

A black and white photograph of a woman and a child lying on a mat on the ground. The woman is lying on her side, facing left, with her eyes closed. The child is lying on their side, facing right, with their head resting on the woman's chest. A dog is lying on the ground in the upper left corner. The background is a field of dry grass and twigs.

SPECULATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

**A LITERARY HISTORY
OF CONTAMINATION**

OSCAR HEMER

SPECULATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Laurence Aëgerter: *Tristes Tropiques: illustrations hors texte*, 2011, in collaboration with Ronald van Tienhoven. Artist's book published by Filigranes Paris, edition of 1000, 2 books of 56 pages each (21 x 15 cm). Source: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Plon, 1955.

Coming across French artist Laurence Aëgerter's series of subtly ironic paraphrases of Claude Lévi Strauss's famous photographs of Nambikwara villagers in the Amazon, I was struck by her ease in reversing the traditional anthropological gaze, and immediately decided that I wanted this specific picture as the cover artwork, moreover, because *Tristes Tropiques* is fundamental to any discussion on literature and anthropology.

Oscar Hemer

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Canon Pyon

*For Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1962–2024)
with love and gratitude*

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The original project was supposed to be concluded after a year. But thanks to generous additional funding from the Swedish Academy, I was able to extend and expand it to include a visit to Australia. I spent two months, February – March 2023, as a visiting researcher at the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice and the Department of English and Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. The Australian extension was extremely fruitful, and I thank all the colleagues at the centre and the department, especially Anne Pender and Meg Samuelson, who helped me navigate in contemporary Australian literature. But first and foremost, I pay my deepest respect and appreciation to John Coetzee and Dorothy Driver, who made all the necessary arrangements and moreover hosted me in Rostrevor and provided more inspiration than I could have dreamed of. A special heartfelt thanks also to linguist and language revivalist Ghil'ad Zuckermann, who introduced me to the Aboriginal community in Galinyala (Port Lincoln).

1 Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Kerry Bystrom, Cheryl Stobie, Ivan Vladislavić and Zoë Wicomb. Zoë Wicomb eventually dropped out, unfortunately, but agreed to remain a 'ghost' participant. She was replaced by Bronwyn Law-Viljoen in the core group, which also has included my research assistant, Lucy Cathcart Frödén. In addition, several invited artists/researchers participated in one or two of the workshops/seminars: Masande Ntshanga (Gothenburg), Laura Balboa, Teta Diana (Malmö), Salomé Voegelin, Ulrike Wagner and Marion Detjen (Berlin). My Malmö University colleague Anders Høg Hansen joined the tour from Malmö to Berlin.

2 parsejournal.com/journal/#conviviality-and-contamination.

At my home university in Malmö, I wish to thank my colleagues in the former Conviviality at the Crossroads research network (2017–19) and REDEM (Rethinking Democracy) research platform (2019–22), and the still thriving Communication for Development masters programme; among them, not least, Anders Høg Hansen, who has been a companion on several projects, including this one.

Sean Kingston, my publisher, has been supportive from the outset, and I am grateful that this book will in due course also be available open access, thanks to additional support from Malmö University Library and The Lars Hierta Memorial Foundation. I thank Helena Wulff for her letter of recommendation to the latter institution. She has been an encouraging ally in the crossroads of literature and anthropology, ever since she was one of the examiners of my dissertation. Last, but not least, I salute another recurring critical friend, Michael Chapman, who peer reviewed the final draft and made some very valuable and radical suggestions for my final edit.

Sandby, Sweden

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Points of departure



The late Argentinian writer Juan José Saer (1937–2005), critical friend of Jorge Luis Borges, coined the notion ‘speculative anthropology’ as a tentative definition of ‘fiction.’ Saer was not an anthropologist or ethnographer; his academic affiliations would instead be philosophy, history and comparative literature. His novels are intricate explorations of Argentina’s present and past, with a gravitational centre in his home province Santa Fe. The essays are mostly examples of subtle and intelligent literary critique of individual works and authorships – Borges is a recurring subject – or phenomena like ‘*le nouveau roman*’. It is in the rather short and dense essay *El concepto de ficción* (1989)¹ that he arrives, exhausted, at the surprising definition.

Because of this most important aspect of the fictional narrative, and also because of its intentions, its practical resolution, and the singular position of its author between the imperatives of objective knowledge and the turbulence of subjectivity, we can define fiction in a general way as a *speculative anthropology*. Perhaps – I do not dare to assert it – this way of conceiving fiction could neutralize the various reductionisms that, ever since the nineteenth century, have persistently lashed out at it. Understood in this way, fiction might be able, not to ignore them, but to assimilate them, incorporating them into its own essence and stripping them of their claims to being absolute. But the subject is arduous, and it is better left for another time.

(Saer 1997:16, my emphasis)²

1 When Saer collected his literary essays from more than three decades (1965–96) in one volume, he made an exception to the chronological order by putting *El concepto de ficción* from 1989 first and letting it name the whole collection (Saer 1997).

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

That other occasion unfortunately never occurred, and we are hence left with this intriguing suggestion. I have referred to it several times, most extensively in my exploration of truth and fiction in South Africa and Argentina (Hemer 2012:24–6). Now I take it as one of my points of departure for a more thorough, and speculative, interrogation of the intersection of fiction and ethnography, from the literary writer's perspective.

The second point of departure is the even more intriguing notion of contamination, which I first came across in its positive sense in British Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's comprehensive *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. 'In praise of contamination' is an intermediate headline in one of the chapters (Appiah 2006b:111–13). By evoking Roman (Carthagian) playwright Terence (Publius Terentius Afer), whose mode of combining tragedy and comedy was known as contamination, Appiah outlines a literary tradition that goes back at least two thousand years, and he suggests Salman Rushdie to be its most articulate contemporary proponent. In an article, 'The case for contamination' (2006a), that was published as a preview of the book, he further emphasizes the evocative term as a counter-ideal to (cultural) purity and preservation, and explains the choice of his two literary examples.

Terence had a notably firm grasp on the range of human variety: 'So many men, so many opinions' was a line of his. And it's in his comedy 'The Self-Tormentor' that you'll find what may be the golden rule of cosmopolitanism – *Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* – 'I am human, nothing human is alien to me'. The context is illuminating. A busybody farmer named Chremes is told by his neighbour to mind his own affairs; the *homo sum credo* is Chremes' breezy rejoinder. It isn't meant to be an ordinance from on high; it's just the case for gossip. Then again, gossip – the fascination people have for the small doings of other people – has been a powerful force for conversation among cultures.

The ideal of contamination has few exponents more eloquent than Salman Rushdie, who has insisted that the novel that occasioned his fatwa 'celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.' No doubt there can be an easy and spurious utopianism of 'mixture', as there is of 'purity' or 'authenticity'. And yet the

larger human truth is on the side of contamination – that endless process of imitation and revision.

(2006a)³

Appiah says little more about the supposed tradition. The only writers he mentions are Terence and Rushdie. I regard it as a tentative idea, like Saer's 'speculative anthropology', and I am taking on the challenge of outlining and exploring this tradition – but possibly in a different direction than Appiah intended.

Contaminated diversity

Here is another, more recent approach to contamination:

How does a gathering become a 'happening,' that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option.

(Tsing 2015:27)

Chinese-American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing further states that collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaboration we all die (ibid.:28); that is, without contamination, we all die.

In her unexpected bestseller *The Mushroom at The End of The World*, Tsing makes a fascinating ethnographic enquiry into the global economy of the matsutake mushrooms, growing in ruined forests around the post-industrial world and largely picked by South-Asian foragers in Oregon, USA, for the Japanese market, where it is highly prized not only for its unique culinary qualities, but also as a symbolic gift. In her previous work, Tsing had launched 'friction' as a key concept, in response to the tired idea of a 'clash' of civilizations: friction as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up the contemporary world (Tsing 2005). 'Contamination' is more refined, understood as transformation through encounter. It becomes an antidote to the assumption of self-containment (and the self-interest of individuals), and hence to the fatal idea of economy and ecology as sites for 'algorithms of progress-as-expansion' (Tsing 2015:28).

