Traumas and Transformations: Fictions which Play with what "They Say", by Zakes Mda and Lindsey Collen

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> They say things like foetuses haven't got a place in stories. You never know what might happen if they got into stories.
>
> (Lindsey Collen, *Getting Rid of It*, 1997: 54)

> They say our mothers no longer want to talk about these things. Our mothers have learnt to live with themselves.
>
> (Zakes Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, 2002: 217)

Summary

There has been an ongoing debate on attempts to translate traumatic experiences, both personal and public, into a variety of cultural forms. In fictional accounts, particularly, this has involved a focus on redefined selfhoods, which can be linked to the fluidity of identities during times of acute social transition. Through a comparative study of the strategies used in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) and Lindsey Collen's *Getting Rid of It* (1997), I will explore how these texts raise questions about the relationship between the violence and renewal in provocative ways. However, the focus on re-invention through narrative raises further questions concerning the shift from realism and the so-called new aesthetic in recent fiction: how does one avoid trivialising trauma through fictionalising it, or counter readings which co-opt the texts into a variety of conservative public discourses around reconciliation or rainbow-nationhood? Finally, to what extent can these fictions point to the possibilities of new ways of "being" in a world which seems to be testing received notions of what it means to be human?

Opsomming

Daar bestaan 'n voortdurende debat oor pogings om traumatiese ervarings, van persoonlike sowel as publieke aard, in 'n verskeidenheid kultuurvorms te vertaal. In fiktiewe verhale behels dit dikwels dat daar op herdefiniëring van selfhede gefokus word, wat in verband gebring kan word met die vloeibaarheid van identiteite gedurende tye van akute sosiale oorgang. Met behulp van 'n vergelykende studie van die strategieë wat in Zakes Mda se *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) en Lindsey Collen se

Getting Rid of It (1997) gebruik word, gaan ek ondersoek instel na hoe hierdie tekste op prikkelende wyse aanleiding gee tot vrae oor die verhouding tussen geweld en vernuwing. Die fokus op heruitvinding deur vertelling gee egter verder aanleiding tot vrae oor die verskuiwing van realisme en die sogenaamde nuwe estetiek in onlangse fiksie: hoe vermy 'n mens die trivialisering van trauma deur die fiksionalisering daarvan, of hoe vorm 'n mens 'n teenwig vir voorlesings wat die tekste by 'n verskeidenheid konserwatiewe openbare diskoerse oor versoening of "reënboognasieskap" betrek? Ten slotte, in watter mate kan hierdie fiksie dui op moontlike nuwe maniere van "wees" in 'n wêreld wat die indruk skep dat dit besig is om aanvaarde begrippe van wat dit beteken om menslik te wees, te toets?

One of the legacies of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been an ongoing debate on attempts to translate traumatic experiences, both personal and public, into a variety of cultural forms. In his discussion of the TRC process Christoph Marx claims that by personalising rather than analysing the causes of apartheid, "it was possible to stage spectacular, televised, scenes of reconciliation, while for the most part sparing the white population from having to confront the system it had supported" (2002: 51). He cautions that despite all efforts to pursue an integrated process of truth and reconciliation, we are likely to see something similar to what happened in post-war Germany, namely decades of public silence.[1] However, as suggested by the epigraphs above, secrets or taboo subjects do find their way into texts in an attempt to translate traumatic histories into palatable stories which serve to counter what "they say". My focus here is on how the works play with what they say by attempting to textualise the experiences of those who fall through the cracks of public discourses. At the same time, there are of course dangers involved here: on the one hand, how does one avoid trivialising trauma through fictionalising it, or counter readings which co-opt the text into a variety of conservative public discourses? On the other hand, what about the threats of censorship facing authors who tackle such risky topics? For instance, *The Rape of Sita* (1993) by South-African-born Lindsey Collen, for which she received the 1994 Commonwealth Writer's prize, was banned in her home country Mauritius, and Collen, who is also a political activist, was threatened with acid attacks, public rape and death.

