

The Afrikaner Grotesque: Mediating between Colonial Self and Colonised Other in Three Post-Apartheid South African Novels

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Rob Nixon has argued that during the apartheid years,

[t]he successful conversion of the anti-apartheid cause into a world movement was in large part proportionate to the Manichean clarity of the issues at stake, as a showdown between good and evil, victims and villains, black and white, oppressed and oppressors, the masses and a racist minority.

(Nixon 78, qtd. in Barnett 288)

In this paper I will discuss a literary trope that exemplifies the Manichean clarity to which Nixon refers, namely the figure of the oppressive Afrikaner. The term 'Afrikaner' historically describes white Afrikaans-speaking people, and has in the past been used interchangeably with the term 'Boer.' This literally means farmer, but metonymically extends to Afrikaners, who thus valorise their pastoral history.¹ I do not refer below to real Afrikaans-speaking people, but to a mode of literary representation. The same cautions apply to my use of 'civilised' and 'savage,' which need not be taken at face value.

The trope of the oppressive Afrikaner, strongly associated with apartheid, boasts a certain longevity. A number of 21st Century novels that employ such figures have been well received. These include *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) by Zakes Mda, Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), *The Good Doctor* (2003) by Damon Galgut, and *Karoo Boy* (2004) by Troy Blacklaws. The first three of these have enjoyed substantial critical and

scholarly attention, while *Bitter Fruit* and *The Good Doctor* were shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Although Blacklaws has not achieved such distinction, according to his South African publisher Russell Martin (personal communication), rights to *Karoo Boy* were acquired by American, British, Dutch and French publishers, and a film option was taken by the South African producer Anant Singh. While the success of these novels can be attributed to many factors, the market for South African writing continues to see a place for novels that are marked to some degree by the shadow of apartheid, personified in suitably grotesque Afrikaner antagonists (see my related discussion of *The Good Doctor*, in Barris “Absence” 35–36).

Afrikaans writers such as Marlene van Niekerk (*Triomf* 1996; *Agaat* 2006) and Eben Venter (*Horreloot* 2006) have produced novels that involve Afrikaans identity and the grotesque. I have excluded their work from this discussion because they reflect more directly embodied forms of grotesquerie than I elaborate below (see Buxbaum “Embodying Space” 30–33, and “Give the People” 202–13), thereby generating perspectives unrelated to my argument. There is also a considerable body of fiction by Afrikaans writers such as Mark Behr, Etienne Leroux, Michiel Heyns and others that I do not consider simply because their perspective is internal and driven by a reflexive understanding of identity: my focus is on a trope that (as the phrase ‘the Afrikaner’ implies, and in keeping with my Manichean premise) essentialises and objectifies. The works I do consider are *Karoo Boy* by Troy Blacklaws, *The Madonna of Excelsior* by Zakes Mda, and Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit*.

1

An explanation for the longevity of this trope can be found in the ancient position of fascination which Africa holds for European culture, and how the Afrikaner figure is tasked with a mediating role in regard to this fascination. From the opening page of *Orientalism*, Edward Said takes as axiomatic the necessity of the Other for European self-definition:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.

(Said 1–2)

Other postcolonial scholars have observed a similar relationship between Europe and Africa. V. Y. Mudimbe, for example, argues that it was “fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe that invented the savage as a representation of its own negated double” (xii). Concentrating on the aspect of negation, Simon Gikandi has noted that “our relationship to the space of the savage” is marked by the tensions between desire and prohibition intrinsic to the notion of taboo (171). In explaining my premise concerning the Afrikaner, I turn to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (as Gikandi does, 171), partly because it re/produces this binary of Self and Other in relation to the concept of taboo, and partly because it parlays the binary into a form of colonial scientific discourse.

In the first essay in *Totem and Taboo*, namely “The Horror of Incest,” Freud describes the extreme measures taken by ‘savages’ who live by the totem system to avoid the possibility of incest (1–14). He notes that while these measures are justified by the real possibility of committing incest, their scope extends far beyond the prevention of *biological* incest. These measures also forbid a wide range of sexual contacts within complex but non-biological kinship systems. In the closing pages of the essay, Freud explains the biologically superfluous extent of these measures according to the psychoanalytic method: by relating them to libidinal conflicts to be found in neurotic ‘civilised’ people, in terms of which the first choice of sexual object for men (mother, perhaps followed by sister) have not been successfully resolved (14–17). While the details of Freud’s thesis are not pertinent to my argument, the premises underlying it are, namely that in ‘savages,’ aspects of individual and sexual development that are hidden within ‘civilised’ people become visible; and that these hidden aspects are at once forbidden and intensely desirable. ‘Civilised’ people are therefore driven to repress knowledge of such libidinal aspects. However, the fascination which ‘savage’ people hold for ‘civilised’ people can partly be explained by the shared tensions between desire and prohibition which are made visible for the colonial spectator/reader within narrative presentations of the ‘savage’ Other.

