

# Assuming Identities: *Kafka's Curse* and the Unsilenced Voice

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## Summary

As Zoë Wicomb observes in "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa" (1998), the country's history of miscegenation has been silenced by the very people whom the practice has created: "it is after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse" (Wicomb quoted by Attridge & Jolly 1998: 92). In chronicling the ways in which the color bar was constantly and continually being subverted through interracial couplings, *Kafka's Curse* (Dangor 1997) works to challenge the silence surrounding miscegenation as well as the idea that pure categories of race could even exist. But the categories must not be ignored altogether. *Kafka's Curse* cautions against a total rejection of attachment to origins, obscure, distant or elusive as those origins may be. It must be the project of the new South African literature to examine the role of ethnic identification in nation-building, and to consider how "remembrance" can be harnessed toward it.

## Opsomming

Soos Zoë Wicomb in haar "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa" (1998) opmerk, is Suid-Afrika se geskiedenis van rassevermenging die domper opgesit deur die einste mense wat deur hierdie praktyk geskep is: "it is after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse" (Wicomb aangehaal in Attridge & Jolly 1998: 92). *Kafka's Curse* (Dangor 1997) trek die stilte rondom rassevermenging in twyfel deur die maniere waarop die kleurgrens konstant en voortdurend omvergewerp word deur interras-verbintenisse en ook die idee dat suiwer kategorieë van ras sou bestaan, weer te gee. Die kategorieë moet egter nie geheel en al ignoreer word nie. *Kafka's Curse* waarsku teen die algehele verwerping van gehegtheid aan oorspronge, hoe obskuur, vaag of ontwykend dié oorspronge ook al mag wees. Die nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde moet dit ten doel hê om die rol van etniese identifikasie in nasiebou te ondersoek, en te oordink hoe herinnering ("remembrance") daarvoor aangewend kan word.

In Achmat Dangor's *Kafka's Curse* (1998), the first step in Omar Khan's flight from South Africa's townships to its suburbs is a few alphabetic substitutions – the predominantly Indian, light-skinned, colored man becomes Oscar Kahn.

In performing this alphabetic sleight of hand, “Omar-turned-Oscar” is exploiting the complex racial hierarchy of South African apartheid, a strategy that escapes the type of binarism found so often in postcolonial novels and, occasionally, in their readings. *Kafka’s Curse* simultaneously undermines the apartheid-era doctrine of racial purity and separation and interrogates the place of such revisions of apartheid practices in a postapartheid nation. The novel’s project, then, is two-fold: to reinscribe the stories of interracial relationships in the narrative of South African history, and to problematize the use of such stories in the production of a new South Africa. While the role of bringing to light mutually desired interracial relationships seems fairly obvious in the context of representing an interstitial apartheid history, it is less clear how to make use of these stories in the project of nation-building. How attached are such stories to a conception of originary identity? And what is the role of ethnic origins in a new South Africa?

Central to *Kafka’s Curse*’s examination of the value and use of originary identities is its foregrounding of resultant colored subjectivities. Racial mixture, then, is a key aspect of the novel’s exploration of origins. In considering this racial mixture, it is important to start by looking at Caribbean theories of creolité, which privilege mixture over “pure” categories. The trio of Caribbean writers (Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Rafael Confiant) who authored “In Praise of Creoleness” open their essay with the repudiation of originary national identities: “Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles” (Bernabé 1993: 75), they write. “Creoleness is the *interaccional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history” (Bernabé 1993: 87). Here, Creoleness refers to the cultural hybridity of Caribbean art. The various elements contributing to this hybrid do so actively and continuously; that is, the hybrid is not a static form, but one created through the constant interplay of its composite elements. What distinguishes South Africa from the Caribbean historically, of course, is the double colonization produced by South Africa’s settler nation status and the domestic construct of apartheid. Europeans did not have the kind of cultural stake in the Caribbean colonies that they had in South Africa – the Caribbean holdings were instrumental to the production of wealth that was then removed back to the metropole. As a settler colony, however, South Africa became *home* to Europeans; the power they wielded was therefore more encompassing than that wielded by the colonial authorities in the Caribbean colonies. The celebratory spirit of creolité seems inappropriate in the context of such overarching power.

The idea of origins is immediately challenged in *Kafka’s Curse* by the ease with which Oscar claims a white identity for himself. But the background that he invents is qualified by his adoption of a minority affiliation. Posing as a

Jew, Oscar lays claim to a marginalized white identity; he does so to account for the not-quite-white cast of his skin and features. Staking out a marginal identity allows him to escape the kind of scrutiny that would be accorded to someone trying to pass as a Boer or an Englishman. This maneuver does more than simply highlight the *necessity* of such a move – it emphasizes the *opportunity* for such a move already inherent in apartheid categories. Oscar has no need to create a new category to describe himself. He merely chooses from the available classifications. If the “problem” of the colored category is its heterogeneity (Lewis 1987), then it is a problem shared by the category named “white”. The system thus contains alternative definitions of whiteness, whose presence demonstrates that whiteness as a category is neither pure nor fixed, but nebulous. To credit “colored” with challenging “white” may then be seen as eliding an intermediate step – the challenge whiteness contains within itself.

