

Shedding Skins: Metaphors of Race and Sexuality in the Writing of Tatamkhulu Afrika*

Cheryl Stobie

Summary

Tatamkhulu Afrika's life story is often presented in triumphalist terms, charting his progression through various personae, the last of which represents hard-won stability in terms of politics, religion, race and artistic creativity. My investigation of selected poems from *Mad Old Man under the Morning Star* (2000) and *Nine Lives* (1991), as well as passages from his autobiography, *Mr Chameleon*, and his novella, "The Vortex" (1996), reveals complex effects of linguistic slippage which undermine this linear narrative and create a powerful ontological defamiliarisation in the reader. In examining Afrika's representation of skin, I focus specifically on shifts of perception and contradictions associated with race, gender and sexuality. I analyse the effects of the particular crises which arise when binary certitudes are eroded, using the concepts of transraciality and bisexuality to delineate the complexities of these crises.

Opsomming

Tatamkhulu Afrika se lewensverhaal word dikwels in triomfalistiese terme aangebied om sy progressie deur verskeie personae uit te stip, waarvan die laaste een swaar verdienende stabiliteit verteenwoordig wat betref die politiek, godsdiens, ras en artistieke kreatiwiteit. My ondersoek na 'n keur van gedigte uit *Mad Old Man under the Morning Star* (2000) en *Nine Lives* (1991), asook gedeeltes uit sy outobiografie, *Mr Chameleon* (2005), en sy novelle, "The Vortex" (1996), onthul komplekse effekte van linguïstiese glyding wat hierdie lineêre narratief ondermyn en 'n kragtige ontologiese defamiliarisering by die leser skep. By die ondersoek na Afrika se voorstelling van vel fokus ek in die besonder op persepsieverskuiwings en kontradiksies wat verband hou met ras, geslag en seksualiteit. Ek analiseer die uitwerking van die besondere krisis wat ontstaan wanneer binêre sekerhede afgetakel word en gebruik die konsepte "transrassigheid" en "biseksualiteit" om die kompleksiteite van dié krisis uit te wys.

A conceptualisation of skin is crucial to an understanding of the significance of the life and work of the grand old man of South African letters, Tatamkhulu Afrika, who died aged 82 in 2002. I intend in this paper to apply a notion of skin as literal and symbolic dialectical interface between self and society, between subjecthood and objectification, and between writer and reader, to the writing of Afrika. Significantly, Afrika chose to call his first volume of poetry *Nine Lives* (1991), and himself Mr

Chameleon in his autobiography (2005). He sloughed off a variety of skins – personae and cultural affiliations – and came to identify with the racially oppressed in apartheid South Africa, eventually occupying a progressive, activist position. In the autobiography and in commentaries on his life and work, the emotional trajectory tends to be triumphalist. However, by analysing selected passages from Afrika's writing, focusing particularly on his agonised awareness of chromatics, and his struggle with that other symbolic dimension of skin, sensual and sexual connection, I argue that the complex effects of the writing provoke simultaneously sympathetic and resisting responses on the part of the reader. Finally, I comment on the implications of Afrika's treatment of interstitiality with regard to race and sexuality for South African literature.

Writing about skin has a substantial history, including perspectives from philosophy; race studies, such as the work of Frantz Fanon; psychoanalysis, for example Didier Anzieu's *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self* (1989); feminism, such as the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Claudia Benthien, and Sara Ahmed; and literary studies, for instance Maureen F. Curtin's *Out of Touch: Skin Tropes and Identities in Woolf, Ellison, Pynchon, and Acker* (2003), and Louise Bethlehem's *Skin Tight: Apartheid Literary Culture and Its Aftermath* (2006). Key notions derived from engagement with these theorists include the literary use of skin as a symbolic border that is subject to personal, cultural and historical mutation. Skin can either be conceived of as a covering different from the inner being, or as directly representing the self. It can be perceived through sight to signify categories such as age, health, race and gender. Skin can be conceptualised as a text, which can be read or interpreted. It can be a means of touching and feeling oneself or another, and this function includes libidinal sensations.

Skin, as I am using the concept, is a significant marker of identity, as well as a site of exchange or "osmosis" and ongoing discursive production. Skin functions simultaneously to conceal, to project and to reshape subjectivity, as Sara Ahmed suggests:

If skin is the subject's fate and facticity, then skin itself is predicated on the possibility of a mask or a disguise. The skin, then, is both the locus of the subject and that unstable space in which the subject can become an-other; the skin is both already coloured and open to transformation. That openness threatens the absolute distinctions between white and Black which inform the colonial notions of racial purity.

(Ahmed 1998: 57)

As the last of Mr Chameleon's metamorphoses is generally represented as the acme of his life, when he attained a degree of stability and validation, and garnered acclaim for his writing, I begin by looking at the poetic personae in *Mad Old Man under the Morning Star (The Poet at Eighty)*. I

will then use these insights to examine earlier representations, first with regard to race, then focusing more specifically on sexuality.

