MIND YOUR P(EDERAST)S AND Q(UEER)S: THE SCHOOL AS PHALLIC PARENT IN MARK BEHR'S *EMBRACE*[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the school in Mark Behr's *Embrace*, and situates the institution's location at the nexus of gender studies, children's literature scholarship and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The article argues that in the novel, the school is a phallic parent *in loco* and an agent of the apartheid state, eager to enforce white male and heterosexual hegemony in psychologically and physically violent ways. Behr focuses on the vicious abuse of queer boys particularly. The article applies contemporary scholarship in children's literature to what is unquestionably a novel for and by an adult, precisely so because of the book's bold grappling with the questions of what is a child, what constitutes sex, who or what is the phallus, and what constitutes violence; it also situates Behr's thinly veiled autobiography in a (queer) school story tradition. Specific thinkers on whose work the article draws include Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault; gender theorists Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan; and children's literature scholars Karen Coats, Kenneth Kidd and others.

Keywords: apartheid, Mark Behr, phallus, queer child, school story, South African novel

> [S]chool was fascinating: each day seemed to bring new revelations of the cruelty and pain and hatred raging beneath the every day surface of things. What was going on was wrong, he knew, should not be allowed to happen; and he was too young, too babyish and vulnerable, for what he was being exposed to. (Coetzee 1997, 139)

Mark Behr (2011, 5), in an interview with Andrew van der Vlies, states that he 'hope[s] to not again feel the compunction to write anything as claustrophobic or indeed as

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personally distressing as *Embrace*'. As this statement reveals, *Embrace* (2000) was for Behr a consuming personal project. Deep in the novel, in a metafictional aside, he offers a clue as to why this is so – he calls the book his 'inventory of consciousness' (250), a phrase that evokes the words of Edward Said (1978, 1997) who, in *Orientalism*, attempts to explain how he himself 'was led to a particular course of research and writing'. In doing so, Said draws on Antonio Gramsci, noting the latter's assertion that '[t]he starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, *without leaving an inventory*' (Said 1978, 2010, emphasis added). Said then points out that Gramsci's text in the original Italian, though it was never translated into the English version, 'concludes by adding, "*therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory*"' (ibid, emphasis added). Given that *Embrace* was written during a period of critical self-confrontation for Behr, the novel may be read as such a stocktaking.

Behr's self-assigned task is to identify himself as a heavily interpellated white South African Afrikaner-affiliated male during apartheid. The text's overarching concern is to point to what made/makes a boy or a man, and especially what made a white (Afrikaner) boy during that time.[2] Other South African authors, like J.M. Coetzee and Damon Galgut, have explored such themes by representing in their fiction some of the mechanisms and practices of apartheid, the system's devastating effects on white and black alike, South Africa's complex hegemonies, gender roles and a multiplicity of violences. However, none of these writers has used the school story genre, a long literary tradition, to examine the role of the school within these structures as consistently or precisely as Behr does in his fiction, and especially in his thinly veiled autobiography, *Embrace*. Further, none indicts the school for being a phallic parent and thus an agent of the apartheid state to the same extent that Behr does. This is important because spaces and places, real and imaginary, are never palimpsests – they, too, bear 'an infinity of traces' that may matter for queerness and gender.

Embrace represents, and thus reveals, the school as a phallic parent *in loco*, a role that demands enforcing apartheid's white male and heterosexual hegemony. As a corollary, the school also played an important role in surveying behaviour and punishing what it perceived as deviance (especially sex) with violence. As a result, it is not surprising that experiences associated with the school, and especially sexual discovery and practice at school, should be profoundly etched into this writer's consciousness.

Set in the 1970s, *Embrace* recounts 14-year-old Karl de Man's painful attempts to establish his identity within hypermasculine, homophobic apartheid South African society.[3] While it contains abundant flashbacks and is replete with memories, the book's immediate time is the period during which Karl is enrolled at a boys' singing academy in 'the mountain country of the dragon' (3); this is easily identifiable as the Drakensberg Boys' Choir School, which Behr himself attended. This prestigious private boarding school, located in an idyllic mountain valley, offers vocally talented boys a rigorous

academic education, sports, other extracurricular activities, as well as choir training and performance. The choir, which regularly performs for the public in the school's pitch-perfect auditorium, and tours locally and abroad, is considered a regional and national treasure and an ambassadorial corps. Once open only to white students, it now enrolls all races; nevertheless, it still identifies as a Christian institution and adheres to its dual-medium approach of teaching in English and Afrikaans (apartheid South Africa's official languages), and maintains its culture of privileging sport – especially rugby – alongside the musical arts.

Though yet inconsistently, Karl is becoming suspicious of apartheid and concomitantly of its codes of thought and behaviour, and he becomes plagued by sexual and political ambiguity once he reaches adolescence. The novel is a disturbing one in many ways, but in large part because of Karl's sexual activities and proclivities – he has been intimate with an older female cousin, a girlfriend, and is, in the course of the novel, sexually and emotionally involved with another schoolboy of his own age, Dominic Webster, and with his choir master, Jacques Cilliers. He also participates in an act of bestiality with a sheep, and, late in the novel, recalls taking hold of an adult black man's penis. Karl's emerging sexual orientation suggests that he is gay. But, as Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (2004, ix) point out, '[p]eople panic when [a child's] sexuality takes on a life outside the sanctioned scripts of child's play. And nowhere is this panic more explosive than in the field of the queer child ... whose play confirms neither the comfortable stories of child (a)sexuality nor the supposedly blissful promises of adult heteronormativity.'