Of course, there are other compelling reasons why any idea of mixture is immediately problematized by a South African context, in which standard postcolonial nomenclature such as creolité or hybridity may have to be adjusted or abandoned altogether. As Zoë Wicomb observes, the country’s history of miscegenation has been silenced by the very people whom the practice has created: “it is after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse” (Wicomb 1998: 92). Wicomb wishes to foreground the links between color, shame and sexuality, the relationship between material bodies and political culture. In chronicling the ways in which the color bar was constantly and continually being subverted through interracial couplings, *Kafka’s Curse* works to challenge the silence surrounding miscegenation as well as the idea that pure categories of race could even exist. In narrating into existence the lives of Muslims, Indians and Jews, among others, *Kafka’s Curse* reminds us of South Africa’s position in a global circulation of peoples – the country is not a closed system, but subject to constant revision.

Like Wicomb, I wish to criticize the “pure” reality implicit in Homi Bhabha’s ideas of hybridity, in which an in-between space rests on essentialist categories of black and white. But the categories must not be ignored altogether. *Kafka’s Curse* cautions against a total rejection of attachment to origins, obscure, distant or elusive as those origins may be. “Not even myths can change those invisible roots, ingrained like ancient fossil in rock”, Oscar says. “We do not metamorphose. We merely crumble into dust. That is my triumph ... I have broken the cycle of remembrance” (Dangor 1997: 61-62). It must be the project of the new South African literature to examine the role of ethnic identification in nation-building, and to consider how “remembrance” can be harnessed toward it. *Kafka’s Curse* can be seen as a call for remembrance, a means of breaking through the shameful silence surrounding colored subjectivities.

It is not incidental that Oscar was born in 1948, the year before South Africa

enacted the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. As this act applied to future marriages, but not retroactively to existing ones, its very language acknowledged the reality of legally sanctioned interracial relationships. Similarly, the Population Registration Act of 1950, with its official and methodical system of racial classification, suggested that race was not a biological and obvious fact, but rather a legal construct. That legal definition, in fact, rested on appearance – on “general acceptance” of an individual’s racial identity as colored or white (Lewis 1987). As Gavin Lewis notes, “one ran into the problem of how to tell where ‘Coloured’ ended and ‘white’ or ‘African’ began, given the wide range of physical types amongst the Coloured people and, one might add, the extent of miscegenation since the arrival of the first white settlers” (Lewis 1987: 3). Miscegenation carried with it the taint of illegitimacy, particularly after the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. The shame of the colored, then, was multiplied, with indeterminacy of race being compounded by illegitimacy of birth.

In *Kafka’s Curse*, though, illegitimacy does not mark its colored subjects with shame. Patrick Wallace’s affair leads his children to despise him, not their illegitimate half-brother Azur. The grounds for Anna’s and Martin’s disgust is not the new knowledge that Patrick’s mistress was colored; their dislike of their father predates that discovery. Anna and Martin, quite simply, hate their father for deceiving their mother, whom he married for money and not love. In fact, the Wallace family’s sexual relationships constitute the most sustained vehicle for the emanation of shame in the novel, shame that is therefore reflected back onto the text’s white and not colored characters. The most significant sexual relationship is the incestuous one between Anna and Martin, who rapes his sister when they are children. Shame attaches itself to sexual acts that transgress a cross-cultural societal boundary – and this boundary is color-blind.

The literature of the new South Africa should, as Albie Sachs puts it, neither re-enact “the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination” (Sachs 1998: 239) nor propound a “non-racial yuppiedom” (p. 244) in which cultural specificity is lost. The problem that *Kafka’s Curse* seeks to address is precisely that of the new South African literature’s representation of race. The novel harnesses the figure of hybridity to respond to this problem – not necessarily to resolve tensions in a dialectical way, but to present them in their various permutations. As Oscar himself puts it, “the antagonism was not between good and evil or between black and white. I’m still not sure why they became the poles between which I had to choose. I chose neither, of course, and that is when all this began” (Dangor 1997: 50). Binarism, of course, is the phenomenon that *Kafka’s Curse* seeks to abandon. What terms can we use to characterize the syncretism offered in its place? Though it has become fashionable to criticize terms such as “hybrid” and “Creole,” such criticism often reproduces the

central claims of “In Praise of Creoleness”. When, for example, Pnina Werbner calls for “processual models of hybridity to replace the current stress on contingent hybridity, a self-congratulatory discourse that leads nowhere” (Werbner 1997: 22), we need look no further than the emphasis “In Praise of Creoleness” lays on “interaction” and “transaction”.

