

# Splice of Life: Manipulations of the “Real” in South African English Literary Culture

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## Summary

This essay employs the idea of a “splice” to look at ways in which South African writing in English has historically participated in a narrative move in which the category of the “real” is manipulated to lay claim to a greater purchase on authenticity of statement. The essay suggests that both fiction which poses as “more truthful” than confabulated nonfiction as well as nonfiction which pretends to be superior to fiction are playing a similar game. This game is seen as the desire to overcome a scene of near-impossible heterogeneity by laying claim to a more singular truth and a more manageable mode of truth-telling.

## Opsomming

Hierdie essay gebruik die idee van 'n splitsing om na die wyses te kyk waarop Suid-Afrikaanse skryfwerk in Engels histories deelgeneem het aan 'n narratiewe skuif waarin die kategorie van die “werklike” gemanipuleer word om 'n groter aanspraak te maak op geloofwaardigheid. Die essay suggereer dat fiksie, wat sig voordoen as meer waarheidsgetrou as nie-fiksie, sowel as nie-fiksie wat voorgee om verhewe te wees bo fiksie, dieselfde spel speel. Hierdie spel word gesien as die begeerte om 'n toneel van bykans onmoontlike heterogeniteit te oorkom deur aanspraak te maak op 'n meer sonderlinge waarheid asook 'n meer hanteerbare wyse van waarheidsvertelling.

In South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination.

(J.M. Coetzee 1987)<sup>1</sup>

In an article on “The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid”, Louise Bethlehem (2001: 373, 378) argues that the South African literary domain during that period was dominated by what she calls a “stenographic bent” – a strong inclination towards a kind of “representational literalism” that sought to *weld* signifier to referent.<sup>2</sup> Bethlehem locates a “rhetoric of urgency” in the work not only of black writers – who in the apartheid years sought “urgently” to *expose* social injustice by recourse to language in which truth was “reinstalled” and “restored” – but also in the writing of white as well as black critics of most persuasions, including liberals,

revisionists and Marxists. She cites evidence in the literary scholarship of the period for what she calls a “trope-of-truth”, which she says was underwritten by a “dominant investment” in the notion of the *trope-as-truth* – a thorough-going disregard for the discursive codes that mediate between “realism” as a literary construct and the overdetermined social “reality” of apartheid (p. 368).

For Bethlehem, this “instrumentalist concept of language” was implicated in a “regime of meaning” in South African literary studies in English which, she writes, sought to “effect closure between the word and the world in order to safeguard the ethical claims of South African literary culture” (p. 365).

Safeguarding the ethical claims of various parties in South African cultural exchange – more basically, the will to legitimate one’s desire to prevail – has long been a conversational imperative, and it has, in my reading, a much longer history than is allowed for in Bethlehem’s otherwise persuasive account.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I take a view of this more extended history via a meditation upon the idea of *conversation* as an extended analogy for the cultural politics of legitimation in colonial and formerly colonial settings, South Africa in particular. My extended analogy gestures towards the contemporary politics of global cultural exchange – colonial encounters being an early form of globalisation – but in the present paper such gesturing remains implicit rather than explicit. There are also parallels to be made with the broader scene of African literature as a mode of conversational *response* to a history of perceived falsification by outside parties, by the cultural invaders. But that would be a much broader and bigger project than is intended in the present essay.

In their work on the “colonization of consciousness” and the “consciousness of colonization” among the Tswana in South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff (1991: 198) employ the idea of a “long conversation” between evangelists and Africans. They argue that this conversation had both an overt content (dominated by the substantive message of evangelism) and a less overt content, namely a struggle between Europeans and Africans over the *terms* of the conversational encounter (p. 199). The Comaroffs remind us that conversation, particularly intercultural conversation, is embedded in a deeper engagement about *how* conversations are set up, who decides their terms and what their objects and forms should be. (And here one can draw parallels with the struggle for leverage of the conversational metatropes in the cultural politics of many situations, from urban hip-hop resisting bourgeois blankness in New York to the Palestinian encounter with Zionism in the Middle East.)

Taking this idea more broadly but confining it for the time being to Southern Africa, the concept of conversation is useful as a way of understanding the more encompassing frame of historical encounter, particularly when one examines its symbolic and literary dimensions. “Speech acts”, as J.L. Austin argues in his classic text, *How to do Things with Words* (1962: 1976), do more

than merely describe a state of affairs; they are “felicitous” or “infelicitous” depending on whether they are uttered by an appropriate person in accordance with some or other conventional procedure (Austin 1980:12-25). Extending Austin’s theory, the French theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1991) developed the idea that “symbolic power” is differentially distributed in performative utterances. Writing about what he calls “the symbolic order and the power of naming”, Bourdieu (1991: 239) posits what he calls a “symbolic struggle for the production of common sense” resulting in a “symbolic act of imposition which has on its side all the strength of the collective, of the consensus”.

