

A Chain of Voices and *Unconfessed*: Novels of Slavery in the 1980s and in the Present Day

Margaret Lenta

Summary

André Brink's novel *A Chain of Voices* (1982) and Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* (2006) both focus on the lives of Cape slaves in the period 1808-1835. *A Chain of Voices* fictionalises the Galant revolt of 1825; *Unconfessed* presents the life of a slave woman and the efforts of her owners to conceal the illegality of her enslavement. Though Brink presents all the slaves on the farm Houd-den-bek, including women, these last are accepting of their fate, which they are willing to palliate by accepting a sexual relationship with the white farmer. In *Unconfessed* the protagonist sees such relationships as rapes and fights for the freedom which has been officially granted to her. In both novels access to consciousness is all-important, but Brink uses a large and diverse group of individuals to relate circumstances and comment on character; Christiansë locates her novel, for the most part, in the (historically unheard) voice of Sila, a woman slave, who tells her dead son of her sufferings and humiliations.

Opsomming

André Brink se roman, *A Chain of Voices* (1982) en *Unconfessed* (2006) deur Yvette Christiansë het albei as onderwerp die lewens van slawe aan die Kaap in die periode 1808 tot 1835. *A Chain of Voices* fiksionaliseer die Galantopstand van 1825; *Unconfessed* verhaal die lewe van 'n slawevrou en haar eienaars se pogings om die onwettigheid van haar slaafskap te verberg. Alhoewel al die slawe op Houd-den-bek in Brink se roman 'n rol speel, is dit die vroue wat hul lot probeer versag deur 'n bereidwilligheid om seksuele verhoudings met wit boere aan te knoop. In *Unconfessed* sien die hoofkarakter sulke verhoudings eerder as verkragtings en veg sy vir die vryheid wat wetlik aan haar toegestaan is. In albei romans is toegang tot die innerlike van die karakters baie belangrik. Brink benut die belewenisse van 'n verskeidenheid figure om die omstandighede en die karakters uit te beeld; daarenteen gebruik Christiansë hoofsaaklik die (histories versweë) stem van Sila, 'n slawevrou wat haar oorlede seun vertel van haar ontberings en vernederings.

In 1978 André Brink published an essay entitled "Slaves and Masters" in the *Argus*, later included in his collection *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (1983: 154-162). In it he discusses the period between the abolition of

the oceanic slave trade in 1807 (effective in the Cape from 1808) and the abolition of slavery in 1838, and gives special attention to the Galant revolt of 1825 which involved a group of slaves and their masters, as well as a few white dependants and visitors on the remote Cape farm, Houd-den-bek.

This was the period of “amelioration” of the conditions of slavery, and Brink argues that Cape Dutch resentment of British interventions in the relationships between slave owners and slaves retarded abolition. Cape Dutch farmers were angry at the ameliorative legislation which tried to limit their control over their slaves and to lessen the severity of the punishments which they were entitled to inflict. Wayne Dooling (2007: 84) explains that the Cape Dutch believed that their prosperity, and perhaps their survival, depended on slave labour. He gives a full account of the opposition to “amelioration” leading up to the Galant revolt (pp. 84-91). He quotes Clarkson, who explains that this policy was intended gradually to allow slaves to rise to “the rank of a free peasantry” (p. 84). Brink claims that “without these measures ... slavery at the Cape might have been abolished long before [1838]” (Brink 1983: 158).

In his essay, Brink draws detailed comparisons between the actions of the Nationalist government of his own day and those of the officers of the Cape Court of Justice. He concludes with the claim that “it is part of the horror of the South African situation in 1978 that the slave-owner mentality exemplified in the case of 1825 still forms the main ingredient in the social and political thinking of this Government” (1983: 162).

Brink’s novel, *A Chain of Voices*, which consists of a fictionalised account of the Galant revolt, appeared in 1982, and is testimony to his continued interest in slavery and in the slave-owner/apartheid frame of mind. Though *Mapmakers* was not to appear for another year, most reviewers of *A Chain of Voices*, both in South Africa and elsewhere, drew the parallel between the slave-owner-slave relationship and that between the Nationalist government and its black subjects.

Julian Moynahan, in the *New York Times* (13 June 1982), comments, “Brink searches the bad old times for a key to understanding bad times in South Africa today, and what he sees in the historical record is always conditioned by his awareness of South Africa today”. The characters, Moynahan realises, “don’t so much speak according to their condition ... they are given utterance that reflects their author’s large intentions”. He sees that this sometimes fails, when “the author’s own thought goes a little opaque or trite”, but it is clear he finds the novel revelatory: “no one is free so long as anyone is subjected and abased”. His review is a key to what was expected of a South African novel by many people in the 1980s in the United States.