At the same time, we cannot overlook some of the challenges presented by Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, which is a mixed model for considering postapartheid literature. Bhabha’s characterization of hybridity as the sign and the effect of colonial power (Bhabha 1994) is problematic, for it locates the agency for hybridization away from the hybrid subjects themselves: the colonial power is central to the generation of hybridity. Instead of indicting the colonial power, this model seems to celebrate it, albeit indirectly. If hybridity is the effect of colonial power, it cannot simultaneously be considered wholly subversive. And if mixing (of terms, discourses or races) is routine – that is, if hybridity is the *inevitable* effect of colonial power – does it truly transgress the limits of that power? As unsettling as some critics may find the notion of a hybridity that is not explicitly confrontational, it is relevant to a discussion of *Kafka’s Curse*, which represents mixture not as a transgression, but as a certainty. While it may be true, as Jonathan Friedman says, that “[t]he use of the concepts ‘mixture,’ ‘hybrid’ and ‘Creole’ in such terms simply confuses the fact of geographic origins with the practice of cultural integration, assuming that the former rather than the latter is the defining characteristic of culture” (Friedman 1997: 81), hybridity in *Kafka’s Curse* is eminently performative. It is not simply the label attached to the offspring of mixed matches. *Kafka’s Curse* demonstrates that the hybrid subject possesses the agency to produce his/her own hybridity. What *Kafka’s Curse* does, through the juxtaposing of different hybrids and of their different experiences of the world, is expose the infinite variety possible through these hybrid forms. Most notably, through including both Oscar and his brother Malik in the narrative, the novel shows that hybridity is not just a marker of biological status. Although the two men share a common, mixed genealogy, the worlds they create for themselves are conspicuously different.

Characters’ assumptions of racial identities are undertaken for many reasons in the novel, including profit. Oscar’s father sends relatives to Turkey and Lebanon in order to bring them back to South Africa as Turkish and Lebanese immigrants – with the resulting “white”, “European” passports they could open businesses in white areas (the case comes up in Parliament, where Salaam is accused of trying to “subvert the country by ‘koelifying’ the white race”). But there are instances where threats to racial purity are as strongly felt though less clearly justified. Oscar’s in-laws express disdain for his house because they identify it not simply with Oscar’s tastes, but with his race, even though they are not quite sure what that is. “He was a mixture, Javanese and Dutch

and Indian and God knows what else, they would later discover. He was the lovely hybrid whom Anna had fallen in love with, perhaps because of his hybridity” (Dangor 1997: 14). Anna is not attracted specifically to any of the individual nationalities whose blood mingles in Oscar. The one identity Oscar lays claim to is one that is not actually part of his make-up, but one that Anna’s father seems ready to forgive, because his own “impurity” lies in that direction: “*Some Jewish blood in our distant pasts, but that’s okay, everyone has Jewish blood in them*” (Dangor 1997: 15). If being part Jewish is “acceptable”, what indeed constitutes a hybrid? The introduction of “Jewish blood” as a distinct genealogical feature, separate from the Wallaces’ “white blood”, and the concomitant downplaying of it emphasize the flexible application of Population Registration Act categories. In the paradoxical rubric of this act, “white” can encompass even that which is differentiated from “white” (although, perhaps, to a limited extent).

Robert Young writes that because hybridity focuses on the question of sexuality, “[t]heories of race were thus also covert theories of desire” (Young 1995: 9). In the face of obvious evidence, nineteenth-century racialists were unable to corroborate their assertion that the hybrid was sterile; therefore, one line of thinking asserted that fertility of mixed-race progeny would decrease with subsequent generations. Hybridity, rather than serving racialists by perpetrating the eventual demise of the hybrid, instead demonstrated that mixture was a sustained and productive phenomenon. Young suggests that “[h]ybridity here is a key term in that wherever it emerges it suggests the impossibility of essentialism” (Young 1995: 27). At stake in the nineteenth century was not simply the containment of a growing mixed-race population in the colonial holdings, but the sanctity of whiteness itself. “The idea of race here shows itself to be profoundly dialectical: it only works when defined against potential intermixture, which also threatens to undo its calculations altogether” (Young 1995: 17). According to Young, then, whiteness makes sense only in the context of mixture, not blackness.