According to James Strachey, translator of the 1950 edition cited above, *Totem and Taboo* was originally published in German as *On Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (qtd. in Freud vii). These points of agreement for Freud are a matter to be recovered within the discourse of rational enquiry. For ‘civilised’ individuals, observes Freud, such knowledge is to be repressed, out of “distaste which human beings feel for their early incestuous wishes” (17). For the colonial project, however, these points of agreement lead to an operational agenda of

repression, and of policing forbidden, detested, and yet intensely desirable forms of contact between coloniser and colonised. For the colonial and postcolonial text, and for the industry built around its propagation and distribution (see also Barnett 287–89; Chrisman 10–11; Wicomb 197), this conflict of desire/repression contributes to the formation of the exotic, precisely because the narrativised savage renders audible within African objects what is unspeakable for European minds.

It is worth noting Homi Bhabha's related analogy between Freud's concept of the fetish and the colonial stereotype, a mechanism which is similarly directed towards managing the problematic of difference, and by means of which Bhabha links castration anxiety to the anxiety of encounter:

For fetishism is always a 'play' or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity – in Freud's terms: 'All men have penises'; in ours 'All men have the same skin/race/culture' – and the anxiety associated with lack and difference – again, for Freud 'Some do not have penises'; for us 'Some do not have the same skin/race/culture'.

(Bhabha, *Location* 74)

As Derek Hook notes, this vacillation "between irreconcilable beliefs [. . .] which is almost compulsive in nature, is exactly the activity through which the subject attempts to mediate the confrontation with the other" (723).

Graham Huggan defines the exotic in terms which involve a similar oscillation between binaries – as a sign which combines the familiar and the strange within a structurally complex relationship capable of shifting its content according to political need and agenda (13). For Huggan, the word 'exotic' is generally misunderstood as an inherent quality within the exotic object (13). He regards the exotic, however, as a mode of aesthetic perception that renders "people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (13). Further, the paradoxical modality of the exotic can variously be manipulated to support the desire for reconciliation, or to justify ideologically "the need for plunder and conquest" (13). In short,

[e]xoticism, in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity. Within this circuit, the strange and the familiar, as well as the relation between them, may be recoded to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends.

(Huggan 13)

I propose that the Afrikaner figure combines in itself qualities of sameness and otherness as a specialised form of Huggan's strangeness/familiarity dichotomy: the figure partakes at once of European sameness and African otherness, in a particularly literal case of Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry, of the

[. . .] desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.

(Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126, original emphasis)

Precisely because of this mediate position, the Afrikaner figure is uniquely well placed to police the zone of contact, to exercise mastery and domestication.

It was the self-declared mission of apartheid to police 'civilised' and 'Christian' values of social order, maintaining the boundaries of whiteness in all conceivable spheres. This mission of policing the boundaries of whiteness led to the imposition of what was, at least on the surface, a harsh form of order. However, in its obsessive and savage application, and in its fascination with taboo objects, it showed as much disorder, as much unreason, as the putative unreason of the dark Other it was designed to suppress.

This dichotomy of Afrikaner disorder-within-order has the ideological advantage of enabling savage repression while remaining at a suitable moral distance. This advantage accrued under apartheid to various interested parties, as diverse as collusive white liberals and colonial readers inside South Africa, and post/imperial readers outside the country. In this context, the colonial subject (or indeed the metropolitan reader) might then vicariously internalise the benefits of a paternalistic social order, and yet entertain fascination at the violence required to impose it, as well as moral distaste at the crudity of the requisite methods. All of these benefits could only support the ambivalent need of the imperial project (and indeed the related project of apartheid), to repress and to civilise at once.