Karl's situations destabilise and interrogate notions of innocence and experience, power and knowledge, right and wrong. For this reason, the book is also disquieting for its representations of agency and the way that the child employs it – it appears to be Karl who initiates the affair with the adult Jacques, confusing the reader as to whether or not the relationship is exploitative. Further, when questioned by the headmaster about his and Jacques' sexual contact, Karl denies molestation, thinking that '[t]here was nothing to fear from Jacques. Never' (665). As such, it is Karl's relationship with Jacques that is the most daring with regard to representation and also the most culturally challenging, because, as Bruhm and Hurley (2004, xxii) note:

> Whatever paradoxes may present themselves in the cultural and psychoanalytic fantasies surrounding children and their sexuality, there is one aspect of this fantasy that officially brooks no exceptions whatsoever: that sex between a child and an adult, regardless of the gender of either party, is inevitably traumatic and debilitating for the child.

Further, '[w]hereas sex between children has a democratic air around it,' according to [Kate] Millett, 'conditions between adults and children preclude any sexual relationship that is not in some way exploitative' (ibid.). However, Bruhm and Hurley (ibid, xxiii) note that 'the history of ideas about intergenerational sex and the idea of remembering one's personal experiences of intergenerational sex are often much more complicated

than we have allowed ourselves to think'. Behr has not shied away from representing graphic intergenerational homosexual sex; the patriarchy's seduction and rape of its future subjects is the governing metaphor of his first novel, *The smell of apples* (1995), but, because the child believes himself to have agency, and because the school mediates and sanctions (in the word's most ambiguous senses) the sexual contact, *Embrace* is infinitely more complex.

Karl's eventual recognition of his sexual preference for men and defection from apartheid occur outside the novel's space and time. This renders the book's last section poignantly ironic as Karl, hoping to resolve his conflicts, temporarily but fervently re-embraces apartheid.

In processing the role of the school in this novel, the central propositions of several important theorists of power structures come to mind. One of these is Gramsci (1976[1971], 258), for whom '[t]he school as a positive educative function, and the courts as a repressive and negative educative function, are the most important State activities ...'. Louis Althusser (1976[1971]) develops this idea. His explanation for the dynamics of interpellation relies on two terms with which he is now identified: 'repressive State apparatus[es]' (RSAs) and 'ideological State apparatus[es]' (ISAs) (ibid, 1489). RSAs, which operate through 'violence' (ibid.), work in tandem with ISAs like religious institutions, the school, the family and sport, to hail subjects to an ideology. Althusser asserts that the 'educational ideological apparatus' is the most 'dominant' of all ISAs (ibid, 1493). Part of the reason for this, he explains, is that no other ISA has all 'the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven' (ibid, 1495). The significant amount of time a child is at school, he contends, is spent being inculcated with the cosmology of the ruling class. To compound the interpellating role of the school in Karl's life, his, as a boarding facility, has 24-hour access to its 'audience'; further, it is a home away from home, with faculty and staff as parents *in loco*.

Michel Foucault (1969, 1639), although he does not use Althusser's terms, sees an indicting connection between the presiding philosophies of the management and function of the RSAs and the ISAs – that of punitiveness as the overarching method of making a modern subject conform. He identifies a 'carceral continuum' that, conflating the grossest and mildest perceived deviances, renders every agency of the social body, whatever its declared intent, an instrument of surveillance, penalty and normalisation. Behr suggests a similar gulag: the school's letter-writing rooms are 'silent cells' (92), the offices of Karl's unsupportive psychologist, Dr. Taylor, look '[l]ike the passages of a hospital' (250), Karl's return to school after a parents' weekend is 'the return to prison' (654), and when the boys leave the school, it looks like 'an enormous abandoned prison cell; an army barracks ...' (704).

Bruhm and Hurley (2004, xv) note that an important characteristic that Foucault mentions 'is the way institutions endeavored to separate boys from each other at school for fear that they would engage in sexual contact'. As a corollary, Mavis Reimer

(2009, 211) points out that '[a] primary product of [Foucault's] disciplinary society is the subject who ... participates in his own subjection'. 'For Foucault,' she notes, 'this subject is produced through panoptic surveillance, which he understands not as a state in which one is constantly observed, but rather as a state of "conscious and permanent visibility" in which one is sure one might be seen at any time', and '[t]he school ... is an important site for the exercise of such surveillance' (ibid.). *Embrace* bears this out as when Karl, restricted in movement for his activities with Jacques, 'felt sure he was under surveillance. Eyes were on him ...' (682).

Because the school acts as a powerful force in establishing a child's subjectivity, stories set in schools are abundant in literature. Research on the school story in children's literature reveals three important issues that are relevant to this discussion. First, though school stories often manifest a poignant nostalgia for the fun of school life, schools are not always represented as pleasant places. Reimer (2009, 224) states that while '[c]riticism of schools as places of injustice, unhappiness and coercion have featured in narratives from the beginning of the genre', they have done so relatively infrequently. But Kenneth Kidd (2000, 217) endorses Beverly Lyon Clark's observation that there are 'darker incarnations of the [school story] genre' in the 20th century, especially in those texts that are 'decidedly adult, "more critical of school, more cynical, sardonic, subversive"'. One particular scene makes Behr's position apparent: during a rehearsal, Lukas is beaten spontaneously and publically by Jacques for 'grinning' (197) – the implement Cilliers employs is a piece of wooden paneling that he wrenches from the wall, implying that the potential for violence is inherent in the school's very structure.

