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Summary

Patriarchal discourse continually reproduces the division between culture and nature, a division of obvious importance to the colonial enterprise, whose success demands the preservation of dichotomies such as civilized and primitive, white and black, masculine and feminine. The emigration of British women to the colonies served a variety of social and economic purposes; it also neutralized the potential threat to patriarchal discourse of the idea of "surplus women", which exceeded the limits of "femininity". The idea of "frontierswoman" in the colonies posed an additional threat, which was again neutralized by the patriarchal demands regarding femininity and the other cultural imperatives placed upon colonial women. This essay scrutinizes some of these cultural imperatives, namely that women act as "bearers of culture" and as "mediators", and it suggests how women were used by the patriarchal and imperialist system to reproduce the crucial dichotomies, and how they were, in the process, redefined as the "feminine" selves that they threatened, as "surplus women" and as "frontierswomen", not to be.

Opsomming

Patriargale diskoers herskep voortdurend die skeiding tussen kultuur en natuur, 'n skeiding van ooglopende belang vir die koloniale ondernemingsgees, wie se sukses afhang van die bewaring van tweeledighede, soos beskaafde en primitiewe, wit en swart, en manlik en vroulik. Die emigrasie van Britse vroue na die kolonies het 'n verskeidenheid sosiale en ekonomiese funksies vervul; dit het ook die potensiële bedreiging teen patriargale diskoers van die idee van "surplus vrou" geneutraliseer, wat die grense van "vroulikheid" oorskry het. Die idee van "baanbrekersvroue" het ook 'n addisionele bedreiging geskep, wat weer eens geneutraliseer is deur die patriargale vereistes betreffende vroulikheid, en ander kulturele verpligtinge wat geplaas is op koloniale vroue. Hierdie artikel ondersoek sommige van dié verpligtinge, naamlik dat vroue optree as "draers van die kultuur" en as "tussengangers", en dit toon aan hoe vroue gebruik is deur die patriargale en imperialistiese sisteem om die belangrike tweeledighede te herskep, en hoe hulle in die proses geherdefinieer is as die "vroulike" self wat hulle, as "surplus vroue" en as "baanbrekersvroue", gedreig het om nie te wees nie.

South African colonial history is a story that has focused almost exclusively on men. In other countries, most notably those in Europe, North and South America, and in Australia, feminist historical re-vision has permitted feminist scholars to begin to examine the ideological definition and control of female identity, and to analyse the ways in which attitudes to women have served the advancement of the state and the state-controlled family. In South Africa this work has only recently begun. In 1983 the *Journal of Southern African Studies* ran a special issue devoted to women in Southern Africa, which was specifically prompted by Belinda Bozzoli's "Marxism, feminism and South African studies" in the previous issue, but which came in the wake of feminist research published by Jacklyn Cock and Cheryl Walker at the start of the eighties. How few other relevant studies there have been is attested to in the introduction to the special issue. Here, Deborah Gaitskell, the editor for that issue, expresses the hope that scholars of Southern African society will now

be given “some stimulus and direction” for further research into, among other areas, “the social construction of female gender identity” (1983: 2, 11). This essay takes up her suggestion.

However, because of the relatively small amount of gender-alert history and criticism in this country, and because of the paucity of more general, theoretical material on the ways that the constitution of the racially-defined subject has affected the constitution of the female subject, what follows cannot claim to be other than a speculative essay on the “meanings” that women have borne in the South African colonial enterprise. The essay in *Journal of Southern African Studies* by Jean Jacques Van-Helten and Keith Williams demonstrates the ways that “white women were . . . harnessed and exploited by colonialism . . . as colonial domestic labour . . . [and] as imperial mothers” (1983: 18). Although their essay looks specifically at emigrant British women in the Transvaal in the first decade of this century, it makes useful general reference to a longer colonial period, and provides background to some of the discussion in my essay. I have used as the point of departure for my essay their commentary about the ideological determinants of white women’s role in the colonies but turn this commentary in a different direction, on the one hand using specific examples from nineteenth-century South Africa, and on the other deploying post-Lacanian concepts to move further towards an understanding of the complexities involved in the imperialist construction of womanhood. Historical facts and social myths are marshalled (in a way that may be at odds with empirical historiography) to provide illustration, if not “proof”, of the ways that women are meant to “mean” in the terms set by imperialist, racist discourse. A fuller and more certain picture can come only in the wake of a more fully-fledged South African feminist history and literary theory; part of the project of this essay is to suggest some of the paradigms for this new work, as well as, of course, to suggest areas of fruitful exploration in textual analysis of South African and other colonial and post-colonial literatures.¹

1 “Surplus” women and female excess

Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) contains the following passage:

“Caroline,” demanded Miss Keeldar abruptly, “don’t you wish you had a profession – a trade?”

“I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts.”

“Can labour alone make a human being happy?”

“No; but it can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant master-torture. Besides, successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none.” (1983: 179)

A nineteenth-century British feminist reportedly showed this passage to two of her male acquaintances, and asked them where a middle-class woman might find “successful labour” (Vicinus, 1980: viii). One of the men answered that the girl should marry. The other said that she should emigrate.

