the poetic voice denies his muted absence or is uncertain or sceptical about dodgy presence. This essay, therefore, offers an understanding of the constructions of the unnoticed in the presence of

things that Hanson confronts us with in his debut collection of thirty-four poems spread over seventy-five pages.

### 3. THE COVER PAGE AND THE POETICS OF INVISIBILITY

My inquisition along the shadows of presence in this engagement first brings me to encounter images on the book's cover. Entangled faces or shades of one, it would seem, but one, as I might consider for now. One finds conjoined images and perhaps faces, focusing on structurally padded binaries of fluent and blurred schemes of presence on the cover of the book. The image here vitiates the lure of absence. So, there is a face: the shadow pressed against a blank background. One of the images with no activity seems to come almost looking straight and caught nowhere, while the most visible image, overlooking the faint one, veers sideways, into its white environment that produces a striking simultaneous feeling of two faces and the illusion of only one in an entwined visible image and a weirdly absent other. I suppose that this image on the cover page matched with the key part of the collection reveals Hanson's politics of presence, which he weaves as "a noticed absence or an unnoticed presence" (Hanson 9). If one profoundly examines the title, one asks how unnoticed any presence can be—how much more a self-reflective poem, factored in the mirroring of suggestive signs? That is, an automated reflection that is somewhat dodgy, but which is inscribed with a certain illusion of absence.

If anything at all is unnoticed, maybe it is inverted absence. One might ask: Whose inverted "absence" is this presence that we have yet to notice? Is it the poet—whose absence dies now that his thought takes a metaphorically present life—or the textual world he brings to some energy? And does the absence result from deliberate occlusion of materiality? Does it, for instance, verge on the acts of the (un)conscious poet, who concealed his poetic talent for long and tucked it under what I call a "political obscurity"? And has it been mobilised by the belief that there are incredible poets who never gained visibility only because the public literati have not accorded them presence, understandably due to a book-length publication that accrues as Harper notes, "the fact of being present..., ' a measure of authorial visibility? This very latter question, as the preceding others, points to the ambivalence of presence: the best poets have yet written their presence, and many are silent because if they write, the world will shrink; these poets are not absent, at least materially they are noticed in some quarters. Their presence might

be minimal in book clubs, random posts of their poems on the open-access platforms that social media allows, and something that fame shines beyond book-length publications. Hanson's depiction of unnoticed presence recurs, as in the sense of an inverted absence, wherein presence is political if it deliberately refuses materiality; and by the prevalence of maps to meaning in the collection, presence has not evaded it in any form. Thus, on the evidence of Hanson's poetry, this poetics of contrived absence drives the curiosity to inquire into the trope of the "unnoticed presence" as political, at best. To realise some critique along the notion of presence, particularly through the lens of Derrida and Heidegger in their theorisations, this article poses some further questions: Do all brilliant poetry books wait for the season of the sun? Is this Hanson's season of the sun, even though this is his debut? This article cannot provide answers to these questions but engages with deconstructive strategies to throw open the contestations of the "presence," "unnoticed," "unspecified," which all complicate or contemplate contrived "nothingness" and reveal the political underbelly of Hanson's poetry. Is the invisibility that Hanson constructs here not related to how signs of the text reflect the complex world that he reproduces? It might be possible to examine Hanson's collection with the conceptual eye of the signifying chameleon.

The signifying chameleon (Aniemeka n.p.) refers to a model of reading Anglophone poetry, particularly by uncovering reflexive hybrid images, signs, or texts with their contexts.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the cover, as a graphic text, does not envisage its more apparent parts in the ambivalent face – or faces. In this volume, where poetry forges a relation between text and context, specifically as it touches on presence, the cover image supposedly emerges from all indications of signs and signified, as well as their hybrid relationality. Signifying chameleon, relationally applied to the cover image, "actively draws onto its immediate milieu the aesthetic pluriversal environment" (Aniemeka 6). Thus, the concept of the signifying chameleon evinces the integration of text that at once suggests context-specificity and also neutralises same in the context of Hanson's cover image. Signifying chameleon draws on, but places in a different light, the animal figure used by Gates in his theory of the "Signifying Monkey," a framework based on the Yoruba<sup>6</sup> mythological notion of Esu, "a guardian of the crossroads" (Gates 6) and

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the Signifying Chameleon, see Aniemek, Ndubuisi Martins "'Mind-Worlding' and the Signifying Chameleon: Poetics of Reading Modern African Poetry". *Imbizo* 16 (2):24.

