"Break and Be Broken", She Said, "That is the Law of Life": Loss and Racial Melancholia in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*[1]

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Summary

Yvette Christiansë (2003: 373) argues that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission neglected daily narratives of loss in favour of an attempt of a nationwide process of mourning and a subsequent closure of the apartheid past. One account of quotidian losses certainly is Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Agaat* (2004), which focuses on the relationship between the white farm owner Milla and her coloured servant Agaat. Throughout the story, Milla attempts to turn Agaat into a "refined" coloured, maintain control over her body and sexuality. This alienation leads to losses on Milla's part, especially the emotional loss of a potential mother-daughter bond. Because the story is told from Milla's perspective, Agaat's voice is largely silenced. It has often been noted that Agaat uses mimicry in order to subvert Milla's rule. However, critics have largely overlooked Agaat's discriminatory behaviour towards the other coloured farm workers. By drawing on Anne Cheng's concept of racial melancholia, I argue that this behaviour can be seen as Agaat's attempt of melancholically repressing a part of her coloured identity which she has to negate in order to gain acceptance by Milla. The latter's melancholia manifests through the incorporation of Agaat as her lost object of love and the simultaneous rejection of Agaat's racialised body.

Opsomming

Yvette Christiansë (2003: 373) beweer dat die Waarheid-en-versoeningskommissie daaglikse narratiewe van verlies verwaarloos het ten gunste van pogings van 'n nasiewye proses van rou en 'n daaropvolgende afsluiting van die land se apartheidsverlede. Een beskrywing van daaglikse verliese is ongetwyfeld Marlene van Niekerk se roman *Agaat* (2004), wat fokus op die verhouding tussen die blanke plaaseienaar Milla en haar kleurlingbediende Agaat. Deur die hele verhaal probeer Milla om Agaat in 'n "verfynde" kleurling verander deur beheer oor haar liggaam en seksualiteit te behou. Hierdie vervreemding lei tot verliese aan Milla se kant, veral die emosionele verlies van 'n potensiële moeder-dogter-band. Omdat die storie vanuit Milla se perspektief vertel word, word Agaat se stem grootliks stilgemaak.

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[1] The quote in the title stems from van Niekerk's novel (2007: 341). Although I am quoting from the international English translation, entitled *The Way of the Women*, I will use the original title, *Agaat*, to refer to this novel.

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Daar is al dikwels opgemerk dat Agaat spottende nabootsing of mimiek gebruik om Milla se heerskappy te ondermyn. Kritici het egter grootliks Agaat se diskriminerende gedrag teenoor die ander kleurlingplaaswerkers oor die hoof gesien. Met verwysing na Anne Cheng se konsep van rassemelancholie voer ek aan dat hierdie gedrag beskou kan word as Agaat se poging om op melancholiese wyse ’n deel van haar kleurlingidentiteit te onderdruk, wat sy moes prysgee ten einde deur Milla aanvaar te word. Hierdie melancholie manifesteer deur die inkorporasie van Agaat as haar verlore liefde en die gelyktydige verwerping van Agaat se rasgedefinieerde liggaam.

Tracing Loss

Author and critic Yvette Christiansë (2003) argues that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission neglected narratives of quotidian losses in favour of a nationwide process of coming to terms with apartheid politics with the goal of closure and warns that: “those losses that could not be construed as political, that were not the direct effect of the apartheid state’s activities, even if they were indirectly determined or marked by them, are now under threat of remaining unarticulated” (373).

One fictional account which not only focuses on the impact that apartheid had on people’s quotidian lives, but also on the impossibility of maintaining a close relationship “across the colour lines” certainly is Marlene van Niekerk’s critically acclaimed novel *Agaat*. The original text in Afrikaans was published in 2004, while the South African edition of the novel’s English translation by Michiel Heyns came out two years later. This novel focuses on the relationship between a white farm owner, Kamilla (Milla) de Wet, and her coloured surrogate daughter – cum servant – cum nurse, Agaat Lourier. Spanning a period of fifty years the novel tells the story of these two women, who live on a farm, Grootmoedersdrift, in the Western Cape. After finding out that Agaat was mistreated and sexually abused by her brothers and father, Kamilla brings her to Grootmoedersdrift in 1953. Throughout the story, Kamilla attempts to turn the highly traumatised Agaat into a ‘refined’ coloured, educating her enough to set her apart from the rest of the farm workers, yet always attempting to maintain control over her. This alienation leads to various losses on Kamilla’s part, especially the emotional loss of a potential mother-daughter bond towards Agaat which had started to grow before Kamilla degraded her to a servant.