We can thus understand hybridity in terms of the sexual relations that produce its biological form, and the anxieties provoked by desire across racial lines. Sexual desire is woven through *Kafka’s Curse*, particularly across these lines. Another mixed-race character, Amina, who believes that Oscar understood her “terror of unbelonging” (Dangor 1997: 77), becomes pregnant by his brother Malik. On the subject of their unborn child, she thinks:

He could have been anyone, the product of a gene pool that is not unique, as intertwined as the history of our coming here, as slaves, as commercial subalterns of the white man’s empires, as the fucklings of poor white women pressed into

whoredom by impoverished families, nurtured on the sour grief of despoiled purity. Lust brings a different kind of consciousness to the body, a clarity in the groin that the mind could never achieve.

(Dangor 1997: 171)

Implicit in Amina's musings and present throughout the novel is the argument that the history of transgressive sexual relations resulting in hybrid offspring cuts across generations and nations.

Oscar's great-grandfather kills an untouchable who desires his sister (who, the grandfather acknowledges, may have desired the untouchable man in return); his grandfather marries a Dutch woman who prostitutes herself to Chinese, Jewish and Afrikaner men to pay her husband's debts; his father-in-law, Patrick Wallace, has an illegitimate "honey-colored" child by his mistress. Even those characters most vehement about racial purity have their own impure associations. These relations may be irresistible, or perhaps even inevitable, just as the offspring they produce seem to be inevitable in the context of *Kafka's Curse's* scheme, which endorses a "lapse into tangled genealogies" (Coopen 2001) suggestive of a time before history, narration, apartheid or nonracialism. The chaos into which Oscar's garden reverts after his death is also suggestive of a primeval jumble, an extravagant and unruly growth that consumes all order and distinctions.

In this wild organic chaos, no categories hold, not even those produced by mixture, which are no more fixed and essentialist than their component parts. Kelwyn Sole sees a problem with postcolonial studies' valorization of

the "enunciations" (the term is Bhabha's) of those shifting and hybrid identities uttered by marginalized individuals and groups, whose political and cultural identities and behavior have escaped the overweening ascriptions of value and critical scrutiny of ideologies based on nation and class

(Sole 1994: 17)

because what results is a complete relativism. It is difficult, however, to imagine a new South African literature that avoids such "shifting and hybrid identities". In dramatizing these identities, *Kafka's Curse* does not espouse a relativism that evades questions of value or morality (if that is indeed Sole's concern). But what the novel is primarily concerned with is an exploration of race as part of the process of nation-building. This process is allegorized in Oscar's description of storytelling as ongoing and organic. The result is that the terms and meanings of stories are constantly shifting.

So, what are the real origins of the [Majnoen] legend? A trivial incident, sentimentalized and exaggerated to heroic proportions by slaves from India or Java or Malaysia to sustain themselves? A coping mechanism – that's what you

call it, no? It might have been African? This continent is fecund – yes, fecund – with the kind of foliage which gives birth to the secret lives that are the very substance of magical parable .... But making it African would somehow have missed the whole point of the deception, unintended as it was .... Making this tale African would have been too obvious. Everybody wants to make our little room theirs, make their destiny ours. It was Muslim, that much I know.

(Dangor 1997: 31)

Oscar resists identifying the legend as rooted in an African source, but says that the embellishment that turned “a trivial incident” into a legend does arise out of African fecundity – and, more prosaically, out of the practice of slavery. The origin of the story is less important than the process(es) of its development, which can still be identified as African despite having extra-African qualities. Instead of submitting to homogenizing impulses that posit a common source and a common destiny, Oscar claims that the tale is Muslim in origin, alluding to a transnational network that does not have a one-to-one correspondence with Africa in general or South Africa in particular. But identifying even this origin is disingenuous. As elusive as origins are, they are unchangeable. At the end of his narrative, after his death, Oscar suggests that the desire for transformation can never be fulfilled, no matter how arduously pursued. Such desire is based on an attachment to origin that makes little sense as it is imagined, contextualized and applied.

This impulse to privilege origin over lived experience is what *Kafka’s Curse* rejects. In her reading of *Kafka’s Curse*, Vilashini Cooppan asks us to consider what it means to try to represent ethnicity in the context of the new South Africa’s nonracialism, self-consciously dramatized in the difficulty of burying Oscar as a Muslim. Because “Oscar Kahn” so successfully assumes the identity of a white Jew, no record of his Muslim identity can be found. In a bureaucratic farce, it becomes almost impossible for Malik to conduct a religious ritual for a brother whose existence the state denies. Unable to locate a birth certificate for “Omar Khan”, the record clerk advises Malik to “bury Oscar, pray for Omar. It happens all the time. No, you forget, race does not matter anymore ....”

In any case, what’s the difference between Khan and Kahn? A spelling mistake?” (Dangor 1997: 70). *Kafka’s Curse* asks us to wonder – perhaps against our instincts – whether, in death at least, there may be no difference after all. Remembrance is bounded by birth and death. Outside those boundaries, in the tangled primeval chaos that precedes and follows life, such differentiations are not only irrelevant, but futile.

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