A second interesting observation comes from Reimer (2009, 209), who sees a 'tradition of allegory that stands behind the school story'; these tales come to narrate 'the progress of the child through the "little world of the school towards the achievement of successful adulthood in the "wide world" of modern life' (ibid, 209–210). She states that often in boys' school stories, this *petit monde* 'is enclosed and self-sufficient, with conflicts resolved within the terms of that world' (ibid, 212). This 'small world' metaphor is, according to Reimer (ibid, 211), 'a rhetorical figure borrowed from allegory ... that asserts that a school is a complete and circumscribed system, but [also one] that implies the correspondence of the school system to "world" systems on other scales and levels'.

Embrace's representation of the school is consistent with Reimer's argument. The heavily Christian Nationalist institution constructs for itself the metaphor of the nation, as is evident in the principal Mr. Mathison's pre-tour instruction to the boys: 'Behave yourselves like citizens. Patriots ….' (8).[4] The school has its own currency, 'Hills', and emulates apartheid South Africa's dual-language structure of education, thus reinforcing it. Repressive as the apartheid state itself, the school censors correspondence and censures its citizens with harsh bodily acts. Behr's most sardonic representation of the school as a microcosm of the country, and its view of itself as such, happens when Mathison confronts Karl, whom he catches sneaking back into the school using Jacques' key. The headmaster delivers the following injunction: 'Tell me the truth. It is the truth

that will set you free' (669) – this is an anachronistic and ironic representation of one of the promotional mottos of South Africa's postapartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This representation makes sense in terms of Reimer's (2009, 215) perception that it is possible that 'the capacity of school stories ... for "conveying and producing meaning" is tied to ideologies of the nation'. As such, 'many important school stories are set against the backdrop of wars, which are often occasions for the blatant performance of national identities and sometimes occasions for searching inquiries into such ideological formations' (ibid.). One scene in *Embrace* especially foregrounds this point. While Karl is at the school, the bright and promising son of Ma'am Sanders, his favourite teacher, is killed while performing his mandatory military service. The schoolboys attend the sombre military funeral service, and the school choir is co-opted to sing alongside, literally in concert with, the military choir. Religion, nationalism, and militarism blend to structure the event, and Karl describes the funeral as a space where any division between an RSA, the army, and an ISA, the school, is minimal: 'The two choirs, men in uniform on one side, boys on the other, had been arranged in a wedge to face each other ... In this way the end of the ... soprano boys linked with the beginning of the male tenor and baritone[s] ... of Infantry School' (645). This formation allows the men to reflect on themselves as boys, and the boys to foresee their futures as South African men.

An implication of the school's representation as a nation with a related ideology is that just as one can perform perfect citizenry, so can one be a traitor on multiple levels. One of the scenes in *Embrace* that proves important in this regard, is that in which Karl's class is learning about the French Revolution with Ma'am. Dominic proposes that there are similarities between the conditions leading to the revolution and those in 1970s South Africa. Ma'am will not brook this possibility, but she allows a debate on the subject outside of class time. Dominic is selected to argue for relevance, and Karl, a fine debater, against. But Karl refuses to oppose Dominic, and a Jewish boy agrees to take Karl's place – this is to the chagrin of the boys' friend Bennie, an Afrikaner, who does not respect Karl's refusal and accuses Karl of allowing 'an Englishman – a Jew – [to] speak for' their team (204). Bennie calls Karl a '*verraaier*', the Afrikaans word for traitor. This scene exemplifies what Kidd (2000, 216), following Clark, says: school stories 'foreground both peer codes of loyalty and the teacher-student struggle, offering a useful glimpse into "the intersections of literature and pedagogy and the politics of schooling"'.

This dynamic also appears in another thematically significant scene in the novel. After a group hike in the Drakensberg, a roll call reveals that two prefects missed the expedition, and the dreaded Mr. Buys brings the transgressors before an assembly of the entire school. Although the prefects' exact transgression is not disclosed, Buys punishes all the boys for the pair's 'disloyalty' and 'indolenc[e]' (143). But he has (literally) orchestrated a special punishment for the traitors: he instructs the assembly to chant 'suffer, suffer' and clap to a specific beat while the deviants do push-ups 'until [they]

vomit' and collapse (144), thus making all the boys proxies for the punitive school, a sanctioned mob. The schadenfreude of the assembly is appalling: the boys participate in the humiliation of their schoolmates with glee, and, compounding their complicity, they use their sensitivity to tone, harmony and rhythm to spontaneously sophisticate the chant into an 'oratorio' (145). Hardly surprising, then, that memories of the punishment so bother Karl that 'as an adult the scenes arrived to replay themselves over and over in [his] mind'.

The book suggests that the treason of the two harshly chastised boys may have been homosexual activity. This raises another issue about the school story. A characteristic of the genre, Eric Tribunella (2011, 458) states, is its 'homoeroticism, or homoaffectionalism'. He points out that '[a]s single-sex institutions, boarding schools engender a range of same-sex relations, from homosocial friendships to actual sexual explorations and romantic relationships between boys'; for this reason, homosexual references in school stories are frequent. At the same time, though, schools' 'reputations as "hot-beds of vice"' (ibid, 459) did not go unnoticed by those who studied sex: Tribunella (ibid.) notes that Havelock Ellis's *Sexual inversion* (1897) claims significant 'evidence of "the prevalence of homosexual and auto-erotic phenomena in public and private schools"'.