Dominant Racial Melancholia: Racial Rejection, Incorporation, and Marginalisation of the Racial Other

The novel has four narrative strands: the first one depicts the dying, paralysed Milla, who suffers from Motor Neuron Disease, chained to her sickbed in the year 1996, being nursed by Agaat. In this first person narrative, Milla at times feels guilty but, more often than not, her spiteful and suspicious feelings towards Agaat resurface, despite the fact that Milla seeks to establish a reconciliatory attitude towards Agaat on her deathbed. Nevertheless, she also seems to be in need of justification for what has happened between the two women. The second narrative strand consists of flashbacks, beginning in the year 1947, when Milla married her patriarchal and radically segregationist husband Jak. The flashbacks lead up to the year 1985, when Milla’s and Jak’s son, Jakkie, deserts the army and flee the country. The third strand consists of diary entries written by Milla. They show, in their non-chronological order and highly fragmented form that disregards punctuation, how Milla found Agaat, how she rescued her and nursed her back to life. Subsequently, Agaat becomes a kind of surrogate daughter for the childless Milla, whereby the latter always attempts to keep a clear boundary between the child and herself as she knows that in an apartheid state a mother-child relationship between a white woman and a coloured girl is impossible. The last narrative strand is very different from the others in that it is not telling a story (linear or non-linear), but is Milla’s stream-of-consciousness. Written in a lyrical style in which Milla’s voice is still predominantly discernible, it reflects on the two protagonists’ relationship, on Milla’s health, and Agaat’s role as a nurse.

As this brief description of the four narrative strands already indicates, the novel both is and is not telling Agaat’s story, since all of the strands are dominated by Milla’s voice. Agaat is thus, even on a narratological level, marginalised. However, Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009), for instance, have noted that Agaat uses mimicry in order to subvert her white mistress’ rule over her. Moreover, suffering from bulbar paralysis, Milla finds herself depending on Agaat, a dependency which has been considered symbolic for the gradual subversion of power structures on the farm (Buxbaum 2013). Nonetheless, critics seem to have largely overlooked Agaat’s discriminatory behaviour towards the other coloured farm residents. By drawing on Anne Cheng’s concept of racial melancholia (2001), I argue that this behaviour can be seen as Agaat’s attempt of painfully and melancholically repressing and, at the same time, remembering a part of her coloured identity which she has to negate in the first place in order to gain acceptance by Milla.

In his seminal essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917/1953), Sigmund Freud argues that the process of mourning is necessary in order to go on with life after having suffered a loss. Melancholia, in contrast, is defined as pathological, as the person suffering from it does not detach his or her libido from the lost object of love (which does not necessarily have to be another human being, but can also be something more abstract such as a lost country or home). The melancholic person is “psychically stuck” (Cheng 2001: 8) and hence unable to overcome a loss which probably was traumatic at a time in the past. Anne Cheng draws on Freud’s concept of melancholy. However, while Freud refrains from focusing on identity crises as one possible reason for melancholia, Cheng places great emphasis on instances of identity crises and moments of dislocation.

Cheng distinguishes between two different, but interrelated forms of racial melancholia: dominant, white racial melancholia and the melancholy of the racialised subjects. She understands white racial melancholia as the negation and denial of a dominant and privileged (white) group within a society in order to accept responsibility for the discrimination of marginalised groups. The act of exclusion on the one hand, and the tendency of retention of power by discrimination of the racial others on the other, leads to a form of dominant racial melancholia. When the fact of discrimination in society is denied, racialised subjects acquire a constant, "ghostly presence nonetheless" (xi). Furthermore, Cheng coins the term melancholy of the racialised subjects, about which it is slightly more difficult to speak, for to see melancholia as the consequence of racial discrimination, shame and loss of people of colour is to risk "slip[ping] from recognizing to naturalizing injury" (7). Cheng argues that both phenomena, dominant racial melancholia and the melancholy of the racialised subjects, may always manifest themselves differently, yet they have to be seen as defining each other. She suggests that "racial melancholia describes the dynamics that constitute their mutual definition through exclusion. The terms thus denote a complex process of racial rejection and desire on the parts of whites and non-whites" (xi).