In an article in the South African journal *Standpunte*, published in April 1985, Jeanette Ferreira summarises the reception of the novel,¹ both in its Afrikaans version *Houd-den-bek* (1982), and in English, *A Chain of Voices*. It has been read, she shows, as a *roman engagé*² with the contemporary regime. She quotes, amongst others, Johann Johl, who writes of the relevance of *A Chain of Voices* to the political scene of the day (1985: 57). J.C. Kannemeyer considers it politically prophetic. William Boyd, in the *Washington Post*, refers to “Brink’s analogous vision of these forces as they exist today in his own South Africa” (Ferreira 1985: 59).

Ferreira cites Anita Lindenberg’s telling quotation from Stendhal: “Politics in a work of literature ... is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention” (1985: 57). This is a recognition of the irresistible interest of *A Chain of Voices* in its period, combined with doubts about its merits as a work of art. Kannemeyer has similar reservations: he writes that Brink, though he renders a large number of the “voices” well, is unable to avoid a discrepancy between background and “voice” (1985: 58). Muller (24 May 1982) detects compositional weaknesses and repetitions, finding the last section of the novel weak; Johl complains of unconvincing characterisation.

Perhaps the most negative contemporary review is that of Jane Kramer in the *New York Review of Books* (12 December 1982). She is not interested in the political relevance of the work, but only in the execution, which she finds defective. “Brink’s ‘historical chain of voices’ ... escapes into melodrama”, she writes, and “the books are really an exercise in what may be called apartheid Gothic” (1982).

The South African reader is likely to assert that charges of melodrama and Gothicism represent a failure to understand the extremes of suffering in the two periods, slavery and apartheid, the earlier period only beginning to be the focus of historians in 1982. Anna Boekesen’s *Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape, 1658-1700* had appeared in 1977; Robert Elphick and Herman Giliomee had published in 1979 *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*, which contains material on slavery. In 1983 Robert Ross published *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa*, which contains a detailed account of the Galant revolt and the occurrences which led up to it (1983: 105-116), based on the records of the Cape courts. Since Brink could not have had this book available to him, but must have worked from the records on which it is based, it can only be used as a means of verifying the factual base of his novel.

-
1. All Afrikaans comments of the scholars quoted have been translated by Professor P.P. van der Merwe, to whom the present author expresses her thanks.
 2. A novel committed to changing the political beliefs of its day

For the reader or indeed the novelist of slavery of today, other important historical works on Cape slavery are available: Robert C-H Shell's *Children of Bondage* (1994) is a particularly full social history of Cape slavery, and Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais's collection, *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and Its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony* (1994) consists of essays which deal in detail with the period of *A Chain of Voices*, as does Dooling's *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa* (2007). The most important work for the refutation of any claim that *A Chain of Voices* exaggerates the sufferings of slaves is Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald's *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Court of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope* (2005), in which the sufferings of slaves at the hands of their masters and of the law are set out. The revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), into which I shall not enter here, have demonstrated that fictions of apartheid have equally no need to exaggerate suffering.

Kramer's claim will not stand, in fact, when it comes to the facts of slavery at the Cape (about which she does not know sufficient to understand the difference between a Khoi and a slave, which is important in *A Chain of Voices*), but her charge that "[o]ne reads Brink conscious always of some important moral purpose" is more to the point. Here she seems to be in accord with critics who diagnose the problems of a *roman engagé*, and to be suggesting, as does Lindenberg's quotation from Stendhal, that however momentarily arresting, such a work may not deserve to survive its period.

When *A Chain of Voices* appeared, the commitment of the South African novel to what Michael Green calls "intense historicity" (1997: 3) had, as he says, long been taken for granted. Literature, especially the novel, has from its beginnings in South Africa been concerned with interpreting the people and events of this country. Green's first example of such a novel is Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi*, but except that his time span, the 1930s to the mid-1980s, does not allow it, he might well have chosen one of the earliest South African novels, *The Story of an African Farm*, as another example of a novel in which the novelist's imagination works on history. Olive Schreiner has written her own present, the 1870s in rural South Africa, into the work.