Statistics show that in mid-nineteenth century Britain there were significantly more women than men: over 1,050 women for every 1,000 men, so that, in 1871, for instance, more than 30% of women between 24 and 35 were single (Hollis, 1979: 33). Arranging a marriage, then, may well have been more difficult than arranging emigration, although emigration produced its own difficulties and dangers: the journey was long – in 1819, Sophia Pigot embarked with her family from Gravesend in mid-December and disembarked at Algoa Bay on 1 May the following year – and life in the colonies often taxing, as some of the letters to British emigration societies suggest (see, for example, Monk, 1963: chs. 2 and 3). However, as fortune would have it, female emigrants to South Africa usually found marriage too, that other route to “varieties of pain”. The 1820 settler Mrs Philipps noted that “almost all [female servants] who come out are [now] married” (qtd. in Cock, 1980: 190). Later in the century, Miss Laura Augusta Robinson, who ran a school in Wynberg and was secretary of the Girls’ Friendly Society and the British Women’s Emigration Association, noted to the 1893 Labour Commission that the women coming out under the auspices of the GFS were “all engaged on landing”, though she speculated that many of these “engagements” would terminate with the end of the voyage (*Cape of Good Hope Labour Commission*, 1893: 75). There would be further opportunities. One employer complained to the Labour Commission that the young women who “come out under three years contract . . . are barely twelve or eighteen months out here or they get married” (1893: 39). The records of the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society generally tell a story of success – “comfortably placed” or “married well” – but sometimes reveal failure: “No. 49. Australia. Sailed 1862. Very incompetent. Married in four years” (qtd. in Monk, 1963: 4).

Assisted passages from Britain to the colonies had been offered from 1815, and by 1860 some five million people had emigrated. Although official preference had at first been given to single men and young couples, there were also large shipments of single women, unmarried working-class women often picked up, it seems, around the dock areas by captains eager to fill their ships. Some of these shipments came to South Africa. In 1857, for instance, the “Lady Kennaway” sailed into East London with 153 young Irish women to marry German legionaries settled in the area (Steinbart, 1975: 129, 190, 192). In accordance with this practice, marriage ceremonies were sometimes performed en masse – or so popular mythology has it. Sophie Levisieur recounts in her memoirs how the marriage en masse made, at least on one occasion, for easy divorce: “Don’t worry, my dear woman,” one husband allegedly said when his wife asked for a divorce, “I don’t suppose I was ever married to you. We just picked any girl we found when we got out of the church” (1982: 58). Young girls were also shipped out: an Emigration Home for Destitute Little Girls was established in 1872 for orphan or deserted girls from five years of age to twelve (the advantage of little girls over grown women as emigration material was said to be that little girls would adapt better to the work and to the climate [Hollis, 1979: 39-40]).

The emigration process developed a bad name among middle-class women,

for it was said that the dregs of British society were being passed to the colonies, and that women were being molested or “debauched” on board (Hammerton, 1979: 54). The colonial office began to depend on volunteer organizations to select emigrants, to give them a medical examination – “virtuous girls” were required (Monk, 1963: 16) – and also to protect them on their passage out. Emigration societies specifically for middle-class women were set up, with carefully selected matrons on board ship to chaperone the women or with a system whereby young girls would be looked after by family groups. Caroline Chisolm, who founded the Family Colonization Scheme, used as part of her argument for this scheme “the case of the foundling orphan girls from Dublin, . . . sacrificed on board ship by merciless and unprincipled men” (qtd. in Hollis, 1979: 35). In 1862, for instance, the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society, established that year by Maria Rye and Jane Lewin (a leading member of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women) sent 60 women out to the colonies, some of these to South Africa; the interest of the Society was specifically in women educated enough to be governesses who were also sufficiently schooled in cooking, baking, washing, needlework and housework to double-up as home helps (Monk, 1963: 2).

It appears that the term “middle-class” invited, in turn, a fastidiousness regarding the domestic work to be done, for the FMCES was superseded by the British Women’s Emigration Society, which unashamedly advertised for domestic servants, and which established a Colonial Training Home where the settlers would be prepared both for employment in the home “and for the sort of marriages to which such work . . . would be likely to lead” (Monk, 1963: 16). (Trained servants were not otherwise meant to be given loans, as they were needed in Britain.)

The view of some social critics was that emigration solved the problem of so-called “surplus women” in Britain, a problem which derived from the current sexual imbalance. A few others resisted the harnessing of women to marriage, and claimed that the problem of surplus women was simply a problem of female under-employment: for instance, Jessie Boucherett said that even “if we could equalise the number of men and women in Great Britain we should still not be out of our difficulty” (qtd. in Hammerton, 1979: 31) and, further, that the reason for surplus women was surplus men: “not enough men emigrated and left free jobs for women, and too many had taken possession of women’s trades” (qtd. in Hollis, 1979: 41). Nevertheless, the dominant belief was that British women should join the men in the colonies – as long as, in all other respects, the women remained in their proper place.