The exploration of such unofficial histories invites a number of questions. If, as has been argued, trauma "obliterates (removes from memory) old modes of life and understanding at the same time that it generates new ones" (Berger 1996: 410), does this mean that traumatic experiences can be seen as both destructive and productive? To what extent can these narratives, in Njabulo Ndebele's words, go "beyond testimony, towards creating new thoughts, new worlds?" (1998: 17-18). According to Ndebele, the move from old polarities to a new balance of power in the South African context results in relationships forged in an interactive struggle, and, "If there is one thing the hearings of the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission have done, it is to reveal the range of content at the centre of our interactive public space" (1999: 152). This interactivity of new binary relationships, claims Ndebele, "is a humanising space of immense complexity" (p. 151).[2] At the same time, this shift from old polarities emphasises representations of alterity, including attempts to generate meanings from an in-between place. This has an echo in what Harry Garuba describes as the "third text" produced in Third-World countries as a transgressive, transformative discursive strategy.[3] According to Garuba, such a text simultaneously participates in and also resists being integrated into the familiar binaries; in other words, by celebrating a strategic "playfulness", these texts disturb the "stable, settled meanings of the colonialist script" (Garuba 1999: 119). Of interest here is the link between the playfulness of the texts and the forms of parody and pastiche which Garuba identifies as the major tropes of the "third text", its end being "the fragmentation of hegemonic and totalizing narratives" (p. 119). However, this playfulness is not simply a disruptive end in itself, but is associated with the function of creativity, the aesthetic imagination, and with sensory experience, all of which occupy a central position in the narratives to be discussed here. For instance, in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) Popi, the daughter of the Madonna of the title, sets up an apparent opposition between "meaning" and "emotion" when she looks at a painting and asks "*Was it not enough just to enjoy the haunting quality of the work and to rejoice in the emotions that it awakened without quibbling about what it all meant? Why should it mean anything at all? Is it not enough that it* evokes? *Should it now also mean?* (p. 236; original italics).[4] Significantly, in the works to be discussed, the ecstatic artistic or sensuous experience is presented as a catalyst for psychic transformation, for enabling alternative ways of seeing and of being.

Such an emphasis in recent writing on what to some indicates the enormous power accorded to the creative imagination has been read as a disturbing turn to a romanticising utopianism that masks the reality of material conditions of social inequality (cf Sole 1999: 259). A more complex response is offered by Jeremy Cronin in a review of a collection of poems, *Terrestial Things* (2002), by Ingrid de Kok. Referring to "Spring Custom" in which the ecstasy of bird song functions as a form of betrayal since it lures other birds to their death, Cronin comments on the power of the anti-climatic ending: the caged canary hanging in the forest is "shocked rigid/by the sudden shots" and stops singing, but the last line adds, "until the following spring". He applauds De Kok for achieving a balance between the extremes of a "liberatory ecstatic" and "plain cynicism" which has "both neo-conservative and leftist variants". However, says Cronin, despite the mistrust of the ecstatic, the collection is not an invitation to cynicism. "Yes, things are not only bad", he notes, "they are probably worse: all the more reason to keep the faith, to be gentle perhaps, to

respect all of those terrestrial things, who somehow have, or have not, survived" (2002). This raises another question: How can symbolic acts of creativity function as a form of personal and cultural survival? In turn, what use value is embedded in what will be described as the species of "grounded aesthetics" employed here – both as a narrative strategy and as the catalyst which opens up different ways of living in a world in urgent need of a "saving ethos" (Jamal 2002: 119)?[5] Do these texts here succumb to a romanticising utopianism in celebrating the ecstatic?

Apparently contradicting its title, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), the latest novel by playwright and artist, Zakes Mda, begins, "All these things flow from the sins of our mothers" (Mda 2002: 1), and loops back to the beginning in its final sentence: "From the sins of our mothers all these things flow" (p. 268). However, this seemingly traditional mode serves by satiric inversion to construct a narrative that leaks through the silences and blindness generated by the "sins of our mothers", which are of course actually the sins of the fathers, since the novel tracks the history of a much publicised scandal which rocked the conservative South African Free State town of Excelsior in the 1970s when it came to light that a number of its leading Afrikaner citizens had been having illicit sex with a group of black women of Mahlatswetsa township. The culprits were accused under the 1950 Immorality Act, but the case against the "Excelsior 19" was dropped when the women were coerced into not testifying against the men – who in turn claimed all along that they had been "framed".