<sup>6</sup>This describes an ethno-cultural population, language, cultural, and spiritual identities domiciled in South West, Nigeria, and some West African countries, including those that form parts of the cultural hybrids of

headword of semiotics (Gates 22). This is the mythological current embodied in the trickster character of Esu, useful in describing dynamically recursive Black narrative and character motif.

According to Gates, the monkey signification is premised on the “play of the double” (Gates 54). In that relation of signs, what generates a paradigmatic meaning is that the White and Black signifying semantic fields clash (Gates 54). Signifying Monkey and signifying chameleon track signifying matters in similar ways but involve different protocols of meaning. For instance, considering the inscription of this in the trope of a contrasting presence and non-presence, the play on visual figure, can surmise different chameleon folds of visual texts and nodes of meanings. First, is that dodgy background image evinces where the material presence, which suggests a certain erection of materiality by the signs he summons, is deflected either by double negations or the nudge to fill-in meanings. Second, it redirects the contrasting figure after leaving trails of signs that point to a slippery range of meanings. This signifying chameleon range of slippery meanings is suggestive of the semiotic import on the cover page of the book: the dual faces, one distinct and the other indistinct and straight. It might be worth pointing out that the image—particularly the one looking sideways—becomes absent against the shadow in the background.

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South America, and other diaspora communities around the world. To read further on the Yoruba people, culture, tradition, and identities, see: Adeuyan, Jacob Oluwatayo. Contributions of Yoruba People in the Economic & Political Developments of Nigeria. AuthorHouse, 2011. Also, see: “Yoruba.” Countries and Their Cultures, Advameg, Inc., [www.everyculture.com/wc/Mauritania-to-Nigeria/Yoruba.html](http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Mauritania-to-Nigeria/Yoruba.html).



Figure 1: Cover of *Unnoticed Presence of Things* by Hanson Utibe, 2021. Noirledge Publishing. Cover credit: Olusegun David.

This semiotic inscription is retrievable from the cover page of the book, where the human face, which appears multiple and indicates “the unnoticed” and yet unspecified character of the persona, leaves much to the imagination. Therefore, the cover’s artistic chameleon imaging is perhaps wrought against the background of the unnoticed presence. This is so that the reader can feel the unconsciously reiterated presence one views as blank against the backdrop of so much philosophical contrivance of graphic couplings of “presence” with the prefix, “unnoticed.”

#### 4. *UNNOTICED PRESENCE OF THINGS* THROUGH A DECONSTRUCTIVE LENS

The unnoticed sign recurs in the way individual poems are relayed. This is to suggest that in its plural signifying, the key term, unnoticed, invariably contests the uncertain meaning in relation to the poems. This word, “unnoticed,” is decidedly

prominent and fluent, as the line: “panoptic survey, unspecified and detached” is also a specific “invitation,” for it stares at one, conscious that one is unaware of the face which sees one, but as a recipient mind, a chameleon reader, you should be prompted “to see and decide” (Hanson 9). The poet persona also serves a cautionary note: “with the poems not construed to possess definitiveness outside the reader,” as many have no end punctuation, indicating that the road is as long as the reader can imagine. By the absence of punctuation, a style is decidedly present, but this too runs an open sign that means an interminable interpretation.

It might be instructive that, to attempt a reading of Hanson’s collection, a percipient reader must keep in mind the thought of Derrida, particularly his trope of “differance,” which, as Adeshina Afolayan notes, “is a play on word (specifically on the French *différer*) that holds differing and deferral together by the phonetic force of the ‘a’” (Afolayan52). By extension, it suggests that, in the *Unnoticed Presence of Things*, poetic signs would not hold down a certain signification, as the deferred, unnoticed as a sign, ties with his politics of absence, reiterated by the presence that is unnoticed. The sense of the decentred sign of presence is as political as it devolves in slippery meanings, sometimes ambivalent and interminable. The sense of signification is temporal and, perhaps, non-spatial. So, it delays, shifts, and reflects on nothingness, which in fact is presence, and may foreground “differance,” but invites the Barthesian spirit of the absent author<sup>7</sup> and assumes that the author is, in fact, questionably unnoticed. Consequently, where one can assume the new reader—in the void of the author—alive with social codes, one can populate the absent meaning with presences and make them noticed even if nothing unifying relates meaning to the embodied presence. In addition, “difference,” even with the unnoticed presence, might gather at the reader’s instance if that leaves the reader’s eyes stuck with the sonic sensation of fluently moving signs.