The place of women in the colonies was carefully defined and circumscribed within what was an avowedly masculine enterprise. The Indian viceroy George Curzon pronounced at the start of the twentieth century: “For the discharge of great responsibilities in the dependencies of the empire in distant parts you want the qualities not of the feminine but of the masculine” (qtd. in Harrison, 1978: 75). A speaker in the House of Commons said that “our [imperial] policy should be directed in the same masculine, virile way – it may be a brutal and bad way – . . . as the policy of competing nations” where there

is no place for the “feminine traits of compassion and sympathy” (qtd. in Rover, 1967: 45). Indeed, so vehement was the desire to keep women out of all policy-making that, after the Sex Disqualification Act of 1919 was passed in Britain, allowing women to take up any civil profession or vocation, an Order in Council five years later specified that the Sex Disqualification Act was *not* to be applied to the foreign and colonial services (Bailey, 1983: 9). As the presence of Jessie Boucherett in this essay will already have suggested, imperialist discourse was at loggerheads with feminist discourse. Parliamentary and other debate around the beginning of the twentieth century reveals the extent to which the leading imperialists – Curzon, Cromer, the Lugards, Kipling, and Mackinder – actively supported the efforts of the Men’s Committee for Opposing Female Suffrage (Harrison, 1978: 75-76, 120). However, if “feminine . . . compassion and sympathy” were redundant to the execution of public duty, there was a proper place for them. Imperialists and anti-suffragists joined forces to exhort the addition of maternal responsibility to the colonial enterprise: “Empire cannot be built on rickety and flat-chested citizens”, proclaimed one parliamentary speaker (qtd. in Davin, 1978: 17).

In terms of the patriarchal logic traced so far, then, emigration aimed to solve the British problem of “surplus” women in two obvious senses: to despatch these women to the colonies to become governesses/domestic servants and/or to marry, and thereby to confirm women’s proper place within the colonial enterprise as a place confined to “service”. As one nineteenth-century document claimed, domestic service no more disrupted the “essentials of women’s being” than did marriage, for servants “are supported by and . . . administer to men” (qtd. in Cock, 1980: 179).

Moreover, in a context more general than the colonial one, women were being put “in their place”. If the “surplus” women in nineteenth-century Britain were threatening to become “ex-centric from the reproductive orbit” (to use Spivak’s terminology relating to the different, but comparable, issue of clitoridectomy, where the clitoris is seen as excess [1987: 151]), then we might say that the concept of “woman” was threatening to explode its definition as the patriarchally-constructed “feminine”. This reformulation of female nature is what nineteenth-century feminists like Boucherett were working towards. The social threat of “surplus women” was precisely that the “surplus” in “woman” was threatening to break free, the “surplus”, that is, which is at odds with the Symbolic Order which dishes up human beings in their categories of masculine and feminine, and identifies female sexuality with reproduction. About to overwhelm and disrupt the signifying system, the surplus or excess in “woman” was being excised, and the word “woman” was being firmly redefined as “feminine”, thus having its status confirmed as (patriarchal) sign.

Emigration also addressed a set of interrelated colonial problems. It addressed the problem of domestic labour in the colonies, whether that labour came in the form of contracted servants or “contracted” wives. (As Cock notes, domestic servants were increasingly drawn from the indigenous population as the century progressed, but “upper servants” and, of course, governesses – in so far as they were different – were procured from among the

English [1980: 190-191]). Emigration also addressed the threat of an unproductive and unstable male community: the men might sink into sloth and might even consort with black women instead of marrying white. While transient colonial servants were encouraged to leave their wives in Britain, it was considered essential for settlers to marry, for wives would stabilize British hold over the colonies and establish the colonial homestead: their presence, and with it the presence of children, would encourage the cultivation of the land and the production of agricultural surplus (Gordon and Buhle, 1976: 279); wives would also produce their own “surplus”, bearing the children that would populate the British empire and swell the ranks of the white race, protecting the “master” race from the “blood” of those supposedly inferior to it.² If the discourses of imperialism and anti-feminism were combined, as the concepts of property and legitimacy were attended to, so too was added the discourse of racism, in the form of eugenics. There was a similar congruence in the American South, as Ann Firor Scott notes: the “most articulate” spokesmen for slavery “were also eloquent exponents of the subordinate role of women” (1970: 17).

Not surprisingly, the function ascribed to women was usually spoken of in blander (if elevated) terms than the ones being employed in this essay: “marriage [to white women] generally creates civilized society”, proclaimed Governor Guggisberg of the Gold Coast (qtd. in Kuklick, 1979: 125). Such comments occur again and again in the discourse of imperialism: for “civilizing” one reads compassionate, sympathetic, or, more generally, “humanizing”. (Indeed, the humanizing role that women play or might play in the modern world has become part even of much feminist thinking.) As the following section will show, early South African literature written by women shows an interesting and problematic relation between women and their civilizing or humanizing role.