Suggestive evidence for this assertion can be drawn from N. D. Hoffman's *Book of Memoirs: Reminiscences of South African Jewry*. As a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant to South Africa in the early twentieth century, Hoffman is a similarly marginalised figure to the Afrikaner in relation to the imperial centre. Despite this marginalisation, Hoffman speaks as if from the centre, expressing precisely the ambivalent attitude to "the Boers of South

Africa” (10) that I have suggested above, in that he describes with admiration their repressive style in dealing with Africans, while disparaging it not long after:

We must give credit to the *Boers* of South Africa, because they are the only ones who understand how to deal with the black people, that is how to keep them subdued so that they are obedient. The years of cultural contact with the Europeans have made little impression on the native black man. His natural disposition is one of slavery, requiring the strong hand of the master [. . .]. The black man must be restrained with a strong hand, otherwise he can be dangerous. The Boer is in a position to do so [. . .].

(Hoffman 10)

Only four pages later, Hoffman is critical of the harshness of the regime he has described in such glowing terms:

Generally his treatment of his servants is barbaric. He considers them to be slaves, and has no sympathy for them. He requires them to do the hardest work while he stands over them with a whip, like a Russian Cossack with a lash. The Boer despises the Hottentots and holds them in contempt. He considers them to be inferior to whites and not much better than the animals.

(14)

The Afrikaner therefore becomes a useful proxy in the projection of imperial order, not only because he mediates the distance between Self and Other in subjective terms, but because the power he wields is not projected from a geographic distance. Conveniently, ignoring the distraction of his earlier colonial provenance (as descendants of Dutch settlers), the Afrikaner is seen to *originate* from colonised ground. He partakes of both colonised and coloniser status; he is both Self and Other.

Hoffman again provides evidence for this assertion. Having described “the native black man” as “lazy, careless and negligent” (10), he goes on to describe Afrikaners in nearly identical terms:

The Boer is lazy by nature and negligent in his farming activities [. . .]. The Boer is bone idle. He struts around all day, drinking coffee, smoking his pipe and looking for ways to occupy his time [. . .]. Thus he whiles away his time with these light tasks, trying to avoid going crazy with idleness.

(14)

I have suggested above that while the sameness of the Afrikaner registers as European, his otherness registers as an African property. For example, the idleness of the Boer as a sign of alterity finds a strange echo in colonial descriptions of the Khoi-San, named Hottentots in colonial writing. In his essay "Idleness in South Africa," J. M. Coetzee observes that the idleness of Hottentots is repeatedly recorded in early colonial writings as an essential feature of their identity. The trope of idleness, he remarks, is also used by the writers as a distancing device, as a mark of otherness: "Idleness, indolence, sloth, laziness, torpor – these terms are meant both to define a Hottentot vice and to distance the writer from it" (Coetzee, "Idleness" 18).⁴ In the same essay, Coetzee (28) observes that "the true scandal of the nineteenth century was not the idleness of the Hottentots [. . .] but the idleness of the Boers."

While this quality conversely identifies similarity between Boer and Hottentot, it signals "some of the more obvious *differences* between the Hottentot and the West European, or at least the West European as he imagined himself to be" (13, original emphasis). While Coetzee does allow for "a framework of *samenesses*" (13, original emphasis) onto which this and related differences are fixed, it is a radical sameness of species, but only of species, and then barely so: "although the Hottentots may seem to be no more than beasts, they are in fact men" (13).

I would argue that the element of difference (registered as near-bestiality) is exacerbated rather than diminished by the element of sameness. It is more fascinating to be confronted by a man-animal than by a distinct and homogenous category of being, precisely because the former is a grotesque fusion of categories. The trope of the Afrikaner reflects a similar tension to these narrativised Hottentots, namely of suspending within the sign opposed meanings (of alterity/sameness) in violent collision.

In the case of the Afrikaner figure, it becomes more complex: to reap the full benefit of having a coloniser/colonised proxy in the ground of contact, the half-otherness of the Afrikaner has to be sustained while his half-sameness is to be deployed in its task of suppression of the full Other, i.e. the black African. This oxymoron is in accord with Huggan's description of exoticism as "a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity" (13).

Agata Krzychylkiewicz, in her diachronic analysis of how the grotesque has been conceptualised from medieval to modern times, defines the grotesque as a mode of expression that defamiliarises a real world "by drastically altering its proportions and perspectives;" by deliberately fusing realms that in representational work would be kept apart, such as the animal or human; and in its most potent (and exclusively modern) form, through

“images [. . .] which manipulate our perception of a human being” (220). In the latter case, “the human body retains all its ‘real characteristics’ but is no more than an empty shell completely devoid of inner humanness” (220). It seems apposite then, to describe this representation of Afrikaners in English South African writing as instances of what I will term ‘the Afrikaner grotesque.’