In the colonies, the struggle for “common sense” and the “symbolic act of imposition” occurred to a large extent under the guise of beneficence, via the alibi of a conversation of equals. We know that it was with the expressly stated intention of *converting* the native inhabitants, principally through the act of *conversing*, that colonising missions were given their moral and ethical justification. But we have also come to understand that the conversations launched in colonies were often profoundly disjunctive, employing unchecked presuppositions drawn from the sociocultural *habitus*<sup>4</sup> of the proposing culture, and translating these, without much attempt at reciprocity, into the indigenous languages. Then, of course, came the daily back-and-forth of misreading and partial understanding achieved under conditions of cultural chafing that would eventually mark a country such as South Africa almost like a scar – a lasting abrasion, a somatic memory of physical lives abraded and rerouted by a conversational contest with severe material consequences. It is at this point of the conversing-converting nexus – when power and persuasion converge, lifestyle and legitimation meld – that, I suggest, conversation slips by degrees into collocation: the act of setting in a place or position; disposition or arrangement with, or in relation to, others; the state of being so placed (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). This is the gradual process by which a *conversation about* modalities of religious belief, personal presentation, rites of passage, social ritual, moral values, agricultural practice, educational ethos and similarly critical matters slips into a *mode of command*.<sup>5</sup> Or, if you like, into a *commanding* style of discursive exchange, a seizure of the legitimate, in which Bourdieu’s “symbolic power” becomes an imposition, even as it is agonistically negotiated.<sup>6</sup> This transition from (pseudo)conversation to commanding collocation is neatly captured in the words of Wesleyan missionary John Ayliff, speaking in 1835 amid the merry bloodshed of Hintsá’s War: “They are now reaping the reward of their iniquity .... They have rejected the Gospel which was benevolently sent unto them ... and now they have the sword” (Ayliff quoted by Williams 1959: 173). Intercultural conversation thus carries with it a significant shadow, a supplemental question about prior and unequal terms. Often the below-the-line status of the conversation itself comes to stand almost in contradiction to the ethical claims of its substantive content.

However, it is in the nature of conversational drift – in the nature of the will to prevail – that the implicit terms of a communicative encounter may be disguised or passed over, much like a ship can glide over a deep and unsteady body of water with the appearance of effortless and unconditional volition.

The will to disguise the terms of the encounter is especially strong when, as happened in colonial settings, there was a lack of what one might regard as transcultural communication in a Habermasian *intersubjective*<sup>7</sup> sense and, at the same time, a strong – if suppressed – awareness of this lack.<sup>8</sup> It is here where, I believe, Bethlehem’s “empirical dominant” first asserts itself: in the colony’s written supplement, its literary-cultural conversation with itself and with its presumed others. Lacking an intersubjective basis for reciprocity, the colonial conversation resorts to the purported authority of the “real”. Only the authority of empirical fiat will allow conversation to shade, with the appearance of effortless drift, into collocation. In addition, it renders the need for intersubjective reciprocity, and the understanding of cultural difference, secondary to the act of simply setting things out in the way they “naturally” are. This is done, I suggest, by what I call a *documentary turn* in the literary and cultural base of the colonial encounter: the urge to call upon the authority of the witnessed event, the natural or “scientific” phenomenon, or the recorded fact – in other words, the presumed “real”.<sup>9</sup> The resort to the authority of the purportedly “real”, especially in the age of Victorian positivism, overlaid the gap in intercultural and intersubjective understanding, and it safeguarded the colonising culture’s ethical claims to superior symbolic power. It is here that what Ashraf Jamal (2002: 63, 211) typifies as the *simulacral* enters into the South African conversation as a peculiarly persistent phantom. Jamal (p. 63) cites Baudrillard’s formulation of the simulacral nature of the postmodern as that which is “more visible than the visible”, but I would argue that the urge to make claims “more real than the real”, “more visible” than what is seemingly apparent in a landscape of contesting frames of reference, finds a telling precedent in the forceful introduction of modernity’s commanding urgency to a scene such as the wholly other repast which nineteenth-century South Africa presented to starchily ardent Protestant missionaries, whose work it was to reconfigure difference into the semiotics of a known cultural order. As commanders of the “real”, of the scientific positivism that includes religious mythology in its tropes of “natural truth”,<sup>10</sup> these sign-bearers were the first, if unwitting, artists of what I think of as the *splICE* in the great South African drama of representation. They inaugurated a methodological pathology which, as we shall see, came to stick in later discursive ventures, later contests over the nature of the “real” in South Africa.

The resort to the simulacral authority of the “real” served to safeguard the colonising power from the threat of contradiction but in fact the contradiction was internal to the claim itself and to the below-the-line status of the

conversational encounter. The classic example is Daniel Defoe's seminal work, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Defoe symbolically captures the Enlightenment project to domesticate the New World<sup>11</sup> by deploying a quite magnificent documentary fraud. Defoe – widely regarded as the “father” of the English novel – harnesses the authority of the real in a patently fabricated account of the travels of Robinson Crusoe, an invented figure whom Defoe presents to the world, with earnest zeal, as a living character.

The *Robinson Crusoe* case is worth looking at more closely. In Defoe's first edition, he concealed his authorial presence entirely, claiming on the title page that the “Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited island on the Coast of AMERICA, near the Mouth of the Great River of OROONOQUE” was “Written by himself”, i.e. by a real person called “Robinson Crusoe”. Defoe's deception was all the more believable because he was writing within a tradition of factual account-giving about a “new” world regarded as available for exploration and assimilation.<sup>12</sup> There was little reason for contemporary readers to suspect that Defoe was engaged in a deception. Defoe took the sleight of hand a step further in the novel's second volume, in which the Preface defends presumed author Robinson Crusoe against a public claim that the story was invented: “I, Robinson Crusoe”, the undisclosed ghost-writer Defoe declares, “being at this time in perfect and sound mind and mental health, thanks be to God, therefore, do hereby declare their objections [that of Defoe's critics] an invention scandalous in design, and false in fact; and do affirm that the story though allegorical is also historical” (Defoe quoted by Davis 1983: 158).