The commitment to history of *A Chain of Voices*, however, is of a more literal kind. *Mhudi* and *The Story of an African Farm* are novels in which the protagonists, Mhudi, Ra-Thaga, Lyndall, Waldo and Em, are creations of the novelists' imaginations, as are most of the people whom they encounter. The larger context and historical circumstances correspond, in the case of the first to Plaatje's vision of the past, and in the second, to Schreiner's perceptions of her present, imaginatively transformed. The various ethnic groups of what would later be South Africa did encounter each other, and at times clashed violently in the early nineteenth century, as Plaatje shows. Schreiner is right that some Boer farmers (and others) were resistant to the scientific discoveries of the twentieth century, and evil and

rapacious people were drawn to the gold and diamond mines in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

In *A Chain of Voices* Brink has made extensive use of the account of the Galant revolt contained in the records of the Cape Court of Justice, including descriptions of the personalities of the major figures, slave and free. All the important figures, especially the slave Galant and his owner Nicolaas van der Merwe, are derived from the court records. The novel uses not only the recorded plot of the revolt, but surviving evidence concerning the personalities involved. Though Brink is as conscious as Schreiner and Plaatje that orthodox accounts have omitted much that he thinks important, his primary purpose is not to construct a fictionalised vision of the past. He wishes to supply, while as far as possible adhering to recorded facts, what those records purposefully omit. His reliance on recorded history is greater than that of the earlier authors', and seems to have been at odds with the need to evolve an imaginative vision of the past.

Kanneyer admits that it is common to dehistoricise and "actualise" dialogue in novels set in the historical past (Ferreira 1985: 56). In novels of slavery, the novelist has little choice, since he or she is dealing with voices which were drowned out by official versions. *Unconfessed* (2007), the novel to which I shall compare *A Chain of Voices* in this essay, makes no attempt at a realistic rendering of the slave protagonist's voice. Authentic slave voices are beyond recovery.

Brink's novel tells the story of the Galant revolt through the monologues of thirty people, resident on the farm or neighbours, and these compose the bulk of the novel, contained between two translations of the court records, the indictment and the verdict in the case.

These records reveal how completely the voices and viewpoints of slaves are excised from official documents. It is true that in a few cases, as in Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald's *Trials of Slavery* (2005), the heavily mediated voices of slaves are recorded answering questions put to them. Such utterances cannot be corrective of official "truth". For his novel, Brink was compelled to invent a dialect – or rather a series of scarcely differentiated idiolects – which he intended to be acceptable to his readers as the "voices" of slaves. What he seems to have attempted was a divided but eventually composite account, containing the viewpoints of slaves and of their masters, of a rebellion against the condition of slavery.

Brink chose a familiar modernist mode, though not a realist one: Rosemary Jane Jolly quotes André Viola's description of it as "an imaginative reconstruction" (1996: 32), consisting of thirty "interior monologues" (pp. 32-33). Jolly points out that "[t]he individual accounts all give the impression of being addressed to someone, and that someone remains unidentifiable as a character in the text" (p. 33). She identifies the forms of these narratives as having the purpose of "drawing the reader into the narrative" (p. 33). But "the accounts include details that their authors would not be

expected to include if the accounts were intended to approximate to the diary form in orature, that is, if the persons addressed were intended to be the community of farm inhabitants themselves” (p. 33).

Jolly seems to be describing a kind of “unrealistic realism”, that is to say, a mode which while containing elements which are unlikely to form part of a real-life self-revelation, contains sufficient circumstantial (in this case often historically verifiable) detail to persuade the reader, while reading the fiction, to forget this. The further discovery, that the action of the novel significantly paralleled events taking place at the time of publication in South Africa, was, as I have shown, a further inducement to readers to engage with the novel.

Given the interest in Cape slavery at the present day, to which I have already referred, there have been a considerable number of fictions on this subject, and I shall consider in this essay, besides Brink’s novel, a later novel, Yvette Christiansë’s *Unconfessed*, first published in 2006. It is equally firmly based on the history of Cape slavery in the period of “amelioration” and equally though differently draws on available documentation, using a related, but significantly different narrative mode. It is, I shall argue, more successful in the presentation of its protagonist, a woman slave.