2 Women as bearers of culture

In his *Walks and sketches at the Cape of Good Hope* (1805), Robert Semple described Cape colonial women in the following terms:

There exists not at the Cape that marked difference in the manners of the two sexes which we find in Europe. In conversation the women are free and unreserved, and very often not only listen to, but make use of expressions by no means to be reconciled with English ideas of decency and propriety. They are not the disciples, they might be the models, of the school of Mrs Wolstonecraft [sic]; they call every thing by its right name, and seem in general to think that action which men may perform with impunity ought equally to be allowed to themselves. Yet with all this, they are more humane, more affectionate, more disinterested than the men, whose manners they serve to soften and refine; and thus do they still support the natural excellency of the female character. (1968: 31-32)

The personal records, autobiographies and novels written by women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bear out this contradictory picture: however much colonial women might have appeared to male observers to be

the “models” of emancipation, they continued to act as the repositories of values shed by the male colonist as he played out his duty as frontiersman, aggressive, strong, confident and commanding. If the myth regarding white men is that they penetrated and tamed the “dark continent”, the myth regarding white women is that they made that continent “liveable” (Levisseur, 1982: 20). On an obvious level, this term refers to their ability to “soften the edges” of colonial rule (Richard Gould-Adams, qtd. in Monk, 1963: v). According to the culture/nature dichotomy that has been perpetuated in Western rationalist discourse and that associates women with nature, women offer men recovery of their “essential” humanity, the “natural” attribute that has been repressed by the requirements of civilization. In the South African colonial situation, where the Law of the Father has taken hold with particular force and the ideals of masculinity and femininity have been particularly sharply polarized, the humanizing function of women has had a vigorous life in the world of ideas.

However, in much of the literature written by colonial women, the initial impression is that there is refreshingly little sense of the “angel in the house” figure popularized by Coventry Patmore and Charles Dickens. In, for instance, the narratives of Melina Rorke and Elsa Smithers, who both write about the last decades of the nineteenth century, the autobiographical I that they deploy is followed by a set of verb forms even more startling than those constructed for Margaret Atwood’s feminist narrator in *Surfacing* (1972), who merely catches and cleans fish and explores underwater. The young Melina Rorke, who has a “natural instinct” for handling a rifle, kills a Matabele with a “heavy ten-bore shotgun” (1939: 225); her secret ambition is to be the first white woman “to enter the new town of Bulawayo” (1939: 137). Elsa Smithers at fifteen is “superbly strong”; well before this she has learnt “to handle the oxen, to drive the wagon, and to shoot for the pot” (1935: 36); at twelve she used to drive the ox cart (accompanied by two young black boys) to Pilgrim’s Rest from their farm “Klipheuwel” to sell vegetables, a two-day journey over the precipitous Blyde River pass, near the top of which she would outspan for the night. These women’s autobiographies are unashamedly boastful, as adventure stories – along the masculine model – are meant to be.

Yet if the model being rejected is one of feminine timidity and physical limitation, the *essentials* of femininity are not lost: “Strange as it may seem,” says Elsa Smithers, “when at my confirmation the Bishop laid his hands on my head, I heard quite clearly the rustle of an angel’s wings” (1935: 100). In a similar fashion Melina Rorke seems to wish, finally, to neutralize her racy and adventurous life, for at the end of her autobiography she spends a good deal of time describing how she comes to be called “the Florence Nightingale of the Boer War” (1939: 281). It would appear that these *feminine correctives* are not simply added for an external audience, but the need to remain feminine – that is, obedient to the tenets of patriarchy – is deeply internalised.

This kind of contradictory position is visible right at the start of South African colonial literature, with Lady Anne Barnard’s letter and journal writings, produced at the end of the eighteenth century. On the one hand her

writing makes frequent irritable reference to the ways that a patriarchal world confines her movements, both her physical movements and the movements of her mind. For instance, when she has the foresight and temerity to leap out of a runaway carriage and falls on her head, but hurts it only slightly, she complains at the fuss that everybody makes: “The *world* fractured my skull” (1973: 71). She longs to hear the truth that men refuse to tell women whenever there “is real or *supposed* danger in question” (1973: 73); she longs to make a more significant difference to the world around her than her duties as honorary First Lady entail. Above all, she longs to collect the information needed for her writing in the way that a man may:

Mr Barrow was . . . some months ago [given] a considerable collection of minerals and much usefull information of the country. – I often wish when I hear any thing new, curious, or usefull, that I could divest myself of that portion of false shame which prevents me from taking out a memorandum book and marking it down while I remember the particulars which afterwards escape my memory and the thing sinks into oblivion. (1973: 88; original spelling preserved)

On the other hand, she continually has recourse to conventionally feminine apology. Although her letters to Sir Henry Dundas, Secretary for War and the Colonies, are astute and informative, she feels the need to write:

I am perfectly convinced that you must receive along with this such numberless letters from others so *much better* qualified to give you an account of every thing worth your knowing, that it would seem almost *conceited* folly in me to describe things as they appear around me, or still more to give my miserable *female notions* on any thing. (1973: 35; emphases in original)

If there is often a good measure of irony in these feminine disclaimers, and if the awareness of the social construction of femininity is sometimes very close to the surface, the fact remains that Barnard explicitly adopts the “feminine” as a characteristic authorial stance. It is without irony that she says that any woman like her must guard against “wilfully drawing on a pair of blew stockings she has no right to wear” (1973: 88).

What becomes clear to us, through the example of Barnard and others, is that however much the polar opposites of masculinity and femininity appear to break down under the concept of *frontierswoman*, which is so obviously a site of contradiction (as indeed is the concept of woman as *author*), the patriarchal balance rights itself again in terms of these carefully constructed opposites. “Woman” is maintained as a sign in a signifying system that is intent upon creating and reproducing a set of ideal divisions, divisions between culture and nature, the civilized and the uncivilized, masculinity and femininity, rationality and irrationality, divisions upon which patriarchal discourse depends and which are thrown into sharp relief in the colonial context.