This becomes clear in *Agaat* as well: Milla's melancholic attempt of retaining Agaat under control triggers complex and ambivalent reactions in Agaat's psyche, but also leads to Agaat's desire of internalising the white ideal as one consequence. Thus, both Milla's and Agaat's psyches are entangled and interdependent. This interdependence is reminiscent of the writings of Frantz Fanon, especially his seminal *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1967), where he describes the intricate and complex relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Fanon emphasises that the desire for a white ideal of (formerly) colonised people is triggered by the coloniser's extremely racist and cruel behaviour: "There is a fact: white men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (1967: 10). By putting these two facts into such a vexed relation, Fanon implies that the second fact is merely a consequence of the first, that is to say, colonialism and racism trigger inferiority complexes and an internalisation of the white ideal on the part of people of colour. Dominant racial melancholia, that is, the simultaneous exclusion and retention of power over the racial other (Cheng 2001: 10) resonates with Fanon's views and found its most heinous form during apartheid. The apartheid regime's segregationist laws were explicit methods of excluding black and coloured people, while still retaining them under control.

In *Agaat* these dynamic tensions of inclusion and exclusion manifest themselves in a quotidian form. Milla tries to retain Agaat under control from the first instance of their encounter. After being alerted by her mother that things are not going right in the labourers' houses on the farm, Milla visits her old nanny's home and finds Agaat in the cottage. After a couple of failed attempts to speak to the scared and neglected child, a moment occurs between Milla and Agaat that is loaded with vampire motifs:

> [y]ou turned your head with you ear against the child's face and imitated the ggggg-sound. You could feel her breath on your face. This time you heard the ggggg clearly, like a sigh it sounded, like a rill in the fynbos, very soft, and distant, like the sound you hear before you've even realised what you're hearing. That was the beginning. That sound. You felt empty and full at the same time from it, felt sorrow and pity surging in your throat. Ggggg at the back of the throat, as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself. […]. Something convulsed in your lower belly. […] And you wanted to gather it, fold it away inside yourself in a place from which you could safely retrieve it.
>
> (Van Niekerk 2007: 589-590)

Milla does not only literally incorporate a part of Agaat, she also sees herself as having gained something that she cannot name yet, but which she sees as belonging to her alone now. This form of sucking something out of Agaat, incorporating it into her own being is rendered even more vampiric if one has a closer look at the imitation of sound. The guttural "ggggg" that Milla discerns when she demands to know the girl's name is closely linked to Agaat's whole being, not only to her name, but to the occurrence of this sound in nature. During his last return visit from the army, Milla's son, Jakkie, states: "Do you remember, Gaat? The sound of the sea in a shell? The sound of the wind in the wheat? […] everything sounded like your name" (528). Thus, the guttural sound is connected with life; the movement and uncontrollable elements of nature. Since Milla refers to the sound as "the beginning" of their relationship and because she incorporates something of that sound by symbolically sucking it out of Agaat's being, I consider their first encounter, this vampiric scene in which Milla leaves the child with the feeling of owning her, as a key moment for understanding the two women's relationship. From their first encounter, a power struggle is discernible: Milla demands to know the girl's name while Agaat cannot or will not answer. Agaat shields herself from the approaching woman, while Milla sees herself as her saviour when she says: "Tell me, then you come to me, then I'll stop them hurting you, the oumies says they do bad things to you" (589). Here, Milla already tries to "own" Agaat, to elevate herself into a saviour figure, and also to bend her to her will by punishing her. Hence when Milla fails to retrieve Agaat's name, she threatens to ask the latter's violent father.