In various poems in this collection the speaker steps into the skin of other personae as he explores his surroundings, the elements, his memories and his mortality. “[H]overing between root and wing” (2000: 10), he “crouch[es] between stars and voids” (p. 52), querying, “Why do I so hang/ between abyss and sky[?]” (p. 52). He imagines himself inhabiting various interstitial, hybrid or chimerical forms: a hammock (p. 28), “the boneless freak that neither bleeds nor cries” (p. 29), a cross-gendered “testicled hamadryad left/ to its withering in a wood” (p. 36), a merman (p. 26), Frankenstein’s monster (pp. 23-24). The grotesquerie of the “gleaming white leprosy of my skin” (p. 21) repulses him. This is a particularly evocative image: white skin is associated with a horrifying and stigmatised pathology. As Rod Edmond points out, leprosy is a boundary disease associated with deformity, uncleanness and contagion. Lepers are living corpses physically, socially and emotionally: their bodily integrity is violated as their flesh is consumed, and in Leviticus, as in many societies, they were classed as pariahs who were outcast from society and sentenced to dwell alone. Historically leprosy had connotations of physical punishment for moral inadequacies. These constructions were sexualised by being associated with sexual licence and disease, and racialised by being associated with black people (2007: 1-23). By using the image of leprosy Afrika evokes a history of panics around skin pathology, and at the same time overturns traditional racist associations. Similarly revolting to the speaker is the mythical hybrid, the satyr which the speaker visualises, yet coexisting with his disgust is a reluctant sexual curiosity and attraction (2000: 58-59). His deepest yearning is to establish whether he belongs to the land, but he fears that the purity of water rather than his own blood sacrifice is what the land requires (p. 56). These themes in this collection, of interstitiality, skin pigmentation, mixed motives, a vexed sexuality, and his relationship to country and continent, characterise Afrika’s concerns through all his work.

In a poem entitled “Tenant” in *Mad Old Man* the persona meditates on his liminal and alienated existence:

Sundays, I will stand
 in my own small wasteland.
 I will stare through several windows then;
 the garage’s one in each long wall,
 the kitchen’s in the main house’s further-off
 sunken yard, six steps tipping me down
 into the abominable shithouse I share
 with the maids that drift through the days
 like shadows or leaves the wind blows.
 So I will line up the windows and watch

the people of the main house moving in
the kitchen, clotting, dispersing, slow
as creatures in a dream, not speaking although
maybe they are but I cannot hear.
How, then, to cross
the abyss that nothing heals?

....

But the hand will find the door and I will stand
on its threshold, hear
a near bell clang, hear
other, further bells begin to toll,
hear a pot-lid in the main house's kitchen fall,
clattering, to the floor, but nothing in that
to draw me near, and I will eat
as eats the beast that is a solitary man,
a bitterness of weed on the back of my tongue,
a sullenness in my denying that I'm alone.
In bed, I will sometimes find
the moon is shining through
the hand's-width of window over my head,
bathing me in ashen light, readying me
for a hanging or a needle in the veins –
and none, then, that listen as I howl.

(Afrika 2000: 7-8)

The speaker endures on the margins of others' lives, domestically, socially, psychologically and spiritually. His situation is obviously particularly poignant as he stands on the brink of physical annihilation. Skin imagery operates implicitly in various ways in the given stanzas. Neither from the visible but hermetically sealed occupants of the main house, nor from the "maids" with whom he shares a latrine, is the "I" able to make contact with a "you" to validate his identity. Occupying no socially recognised space, the speaker finds the bodily function of ingestion unpalatable because of its solitary nature, and he straddles the divide between human and beast in acts of both eating and ridding his body of waste. Although he acts to sustain life, his status as pariah distresses him. The two deep linguistic categories of person and tense are used to convey a sense of constriction through each stanza's thrice-repeated phrase, "I will": when the speaker speculates about the future he can conceive of no variation in the stultifying patterns of life. The phantasms which assail him in his "wasteland" on the way to "the abyss" are visualised as the enacting of a death sentence on the hapless body whose borderland between existence and imminent annihilation is literally the skin, the integrity of which is violated as the noose encircles the neck or the needle containing a lethal dose punctures the flesh and enters a vein. The

speaker, aghast at his fate, can only “howl”, although no-one – human or divine – hears.

The speaker’s skin, as suggested in this poem, is perceived in terms of a container which is coterminous with an inner self, and which in being deprived of contact is rendered less than human. His humanity is reduced to his awareness of his approaching death. This harrowing depiction of “*Timor mortis conturbat me*” is heightened by its intertextual references to Eliot and Donne. The reader responds with sympathy and a frisson of existential terror to the poetic effects.