One of the things, in fact, such a thing as “absence” in a poststructuralist thinking, is the apt affirmation of presence as “unfinalizable.” This relates to whether the notion of presence is endlessly floating, decentred, or ambivalent in its trail of significations made possible by context. In the first part of the poem, *Ascent*, which comes with the biblical epigraph, “Come up hither” (Revelations 4:1), we find some acquiescence with a plot

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive description of how Roland Barthes the semiologist divests the author of his historical consciousness resulting in the phrase: “death of the author,” see: Barthes, Roland “The Death of the Author” *Image, Music, Text*. Trans: Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977, pp. 142-148.

structure—the typical rising scheme of actions, which, as it were, normally recurs in traditional literary work of drama. By this, it is possible to think of signs that hold only temporary meanings, and if matched against “the unspecified,” that ideation leaves a neuter plot scheme orphaned, providing the reader with an interpretive energy to fill non-meanings with presences, even if caught in the gulf of the Derridean “difference.”

However, the close affinity to meaning, which the poet persona attempts to deny, is inaugurated in “Creation story,” for it is the poem that postures God as a creation: “this is God / translated into letters, / breathed upon” (Hanson 13) and not just taking on the form of it. The creation affirming this presence is indicating that God is “left to brood, unfolding over the pages,” as a conscious peripatetic being in some way, even as he is “kinetic, / rising to life” (13). However, the translated creation: God, perhaps, unnoticed, yet brought to form, is not complete, as it lacks the period, an indication of the endless sign of ill-formed sententiality. This suggests some kind of abrupt stop, having nodal verbs but also lacking the end punctuation that suggests a finalisable thought. Not having a full stop, as it were, is the structural anomaly for a sentence, but in this slippery sense, the poet suggests a flow of an absent creation, or, as conceived in literary quarters, a certain poetic licence to decentre syntax. Perhaps, there is a sense in which the poems are fluid and unfinalisable. This assumption of a reader-fill-in meaning method is obvious in *Unnoticed Presence of Things*:

With the poems not construed to possess definitiveness outside the reader, several of them do not finish with a full stop, which implies, in the words of Walt Whitman, that the reader may contribute a verse if they are unable to detect and dictate satisfactory significations with their contexts of approach. (Hanson 9)

It might be possible to ask: Is this some Hanson’s manner of bringing Derridean thought to his “aporia” of disjunctive absence, in relation to presence embodied by his string of decentred signs? And to relate further the unnoticed presence of an inverted absence, Hanson puts the key to further reading in the hands of the reader. The second poem, “Invocations,” dives in, for perhaps, it harps on the previous “Creation story” the poem without a full stop, fuelling the belief that the persona wants the reader to increasingly stretch the poem that is not “finalizable.” Whether or not the obscure persona is absent but presently invoked leaves the reader wondering thus, “If loss/permits / the gloss / of art, / are we / to nurse / for life / the hearse?” (Hanson 14). An aesthetic play suggests that there is a thin line between absence and presence, as indicated by the consonantal elision

of “gloss” producing “loss.” Also, this morphological tweak between “gloss” and “loss” creates some tension that lies in the range of the internal lines, indicating the slipping into non-presence but with the background leaving traces of presence. This is some poetic reclining that “loss” perhaps gains some signified cause, albeit presence. This sign of negation hits another point on “gloss,” so that the world, like the persona, loses its consciousness as a deleted third scheme of witness to life by a secondary beingness recovered later in “to nurse / for life / the hearse” (Hanson 14).

Hanson’s “Invocation,” at a first glance, presumably lacks any spiritual forte; even though the apostrophised presence of art as life recurs, one wonders what is invoked. “Invocation” invites the reader to interrogate meaning but leaves deferred signs in its wake. Perhaps it is the din of the questions of absence, of political beingness, the clusters of morality around which Hanson creates such a signifier of absences surrounding the creator, the state, and the creations. For all the shenanigans of deference to chaos, what is pointed is “the hate / inside / the crate / of life / inflicts / the man / and stunts / the clan” (Hanson 15). This run of lines stamps the well-known incontinence and the range of misdeeds of which man runs and ruins society. Still, the rot, with time, catches up with man and society. The postmodernist logic of rupture with its instability of signs opens to the Hansonian unnoticed leitmotif, so that he retains the presence of another sensual body of muse, but this motif gets rife on the moralist radar, making the reader think of possible meanings that the sensual body compels.