An additional component in their relationship, which becomes clear only when Milla takes Agaat to the farm, is the white woman's attempt of "othering" Agaat (Said 1978; Spivak 1985). This is visible on multiple levels and is always accompanied by an extremely ambivalent behaviour towards her surrogate daughter. After taking Agaat to Grootmoedersdrift, Milla attempts to "humanise" the little girl. On the one hand, she tries to heal the child's wounds and she also gives Agaat a private education in Afrikaans, not only in the daily language, but above all in music, rhymes and folk tales:

> Milla teaches the intelligent girl from key texts one for each aspect of knowledge which she is expected to learn, allowing for no deviation from the one authority […]. Agaat's four master narratives are: The Bible for spiritual matters, a handbook for farmers for agricultural matters, an Afrikaans folk-song book for cultural matters, and a book on embroidery for a practical – and appropriately feminine and domestic – form of aesthetics.
>
> (Stobie 2009: 63)

Thus, the decision to give Agaat an education is marked by several ambivalences. Firstly, the four sources from which Agaat is taught are symbolic of Milla's attempt to indoctrinate Agaat with Judeo-Christian and Afrikaner Nationalist beliefs without pointing to other modes of identity formation. Besides, Milla sees her role and function as a missionary project in which the humanitarian, "civilised" white woman rescues a poor coloured child from devastation. She thus refers to the task of taking care of Agaat as both a "commission" and a "vocation" (Van Niekerk 2007: 438). Although Milla believes that she takes care of Agaat as well as she can, even calling her "my child" (593), she treats the totally traumatised girl very harshly before transporting her to the farm, displaying in the process her ambivalent attitude towards the child: "You held the dropper of valerian at the ready and on entering grabbed the child, clamped fast her head, forced open her mouth" (603). This process of seeing Agaat as her child, yet distancing herself from her in the next instance, is repeated throughout Agaat's childhood. For example, at one moment Milla crawls into bed with Agaat after a row with Jak (565), but then she refuses to transcend racial boundaries for Agaat's sake: "Too much intimacy not a good thing now. She must learn *to know her place here*" (506, emphasis mine). Consistent with apartheid's categorisations, Agaat's place is not as a surrogate daughter; her role can only ever be as a servant. Consequently, Milla prepares her for this role from early on: "I'm getting Agaat used to her role in the house. Put an apple box in front of the sink so that she can reach. Now washes the coffee cups every morning for me" (512).

Through this othering and combinations of verbal and physical violence, she attempts to control Agaat, shaping her according to her own eccentricities. This is where Milla's dominant racial melancholia plays itself out most dramatically. On the one hand, Agaat is Milla’s object of love which she has appropriated from the very beginning of their relationship. On the other hand, Agaat is always lost to her due to her position as the racial other. Milla, who “can neither fully relinquish nor accommodate” (Cheng 2001: xi) Agaat, constantly attempts to retain her by discriminating and marginalising her. Thus, apartheid’s laws are enacted on a daily basis. Agaat is not allowed to enter spaces designated for whites only. She must always remain outside, in the car, or in spaces where she is not seen by white people. For example, during Agaat’s adolescence, the De Wet family frequently goes on a beach holiday and Milla reflects: “perhaps [Agaat] wants to swim. Please just at a time and place where she won’t offend because the beach is for whites only. Not that I needed to say it. She knows her place” (Van Niekerk 2007: 283). This admission does not only show that Milla does not question apartheid’s laws (in this case, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953), but that she believes she has shaped Agaat enough in order for her to “know her place” and not to question her role as being the other, the excluded and marginalised person within the family.