While the colonial enterprise has created women of initiative and capability, then, it has been in its interest to have women *play* traditional feminine roles. Despite their fulfilling a set of practical frontier needs, women must be

seen to withdraw to home and hearth, which no doubt becomes the more urgent project the more opportunities open up to women *not* to withdraw. (Interestingly, there is the same kind of contradictory imperative placed on black South African women in a revolutionary climate. But my immediate focus is on white women). Home and hearth should have been the place for Madeline Una Wookey, for instance, who was granted her articles of clerkship in 1912. The Provincial Division of the Law Society article her on the basis of the wording in the Cape Charter of Justice to the effect that “such persons as may be instructed in the knowledge and practice of the law, etc., may be enrolled as attorneys”. However, the Incorporated Law Society successfully argued that “the word persons included only male persons”, and Madeline Wookey was not enrolled. One of the Law Society’s plaintiffs reminded the court that Roman Dutch Law states that “nearly the whole of womankind by reason of an inborn weakness is less suited to matters requiring knowledge and judgement than men” (qtd. in Baikoff, 1981: n.p.). Such a finding has its precedent in the wording of the 1904 Cape Census, which discovered what it deemed “a not unsatisfactory state of affairs” among families “of the European race”, since – it said – a minimal number of the wives were employed, and these “in occupations . . . unlikely to interfere with the proper performance of their home duties” (qtd. in Walker, 1982: 14).

Whatever the “inborn weakness” or so-called innate irrationality of women, and however passive and natural their civilizing function was meant to be, part of their “proper performance” was an engagement in the process of socialization, that is to say, in the passing on of cultural values. (How active this engagement has been is, of course, defined by the general confinement of middle-class women to mothering, primary school teaching, the lower-level “caring” professions, and the “drawing-room” arts).

The assigned task of socialization, within the more general patriarchal project to (re)domesticate women, goes a good part of the way towards explaining the place of women both in the British novel and in the colonial novel. In her *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* Patricia Stubbs writes of the congruence in British life of two interrelated moments that have much to do with the shaping of the relation between women and fiction. Industrialization began to create an artificial split between public and private life, placing upon women – who were increasingly excluded from the public – the burden of feeling or sentiment that the pressures and institutions of industrialization lacked or denied. (Women had already been the “natural” embodiment of feeling, of course, ever since the construction of man’s “war-like nature”.) At the same time the novel came of age, a form “characterized by its absorption in private experience” (1981: x-xi). The associations of women and the private, and women and sentiment, may, of course, have had little to do with the empirical world (for one thing, working-class women do not live the way that middle-class women do); nevertheless, the novel has come to focus on women as private or domestic beings rather than on their installation into the public sphere, and has also provided a forum for sentiment which is out of place in the industrialized “progressive” world. If the “proper performance” of women was to keep to the novel form (and letters,

journals, and ladies' travels), then, they were also expected to incorporate within it the qualities they were (meant to be) equipped with: the kindness and compassion that would be otherwise expunged from the world through industrialization.

The parallels between the aggressive, brutal and masculine industrialization process and the colonization process lead one to use Stubbs's model, then, to explain the number of women novelists in South Africa, what W.H. Bell called the "overwhelming predominance" in the "world of letters" of "the feminine element" (1929: 16). (There was, correspondingly, an attempt by male novelists to masculinize this feminized genre: the work of Rider Haggard bears rampant testimony to this, as David Bunn's research [1986] suggests.) The focus on what I will loosely call sentiment in much writing by white South African women is also explained in terms of Stubbs's model: colonial women were enjoined to bring forth sentiment as much as had been their British antecedents.

Women's sentimental duty has two aspects worth noting here: the general, humanizing aspect already referred to, and the more specific mediatory aspect. To use an example from British fiction, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* provides a set of obvious and pertinent examples in the figures of Caroline and Shirley herself, as they attempt to soften the presentation of self, if not the authority, of a man like Robert Moore, and as they attempt to bridge the gap between workers and capitalists. As a general rule, we might say that in the British context women act as mediators between the classes, whereas in the colonial context they mediate between the races.

Even in "real life" in South Africa, there has been a cultural imperative in this country that women act as mediators between racial groups that the colonial enterprise otherwise keeps apart. For instance, when Margaret Balingier was nominated by a native electorate for parliament (becoming, later, a native representative of the Cape Province in the House of Assembly), "many electors suggested that a woman might restore to them the rights which had been stolen by men. It was the great White Queen who gave us the vote, they said. Men have for years been gradually taking the vote from us . . . Perhaps a woman will save the Bantu" (First and Scott, 1980: 238). And, to return to the world of fiction, William Plomer's novel, *Turbott Wolfe* (1926), which has as its subject the breaking of the colour bar, gives this task to the white woman, Mabel van der Horst. The novel suggests that white men cannot bridge the gap created by colonial racism: were Turbott Wolfe to copulate with the beautiful black woman he admires, Plomer would thus inevitably characterize him as the colonizer-figure. There is what Plomer calls a "steely intangible barrier" (1980: 42) between black women and white men, which is the sword of colonization and power. No such sword exists between the black man and the white woman, for she is innocent of the power that colonialism and racism imply.

