

Transgressions/Transitions In Three Post-1994 South African Texts: Pamela Jooste's *Dance With a Poor Man's Daughter*, Bridget Pitt's *Unbroken Wing* and Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse*

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Summary

The representations and the writing self of three South African writers, two white women and one male of Malay descent, are explored against apartheid identity paradigms and the postmodernist revisioning of the Enlightenment notion of the self as complex and constantly shifting. The focus in the article is on the reformulations of the self by the crossing of actual and conceptual boundaries to show dominating patterns as well as failures, silences, displacements and transformations.

Opsomming

Die voorstellings en die skrywer self van drie Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers, twee wit vroulike skrywers en een manlike van Maleier afkoms, word ondersoek teen die agtergrond van apartheidsidentiteit paradigmas en die postmodernistiese hersiening van die Verligting-idee van die self as kompleks en voortdurend veranderend. Die fokus van die artikel is op die herformulerings van die self deur die oorstek van werklike en konseptuele grense om die dominerende patrone, sowel as die mislukkings, stiltes, verplasings en transformasies, aan te toon.

The idea of a fixed, unified self as natural and inevitable has long been shattered by postmodernism. Among other long-held beliefs the postmodern deconstructs

the magnificent Enlightenment swindle of the autonomous, stable, and self-contained ego that is supposed to be able to act independently of its own history, its own indigenist strands of meaning-making and cultural and linguistic situatedness and free from inscriptions in the discourses of, among others, gender, race, and class.

(Giroux & Maclaren 1994: 196)

Rather than a stable category the shifting self is dynamic, complex and relative. The self comes into being in relation and in connection to other people. The process is ongoing as the self becomes a series of roles, conformities, contradictions, idiosyncracies, formulations and reformulations moreso if there is self-critique. The postmodern notion of the self as a complex, fluid entity, capable of constant refashioning of itself is liberating particularly in a country historically and, regardless of 1994, still obsessed by the definition of identity as a certain fixed reality systematically categorised and placed or displaced within definite, unchanging boundaries.

This paper seeks to show how that self, the rigid apartheid invention, is subverted, but not always to the extent or degree imagined, by breaching long-entrenched racial barriers in three novels published after 1994. The novels, Pamela Jooste's *Dance with a Poor Man's Daughter* (1998), Bridget Pitt's *Unbroken Wing* (1998) and Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse* (1997) are about a fictional narrating self and main characters respectively, transgressing racial, social, political and economic boundaries basically set up by the apartheid system. Jooste takes on the persona of an eleven-year-old "coloured" girl during the time of "black spot" removals in the solidifying apartheid decades of the 50s and 60s in the Cape. Pitt's Ruth participates, though not very successfully in her view, in the anti-apartheid struggle and has a "coloured" lover. Dangor's Omar goes in the opposite direction by "playing white" (Jewish) Oscar and marrying into "white" South Africa. The novels by the two white women writers are set in apartheid times while the male writer of Malay origin goes further by extending his magic-realist narrative from the apartheid to the early post-apartheid, post-1994, periods.

Given the origins and history of this country the setting common to all three novels can be taken symbolically to signify an attempt at self-review and perhaps correction by a return to the starting point of some self-arrivals and self-formations in the country. The first two novels are set entirely in Cape Town while the third shifts eventually to the Mother City from Johannesburg and back again, which tells another side of the complex and diversified South African peoples' story.

The transgressions, that may also be considered transitions/crossings in light of expressed intentions, of the writer Jooste, as the narrating self, and the characters, Ruth and Omar, will be explored in terms of the continuous formation, negotiations and reformation of identity and the self. The aim is to show how the self is both socially formed and self-negotiated, often self-deceivingly so. The self, as reflected in the narrative, will be the focus, with its mixture of attitudes, beliefs and emotions as it attempts not always successfully to transcend deeply rooted psychological barriers designed to isolate and divide. The examination of the unstable self transgressing into the once forbidden, the tabooed will also serve to bring to the surface hitherto hidden

or unexpected layers of the complex South African experience as we struggle, in the years after 1994, to take control over our identities and the meanings that we now desire to be. It is also to show the reality not of a “rainbow nation” but a rainbow society striving by shattering racial enclaves, apartheid separateness and divided hearts to come into being.