“As lovers do” is another poem, which comes in initially unnoticed, crosses the line between art and body, and of course, it returns to the whole flesh of poetry. How do lovers do? What reference can assume the predicative experience of the act? “I was uneasy with the / mention of dry bones/ because my heart was/a cave of rattling things; / then you came, / standing before me unclad; /” (Hanson 17). Hence, one thinks of such audacious incarnate creation, one supposes was a female body till one realises that lovemaking is merely hinted in “my hands tremble over the fullness of your heart, groping for the knobs, / I find and twirl them.” However, it is absent by theme, but acting in the illusion of lovemaking and as the imaginary suggests: “your eyeballs vanish / like the meeting point of earth and sky/leaving a blank whiteness/moaning meanings; / I suck them and your lips, / I snake my tongue / to the cavern of mutiny warring there” (Hanson 17). Does “As lovers do” not hark back to the suggestion of a certain predication, “in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something” (Heidegger 193)? Hanson

sustains the unnoticed presence of the coital signifier, and he foregrounds deeply the sensual in the stretch of predication: “you turn me over, / licking my lobes, whispering, coursing your hands through my goosebumped body/ like water making its way through rocky plains” (Hanson 17). However, he also flings a rebirth, suggesting some regeneration that can be possible after such experience that might have been mistaken to be sexual: “I become a child again/in your arms, yet soar beyond where babel's tower stopped” (Hanson 18).

Again, Heidegger, in explaining predication, notes that a “subject” is given a definite character by the “predicate” (Heidegger 196). Can we construe a definite situation by Hanson’s subtle predication of the coital sign, which deflects from its entire nucleus of signification after tending to the referential imbrication of the sensual? This intimation of the poetics of the sexual is perhaps present till we reach the climactic epiphany that all along, his subject and predication, gather in his exclamation, “O Poetry!” (Hanson 18). Moreover, Hanson plays out Derrida, particularly in the way that his post-structuralist thinking closes the intersection between the body and the text, in his extensive deconstructive readings that produce such an intrinsic field for interrogating signs and bodies, in relation to speech and writing, and more generally, language and meanings,<sup>8</sup> at constitutively interlocked levels. Relating this to Hanson’s “As lovers do,” the corporeality of the text, Derrida believes, is not exterior to the body. In the exclamation that ends “As lovers do” is a meaning that veers away from the cohesion of signs as body. Hanson’s construction of sign-relations connecting body as unnoticed language stretches non-presence or delays its poetic meaning; perhaps to his reader, it is such a rude dismantling of signification of the body. Hence, the poetics of the sensual becomes lost, and at once, entirely nullified but not unnoticed in the syntax of signs and slippery references unrealised until the predication hits the reader into the realm of “difference.”

With the poem “Invitation” the structure of feeling meets with the music of nothingness, or rather, “the tune of an expert flautist,” as it were, “tolls to the heart with

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<sup>8</sup>This notion is derivative of Derrida’s extensive deconstruction of the dichotomies between speech and writing, as he appears to problematise the natural force of speech and the artifice of writing, noting that speech was always inhered in writing: “The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa” (Derrida 35) For more exploration see: *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

the sacred tintinnabulation of a church bell” (Hanson 19). Who else has yet seen that the unnoticed presence becomes the thudding question of a chameleon reader? The reference that suggests the state of affairs in this dialogic poetry collection, hewn as monologue, is a certain presence, pleading to be loved right. This implies that, again, in keeping with the corporeality of the text as body, “you have the throat of a nightingale,” relocates the meaning embodied in the singing bird, “nightingale.” Is the presence of Hanson’s persona, revealed in “I am a scorched rose, water me with your essence and see me bloom to the loveliness of all your desires” (Hanson 19)? It goes without saying too that Hanson’s poetics of the unspecified sign produces a certain deferral of meaning, where the reader speculates whether he invokes poetry here or offers spiritual intimations to a transcendental force.