Cheryl Stobie (2009) argues that Milla, by the mere fact of having adopted Agaat, can be seen as a person who finds herself situated between the marginalised other and the oppressive Afrikaner society. Borrowing a term from Trinh Minh-ha, she states that Milla is “not quite the same, not quite the other. She stands in that indeterminate threshold where she constantly drifts in and out” (Stobie 2009: 62). This is certainly true in the first months after Agaat’s adoption, since Milla’s decision to adopt the girl is met with criticism by the white community: her friend Beatrice lets her know that her relationship towards Agaat is regarded as abnormal, for instance (Van Niekerk 2007: 573). Likewise, Jak refuses to have anything to do with Agaat’s upbringing (507). Thus Milla finds herself alienated from society to a certain degree. However, as the passages referred to above show, Milla refuses to go against apartheid’s rules for Agaat’s sake. Thus she is, from the very beginning, complicit with the apartheid regime and its racist ideologies. Yet, because Milla has no children of her own, and because she invests a lot of time and effort in Agaat’s upbringing (Stobie 2009: 62), she becomes emotionally attached to Agaat and thus finds it difficult to maintain these invented boundaries (Van Niekerk 2007: 570).

This, however, changes significantly when Milla becomes pregnant after twelve years of marriage and gives birth to her only son, Jakkie. Agaat, who may previously have been regarded as a surrogate daughter by Milla, is now officially degraded to a servant. She is given the back room and takes henceforth the role of child-minder and farm assistant for the white family. This has devastating consequences for the two women’s relationship: it becomes loaded with tension, suspicion, and punishment. On Milla’s side this punishment is open, while Agaat can only punish her mistress through silence and by drawing Milla’s son closer to herself than to his own mother.

Also, after degrading Agaat to a servant, her colouredness becomes a much more prominent issue for Milla. Racial retention (Cheng 2001: 10) and the attempt of desexualising Agaat are central for the white woman during Agaat's adolescence.

From the start of their relationship Milla refers to racial markers which highlight Agaat's colouredness and all the ambivalences and stereotypical views that have troubled coloured identities in South Africa. From the very beginning of Agaat's adoption, Milla is repelled by the body of the child. In 1954 she writes in a diary entry: "I can't help it, sometimes she nauseates me (yes, I'm ashamed of myself, but it's true!). The long jaw, the bulbous eyes that can glare so coercively, the untameable woolly mop" (Van Niekerk 2007: 517-518). Agaat is always racialised by Milla, who, however, as long as Agaat is still a child, cannot help but feel close to her despite herself: "We are one, Agaat and I, I feel it stir in my navel" (468). This unity and oneness, which she feels when she is with Agaat, again points to Milla's melancholic ambivalence towards her surrogate daughter. This closeness, this oneness, is the image of one having incorporated the other and it stands in stark contrast to the harsh treatment that Agaat undergoes at the hands of Milla. Milla thus ambivalently oscillates between love and hate for the child, between the incorporation of Agaat as her object of love and the rejection of that very same object.

When Agaat officially becomes the family's servant on her twelfth birthday, Milla actively tries to control Agaat's coloured body, more specifically her hair and her sexuality, which again points to the racial rejection and ostracisation of the young girl by her white "mistress". When Agaat is shown her future room, Milla tells her what she expects of her in the future:

> [a]nd I opened the little curtain taterata-a-a! and showed the black uniform dresses. That's all you'll wear six days a week then you can save your house clothes I said […] The caps were the most difficult. I said I know you don't like things on your head but you'll just have to like it or lump it. Asked her nicely she must put on a clean one every day &c pin it up nicely. […] *I thought I'd show her how to put on the cap &c I said I don't want to see a strand of hair*.
> (pp. 111-112; abbreviations and punctuation in the original; emphasis mine)

It is significant that Milla is intent on subduing and taming Agaat's hair, which has always been a source of annoyance to her. Not only does she say that she is at times disgusted by it (512), but she also mentions at some point during Agaat's childhood that she "can't manage the woolly head all that well" (565). From Milla's perspective, the cap disguises a racial marker which, according to Mercer, "has been historically devalued as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin" (Mercer in Erasmus 2000: 381). This indicates, for Milla at least, that Agaat has been properly “tamed” and “put in her place”. It is telling that Milla sees Agaat only once without her cap during her adult life: “You felt as if you’d caught her naked […]. The unkempt hair mass made her look feral. You wanted to look away, but you couldn’t. The hair filled the otherwise tidy room like a conspiracy against everything in league with daylight and subordination” (van Niekerk 2007: 415). Carvalho and Van Vuuren (2009: 51) argue that “[t]he subservience inherent in Agaat’s cap is therefore at odds with the unruliness of her hair and suggests that she has a binary identity, split between her role as compliant servant and bold dissident”. In encountering Agaat without her cap, Milla is confronted with the fact that the cap may hide what she does not want to see, but it certainly does not entirely curtail Agaat’s “untameable nature”. It is not only Agaat’s hair which Milla is bent on “taming”, but also her sexuality.