Like Brink’s, Christiansë’s impulse may be called revisionist-historical: the double obligation, to the recorded facts of history, and to filling the gaps intentionally left in those records, is the determining principle of her novel, but the dependence on history is of a different kind from Brink’s. Whereas *A Chain of Voices* retells the story of a specific series of incidents and persons, *Unconfessed* is focalised, with the exception of the first forty pages and a one-page epilogue, through the consciousness of a fictional slave woman. Like *A Chain of Voices*, it takes as its subject the way in which slaves at the Cape experienced their condition in the interim between the abolition of the oceanic slave trade and the abolition of slavery. *Unconfessed*, however, is not about a single historical incident but about the doubly obscured condition of women slaves, where all the general taboos on discussion of – and still more on recording – the lives of slaves applied, together with a deeper silence regarding the relations of women slaves and their masters.³

The effect of the large number of “voices” in Brink’s novel is not so much to compensate for the exclusions and partiality of the court records as to dissipate the intensity of focus which might more effectively have been trained on Galant, whose aspirations towards freedom need to be explored.

3. Olive Schreiner, in her *Thoughts on South Africa*, first published in 1923, but worked on by the author from the 1890s, quoting stories that had been told her, tells the story of the rape of a slave “wife”, and her husband’s resentment. Her informant says, “We children dared say nothing, because my grandfather never let anyone remark about the slaves” (Schreiner 1992: 105).

Do we, for example, need to know the story of Galant's child-mother, whom he never knew? Could not the slaves and Khoi have been represented by a single voice, or perhaps two voices, in each case?

An example of the triteness to which Moynahan refers is the monologue which immediately follows the court indictment, of Ma-Rose, an old Khoi woman who lives on the farm. Ma-Rose is necessary to the novel, since she can tell the story of Galant's infancy and childhood, but her narrative shows that where Brink cannot use recorded history, his imagination is often clichéd. Besides occupying the historically documented situation of a Khoi in near-serfdom on a Cape Dutch farm, Ma-Rose is presented as the earth-mother. Her confidence in the survival of her people and the ephemeral nature of the Dutch occupation seems unlikely to have been shared by any Khoi woman of her time:

Indeed, our mountains are old, stretching like the skeleton of some great long-dead animal from one end of the Bokkeveld to the other, bone upon bone, yet harder than bone, and we all cling to them. They're our only hold. They shelter us from the sun and ward off the wind from the narrow valleys and inlets among the rocks, the fields and the farms, the sudden whiteness of the homesteads and walls, the grazing sheep and cattle. There is a settled look about the string of farms with their houses, outbuildings and kraals ... but don't be fooled by that. One single gust of wind and it's all gone as if it had never been.

(Brink 1982: 24-25)

This portentous piece is followed by the reflections of Piet van der Merwe, the now disabled father of the family that owns the farm Houd-den-bek. He is the historical stereotype of the patriarch, combined with the crude self-assertion of the frontiersman. He remembers how he abducted his wife from a Cape Town family, and explains his right to the sexual services of his slaves and Khoi on the farm.

Other monologues give access to the slaves' memories of freedom and their reactions to their present life: Ontong, for example, yearns for his home in lush Batavia. Achilles, captured in Mozambique, remembers the forced march to the coast, the slave pits in which he and his fellows were lodged, the deaths on the voyage. Their narratives present the different origins of Cape slaves. Where they are not dealing with events, they are stereotypical.

Unconfessed is authentic in a different sense. Its narrative mode emphasises that this protagonist is fictional: not only does it give prolonged access to the mind of the protagonist Sila and her privacies, as do Brink's interior monologues, but we learn about her past life not in any temporal sequence, but as she needs to explain the circumstances of her life to her ghostly son, Baro.

Sila's language is a language of thought, unlike that of the slaves and Khoi in *A Chain of Voices*, which often mimics the language of ordinary exchange (though with the reservations that I have registered earlier, that "ordinary exchange" of the 1820s at the Cape is irrecoverable). She reflects in the present tense on what happens to her on Robben Island, and in the past tense on her sufferings at the hands of her masters. At times she addresses Baro, whom she killed to save him further suffering.

The claim of the novel is that Sila's sufferings were endured by many women. Though her experiences may seem extreme, they are documented as having occurred in other cases. The concept of "domestic correction" (Shell 1994: 208) allowed a slave owner to beat his slaves, often brutally and at times to death.⁴ Sila's many beatings and her deafness as a result of a blow are entirely credible. Illegally imported,⁵ freed in a will which is destroyed by the would-be heir,⁶ sexually abused by male owners to the extent that her children are almost all the results of rape,⁷ driven to despair by the sale of some of her children⁸ and the brutal treatment of another, Sila murders her baby son, who has been brutally beaten by her owner. Accounts of despairing slave women who killed their children are recorded by Worden and Groenewald (2005: 567-568) and de Kock (1950: 184, 185). Christiansë, in 2006 when the book first appeared, unlike Brink in 1982,