The notion of the transcendental finds some curious connection with the next poem, “The Communion,” as the dissolution of art and the artist is hinted therein, heightening the transcendental schema in the poem, or more still, challenging its slippery, signifying meaning. So, does this not inherently vitiate an unnoticed presence? In “The Communion,” the poetics of the unspecified sign feeds off the symmetry of the subject and the predicate in the articulation of the concept of “being,” or “presence,” in short. The lines quest after the unspecified, even if individual signs announce their signified presence lurking in ambivalence:

In a spin  
of white secrecy,  
the flamingos  
spindle in the  
swamp,  
a blaze of pink glamour. (Hanson 23)

Hanson further relates an aesthetic construction of intimate zones – the material ontologies of the art and the artist, both embodied in the process of imagination:

I, behind the canvas,  
and she, the artist, empties herself  
onto the pallet, these are my dreams  
broken for you,  
be beautiful in all the places  
they wouldn’t let me. (Hanson 23)

The ontologies of the art and the artist dissolve “in a spin of white secrecy” (Hanson 23) where the persona suggests that “the flamingos spindle in the swamp, a blaze of pink glamour” (Hanson 23). What has Hanson specified? Nothing as it perhaps seems. What is nothing when linked to the unspecified following the deconstructive tenets of “aporia” and “unfinalizability”? The reader finds the disruptive referentiality in the phrase, “a blaze of pink glamour,” which might offer us the question of the “unspecified,” if one charts the uncanny relations between the opening line, “in a spin of white secrecy” and “the flamingos” (Hanson 23). What is the milieu of this communion? Does “the swamp” hold down the fluent set signs tending the signified with other sequence of the referential as “white secrecy” and “a blaze of pink glamour”? (Hanson 23). The unspecified, one might suggest, ranges for sets of signs supposedly feeding on meaning and its scheme of “difference,” however presence is cast in the forge of nothingness as meaning is “unfinalizable.”

Furthermore, one can inquire the way this disruptive referentiality into nothingness has happened. The chameleon reader finds the curious play of “difference” in the poem, suggesting the unspecified, but where there is clarity in the antimonies inaugurated about a work, what name or mode of interpretation attends to it? In the poem, “As poets have decided to be poet no more” the signifying chameleon reader’s insight possibly indicates the subject and the predicate only in the sign structure rather than in meaning tending to Hanson’s idea of nothingness.

There is the curious question of sign evisceration in the poetry volume, and it is resonant in the whole construction of presence. Whether Hanson debunks his poetic profile as absent, loss, or grief for those of others might be implied in “As poets have decided to be poets no more.” Perhaps, this form of presence that suggests death is obvious in: “thick green leaves / shrink to yellow beams, / falling, / scatter on his grave— / a reverse constellation of stars” (Hanson 24). The lines refract a certain predication on death, loss, and absence. The poem, moving from the personal inscription informed by loss and deathly intimations, enters what might be referred to as “null memory”—which suggests the debunking of past life by means of present absence—because of loss occasioned by death or silence. This poem importantly veers away into the rhetoric of a political silence from the lines:

a mother will no longer  
wake up before her children

but roll over them  
 in the weight of night  
 —the journey is six feet tall  
 from looking down. (Hanson 24)

Its heightened, possible neocolonial politics recalls in “a nation sleeps / soundly in the arms of chaos / and pretends peace is not the absence of storms” (Hanson 24). If the presence is not noticed, the reader draws on the negation of the poetics of the unspecified sign by the clarity of precarious reference in: “a knife cuts through / the dawn, / innocence leaking like a bad roof on rainy nights / smearing the linen of silence / yet silence stays still” (Hanson 24). Hanson, then, questions the meaning of poems in their plural present forms – page and stage in the subsequent lines. However, the lines alluding to the poets, “the eagle is not a strange bird / but a strange bird / in the gatherings of cocks” (Hanson 24), hint at the discordant appropriation of silence to poets who are functionally the reflective compass of society.

Although not directly stated, Hanson collapses the referent of “sleep” with a nation, in the “arms of chaos,” overlooking the presence of a storm. This finds a poetic reverberation with the statement from the Punjabi poet, Pash,<sup>9</sup> who posits that “the most dangerous thing in the world is the death of our dreams” (Bhalla n.p.). Drawing inference from Pash, one thinks that Hanson and other Nigerian poets, not in the literal sense of dreamers, paint both the personal and the public matters that confront them. Is the dream of a nation free from rancour also strewn in the thematic of nothingness? As Hanson relates, “ripples have nowhere they go,” grounds a subtle way of the denial of a voice lost in the maze of absence. This merging into the maze of absence is so that the poet-persona is embodied here in his sign grammar of self-other politics. Suggestively, too, as an extended insight, the persona is submerged in a postcolonial sense, as noticed or perhaps floating through his constructed landscape of chameleonic nothingness. However, naming is tied to the politics of presence, and even though nothingness is a construction, it returns the politics of the named, perhaps, calling itself to a certain materiality in the process.