At the same time, however, the reader is uncomfortably aware of another current within the poem which elicits a contradictory and resisting reading. In the first place, the speaker shows no fellow-feeling towards the “maids”, whose gendered bodies are associated with filth. This reading places the speaker within a hierarchy where he desires connection with relative privilege, but distances himself from contamination by alterity. In the second place, the claim in the final line of the poem, “and none, then, that listen as I howl”, may apply to the speaker’s circumstances, but the act of reading performs the function of attention to his lament, and the line seems to wring a sympathetic response so obviously that one feels coerced and resentful. This slippage between readings precipitates ontological defamiliarisation. The reader oscillates between an imaginative entry into the speaker’s skin, and a distanced retreat into one’s own skin.

In examining Afrika’s prose with regard to the depiction of skin in terms of race, similar slippages of ontological instability can be discerned. The familiar legend attached to the persona of Afrika rightly views him as a hero, and pays tribute to the courage and principle which led him to have himself reclassified as a person of colour. Without wishing to detract from his considerable achievements, I wish to point to complexities discernible beneath the surface of his self-representations.

In *Mr Chameleon*, Afrika makes it plain that despite his pride in his rare achievement of crossing the race barrier in the “wrong” direction, this was not a simple or unproblematic act. By having himself reclassified, although he could easily have “passed” as white, he registered a powerful protest against the apartheid regime for 30 years. Yet it is a comforting myth to see this act as personally metaphysically transformative. He tartly notes that

the more starry-eyed among the “lefty libs” are always asking me what it was like to cross over from the “White” world to the “Black”, and did I undergo any spiritual transfiguration on the way? ... [W]ithout exaggeration, but put pitilessly – it was hell!

(Afrika 2005: 394-395)

Afrika’s traitorously pallid skin led to his being treated on the one hand with courtesy or as a lucky talisman, or on the other hand as a novice or *agent provocateur* within the Muslim community. Such was his anguish at being

so lacking in pigmentation despite his Arab/Turkish parental heritage that he obsessively tried to darken his skin:

So desperate was I to smash the Whiteboy image that was robbing my life of all fullness and light that, in the winter months when it incessantly rained and I could not get down to the beach to tan, I would colour my hands, arms, neck and face with Coppertone and try to persuade myself that I felt at home in my crude, wild simulation of a bastard's skin ... [I]f I was caught by an unseasonably hot day and the Coppertone with its vinegary smell began to run on my sweating skin, I would feel like a fool in paper clothes on a rainy day and would dart, silently crying, in pursuit of the least fragment of steady shade.

(Afrika 2005: 396)

This ontological crisis of skin colour in a pigmentationally overdetermined context raises issues of authenticity, impostership and the mismatch between perception of self and appearance in the world. Afrika's melting tan-mask marks, as Sara Ahmed comments, "the unstable space in which the subject can become an-other" (1998: 57). As she points out, such a fluid space of becoming "threatens the absolute distinctions between white and Black which inform the colonial notions of racial purity" (p. 57). The stereotyped binary schema of whiteness typifying goodness, purity, the intellect and superiority, and blackness epitomising evil, corruption, corporeality and inferiority is rendered permeable as the masquerade of brownness threatens to dissolve, revealing its "leprous" undercoat. The representation of the reverse passing of apartheid's borderlands, which is played out on Afrika's skin contains a number of significant effects which support the autobiographer's appeal not to sanitise or sentimentalise the drama. The skin is evoked in terms of the gaze of the onlooker who may notice the unsuccessful attempt to conceal an underlying truth. The speaker feels the cosmetic surface dissolving, in one of a related chain of signifiers suggesting moisture and changes of state. The self is perceived as exposing the dissonance between his idealised image and his appearance. Imagery within the passage reveals the effects on the self in terms of various category crises of age, gender, integrity and wisdom, as well as race. The persona connected with whiteness which is foisted on an unwilling Afrika is "Whiteboy", a corollary of the infantilisation by which black adults during the apartheid years could be termed "boy" or "girl". The reference to crying serves to blur the gender divide. This suggestion of feminisation acts together with the analogy of the carnival fool to figure the autobiographical subject as the grotesque, unruly, abject body. The threat of nakedness is viewed with anxiety, which is a contrast to the confident masculine poetic self-display of, for example, Walt Whitman, Robert Lowell or Alan Ginsberg. The veil which staves off the nightmare of nakedness is paper, which may disintegrate in the rain, but which suggests the possibility of a

surface on which to narrate the anguish and shame which are experienced instead of the desired shared identity between people born in and belonging to Africa. The descriptions of painfully shifting racial and other identities in this passage are poignant and effective.