As Tison Pugh and David Wallace (2006, 273) point out, Clark argues that in some school stories, 'homoeroticism emerges ... without much ado and is treated as "simply a stage in adolescence" ... passing phases in a trajectory toward heterosexual marriage'. Even so, Tribunella notes, school stories manifest huge anxieties about homosexuality and these are related in complex ways to those of constructions of masculinity. In this he defers to Claudia Nelson's scholarship of *Tom Brown's schooldays*, the touchstone English school novel.

Thomas Hughes penned *Tom*, Tribunella (2011, 457) argues, 'for the occasion of Hughes's son's impending departure for [Rugby] school'. It 'serves not only as a warning to new schoolboys about the difficulties of school life but also as a guide to negotiating its complex social, political, and sexual dynamics' (ibid.). The book is, then, a material product of paternal anxiety, didactic and interpellative in its aim, and it is thus profoundly implicated in the phallic order that I discuss later in this article. In *Tom*, the effeminate child, Arthur, is the one who occupies the moral high ground, with the hypermasculine one, Flashman, represented as the bully. Despite their dislocation in space and time, it is possible to see a parallel between Hughes and Behr's novel; in *Embrace*, effeminate and liberal Dominic represents Karl's ethical better, and the *verkrampte* (repressedly conservative) Lukas and Bennie, though not as harshly represented as Flashman, signify his more personally, structurally and culturally violent self.

Representations in both novels seem to indict hypermasculinity in favour of affectiveness, but the reader should not be misled. Even if the gentle, effeminate boy is represented as more morally respectable than the violent hypermasculine one, in *Tom*, 'Hughes's anxiety seems to hover around the figure of the feminized male' (Hall cited

in Tribunella 2011, 471). Looking at Nelson's work, Tribunella (2011, 464) notes that 'Hughes's novel does allude explicitly to specific anxieties about sex between boys', with a corollary concern about the nature of an acceptable masculinity. Nelson extracts that 'to be manly for Hughes meant an "androgynous blend of compassion and courage, gentleness and strength, self-control and native purity"' (ibid, 468), and argues that in *Tom*, 'asexuality is an explicit and essential component of the anti-masculine manliness [Hughes] upholds' (Nelson cited in Tribunella 2011, 85). This was because '[to] be sexually incontinent by engaging in masturbation or nonprocreative sex is to risk one's mind, by being egocentric or narcissistic, and [one's] soul, by engaging in sexual sins that constitute moral corruption and lead to damnation'; Nelson (cited in Tribunella 2011, 464) explains that '[f]or Hughes it seems that the threat of the [effeminate] boys of pre-reform Rugby was not that they might grow up homosexual, but that [they would be] introduced to sex in a context in which purity and repression played no part'. Since *Tom*, 'the main tradition of boys' school stories [has] clearly functioned to create the gendered masculine subject, a subject closely connected to national and imperial imaginaries' (Reimer 2009, 216). It is this subject that intrigues Behr, and, while he represents his school as one where purity had given way to pederasty, his educational environment, like the apartheid state that it emulated, was highly repressive.

Following historian Matt Cook, Tribunella (2011, 458) notes that boys' schools – especially boarding schools like Rugby – were also important to constructions of masculinity because they 'removed boys from the influence of mothers and nurses and exposed them to communities of other boys and male schoolmasters'; one might even read this as a kind of gender role apartheid. This is evinced in *Embrace* when Karl's father bans the boy from food preparation in the home – he calls this 'women's work' (387). In terms of contemporary theory, though, the implications of this are complicated. In her passionate polemic, 'How to bring your kids up gay: The war on effeminate boys', Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2004[1991], 144) notes pervasive gender-based power struggles at play here: to those who are effeminophobic, homophobic and misogynistic, '[m]others ... have nothing to contribute to [the] process of masculine validation, and women are reduced in the light of its urgency to a null set: any involvement in it by a woman is overinvolvement: any protectiveness is overprotectiveness'.

Sedgwick (ibid.) observes the belief and practice of even purportedly gay-affirmative 1980s psychiatry and psychoanalysis that 'ego-syntonic consolidation for a boy can come only in the form of masculinity, given that masculinity can be conferred only by men ... and given that femininity in a person with a penis, can represent nothing but deficit and disorder'. This is a sophisticated formulation of the idea that orthodox masculinity constructions proscribe what Robert Brannon (in Anderson 2005, 22) simplistically calls 'sissy stuff'. This term stigmatises that which is feminine, by conflating it with that which is childlike or cowardly; for this reason, as Eric Anderson (2005, 23), following Michael Messner, explains that 'men must ... avoid at all cost emotion, compassion, and the appearance of vulnerability, weakness, and fear'. Men

who manifest orthodox masculinity must also be 'big wheel[s]' (ibid, 22) and 'top dog[s]', claiming their dominance through recognised success and/or leadership of other men (ibid, 23). Further, they must remain stalwart in the face of physical and emotional challenge, and show superior will and strength with the goal of vanquishing – they must be 'sturdy oak[s]', capable of 'giving 'em hell' (ibid, 22).