To begin with, the writer’s white-woman self, as reflected in Jooste’s adoption of the persona, the voice, of a “coloured” girl and her (Jooste’s) efforts to crawl under her dark skin and “tell” her life during hardening apartheid times, that the writer acknowledges and, yet, in the process, explains away needs to be closely examined. Jooste explains how her coloured nanny took her, as a child, home to the traditional Muslim quarter of Cape Town and how her (the nanny’s) attitudes and view of life played “a large part in shaping her [Jooste’s] own”; at the same time, although the past experience shows how a sympathetic closeness to the characters may have developed, it is an oversimplification and obliterating of the complex nature of positionality and voice, particularly in the race/power situation of apartheid South Africa (Jooste 1998: 10). Jooste is, certainly, not unaware of the complexities involved since she says further in her author’s note to the novel, “but I was a white child and my life was different. Perhaps it was this difference that fascinated me and made me such a keen observer of what life was like across the colour line” (Jooste 1998: 10). It is because she recognises “difference” and the “colour line” that her Lily becomes, from the pivotal point of “difference”, something else. Mediated by the awareness of “difference” the authorial viewpoint takes on the disturbing guise of the customarily hierarchical in a white supremacist society. The narrative is about Lily and her family, but it is also about Jooste the writer, and her cultural and psychic baggage that is dragged into what may ostensibly be good intentions and her notions of herself. To throw some light Spivak explains the two meanings of “representation”:

Which would have been clear to Marx, writing in German, but which English usage elides: “treading in your shoes, wearing your shoes, that’s *Vertretung*. Representation in that sense” political representation. *Darstellung* – *Dar*, “there”, same cognate. *Stellen*, is “to place”, so “placing there”. *Representing*: “proxy” and “portrait” Now, the thing to remember is that in the act of representing politically, you actually represent yourself and your constituency in the portrait sense, as well.

(Landry & Maclean 1996: 6)

The two meanings that are captured more accurately in two German words help to unpack the narrative voice called Lily and the English word “representation” into the aesthetic or theatrical sense of representation, the restaging, the

portraiture and the “actual being-in-the-other’s-shoes” (Landry & Maclean 1994: 197-198). Moreover, Jooste from what she says at certain points in her interviews believes the narrative is based on a literal referent; what it really is is an unstable identification with imagined, negotiated configurations. She also assumes she knows the self that narrates the story. But as Landry and Maclean sum up, “there is no *Vertretung* without *Darstellung*, without dissimulation: the two terms are locked into complicity with one another. Deconstruction perpetually reminds us of this complicity, which fundamentalism would pretend to do without” (Jooste 1996: 6).

The want of insight on Jooste’s part of what her Lily, her narrative invention, is really about, is extended when she says in an interview with Silke Hunerkoch that she chose to tell the story through Lily because she is “old enough to see things clearly. But she’s not old enough to be politicised. She doesn’t take a stance. I didn’t want to write a political book – we’re all so sick of the polemics. Just let Lily tell her story and the reader fill in the political details” (Jooste quoted by Hunerkoch 1998: 105). Her line of reasoning reveals a belief in a naive sense of “purity”, an uncluttered, uncontaminated narrative presence that she, unmindful of all manner of sedimentations, believes can be easily assumed. It is a stance, unmistakably authoritative and editorialising, that is evident even while she tries to talk the politics of herself away in the interview with Hunerkoch.