Many would argue that Defoe's playful assumption of other people's voices and his deliberate use of narrative guile are central to the practice of fiction. Defoe's mischievous overconfidence, his assertion of what one might call a mere surface or technical untruth about the narrative persona, might in many cases be regarded as acting in the service of the greater and deeper revelations of fiction. Insofar as Defoe's narrative underscores the virtues of a Puritanically conceived sense of Providence and the necessity of eating one's bread in the sweat of one's brow, and insofar as his narrative engages in a conversation with readers drawn from his own national, cultural and religious context, his assumption of a purportedly real historical voice does no great harm. In fact, it strengthens the authority of the book's moral lessons. But *Robinson Crusoe* does not only serve to emphasise right moral and religious conduct for its eighteenth-century British readers. In the process of doing this, it indulges in an amateur form of ethnography which would, unfortunately, become authoritative to a degree quite out of proportion to its worth in intercultural or conversational terms. Apart from its moral lessons for an English audience, *Robinson Crusoe* also celebrates the European prototype of Renaissance Man

as a model for all humankind, and it renders its non-European native, Friday, infantile, unredeemed and uncivilised (“wild”). It participates in the setting up of a binary vice in which, over time and under the auspices of many similar acts of staged “documentary” truth, the subjectivity of indigenous people all over the New World would be subjected to mutilating pressure. These are not new ideas. Texts such as *Robinson Crusoe*, Allan Gardiner (1987: 175) writes, “are themselves part of the colonization process, in that they capture the meeting within European ideology and thereby set the terms in which it will occur in future encounters”. Helen Tiffin (1987: 23) writes that Robinson Crusoe was “part of a process of ‘fixing’ relations between Europe and its ‘others’, of establishing patterns of reading alterity at the same time as it inscribed the ‘fixity’ of that alterity, naturalizing ‘difference’ within its own cognitive codes”.

For the purposes of this paper, the *Robinson Crusoe* example is one of the founding instances of the conversational drift I have suggested in which the contrived *document* comes to stand for the empirically *documented* record, and in which an authoritarian collocation of symbolic power supplants the differential mediations of conversation. Simply put, representation is collapsed into reality in what philosophy of science would call an extreme or naive correspondence theory of truth. Defoe’s text shows how the documentary pretence acts as a *splice* to conceal the infection of the constative “real” by the tropes of fiction. It is the invisible join that allows trope to masquerade as the “real” truth, so bypassing the need to negotiate difference or culturally resistant meaning. This is strikingly evident, in the *Robinson Crusoe* example, when Defoe, under the pretence of writing a selfless documentary record of Crusoe’s “true” experiences, places in Friday’s mouth words in which he, Friday, emphatically begs for his own subjection and conveniently proclaims his own barbarism:

*Why, you angry mad with Friday, what me done? I ask’d him what he meant; I told him I was not angry with him at all. No angry! No angry! Says he, repeating the Words several Times, Why send Friday home away to my Nation? Why, (says I) Friday, did you not say you wish’d you were there? Yes, yes, says he, wish be both there, no wish Friday there, no Master there. In a Word, he would not think of going there without me; I go there! Friday, (says I) what shall I do there? He turned very quick upon me at this: You do great deal much good, says he, you teach wild Mans be good sober tame Mans ....*

(Defoe [1719]1972: 226)

In Bourdieu’s terms, this outrageous symbolic imposition of willed subservience, expressed in a grotesque pidgin of gratuitous self-abasement, accrues power because it speaks with all the authority of the institutional habitus from

which an expansive and self-promoting Enlightenment gains its legitimacy. It is here that the by-now clichéd term, *othering*, finds one of its earliest manifestations in a formal act of what one might today call the voice-over. The institutional habitus of the Crusoe narrative infiltrates the represented-as-real body of Friday like a speaking phallus, animating it with a bizarre and masturbatory form of self-mockery, abasement and quite literally, the desire to be ravished – fucked over if you like – by the colonising culture’s ever-desirable form and shape. Ronald Hyam ([1990]1991) and Robert J.C. Young (1995) have pointed to the latent (and not-so-latent) libidinal content of colonial encounters, and my postulate is that the splicing of, on the one hand, a phantasmal version of the bodies and minds of people and places they live in with, on the other, the presumed face of documentary truth, is a procedure which serves to mask a pathological form of desire: the desire to prevail, to frame the encounter, to eliminate the supplement of difference.

If my argument is correct, then the act of splicing is coterminous with conversational disjuncture, and it invariably involves a sleight of hand: passing off a representational mode as an article of truth. The deep irony is that, in so doing, the splice as methodology creates a simulacral “reality” which earnestly believes itself to be free of the defounding qualities of mediatory discourse. In a situation of deep, enduring and irresolvable cultural difference such as that in South Africa, all kinds of people in all kinds of situations and at many points in time have sought (and will continue to seek) to close down an otherwise endless argument by passing off opinion as fact. In the South African splicing room, what ends up on the floor, the cast-off role-plays, the excess of identity-formation, factual datum, ethnic particularity, or, more generally, the unwanted supplement – the cloth that did not fit the colonial, and then the apartheid, coat – has turned out to be our greatest loss. However, editing, cutting and splicing has been necessary to maintain what Bourdieu (1991: 239) calls “the strength of the collective, of the consensus, of common sense”. And so the hegemonic collective has impoverished itself, cut out that which would de-found it, that which would confirm its “aggravated unsettlement” (Jamal 2002: 36), and instead spliced in the metatrobe – whether of a simulacral sameness-in-difference (post-1994 rainbow triumphalism) or hypostasised difference which is presumed to be the natural order of things (as in the scientific racism of segregation in early twentieth-century South Africa, based on discredited social-evolutionist ethnology, or in apartheid’s different-but-equal mythology).