In demanding reliable and specific performance, these injunctions invite the 'stylization of the body' that Judith Butler (2004[1990], 2501) argues produces gender. Three points constitute the crux of Butler's observations about gender: 1) gender is performative; 2) its performance is repetitious; and 3) performing gender is mandatory. She states that 'we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right' (ibid, 2500). One sure way to 'do' orthodox masculinity incorrectly is to display effeminacy.

Effeminacy, therefore, needs correction, and when his own efforts fail, Karl's father Bok employs Dr. Taylor, a psychologist who masquerades as an educational consultant – as such, Taylor is simultaneously an agent of both the father and the school. Taylor's aim is to persuade his patients to abandon behaviours that might detract from credible performance of apartheid masculinity; he is committed to 'a nongay outcome' (Sedgwick 2004[1991], 145). As such, he is firmly in the tradition of effeminophobic 'helping' that Sedgwick finds so disturbing. This goal is often also shared by the parents of 'proto-gay' children (ibid, 143);[5] she notes effeminophobic psychiatrist Richard Green's comment that '[t]he rights of parents to oversee the development of children is a long-established principle. Who is to dictate that parents may not try to raise their children in a manner that maximizes the possibility of a heterosexual outcome?' (ibid, 146). This question is consistent with Bruhm and Hurley's (2004, xiv) observation that the child is always 'project[ed] ... into a heteronormative future'. The name 'Taylor', then – a version of that which signifies the profession of those who fashion or alter clothes to achieve a perfect fit – is appropriate for one whose task is to construct the masculinity of boys according to society's hegemonic measurements.

In the context of names, it is even more significant that Karl's parents are known to him as 'Bok' and 'Bokkie' ('Buck' and 'Little Buck' in Afrikaans). These monikers, apparently affectionate, seem appropriate because Bok is a professional game ranger. Nevertheless, it is impossible to disassociate these names from the animal that was the symbol of, indeed a metonym for, the apartheid South African state: the buck appeared as the logo for the national air force, airline, railways, on the country's coat of arms, and elsewhere. Further, all national sports teams were named 'Springboks', most memorably and enduringly the rugby team, revered particularly by white Afrikaner men and boys. In the case of *Embrace*, then, it is fair to suggest that, as Jacques Lacan (in Segal 1990, 84, emphasis in the original) states, 'it is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law'.

The 'name of the father' in Lacan's work is closely related to his concept of the phallus. For Lacan, 'the phallus' is not a physical penis, but is symbolic of a/the

instrument and locus of power and privilege in a society. Karen Coats (2004, 100, 101) explains that the phallus 'is on the side of the masculine Symbolic' in Western cultures, because 'those things that ... occupy the position of the phallus (e.g. power, capital, sex) tend only to be accessible to and through the masculine position'. For this reason, '[t]he Symbolic phallus is important to the construction of masculinity' (ibid, 100). Coats (ibid, 99) adds that '[a] person has masculine or feminine structure according to how he or she is situated with respect to the Name of the Father', which is also closely associated with 'the law of the father'. This idea, related to that of the 'phallic order', describes the authoritative body of social convention represented and overseen by the Symbolic father, who sternly regulates and normalises behaviour, and in doing so, thwarts the influence of the mother in the emotional life of the child. 'To some degree, all subjects are under the sway of the Name of the Father, having negotiated alienation [and] separation' (ibid.). And, as Coats explains, the very concept of the Symbolic is fundamentally related to the idea of performativity that is so central to *Embrace*: 'There is a way of conceiving the Symbolic order as that which fixes reality. It states its own laws and builds its own expectations. We have been calling this its performativity ... the Symbolic performs what it purports to describe' (ibid, 107).

In Lacanian theory, what is symbolic is not real. But in literature, which trades in metaphor and symbolism, literal readings concomitant with symbolic ones are possible, even necessary. One example in *Embrace* is the symbolic phallus/literal penis: Jacques, as a white male teacher, enjoys a significant share of phallic power, even if his sexual preferences are considered deviant by the ruling hegemonic order. Karl literally desires Jacques' erect penis, but, at the same time, his access to it and apparent power to stir it allow him to shift closer to the phallic center than his marginalisation as a child (and an effeminate one at that) has thus far permitted. Similarly, while Lacan's symbolic father is not the real father, the real father is symbolic for being metonymic of the patriarchy. Coats (ibid, 102) offers a precedent for privileging the literal 'name of the father': in Mary Poppins, the father's name, George Banks, 'indicates the relationship he has to the signifier – he is a banker, and his name is Banks. Hence his being is wholly determined by the signifier's symbolic mandate.' Similarly, 'Bok' indicates Karl's father's relationship to the signifier: while he is not a 'Springbok', he is a proponent and supporter of the relationships with the state that are signified by the term. Bokkie's name suggests that she, too, is associated with what the Springbok represents, but, given that her moniker is a diminutive and feminisation of her husband's, it concomitantly suggests that she is hegemonically limited.