Belief in a pure narrative presence is elaborated upon in another interview with Joy Cameron-Dow on the Safm radio programme “Bookshelf” of 28 February 1999, when she says that she acts as a channel for characters who come to her, and because she is used by the characters to voice their stories she, the white woman, feels no need to apologise for “coloured” Lily. This conviction is reiterated in the author’s note prefacing the novel: “Some stories insist on being told” (Jooste 1998: 9). But the sentiment jars sharply with another in the same note when she writes: “what happens in these pages did happen”, a sentiment which harks back to the “literal referent” point made earlier (p. 9). A set of opposites, the writer as medium or channel and the representational mimetic writer which when added to what has already been distinguished in the narrative voice, *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*, further complicates the interplay of elements in Jooste’s fictional Lily-voice.

The probing of the narrative voice is to interrogate the claims made by the author, the identity assumed, the identity believed to have the truth. In a sense the interrogating leads to the uncovering of another kind of truth; at one and the same time it brings to the fore the doubling and the subverting of the privileging of identity. That is, even as the coloured fictional girl-self is privileged by foregrounding it works to privilege the white-woman identity.

As a result of the forces at play, the privileging that doubles upon itself even as it is subverted, carries over into the publishing and knowledge-making

domain where as a result of past practices economies of truths are continuously processed and disseminated. With her journalistic background Jooste has access, even more in these South Africa-friendly days, to discursive opportunities. Her privilege is further reinforced by her publishers in London who “really know very little about that [coloured] community and they certainly didn’t know the difference between ‘coloured’ and ‘black’” as Jooste herself is quick to remark (Jooste quoted by Hunerkoch 1998:107).

To help the publishers picture “coloureds” Jooste sent them a photo of Gloria Arendz, the “well-known society beauty whose brother Errol is a fashion designer in Cape Town. The picture of Lily on the book actually shows Gloria as a young girl”, which may convey the way some “coloureds” may look but is fraught with other problems. One that immediately springs to mind is that it masks the reality of specificity and individuality as the “coloured” people are homogenised, collapsed into the somewhat privileged Arendz. By using the picture of Arendz the actual experience of Jooste, the child, with her “coloured” nanny and her family, the inspiration for the novel is compromised in essentialising apartheid fashion.

Jooste, as has already been shown, is aware of the tricky situation in which she is not the first white writer to find herself. She is preceded by other writers such as Elsa Joubert (*Poppie Nongena*) and J.M. Coetzee (*Life and Times of Michael K.*). The point of the interrogation is not to silence white persons speaking even for blacks but to scrutinise the approach, the justifications, rationalisations and self-beliefs in a country where a race, an appearance, a voice and access to writing and publishing are predetermined givens. Well aware of this Coetzee problematises his “speaking for the other” in *Michael K.*, where the eponymous protagonist remains voiceless to highlight, as Spivak does, how representation, naming is compromised to a great extent by the teller of the tale, the presiding author, the practice of authorship or for that matter a reading, meaning-making community.

Though Jooste’s situation is not the same, Coetzee’s comments on his translation of the Dutch poet Achterberg go further into the complexities involved in “speaking for the other”, particularly if the other is one of the oppressed blacks. He says, “the perfect solution is impossible ...[because] there is never enough closeness to it” (Coetzee 1992: 88). The result is a

shift of value Something must be “lost”; features embodying certain complexes of values must be replaced with features embodying different complexes of values At such moments the translator chooses in accordance with his [sic] conception of the whole – there is no way of simply translating the words. These choices are based, literally, on preconceptions, prejudgment, prejudice.

(Coetzee 1992: 88)

That there is no neutrality in translating points even more strongly to the compromised position of “white writing” about blacks in South Africa.

To add to which Jooste’s approach justified by a childhood intimacy is also, in a sense, a denial of voice, an unspoken conviction that Lily or the “coloured” she represents cannot speak for herself but can only be spoken for. Her novel is not the result of frank open exchange between herself and “coloureds” but the writing of a white South African gate-keeper professing “untheorised solidarity, without liabilities” (Spivak 1996a: 271). Besides which even if her novel is accepted as testimonial work, diachronic processes of textual negotiation, it is additionally compromised by being commodified. This raises discomfoting questions about perhaps unsuspected motives for crossing colour lines, particularly since Jooste’s experience goes back to childhood, the archival source that is transformed into a commodity of exchange.