-
4. See Worden and Groenewald (2005: 176-187) for an account of a woman slave, Diana, beaten to death on the instructions of her master.
 5. Ross writes that "[i]n 1808, the governor 'instituted a committee to investigate the antecedents of every slave who had changed hands within the previous six months. No less than 110 slaves were found who could not be properly accounted for and were set free'" (1983: 98). Sila, according to Christiansë, was not so lucky, and she gives an account of the stratagems by which her owner concealed the illegality of her enslavement.
 6. See for example Robert C-H Shell's account of the slaves of Maria Pietersz, manumitted in her will but retained in slavery for a further 22 years by her heir (1994: 390).
 7. Schreiner remembers accounts of slaves being raped by their masters (1992: 105) and of slave masters boasting of having fathered slave women's children (1992: 108).
 8. Shell discusses at length the sale of slave children under various conditions (1994: 126-130). Robert Semple's *Walks and Sketches at the Cape of Good Hope* ([1803]1968), and probably relating to experience of the Cape in the years 1798-1803) tells of a slave auction in which a mother is to be parted from her three-year-old, and mother and child are only sold together because of the compassion of a buyer.

could write in the knowledge that the history of Cape slavery is available to any interested reader.

The characteristic note of Sila's reflections is anger, and she has many causes for her anger. The strongest is that she knows herself and her children to have been emancipated in the will of a benevolent woman owner, which was destroyed by her son. Compelled to accept that she cannot prove his crime, she is told to earn freedom for herself and her children, and works for years to do so – another cheat ([2006]2007: 302-304). Other motives for anger are her abduction from her parents' home, the appalling march to the coast, the voyage, her sale, the many attempts to rape her, some of them successful, and, most of all, the sale of her children – the condition of slavery, in fact.

Unconfessed challenges the belief that a slave had no past before enslavement by allowing Sila, labouring on Robben Island, to recover the memories of her childhood in Mozambique, obscured when she worked on Dutch farms. The novel refutes the belief that slave women wantonly gave birth to fatherless children, and that their sexual contacts with masters were not rape but licentiousness – a belief about which *A Chain of Voices* is at best ambivalent. The claim that constrained sex between slave and owner constituted rape is made only in one case in Brink's novel, and is often denied by implication. Brink sees sex with the master as something that women slaves usually accepted and from which they made what profit they could. Sila reflects on how hateful the sex was that her masters forced on her.

The major failure of *A Chain of Voices* is the character of Galant, described by Dooling as a "charismatic slave" (2007: 87), and by Ross as "the strongest personality on the farm" (1983: 106). Dooling says, "Galant's object was nothing less than freedom", and goes on to say that "[r]epeatedly frustrated by the unwillingness of the local magistrate to listen to his complaints, Galant believed slave-owners were illegally holding slaves in bondage" (2007: 88). His energy and assertive personality and his boyhood friendship with the sons of the family to which he belonged appear in the court records, and in the novel he realises early that he is stronger and more enterprising than either of these sons.

When Galant, in the novel, is given to Nicolaas, the younger son, on his marriage to work on Houd-den-bek with him, Brink moves out of history to suggest that a sexual problem enters the relationship between master and slave: Nicolaas has a difficult relationship with his strong, rather masculine wife, Cecilia. He has Galant flogged more than once out of complex sexual jealousy, and beats his baby son so that he dies. Nicolaas himself, in the novel, has only daughters, though the court records, according to Ross, state that he had a son and a daughter (1983: 106). Between the fictional Galant and Hester, the wife of Barend, Nicolaas's elder brother, there is a strong attraction. Brink's point here seems to be that in a patriarchy, power and sexuality are inextricably allied, and undercurrents of sexual jealousy, indis-

tinguishable from male self-assertion of other kinds, may cause trouble. Galant eventually kills Nicolaas out of another kind of jealousy: he is killing the master and by this act, claiming freedom. But what is freedom as he conceives of it? *A Chain of Voices* offers several negative answers to this question. Nicolaas, on a visit to Cape Town, sees a slave run amok, “swinging the axe in all directions”, wounding and killing bystanders (Brink 1982: 226-227); an incident of which historical accounts tell of many occurrences.⁹ He tells the story to Galant, and the two men understand it differently. Nicolaas reacts with horror at the potential for violence unleashed, and Galant with excitement at the idea that a slave had such power. The fact that the slave was executed, he feels, is outweighed by his moments of freedom. It may be that Brink intends us to see the rebellion as a form of running amok: Galant has little hope of achieving long-term freedom, and quickly accepts that he will die. But the matter is not mentioned again.