Shifting racial affiliation is referred to by Michael Awkward (1995) and Susan Gubar (1997) as transraciality. Awkward's very specific concept of this term fits the case of Afrika's narrative particularly snugly. For Awkward, transraciality is an "individually determined ... traversal of boundaries that putatively separate radically distinct social groups" (1995: 180). More controversially, he maintains that the transracial is a "mode of masquerade [which] necessitates the radical revision of one's natural markings and the adoption of the human surface (especially skin, hair and facial features) generally associated with the racial other" (p. 180). Although instances of transraciality which do not entail this performative element are conceivable, this strong use of the term accords perfectly with Afrika's use of tanning cream on his publicly visible skin. Awkward further comments that in general, "texts of transraciality suggest that the ultimate outcome of the assumption of the other's traits of physical difference is neither abandonment of origin nor wholehearted adoption of either group's ideology, but is the creation of another category, another state of racial being" (p. 182). Similarly, Gubar suggests that the transracial individual, or "racechanger", "dwell[s] within racial borderlands", and is "[s]ecurely positioned in the place of neither the self nor the Other" (1997: 248).

While Afrika's history reveals multiple shifting cultural affiliations and his transracialism is therefore more complex than a negotiation between two groups' ideologies, it is useful at this point to consider three connected instances of ways in which a legally "coloured" Afrika arguably unconsciously retained elements of privilege associated with his white past, illustrating the racial interstitiality to which Awkward and Gubar allude and its effects on the reader. In the first example, Afrika recounts in *Mr Chameleon* an anecdote about being asked to read an important document in front of a huge public gathering of Muslims. However, overcome by the rhetoric of the occasion, he concluded by shouting the call "*Allah-o-Akbar*", with the crowd enthusiastically responding with the refrain. This call was the prerogative of the "Sheikhs", who were affronted by Afrika's perceived pushiness. This opprobrium is depicted by Afrika as one moment in his descent "down the ladder to the untouchable that I was to become" (2005: 384; the reference characteristically mordantly employing a metaphor of deprivation of skin contact). Unlike the melting Coppertone passage I quoted earlier, which stressed multiple interrelated images of border crossing which reduced the speaker's power and agency, here the effects seem to me to combine power and powerlessness. The hyperbole of "untouchable" bears the traces of a previous ambition, now balked. I would suggest that Afrika's earlier social persona as a white heterosexual male

furnished him with the self-confidence to make the shift to a transracial identity. His embodied privilege provided him with the authority to choose, cross, act, speak and write. Patently there was initially a degree of romanticisation of the community he was entering, some expectation of a central role which he was to play (a more illustrious one than he occupied in the white community), and a subsequent sense of disillusionment on both sides. The habit of othering, so prevalent during the apartheid era, inevitably persisted in a transracial context. My reaction, then, is an oscillation between sympathy and scepticism.

The second instance of a racial borderland evoked in *Mr Chameleon* concerns Afrika's switch from the Sunni Islam adopted by most Muslims in the Cape to "Iran's Shi'i Islam", on grounds of purity:

Chameleon, reversing the process and wanting his surroundings now to conform to the colour and pattern *he* had chosen, exhorted the faithful fellows to follow him into the badlands of Shi'ism, but all they saw was that bloodyminded Whiteboy who could turn a clever trick or two with his tongue, but what did a Whiteboy know about the *Faith*, particularly when it came to what their forefathers had followed for fourteen hundred years, and they left me in droves.

(Afrika 2005: 386)

The pain of the thin-skinned, thwarted would-be leader is palpable. Yet the ironic split-voice simultaneously gives some credit to the reasoning of the putative followers turned defaulters. The passage, poised between the italicised "he" and "Faith", dramatises the conflict between arrogance and obedience, and between on the one hand Western individualism, with its strengths of personal resourcefulness and drive, and its weaknesses of pride and imperious assumptions of infallibility, and on the other a strong collectivism moulded by a long history, both religious and political. Again the reader is required to negotiate contradictory responses towards hubris and dashed hopes.

The third example of Afrika's use of racial borderlands concerns two ways in which he moved beyond his overblown expectations of validation through assuming a leadership role in a pre-existing cultural context, and the consequent disappointments. He attained a sense of productive purpose which transcended the sectarian through commanding a small anti-apartheid bomb unit, yet he integrated his religion with this activism by attempting to respect the Islamic prohibition on killing. His new-found peace and compassion are revealed by his ready forgiveness of the person from within the group who betrayed them after three years, leading to their being jailed. In addition to this non-racial activism, which validated him, Afrika attained a sense of affirmation through the publication of his poetry and prose, and the acclaim accorded this work by progressive literary circles which included members of all races. Work, both collective and individual,

enabled Afrika to exorcise his demons and attain a more contented and effective – yet still contradictory – transracial identity.