What we are dealing with here strikes me as a methodological *infection*, a markedly South African habit of reconfiguring the ground (of intercultural discursive mediation) which is no ground and therefore seen as urgently disciplinable. The tradition so famously entrenched by Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*, seen above, was mimicked by any number of explorers and travel-writers to southern Africa who passed off trope as truth in their efforts

to construct a singular frame of understanding out of that which is multiply refracted. This was done in an effort, as Roland Barthes (1986: 148) describes it in a different context, to make writing work as a form of notation which is “the pure encounter of an object and its expression”. Only *notation* could stave off the threat of vertiginous contradiction, of the groundlessness that would, indeed could, have been the reward for allowing cultural foundationalism to fall away. But that way lay the perceived perdition of Dr Johannes van der Kemp, the famous early missionary who married an ex-slave woman and allowed himself to absorb cultural difference to a degree greater than was otherwise considered safe,<sup>13</sup> or a Coenraad de Buys, who intermingled, intermarried and dissolved his “white” identity,<sup>14</sup> allowing it to become defounded. Both Van der Kemp and Buys disappeared off the official “maps” of social control. Like his latter-day poet-avatar, Wopko Jensma, Buys physically disappeared off the face of the (southern African) earth too, or so everyone believes.<sup>15</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that conventional South African colonial literature is thickly braided with spliced narratives. We know, thanks to research by Craig MacKenzie (1999) into the country’s rich colonial tradition of the “fireside tale” or the “oral-style” short story in English, that a critical element is the idea of “plain truth” and “authenticity”, as though even fireside entertainment was given an extra kick, that special brand of illumination that accrues to a tale when a “true story” is set apart from dispute or cultural negotiation. In fact, such tales are often about (questionably) objectified instances of cultural otherness presented much like the fly trapped in amber. There has, in addition, long been a tradition of stories in the “strange-but-true” mould, with the accompanying sense that in the New World fiction was often unequal to the assumed strangeness of the represented real. In his 1979 study, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, Stephen Gray inadvertently plays into the splicing infection by restating the priority of the “real” over mediation in southern Africa. Gray, writing about the construction of the Adamastor myth, sees in Camoens’s Portuguese epic, *The Lusiads* (1655), an implication that literary precedent comes up against a special challenge when “the stuff of sensational poetic embellishment, good for thrills and spills, actually does occur in new experience” (Gray 1979: 18). Gray fails to note that the factual datum which, it is assumed, “actually does occur in real experience”, is itself a prior representation, confabulated in order to feed the appetite for an assumed otherness that is exotically “real” but nevertheless representationally disciplinable. Camoens, in creating Adamastor as his African “creation myth”<sup>16</sup> – that is, in splicing Greek mythology with the perception of Table Mountain as a monstrous, vengeful barrier and presenting the result as a form of documentation – inaugurated a theme which has reverberated throughout South African writing in English: the forceful intrusion of what Barthes calls



a “reality effect”<sup>17</sup> in the domain of symbolic exchange. In my language in this essay, this involves cutting and splicing in the editing chamber behind the grand proscenium of public, literary and cultural representation. For Barthes (1986: 139), it is an “unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent”. From Camoens’s “creation myth” onwards, if that is what it is, or from a South African cultural origin conceived perhaps as Bushman rock art, there is a sense of *editing* – cutting and splicing – realities that are deemed to be the datum of difference (culturally, geographically, linguistically, mystically, politically) into an English which gradually asserts itself as representationally more pure. This occurs in the same moment that colonial English becomes increasingly simulacral, a fantastic array of representational phantoms which nevertheless accrue symbolic power in the colonially controlled social collective. This is an English which is regarded as ideologically neutral, a cultural lingua franca infused with reflective benevolence and a corrective measure of “objectivity” because English, especially in the Victorian period, was seen – in my view, falsely seen – as able to carry in its venerable lineaments the combined textures of empirical science, “natural history” and religious truth.<sup>18</sup>

Colonial literature, in South Africa as elsewhere, is then typically saturated with presumptuous imperial impositions of purported “fact” and regimes of positivist “truth” which seek to keep people in their place, and we should not be too surprised to find a whole range of symbolic impostures, ranging from adventure fiction in which fantasy carries a suggestion of the “strangely” real, such as in Rider Haggard’s work, to field description in which “documented record” is troped in terms of predictable narrative/fictional conventions (for example in Robert Moffat’s *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*, 1842).<sup>19</sup> When Olive Schreiner prefaced her famous novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), with the celebrated epigraph committing her fiction to “gray pigments” rather than the more-titillating-but-less-truthful colours of fancy (and fantasy) in Eurocentred writing about South Africa, she was signalling the start of an indigenously-based (if still colonial) tradition of writing in and from southern Africa. In effect, Schreiner was recalibrating discursive measures and notational indices in favour of a more sober, increasingly sombre discourse of social realism – for which she is celebrated in South African fiction studies<sup>20</sup> – but one cannot fail to note that she was playing much the same conversational game. It is worth looking at Schreiner’s “realist manifesto” in closer detail:

It has been suggested by a kind critic that he would better have liked the little book if it had been a history of wild adventure; of cattle driven into inaccessible “kranzes” by Bushmen; “of encounters – with ravening lions, and hair-breadth escapes”. This could not be. Such works are best written in Piccadilly or in the

Strand; there the *gifts of the creative imagination, untrammelled by contact with any fact*, may spread their wings.