Behr draws attention to the literal 'name of the father' in other places in the novel too, but his concern is most apparent in the convoluted conversation that takes place when Jacques and Karl spend an intimate weekend in a hotel in a town called Paternoster, which means 'our Father' in Latin – this is Behr's alert to expect a father-related scene. When checking in, Jacques, seeking to avoid scandal, identifies Karl as his son. In the room, he tells Karl that he would like Karl to call him 'Jacques', but

fears being overheard. Karl 'had thought fleetingly of calling him Papa or Pa, but [he] couldn't get the word over [his] lips. [His] father [Ralph] was Bok and had never been Dad to [him] except [in writing] ... Not Father, Pa, Pappa, Pappie or anything else. Just plain Bok' (166). Jacques asks Karl if he wants to use his school master-lover's first name. 'I knew his name' (166), Karl informs the reader, but he tells Jacques that he is willing to call him 'Sir' (167), Jacques protests that when they are alone, 'Sir' would be 'absurd'. Karl responds by suggesting that he will call his lover 'Jacques' at Paternoster, but 'Sir' at school. Jacques asks if Karl '[c]an ... manage Pa or something' now. When the boy rejects that, Jacques protests that their dialogue at Paternoster would sound 'disrespectful' if Karl avoids a name or parental title. Karl concedes: 'Pa here ... sir at school, and your name when we're alone.' Then Jacques tells Karl to say his name, but the boy struggles until he can poignantly whisper, 'I love you, Jacques ....' (ibid.).

Confusion regarding the father figure's name indicates the unstable nature of Karl and Jacques' relationship. As Karl's teacher at a boarding school, Jacques has a parental function, but he is not the boy's father. As a teacher, Jacques might well be called 'Sir', but as a lover, it would be appropriate for Karl to call Jacques by his first name. But Jacques neither fully occupies nor fully abdicates the positions of parent, teacher or lover; instead, he inhabits them as he pleases. In terms of Lacanian theory, then, the social norms and laws that Jacques signifies are irregular and confusing to the child, who feels privilege at being given options, but is bewildered by containments and conflations. As such, Karl's pederastic part-time pater is just one iteration of the phallic order.

What does a Lacanian reading offer regarding literary mothers like Bokkie? Sedgwick (2004[1991], 144), though she laments the tragic consequences of universal hostility to effeminate boys, notes in these children 'mysterious skills of survival, filiation and resistance', suggesting that these 'could derive from a secure identification with the resource richness of a mother'. However, as *Embrace* unfolds, it becomes apparent that Bokkie too is disturbingly complicit in persecuting Karl for his effeminacy. The Lacanian paternal metaphor helps to explain this dynamic. As Coats (2004, 101) points out, a woman, lacking a phallus, may try to protect her limited position in order to share vicariously in phallic power; as such she 'partners ... with the symbolic phallus', accessible 'only through a man'. In her parenting, then, this woman may prove a 'phallic mother' (ibid, 29). Coats (ibid.) explains: 'The danger is, according to Lacan, that the mother's desire [for the phallus] is like a crocodile [and] you never know when its jaws might clamp shut.' In short:

> [T]he whims of the mother are themselves ordered by a Law that exceeds and tames them. This law is what Lacan famously dubs the name (*nom*) of the father ... When the father intervenes, (at least when he is what Lacan calls the symbolic father) Lacan [holds] that he does so less as a living enjoying individual than as the delegate and spokesperson of a body of social Law and convention that is also recognised by the mother, as a socialised being, to be decisive. (Sharpe n.d.)

Bokkie's role as a phallic mother is most obvious in the distressing murder-castration threat scene(s). Once in each of the book's five sections, Behr relates and develops a flashback that Karl experiences. The first and shortest description reads: 'The boys is ten. In the passage he stands dressed in his school uniform. His father walks up. He tells the boy that if he ever catches the boy doing it again he will be killed' (98). By the end of the book, this scene has grown to a page and a half that includes:

> I hear my father telling me to look him in the eye like a man. Perhaps ... saying: 'If you ever go into your mother's things again ... I will cut off your filafooi, do you hear me? If you want to be a little girl, I will turn you into a little girl. If you don't want to be a little girl, then I'm warning you: if you ever even think of doing it again, or if I or your mother even suspect you of doing it again ... I will kill you. (722)

The end of the novel yields the secret of the boy's transgression and the hyperbolic relationship between it and the threatened punishment: Karl has taken one of his mother's hairclips. To his parents, this is evidence of the boy's ineluctable attraction to femininity. While Bok does not literally kill or castrate Karl, the boy does experience figurative castration. Lacan posits that all children will, in the course of 'normal' development, and usually as a result of paternal intervention, relinquish the idea that they can be the phallus for the mother. Thus, even while they are not literally violently desexed, '[a]ll subjects are castrated' (Coats 2004, 99). If, as Lacan (in Coats 2004, 102) argues, '[i]t is through the phallic function that man as a whole acquires his inscription' , this symbolic castration would degrade Karl to female by shaming him and stripping him of the apparatus of, and proximity to, power. The father, metonymic of the patriarchy, is thus threatening his son with expulsion from its protection.

Bok and Bokkie, then, prove a phallic parental partnership, but they have a full team supporting them – the faculty and staff of the school. And the bite of the school's phallic mothers – the female teachers – is especially sharp. One example is when Karl inadvertently discloses the boys' bestiality to Miss Roos, and she reports them; this deviation is conflated with homosexuality, for which the group, after an abusive diatribe from Mathison, is brutally caned by another teacher.