In his writing Afrika portrays the chillingly brutal horrors and absurdities of apartheid. Further, he writes from a series of shifting perspectives: his own altering identities or skins, and others' varied viewpoints. He also points to the need for strategic, progressive alliances both in the apartheid past and, by implication, in a democratic present. His work raises questions about the problems of minorities, the dispossessed, the homeless, the marginalised and alienated within society. However, at the same time as he explores the plight of outsiders, his writing is redolent of a degree of privilege, and itself carries the traces of conflict or negotiation between self and other. His oeuvre illuminates what it means to see oneself as South/African; to be seen or read as South/African; to behave as a progressive South/African in a context where skin, in the sense of race and ethnicity, is accumulating new associations; and to write and read critically as a South African citizen.

As I pointed out in my analysis of the Coppertone-mask passage, Afrika explicitly connects transracialism with shifting borders of gender and sexuality. I turn now to an examination of Afrika's other characteristic exploration of skin as medium of erotic interchange in order to focus on the parallels between sexuality and gender, on the one hand, and race, ethnicity and culture, on the other. As Afrika occupied so many interstitial positions, being ethnically creolised, and at home speaking in English or *Kaaps*, the "coloured" dialect of Afrikaans, it is unsurprising that his treatment of sexuality was also complex. However, stereotypes and taboos associated with the intimate domains of sexuality and gender are often more deeply ingrained than those associated with race.

Afrika's explorations of the skin contact of sexuality are striking in view of his chosen community's – particularly observing Muslims' – reticence in these matters. More than this, however, Afrika writes both in his autobiography and in his poems and novels of taboo sexuality in an interstitial ground analogous to his transraciality. One of the best-known novels which explores these parallels between a complex racial heritage and a middle ground of sexuality between the poles of heterosexuality and homosexuality is Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* ([1990]1991). The narrator, whose father is Indian and mother English, muses: "Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action and sexual interest I could find" (p. 3). He subsequently explains that as he finds boys and girls sexually attractive, "it would be heart-breaking to have to choose one or the other, like having to choose between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones" (p. 55).

The representation of the sexual mutability in two of the main characters in Kureishi's comic novel accords with Marjorie Garber's view of

bisexuality as “the radically *discontinuous* possibility of a sexual ‘identity’ that confounds the very category of identity, in which sexual passion elects its subjects and objects across these defining (and self-defining) boundaries” ([1995]1996: 513). As I intend to use the concept of bisexuality with reference to Afrika’s representation of sexuality, it is necessary to mention that, as bisexuality is inclusive and protean rather than fixed according to the familiar and naturalised binaries of hetero- and homosexuality, it is a site of scandal and misunderstanding. Jo Eadie enumerates three of these misunderstandings:

that it entails *simultaneous* attraction to men and women; that it entails *equal* attraction to men and women; and that it entails sexual *activity* with both men and women. While these may be true for some bisexuals, others may be: attracted to different sexes at different times in their lives; more strongly attracted to one sex; sexually active with only one – or neither – sex.

(Eadie 2004: 17)

In addition to these caveats, it is necessary to comment that I am not maintaining that I would categorise Afrika as a bisexual, or that he identified as such. In South Africa there is even now no bisexual community or activism. In other countries, however, with more strongly developed bisexual communities and theories, links have been made between bisexuality and bi-, multi- or transraciality.

Aurora Levins Morales comments that “bisexuality and mixed race heritage feel so similar because they pose the same kind of challenge to a category: the societal belief in immutable, biologically based groupings of human beings” (1992: 24). June Jordan, who draws a parallel between bisexuality and an “interracial or multiracial identity”, avers that current paradigms need to give way to a “multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial world view” (1992: 192) beyond binarisms. Lani Ka’ahumanu provides a political perspective:

Like multiculturalism, mixed race heritage and bi-racial relationships, both the bisexual and transgender movements *expose and politicize* the middle ground. Each shows there is no separation: that each and everyone [sic] of us is part of a fluid social, sexual, and gender dynamic. Each signals a change, a fundamental change in the way our society is organized.

(Ka’ahumanu 1993: 16)

However, despite this idealised vision, in practice such personal and social transformation is problematic and difficult, particularly in contexts where binaries have been institutionalised for decades. As Lilith Finkler comments: “Answering what is bisexual in a social vacuum is difficult” (1995: 31). In the absence of any forebears or models, achieving an identity or politics which integrates anti-binarism racially and sexually is fraught in the extreme.

Bearing in mind the potential of a mutable sexuality read in a progressive, transracial context, let me examine some of Afrika's writing which deals with these issues, particularly with regard to the metaphor of skin. An allegorical poem in which he mourns the loss of District Six begins with an explicit erotic memory:

I never laid
with a lover without
swopping skins, sliding on
the satin of her loins,
breathing with her breath
the foetor and the fragrances of the flesh,
holding fast,
as though I clasped to me my life,
her slick
body's twining length,
motherly, sweet
milkiness of her sweat,
and all of her roundnesses slotting in
the crying hollows of my heart.
Abandoned, I'd unlearn
our languages of love;
like some tailless
lizard from my childhood grow
back my own
time and salt cured,
stretching-ever-thinner skin ...