3 The Rushdie quote is from *Imaginary Homelands* (1992:394).

Contaminated diversity is everywhere, but we tend not to see it, and/or we don't make use of these stories in our understanding of the world. Why, Tsing asks, before suggesting a partial answer that provides even stronger incitement to insist on a term that evokes such mixed reactions.

One reason is that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence and environmental destruction [...] The survivors of war remind us of the bodies they climbed over – or shot – to get to us. We don't know whether to love or hate these survivors. Simple moral judgments don't come to hand.

Worse yet, contaminated diversity is recalcitrant to the kind of 'summing up' that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and historical, ever changing, but also relational. It has no self-contained units; its units are encounter-based collaborations.

(*ibid.*:33–4)

The matsutake forest is the epitome of the colonial plantation, which served as model for later industrialization and modernization. It is an anti-plantation, impossible to cultivate. In Japan, matsutake is almost always a gift. No one buys a fine matsutake just to eat. The mushrooms build relationships, and as gifts they cannot be separated from these relationships. Matsutake becomes an extension of the person, the definitional feature of value in a gift economy (*ibid.*:123). As a grocer tells Anna Tsing: 'You can understand France without knowing about truffles, but you can't understand Japan without knowing matsutake.' (*ibid.*)

Relations are not only interpersonal but interspecies. And human disturbance is not necessarily damage. From the forest's point of view, the Japanese Meiji Restoration in the mid nineteenth century and the Chinese Giant Leap Forward in the mid twentieth century are comparable disturbances. Tsing's interrogation is an eye-opener, constantly challenging not only conventional presumptions but also those that one may have cherished as radical or imaginative.

But how does the notion of 'contaminated diversity' relate to a supposed literary tradition? Appiah's suggestion was made in the context of cosmopolitanism: contamination, to him, is primarily an ethical and political proposal in response to the claims for purity that had surged again in the early 2000s, in the wake of the war on terror, the alleged 'clash of civilisations' etc. Terence was an early proponent of cosmopolitanism. Clearly, Appiah's other

example, Salman Rushdie, is as much a political figure as a literary creator; the fatwa made it difficult to separate the two sides. When Arjun Appadurai, a decade earlier, had used Rushdie as proof of the social and political impact of literature, he was probably referring more to the inflammatory force of rumour – about the blasphemy of the *Satanic Verses* – than the revolutionary literary power inherent in the work itself (Appadurai 1996:58). Tsing is also, albeit not as explicitly, writing in a context of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan knowledge, she says,

develops out of historical mergings with research subjects, living and non-living, and with itself in other forms

(Tsing 2015:239)

Her ethics aims for ‘good-enough’ worlds, always imperfect and under revision (ibid.:255). And, regarding our specific purpose here: Tsing’s ‘creative non-fiction’ arguably inscribes itself in Appiah’s suggested tradition – or my slightly distorted one. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* reads as a hybrid of theoretical treaty, travel report and literary essay – with a layer of meta-reflection, which in the concluding chapter is voiced in her reflection: ‘What kind of book is this that refuses to end?’ (ibid.:287).

A Global-Southern purview

Departure is also embarkation, and both connote travelling – a journey. I would be tempted to quote the French surrealist ethnographers that I refer to in Chapter 1: *Ceci n’est pas un voyage*. But this is a journey of sorts, literally and metaphorically. By way of preparation for the workshop/seminar road trip from Gothenburg to Berlin that formed the backbone of the collaborative part of the Conviviality and Contamination project, I made a one-month tour of South Africa in March 2022, and a year later I spent two months in Australia. For the chapter on Argentina (3: Wonderland) I am also partly relying on impressions from my one-month stay in the country in late 2019, just before the world locked down due to the Covid pandemic. Other previous personal experiences from the Global South have also informed the text, most importantly my two-year residence as ‘dependent’ in Ethiopia in the late 80s.

I have kept a journal before, during and after the collaborative project, an undertow that occasionally comes to the surface as ‘interludes,’ referring to my earlier ‘contaminations and ethnographic fictions’ (Hemer 2020), as well as my comparative study of fiction and truth in transition, in South Africa and Argentina (Hemer 2012), which are previous points of embarkation on this same journey.

I am well aware that I am inevitably following in the tracks of mostly male white writers, anthropologists and world reporters, who have almost exclusively travelled from North to South, from the 'metropole' to the 'periphery' (colony or post-colony), not only as voyagers but as voyeurs of marginal people and their customs, seeking either to turn an Other into a Same or to idealize a primordial nobility and even 'go native.' However much I may defy 'woke' and identity politics, and refute allegations of 'cultural appropriation,' I cannot escape my white skin or the fact that I have grown up in (formerly social-democratic) Scandinavia, a marginal yet relatively privileged corner of the Western world. My primary aim is, however, not to report back to where I came from, but rather to seek connections between the different parts of the Global South that have provided most of the material for this study. To paraphrase Andrew Gibson, whom I refer to extensively in Chapter 4, it is my deliberate intention to adopt a Global-Southern purview in my speculative staging of contamination as a transgressive literary tradition.

Return to letters



Anthropology's so-called literary turn is by default attributed to one book, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by US American scholars James Clifford and George Marcus. Published in 1986 (with a twenty-fifth anniversary edition in 2010), it arguably remains one of the most influential books in the humanities and social sciences of the last three or four decades.¹ But another book, by another Clifford (Geertz), conceived at the same time although published slightly later, was almost as important for a reorientation that was at the time also, perhaps primarily, known as the postmodern turn. In *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988), Clifford Geertz elaborated and extended a series of lectures held at Stanford University in 1983, a year before the 'Writing Culture' seminar in Santa Fe in April 1984. Some of the speakers at the latter event, whose papers would form the *Writing Culture* anthology, took Geertz's controversial lectures as a starting point.²

Geertz, who had coined the concept 'thick description' in the interpretation of cultures, was also possibly the first to launch the idea of ethnography as fiction, comparing his own representation of a contemporary Moroccan village to that of a novelist constructing provincial life in nineteenth-century France (Geertz 1973:15). In his lectures ten years later, he takes this discussion

1 It was Bob Scholte (1987) who coined the notion of 'the literary turn in contemporary anthropology' in his review of *Writing Culture*. The twenty-fifth anniversary was also the pretext for a seminar at Duke University that attempted to assess the significance of *Writing Culture* and the ensuing debate. The papers of 'Writing Culture at 25' were presented in a special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* 27(3), edited by Orin Starn, and more recently in an extended volume, *Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology* (Starn 2015).

2 James Clifford called them 'controversial' in his book *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), which forms another key reference for this chapter.

further and deeper, with a starting point in literary theorist Roland Barthes' distinction between an 'author' and a 'writer', and between a 'work' and a 'text'.³ The author performs a function; the writer, an activity. Barthes compares the author's role to that of a priest (or witch doctor), whereas the writer's is that of the clerk. The latter comparison may seem scornful, but Barthes generally celebrates the move 'from Work to Text', in line with his earlier declaration of 'the Death of the Author',⁴ although with a certain ambivalence.