From early on it is clear that Agaat will not be able to bear children. This is a consequence of her having suffered multiple violations at her parents’ home. Milla’s reaction – “all the better” (Van Niekerk 2007: 430) – shows that she does not want Agaat to have children, as she associates colouredness with “miscegenation”, that is, the shameful and violent encounter between the colonisers and the colonised black women in South Africa. Thus, Milla can only accept Agaat in her home if she is able to erase, hide and “tame” racial signs that would otherwise display, in the white woman’s eyes, her shameful coloured identity.

The Melancholy of the Racialised Subjects: Mechanisms of self-Rejection and Subversive Elements

Despite the fact that she constantly others Agaat, Milla does not want her to mix with the coloured farm workers either (150, 563), indelibly inscribing the idea in the child that she is too refined for their company. Agaat is being maintained, trapped as it were, in a liminal alternative, yet still racially categorised space that is defined by Milla. This has devastating consequences for Agaat’s psyche. Cheng states that while dominant racial melancholia expresses itself through the aforementioned dynamics of exclusion and simultaneous appropriation of the racial others, the melancholy of the racialised subjects could be seen as the consequence of a desire for a “never-possible perfection” (Cheng 2001: xi), that is to say, the desire to gain acceptance by white society by being recognised as equal. In other words, racial exclusion in the form of the non-acceptance of people of colour within racially classified society may lead to the very desire to strive for a white ideal, which in turn fuels a rupture of one’s coloured identity.

Agaat’s in-between position leads her to constantly affirm, yet simultaneously negate, her coloured identity. Van Vuuren and Carvalho (2009: 40) note that despite the fact that Agaat’s voice is largely silenced throughout the text, Agaat mimics in order to subvert her white mistress's rule over her: "Armed with the culture, or "tools" of her foster mother, Agaat attempts to "break down the house of the master", or to challenge the white woman's dominant perspective and provide another dimension to the story she tells". This is evident, for instance, when Agaat teaches Jakkie the folksongs and rhymes that Milla taught her, "but what she makes of it is the Lord knows a veritable Babel" (Van Niekerk 2007: 329). Besides, when Jak becomes more interested in the upbringing of Jakkie, wanting to separate him from Milla and Agaat, the latter throws herself in the middle of the manipulative battles that Milla and Jak fight over their son and sides with whomever it is more convenient for her own good. Ultimately, she manages better than his parents to influence and shape Jakkie's identity, not only by love, but above all by the same manipulative strategies that Jak is using in order to draw Jakkie to himself.

Lara Buxbaum argues convincingly that Agaat, though marginalised by Milla, still affirms her "destabilising presence" (Buxbaum 2011: 40) on the farm, by planting fennel seeds all over Grootmoedersdrift. The seeds are given to her by Milla during her childhood. When Milla orders her to remove the fennel, she refuses to do so. In the present, Milla states that the fennel is one of Agaat's trademarks. Jak ironically calls her "Minister of Fennel" (Van Niekerk 2007: 564). Buxbaum argues that "Agaat's fennel seeds exist as a means of challenging apartheid's cartographic discourse […]. The fennel, then, metonymically represents [Agaat's] body which exists as a 'blind spot' on the racially constructed road, in Milla's narrative [and] in apartheid cartography" (Buxbaum 2011: 40).