When Galant later runs away to the Cape (another historical fact), he returns saying (in the novel), “I know my place is here” (2005: 317). We hear of his Cape experiences in the novel in an account by Thys, one of the Khoi on the farm: the races, parties, revelry which sound to the slaves and Khoi like the essence of freedom, and which the reader recognises as fantasies of absolute licence which Galant is using to bind the people of the farm to his cause. He has come to understand that escape from the farm to the life of a *droster* (runaway) at the Cape is not freedom. His resentment of his illiteracy and his suspicion that he is being prevented by his owner from knowing of legal changes in slavery, both documented facts, are also presented.

In a meditation on his struggle with a stallion (pp. 201-202) he comes to understand that he is contending with Nicolaas because of an almost physical need for freedom. The problem is that the stallion incident, though its purpose is clear, is something of a cliché and oversexualised. If Galant’s longing was to be the alpha male, as the unconscious desire of the stallion is, the story would be a simpler one. The other incidents of his childhood and youth – when he kills a lion, and Nicolaas claims that the achievement is his; when Barend marries Hester; Galant’s resentment at the appropriation of his concubine by Nicolaas – all these can be fitted within the aspiration to be the alpha male, for which his talents and energies fit him and his position as a slave absolutely disqualifies him.

If Galant’s rebellion is to have more than what may be called gendered significance – and there are signs that Brink wishes this to be so – two other characters, Campher, the *knecht*¹⁰ from Brabant, who has heard of the re-

9. See Shell (1994: 55); Semple (1968: 45) gives an early account of this kind of incident.

10. In the early-nineteenth-century Cape, a *knecht*, literally a servant, was generally a white former employee of the Dutch East India Company, employed as an overseer on a farm.

volutionary principles of “*Liberté – égalité – fraternité*” (1982: 420) and the gigantic slave convict whom Galant meets in prison (1982: 206-210) who tells him of the colony of “bastards” and “runaways” (p. 207) which exists beyond the borders of the Cape Colony, should have been invested with greater power. The convict is a brief acquaintance, suggestive to Galant because he is willing to prefer death to slavery; his strength and size seem to be intended to indicate that he, like Galant, though for different reasons, is unfitted for servitude. Neither of these characters is sufficiently realised to offer Galant a convincing ideology of freedom. Campher’s revolutionary principles are assumed, anachronistically and without explanation, to inspire a slave at the Cape. Campher himself says, “I never thought it would get beyond the stage of talking” (2005: 419), and seems to have seen such principles as a comfort to the oppressed, never to be translated into action.

The limitations of these characters prevent any credible sense that the revolt is more than the sum of Galant’s energy and masculinity and the atmosphere of the period, which by offering slaves and masters a sense that the end of slavery was close, produced rebelliousness in the one group and a greater degree of severity in the other. This may be as far as surviving accounts can take us, but Brink the novelist has aspired, it seems, to something more, as indeed he was obliged to. Galant must surely have had some special motivation, other than that possessed by many slaves. Yet the creation of Galant as tragic hero, which is what the project required, has been beyond Brink.

Christiansë too has made the aspiration towards freedom the key to her protagonist’s character. Like Galant, Sila continually demands freedom: knowing she was emancipated in Oumiesies’s will, her belief that she has a right to be free is what sustains her. But Christiansë has made clear what freedom is for her: it is to work for a wage, as does her friend Spaasie, and to have all her children who survive, and who can be recovered, around her. A comparable investigation of the aspirations of the male slave who rebels might have led Brink to explore, positively as well as negatively, what freedom might have meant to Galant.

Sila, in terms of her author’s project, has been made to an extent typical of her class and period, though that is not the same as being stereotypical. If there is a South African historical stereotype of the unfree woman, it is nearer to Kaatje Kekkelbek (Chapman 1981: 51-52) than to Sila, which is to say that it combines the popular (white) prejudices of a period concerning a particular type of person. The drunken but indomitable figure of Kaatje (not in fact a slave but a Khoi) was for decades the white South African image of the black woman fitted only for bondage.¹¹ Yet, despite Kaatje’s author

11. Interestingly, Brink has included in *A Chain of Voices* an ancestral figure to Kaatje, Ma-Rose in her youth, whom Piet van der Merwe remembers as most completely the wild woman.

Andrew Geddes Bain's intention to portray her as degraded in her self-assertion, other indomitable women in literature have derived from her, of whom the most notable is Athol Fugard's Lena (1985: 237-293), whom Sila resembles in her anger against injustice, and in the way in which she reflects on the wrongs done her.