Plomer's Mabel is a woman supremely natural: she carries in her hand "a short branch of wattle, sprigged with pollinous flowers" (1980: 65) as if she has the right equipment for her task of cross-pollination, and when she speaks she does so not like a man but "with the intimate grace of an animal" (1980:

67). Mabel is mediator between the worlds of the civilized and the uncivilized, by virtue of her close association with nature, even while she is owned or defined by its opposite. The appropriateness of her mediation with the black world which Turbott Wolfe cannot properly “enter” is determined by her inhabiting the same ideal space that that world inhabits: the world of nature.

3 Difference

As the example from Plomer suggests, the symbolic signifying system, in its dichotomising of culture/nature, masculine/feminine, white/black, reason/sentiment, and so on, places (white) women and black people within the same categories. Not surprisingly, imperialist rhetoric offers specific examples of a metaphorical alignment between women and the indigenous, colonized people. In early eighteenth-century Sumatra, one of the governors wrote of his dealings with native leaders in the following terms: “I treat them as a wise man treats his wife, very complaisant in trifles, but immovable in matters of importance” (qtd. in Boxer, 1975: 98). A French anthropologist went so far as to argue explicitly that blacks were “a female race”: “Just like the woman, the black is deprived of political and scientific intelligence: he has never created a great state . . . he has never accomplished anything in industrial mechanics. But on the other hand he has great virtues of sentiment” (qtd. in Cohen, 1980: 236).

What happens then in the literature written by women? I argue elsewhere³ that the mediatory role placed upon and assumed by South African women writers involves them in a set of contradictions, ambivalences and obliquities. I will not rehearse the argument and its illustrations here, except to stress that women’s sympathy for the oppressed and their simultaneous entrapment within the oppressive group on whose behalf they may desire to mediate complicates their narrative stance. Indeed, as current orthodoxy states, as soon as women writers take up the pen they enter a contradictory position: if writing is a displacement of nature (Derrida, 1976: 266), women who become writers, and therefore enter culture, need to define themselves against the nature that they are, in other respects, defined as. That their writerly separation from nature may also involve a separation from blacks, and specifically from black women, as a part of the “natural”, may further complicate their narrative stance. Alternatively, any attempt to bridge the gaps between white and black is inevitably constructed within the very terms already created to keep white women in line within the signifying system: in terms of the sentiment and “feminine” compassion that define women as not-masculine and not true authors or authorities. This entrapment is, of course, a linguistic entrapment, an entrapment within the discourse of imperialism, which is to say, the discourse of patriarchy, an entrapment in language itself.

To go in a more material direction than the points made above, it is also crucial to see that the differences between black people and white women are particularly marked in the South African colonial enterprise, whatever the “natural” analogies. (It is also important to note that, as Barbara Johnson says, the metaphorical association of women and blacks tends to silence “the

types of oppression from which black women have the most to suffer” [1984: 216].) If there have been injunctions, of different kinds, that women should stand in alignment with black people generally and black women in particular, the patriarchal imperialist world has also offered *another* injunction to women: “the father’s absolute authority . . . is [to be] exercised through the agency of the mother” (Mannoni, 1956: 58). As a male character in Perceval Gibbon’s *Margaret Harding* (1911) asserts, “A white woman belongs to her own people and must stand by their way of lookin’ at things.” The female character agrees: “A respectable woman doesn’t let a Kaffir come near her if she can help it. She never speaks to them except to give them orders. And as to – marrying them, or being friendly with them, why, she’d sooner die” (1983: 187).

Whatever sympathies may have developed among white women for the indigenous or colonized people, then, white women were also often either enjoined to or manipulated into aligning politically with their own racial group. The obvious historical example is in the granting of the franchise to white women during the late twenties, whereby the newly-politicized group of women who formed the local feminist movement was useful (precisely because of its politicization) to the conservative constituency. When General Hertzog, desiring to reduce the importance of the black vote in the Cape, decided, in a strategically brilliant move, to grant the vote to white women, the suffragists played right into his hands. At the 1926 Select Committee hearing on women’s suffrage, Aletta Nel testified that as a *woman* she favoured giving the vote to black women, but not as a *South African*, and Mrs Grant concurred: “Should we women be so wonderfully just, when after all, the white men in this country are not entirely just to native men?” (qtd. in Walker, 1979: 48). The “woman” in “white woman” acts one way, then, and the “white” another.

Despite the fact, then, that in some sense white women and black people are said to occupy the same “natural” space, white women have been sharply differentiated from blacks and have, in fact, been used to maintain the difference between white and black. They must prevent the union of white men and black women, which would threaten those very categories on which imperialist discourse depended (there are any number of examples of social outrage at the spectacle of white men “going native”): in the words of Jacques Lacan: “The primordial law . . . superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating” (1977: 66). The emigration of “surplus” white women from Britain quite specifically addressed the problem of other kinds of “surplus” in the colonies, then: the “surplus” implied by the potential of white men to abandon themselves to the world of nature, and by the apparently boundless availability of black women as sexual partners for white men.