The lack of a sense of aporias or ethico-historical dilemmas is evident in the greater scheme of publishing where Jooste’s novel has attracted “quite a lot of film interest”; it is also the recipient of the Commonwealth Best First Book Award for the African Region, the Sanlam Literary Award, and the Book Data South African Booksellers Choice Award (Hunerkoeh 1998: 108). Perhaps the film interest and the other prizes may have something to do with the novel being diagnosed as a case of exoticisation, which is not far off the truth, considering the way the photograph of Gloria becomes its cover (Suleri 1991: 11-12).

In a way the novel as a piece of compromised writing caught up in the web of conventional discursive practices, from production to circulation, is in the name of decolonisation, good intentions and the intimacy claimed with an informant “coloured” group, really a series of neo- or re-colonisations or “ontological imperialism” as Emmanuel Levinas would say. It may also be likened to a “belittling befriending” similar to the production of *Poppie Nongena*; Jooste’s effort is *Darstellung*, the production of the subaltern subject, a portrait, an immobilisation in the name of “doing good” and yet “with an implicit assumption of cultural supremacy which is legitimised by unexamined romanticisation” (Spivak 1996b: 293).

This is borne out together with essentialising in the larger than life “dead uncle Maxie”, the gangster, who “died with a knife in his ribs”, uncle Gus-Seep, the drunk, hawker and punter, cousin Royston, the apprentice-gangster, uncle Errol, the homosexual ballroom-dancer who did not return home after one of his work-trips to England on the Union Castle Liner, and Lily’s aberrant unwed mother, Gloria, who leaves her with her grandmother and aunt Stella, to seek a better life as a gangster’s moll in Johannesburg (Jooste 1998:16). Lily is represented as having a loving woman-dominated family life but at the same time the representations reinforce and promote stereotypes of “coloureds”. In

the words of bell hooks:

They are a fantasy, a projection into the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound where there is distance. They are an invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed.

(hooks 1995: 38)

The dilemma is in no way resolved when Jooste herself says, “I realised recently that those people who are real to me seem larger than life to others” (Hunerkoeh 1998: 107). Her “real”, from what has already been discussed, is highly questionable and so is her “kind of childhood experience”, that is memories, out of which she “tend[s] to write” (p. 107).

The story is also couched in certain, unmistakeable, Cape “coloured” patterns of speech which capture the down-to-earth but fatalistic attitudes in reinforcingly limiting clichés. Jooste certainly has a good ear for common expressions and speech patterns to create verbal portraits of the “coloureds” in the English sociolect they use. The strings of words, repetitive circular word-bites, while creating flavour, atmosphere and humour, through mimicry, also lead to freezing character into caricature. Ventriloquism, mimicking, “ethnic” speech habits and patterns especially when the controlling narrative voice is that of an invented eleven-year-old girl finally succeed in creating a superficial skimming of the surface of lives, albeit quite comically at times in what turns out to be a heroic story-line. Perhaps because of that it also simplifies, masks and blocks the writer from getting to grips with the characters who are for the most part portraits. By so doing the writer subsumes a definition of herself as the positive element in standard binary categorisation.

Jooste depicts one variety of agency and transition that loops back upon itself into essentialising in textuality which writes her (Jooste), the narrating self, as fractured, fraught with sometimes contradictory unexamined identifications. However, Pitt in her narration of a period in the life of fringe-activist, white, middle-class Ruth, places contradictory identifications, even as she too, like Jooste at times but not always as blindly, reproduces a version of the status quo under the spotlight. As presented by Pitt, Ruth takes into her relationship with Jack, her sexually exciting, yet troubling, “coloured” musician-activist and the anti-apartheid struggle a mixture of attitudes, beliefs and emotions (including perhaps though never explicitly stated, the attraction to the forbidden and the mythic), which opens up for scrutiny mixed-race relationships and white involvement in mainly black struggles in South Africa. Ruth’s, and in truth the writer’s, transgressions into the interstitial space of crossroads also incorporate legal and moral connotations of trespassing. Henderson renders it thus:

Breaking down structures of resistance not only speaks to breaching the ramparts that bolster the systems of containment and categorization, as Derrida insists; it also concerns the modifying of limits in order to transform the unknown or forbidden into habitable, productive spaces for living and writing.