But, should one sit down to paint the scenes among which he has grown, he will find that the facts creep in upon him. Those brilliant phases and shapes which the imagination sees in far-off lands are not for him to portray. Sadly he must squeeze the colour from his brush, and dip it into the gray pigments around him. He must paint what lies before him.

(Schreiner [1883]1979: 28; my italics)

Uncharacteristically for the time, but to her great credit, Schreiner, here still writing as the pseudonymous Victorian man, Ralph Iron, acknowledges that she is engaged in an exercise of representation in which there is a choice of signifiers (“paint”) and a spatial/referential gap between the scene of writing and the intended referent (“what lies before him”). Yet she makes a strong *ethical* claim to greater indexical felicity in her fiction by her stated reliance on a *factual* base which is purportedly more truthful than the works of writers who merely *imagine* scenes of “wild adventure” from their Strand and Piccadilly sinecures. This is a strange argument to come from a writer of fiction,<sup>21</sup> since it seeks to advance the veracity of an imaginatively rendered account by recourse to imagination’s lesser sibling: the substratum of circumstance and locale, mimetically drawn, that must underlie even the most embellished accounts of realistically portrayed human experience. But it is the ethical content of Schreiner’s argument that is preeminent, and to which the fictional element of her book is arguably secondary: she wishes to make it clear that she regards it as more honest, more true to the lived experience of real people, and therefore more responsible, to dip her brush into the “gray pigments” of what “lies before [her]” instead of the “brilliant shapes” of *mere* imagination.

In a sense, then, Schreiner tried to reverse the order of terms in the South African conversation. This is partly why *African Farm* is such a symbolically charged and important work in the field. Retrospectively regarded, it is clear that “Ralph Iron” used his considerable muscle to wrest away the symbolic capital invested in a documentary turn that Iron/Schreiner saw as fraudulent. In effect, Iron/Schreiner redefined this imperative: it was no longer imported “natural truth” or exportable “wild adventure”, both of which made substantial but spurious claims to authenticity as their *raison d’être*, but *located observation* with an indigenous orientation which was now deemed to convey clarity of vision in serious writing about the South African colony.

Of course, the *local* and the *located* would in later years become key terms in politically charged cultural debate under apartheid, as would the loaded signifiers *real* and *history*. Indeed, when one of Schreiner’s avatars in the line of significant South African authors, J.M. Coetzee, found himself defending

storytelling against the claims of History a century later, he was enveloped in this very same South African conversation about the “proper” ethical content of invested writing. For Coetzee in the 1980s, when to be perceived as *not sufficiently political* was widely regarded as ethically insupportable in radical circles claiming the moral and political high ground, the point was to restore storytelling to its status as discourse *independent of* the discourse of history. It was to insist that the “categories of history ... do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality” (Coetzee 1988: 4). In context, Coetzee was offering a corrective coda to a then-ascendant, often Marxist-based oppositional orthodoxy which privileged “history from below”, oral sources and thickly documented accounts of social history above most other forms of conversational address. The social historians saw their work as an alternative, in equal measure, to both liberal-capitalist hypocrisy in South Africa and the palpable lies of apartheid hegemony. Typically in the South African case, these historians were engaged in a recursive dialogue: in order to counter what they regarded as a fabric of lies, of ideological brainwashing, they resurrected the authority of the provable referent: the detailed case-study, the oral and therefore unmediated testimony of victims. Like Schreiner, they tried to bring into view what lay before them, against the encroachments of falsely imported (or exported) discursive finery. But, like Schreiner, they were unable to escape the infection of the splice: unable to avoid making a referential move which proclaimed a greater purchase on the “real”. Michael Green, writing in 1996, drew attention to what he called the tendency of revisionist social historians “to treat the ‘realism’ of their approach as a guarantee of the ‘reality’ of [revisionist social historians’] findings – signalled by their readiness to announce their evermore centralised projects as ‘The Real Story’” (Green 1996: 230). Green described this as a “truly worrying manifestation of their position within present power relations and the truth-claims this allows” (p. 230).