In an interview Mda says that many people had forgotten about the Excelsior case, and the novel is based on his research as well as his meetings with the women involved: "I'm a storyteller, but also a social critic and teacher" (Mda in Tempkin 2002: 3), and though he claims this is not his primary role here, the voice of teacher and social critic does come through, strongly and intrusively at times – though balanced by the interweaving voices telling the story. As in his acclaimed *Ways of Dying* (1995),[6] Mda constructs a composite narrative which employs both a retrospective communal voice and an often biased witnessing narrator from the township (and occasionally even from inside the Afrikaner community). The Madonna Niki and her daughter Popi also serve as focalisers for sections of the story, and in addition, the voice of the implied author intrudes from time to time. Blending fiction and history, Mda incorporates archival reports of the events, and prefaces each chapter by a description of a painting by the "trinity", the name given to the well-known Belgian painter-priest, Father Frans Claerhout, whose works draw on and recreate the landscape and inhabitants – especially the women – of the area surrounding Excelsior. (Somewhat whimsically, the novel is dedicated to a bird painted on a flyleaf for Mda by the now 85-year-old priest .) From the outset the reader is made aware of the simultaneous airing and censoring of the taboo subject: we are told that the women of Mahlatswetsa Location, "no longer want to talk

about these things" (Mda 2002: 217); similarly, amongst the pillars of the Afrikaner community, "[t]he sins of our mothers were never mentioned at dinner tables" (p. 143). While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings recorded testimony involving the Sharpeville 6 and the Gugulethu 7[7] and opened these abuses up to public scrutiny, it seems that accounts concerning the apartheid legacy of such outrages as the Excelsior 19 have not received the same attention, even though the results of the rapes and sexual encounters are "walking the streets of Excelsior" (p. 101) to this day.

Interracial rape and miscegenation have long been an informing trope in the literature of apartheid, and it is interesting how this continues to be a feature in post-election writing. However, given the extremely high incidence of violence directed at women and at children, it is not surprising that this has also elicited strong criticism. For instance, Meg Samuelson, while claiming to be wary of adopting a prescriptive tone, says that this represents a failure of the South African literary imagination since "the literary script of rape thus distorts the realities of sexual violence in order to direct attention away from the violated female body, or the male body gendered female" (Samuelson 2002: 85). The point she and others make is that the focus on interracial rape obscures the fact that the majority of rapes in South Africa today are in fact intraracial (Graham 2002: 91). At the same time, Samuelson argues, the birth of a mixed-race child which is produced by the rape is seen as integral to the re-fashioning of the "rainbow nation". Interracial rape has thus also become the script for producing "coloured" identity which appears to be the focus of much writing about post-apartheid identities, and it has been noted how it is within especially this heterogeneous group "that issues of identity will be most telling in a democratising South Africa" (Daymond 2002: 26).This is illustrated when the implied author juxtaposes a report on the Excelsior contraventions of the Immorality Act in *The Friend* newspaper of 17 November 1970, with a description of the trinity's painting of five nuns whose "world has nothing to do with the outside world of miscegenation", and who "live only in the continuing present" (p. 94). The models for the paintings are of course the same Excelsior "culprits":

> Yet each one of them is carrying a baby. Babies with slanting eyes. Babies that look grey at first glance, but have the colours of the rainbow painted if you look hard enough. (God promises us through the rainbow that He will never destroy the world again.)
>
> (Daymond 2002: 94-95)

In describing the initial rape of Niki, the Madonna whose girlhood was taken from her in a field of sunflowers by Johannes Smit of the hairy buttocks, we are told that "Yellowness ran amok. Yellowness dripped down with her

screams" (Mda 2002: 16), and throughout Mda employs a grotesque juxtaposition of the individual human drama against a broader indifferent or apparently empathetic natural environment, which (while Mda would probably reject this comparison), reminds me of Hardy's similar juxtapositions, drawing attention to a world out of joint, and in the process suggesting a naturalisation of what are in effect social and political injustices. This in turn affects the way Niki responds. Consumed by her anger at this and other violations of her body as she is stripped and weighed by Madam Cornelia, her employer, raped and used as a "masturbation gadget" (p. 19) by Johannes Smit, beaten by her father and by her jealous husband, Niki thus deliberately accedes to the advances of Stephanus Cronje, Madam's husband, as an act of vengeance against the men and women of Excelsior. This time it is she who was "gobbling him up" and "chewing him to pieces" (p. 50), on Madam's bed, and in Johannes Smit's barn during carnivalesque communal copulation sessions in which the women (for a small financial reward) reduce the respectable citizens of Excelsior to a cacophony of inarticulate howling, squealing and bleating. She even meets him amongst the very sunflowers which were the site of her violent deflowering, where Niki now claims to have Stephanus Cronje "entirely in her power" (p. 50). However, as a result she gives birth to an almost-white child, Popi, who literally embodies both the structural violence and violations of apartheid, as well as its own transgressive desires. Not only the child Popi, but Niki herself embodies these violations as she subjects her youthful beauty to the scarring of skin lighteners; but ironically, to escape arrest, she literally "roasts" her infant daughter's fair skin over an open fire in an attempt to darken the signs of miscegenation. The blue-eyed Popi herself feels disgust at her hairy legs and hides her long straight hair in a tightly coiled turban, responding to the shame at racially-loaded gibes about her "boesman" status from both the white Afrikaner and her own Basotho community. On the other hand, Mmampe, Niki's betraying friend, another of the Excelsior 19, remarks resignedly, "White men have always loved us. They say we are more beautiful than their own wives. We are more devastating in the blankets" (p. 62), and the communal voice notes that the unlikely friendship that develops in the post-election period between Niki's half-brother, erstwhile freedom fighter Viliki, and Adam de Vries, lawyer for the Excelsior 19 men, manifests "the old love affair between black people and Arikaners that the English found so irritating" (p. 223). In turn, these changing alliances can be seen as an example of what Ndebele describes as the highly charged interactive, and "humanising space" beyond the old polarities referred to earlier. Popi herself eventually comes to inhabit that space since the story spans the period from the height of apartheid excesses to the dramatic social transition of the 1990s, and then to the present uneasy truce between old enemies enacted in the petty politics of the town council of Excelsior. This is presented as a comically foreshortened record of