(Henderson 1995: 2)

To add to which there can be no transgression without the notion of boundary and vice versa. With that goes the incumbency, as George Steiner says, of “pressing the unpleasant questions, the questions which are in bad taste, the embarrassing questions, the taboo questions” (Steiner 1986: 194). In the context of Pitt’s Ruth the crossing over constitutes challenging divides, subverting frames and merging as well as resisting. It is also accompanied by a parallel passage in space, from one place to another, to a house Ruth shares with a like-minded white female. For a time during this period, the “blurring and merging of distinctions”, as termed by Turner, she experiences liberation from normative constraints (Turner 1974: 13-14). In the region of borders, as it were, it is the beginning of problematising positionality, dehegemonising position but still a long way off from the occupation of the subject position of the Other.

This is because Ruth’s experience is also mediated by the cultural baggage she carries even as she attempts to formulate an alternative arrangement for herself. As she explores and crosses the boundaries of culture, class, and race she carries “something creative as well as destructive – something potentially damaging as well as enabling” (Marcus 1989: 273). She may transgress family, class and racial boundaries; simultaneously and taking into account the birth of her child and return to her maternal aunt’s home at the close of the novel her effort comes off as “negotiating dangerous identifications ..., edgily balancing on boundaries and testing limits” (Marcus 1989: 273).

The caution, the reservation that this implies is reinforced by Ruth being presented as an “out of body” presence, her narrator-self recording, in the third person, the “other” self. The series of border crossings come across as a result of this as “stagings”, self-staging positions at intersections of cultures, races, classes and gender, as she picks and chooses her way forward. In crossing over, no matter how tentatively, she discovers a means of opposing and subverting the privilege, classism and racism of her own family and yet leaves an unease about whether her transgressions are subversive or complicit with the dominant culture.

For example, the “out of body” observing of herself in a role in the struggle begs questions of the sincerity of her convictions especially when she also appears often to be laughing, not so much at the struggle in itself, as at the “strugglers” and their antics. Of one meeting, called by the Democratic Lawyers’ Association aimed at abolishing the death penalty, for example, she

says, "Once it got into the swing of things, however, the meeting also called for an end to capitalism and imperialism, gutter education, high rents, low wages and the plethora of other evils" (Pitt 1998: 73). This may very well be a critical mind at work but there is nothing to say that it is not the replication of colonisation, the white gaze, voyeuristic ethnographic note-taking that makes a spectacle of blacks, her other actions and commitment are surely meant to repudiate. It may also be a case of a woman crossing borders of community and geography only to be beset by the discovery of deeper borders within herself, a point taken up again below.

Whatever it is, Fanon and Du Bois, as referred to by Henderson, "both claim that the articulation of challenges to racism and imperialist encroachment requires a volitional, creative act of self-representation" (Henderson 1995:10-11). Du Bois also conceives of African-American exile as "double-consciousness" which allows for one "to profit ... without being enslaved" (Du Bois quoted by Henderson 1995: 11). These explanations do not quite resolve the case of Ruth as she discovers and plays with aspects of her self-identity. Somehow it reinforces the notion that she both opposes and is complicit with the dominant and hegemonic formations of herself.

In several ways she is certainly out of place, a situation exacerbated by being outside her own world and her own experience including her relationship with Jack. For instance, when she visits him in jail because he was quiet "she assumed that his silences signalled some breach of conduct on her part, some unmentioned and unmentionable transgression which she had compounded by not perceiving what it was" (Pitt 1998:75). Edward Said has coined a useful phrase to refer to this state of mind: "the perilous territory of not-belonging", which gives rise to recognisable differences or oppositional identities (Said 1989: 237).