But Karl's most painful betrayals by a female teacher are those delivered verbally by Ma'am, his 'mentor' (623). Ma'am shows herself to be as complicit as any of the male teachers in the 'hostile and condemning environment, verbal and physical abuse, and rejection and isolation from families and peers' that constitute the 'war against gay kids' that 'may leave the effeminate boy ... in the position of the haunting abject' (Sedgwick 2004[1991], 139). This idea is disturbing, especially because many studies suggest that for most gay men, 'wherever [they] may be at present on a scale of self-perceived or socially ascribed masculinity ... the likelihood is disproportionately high that [they] will have a childhood history of self-perceived effeminacy, femininity, or nonmasculinity' (ibid, 142); effemininity may thus be a form of 'proto-gay'ness (ibid, 143). Dominic is the most effeminate of the boys in Karl's circle, but the boys are horrified at the extent to which their own (even Lukas') queerness is noticeable to others. During their Malawi

tour, Karl's coterie is chaperoned by Ma'am. Karl and Steven overhear Ma'am and their host in discussion: 'All of them ... Borderline cases,' Mr. Olver says (359). 'And then Ma'am: "I suppose that's the million-dollar mystery, isn't it? How to keep a boy sensitive and still make sure he's not ... You know ... Happy!"' Ma'am, this conversation suggests, can tolerate some of the affectiveness that is proscribed by hypermasculinity, but, as Sedgwick (2004[1991], 145) predicts, she, like even psychoanalysts and parents, has a 'disavowed desire for a nongay outcome'. Her choice of the word 'happy', then, may even be read as suggesting that she finds the word 'gay' unspeakable.

As such, the boys are more vulnerable to Ma'am's vagaries than they realise. After Graham's death, Ma'am's patience is short. In class one day, Dominic becomes sardonically playful, and emulates Marie-Antoinette by 'strik[ing] a [simpering] pose' (618) on a chair. Ma'am immediately instructs him to sit down, and releases the patriarchy's emotional guillotine on the boy queen(s) by saying, 'I cannot stand effeminate boys'.[6] Dominic sharply retorts that she 'obviously [has] a preference for boys who play with guns' (618). The resulting partisanship between the boys causes them to fight. Mathison enters, and the whole class is ordered to submit to caning. But Ma'am's confessed loathing of boys like him more profoundly hurts Karl than the beating, and he perceives figurative violence in that her comment was '[l]ike a white-hot branding iron through [his] body, into [his] soul' (623).

In other scenes in this novel, too, the school's hyperbolically broad and brutal corporal punishment is less scarring than the psychological debasement it inflicts. After Karl and Lukas skip the mandatory pre-performance nap while touring with the choir, Karl yawns during the concert. The next morning, Mr. Roelofse asks the transgressors to step forward, or the whole choir will be caned. When the pair admits responsibility, Roelofse instructs everyone to leave the bus and form a line. Karl realises what is about to happen: the '*bakoond*' [baking oven]! He relates:

> Thirty-eight boys disembarked and fell into line on the tarmac behind each other, facing the two of us. Ahead of us, legs apart, torsos inclined slight forward, was a tunnel ... We went through, hands and feet ... while they beat us on the buttocks and back. (462)

Lurking behind Roelofse's reckoning, and all the others described in *Embrace*, are the ever-present demands of hypermasculinity, which condemn any affectiveness on the part of the punishers or the punished – stoicism must be summoned in order to avoid (further) humiliation and the undoing of the group. The punishment generates not only somatic hurt, but also mortifying shame that is exacerbated by the 'esprit de corps' (the title of a later short story by Behr, translated into French, that deals with similar themes) that is employed to maximise its effect. Again, Karl '[feels] little pain, but could choke on the force of humiliation' (463).

The demand for hypermasculinity and the nature of the corporal punishment – its very form – are also important in the novel in that the physical prowess demanded by negotiation of 'baking oven', like the 'suffer-suffer' push-ups described earlier, evoke

another area of partnership between parents and school – the national, male sport of rugby. Rugby is the game that allows a boy to approach touchstone South African white Afrikaner maleness, the very phallus itself, and to become a Springbok. As a corollary, to be unwilling or unable to play rugby is here, as in other South African novels (as I have described elsewhere), metonymic of defection from the constellation of 'codes and expectations, real and imagined, imposed and self-imposed' (404) of which Karl is increasingly aware. School rugby is, for Bok and Taylor, the antidote to imperfect performance of masculinity, and the school encourages all boys to play. When, on a father–son trip, Karl challenges his father's political philosophy, he is met with a tirade that exemplifies the conflation and corollaries of pro-apartheid ideology, masculinity and affinity for rugby: 'You will play rugby until you become the man I want you to be. No communist kaffir-loving queer will ever set foot in my house ... If it's the last thing I do to you ... I will make you a man' (596). Understanding some of what the game signifies, Karl detests playing rugby, in part because of the performance of violence that it mandates delivering and suffering: he 'hop[es] that [he] will not be injured or scarred ... develop cabbage ears or get a fist in [his] eye' (404).

Karl, who plays the position of lock, has a place in the scrum, where his second-row power is vital – the locks support those in front to give the formation its force. The locks' specific strategy is to bind together and insert their heads between the bodies of their team's prop and hooker, thus sealing the formation. The scrum is the epicenter of hypermasculinity and is a particular site of complicity, especially if it is viewed as symbolic of male homosocial bonding and of patriarchy. Paradoxically, then, it is from this position of literal and figurative inclusion, where male contact is mandatory, that Karl confesses his loathing of rugby and the culture of which it is metonymic: 'My game, my motive – my heart –,' he says, 'is different from theirs even as I engage in theirs, even as I function within the rules of this savage sport' (403–404).