recent history played out as a species of sibling rivalry, and which by undermining the binaries associated with apartheid exposes the intimacy of oppressive relationships lingering at the heart of the interactive space.

When Niki and Popi model (again for a small fee) as Madonna and child for the trinity, Niki (who has distorted her own face and roasted colour into her child) looks at the richly coloured canvases of distorted women and beasts and wonders somewhat indignantly: "[W]hat gave the trinity the right to change things at the dictates of his whims. To invent his own truths. From where did he get all that power, to re-create what had already been created?"(p. 108). These painterly creations of the Free State landscape with purple skies, robust blue and brown madonnas, distorted donkeys, sunflowers and cosmos, serve as a preface to each chapter, as if the subjects created by the mad painter-priest step out of their immersion in the canvas, achieving their own realities in a way that has become typical of Mda's theatrical style of storytelling, where the performativity of meanings is foregrounded. But the distortions that Niki refers to with some irritation here are precisely what attract her daughter Popi, the "sweet harvest" (p. 231) of her mother's wrathful miscegenation, since the canvases excite and move her, providing coherence and shape to her own confusing sense of identity by revealing other modes of experience. When at the end of the novel Popi takes a last trip to see the trinity's paintings which she associates with significant moments in her painful growing up, her response again recalls the ecstatic and cathartic power of emotions evoked by colour: "The works exuded an energy that enveloped her, draining her of all negative feelings. She felt weak at the knees. Tears ran down her cheeks". Yet when she leaves, "she felt that she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe" (p. 238). The emphasis on the use value of such aesthetic distortions through which traumatic experience is translated, fictionalised, transformed – or simply made palatable, have become a significant feature of post-TRC writing. At the same time, alternative modes of knowledge are validated, and as mentioned earlier this is in keeping with the shift from the polarities associated with the realism of the 1970s and 80s. However, it can be asked whether this functions as another form of "fetish-ising" realities in a way that ignores material conditions and experiences.

Reading Mda's *Madonna of Excelsior* in relation to other works dealing with "invisible" communities, both locally, and elsewhere, establishes interesting reciprocities. For instance, Elana Bregin's *The Slayer of Shadows* (1996)[9] is presented as a species of surreal fairy-tale, fable and fantasy, but it is also a fiction of development that depicts a world out of joint. It is set in an unidentified place and time which appears to have been bypassed by the political transformation of the last decade; however, it also deals recognisably with a violently traumatic coming of age in post-apartheid South Africa. The child narrator is named Sorrow by her grandmother since she is the only

survivor of one of those mysterious killings that were all too frequently reported in the early 1990s, where entire families were murdered in remote areas by a faceless "Third Force". Sorrow is renamed Marinda by the brown-skinned but flame-haired Shadow-slayer who attempts to rescue her from the lawless jungle of shack-dwellers, and her story records her attempts to survive in a chaotic gang-ruled world of violence and despair where her credo is, "Learn to love nothing" (Bregin 1996: 24). On the other hand, *Getting Rid of It* by Lindsey Collen, is like Mda's *Madonna*, a composite narrative, set in Mauritius where Collen has been living since 1974, and deals with a day in the intertwined lives of three women involved in a bizarrely convoluted and at turns even darkly comic quest to help their friend dispose of a miscarried foetus. Here the suggestion of a world out of joint is epitomised in several references to sightings of a mysterious Naked Midnight Man, "[a] shiny and black and beautiful visitor who appears all of a sudden". It seems that the Naked Midnight Man always comes at night, and mainly to women and girls, and occasionally even in the guise of a wolf: "Sometimes he leaves red marks on women's necks. Or he leaves young girls pregnant. So then men, men and boys, they make up bands and roam the streets with pangas, bloodthirsty" (Collen 1997: 10).