However, I would like to argue that there is a somewhat more problematic side to the formation of Agaat's identity, apart from her role as a marginalised figure who resists categorisations. In a deeply troubling way, Agaat repeats or mimes the injuries inflicted upon her by Milla. Agaat is, from the very beginning of her life on the farm, denied the possibility of, firstly, overcoming the loss of her familiar environment, for as violent as that life was, she was torn out of a familiar context without further explanation. Secondly, she seems to have had an emotional bond with her older sister Lise at least. Consequently, while Milla ensures the child's physical healing from her childhood trauma, she never helps her to work through what happened to her, but she treats her harshly instead, inflicting punishment on Agaat until she bends her will. She is frequently locked up in her room or denied food until she does what Milla demands her to do, for instance (see for example Van Niekerk 2007: 423, 502, 503). During her childhood and adolescence Agaat mimes these injuries, which always have to do with power and marginalisation, punishment and the deliberate infliction of pain, while her childhood trauma of having been maltreated by her father and brothers remains unspeakable, buried under the psychic injuries caused by Milla.

The first instance in which Agaat mimes Milla's cruel behaviour occurs after Milla threatens her with phoning the police in order to tell them that Agaat has misbehaved: "Gave her a good fright, […], made as if I was telling the constable on the phone how naughty she was, asked that they should come and take her away and lock her up in a cell with bars behind a great iron door without food and without pee-pot […]. Now she's good and terrified of the telephone" (Van Niekerk 2007: 517). A couple of days later, Milla realises that Agaat repeats this scene, that Milla repeatedly acts out to scare her, on a doll that Agaat plays with:

> [s]he deliberately places the doll filled with river sand in such a position that she *has to fall off. Then she falls off, then she gets a slap, then she falls off, then she gets a finger in the eye!* Sit, doll, sit! If you can't sit up straight nicely and look at me, and answer me when I speak to you, then I'm phoning the police! […] hello police? Come and fetch her, lock her up! She's full of stuffing!
>
> (Van Niekerk 2007: 518; emphasis mine)

It is not so much Agaat's words which are unsettling, but rather the fact that she exerts physical and psychological power over the rag-doll. It is not only the telephone scene which is repeated, but above all, the unsettling power struggle between Agaat and her foster mother, whereby in the incessant repetition Agaat acts out Milla's part.

This recuperation and repetition of Agaat's trauma recurs again during her teenage years. However, this time, the object of her rage is not the rag-doll anymore: she directs her rage against "the fantasmatic likeness of [herself]" (Cheng 2001: 18). Agaat treats the coloured farm workers and their families in an extremely aggressive way after she is sent to them by Milla in order to hand out medication after pork measles had broken out on the farm:

> [y]ou [Milla] saw how she grabbed the children by the hair and pulled their heads back and clamped their noses until they opened their mouths. With every spoonful she scolded. This is what you get for shitting in the bushes like wild things! […] Rubbish! She screeched and she up and kicked, one, two kicks into the bundle with her black school shoes so that they dispersed chowchow.
>
> (Van Niekerk 2007: 258-259)

Here, Agaat mimes, in a traumatic repetition, Milla's cruel behaviour towards herself when she was brought to the farm (603). She may also be shamefully reminded of her own childhood when she refused to use the toilet, but defecated in the garden instead, for which she was punished by Milla after the latter had discovered what she had done (436). Milla's cruel attempt at "taming" Agaat and of "putting her in her place" is repeated by Agaat who, in this scene, cruelly others the coloured farm workers, just as she has been othered by her white foster mother.

It would be too simplistic, however, to read Agaat's behaviour only as a pathological reaction in the Freudian sense to childhood losses of motherly love and Agaat's coloured identity. She had to negate this troubled identity in the presence of her surrogate mother and this act leaves her irreversibly damaged and melancholic, as it were, unable to mourn this loss. Rather, within this melancholic repetition of her trauma something else is implicit: Agaat's miming of her own injury "offers the profound and disturbing suggestion that the denigrated body comes to voice, and the pleasure of that voice is amplified only by assuming the voice of authority" (Cheng 2001: 75).