I do not know if a hedonistic aesthetic ever existed, but there certainly exists a pleasure associated with the work (at least with certain works). I can enjoy reading and rereading Proust, Flaubert, Balzac, and even – why not? – Alexandre Dumas; but this pleasure, as keen as it may be even if disengaged from all prejudice, remains partly (unless there has been an immense critical effort) a pleasure of consumption. If I can read those authors, I also know that I can't *rewrite* them (that today one can no longer write 'like that'); that rather depressing knowledge is enough to separate one from the production of those works at the very moment when their remoteness founds one's modernity (for what is 'being modern' but the full realization that one cannot begin to write the same works once again?). The Text, on the other hand, is linked to enjoyment [*jouissance*], to pleasure without separation. ... [T]he Text participates in a social utopia of its own: prior to history, the Text achieves if not the transparency of social relations, at least the transparency of language relations. It is the space in which no one language has a hold over any other, in which all languages circulate freely.

(Barthes 1979:80)

Geertz argues that the characteristic literary figure of our time (the late twentieth century) is a bastard type, the 'author-writer', caught between wanting to 'create a bewitching verbal structure' on the one hand and to 'merchandise information' on the other. Anthropological discourse remains, as Geertz puts it, poised, mule-like, between the two (Geertz 1988:20).

3 Barthes 1979 [1971]. 'From work to text' ('De l'œuvre au texte') is part of a seminal collection in English that also includes Michel Foucault's key essay, 'What is an author?' ('Qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un auteur?'), originally a talk at Collège de France in February 1969, to which Geertz refers as well. He finds, however, Barthes' discussion of 'the discourse problem' (what does an author author?) 'rather subtler' (Geertz 1988:17).

4 'La mort de l'auteur' (1967), one of Barthes' most famous essays, was a radical critique of prevailing approaches in literary criticism. It was published in 1968 in the journal *Manteia*, but an English translation had curiously already been published the year before in the American journal *Aspen*.

An author, in Foucault's sense, is someone whose personal name is attached not only to a work, but occasionally to a whole system of thought, like Marx or Freud. Geertz's dense yet light-footed book's focus is on the works and lives of four anthropologist authors: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict.



Remnants of Paradise

I take out Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Kulturspillror* from the bookshelf; the turquoise Swedish 1968 paperback edition of *Tristes Tropiques* – a pocketbook, as the format is still called in Sweden; actually, I now find out, a much-abbreviated version of the original, without the photographs. It's been there, through several moves, since I bought (or stole) it in the early 1970s, but it hasn't been opened in almost half a century and I can't recall whether I read it before or after my own journey to South America. Most probably shortly before. My interest in ethnography goes back to my childhood's not very original fascination for world maps, travellers', and explorers' tales, but it had never occurred to me to study anthropology at the university, let alone to pursue it as a career. I took Spanish courses in Lund, before and after my year-long journey through the Americas, and then went straight to the School of Journalism in Stockholm, not realizing that it would be purely vocational training; that at the age of twenty-three I would have become a legitimized journalist, whether I liked it or not. My vocation was literature, that is, literary writing, but at the time there were – luckily – no Schools of Creative Writing in Sweden. Going through such training in the mid 1970s would most likely have been a devastating experience. The School of Journalism, split in two between those who supported Democratic Kampuchea and those – including myself – who welcomed the Vietnamese invasion, was sinister enough. But I remained a sort of amateur anthropologist, with Lévi-Strauss as the undisputed hero. From Peru, I had brought a Spanish translation of *La pensée sauvage* and, years later, somewhat randomly procured the two first volumes of *Mythologiques* in English (*The Raw and the Cooked; From Honey to Ashes*), without ever trying to read more than short passages. But I devoured *Tristes Tropiques* with an eagerness that was only given to some few works of fiction that had a corresponding impact on me in those formative years, like Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [*Journey to the End of the Night*] or Michel Tournier's *Le roi des aulnes* [*The*

Erl-king] ... The Swedish title was originally *Spillror av Paradiset* – Remnants of Paradise – but for the pocketbook edition, it was rephrased to the more prosaic *Kulturspillror* – culture remnants.

Reading it again five decades later, in parallel with Geertz's analysis, is largely like reading it anew. The Swedish translation is surprisingly good – more poetic than the rather dull English one – although part of the vocabulary is shockingly dated – more so than in the original. But the literary quality is ever so more striking. I dwell with delight on the exquisite metaphors. Take the description of the Bororo architecture:

The village served the villagers as a coat of light elastic armour; they wore it as a European woman wears her hats.

(TT 1961:198 [1955:223–4])

Or his correction of the established misconception that America for twenty-thousand years had been isolated from the rest of the world, because it had had no contact with Western Europe:

Everything points, on the contrary, to the hypothesis that, while the Atlantic remained in total silence, a humming as of innumerable bees could be heard all around the periphery of the Pacific.

(*ibid.*:246)⁵

Envious colleagues have somewhat derogatively labelled his style 'rainforest prose', but I am struck by its sensuous beauty, with a surprisingly frank eroticism in for example the depiction of the Caduveo women's delicate body painting. It makes absolute sense that Lévi-Strauss, in the wake of the success of *Tristes Tropiques*, was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. I found his nomination while going through the Academy protocols from the early 60s, in search of references to Jorge Luis Borges, and the prize committee's unreflecting dismissal of Lévi-Strauss's candidature appears to be yet another proof of prejudice and narrow-mindedness on part of that same committee.

The first chapters have underlinings, as if I had read it as a textbook for an exam. But they eventually disappear and at some

5 The English translation is here remarkably blunt as compared to the original: *Tout suggère plutôt qu'au grand silence atlantique répondait, sur tout le pourtour du Pacifique, un bourdonnement d'essaim* (1955:268).

point in the second half; I doubt whether I read it fully the first time. But then another underlining suddenly appears, about the flowering Tupi culture that the early French and Portuguese explorers had met in the lower and middle part of the Amazon:

...for it was under their unknowing influence that the political and moral philosophy of the Renaissance set out on the road which was to lead it to the French Revolution.

(TT 1961:329 [1955:359])⁶

To be the first to penetrate a still-intact Tupi-Kawahib village, Lévi-Strauss imagines in the following paragraph, was to go back more than four-hundred years and join hands with Léry, Stade, Soares de Souza, Thevet, and even with Montaigne – the latter ruminates in his famous essay ‘Of cannibals’ on a conversation with Tupi Indians whom he had met in Rouen. ‘What a temptation!’, Lévi-Strauss excitedly exclaims on the verge of this ultimate expedition. My later underlinings are seemingly random and obscure, but this passage captures what appears to be, as we shall see, the peripeteia of *Tristes Tropiques*, reminding me of the ‘melancholy of success’ that had beset Sir Richard Burton on the return, as the first Christian and European, from his expedition to Harar in what is now Ethiopia.



Geertz’s approach to Lévi-Strauss is from an ‘appreciative yet unconverted’ perspective. He is sceptical towards the structuralist project as a research programme and outright hostile to it as philosophy of mind; yet regards the construction of an entire discursive realm as a stunning achievement. Structuralism brought a sense of importance to anthropology, and most especially ethnography – in which Lévi-Strauss declared that he had found ‘the principle of all research’. He incorporated all the neighbouring fields (literature, philosophy, theology, history, art, politics, psychiatry, linguistics, even some parts of biology and mathematics) into anthropology; It was

6 There are two English versions of *Tristes Tropiques*, John Russell’s translation from 1961 and John and Doreen Weightman’s from 1976. Both kept the French title, but with capital Ts. Although Lévi-Strauss preferred the newer version, Geertz mainly quotes Russell’s translation, which he finds more congenial in tone with the French original. I have followed Geertz’s example.

the grandiloquent invention of this new mode of discourse that made US American writer and critic Susan Sontag call him ‘an intellectual hero.’

Claude Lévi-Strauss has invented the profession of the anthropologist as a total occupation, one involving a spiritual commitment like that of the creative artist or the adventurer or the psychoanalyst.