In “A valediction: permitting mourning” Hanson recalls John Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” which is a metaphysical poem that deploys the mathematical sign of compass as a conceit to suggest that what binds the persona and his

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<sup>9</sup> While Pash is his pen name, his real name is Avtar Singh Snahu; and he lived between 1959-1988.

lover is more spiritual than it is physical. Noting the numerous critical readings of Donne's poem, linked to his spiritual undercurrents, Hochberg Shifra characterises "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" as "symbolizing the intratextual lovers and the spiritual perfection of their love" (Shifra 325). This spiritual affinity that Donne shares with his lover is alive in the following:

But we by a love so much refined,  
That ourselves know not what it is,  
Inter-assured of the mind,  
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss. (Donne n.p.)

One might reason that if Donne demonstrates a Biblical wit, which is also transcendental in his poem, Hanson picks up this aspect of spirituality but redirects it to the notion of a new politics of the unnoticed presence. While Donne's valediction forbids mourning, Hanson's work intertextually permits it. Therefore, Hanson deconstructively harks back to the spiritual rootedness of the poem to articulate subjects centred on invocation, loss, grief, and despair. Seen as not an unnoticed presence of parody of Donne, the poem problematises the poetics of the "unspecified" as Hanson might suggest. The political texture of the poem is not unnoticed from the range of signs that form here in the first part of it:

Your name shall  
bring no shame  
wafted upon the tongue  
like fur  
raging with the audacity  
to vomit trash  
and colour a wall  
with unneeded shades. (Hanson 25)

The reference to a society, supposedly Africa, whose life and meaning depends on neoliberal market supply of needs—a recurrent cycle of extractive regimes and geopolitics of the western world—breaks the logic of nothingness in the lines: "we shall no longer / worship what is shipped / to us across oceans / on the wings of waves / heralded by the meaning / of nothing / and forced down our throats / like a needed medicine" (Hanson 25). Since it seems like the signs refer to some conjectural postcolonial entity wanted to the consumption of foreign goods, do we still inhabit Hanson's world of nothingness? Should a poet's imagination of the personal and the

public landscapes of “being” and “time” translate into the unnoticed? And how does the motif of the unnoticed stretch its material absence when the re-inscription of signs points to a presence, at least postcolonial by some referents?

In the second part of “a valediction,” while touching on Donne’s similar theme of nullity of absence for two physically displaced, but spiritually connected lovers, Hanson seems to enact the idea that mourning trumps nothingness. This is also noting that there is a sense in which the persona ventilates otherworldly aspirations removed from the postcolonial society that he brings to light in the first part of the poem. In this second part of “a valediction,” a name suggests the deconstruction of nothingness, as Laretta, the principal “subject” of the poem draws on the “predicate”: this is for Laretta, speckled with stars / but rubs mud to cover them / because she has been told she shines too much” (Hanson 25). In a weird stir, this poem suggests the notion of inferiority cast upon “over-visibility,” such that the subject of the poem attempts obscurity, in submitting to the political absence that frames the idea of one’s critical extrapolation of presence in the book. This might not extend to mean that Hanson has invested his unnoticed presence in his poetic subject, Laretta, in what becomes the abject consequence of the noticed, confident presence, swapped for the unnoticed, the masked absence. The image built around Laretta in the poem, however, draws on a curious critical contemplation of despair for the way the world might judge some extraordinary people.

If the poem, “A theory of silence,” feeds into the imagination of the poet, it finds its meaning in the entire collection’s unhinged thematic canvas through the transcendental construction of God as the judge of things that He has freely provided to all who have their talents but have crafted them into the notion of nothingness. But in another sense, submission to the force of the divine contends with the logic of nothingness: “before you entered / through your dream, / houghing across the revelation, / the lily opened her face to her God, / its fragrance, / a sigh of redemption” (Hanson 27). The evocation of the transcendental vitally intersects with the aggregation of nature and the undercurrents of the spiritual, as might be linked with the following lines: “beyond the orchards, / where the wind peeled off / and spread out petals / in honour of itself, / heaven froze / into a ball, / when they met on earth” (Hanson 27). Hanson’s denial of presence or a subtle admittance to a marginal presence sometimes subsists in some planetary logic in the collection.