In the fictional present, when it is clear that the power structures on the farm have changed, Agaat confronts Milla for the first time with her rage, anger and her unmourned losses. When Agaat finally presents Milla with the maps of the farm and region that the latter has been desiring to see all this time, Agaat also displays, for the first time, her disfigured right arm (Van Niekerk 2007: 363). The disfiguration of Agaat's right arm and leg is a consequence of the abuse that she suffered at her parental home even before she was born. Especially her arm is, during her whole life, a cause for anguish and shame. Milla notices soon after her adoption that she tries to hide her arm from view, which is why Milla sews the right sleeves of Agaat's clothes slightly longer, so that no one is able to see her disfigured body part. However, readers are constantly reminded by Milla of Agaat's impairment, especially in moments of crisis that happen on the farm. For example, Jakkie's premature birth in which Agaat has to deliver the baby, comes to mind: "her little arm hanging like something that had been loose all the time, something that had broken off that she was hiding. You thought, God help me, you need two hands for a delivery" (157).

In the present, however, when Milla is bound to her bed and unable to communicate apart from blinking with her eyes through which she is able to speak to Agaat, Agaat confronts her foster mother symbolically with her childhood traumas, by exposing her disfigured arm: "[s]he strips the sleeve of her bad arm up all the way to the elbow. As if she's preparing to grab a snake behind the neck. She looks straight at me. All the better to show you, my child. She shakes the little arm at me" (363). Buxbaum (2013: 96) states that "[f]or the first time in the novel, Agaat appears to lose her self-control as well as any embarrassment about her [arm] as evidence of her suppressed anger finally surfaces explicitly". While little narrative space is given to Agaat, she lets her body speak in order to show that she has not overcome her traumatic past. Her disfigured right arm may be viewed as symbol for the loss of her two homes: her parental home, which she had lost even before she was born, for she was not welcomed into it; and her second home, Milla's farm, from which she was thrown out when she entered puberty. The display of her right arm is accompanied by words. This is the first time in the novel that Agaat speaks about her injuries and losses in her own voice:

> "Mailslot! Lowroof! Candle-end! Lockupchild! Without pot! Shatin-thecorner! Shatupon! Dusterstick on Agaatsarse. Au-Au-Au! Ai-Ai-Ai! Neversaysorry! Sevenyearschild. And then? Can-you-believe-it? Backyard! Skivvy-room! Highbed! Brownsuitcase! Whitecap! Heartburied! Nevertold! Unlamented! Good-my-Arse! Now-my-Arse! Now's-the-Time!"
>
> (sic; Van Niekerk 2007: 367)

This account of her injuries and losses is highly fragmented, indicative of her trauma, and does not hint at a new beginning or even at a process of speaking and thus inception of a healing process, as was intended in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for instance. Rather, it seems that Agaat has merely transformed her melancholia into anger, which may not give her a sense of closure, but does empower her to a certain degree to speak out, if only in a fragmented form, against the injustices of the past performed on her body and psyche.

Milla, in contrast, holds onto the child that she has long lost until the very end of the story. The final scene, where she pictures herself dying, "in my hand the hand of the small Agaat" (604), has been regarded as "[unlocking] a spirit of generosity and reconciliation" by Cheryl Stobie (2009: 69). However, I argue that it can also be seen as Milla's melancholic refusal to let go of her lost object of love that she is unable to relinquish until the very end of the narrative.

Conclusion

In closing, I suggest that the ongoing attachments, the mechanisms of racial rejections and desire, and the impossibility of a reconciliation between the two women point to continuous tensions within interracial relationships in post-apartheid South Africa. Reading *Agaat* through the lens of racial melancholia has shown that white power and dominance do not vanish after a change of power structures. While earlier texts by white South African writers, such as J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) or Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* (1998) emphasise the deep-seated dividedness between South Africa's black and white populations, *Agaat* draws attention to a different phenomenon. Through the exploration of the two protagonists' intimate and racially troubled relationship that is dominated by various power struggles, Van Niekerk's novel shows the huge extent to which both the oppressed and the oppressor's psyches are intertwined in a post-apartheid context. In this respect Van Niekerk's novel might be unique within post-2000 writing in South Africa in that it explores notions of racial exclusion by retention, mechanisms of self-rejection, and white dominance in such a powerful way.

The text does not only achieve this by drawing attention to the changes that the protagonists' relationship undergo that are always related to questions of power and racialisation, but above all, by highlighting the painful effect that white power and dominance has had on the quotidian lives of those who are othered and racialised.

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