(Sontag 1966:70)

Although Sontag describes Lévi-Strauss as a scholarly academic, that is, ‘not a man of letters’, she appoints ‘the incomparable’ *Tristes Tropiques* as a ‘masterpiece’ and regrets that its first English edition was ‘shamefully ignored.’

Tristes Tropiques is one of the great books of our century. It is rigorous, subtle and bold in thought. It is beautifully written. And, like all great books, it bears an absolutely personal stamp; it speaks with a human voice.

(ibid.:71)⁷

The cosmic egg

It is a curious paradox that the ‘literary’ or – perhaps more adequately – ‘postmodern turn’ was in many ways a generational, post-structuralist, revolt against Lévi-Strauss and some other authorial predecessors, and yet had been impossible without him. In terms of the ‘literariness’ of anthropology, it is all there in *Tristes Tropiques*, which, in Geertz’s words,

is a classic example of the book whose subject is in great part itself, whose purpose is to display what, were it a novel, we would call its fictionality; a painting, its planarity, a dance, its comportment: its existence as a made thing.

(Geertz 1988:28)

Its nearest resemblance in literary fiction would feasibly be the ‘total’ novel – say Carlos Fuentes’ *Terra Nostra* (1977[1975]) or Georges Pérec’s *La vie. Mode d’emploi [Life. A User’s Manual]* (1987[1979]) – with its ambition to

7 Before Susan Sontag, journalist and archivist Sonia Orwell – second wife of George Orwell – had introduced *Tristes Tropiques* to the English-speaking world as one of three works that mattered on the French literary scene of 1956. The others were Michel Leiris’ *Fourbis* (Scraps) and Marguerite Duras’ *Le Square* (Loyer 2018:337).

comprise the whole world between its covers; or, as Geertz says about *Tristes Tropiques*, with world-making intent.

At a first glance Lévi-Strauss's entire and extensive work may appear as that of an ordinary, even old-fashioned, anthropologist. But appearances are deceptive. To Geertz's mind it is organized neither linearly nor quantumly but centrifugally. And *Tristes Tropiques* is the 'cosmic egg', the arch-text out of which the others are, in a logical sense, generated (ibid.:32). He likens it to a moiré – as several books superimposed one upon the other. Firstly, it is a travel book, recounting a series of hardship journeys into the Brazilian Amazon in the mid 1930s, recapitulated some fifteen years later. The style and attitude remind Geertz of André Gide's *Voyages au Congo* or the travelogues of Pierre Loti. Lévi-Strauss would certainly have taken the latter comparison as an insult, but although he supposedly reacted against the depreciated French travel literature, he reincarnated and even exploited it, according to Geertz.

Secondly, it is an ethnography.

...the mystique of fieldwork that Malinowski founded and Mead proclaimed finds its apotheosis here, significantly enough in someone who has not done all that much field work and who would deny its experiential authority.

(ibid.:37)

But unlike the travel text, the ethnography has a thesis, namely the one that Lévi-Strauss pursued ever after. In Geertz's view, he was never able to put capital-S Structuralism in so neat a nutshell as he did in *Tristes Tropiques*:

The ensemble of a people's customs has always its particular style; they form into systems. I am convinced that the number of these systems is not unlimited and that human beings (at play, in their dreams, or in moments of delusion) never create *absolutely*; all they can do is to choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas which it should be possible to reconstitute. For this one must make an inventory of all the customs which have been observed by oneself or others, the customs pictured in mythology, the customs invoked by both children and grown-ups un their games. The dreams of individuals, whether healthy or sick, should also be taken into account. With all this one could eventually establish a sort of periodical chart of chemical elements analogous to that devised by Mendeliev. In this, all customs, whether real or merely possible, would be grouped by families and all that would remain for us to do would be to recognize those which societies had, in point of fact, adopted.

(TT 1961:160 [1955:183])

Thirdly, it is a philosophical text, and largely an attempt at restoring the ‘misunderstood’ Rousseau. Among the Nambikwara, Lévi-Strauss claims to literally have found living proof of Rousseau’s *contrat social*. This astonishing assertion could easily be interpreted as an idealization of ‘the noble savage’, especially in view of the accompanying photographs of happy naked villagers. But that very notion of *le bon sauvage* is a misunderstanding of Rousseau that he ascribes to Diderot’s confusion of the ‘natural state’ and the ‘social state’. What Rousseau envisioned was nevertheless a *société naissante*, whose closest model is found in the neolithic age. The purpose of constructing such a – theoretical – model is not to reveal a utopian state of Nature, but to disentangle ‘what in the present nature of Man is original, and what is artificial’.

...this model – and here lies Rousseau’s solution – is eternal and universal. Other societies may not be better than our own; even if we believe them to be so we have no way of proving it. But knowing them better does none the less help us to detach ourselves from our own society. It is not that our society is absolutely evil, or that others are not evil also, but merely that ours is the only society from which we *have* to disentangle ourselves .

(TT 1961:391 [1955:423–4], original emphasis)

The passionate resurrection of Rousseau leads Geertz to define the fourth characteristic of *Tristes Tropiques*, as a ‘reformist tract’, and as such, one of the most powerful and bitter indictments of the West, making ‘Frantz Fanon sound positively genial’ (Geertz 1988:39). A more recent reading, by French philosopher Claude Imbert, suggests that we see it not as a reformist tract but as a ‘meditation on survival’ in a post-war world in which the confidence in the superiority of European Enlightenment rationality has collapsed (Imbert 2008, quoted in Das *et al.* 2014:14).

This indictment was no doubt what appealed to me most when I read the book in the 70s – and it entails precisely that which I find most problematic when reading it anew. Not, of course, the ‘civilization critique’ with its denunciation of the destruction of the Amazon life-world, but the implicit, if not outspoken, idea of primordial cultures (systems) that are disrupted by contact with other systems. *Tristes Tropiques* is clearly a touchstone in terms of the first criterion for this study: the merger – *moiré* – of genres at the crossroads of literature and anthropology; that which may be enclosed in the widely defined term ‘ethnographic fiction’. But Lévi-Strauss would only reluctantly qualify for the second criterion, as representative of a suggested tradition of contamination. In fact, he shuns hybridity. He speaks derogatorily of Indians who have ‘mixed blood’ with the local Brazilians,

and he has only contempt for the ‘former savages’ who have moved into the favelas of São Paulo. I must shamefully admit that this generalized dislike for the mestizo was one that I unreflectingly shared on my first reading, as well as on my own primordial journey through the Americas.

Geertz associates Lévi-Strauss’s ‘intense hatred for industrial civilization’ with a distinctive strand in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformist thought – represented by, for example, Flaubert and Nietzsche – that reacted to modernity with an essentially aesthetic repugnance raised to a moral level (Geertz 1988:40). The ‘transmogrified distaste’ becomes evident in his depiction of Third World cities as constituted by filth, promiscuity, disorder, shacks, excrements ...

– all these *by-products of co-habitation* that we [Europeans] loathe and protect ourselves from at great cost are [in the Third World] the natural setting if the town is to survive.

(TT 1955:132)⁸

Fifth and finally, but certainly not least, Geertz reads *Tristes Tropiques* as a kind of symbolist literary text that insists on being read as such.

That Lévi-Strauss is concerned to place himself and his text in the literary tradition established by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and – though, as far as I can discover, he never mentions him in *Tristes Tropiques* – especially Proust, is clear from the way he writes, from what he writes, and from what he says he is concerned to do: decode, and in decoding, recover the power to use the sensuous imagery of Neolithic thought. *Tristes Tropiques* is, in one dimension, a record of a symbolist mentality, which Lévi-Strauss insists that not just his Indians but he himself has, at play in the forests and savannahs of the Amazon.