Coetzee’s call for the independence of fiction makes the obvious point that history, like fiction, is a kind of discourse, and that the opposition between “real” and “fiction” is false. However, for some reason this methodological infection, this referential splice which serves to cover the mediation and negotiative instability of representational codes, and which lodges, instead, a claim to a seamless “real”, has remained deeply lodged in the below-the-line content of South African conversations. Cumulatively, one may call it a “reality imperative” which is there almost wherever one looks: in the country’s vast, almost overpowering tradition of autobiography (not to mention its annals of invested biography); in the stuffy, compromised archives of liberal-humanist dissent in South Africa; in the mimetic dullness of much “relevant” anti-apartheid fiction; in the country’s strictly empiricist tradition of historical writing; in the assumptions of “revolutionary” poetry about an opposition

between “aesthetics” on the one hand, and “raw experience” on the other; and, abundantly, in the many acrimonious critical debates about “materialist” versus “idealist”, or “empirical” versus “postmodernist” agendas. It is as though the South African literary-cultural dialogue is a conversation trapped in its own founding disjunctures, and as if the splicing remedies resorted to as a way of escaping infinite disagreement have become constitutive to the country’s protocols of symbolic exchange.

Such entrapment can only be regarded as an inevitable consequence of an endlessly long conversation of unequals in which the ethical imperative – the desire to prevail – prompts a need to grasp for a higher cause, a legitimating condition beyond the vagaries of intercultural and intermediary conversation. This is a telling pathos in South African symbolic exchange because such attempts have, in the long run, always failed. Yet the splice has survived because it is enormously, if pathologically, productive. “Life in the splice” involves the deliberate invocation of a *productive* dualism in order to assert one of its terms as if it were a third term, an Hegelian synthesis arising out of a thesis and an antithesis, except that the splice seldom allows for rational transcendence of the Hegelian kind. Rather, it tends to pass one thing off as another, and in doing so seeks to annul the defounding vertigo that is the shadow-side of intercultural conversation, the shadow I have called, elsewhere, “radical heterogeneity” (cf De Kock 2001). So, perversely, the splice has been peculiarly generative in the symbolic exchange that has occurred in South Africa. The act of splicing clearly suited the purposes of many missionaries to South Africa, those pioneer bearers of the signs of Western civilisation, who found it easier to resolve cultural difference by the assertion of “natural” or sacred “truth” as *universally* applicable than to negotiate that difference without resort to an ethical universal; the splice was productively useful to the many travel writers in southern Africa in the years before (and after) Schreiner’s intervention: for them, “factual” narratives could be given the exotic colours of fancy and yet be spliced as “true”, lending their stories the aura of “truth stranger than fiction” – and in the process fixing otherness in an assumed ground of “reality”; for the spinners of yarns and fireside tales, a similar move was possible: they could invest their “fictional” tales with the splice of authenticity by claiming that its central event was “actually true”; in this way, they could colour fiction with “fact”, and render cultural difference as beyond dispute, such as the apocryphal tale of Shaka’s warriors who, should they as much as flinch when stepping on viciously stabbing devil-thorns, would be clubbed to death for cowardice;<sup>22</sup> but the splice was also productive for the writer who, instead of looking out towards a metropolitan audience, turned her gaze inwards, as Schreiner did, and used it to confirm the ethical value of the “real” as nonsensationally conceived above embellished acts of fiction masquerading as fact. In Schreiner’s case, as in the entire corpus of

locally invested social realism that followed, the splice was highly energising: it set the “here” and the “now” and the “real” off against various manifestations of the metropolitan, the international or the global, whether these manifestations were regarded as undesirable (the Piccadilly and Strand writer-poseurs in Schreiner’s day, putting a false face on the country) or desirable (the international culture of human rights, absent for the writers under apartheid who would nevertheless continue to invoke the opposition). Consider, too, the long and venerable tradition of black autobiography in the “Tell Freedom”<sup>23</sup> mould, in which the act of urgently bearing witness to the cruelties of apartheid as against the propaganda of its perpetrators created an ethical imperative which was invested in the starkest of dualisms. While few people would argue with the validity of that ethical imperative, it exacted a heavy price in later black (and white) writing when the investment in such an absolute right-and-wrong oppositional economy became oversubscribed and stale, leading to superficial, second-hand literature and assumptions of entitlement to an ethically dominant truth without an equal sense of the need to rediscover and recalibrate an ever-shifting and contingent sense of things, as Njabulo Ndebele felt compelled eventually to point out.<sup>24</sup> Connected to the autobiographical tradition is “protest literature” and the heavy load of cultural debate vis-à-vis such writing, in which the “urgent”, the “relevant”, the “raw” and the “real” were set off violently against what was seen as aesthetic puffery, fanciful “art for art’s sake”, belletristic embellishment and irresponsible escapism. As we have seen, academic debates in the social sciences, around the concept of social history particularly, have derived a strong imperative from taking the microhistory drawn from oral sources or derived in some way from “below” the conventional sources of history, setting this up against the false “official” accounts, and splicing the social history version as ethically preeminent in terms of truth value. Here, too, the price of such seemingly unclouded ethical clarity was the entrenchment of a methodology in which awareness of the narrative mediations of historical discourse was denied, so impoverishing the ultimate philosophical refinement of the narratives so brought forth, especially the lesser ones which followed in the wake of the leading examples.