The poem, “remembering rivers,” lies in the part flagged “Journeying” undergirded by a line in Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” The certain intimation of memory as a notion decentres the poetics of nothingness even if the poem’s stylistic perspicacity works assiduously to mask it. The subject of the poem is the persona’s father, as in “my father died with/ his dreams in his stomach” (Hanson 33), and it already discounts the “unspecified” and the notion of the unnoticed, where the context of death privileges the loss, not of nothingness, but of an embodied father in this poetic scape. The burial place of the father is an active site for an ecological imagination, a riverbed, which postures the historic memory of a spiritual presence.

Another curious poetic point is the element of the uncanny, this dead father’s father, “married a new wife and soon planted seeds that would not bloom like him.” Aside from the hopelessness in not fulfilling one’s dreams, “dead,” in one’s stomach like “my father,” what cycle of birth and rebirth points to is an “unfinalizable” conundrum of signs? There seem to be two apostrophised fathers left to a sort of ambivalence, as the persona’s father’s father takes a new wife. The cycle of regeneration or the repeated cycle of marriage challenges the notion of presence. What does the interminable scheme of signs as built up in Hanson’s collection indicate? Is the eventuality of death and rebirth as reflected not self-deconstructive within the notion of nothingness? These questions return to the poetics of the unspecified, where the reader fills up the volleys of meaning, however “unfinalizable” this might be.

For the poem “Look homeward,” where loss in the weight of unfinalisability of death drives the poem, is it productive to ask questions about life as nothingness that interlaces both cognition and spatiality of Hanson’s poetry? One might then ask a question of how home frames people and dreams, amidst temporal subjectivities tied to the sphere of imagination that “we stumbled on our dreams, / still like a mountain of ice/perspiring in the looking eyes of the sun/ till it dissolved into an ocean/ with wobbly tides” (Hanson 34). It is pertinent to point to the argument along presumed presence that loss negates nothingness and the imagination of grief that it incubates, marking a specific, noticed presence in “Look Homeward.” This ideation follows that, “time is the insecure bird/ that soon flies / and death is a man / with bottomless stomach” (Hanson 34). Death and time reinforce the subjects and predicates of presence and beingness, which return one to the way Hanson teases out schemes of relational, yet ambivalent meanings from these philosophical concepts.

## 5. CONCLUSION: HANSON'S PRESENCE AS A POLITICAL ABSENCE

In closing this critical essay, it is important to contemplate how presence is political. Thus, the textual reading relates the argument that is open-ended: that the absence registered by the poet is political, where tellingly, the reader encounters the poetry bordered on inverted absence. This is as Hanson shuttles between playful, experimental poesy and finely wrought ideas that dodge as if they are (non)present in the leitmotif of nothingness, which inherently prescribes invisibility and “unfinalizability.” Perhaps, the disguise of the unnoticed is in lunging into morality, even to inscribe scripturally sensual poetisation, to the degree of producing the chameleon persona that hides and emerges. This uncertain shift in signs aligns with the questions on absence or presence tugging at the interpretive logic of the various subjects encompassed in the *Unnoticed Presence of Things*. The recurring trope of the unspecified intensifies schemes of presence and nothingness, tending to different and disruptive meanings in the analysed poems.

The personae of the poems are revealed in their ambivalent matrices: at once soiled and innocent, and it becomes so from the erasure of the obvious construction of presence by Hanson's deft predication of the unspecified. We find, for instance, the overtly sensual by some feminisation of poetry in “As lovers do.” So that even in the claim of nothingness in many of the poems analysed in this essay, poetry becomes a being, that which finally erects some presence, but at best political as they are interminable. The political suffices by the paradigmatic cluster of clever lines and self-erasure politics that produce individual poems, which are thematically diverse, well-strung in slippery styles, tending to such inverted absence, and posting the “aporia” of an unnoticed presence for the poet. The article, however, submits that Hanson masks his obvious presence, or that the textual nothingness advanced in his poetry, is at best political. This point, perhaps, through another deconstructive reading does not hold true, and deconstruction privileges this on-going contestation of meanings in any text floating through multiple readings that Hanson's poetry or another's poetry invites.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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