The trouble she has affiliating is also bound up with her sense of guilt; as representative of white guilt she tends to cover it up in chatter "hoping that this incessant flow of words would somehow wash away her sins" (Pitt 1998: 75). By presenting Ruth in this way Pitt is also delving into what it means to be white in Africa, the white racial identity that is generally glossed over especially in relation to the other. In the words of Fanon who speaks specifically of an Algerian woman but is just as effective here, Ruth "must consider the image of the occupier lodged somewhere in her mind and in her body, remodel it, initiate the essential work of eroding it, make it inessential, remove some of the shame that is attached to it, devalidate it" (Fanon 1967: 52).

Ruth may be presented as half-hearted and ambivalent and in prose that is more the result of research than life itself (which may probably explain the "out-of-body" distancing as well), but in so doing Pitt dares to begin interrogating the culture of whiteness itself. For instance she alludes to Ruth's upbringing in Africa by referring to the books set elsewhere that she had read,

such as *The Hardy Boys*, *Boys' Own* magazines, *The Secret Garden* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. She also makes the protagonist confront herself and her motives.

For a while, with this struggle thing, she had joined in the marching, singing and shouting, all the time, thinking to herself Look at me! I'm doing it! I'm joining in! I'm part of something! See me sing, see me shout slogans, see me discuss strategy in meetings, see me hug my comrades! But in her heart she knew it had been a pretence – not the ideals and principles but this sense of belonging.

(Pitt 1998: 163)

Scrutinising whiteness is crucial to offset the naturalising of whiteness as a cultural marker against which otherness is defined. Coco Fusco warns that “to ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it. Without specifically addressing white ethnicity there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other” (Fusco quoted by Wallace 1991: 7). Whiteness is part of the social texts in which social norms are constituted and reconstituted. Furthermore, West points out how whiteness is a “politically constructed category parasitic on ‘Blackness’”, that passes invisibly into social practice and becomes the unseen norm for the dominating culture to gauge its civility (West 1990: 29).

Whiteness is not beyond ethnicity, history, privilege and struggle, thus it has to be taken up as a relational issue along with other cultural differences so that no particular group is isolated and marked. It is only then that its dominant histories, codes and relations become unsettled, open to challenges and rewriting in a broader sense of identity politics beyond polarising binarisms.

Ruth is shown to intervene in her own history, fumbling and stumbling through the choices she makes that totally confound the expectations of her white middle-class upbringing. She has not much self-confidence when first we meet her or when she compares herself to Muriel, the more active anti-apartheid activist with whom she shares the house. Ruth berates herself: “I fuck up everything I lay my hands on – my work, my politics, my relationships. It's always me running to you with some sob-story or other. It gets a bit much. I would like to maintain some semblance of dignity” (Pitt 1998: 100). Her desire to be radical is subverted by the white-woman, dependent, childlike stereotype. Wrapped up with this is her internalised gendering which shows up in her relationship with Jack; femaleness in the person of Ruth is in and of itself treated as a deformity.

Pitt's representation, insofar as Jack figures, calls attention to the subtext in which black liberation is, in some ways, equated with a black manhood which promotes and condones black male sexism. Simultaneously, Jack's treatment of Ruth is also entangled with racial hierarchies so that his response to her is

both sexist and a reaction to racism. Apartheid racism allows him to deflect attention away from black male accountability for the exploitation of woman. As a response to one form of oppression or abuse and without any other form of release (which is no excuse) he becomes an abuser. This does not mean, however, that black liberation will naturally lead to the end of sexism. Nor is black liberation predicated upon the saving of black males' wounded masculinity.

But Ruth's impending motherhood finally enables her to sever the connection with Jack. At the same time motherhood as redemption from male dominance is put in question since this solution to woman's struggle is still linked in a way with the enslavement to male affirmation of sexuality. In this sense it is a standard depiction of male supremacy and female dependence. And furthermore sexuality becomes cultural capital and if followed by pregnancy and birth (after one or two miscarriages in Ruth's case) it is a problematic solution and definition of woman. The unfolding of these phases helps to highlight these dilemmas and also to make visible the political games that the transgressing character plays around her fractured and decentred identities.