In conclusion, I would like briefly to discuss two literary texts which tell us more than they perhaps mean to about the methodological ironies I have been discussing in this essay. The first, a piquant example of a represented-as-real text which implicitly deconstructs its own splice, is afforded by Charles van Onselen’s classic, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894-1985*. This text very charmingly gives the lie to South Africa’s often obsessively empirical bent in its historical narratives. In a work derived from strict adherence to meticulously researched oral testimony over many years, the narrative is often rendered beautiful by a representation of protagonist Kas Maine’s interiority in terms which bear the unmistakable mark

of an imaginative writer, as for example in the following sentence:

Kas shuffled forward to the seated figure until, despite his clouded vision, he thought he could detect the profile of his eldest son. He paused, poised awkwardly between joy and fear, and then asked the man if he knew who *he* was.  
(Van Onselen 1996: 513)

In this passage, Van Onselen produces a moment of dramatic emotional impact based on researched fact. And yet he renders the moment with a delicate and imaginatively constructed sense of interiority which is surely beyond the reach even of oral testimony (“He paused, poised awkwardly between joy and fear ...”). A stark example of Van Onselen using his little-acknowledged skill in rendering *exteriority* in a lyrical manner is the following: “Winter slid down the hillside and took control of the valley” (Van Onselen 1996: 423); and the following: “September [of 1925] was unusually dry. Occasionally an energetic gust of wind managed to sneak in across the plain and for a few wonderful minutes would lift the blanket of thick hot air hovering over the Triangle, only to retreat as a whisper to a distant place” (p. 124). Oral history or outright lyricism? Clearly, the imaginatively rendered moments (if one accepts that this is what they are) come across as radiant shafts of light *because* they are embedded in a text of such overpowering facticity, and *because* they emerge despite the empirical tenor of the work as a whole. But they also make it clear that Van Onselen’s epic text, which has been rightly applauded as a major work, is embedded in a richer play of discursive mediation than it consciously admits to, and that it cannot remain stuck in the confines of a mode as narrow as the South African splice.

My second example comes from the most recent work of leading poet Ingrid de Kok, specifically a poem that is part of a cycle recalling her childhood in the mining town of Stilfontein. In these poems the sense of history and the datum of the real, deeply felt and intensely evoked, create a characteristically South African sense of the incandescence, the terror and the ineradicable insistence of the “real”, in memory and in its transformation in poetry, that medium of truth beautifully told. The poem, “Under the Ground”, reads as follows:

Every day on my way to Strathvaal School  
I dragged my feet,  
wanting to be free  
of their black cockroach lace-ups  
kicking the half-tarred ground,

JLS/TLW

varicose as granny's skin.  
And I thought of miners and their tread,  
thud of reluctant boots to work.

I knew they were pacing too,  
deep beneath playground and street:  
there where the underworld's arms  
opened veins of honeycombed gold,  
where workers were digging  
in caves, hot, tight, blacker  
than anything up here  
even at its starless breathless darkest.

When men surfaced  
were their boots left behind,  
embalmed at level twenty-six,  
like the bronzed first shoes of babies?  
Was underground a makeshift maze,  
feet searching for exits  
in the breaths between tremors?  
A coffin for lost shoes and feet?

(De Kok 2002: 47)

What this poem demonstrates is that the splice will not hold; a singular modality of perception or representation will be defounded and unsettled by the very instability of the ground itself, both literally and figuratively. The idea of *real* mineworkers, and the sense of their contingent mortality, will drift up from the psychic as well as physical underground and intrude upon the reverie of a young white girl as she walks the mining-town streets. The presence of those mineworkers *will* infuse the poetic imagination and impose upon the poetic sensibility that sense of historical *presence* which, though mediated and perhaps absent in the Derridean sense, nevertheless holds imaginative writing in an unwilling, unwitting and unwavering clasp. For every step above the visible line of the earth's surface, there is the sense of that shadow-step below the surface, the deep source of the country's wealth. In the symbolic economy, there is a similarly subterranean sense of a separate, unmovable shadow-presence which will not altogether go away, despite the alibis (the discursive splices) of progressive capitalism, trickle-down benefits, job creation, they're-better-off-than-in-the-rest-of-Africa, and so on. The sense of a "coffin for lost shoes and feet" will dog the steps, the almost carefree steps, of a young girl and stay with her for the rest of her life. That is the way the country works on its subjects.

What these examples show is that there is a telling antagonism, in South African and African cultural exchange, between a sense of the “real” as overpowering and consuming on the one hand, and the “rustle of language”<sup>25</sup> through which the “real” must ultimately be mediated on the other – the alternately sweet and harsh rustle of language. This antagonism, in its more generative and profitable moments, has created a peculiar *frisson*, a sense of anxiety, urgency and delicate reverberation as writers find themselves manipulating the modalities of the “real”, whether they are aware of it or not. In the other, less profitable cases, writers of various kinds have sought to fasten onto a foundational cause, an ethical dominant, a truth that will stick. There is a terrible pathos in the splice as an act of cultural homogenisation – it is a pathos that speaks to the deep need in situations of harrowing cultural and perceptual diversity to *hold fast*. It is an attempt that should perhaps be regarded with a measure of understanding, for it speaks of a need to create a more singular understanding, a more certain mode of address. However, it is an attempt which must be resisted in the long run. Singular ethical imperatives, singular discursive modes, and the splicing that makes the impossibly diverse strands of the radically heterogeneous *appear* singular are simply too amenable to the appetites of singular nationalisms. We must learn to uncover the splice at every opportunity, for it is a debility that has held the South African carnivalesque, the enormous scene of difference, in a suffocating clasp for altogether too long now.