(Geertz 1988:42–3)

In sum: a travel book, even a tourist guide; an ethnographic report; a philosophical discourse, attempting to rehabilitate Rousseau and the social contract; a reformist tract, attacking European expansionism on aesthetic grounds; and a literary work – his *A la recherche du temps perdu* – exemplifying and forwarding a literary cause. What, then, is the moiré that

8 My emphasis. It is interesting to note the connotations of the term co-habitation, which would be synonymous with conviviality. This passage is omitted in Russel’s English translation as well as in the Swedish one.

emerges? In Geertz's reading it is a myth, a quest story – the 'anthropologist-as-seeker' myth. After *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss dedicated himself to the writing of a myth about myths – and *Tristes Tropiques* remained the syntax of syntax, the enclosing form abstract enough to represent, or better, govern the whole (ibid.:45).

In Geertz's interrogation, the critical issue is, on the one hand, the highly distinctive representation of 'being there' that *Tristes Tropiques* develops, and, on the other, the equally distinctive inverted representation of the relationship between experience and reality that follows from it. Lévi-Strauss concludes that the notion of a continuity between experience and reality is false. Interestingly, this conviction arises out of a revelatory experience, 'the barren, defeated end of his Quest'. When, finally, he faces the ultimate savages he has so long been looking for – the 'untouched' Tupi-Kawahib – he finds them unreachable:

I had wanted to pursue 'the primitive' to its furthest point. Surely my wish had been gratified by these delightful people whom no white man had seen before me, and none would ever see again? My journey had been enthralling and, at the end of it, I had come upon 'my' savages. But alas – they were all *too* savage... There they were ... as close to me as an image seen in a looking-glass: I could touch but not understand them. I had at one and the same time my reward and my punishment, for did not my mistake, and that of my profession, lie in the belief that men are not always men? That some are more deserving of our interest and our attention because there is something astonishing to us in their manners, or in the colour of their skin? No sooner are such people known, or guessed at, than their strangeness drops away, and one might as well have stayed in one's own village. Or if, as in the present case, their strangeness remained intact, then it was no good to me, for I could not even begin to analyse it... Who is, in the end, the one most defrauded by the disquiet which we arouse in the reader? ... Is it the reader who is deceived by his belief in us? Or ourselves, who have not the right to be satisfied before we have completely dissolved that residuum which gave our vanity its pretext?

(TT 1961:326–7; 1955:356–7)⁹

The answer to the rhetorical question is, of course, 'both'. What I find amazing about this quote is however not the intra-disciplinary questioning of anthropological authority, but the preceding existential void that impels

9 Geertz quotes the Weighman translation, but I have followed Russell and slightly edited the abbreviation of the quote.

Lévi-Strauss to reflect on his vanity. How many literary writers question the pretext of their vanity?

Anthropology's 'turn' towards literature is often perceived to be an unanswered courtship. Few literary scholars, let alone writers, engaged in the debate, and the young aspirational anthropologists who wished to break out of their disciplinary shackles, even tended to be regarded as 'failed' or 'wannabe novelists'.¹⁰ Now, when I am going back to and getting immersed in that same discussion, it strikes me how relevant it was – and remains – for any writer; how it actually forecasts discussions that will surface some decade later in literature, in the discussions on fact versus fiction, in the surging phenomenon of 'autofiction' etc. I find fascinating the parallel analyses of Geertz and, especially, Clifford; approaching the same topics from slightly different yet very congruent perspectives. It reminds me that the late 1980s and early 90s were a veritable golden age for cultural and social critique, which in many respects speaks as an informative corrective to the rigid and barren op-positions in today's intellectual and political discourse. Yet the most striking revelation is, as will be demonstrated further, that the literary turn was rather a 'return'.

Letting go

But let us stay a little longer with *Tristes Tropiques* and its centrality, by looking at it through other prisms than Geertz's rather parsimonious one. Emmanuelle Loyer's recent magnificent biography *Lévi-Strauss* (2018 [2015]) casts some very interesting light on both its conception and its reception. The years in exile in New York – after a short stop in Martinique, where the Vichy regime resided – and his contact with US anthropology, alienated him from France, and he had to struggle hard on his return (1947) before being enthroned at the Collège de France in 1959. *Tristes Tropiques* was written in this interregnum, 'in a fit of literary effusion over the course of just a few weeks' (Loyer 2018:4). It was 'written in rage and received as a bombshell' (ibid.:321). The bombshell metaphor is used by historian Pierre Nora in the preface to the 1990 edition. The same word was used by film-maker Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah*, when recalling, fifty years after the fact, the first time he read the book. Loyer herself regards it as 'a great Book of Disquiet', alluding to Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's fragmentary autobiography. An intriguing comparison! But unlike Pessoa, who published his book under one of his approximately seventy-five heteronyms, *Tristes Tropiques* had an author – a forty-six-year-

10 The term 'novelist manqué' was coined by the British social anthropologist and Lévi-Strauss interpreter Edmund Leach, generally recognized as one of the most prominent stylists of the discipline in the English language.

old anthropologist, on sabbatical from himself for a few months, an academic outcast in his own country, in a state of irresolution (ibid.).

An important inspiration was the younger fellow anthropologist and explorer Jean Malaurie's book, *The Last Kings of Thule* (1982 [1955]), in the 'Terre humaine' series. Malaurie had made a proposition to the publisher Plon to create a new series of 'philosophical travel writings' and would remain the editor of a collection that to date has published over a hundred works, many of which are considered classics in anthropology. Lévi-Strauss was one of the first to be approached, because Malaurie had seen the photographs illustrating the minor thesis about the social and family life of the Nambikwara.¹¹ He found the thesis boring and contracted Lévi-Strauss for his talents as photographer rather than anthropologist; but Lévi-Strauss accepted and the proposal came at just the right time, when he was convinced that he had no future at the university, and therefore could afford to 'write what came to [him]'. The sense of transgression and liberation was however coupled with guilt for not working on the second volume about the complex structures of kinship. 'I believed I was committing a sin against science,' he explained 1991 in conversation with philosopher Didier Eribon (quoted in Loyer 2018:324). But it was also, most importantly, the achievement of a long-frustrated literary aspiration. He turned this aspiration into one of the subjects of the book, deliberately weaving in passages that expressed his literary yearnings, and references to an unfinished novel (a few pages long) and play (*Lapothéose d'Auguste*, in three acts). The title, *Tristes Tropiques*, was the one he had originally chosen for his novel. In a self-portrait in *Magazine littéraire* in 1985 he made this description of the creative process:

I churned [it] out in four months' time, and in a permanent state of intense exasperation, putting into it everything that came into my mind, throwing caution to the wind.

(Lévi-Strauss 1985:24, quoted in Loyer 2018:324).

Loyer comments: for once in his life Claude Lévi-Strauss chose to let himself go; he unleashed his pen.¹²

11 The thesis in question, *La Vie familiale et sociale des Indiens Nambikwara* (1948), was a form of pre-study, intended to be followed by a more general analysis of the structures of kinship. A first volume of this major thesis was published the year after as *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elemental Structures of Kinship*, English translation 1969).

12 To 'let oneself go' is a formulation that will recur in the other monumental work of French literary ethnography, Michel Leiris' *Phantom Africa*, which will be

Taking up the intimate and political crisis of its author, *Tristes Tropiques* is a broad transgressive synthesis whose desperate, fiery writing – experienced as a catharsis – was to allow him to partially resolve them.

(ibid.)

There is no first draft. The manuscript was typed directly on a small portable typewriter with a German keyboard, bought in São Paulo. Four hundred and sixty-five pages of uninterrupted small print, without even breaks between the chapters. Lévi-Strauss's third wife, Monique, received the manuscript in instalments of thirty pages each, while her husband was writing. She returned it with notes and comments on separate sheets, and he then made corrections directly onto the original manuscript. Monique was hence not the typist, but rather an editor – and very important as such.