Jooste and Pitt have represented ways of crossing borders and how the power relations and positionality shape the consequences and possible inequities resulting from such events in the larger world as well as in the world of intimate interactions. Border crossings move in different directions and from different locations. Jooste and Pitt represent crossings from positions of centrality and dominance in spite of the fact that they are women situated in patriarchy. Dangor on the other hand does the opposite with Omar by showing him moving from marginality and powerlessness, from black space into white in which another dance of identities is enframed. But Omar's dance of identity proves to be fatal, a *danse macabre*, almost as if he has to pay with his life for passing as white and marrying a white woman, analogous in a way to the lynched black man of the American South and the hapless gardener, Majnoen, who desires the princess Leila in the myth named after them. As such his *danse macabre* serves as well to implicate white woman in a terrible crime as he struggles to live in the interstices between the black and white worlds in South Africa.

Of mixed white and Indian parentage Omar, descendant of immigrants, is born into exile as he embodies several displacements; this is compounded and confounded in apartheid social and political arrangements. As Said puts it: "Exile is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with one's native place" (Said 1984: 54-55). In light of Omar's mixed heritage and eventual fate his "native place" and "true home" are more than physical locations and are comparable to borders which are both

actual and conceptual. It is the “locus” where he can be himself and his self feels “at home” but with the exile of body displaced repeatedly there is no “true home” but only exile of heart.

Omar, the Muslim Indian, plays white (Jewish) Oscar Kahn in apartheid South Africa to survive the best way he can in order to counteract the death of being black but at a price he himself cannot imagine. In search of himself he leaves the township for the suburbs and a white lifestyle. It is to undo the failure of recognition which is all the more twisted in his case and the apartheid stress on appearance because for all intents and purposes he looks white.

His crossing over to the white world is governed by the logic of ambivalence. It is an act of resistance to a deprivation of rights and the apartheid identity imposed upon him. The repudiation is simultaneously, however, an embracing of the order that continues his self-bondage even as a white person and a Jew. He still does not own himself, since he has deliberately chosen to live in accord within another, albeit, superior category of the population regulatory system. Therefore, he forever balances attachment with aversion not only to the white world but also to the one he has discarded. Du Bois calls this ambivalence of exile the experience of not-belonging, a double-consciousness.

As a result Omar who is given a chapter to himself in the novella fails to show any sign of self-consciousness, critical self-reflection like his maternal uncle Hashim or his brother Malik who gives him away when, during the dying days of apartheid, he comes to inform him of his mother’s death. More often than not he sees himself through the eyes of others. And though he is assimilated into the white culture, ever so often ethnic markers break out in ways that betray him. For instance, the furniture in his house, his “choice, this mishmash of colours and dull shapes” is a dead give-away in the eyes of his white in-laws after he is found out (Dangor 1997: 11).

The legal documents proving his right to be white “would stand up to legal scrutiny, for [his] father had known how to get to the right people” but he is given away by “probably some manner or mannerism, a mispronounced word, a plural verb in the wrong place” (Dangor 1997: 32). Though a “lovely hybrid whom Anna had fallen in love with, perhaps because of his hybridity”, Oscar is definitely not “one of [them]”, so says his sister-in-law, Caroline (Dangor 1997: 11). The absence of outright brutality and unregenerate evil does not imply the absence of racism or the presence of justice.

Playing white was supposed to constitute arrival, homecoming, and yet it is a constant reminder of white power and control. Instead of bringing in benefits it mutilates and keeps Omar continually on edge, constrained, repressed, fearful and on the lookout. For instance, when making love he had to learn “to mute ... [his] cry of love, reduce it to a low and incomprehensible moan” (Dangor 1997: 32). He has internalised this part of the colonising process so well that by holding himself in he perpetuates and maintains white supremacy.