It has been suggested that such sightings of bizarre or inexplicable otherworldly presences are frequently associated with societies experiencing rapid social transformation, and can be seen as attempts to reclaim some sense of identity in resisting the "rational" forces of imposed social control (cf Pratt 1999: 6). In this text, then, the perception of a world out of joint is more explicitly linked to processes of social transformation.

Similar to Mda's and Bregin's texts, Collen's *Getting Rid of It* also attempts to translate, or to present some coherence to unspoken traumatic histories. Central to this translation are various types of artistic expression (music, storytelling, painting and other forms of aesthetic patterning), while desire – as that which is outside ideology (Belsey 1994) – is represented as crucial in the processes of subjecthood explored here. However, there are also significant differences in the way desire and a "liberatory ecstatic" work in each text. For example, in Bregin's text Marinda's transformation is triggered by music, by colour and by the story the Shadow-slayer tells her:

> I closed my eyes and let its current take me, away through the world to the place of colours and dreams .... I cannot say why those images were so comforting to me. They freed me in the same way the flight of birds did. They were sanctuary from the Jungle's ugliness.
>
> (Bregin 1996: 41)

This recalls Popi's sense of feeling healed by the trinity's canvases (Mda 2002:

238). A similar emphasis on a type of pre-rational sensory experience is evident in *Getting Rid of It*, though here it is located in sexual awakening as a precursor to a sense of selfhood. This is demonstrated in several lyrical passages describing love-making, such as between Jumila and her first love, Rahim, or Goldilox Soo and her lover-boss, Sara. In each case love-making is described as experiencing a liberating sense of being "out of time" – time here associated with the surveillance of social constraints: "Love linked them to the world of the past when life began and the world of the future where the unknown lies like an eternal gaping" (Collen 1997: 40). This provides a telling contrast to the vengeful degradations described in Mda's text where desire turns the pillars of Afrikaner society to baying like dogs, pigs and goats, or even reduces them to infants in an interesting reversal of power. This is spectacularly evoked in the communal fornication scene in Johannes Smit's barn, where the sighs and moans of pain and pleasure of the copulating couples are replicated in the restlessness of the cattle grazing outside. At the same time, the black women going to the barn are described as "five supplicants" walking into the "wanton temple" (Mda 2002: 52), mirroring the five nuns of the trinity's painting referred to earlier. The ensuing events are described with all the extravagance of an operatic crescendo reaching its climax, and permeating the surrounding countryside itself:

> The romps on the hay deteriorated into moans. Moans relayed from one pair to another. Simultaneous moans. A barnful of moans. And howls of enjoyable pain. The baby cried. But no one paid attention. The baby bawled and bawled. The Brahmins outside went berserk. With their big ears, they had very keen hearing and were sensitive to strange noises. The Brahmin bulls bellowed and raised dust. No one paid any attention to them. A cacophony of moans, howls, baby cries and the deep bellowing of the bulls.
>
> (Mda 2002: 55)

Here again the parodic extension and juxtaposition of human and natural worlds evoke a typical sense of rampant sexuality that disrupts the master narratives of power; this is clearly evident in the way desire enables the women to obliterate their master's language which is reduced to inarticulate bleats, squeals and grunts.

Apart from a common focus on a liberatory ecstatic in each text, one can also track the role of pariah figures as catalysts who inhabit, literally, the margins of their communities. In turn, these pariah figures are integral to the configuration of alternative family dynamic, and its relation to a developing nation. In Mda's text, Niki withdraws increasingly from her community and finally immerses herself in tending her bees since they provide her with a healing connection to her ancestors, transforming herself from one of the

Excelsior 19 to the Bee Woman. However, she retains intensely close ties with her children, her daughter Popi in particular, and the communal voice remarks: "We observed that the motlopotlo that existed between them was very strong. The motlopotlo was the invisible cord that tied the child to its mother" (Mda 2002: 231). At the same time, Niki has throughout included Tjaart Cronje, the child of the despised Madame Cornelia and Stephanus Cronje, as one of her children, ever since he "rode horsey" on her nursemaid back as a small boy, and this relationship is played out in the sibling rivalry of the debates in the newly democratic council meetings. Here Tjaart as spokesperson for the ultra-right engages in angry exchanges with Niki's children, the Pule Siblings, Popi and Viliki. Looking at the "rainbow queue" in the bank, the communal voice remarks,