(Afrika 1992: 114)

In this account, identification and reciprocated desire entail a metaphoric shedding of the individual skin and the acquisition of a shared skin and identity, and new "languages of love". However, the abrupt severing of the relationship leaves the speaker ruefully contemplating his painful defencelessness, necessitating a regrowth of his damaged sense of self. The impression created in the quoted section of the poem "District Six" is of a secure heterosexual history. Yet the swopping of skins, the characteristic doubling of "foetor and fragrances", the unsettling combination of the erotic and the maternal female body, along with the speaker's oscillation between intimacy and rupture, vulnerability and solipsistic rearmouring, all point towards a more disturbing and complex sexuality than appears on the surface.

Anzieu's discussion of skin perceptions from the psychoanalytic perspective of two types of early childhood memories of mother/child relationships provides a useful gloss on the quoted section of "District Six":

In the narcissistic phantasy, the mother does not share a common skin with her child, but gives her skin to him and he dresses himself in it triumphantly

In the masochistic phantasy, the cruel mother only pretends to give her skin to the child. It is a poisoned gift, the underlying malevolent intention being to recapture the child's own Skin Ego which has become stuck to that skin, to strip it painfully from him in order to re-establish the phantasy of having a skin in common with him.

(Anzieu 1989: 124)

In the poem, the narcissism and empathy of the erotic act entail "swopping skins", casting off the limits of the individual skin surface and imaginatively becoming the (m)other. This cross-gendered identification is quickly succeeded, however, by masochistic disillusionment.

The reader's impression of a complex sexuality and sense of belonging is confirmed by a reading of *Mr Chameleon* and the semi-autobiographical novels and novellas. Elsewhere I comment on vexed same-sex intimacies mentioned in *Mr Chameleon* and *Bitter Eden* (Stobie 2005); here I will limit myself to a brief overview of characteristic homoerotic and homophobic preoccupations in Afrika's autobiography and his fiction, using for illustrative purposes the novella "The Vortex" in *Tightrope*. In *Mr Chameleon* Afrika remembers his child-self as being highly sensual and erotically charged, although living in a sexually repressive home. At various points during his life, Afrika became intimately emotionally connected to men, but this did not include a direct sexual dimension. In several instances the highly charged emotional bond was libidinally cathected through a third person, a shared woman. As this trope is explored in "The Vortex", the main protagonist, Johnny, is offered sex by his intimate friend's female lover, whom he finds unattractive. However, when he visualises his friend sexually engaged with the woman, he becomes aroused, but is disgusted with himself when he realises that his attraction was not to her:

[H]e snatched back his hand, understanding, sickeningly almost too late, that what he had sought was not her skin as *her* skin, but as the skin on which had lain – in an intimacy he had never shared – the skin of him to whom she belonged.

(Afrika 1996: 35)

A feminist reader's response to the dynamics of this triangle, however sympathetic, is rendered more distanced by the objectionable suggestion that a woman "belongs" to a man. Afrika too is mentally conflicted with regard to same-sex attractions, as can be seen in *Mr Chameleon*, for instance where he makes mention of a painful fellatio which he received from a male stranger. He obsessively attempts to find a mid-ground between acceptable desire and taboo behaviour, questioning for instance in the autobiography:

Have I just written of Dennis C----- as would a gay man? Did not only admiration but lust fire me as I was confronted with a wholeness and beauty of the flesh that I knew I could never achieve? What man can honestly say that

he has felt no stirring of the genitals when faced with a virility he cannot rival – that challenges his Yin with its Yang? Today, we pretend that “male bonding” is asexual love – like hell it is! Where there is love of whatever kind, there is desire of a kind as variable, and that daunting sinuousness that is the arousal of the loins runs through them all.

(Afrika 2005: 101)

There is a strain within this passage between the insistence on variable love and its correlative desire, on the one hand, and the fastidious distancing of himself from the label of “gay man”. Indeed, although in a number of contexts Afrika describes coming into contact with gay people, there is a pronounced element of homophobia, and in particular effemiphobia (as well as misogyny) in his writing. His dilemma is exacerbated by the strict demands of Islam, which he describes as “more adamantly hostile to homosexuality than any other faith of which I have heard” (p. 358).

The clearest discussion of his position occurs in an interview during which he discussed his contradictory attitudes about same-sex love:

“... I’m not only talking of love in exceptional circumstances like the suffering in a camp full of men. I believe people are born homosexual. And *that* brings me into violent conflict with my faith, which says it is a dreadful sin

“Now there are people who ask me if I am homosexual. And I answer that I have known love for women, I have known love for men. I have lived my life long moving through a human landscape without boundaries.”