2

Karoo Boy (2004) by Troy Blacklaws is set in a fictitious Karoo town named “Klipdorp” [Stone Village], in the time of apartheid. “Stone Village” carries obvious implications of harshness and suggests an unyielding surface. This must be related to the fact that the text is rich in ethnic references. There is relentless essentialised categorisation of bystanders, often with stereotypical accents and dialects to match, and stereotypical cultural and political beliefs. Given this density of ethnic tagging, and the richness of teenage slang in the narrator’s idiolect, “Klipdorp” also hints at the terms ‘rock’ or ‘rockspider,’ which were pejorative descriptors of Afrikaners widely used by English-speaking white South Africans in the apartheid years.

Karoo Boy is the tale of a fourteen-year-old boy from Cape Town, Douglas, who moves to Klipdorp. The society in which he finds himself is dominated both at school and adult level by its Afrikaans inhabitants. He is dismayed not only by their refusal to engage with him, but by the hostility and cruelty that he experiences from both teachers and pupils. There is one partial exception, the beautiful Marika, with whom he is able to form a relationship. The cruelty of this community is not only directed towards the English-speaking outsider Douglas, but more cogently towards the black inhabitants of the town, a cruelty dramatised by the pair of gun-toting thugs who terrorise Douglas’s black friend Moses, and by Marika’s shotgun-wielding father. The atmosphere is suggested by Marika’s first words to Douglas’s black friend Moses: “My pa does not want me to talk to blacks. He says blacks smell, and they rape white girls if they catch them in the veld” (Blacklaws 99).

The Afrikaners in *Karoo Boy* exhibit a monolithic quality of power, namely brutality of thought, speech and action. Marika’s father, for example, is concerned to protect his daughter from the contagion of social contact with black people, or even with those who like black people:

Marika’s father snatches Marika’s arm and he rattles her as if he wants to free a fishbone caught in her gullet.

- I told you I don't want you hanging around kaffirs, or Cape Town kaffirboeties. Hoorjy my? [Do you hear me?]
- One day I will go to the black township, Marika shouts at him. You can't stop me.
- Marika's father backhands [her] across the cheek.

(103–104)

When in fact she does go to the black township, her father follows her there, shotgun in hand. This has fatal consequences for him: his actions precipitate a response of crowd violence that results in his death.

There are other depictions of racist violence and abuse, such as the sadistic treatment of Douglas's black friend Moses by two young Afrikaners men whose weapon of choice is also a shotgun. Indeed, the phrase "shotgun cowboys" is used repeatedly, perhaps a suitable but overworked image for practitioners of apartheid whose politics is brutal physical action.

This presentation of shotgun-toting Afrikaners, who replicate one another in diction, action and weapon, suggests that their hate-filled violence is an essence named 'Afrikaner.' It does not allow one to imagine the possibility that the term 'Afrikaner' might embody anything other than properties of racial hatred and violence. There is no exploration of any dynamic of history that might render their politics legible. In sum, violent racism is a form of closure with which characterisation begins and ends. The otherness of the Afrikaners is therefore unmitigated and insuperable. There is no possibility of seeing into these monoliths of ugliness and violence, and so the narrator does not interact with the crises of the novel so much as survive them. If there is growth, it is through ageing and hardening, and because Douglas's defences against a particular inner secret (concerning the death of his father) are eventually dislodged by the harsh accidents of his life in the Karoo.

The grotesqueness of these Klipdorp Afrikaners can be read against Krzyżylkiewicz's view, noted above, that the most powerful grotesque images retain the outward human form while emptying it of all "inner humanness" (220). The Afrikaners of Klipdorp do not have the hooves, horns or other animal features to be found in traditional forms of the grotesque, nor do they represent any kind of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. However, Krzyżylkiewicz's view of the most extreme form of the modern grotesque remains pertinent.

Applying the concept of the grotesque to militant Afrikaners who take violent measures to maintain the racial hierarchy of apartheid, in fact, suggests an interesting variation of Bakhtin's association of the grotesque

with the subversion of hierarchy. For Bakhtin, the grotesque involved a relieving “second world and second life” (6) outside the official order:

All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, and man, and of human relations; they built a second world and second life outside officialdom [. . .].