> We saw what we had always whispered. They looked as if they had been hatched from the same egg. Popi was just a darker version of Tjaart. We also noted that Tjaart did not see himself in Popi. And Popi did not see herself in Tjaart.
> (Mda 2002: 153)

In Bregin's text the Shadow-slayer and Marinda initially occupy a shack situated outside the Jungle, but end up living a deliberately unsettled nomadic lifestyle in an attempt to go back to an "apparently untained" existence. However, an alternative family structure is most clearly articulated in Collen's *Getting Rid of It*, which explores the friendship between Jumila, Sadna and Goldilox Soo in the process of helping Jumila get rid of her incriminating "evidence". Jumila arrives with a leaking one-rupee plastic bag, which is placed inside an Air Islands Duty Free bag, which in turn is eventually placed inside a bag with a Priba Paradise logo. The leaking bag which seems to mock its labels contains a miscarried foetus, and is gradually followed by a persistent bluebottle. Needless to say, this is a risky enterprise in more ways than one, not only do they court the ire of the police, who frown on such unpleasant and even potentially murderous evidence, but as the implied narrator intrudes to tell us, this is not considered a suitable subject for stories; in fact, "people aren't used to foetuses being in stories anymore. They have been censored for so long now. Hidden in secretive gestures, not even amounting to whispers anymore" (Collen 1997: 54). However, Collen deftly weaves a tale that spins around each woman's present involvement in the trek to bury, throw away or otherwise get rid of the foetus, and her traumatic past. In the process their personal histories become linked to other women, since each of them becomes emotionally involved with a woman "boss", which in turn pushes them to become politically active in the fast-growing housing pressure group, the House Movement.

Collen establishes a connection between the invisible women's situation

outside, or in the "interstices" of society as homeless, poor – but not helpless – victims, and their political awakening. This follows from the initial liberatory ecstatic which was integral to their developing sense of self, described earlier. Interestingly, for each woman, being rendered homeless after being "kicked out" by the husband of her woman boss follows an aesthetically or sensory ecstatic encounter with their female employers, who are all to some extent imprisoned in their wealthy abodes, so that Jumila, Sadna and Goldilox Soo become the agents for the transformation of their bosses. This is a strongly patterned narrative, both in terms of linking these women's history in the present, but also in a collective past. The encounter between the women and their female employers leads directly to the suicide of each boss, one by fire, one by water, and one by steel as she slits her wrists. This action, while functioning as a form of escape from an intolerable existence, is also seen as an act of subversion, "submit or suicide" (p. 192), as the women, literally, "get rid of" themselves. Significantly, this choice, to submit or to kill oneself, is recognised by Sadna as a "slavethought" (p. 192) that hovers as a legacy of the slave past of Mauritius, though in this case it is the employers who are making traumatic choices previously made by slave women, on whose sufferings their own privilege is built. In the process, the self-slain wives turn their husbands into zombies by wresting the power over their lives from them, and causing national panic as a wave of suicides is followed by a wave of wife and husband killings. After being rendered homeless by the zombie husbands of their employers, Jumila, Goldilox Soo and Sadna find themselves moving to Kan Yolof where

> they live in enclosed spaces between things. Places where the land developers haven't got to yet .... Where old warehouses, and mansions, and stone gables, and new skyscrapers all mingle, and in-between there are still spaces. Interstices.
> (Collen 1997: 145)

In describing the move, the narrative voice slides into a communal "we", challenging what "they say":

> So the three of them had found out separately but in the same year that you got to have a house first .... First a house. Then a job. Create the earth first, then work it.
>
> That's how come we came to be living in Kan Yolof. That's how come we got sidetracked from looking for a job. When you lose your boss and your house, there's no relative, no friend, no do-gooder, no charity, no no one good enough to help you. You are beyond help. You are bad news. Sometimes they call you a hopeless case. They just look at you and then at the kids, or at the kids and then back at you and they shake their heads and say to one another "She's a hopeless case". You're so hopeless, they can just say it right there in front of you. As if

> you're not there. Invisible.
>
> That's their song.
>
> Then you have to go to Kan Yolof. There, there's the poor. They don't think you're helpless .... Even they have got hope.
>
> (Collen 1997: 144)

Different to Mda's and Bregin's text is the emphasis on communal action here. But like Mda's novel *Ways of Dying* where the magazine illustrations of luxurious home and garden scenes enable Toloki and Noria's imagined translation into an alternative world, there is also an emphasis on a grounded aesthetic in the way the inhabitants of Kan Yolof transform their plight by similar creative inversions. This is achieved by claiming that it is precisely because they are inhabiting these in-between places that they can claim ownership of living differently:

> And in these spaces, you can do your own architecture. It's one of the few places where you can still do your own architecture on this planet .... Even bosses don't do their own architecture. Talk about helpless. They're the hopeless ones.
>
> (Collen 1997: 145)

It is significant that the narrator invites us to see this perverse inversion as the precursor to their being able to speak, and then to take political action: "As you can see, from such words, they're fighting back now. Because I only write what's in their heads. Their song" (p. 145).