(van Zyl 2002: 13; my translation from the Afrikaans)

This tortured impasse, of respecting the unbounded loves of his past and the demands of his religion, is played out repeatedly in his writing. Despite religious and social sanctions, as he makes plain, same-sex attractions and sexual behaviour occur, even when individuals do not identify as gay, for instance in prisoner-of-war camps and prisons. At the end of “The Vortex” the chief protagonist, Johnny, is jailed for murdering his mother, as a result of which he loses his bodily integrity and humanity.

That night, criminal, he crossed the line and, when the lights switched off, they came for him, not singly, but as the grey wolves in the dream of long ago, bearing him to the floor. At the first thrust, he screamed, piercingly, desolately, as a beast entrapped, but then was silent till they were done with him and the cell-boss said, “Leave it now. Now it’s mine.”

But his master had not been unkind: had treated him as he said he had always treated the wife who had written him from Soweto that she could no longer wait, had found herself another man.

So, when Fiona's message that Ray [his intimate friend] was dead was smuggled through to him where he sat, sunning himself in the exercise-yard, it was not unexpected that his master should yell, "Ithini cwaka! Shut up you fucking shits! Can't you see the wyfie's crying for her other man?"

And they heard, sat in silence, watching, almost in awe, as he keened to the bright sun.

(Afrika 1996: 57)

For the character, Johnny, this passage represents a "category crisis", a term used by Marjorie Garber in relation to "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, ... master/slave" (1992: 16). On being classed "guilty" Johnny loses his white, middle-class privilege, and is subjected to brutal rape, which in repeatedly violating the integrity of his skin surface reduces him from the category of human to the bestial. The pronominal markers are witness to his dehumanisation: he is viewed as "it" by his black master before he accepts the role of "wyfie" which is ascribed to him. Yet alongside his debasement and the loss of his masculinity he is accorded a degree of respect, and in captivity is paradoxically freed to acknowledge the significance of his homoerotic bond with his dead friend, which is paralleled with his prison "wifehood". Enforced situational bisexuality has its counterpart in the emotional domain, and in the wider society, as Johnny, divested of the carapace of machismo, is able for the first time to acknowledge his passionate devotion to Ray – a devotion unquestioningly accepted by his master and the other prisoners.

In a few paragraphs in "The Vortex", Afrika breaks the taboos associated with sexual expression and emotional connections between specific male friends in homosocial groups or circumstances. Beyond mere frankness, however, he economically reveals the porous boundaries between the categories of masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. Both poles, in terms of gender and sexuality, shimmer mirage-like with undecidability. Power dynamics with regard to race are also overturned. Although during apartheid prisons were racially segregated, after democracy this changed. In the quoted passage from "The Vortex" the previous assumption of white superiority, epitomised by social reiterations of the power of the white phallus, is denied. Yet Afrika does not, despite the rape episode where Johnny becomes a passive, suffering receptacle of sexual power, re-create white South Africa's anxious moral panics with regard to the black phallus. Instead, he substitutes an image of domesticity, with a decent, compassionate and empathic "master" figure. In a final clever stroke of the author's, through humility Johnny attains subjecthood and self-knowledge, as he never did before.

While I am able to read thus far with Afrika, I am also deeply troubled and alienated by the centrality of rape in this passage. Afrika attempts to

sidestep the white racist male's anxious association of black masculinity with "excrement and buggery" (Slade 1974: 198) by splitting the rapists into the pack and the kindly master (much as the maternal aspect of femininity was split in "District Six"). However, in its focus on the effects of rape on the white protagonist this episode moves in the other direction, bringing to mind Jean-François Lyotard's infamous theorisation of skin, surface, and rape:

[T]he whiteness of skin carries no shadows, no values. Made of a tissue consistent with itself at every point, more than any other kind of skin – with the exception of a few dark black skins – it makes you aware that bodies are not volumes, but only surfaces. White skin is therefore impenetrable. Now, the idea of rape is that one must penetrate the impenetrable: that is, create a volume where no fold offers itself, make what is nothing but unproductive evenness resound like a soundboard. That the screen of skin should enfold itself ... dark and rollicking, around the cock – that is what envy wants. Invasions from the outskirts create a metropolis, according to the permeability of its frontiers, the suppleness of its skin. And inversely, the naïvete of whiteness, so central, blackens everything that desires its whiteness.

(Lyotard 1989: 59)

In the current climate in South Africa, where rape is so prevalent, it is problematic to me to appear to condone or valorise rape, as Afrika and Lyotard seem to do – even if both are writing metaphorically. While I would agree that whiteness needs to be seen as a structuring category of power relations which needs systematic deprivileging, to illustrate this process through means of the horror of rape is shocking to me, and inflects my otherwise positive response to the passage from "The Vortex".