An enthusiastic as well as careful reader, she ... played a crucial part in the writing phase, marked by periods of despondency (further accentuated by fatigue) and especially of doubt regarding the value and timeliness of the work in progress.

(ibid.:326–7)

But everything was not speed-written in five months. *Tristes Tropiques* is also a work of *montage* – bits and pieces borrowed from course notes, excerpts of notebooks from Brazil as well as Pakistan, entire chapters from the minor thesis on the Nambikwara, all pasted together with adhesive tape. Time is another crucial factor. The object and motive are to revive memories that go back nearly twenty years. Lévi-Strauss likened it to looking at a faded photograph. Yet, memory is not only the capacity to forget and recall, but, more profoundly, the power to decant, to understand and make sense.

'Every man,' wrote Chateaubriand, 'carries within him a world which is composed of all that he has seen and loved, and to which he constantly returns, even when he is traveling through, and seems to be living in, some different world.' Henceforth it will be possible to bridge the gap between the two worlds. Time, in an unexpected way, has extended its isthmus between life and myself; twenty years of forgetfulness were required before I could establish communion with my earlier experience, which I had sought the world over without understanding its significance or appreciating its essence.

(TT 1974:43–4)

discussed later in this chapter.

One of Lévi-Strauss's admired predecessors, the sixteenth-century explorer Jean de Léry had left for Brazil at the age of twenty-two and waited eighteen years before he wrote his *Voyage* (in between were the French Wars of Religion). For Lévi-Strauss the interim was the Second World War and the flight from the Holocaust. This is what makes *Tristes Tropiques* a 'profoundly Proustian narrative: a series of disappointments' (Loyer 2018:328). Here, Loyer leans on Victor Debaene's imperative study, *Far afield* (2014 [2010]). But the association is recurrent in the reviews, although Lévi-Strauss himself never explicitly referred to Proust. Michel Leiris, whom I will discuss at length below, saw the rejection of chronological time as an experiment in taking control of the flow of time in the manner of Proustian illumination. He also associates it to Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness (Leiris 1956).

If Proust is an implicit reference, Rousseau is such an obvious one that it sometimes is difficult to differentiate between the master and his admirer. But what may appear as plagiarism is, in Loyer's words, a profound integration. On the occasion of the Romantic philosopher's 250th anniversary, Lévi-Strauss dubbed him 'an anthropologist at heart', precisely because of the paradox of his life and work.

That Rousseau could have, simultaneously, advocated the study of the most remote men, while mostly given himself to the study of that particular man who seems the closest – himself. [...] *It is in feeling foreign to oneself, experiencing oneself in the third person, that the anthropologist can understand the other as an 'I'.*

(Lévi-Strauss 1962, quoted in Loyer 2018:331, my emphasis)

This marvellous and quintessential quote could stand as a motto for this entire interrogation of the convergence – or bifurcation – between literature and anthropology. Alienating oneself in order to understand the other. The reverse approach would be communion with the other to understand the self. In the end, of course, they may be the two sides of the same coin.

The 'bombshell' of *Tristes Tropiques* was not so much its relativism, unacceptable to both Marxists and conservatives, as its deep pessimism. The lasting metaphor is that of entropy – that excessive exchange levels the world and unavoidably contributes to its growing inertia, 'which one day, will be final'. Lévi-Strauss even suggested that anthropology might more aptly be called 'entropology', a discipline concerned with the study of the highest manifestations of this process of disintegration (TT 1974:413). But let us for the time being disregard that disturbing element, and look more closely on the other core controversy in the debate: the 'great divide' between art and science. The critical reception underscored the differences between two French

traditions. *Tristes Tropiques* was seen as either reviving the ancient *belles-lettres* tradition or marking a new offensive for literature with the ambition to ‘federate all thought’, or else as the ultimate and definitive expropriation of literature (Loyer 2018:336). The second idea was most fully developed in Georges Bataille’s (1956) review, which argued that literature had to reclaim the human in all its dimensions and stated that ‘literature appears as the future of the human sciences’. Maurice Blanchot (1956), to the contrary, considered Lévi-Strauss to be decidedly on the side of science, as literature in his view is more than a matter of belletristic style. Blanchot’s aloof position was shared by Roland Barthes, although only implicitly, as Barthes never wrote a single line about the book, and hardly ever referred to it. This total silence is remarkable, given that Lévi-Strauss and Barthes were soon to be lumped together as representatives of structuralist thought. Debaene’s interpretation is that the two scholar-writers, despite their dates of birth, ‘were not contemporaries’ (Debaene 2014:269). Whereas Barthes took active part in the *Nouveau Roman* scene, Lévi-Strauss felt no affinity at all with contemporary literature, which he found ‘unbearably boring’. Interestingly, Jean Malaurie expressed similar contempt for modern literature as for modern science (represented by Lévi-Strauss), both of which he found ‘desiccated’ and ‘dehumanized’, proclaiming his *Terre humaine* series to be a form of resistance against both the overly scientific anthropology (structuralism) and the overly cerebral literature that developed through the 1950s (Loyer 2018:337).

The dilemma of defining the groundbreaking work was highlighted when the members of the Goncourt Prize jury, three days before the announcement, confessed to the press that they would have wanted to give the 1956 prize to *Tristes Tropiques*, but that this was impossible since it had been classified as an essay and not a novel and was thus ‘outside their jurisdiction.’¹³ Shortly afterwards, Lévi-Strauss declined to accept the prestigious *Plume d’Or*, the explorers’ prize, amounting to 250,000 Francs – corresponding to the incredible sum of 550,000 Euros (2021). Reached by telephone, our ‘intellectual hero’ declared that several jury votes were ‘not to his taste’. This sensational rejection immediately enhanced his literary status, associating him with Julien Gracq, who had turned down the Goncourt Prize in 1951.¹⁴ Eight years later, Jean-Paul Sartre would more famously turn down the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature.

13 CLS Archives, NAF 28150, box 234, Dossier de presse de *Tristes Tropiques*.

14 *Le rivage de Syrtes* [*The Opposing Shore*] was awarded the prize, but Gracq refused to accept it in protest against the commercialization of contemporary literature.

The fieldwork report and its double

Returning to the 'Writing Culture' seminar and anthology, one important feature is that it was at the outset inter- or even transdisciplinary. Most, but not all, participants were anthropologists. Mary Louise Pratt – often quoted for her exclamation 'How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books?' (Pratt 1986:33) – is a professor of Spanish and Portuguese languages and literatures. Editor James Clifford is a historian, albeit primarily interested in the history of ethnography. Vincent Crapanzano is anthropologist and literary scholar, with a special interest in psychoanalysis. Many of the other contributors also have a clearly multidisciplinary orientation.

Pratt, the only woman in the congregation, is also the one who looks at ethnography with an explicitly layman's perspective, and her verdict on dullness is aimed at the scientific ethnographic reports – not the subjective 'fieldwork reports' that sometimes supplemented the ethnographies as a separate publication, or otherwise accompanied them in the introduction, if only as a short comment.¹⁵ This 'self-reflexive fieldwork account', as Clifford calls it, is in fact the heart of the matter. Clifford discerns it as not a subsidiary, but a subgenre, and even as the most adequate form for an ethnography that is aware that (ethnographic) truths are partial – committed and incomplete – and that, consequently, the former balance between the 'ethnographic self' and the 'personal self' is unsettled. This is feasibly the core meaning of the 'turn'; that the ethnographer may become a protagonist among the others – and the others, formerly confined to the role of 'informants', may come forward as co-authors. The informants turned co-authors may even express diverging opinions, deliberately defying what French Jesuit philosopher Michel de Certeau calls the univocity of the (natural) science ideal.¹⁶ This plurivocality, to use Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's more graceful term for one of the key characteristics of literature, resembles the shifting subject positions of a novel.