(Bakhtin 5–6)

By contrast, an inverted politics of the grotesque obtains: it is not hierarchical order, such as that of feudal Christianity (or for that matter Stalinism) that is disrupted, but the human rights ethic against which apartheid has been widely measured and found wanting. Instead, the Afrikaners of Klipdorp disrupt the possibility – or perhaps the ideal – of humane order. This becomes therefore a cold and negative grotesquery, stripped of the libidinal dimensions of carnival. The otherness of the Afrikaner – this Afrikaner grotesque – is stripped too of the complexities and contradictions of individual personality. It becomes instead an allegorical property in a contemporary morality play, a fixed marker of barbarism that is deeply familiar to an audience founded on the hermeneutics of anti-apartheid fiction. As such, it becomes an objectification or entrenchment of difference.

The Madonna of Excelsior (2002) by Zakes Mda, by contrast, offers a more nuanced and mobile view of the Afrikaner figure than *Karoo Boy*. It depicts a number of Afrikaners, representing a range of social meanings, and bearing different implications for post-apartheid discourse. I will discuss only three of these figures, namely Johannes Smit, Tjaart Cronje, and Adam de Vries.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, sexual transgressions that occurred under apartheid play into the post-apartheid present, and constitute the opening chapters of the novel. *The Madonna of Excelsior* thus revisits the past as a means of constructing the present. The germinal past moment is a fictionalised account of an historic event: a series of incidents of ‘miscegenation’ that took place in the little town of Excelsior in the Orange Free State in 1971, between powerful Afrikaans men and disenfranchised African women (see Jacobs 277–84 for a detailed account of the historic events on which *The Madonna of Excelsior* is based). As I will show below, Mda differs from Blacklaws in not representing so essentialised and monolithic a form of Afrikaner power, depicting more versatile Afrikaner

figures that are capable of change. To be more precise, several of his Afrikaner male figures show this quality, while one (Tjaart Cronje) proves otherwise. It is only in this exceptional case that the generic Afrikaner qualities appear to be entirely fixed. Mda thus avoids an essentialising practice by charting a series of changing subject positions within Afrikaner men that arise in response to post-apartheid change.

A related narrative strategy is the use of satire to subvert the master narrative of patriarchal Afrikaner power. In this sense, Mda's use of the grotesque becomes more Bakhtinian. Both narrative strategies can be seen in the farmer Johannes Smit, the first to participate in the orgies of Excelsior. He begins by raping Niki, a rural African woman, so establishing a moral baseline for the text, firmly establishing as well the asymmetry of power between white men and black women. At first, Smit's male Afrikaner power seems absolute. However, he is one of the figures in whom Afrikaner patriarchy is not entirely essentialised. Although he remains objectionable throughout the narrative, he does demonstrate a measure of change.

Satire begins with Smit's sexual difficulty, namely premature ejaculation, and in the images of disgust constantly associated with the farmer, for example, "He just lay there like a plastic bag full of decaying tripe on top of her" (Mda 16). Indeed, an aura of distaste surrounds him: "On every occasion in the yellow fields, she just lay there and became a masturbation gadget" (18–19). Mda elaborates this beyond the isolated example of Smit to the other Afrikaner orgiasts. Miki Flockemann notes the subversive description of "carnavalesque communal copulation sessions in which the women (for a small financial reward) reduce the respectable citizens of Excelsior to a cacophony of inarticulate howling, squealing and bleating" (253). The effect of this, argues Flockemann, is to subvert the language of power not only in Johannes Smit's case, but the power possessed generically by the Afrikaner men of Excelsior. The sessions evoke "a typical sense of rampant sexuality that disrupts the master narratives of power; this is clearly evident in the way desire enables the women to obliterate their master's language which is reduced to inarticulate bleats, squeals and grunts" (Flockemann 256).⁷ (Bell, 67, and Sewlall, 340, make similar observations about Mda's use of satiric and carnivalesque elements.)