Although in the discussed passage from "The Vortex" normative binarist categories of race, gender and sexuality are all being reconfigured, my main focus in this section of my article has been a consideration of skin as an emblem of sexuality. In this regard, as well as representing a category crisis for the individual character in the novella and elsewhere in his writing, Afrika is opening up a category crisis in South African literature by exploring queer sexuality within a context which is still heteronormative. As in the case of his exploration of the problematic aspects of his autobiographical attempts to shift from the category of white to that of black, he opens a creative space for the conceptualisation of alternative sexualities, although in the latter case he proceeds from a more conservative ideological position. The contested terrain he explores is no positive apologia for queerness, but embodies the middle ground of social struggles between heterosexism and homophobia, on the one side, and a progressive receptivity to the spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered identities, on the other. Afrika's writing functions to destabilise racial bigotry, heteronormativity and clear binary divides between races and

sexualities. The skin of which he writes is a permeable, interstitial membrane, emblematic of the position both of South African literature and society in the post-apartheid era.

In one of his poems, Afrika promises: "I will brush you with a feather of skin/ be gone as into your bones" (2000: 63). Responding to this "feather of skin", letting this touch get under one's skin, reveals the impossibility of entering the skin of the other, while it places an ethical imperative upon the reader to make the attempt to do so. Afrika's writing contains linguistic slippages between categories such as victim and hero, body surface and the body politic, desire and taboo, the abject and the transcendent. The reader responds to these metaphors of skin through visual and tactile identification, but also a degree of critical distance. The resulting ontological defamiliarisation provides a fresh look at the problematic issues of race and sexuality today.

* This work is based upon research supported by the National Research Foundation. Any opinion, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and therefore the NRF does not accept any liability in regard thereto.

References

- Afrika, Tatamkhulu
1991 *Nine Lives*. Cape Town: Carrefour/Hippogrif.
1992 *Dark Rider*. Plumstead: Snailpress.
1996 *Tightrope: Four Novellas*. Bellville: Mayibuye.
2000 *Mad Old Man under the Morning Star (The Poet at Eighty)*. Plumstead: Snailpress.
2002 *Bitter Eden*. London: Arcadia.
2005 *Mr Chameleon: An Autobiography*. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Ahmed, Sara
1998 *Animated Borders: Skin, Colour and Tanning*. In: Shildrick, Margrit & Price, Janet (eds) *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/Logical Body*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 45-65.
- Anzieu, Didier
1989 *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*, translated by Chris Turner. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Awkward, Michael
1995 *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Benthien, Claudia
2002 *Skin: On the Cultural Border of the Self and the World*, translated by Thomas Dunlap. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bethlehem, Louise
2006 *Skin Tight: Apartheid Literary Culture and Its Aftermath*. Pretoria: Unisa.

- 1995 *Plural Desires: Writing Bisexual Women's Realities*. Toronto: Sister Vision.
- Curtin, Maureen F.
2003 *Out of Touch: Skin Tropes and Identities in Woolf, Ellison, Pynchon, and Acker*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Eadie, Jo
2004 Bisexuality. In: Eadie, Jo (ed.) *Sexuality: The Essential Glossary*. London: Arnold.
- Edmond, Rod
2007 *Leprosy and Empire: A Medical and Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fanon, Frantz
1967 *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by C.L. Markmann. New York: Grove.
- Finkler, Lilith & Chater, Nancy
1995 "Traversing Wide Territories": A Journey from Lesbianism to Bisexuality. In: Acharya, Leela et al. (eds) *Plural Desires: Writing Bisexual Women's Realities*. Toronto: Sister Vision, pp. 14-36.
- Garber, Marjorie
1992 *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge.
- [1995]1996 *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*. New York: Touchstone.
- Grosz, Elizabeth
1994 *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gubar, Susan
1997 *Race Changes: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jordan, June
1992 The New Politics of Sexuality. In: Jordan, June (ed.) *Technical Difficulties: African-American Notes on the State of the Union*. New York: Pantheon, pp. 187-193.
- Ka'ahumani, Lani
1993 A 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Rights and Liberation Speech. *Anything That Moves* 5: 16.
- Kureishi, Hanif
[1990]1991 *The Buddha of Suburbia*. New York: Penguin.
- Lyotard, Jean-François
1989 Passages from *Le Mur du Pacifique*, translated by Pierre Brochet, Nick Royle, & Kathleen Woodward. In: Benjamin, Andrew (ed.) *The Lyotard Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 56-68.
- Morales, Aurora Levins
1992 First but Not Least: Review of *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*. *Women's Review of Books* 9(6): 23-24.
- Slade, Joseph
1974 *Thomas Pynchon*. New York: Warner Paperback Library.

SHEDDING SKINS: METAPHORS OF RACE AND SEXUALITY...

- Stobie, Cheryl
2005 Mother, Missus, Mate: Bisexuality in Tatamkhulu Afrika's *Mr Chameleon* and *Bitter Eden*. *English in Africa* 32(2): 185-211.
- van Zyl, Johan
2002 Verkleurman se naam is Tatamkhulu. *Die Burger*, 25 October, p. 13.