Given that the phallus is the mark around which subjectivity is constructed, and hence the mark around which the culture/nature opposition is defined (subjectivity being constructed in terms of the continual displacement of the “other”, which is defined as nature), one might say that emigrant women were used in a phallic sense, as a mark of difference between white men and

black women. This closer association of women with the power of the phallus takes one back, of course, to the potential masculinity of *frontierswoman* and explains the haste with which this phallic identity must then be undone if the cultural subject is to be preserved as male. It also gives special meaning to the social dictum that women are the bearers of culture: women *bear* (but do not possess) the phallus that divides culture from nature, and white women themselves become the signs that push black people to the further outposts of culture – if women are “other”, blacks are more “other”.

To turn briefly to the signification of black women as it touches on my argument here, it appears that indigenous women acted as vehicles or decoys for the kind of male lust that was deemed not suitable for their white counterparts, just as, more generally, prostitutes were seen as “a safety-valve for public morality, and as some protection to the chastity and purity of our virgins and matrons”, as the *Cape Argus* noted in 1868 (qtd. in van Heyningen, 1984: 174). A novel by Birch Bernstein presents a group of sailors “dragging two Hottentot women after them into the bush” while one bystander notes, “Some of those men after three months at sea are as near to savage as the Hottentots. Better that they consort with such than they annoy our women” (1951: 17). Indeed, this situation (analogous, again, to a British situation where class functions while a South African usually thinks of race) is probably one of the givens of South African society, extending also into this century, “coloured” women often providing young white men with their sex education and even functioning as “second wives”. The white women, meanwhile, would remain inviolate, as it were, as ideals of feminine purity.⁴ And, to amplify the point made by Johnson, cited earlier, whatever position black and white women might have in common under male dominance guarantees competition rather than sympathetic cohesiveness: competition for the (white) phallus, competition for a place closer to culture than nature. Daphne Rooke’s novels, set in Natal and Zululand in the first half of the twentieth century, deal with just this kind of inter-racial intercourse, seeing it as the basis for the competitiveness and malicious jealousies between the young white ladies of the house and their personal servants.

If indigenous women have functioned to keep white women “pure”, and to help define them as less “other” than they might otherwise be, they have also, more practically, functioned to keep them in a leisured class, able to devote their time and attention to their duties as wives and mothers. In a memoir written by Sophie Levisseur, she speaks of her grandmother as a “wonderful organiser and housekeeper, so there was no need for her to do the actual work” (1982: 41). The tasks of Elsa Smithers’s mother are presented in more detail:

[Mama] had learnt from the Dutch women to arrange domestic details comfortably installed in a chair; indeed, hampered with a crinoline as she was, it would have been difficult for her to take a more active part. It must not be supposed, however, that my mother was idle or lazy; often she sat at a table working her sewing-machine. The servants would bring her the pots and pans and ingredients, so that without moving from her seat she could prepare the most delicious food ... (1935: 64-65)

Without wishing to deny the considerable hardships suffered by many colonial and frontier women, and without wishing to accuse individual women of bad intentions, it is this kind of (conscious or unconscious) female participation in exploitation that must make us treat with irony statements that white women coming to Africa helped to make the country “liveable” (Levi-seur, 1982: 20).

4 Conclusion

Towards the start of this essay I suggested that imperialist discourse confirmed the signification of “woman” as “the feminine”, so that the term became restored to its proper place in the signifying system. In his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* Claude Lévi-Strauss argues (as he himself summarizes in his *Structural Anthropology*) that “the complete set of marriage regulations operating in human societies . . . can be interpreted as being so many different ways of insuring the circulation of women within the social group or of substituting the mechanism of a sociologically determined affinity for that of a biologically determined consanguinity” (1967: 58-59). Lévi-Strauss’s argument⁵ involves reciprocity between two groups – group A gives women to group B in expectation of receiving women in return, either from that group or another – and does not deal with the situation where one group has surplus women. Nevertheless, the “exchange” or, more appropriately here, the “gift” of women from the metropolitan patriarchal authority to the colonial outpost has its return not in the form of more women (for the metropolis has enough) but in another form. Through the harnessing of female energy to specific social objectives related clearly to the family and home, the unwomanly in “woman” is expunged and “woman” makes its return as an ideal of domestic perfection and sexual purity. This is the reciprocity at work. Lévi-Strauss’s argument also involves the relation between women and signification: he characterizes marriage systems as systems of communication, so that women are seen as the words that are exchanged between groups. Women become the “conduit of a relationship” between men (Rubin, 1975: 174), the medium by means of which the Phallic Law is transmitted. They are both the “objects” that are given in (marital) exchange from the metropolitan patriarchal authority to the colonial outpost, and also the words – words signifying femininity, and thus also defining masculinity – to be passed back and forth between the speakers of the Language of the Father.