The second of the three Excelsior Afrikaners to be discussed is Tjaart Cronje. At the time of Niki's first sexual encounter with the white men of Excelsior, Tjaart is only a child, and Niki is his nanny. At the age of seven he insists on being carried on her back. He does so because he has the same sexual fascination with black women that runs through the adult Afrikaans male collective of the town: "But she stopped when she realised that whenever he was strapped in a shawl on her back, he induced an erection

and worked himself up with unseemly rhythmic movements" (9). His sexual precociousness is again evident when his mother orders Niki to strip off her clothing on suspicion of having stolen meat from her butchery: "[Tjaart] saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks" (42). This objectification of sexual parts is repeated elsewhere in the novel, but the fact that it is evident in a child points to a reading of this trait as an inherent quality of Afrikaans males, hegemony sexualised and thereby given grotesque expression.

Tjaart Cronje peaks, as it were, in the transitional years. He grows to manhood and becomes a soldier of apartheid. If he is seven years old in 1971, it is clear that his military service, and his prime years, will see him through the turbulent change from apartheid to democracy. As a soldier of apartheid, he experiences his power, his social cachet, and is confident of both. In the early years of the new South Africa, his confidence is transformed into resentment. As time goes by without the fruits of hegemony to sustain him, he loses what is left of his confidence, and grows so despondent that his health eventually breaks. Mda thus essentialises the one character who is too rigid to adapt to social change (see Goodman 63–64 for related argument). Where society has transformed, Tjaart is unable to transform with it, and so dies in the end, grotesquely, of political rigor mortis.

If Tjaart Cronje represents what Goodman describes as the pole of "indignant patriarchy" (63), Adam de Vries stands elsewhere on this spectrum of political attitude, developing, as the narrative proceeds, a more open-ended response to the advent of democracy. It is probable that de Vries does not participate in the Excelsior orgies. There is room for doubt in that five men take part in the initial orgy (Mda 51ff.), set in a barnyard, but only four are named; it is both possible and uncertain that he is the fifth. However, there is nothing further in the novel to suggest his direct participation. While de Vries might be unlikeable at the beginning of the novel, he is not given grotesque embodiment. His relevance to my argument lies in the contrast that this illustrates between Mda and Blacklaws. Mda is able consciously to exploit, modify, and abandon the Afrikaner grotesque topos, whereas Blacklaws reiterates it in essentialised, fully stereotyped form, reminding us of Ndebele's influential critique of the 'spectacular' representational mode (Ndebele 43).

The discursive movement that Mda shows in De Vries is reflected in his unpromising opening position: he is a staunch Nationalist, and a champion of apartheid legality. As a member of one of the founding families of Excelsior, and as its mayor, he bears the full weight of Afrikaner hegemony. As a prominent local lawyer, he defends the Afrikaner men charged under the Immorality Act. His defence reflects not only the asymmetries of power

in gender and race, but also the selective vision of apartheid: as he presents the case, the white men have been framed by the black women, and are entirely innocent. De Vries is thus satirically presented at this early stage of the novel as a champion of apartheid-derived legality and morality. However, as the fledgling democracy begins to forge its precarious identities, De Vries enters a space in which cross-cultural understanding is possible. He therefore retains a productive role in society because he has managed to adapt to the new, despite his retention of a somewhat softened hegemonic perspective.

In the discourse that Mda establishes around the three Afrikaner figures under discussion, de Vries is offered as a more positive example of adaptive positioning within the new polity. The substance of this positioning can be articulated through Wendy Woodward's argument that a paradoxical set of conditions is necessary for cross-cultural communication (Woodward 21). In her view, such communication "is feasible only if selves are able to move into a different order of relationships beyond colonising patterns of domination and subjugation, beyond notions of essentialised identities, *while acknowledging the effect of social constructions often imposed by essentialisms*" (my emphasis). Historical identities, she argues, still come into play: "Paradoxically, then, this relational space does not depend on a denial or a transcendence of historicised and racialised identities; instead, social and political legacies inform the place from which one speaks" (21). While figures such as Tjaart Cronje and to a lesser extent Johannes Smit exemplify only the second condition ("acknowledging the effect of social constructions imposed by essentialisms"), Adam de Vries is able to enter a relational space to the degree that he does because he embodies both conditions (including the ability to move "beyond notions of essentialised identities").²

I close this article with a brief consideration of *Bitter Fruit* by Achmat Dangor (2001), a novel which demonstrates a further variation in the way in which the Afrikaner grotesque trope is deployed. In this novel, Lieutenant du Boise is an apartheid-era security policeman who has raped Lydia Ali, the wife of an anti-apartheid activist Silas Ali. Mikey, the child of this rape, is brought up by Lydia and Silas as if he were their own. Mikey is thus the eponymous bitter fruit himself, connecting in his own biography the atrocity of apartheid with the problematic of freedom in the new South Africa. While *Karoo Boy* essentialises Afrikaner identity and fixes it in the past, *The Madonna of Excelsior* suggests possibilities of political evolution. *Bitter Fruit*, however, traces the historicising shadow cast by the apartheid past into the present, suggesting metonymically that the current dispensation is indeed the troubled child of its own history.