## Notes

1. From Coetzee’s Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, in Coetzee and Attwell (1992: 99).
2. Bethlehem uses the term “signified” rather than referent, but in my view the weight of her argument suggests that she means “referent”, i.e. something outside of the sign itself. Conventional understanding is that the signifier/signified are both components of the sign itself, whereas Bethlehem’s argument is about the attempt to effect closure between *word* and *world*, in other words sign and referent.
3. Bethlehem’s work derives from her doctoral thesis, *Literary Historiographic Discourse under Apartheid: 1976-1985* (1988).
4. *Habitus* is the term Bourdieu uses to describe the set of dispositions which incline people to act and react in certain ways. They are, writes John B. Thompson, editor of Bourdieu’s *Language and Symbolic Power*, inculcated, structured, durable, generative and transposable (Thompson in Bourdieu 1991: 12).



5. See De Kock (1996) for an extensive documentation of this process.
6. On the question of agonistic negotiation within discursive power-broking, see De Kock (1996: 34-38, 105-140).
7. Communicative intersubjectivity is helpfully summed up by one of its leading exponents, Jurgen Habermas (1995), in the following critique of deconstruction:  
Even the furious labor of deconstruction has identifiable consequences only when the paradigm of self-consciousness, of the relation-to-self of a subject knowing and acting in isolation, is replaced by a different one – by the paradigm of mutual understanding, that is, of the intersubjective relationship between individuals who are socialized through communication and reciprocally recognize one another.  
(Habermas 1995: 154)
8. One finds in the writing of famous and celebrated missionaries such as Robert Moffat a decided undercurrent of uncertainty and an awareness of failure to achieve the kind of “results” that mattered – converted souls (cf De Kock 1996: 155-162). The failure to “convert” in large and convincing numbers unmistakably points to a failure to “converse” in terms that would make converting a matter of desire rather than circumstantial coercion, which it very often was.
9. In philosophy of science, such strong reliance on correspondence between the presumed “real” and representation is known as “naive realism” or “metaphysical realism”. Bas van Fraassen (1980: 67) writes:  
What exactly is scientific realism? A naive statement of the position would be this: the picture which science gives us of the world is a true one, faithful in its details, and the entities postulated in science really exist: the advances of science are discoveries, not invention.  
(Van Fraassen 1980:67)

In the Victorian era a widespread attempt was made to sell cultural conviction as “science” or “natural history”, a habit which was common among the high-minded empiricists of the period, who alternated effortlessly from field description to religious conviction and back again. The export of Enlightenment versions of truth required a discourse of what was thought to be reliable scientific account. For Mary-Louse Pratt, “natural history” was intimately engaged with European economic and political expansionism. Key to Pratt’s argument is the assertion that the processes of the “real”, of “natural” phenomena “correctly” observed,

asserted an urban, lettered, male authority over the whole of the planet; it elaborated a rationalizing, extractive, dissociative understanding which overlaid functional, experiential relations among people, plants and animals.  
(Pratt 1992: 38-39)

10. See note 18 on the commingling of “natural truth” and religious sentiment.
11. Susan Narramore Maher (1991: 34) calls *Robinson Crusoe* “the most compelling myth of Empire”. Allan Gardiner (1987: 175) suggests that Defoe’s pseudo-historical fiction is “the first English novel that portrays the expansion of European capitalist arrangements into non-European, non-capitalist settings”.
12. In 1718, the year before the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe published *The Memoirs of Majr. Alexander Ramkins, a High-Land-Officer, Now in Prison at Avignon*; and in 1720, the year after *Robinson Crusoe*’s publication, Defoe published *An Historical Account of the Voyages and Adventures of Sir Walter Raleigh, with the Discoveries and Conquests He Made for the Crown of England*.
13. See Enklaar (1988: 204-6).
14. See Schoeman (1938).
15. On Jansma’s schizophrenia and his ultimate debility, see Du Plessis (1991) and Cummiskey (1995: 48-50). On De Buys’s disappearance, see Schoeman (1938: 99-102).
16. Gray (1979: 15-37) entitles his chapter on Adamastor “The White Man’s Creation Myth of Africa”.
17. The term *reality effect* derives from Barthes’s essay, “The Reality Effect” (1986: 141-148) and elsewhere in *The Rustle of Language*, for example in “The Discourse of History”: “[I]n ‘objective’ history, the ‘real’ is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent. This situation defines what we might call the *reality effect*” (1986: 139).
18. See Siddle (1973: 87) for whom the mid-Victorian field-scientist such as David Livingstone “clearly [reflects] the uneasy relationship between science and religion”. For Pratt (1992: 39) “science and sentiment code the imperial frontier in two eternally clashing and complementary languages of bourgeois subjectivity”. See also De Kock (1996: 174).
19. See De Kock (1996: 155-162).
20. Notably (but not only) by Stephen Gray in his *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979: 133-159).
21. Although it deserves to be noted that in terms of quantity, Schreiner’s oeuvre leans more towards the rhetoric of passionate address and factual recall than it does towards fictional invention.

22. The tale appears in E.A. Ritter's novel *Shaka Zulu* ([1955]1978). According to Dan Wylie, an expert on the narratology surrounding Shaka, the tale is entirely without factual foundation (e-mail communication, 5 September 2002). See Wylie's *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (2000: 217-237).
23. *Tell Freedom* (1954) is the title of Peter Abrahams's autobiographical bildungsroman in which he narrates his life under apartheid, culminating in his flight from South Africa.
24. Most tellingly in his "Turkish Tales" essay (1991).
25. *The Rustle of Language* (1986) is the title of Barthes's collection of essays which includes "The Reality Effect".

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