Much against what he believes, his crossing-over is still within the frame of the victim-identity, an identity from which he takes sole responsibility for eroding racism. Yet the fear of whites, one aspect among many, of the victim-identity is ironically doubly useful; it helps Omar maintain a charade, a performance art and mediates relations with his white in-laws since there is no place in the scheme of things for self-determining, and, hence, threatening blacks who demand redress and reparations. Omar in the view of bell hooks acts “in complicity with an assaultive structure of racist domination in which” he himself invests “in the absence of agency” (hooks 1995: 58).

By becoming an architect, moving to the suburbs and marrying a white woman, he believes he is performing acts of free will. He escapes one life and seeks admittance to another by embracing essentialist concepts of apartheid constructions of black and white identities. In Fanon’s view Omar “is in fact an existential deviation”, a slave of myths engendered by apartheid engineers. He is driven to transform his skin colour into a mask, a mask that repudiates blackness and demands acknowledgement as a white. Deeply in thrall to the apartheid definition of himself

[h]e is incarnating a new type of man that he imposes on his associates and his family

The black man wants to be like the white man. For the black man there is only one destiny.

And it is white.

Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence.

(Fanon 1965: 228)

What Omar lets happen to him Fanon ascribes to a form of narcissism; Omar is driven by the desire “to see in the eyes of others ... a reflection that pleases” him (Fanon 1965: 212). His white family sees his white skin, a body mask that conceals his inner being and yet at the same time he is treated with reservation in the sanctuary of white culture. After his enforced “coming out” he is shunned by those who have produced his subjectivity.

Omar’s condition of exile is historically and repeatedly determined. The move to the suburbs and the use of his skin as a mask structures his identity which is split, self-divided. In consequence he behaves one way with his Indian family and in another way with his white family because of reiterated “colonialist subjugation” (Fanon 1965: 17). Fanon prescribes a remedy, “an existential, creative, demanding freedom of consciousness upon which any possibility of willed action or passivity with respect to social structure is predicated” (p. 100).

From Dangor’s picture of Omar he (Omar) is incapable of putting into

practice the suggestion of Fanon and is instead overtaken by a strange fate. His demise is connected by Martin, Anna's brother and Director of the School of Psychology at the university, to Kafka's curse. But Omar himself connects it to his Indianness, embedded in his cultural matrix, in the ancient cautionary tale of "Leila and Majnoen", in which an overreaching gardener turns into a tree while he waits for his princess lover who will never arrive. Omar the hybrid is shown to be punished for defying "takdier", the fate and destiny ordained by his religion, language and status. He metamorphosises into a being resembling a depersonalised, dehumanised tree, mirrored in baffling genealogical family trees and the branching out of the narrative into fragments from the perspectives of different members of the extended Indian family and his wife, Anna, who left him. His body shows the results of daily assault and emotional repression, the very antithesis of activism.

By fictionalising in magic-realist terms Dangor sets up in his story of Omar metaphors to engage us about change, alienation, estrangement and otherness. "Purity" as well as "hybridity" are explored while what has for so long been repressed is uncovered. This paper set out to show how, in a different way from former attempts, post-1994 counternarratives to the master apartheid narrative are beginning to evoke and erase totalising boundaries (actual and conceptual) in order to subvert ideological manoeuvres through which imagined South African communities are given essentialist identities. Identities previously legislated and believed to be immutable are shown in the narratives explored to be open to all manner of possibilities and negotiations as they throw light upon one another.

Boundaries as markers of difference in race and space are also in these discursive practices shown to be deeply implicated in identity and self-formation. Identities in transition have been teased apart to show them to be multiple, fluid, cross-cutting, overlapping, changing, regressing and lapsing. The objective of this paper was to document the dominating patterns and track the failures, silences, displacements and transformations produced by the functioning self in the midst of transitions. These writings reinterpret identity as a process of ambivalent identification caught up in the agonistic process of narrating. Subjectivity, rather than being unified and integrated, has been shown, in both residual apartheid and a nonapartheid sense to be "constituted out of and by difference and remains contradictory" (Grossberg 1986: 56).

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