The climactic point of the novel is Mikey's murder of his biological father, which occurs in the post-apartheid period. This patricide bears a refutation of two important fixtures of the South African political imaginary. The first of these is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which scripted and staged a national allegory of confession and potential exculpation, and in which the grotesque narratives of real-life Afrikaans figures such as Colonel Eugene de Kock unfolded (see Barris "Interrogations" 47–48; Frenkel 157–60).³ Dangor instead has written a counter-allegory of retribution, that itself shows compound features. Firstly, Lydia has refused a victim's session at the TRC (140), choosing instead not to express her pain on the national stage, and thus not to endorse the project of reconciliation. Secondly, Mikey's patricide invokes as its source the Oedipal narrative, rather than the Judeo-Christian imagery of the TRC narrative (in fact there are suggestive moments of near-incest that occur between Mikey and Lydia (143, 146) which acknowledge both the Freudian and Sophoclean versions).

The second key trope is that of blood taint, as exemplified in Sarah Gertrude Millin's novel *God's Stepchildren* (1924). In characterising the discourse of miscegenation, J. M. Coetzee identifies blood as a pool of unconscious and ineradicable memory which records the shame of blackness for all generations to come: "All acts of shame are recorded in the blood. The blood is thus a pool of unconscious memory, passed down through the generations" ("Blood" 150). In the 'scientific' literature and popular discourse of miscegenation, it is black blood that is tainted (see Adhikari "Hope," "God Made;" Blair; Coetzee "Blood;" Wicomb). By this convention, the memory and metaphor of blood would be embodied and concretised in Mikey, the child of mixed race. In *Bitter Fruit*, however, the colour dynamic is reversed: it is the stigma of white blood that must be excised from the body politic:

Michael sees the bits of flaking skin, those tired, red-rimmed eyes, the bitter half-smile, sees himself mirrored in the sweat breaking through the powdery brow. That could be my face one day, my thin body (how pot-bellied and red-faced he might have been were it not for the cancer!).

My heritage, he says in a whisper, *unwanted, imposed, my history, my beginnings*.

Michael fires – twice – directly into Du Boise's face [. . .]. He wants to obliterate Du Boise's face, wipe away that triumphant, almost kindly expression, leave behind nothing but splintered bone and shattered skin.

(Dangor 246, my emphasis)

Dangor does not foreground the Afrikaner identity of Lieutenant Du Boise. In fact, it is confirmed explicitly only towards the end of the novel (245). However, the lieutenant remains an Afrikaans character who instantiates the role of apartheid oppressor, while exercising a form of order that takes on exactly the savagery and unreason it is ostensibly designed to suppress, and casting a shadow into the post-apartheid dispensation. Dangor's discursive twist is that Mikey attempts to expunge the Afrikaner within, thus inverting and problematising the Otherness of the trope.

I conclude that the strategic stereotyping evident in the reception and structuring of the anti-apartheid writing explored above has given rise to the trope of the Afrikaner grotesque. It is not surprising that the figure continues to loom in post-apartheid literature, given its versatility, the robustness of literary tropes in general, and the longevity of economic and political imbalances of power in nominally transformed societies such as democratic South Africa.

NOTES

1. The term is particularly charged, because its historic use has excluded Afrikaans mother tongue speakers who are not white. 'Boer' also carries pejorative connotations within the culture of the anti-apartheid struggle, while both 'Boer' and 'Afrikaner' are contested terms within Afrikaans counter-culture.

2. Gail Fincham locates renewal of postcolonial identity in a different, and interesting space, based on the ecphrasis that Mda establishes by beginning each chapter with descriptions of the paintings of Frans Claerhout. The descriptions feed into Mda's "strong painterly imagination" which "teaches the reader how to see anew by creating changed spaces in memory and culture that redress the negativity of colonial experience" (Fincham 77).

3. Colonel Eugene de Kock was one of the most notorious perpetrators of apartheid atrocities to appear before the TRC.

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