As suggested earlier, these processes of re-invention through narrative in each text raise questions about the shift from realism and the so-called new aesthetic in recent fiction (which in fact incorporates older forms such as myth and folklore). In turn, this invites a response to some of the concerns that have been expressed at this current emphasis on imagination, or the dangers of the "ecstasy of pure song" at the expense of acknowledging sociopolitical realities. I feel that texts like *The Madonna of Excelsior* and Bregin's *The Slayer of Shadows*, in different ways illustrate precisely the difficulty of negotiating a way between, or out of, the polarities of realism and a potential lapse into romantic utopiansim. This is seen, for instance, in the way evil seems to be naturalised in Bregin's text, and at the end, there is the suggestion that Miranda's son Isak, the product of violent gang rape will return to the Jungle and extract vengeance. She recalls the lessons the cockroaches in her death-infested childhood home taught her, that it is "the poison of snakes [that] makes the best anti-venom", and imagines her son striding through the shadows of this world: "I think – I know – that the Jungle has not seen the last of him. When he returns there, it will be with the avenging might of angels on his side. And the Jakkals shall have cause to rue his sting!" (Bregin 1996: 152).

While on the one hand *The Madonna of Excelsior* also naturalises the absurdities of apartheid's oppressive power relations by grotesque inversion, as seen in the Church Elders' perceptions of an "outbreak" of the veritable "plague" of miscegenation, "grabbing the upstanding volk by their genitalia and dragging them along a path strewn with the body parts of black women" (Mda 2002: 89), one can also read this as being in keeping with the disruptive strategy of the "third text" described earlier, which can also be associated with the extravagant vulgarity typical of what Achille Mbembe defines as the postcolony.[10] Then too, while the colours in the trinity's paintings serve as an enabling grounded aesthetic for Popi, which favours evoking "emotion" over "meaning", it could also be suggested that this emphasis on colour as paint, rather than race, could also be read as an attempt to, in Ndebele's words, go "beyond testimony, towards creating new thoughts, new worlds" (Ndebele 1998: 17-18). Nevertheless, it is a tricky balance to strike, and points to the difficulty of writing "outside" existing paradigms of reading, such as suggested by the accusation that a focus on interracial rape represents a failure of the imagination.

Collen's *Getting Rid of It* also presents a utopian ending where at the close of the day's pilgrimage to "get rid of it", the women and their assorted biological and adopted children prepare for a party to celebrate the House Movement, and at the same time, the foetus is at last ceremoniously taken out of its various plastic bags, washed, wrapped and prepared for decent burial under a breadfruit tree. Jumila at the party performs the dance of the lost pregnancy, while Sadna recalls her lover-boss's final advice that she must take legal action for unfair dismissal. As manifestation of the alternative family dynamic, Sadna offers her girl twin (product of the zombie husband's punishing rape) to Jumila as comfort for the infant lost, while the Boy Who Won't Speak finally speaks his request for this sister. Again the power of speaking is evoked in the protean possibilities in definitions of the word "party":

> And the political party now. What does it mean? Who would want them in one anyway? Ah, they would find out.
>
> And not being the guilty party. Yes, they thought they were always the guilty party. But no. A court case might recognize them as a party. And maybe not the guilty.
>
> And even a wild party.
>
> Yes, they would learn about parties.
>
> (Collen 1997: 146)