Sila in some respects is a reinterpretation of the stereotypical qualities of the oppressed South African woman: she is almost illiterate – because she has received no formal education. She becomes the victim of another part of the stereotype: at her trial she is falsely accused of having been drunk (Christiansë [2006]2007: 240), and Spaasie, the freed slave who is her friend, is not listened to when she claims that Sila never drinks alcohol.

The most obvious ancestor text of *Unconfessed* is not a court record or any other official document. The most obvious influence on Christiansë (now an academic at Fordham University in New York, teaching Afro-American literature and African literature) has been Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Sila's killing of her abused child Baro to save him from more suffering at the hands of a master recalls Sethe's killing of her daughter Beloved. Both children return from the dead to their mothers, though Baro's return is a simpler matter than Beloved's: Sila becomes able to envisage him and address him, but there is no suggestion that his presence is destructive.

Less obvious but just as important is the resemblance between Oumiesies's farm and the treatment of the slaves, there and Sweet Home in *Beloved*: in both cases the personal benevolence bestowed on the slaves gives them the mistaken belief that they are safe from the miseries inherent in slavery. In both cases, a compassionate woman is succeeded by a cruel and exploitative man. This succession and the change of regime which it brings about is not a misfortune for the slaves, which was entirely unexpected; it is inevitable, as Theron, Oumiesies's son asserts. "He said she had cheated his father out of his marriage due, and as his father's heir he wanted some of us" ([2006]2007: 111). The *advocaat* whom Oumiesies calls to make her will, freeing her slaves, agrees with him: he "wants to know if she has told her son what she is planning. Her son is master of the house, is he not?" (pp. 179-180).

Sila differs from Morrison's Sethe in the area of sexuality and maternity. As a slave she is denied the capacity to marry and is at the disposal of her master, and her contacts with men whom she could feel anything but hatred for have been brief. Sethe's commitment to Halle, though her mistress smiles at her sense that it is a marriage, is loving and monogamous. Sila has been forced into the accommodation that she explains to Baro: "Now. Where did your sister Caroline come from? The fathers do not matter to me. Except one. Perhaps I will tell you about him one day" ([2006]2007: 191).

A resemblance between *Beloved* and *Unconfessed* of which Christiansë may have been unaware is that both protagonists endure gaps in their knowledge of the lives of those whom they love, which correspond to the

limits in personal mobility and the inaccessibility of information which a slave endures. Halle, Sethe's "husband", disappears from the novel and his fate is never known. Sila cannot trace her children who were sold by Theron:

Of Camies there is nothing. What has happened to that boy? I heard he was with Carolina for a time, but there is only silence about him now. I fear for him, Lys. He was not very strong. Not like Pieter. Now *that* boy was strong. He came out of me with a kick. He did not cry. I thought he was dead – can you imagine how it feels to give thanks, even for the space of one breath, maybe two, when you think that what you have carried in your body is not life, but death?" But he was alive. Just quiet. Not weak. Strong. He looked at the world with old, strong eyes.

Pieter! I do not even remember that boy's face.

(Christiansë [2006]2007: 207)

For Sila, unlike Sethe, there is no free land to the north – or indeed anywhere else – to which she can escape. Ineffective though it is for Sethe at times, there *is* a community of the free in the northern states which will grant her access to the law, which is more than Sila ever receives.

Another influence on Christiansë, especially in her narrative mode, may well have been Wilma Stockenström's *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983), which is entirely narrated by a slave woman, now alone in the African interior, and remembering her life at the coast. She is nameless, because like Sila she is representative of many; the rendition of her voice makes no attempt at realism. She meditates on her abduction from her family, rape by masters, the loss of her children, which, though the novel is not set at the Cape, recall to an extent Sila's experience. What is important is that both Stockenström and Christiansë have devised a language of thought for their protagonists, rather than imitating speech.

Unconfessed ends by listing Sila's possible fates:

"[S]ome say she left the island ... on the centre of a piece of paper that she rode like a bier ... some say ... all of the women left the island for a house of correction on the mainland Some say it was nothing like that, but a long and narrow box ... [or] a quiet freedom in the shadow of Signal Hill".

(Christiansë [2006]2007: 350)

The book must end with such uncertainty, because the fates of rebellious women slaves differed, and Sila represents them all.