Lévi-Strauss established anthropology as a science (structuralism), but the 'scientification' of ethnography is often blamed on Malinowski, the one who instilled fieldwork – intensive participant observation – as a professional norm. He was on the one hand the absolute cosmopolite, a figure so adaptable as to be able to

15 Among the examples of 'paired books' she mentions are Jean-Paul Dumont's *Under the Rainbow* (1976) and *The Headman and I* (1978), and Paul Rabinow's *Symbolic Domination* (1975) and *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977).

16 De Certeau 1983:128, quoted in Clifford 1986:5.

see as savages see, think as savages think, speak as savages speak, and on occasion even feel as they feel and believe as they believe

(Geertz 1988:79)

On the other, he was the complete investigator, a figure so rigorous as to 'make Laplace look self-indulgent'.

High Romance and High Science, seizing immediacy with the zeal of a poet and abstracting from it with the zeal of an anatomist, uneasily yoked.

(ibid.)

Malinowski, the emblematic anthropologist, was greatly concerned with separating the ethnographic self from the personal self, and with convincing his readers that the facts he presented were objectively acquired and not subjective creations. Then, when his own 'subjective fieldwork account' from New Guinea and the Trobriand islands was published, posthumously, in 1967, it evoked no less than a scandal. *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989), mostly written in Polish and obviously never aimed for publication, disclosed what Geertz describes as 'a womanising café intellectual cast among savages' (1988:85). He compares Malinowski to the thirty-three years younger Australian anthropologist Kenneth Read, who chose to work in the same part of the world as the master, although thirty years later, and whose rectitude, tolerance, patience and good nature is contrastingly described as that of 'an indefinite country vicar' (ibid.).¹⁷ Clifford's monograph *The Predicament of Culture*, published almost simultaneously with Geertz's *Works and Lives*, has a corresponding chapter on Malinowski that compares him to another exiled Pole and polyglot, Joseph Conrad, who clearly was an inspiration to his younger countryman. In his scattered notes, Malinowski not only confesses to having 'impure' thoughts about women – European and native – but expresses annoyance with the Trobriand islanders to the extent that he quotes Kurtz' famous assertion in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: 'Exterminate the Brutes!'

As Clifford's notes, most commentators have associated Malinowski's diary with Conrad's African tale. Both appear to portray a crisis of identity at the limits of Western civilization, struggling against the threat of moral dissolution. This commonplace parallel is not very revealing – beyond demonstrating that literature postulates reality, as Borges would have put

17 Geertz reads Read's diary-based *The High Valley* (1965) as 'one of the first, and one of the best, attempts to construct I-witness style ethnography'. Note that it was published two years before the disclosure of Malinowski's 'impure thoughts in scribbled Polish' (Geertz 1988:84).

it. But what Clifford finds illuminating is a more profound, subversive theme: the famous 'lie' – in fact a series of lies – that in *Heart of Darkness* both undermines and somehow empowers the complex truth of Marlow's narration. The most prominent of these lies is Marlow's refusal to tell Kurtz's Intended his last words, 'The Horror'. Malinowski's corresponding lie, his 'all-too-believable account', would according to Clifford be the classic ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. He cautions us however not to read *Diary* and *Argonauts* as 'paired books' in Pratt's sense, where the former is the 'true revelation' of the fieldwork experience. The two texts should be read as 'partial refractions, specific experiments with writing.'

...in its rawness and vulnerability, its unquestionable sincerity and inconclusiveness, the *Diary* seemed to deliver an unvarnished reality. But it is only one important version of a complex, intersubjective situation (which also produced *Argonauts* and other ethnographic and popular accounts). The *Diary* is an inventive, polyphonic text. It is a crucial document for the history of anthropology, not because it reveals the reality of ethnographic experience but because it forces us to grapple with the complexities of such encounters and to treat all textual accounts based on fieldwork as partial constructions.

(Clifford 1988:97)

There is a striking similarity, yet a notable difference in nuance, between Geertz and Clifford's respective analyses of this 'crucial document'. Geertz stresses that the negotiation of the passage from what the ethnographer has been through 'out there', to what s/he says 'back here', is not psychological in character, but literary. This arises for anyone who adopts 'the I-witnessing' approach to the construction of cultural descriptions (Geertz 1988:78). Nevertheless, the turn Geertz discerns in ethnography is not (primarily) a literary one. Instead, he identifies a rather introspective turn, 'obliquely in the 1920s and 1930s, more and more openly today [the 1980s]'

To be a convincing 'I-witness' one must, so it seems, first become a convincing 'I'.

(ibid.:79)

Geertz is specifically addressing – not to say targeting – three prominent anthropologists in the generation after his own: 'Malinowski's Children', as he spitefully calls them: Paul Rabinow, Vincent Crapanzano and Kevin Dwyer. Like Geertz, all three have done fieldwork in Morocco. Two of them – Rabinow and Crapanzano – are also among the contributors to *Writing*

Culture. A common catchy motto, borrowed from Paul Ricoeur (1969:20), is ‘the comprehension of the self by the detour of the other.’¹⁸ What mostly strikes Geertz about these ‘author-saturated’ anthropological texts – which ‘appear almost by the week’ – is ‘the strong note of disquiet that suffuses them’ (ibid.:97).

‘I is indeed very hard to write; ‘I am worth more than I write’, very hard to prove; ‘second-degree image-repertoire’, very hard to avoid. The sincerity crux awaits all who pass this way. For some, the result of coming to see this is a movement away from ethnography toward metascientific reflection, cultural journalism or social activism. And for others ... it is a redoubled effort to meet the literary challenges left by the Malinowskian legacy. ‘I-witnessing’ may not be altogether well; but it is very much alive.

(ibid.:99)

Geertz’s polite bullying of the younger colleagues and competitors surprises and amuses me. In his contribution to *Writing Culture*, ‘Hermes’ dilemma: the masking of subversion in ethnographic description’, Crapanzano returns the insult with a subtly malicious analysis of Geertz’s famous study of the Balinese cockfight (1973). But it is another and older text by Crapanzano that comes to my mind; one reflecting on the dissociation between the field experience – ‘the ethnographic confrontation’ – and the writing:

Indeed, one could argue that at one level the writing of ethnography is an attempt to put a full-stop to the ethnographic confrontation, just as, so often in the history of civilization, writing has selectively embalmed reality rather than continuously explicating it.

(Crapanzano 1977:70)

I have referred to this paragraph twice before, in similar contexts;¹⁹ like many quotes taken out of a text due to some special appeal at the first reading, it has tended to become like a catchphrase, with blurred or even altered meaning. Now, I review it in the wider context and it attains slightly different connotations. In that same essay, Crapanzano reflects upon writing as ‘a complex act of communication between a self and an other’ and suggests

18 Rabinow is the first to launch it, in his *Reflections on Fieldwork* (1977), whereafter the other two have both adopted it. As we shall see, this motto can be traced to another earlier and arguably more important source than Ricoeur.

19 Hemer 2016a:174 and 2016b:162

a very intriguing definition of this act as talking to oneself, though wanting to be heard.²⁰

Geertz's subtle reservations in advance of *Writing Culture* were followed by much harsher allegations. The perhaps most fervent critique came, not surprisingly, from feminist colleagues. Not only are women anthropologists conspicuously absent among the contributors – the lone exception, Mary Louise Pratt, is as already noted not an anthropologist – but Clifford moreover, in anticipation of this critique, explains the exclusion with women ethnographers' alleged lack of interest in innovative writing (Clifford 1986:20–1). As Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon exclaim in the introduction to their co-edited volume *Women Writing Culture* (1995):

No two pages in the history of anthropological writing have ever created as much anguish among feminist readers as did James Clifford's uneasy statements justifying the absence of women anthropologists from the project of *Writing Culture*.