I have also argued that women, apart from being used as the transmitters or bearers of the Phallic Law as it relates to the constitution of gender, have also been used to establish difference between white and black. Again, this argument may usefully be put in Lévi-Straussian terms. While white women were given by the metropolitan authority to the colonial world, they were *not* given from white men to black men (whatever the fictive imaginings of Plomer and others). In terms of the so-called Immorality Act, white women became prohibited to black men, who were thereby defined as not-“kin”. In this case, white women are used as signs of that which is not given; they do not transmit the phallus from one group to the other. As I have suggested, the cultural

opposition or antagonism that is thus established, in terms of this theory, between white women and black people is interesting precisely because it is elsewhere contradicted, not only by such terms as “sympathy and compassion” (which might have extended from white women to black) but also by the standard correlation between women and blacks, who are both associated with nature and more or less marginal to culture. If a particular meaning has been given in this essay to the idea of “surplus” women and to the idea of women as bearers of culture, so too is the idea of women as mediators more clearly defined: white women are not the mediators between the races simply in the sense that they are intermediaries, intervening in order to reconcile differences, nor simply in the sense that they form a connecting link or transitional stage between the two (as between culture and nature), but they are mediators also in the sense that they divide into two parts the two racial categories, as the Latin *mediare* further suggests.

Gayatri Spivak has said that “imperialism . . . was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (1985: 243). Cultural representation refers to the process of continual construction and reproduction of the cultural subject – in this case the English cultural subject. That aspect of imperialism which involves control over women and femininity was a crucial part of the representation of the English cultural subject as adventurous, civilized, masculine, and white. Indeed, in a historical period in which women were becoming politically and culturally more and more active – as they were in nineteenth-century Britain – the patriarchal need to maintain women as domestic and private found its vehicle in imperialism. The Law of the Father establishes difference between “self” and “other”, or culture and nature. Its existence needs to be continually reenacted or reproduced, and imperialism became a significant means of that reproduction.

In the dichotomising of culture and nature by which the (cultural) subject becomes established, the Law of the Father excises from itself or culture all that is excess, the excess in nature and in sexuality. The material that imperialism worked on, of course, was nature, all that had to be ordered, shaped, and controlled in the act of culture. Under the aegis of imperial rhetoric, women and blacks were defined as the natural that had to be controlled, in a double movement that managed whatever threats women and blacks held for the English cultural subject.

Such an association comes together in the nomenclature “dark continent”, whose various references to an unknown country, to a hidden but burgeoning sexuality, to the unconscious and to women are by no means unrelated. The feminization of the “dark continent” made it known as a virgin country, a country yet to be penetrated and explored, and its various parts yet to be charted and named. In this way, the prior inhabitants of that continent were characterized as they-who-have-not-penetrated, the people without the phallus; they remained “dark”. Yet the threat remained: the “dark continent” would take on its own force if it remained unchecked, which is to say, uncharted and unadministered by English Phallic Law. So too would the newly emerging woman (represented in this essay by the “school” of Mary Wollstonecraft that the traveller Robert Semple refers to) take on her own

direction into the excess of a “dark” nature if she were to become un-domestic, un-married, un-feminized. I am doing more than drawing a metaphorical connection here. I am, instead, saying that the presentation of the “dark continent” to the English mind as a natural, uncivilized, and chaotic space was an opportunity for the English to proclaim themselves as civilized and civilizing (whatever big, greedy, imperialist mouths said to the contrary), and that the definition of the “dark continent” as a virgin territory to be penetrated and controlled by the brutal and aggressive colonizer was an opportunity to proclaim the cultural subject as a not feminine (neither effeminate nor effete) country, an opportunity the more urgently seized upon at a time when that which was within woman (and within the dark continent itself) had to be defined as *excess* in an effort to curb its potential *success*.

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Notes

1. The 1983 issue of *Journal of Southern African Studies* provides a useful bibliographic survey of the work done in this area to date, and my particular acknowledgements of indebtedness are, of course, reflected in my references. However, I must make special mention of David Bunn’s important research on the place of “woman” in South African romance, which encouraged some of my thinking on the signification of colonial women. I must also specifically acknowledge my indebtedness to Susan Bailey’s annotated bibliography of women and the British empire, which (though its South African sources are scanty) gave me many of the references I needed for the start of this essay.
2. Perhaps a masculinist reading (which I here posit as different from a phallic one) would speak of the way that men have been brought back into line by women; men, like women, are defined in terms of difference, and are locked, with women, in mutual entrapment in a signifying system. Clearly, men as well as women have been the pawns in an imperialist game.
3. In what is in many ways a companion piece to this essay (but different from it in that it is less theoretical and takes fewer speculative risks), I present a more basic and carefully staged argument of some of the major points made here, and provide a set of illustrations from South African literature written by both black and white writers. The essay will appear under the title, “Women and nature, women as objects of exchange”, in a book edited by Michael Chapman et al, forthcoming from Ad Donker, Johannesburg.
4. It is interesting to compare to this idea Sander L. Gilman’s finding regarding pictorial representations of black and white women. Gilman argues that the black female becomes the signifier of the sexuality and the sexual availability of the white female (1985: 221). What he does not emphasise is that the sexuality of the white female (not including the prostitute) may then remain covert, for it is displaced onto the black female: difference between black and white is maintained, even while “essential” similarity is affirmed, and the white female becomes the sign of the more civilized, she in whom sexuality is repressed, ordered, no longer excess.

5. Lévi-Strauss's argument has come under criticism for presupposing "the subordination which it is intended to explain" and for its complicity with that system of subordination (Mitchell and Rose, 1985: 45). While my analysis is not intended to explain the "cause" or origin of women's subordination, I hope that my focus on the reproduction of subordination avoids the flaws in Lévi-Strauss's argument.

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