The end of *A Chain of Voices* is imposed on Brink by the form he has chosen: it is the verdict of the Court of Justice: Galant, his second in command, Abel, and the Khoi Thys are to be executed, and the rest of the gang flogged, branded and condemned to labour on public works. The court moralises about the wickedness of the accused, though it also lets slip that its severity towards slaves is necessary for the maintenance of the status quo

in the Cape Colony. “The trial was a formality,” writes Ross. “Advocate Hofmeyr, acting for the defence, made no attempt to deny the charges, nor to save the lives of Galant and Abel” (Ross 1983: 115). Brink’s own ending may be said to be Galant’s reflections on his act of sex with Hester, which he hopes will produce (of course) a son: “something of what is now departing will return” (1982: 509).

A Chain of Voices makes a demand on the reader which is allied to realism: accept that though slave voices have been excised from history,¹² this is how it must have been. *Unconfessed*, on the other hand, continually reminds readers, not only through the representative nature of Sila and what she suffers, the presence of the dead Baro and the multiple endings of the novel, but also in the tone of her thoughts, that the text is an imaginative construct.

Each novel belongs to its period of composition: *A Chain of Voices* was written when a degree of historical realism was a required component of literature for the struggle, and a text which required the reader to grapple with a patently nonrealistic mode was often regarded as insufficiently accessible. Similarly, *Unconfessed* belongs to the period of late feminism, post-*Beloved*, and of revived interest in Cape slavery, when a variety of social histories have given access to the lives of both men and women slaves – and when it has been recognised that the lives of women slaves were significantly different from those of men.

Does *A Chain of Voices* remain a sufficiently compelling fiction to deserve attention today? The interest in slavery at present is great, but the demand for parallels between a fictionalised past and the circumstances of the 1980s has faded. Detailed accounts of the “amelioration” years, both historical and fictional, are readily available. Yet Brink’s novel may remain of specialist interest as a work of the 1980s, when the demand that a historical fiction relate to its own time, as well as to the period which it portrayed, was strong.

12. A few slave narratives do survive, of which an important one is the story of Frederick Opperman, which was “heavily edited by a missionary of the Church of Scotland, David Duncan Stormont ... at Lovedale” and first appeared in the *Christian Express* in 1891. Another slave’s account is that of Katie Jacobs, which was collected in an interview with her and first published in the *African Political Organization Newsletter* in 1910. As Robert C-H Shell has commented, the unknown interviewer and/or transcriber was “somewhat intrusive”. Both narratives, as can be seen from their dates, were collected and published long after emancipation. I am indebted to Professor Shell for making these narratives available to me.

References

- Brink, André
 1982 *A Chain of Voices*. London: Faber & Faber.
 1983 *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Chapman, Michael
 1981 *A Century of South African Poetry*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker.
- Christiansë, Yvette
 [2006]2007 *Unconfessed*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- Coetzee, J.M.
 [1987]1988 The Novel Today. *Upstream* 6(1): 2-5.
- de Kock, Victor
 1950 *Those in Bondage: An Account of the Life of the Slave at the Cape in the Days of the Dutch East India Company*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Dooling, Wayne
 2007 *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Ferreira, Jeanette
 1985 Historiese Fiksie/Politieske Roman: *Houd-den-bek*. *Standpunte* 176 (2): 56-62, April. Vol. XXXVIII.
- Fugard, Athol
 1985 *Boesman and Lena and Other Plays*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Green, Michael
 1994 *Novel Histories*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Jolly, Rosemary Jane
 1996 *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee*. Athens: Ohio University Press; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Kramer, Jane
 1982 In the Garrison. *New York Review of Books*, 12 December.
- Morrison, Toni
 1988 *Beloved*. London: Picador.
- Moynahan, Julian
 1982 Slaves Who Said No. *New York Times Book Review*, 13 June, p. 15.
- Ross, Robert
 1983 *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Schreiner, Olive
 [1883]1982 *The Story of an African Farm*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
 [1923]1992 *Thoughts on South Africa*, edited by Margaret Lenta. Johannesburg: Ad Donker.
- Semple, Robert
 [1968]1803] *Walks and Sketches at the Cape of Good Hope*. Cape Town: Balkema.

Shell, Robert C-H

- 1994 *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Stockenström, Wilma

- 1981 *Die Kremetartekspedisie*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.
1983 *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*, translated by J.M. Coetzee. London: Faber & Faber.

Worden, Nigel & Crais, Clifton (eds)

- 1994 *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and Its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Worden, Nigel & Groenewald, Gerald (eds)

- 2005 *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Court of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope*. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society.

Margaret Lenta

Department of English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal
Lenta@ukzn.ac.za