To render the school's complicity with the state even more complex, in *Embrace*, as in 1970s South Africa, the very spaces of rugby and the military become conflated when white schoolchildren take to the rugby field to practise 'cadets' (262). As Gavin Evans (1989, 284) explains, the cadet programme was '[t]he most overt and perhaps the most significant aspect of the militarisation of white schooling'. Its purpose was threefold: 'for the youth to develop a sense of responsibility and love for their country and national flag', 'to instill civil defence in the youth', and 'to train [youth] in good citizenship as a forerunner to their National Service.' The programme's goal, then, was both ideological and practical. This is consistent with Bok's belief that the school has a role in 'prepar[ing boys] for the army' (83). And there's a lot at stake: as Althusser 2001 [1970], 1483), quoting Marx, notes, 'every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time as it produced would not last a year'. Therefore, just as the school must replenish its choir (boys grow up, and their voices change) as well as its sports teams, so the country must keep reproducing the

conditions of production; the parents and the school partner with the state by preparing fresh recruits.

The choir's grand end-of-year concert in Durban honours the South African Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster, and commemorates the school's founding; as such, Behr is paralleling the heinousness of both institutions. For this, the boys have been practising especially hard. The concert may be placed in a Gramscian context and read as a purposeful cultural levitation: Gramsci (1976 [1971], 258) postulates that the state must work 'to raise the great mass of population to a particular cultural and moral level ... which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes'. The concert, like Graham's funeral, may also be viewed through an Althusserian lens: the 'concert' is a figurative one, during which the school (of which the choir is synecdochal) and government (of which the prime minister is synecdochal), ideological state apparatus and repressive state apparatus respectively, come together in recognition that 'no class can hold State power over a long period without ... exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses' (Althusser 2001[1970], 1491).

At this concert, the presence of the Prime Minister, Mayoress (metonymic of phallic mothers), and state broadcasting's television cameras compound the importance of other national symbols, like the flag. Self-congratulatory parents present themselves to honour the phallic order, and to witness their sons' 'per-form'-ance.

As at Graham's funeral, the event ends with the national anthem *Die stem van Suid Afrika*, or, in English *The call of South Africa*. The Afrikaans title is significant because the word '*stem*' means both 'voice' and 'vote'. Before he eventually defects as an adult, Karl/Behr 'votes' by pledging commitment to the 'codes and expectations' that include apartheid ideology, exclusive heterosexuality, willing military performance, and a devotion to rugby.

As an emergent gay boy educated during apartheid, Karl/Behr comes to know well 'the cruelty and pain and hatred raging beneath the every day surface of things' going on in his school (Coetzee 1997, 139), but it takes years before he fully understands that '[w]hat was going on was wrong ... should not be allowed to happen' (ibid.). Later, while writing *Embrace*, he inventories those agents responsible for scar(r)ing his young self, he recognises the school's complicity in inflicting phallic power and its associated violences – like apartheid South African society itself, the school nurtured and shielded its range of political and sexual pederasts along with its other administrators and arbiters of power, but it profoundly minded, and was especially hard on, its queers.

NOTES

1 I use the term 'queer' not as a slur, but in the same sense as is used by Queer Theory, the body of thinking concerned with gender and sexual alterity. Queer theorists use the term

almost gleefully to signify that which is outside of hegemonic 'normality'. The ethos of Queer Theory is to trouble perceptions of what is normal and acceptable, and its use of the term 'queer' is a proud reprisal of the word as derogatory.

2 For those interested in Gender Studies and Queer Theory, reading *Embrace* means recognising that there are many different kinds of masculinities and queernesses in Africa – neither Behr's book nor my study takes into account the multiplicity of experiences of other men in Africa, or those of women, in their encounters with school and state. For some information on this, see, for example, Cheryl Stobie (2007) and Kopano Ratele's oeuvre.

3 For more on how hypermasculinity and apartheid nationalisms were implicated, see also Thomas Blaser (2009), Anne Reef (2010, 2012), Ratele's body of work, amongst others.

4 Christian National Education, the ideological strategy driving the schooling of white children in South Africa during apartheid, was conceived to inculcate apartheid ideology in the white population and prepare it for rule. As Kros (2010, 46) explains, it 'promote[d] the idea of a divinely sanctioned "national spirit" made manifest in religion, culture and language which had to be nurtured in ethnically separate schools'. Its corollary was Bantu Education, a strategic and grievously sub-par system for the education of black South Africans designed to install and maintain white supremacy by choking the possibility of an adequate education for anything but manual labour in the service of whites. For more detail on the origins and implications, see Kros.

5 'Proto-gay' is Sedgwick's (1991) own term. In 2015, I find it problematic because it seems to connote a teleology from effeminacy to homosexuality that is, in many ways, at odds with contemporary Queer Theory, which recognises the fluidity of gender identity, and argues that sexual preferences and gender performance are affected by complex interactions of individual subjectivity with external contingencies.

6 The term 'boy queens' in this context is my own, and is a pun on the boys' emulations of Marie Antoinette as well as their effeminacy in emulating her. I use it in the same spirit as the term 'queer', and as my own linguistic microgesture to speak, to name, to bring into language and thus consciousness, what apartheid (and homophobia generally) preferred to remain invisible and unspeakable.

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