Finally, to return to the problem of the potential romanticism of utopian endings: in the case of *Madonna*, this is indeed a tricky issue, and clearly the

work can be (and has been) read as evoking "nice warm feelings" as a reconciliatory text, and runs the risk of being co-opted into the "Proudly South African" nation-building discourses lamented by some as flattening South African culture for an international market (cf Willoughby 2003: 3). Such a reading forces an emphasis on rainbow-nationhood achieved at the expense of the traumas experienced by women like Niki and Popi. However, if the text is read in terms of a disruptive "third text" described earlier, then more subversive readings are possible outside the conventional response paradigms. Perhaps the problem is that in this multi-voiced narrative the tone of lampooning satire is not consistently sustained, so that the voice of Mda as teacher and social critic intrudes, allowing for slippage of readings. In turn this can also be seen as endemic to the complexitiy of the interactive space referred to by Ndebele, where old polarities are subverted so that colour can signify more than only race. On the other hand, the multivocality of Collen's text is successfully sustained, and it seems to me that one can usefully read the celebratory ending of *Getting Rid of It* as an example of a strategic utopianism that provides a form of "wedge" in-between binaries and familiar habits of reading at a time when, as the implied author intrudes to complain: "Audiences have gone suspicious of storytellers"(Collen 1997: 55). And she should know.

Notes

1. Christoph Marx is critical of the personalisation of the TRC process, and feels that the emphasis on notions of African humanism, or Ubuntu, and on community spirit could result in strategies of exclusion which counter the development of a viable democratic culture (2002: 51).

2. Ndebele provides fulsome content to the complexity of the interactive space as follows:

   > It is a space brewing with risk-taking, trust and suspicion, intrigue, transparency and obfuscation, real and imaginary boundaries, negotiation and imposition, honesty and dishonesty, concealment and discovery, alignments and realignments, shifting identities, the pains and horrors of lapses, loyalties and betrayals, idealism, greed, courage, doubts and certitudes, redeeming truths and insights leading to optimism and progress, and the excitement of infinite possibility.
   >
   > (Ndebele 1999: 151)

   The interactivity that is generated, he says,

   > releases energies that have the potential not only to render the inherited binary relationships inherently transient, but also threaten to explode it into a multiplicity of relationships.
   >
   > (Ndebele 1999: 151)

3. This is not unlike Bhabha's in-between Third Space described in *The Location of Culture* (1994), or Eugene Barba's Third Theatre which "lives on the fringes, often outside or on the outskirts of the centres and capitals of culture" (Watson 2000).

4. This connection between colour and feelings is in keeping with the long history of the use of colour to express emotion. For instance, artists like Kandinsky claim the effect of colour on the spectator can evoke a mystical or spiritual experience. He refers to the "sound" of colour, "the artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively to cause vibrations on the soul" (Kandinsky quoted in Acton 1997: 114).

5. Drawing on Adorno, and Bhabha, Jamal argues persuasively that we need to resist a culture of entrapment and fatality: "We can – and must – emerge 'as the others' of ourselves" (2002: 121).

6. In a discussion of the narrative voices in *Ways of Dying*, Johan van Wyk comments on the way the narrator functions as the collective alter-ego of the central character, Toloki, and yet also speaks as the voice of the group. "In its omniscience it embodies the omnipotence of the group", and it is clear that as in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, "the collective narrator ... is not an innocent one" (Van Wyk 1997: 84).

7. The Gugulethu 7 refers to the seven young men from Gugulethu township outside Cape Town who were killed in an ambush by police, their bodies paraded as "terrorists", though testimony at the Amnesty Hearings of the TRC exposed the lie perpetuated by the media. The Sharpeville 6 refers to the individuals who were condemned to death for the killing of a community councillor on the grounds of "common purpose", even though it had not been proved that they were in fact responsible for the killing. (The Gugulethu 7 featured in a film on the TRC, *Long Night's Journey into Night*, while one of the survivors of the Sharpeville 6, Duma Kumalo, has performed his story in a play written with director Yael Farber, *He Left Quietly*.)

8. According to Samuelson,

   > [a] striking pattern is emerging in fictional representations of rape published during the South African transition from apartheid to multi-racial democracy. It is a configuration that relentlessly inserts race into the scene of rape by focussing almost exclusively on interracial rape .... Within this scheme, the consequence of rape is measured in the birth of a mixed race child.
   >
   > (Samuelson 2002: 88)

9. Bregin won the FNB VITA/English Academy Percy Fitzpatrick prize for youth literature in 2000, though as she says, it is intended for a broader audience which

could include mature young adults. (See also Flockemann "Coming of Age?: From Ghosts of the Past to Cross-Cultural Encounters: Fictions and Theatres for Teaching in the Transition in *English in Transition* (2002).

10. This has an echo in Achille Mbembe's description of a feature of the postcolony where the emphasis on sexuality and the genital organs of those in power provides scope for laughter which as it were "kidnaps power" and forces it "to examine its own vulgarity" (2001: 109); he argues that "what defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid and modifiable, even when there are clear, written and precise rules" (p. 129).

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