(Behar and Gordon 1995:4)

Their 'counter-anthology', with one sole male contributor – a graduate student – is an angry yet good-humoured manifestation of female creativity in 'a discipline overcrowded with literary wannabes'.²¹ Women have crossed the border between anthropology and literature throughout the twentieth century, they claim, but usually 'illegally', as aliens whose works tended to be viewed as 'confessional' or 'popular'; or, in the words of Virginia Woolf, as 'little notes' (ibid.). *Women Writing Culture* aims to find a new location for anthropology 'between feminism and multiculturalism'. It moreover 'refuses to separate creative writing from critical writing', or

recite the mantra of gender, race and class and go on with academic business as usual, handing difference over with one hand and taking it away with the other

(ibid.:7)

20 Curiously, this is actually a quote from Jean-Paul Sartre's characterization of the writing of Jean Genet (Sartre 1964 [1952]: 494). Crapanzano borrows from Sartre, as Rabinow borrows from Ricoeur... The preferably French orientation was another common denominator for the then emerging generation of US anthropologists.

21 Deborah A. Gordon, who at the time identified herself as a feminist historian of ethnography, dedicated the book to 'her teachers Donna Haraway and James Clifford'.

Speaking on behalf of, not only women but also ‘minorities’ and ‘indigenous people,’ *Women Writing Culture* adheres to a US understanding of ‘multiculturalism’ that seems at the same time dated and a harbinger of the current decolonial discourse. One can easily imagine certain kinds of reactions that *Writing Culture* would have received today, if it were not dismissed altogether as the soul-searching of a bunch of privileged Western white males. Nonetheless, the *Writing Culture* debate was an offspring of decolonization – in some ways perhaps even an expression of ‘decoloniality’ *avant la lettre*. It emanated from a severe legitimacy crisis for the whole discipline of anthropology, which had been so intimately tied to the colonial project, not only through the imperial expansion of the West but also through a salvational belief in the powers of science – and with some perverted deviations of science at that, like *Volkekunde* in South Africa, which was to form the ideological foundation of apartheid.²² There was, for good reasons, a rather widespread concern – not to say fear – within the discipline that ‘the end of imperialism will mean the end of what has been anthropology.’²³ But ethnographers were also, as we shall see, among the first to defy colonialism.

Geertz notes that ‘in anthropology, as in Faulkner’s South, the past is not only not dead, it is not even past’ (1988:135). His reading of the three younger colleagues ends on an interesting note about their predicament. Decolonization has not only shaken the moral foundations of ethnography on the ‘being there’ side, but also provokes a general loss of faith in received stories on the ‘being here’ side.

Confronted, in the academy, by a sudden explosion of polemical prefixes (neo-, post-, meta-, anti-) and subversive title forms (*After Virtue, Against Method, Beyond Belief*), anthropologists have had added to their ‘Is it decent?’ worry (Who are *we* to describe *them*?) an ‘Is it possible?’ one (Can Ethiopian love be sung in France?), with which they are even less well prepared to deal. How you know you know is not a question they have been used to asking in other than practical, empiricist terms. ... They are, at least those among them not content to rehearse habitual skills, beginning to get used to asking this question now, and some, a bit unsteadily, are even trying to answer it, if only because if they don’t, others – linguists, semioticists, philosophers, and worst of all literary critics – will do it for them.

(*ibid.*:135–6)

22 See Hemer 2020 for a further discussion of Eiselen and the other architects of apartheid.

23 Willis Jr 1972, quoted in Geertz 1988:135.

‘Worst of all ...’ Anthropologists’ courting of literature may be unanswered, but not recurrently rejected, whereas there seems to be not only tension but outright hostility between Anthropology and Literary Studies. Why? The ‘introspective turn’ certainly applies as much or even more to literature. With a few years’ delay, the discussion of the ‘new’ phenomenon of auto-fiction will in many ways mirror the auto-ethnography debate. But whereas auto-fiction may have only the subject ‘I’ as locus, auto-ethnography must, by definition, relate the ‘I’ to the lived experience of (other) men and women.²⁴ In contrast to Literature, which at the time being discussed – the postmodern 1980s – had largely turned its back on what was still known as the third world, Anthropology admitted the association with empire (imperialism) and engaged, perhaps more than any other discipline, with its own complicity and culpability. Literature has been less prone to concede its liaison with nation (and nationalism). The construction of the national memory, consciousness and self-understanding has largely been the task of literary writers, including in the new nation-states of the former European colonies. The canon is primarily tied to the nation, or to a language saturated in nationalism. The Western canon comprises all the European imperial languages – even Portuguese, although Camoës may be its only remaining representative on a ‘Top 100’ chart. But most languages are national – or regional, like Basque, Catalan or Kurdish. In small- and medium-sized countries, such as Sweden, literary studies naturally tend to be national and conservative in the essential meaning of the word.

In my first artistic research project, on fiction and truth in the recent transition processes in South Africa and Argentina, I arrived at the not very original, though crucial, conclusion that the literary writer’s point of view is more akin to that of the ethnographer than that of the literary scholar or critic.²⁵ A writer should not analyse his own work – that is the critic’s task – but s/he may reflect on his own practice and his subject position vis-à-vis the material in pretty much the same way as ethnographers (anthropologists) have been obliged to do, ever since decolonization. That is indeed what a writer may learn from anthropology’s literary turn.

Yet: ethnography is indeed not literature, as Martinican poet-philosopher Édouard Glissant emphasizes in *Poetic Intention* (2010 [1969]), a beautiful treatise that, among other themes, approaches the relation between ethnography and literature from the literary side.

24 Norwegian anthropologist Marit Melhuus (1994) makes this distinction in her discussion of the ethnographic reading of literary texts. See Hemer 2012: 54-55

25 Hemer 2012:61

‘The attentive observer’ that is (or was) the ethnographer must *inscribe himself in the drama of the world*: beyond his analysis – in principle, ‘solitary’ – he must live a poetics (sharing). Thus Leiris.

(Glissant 2010:122, original emphasis)



Poetics of displacement

Most anthropologists who have aspirations to a literary style make a distinct separation between their ethnographic work, on the one hand, and their literary expressions ‘on the side’. Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict both wrote poetry, but not as part of their ethnographic practice. Laura Bohannan decided to write a novel about her fieldwork experience in Nigeria, under the pen name Elizabeth Smith Bowen (*Return to Laughter*, Bohannan 1954). Hers is a common anthropological approach to literature, as a means of conveying anthropological knowledge in a popular form. Tony Hillerman’s detective novels with Navajo protagonists are a more recent example. In one of the many anthologies that followed on *Writing Culture* in the late 1980s and early 90s, he gives a telling description of his methods and motives, in this case for constructing the story of a traditional Navajo funeral:

I want to get the character and the reader thinking about the business of graves and the body after death. I can thereby justify imposing on people who really aren’t buying an anthropological text on the Navajo, but a piece of entertainment. I can tell them more about Navajo funerals than they ever intended to know.

(Hillerman 1989:6)

Other anthropologists, writing in the vein of ‘creative non-fiction’, are often tempted – or persuaded by their publishers – to play down references to an academic discipline in order to reach a wider audience.²⁶ Well written and intriguing as these examples of ‘literary anthropology’ may be, they are not the focus of this investigation. *Tristes Tropiques* is by contrast, as I have already argued, a touchstone in its multilayered complexity and ambiguity, whereas the bulk of Lévi-Strauss’s work falls under a non-literary category.²⁷

26 See for example Ruth Behar’s chapter, ‘Believing in anthropology as literature’ (2009:106–16).

27 Vincent Debaene (2014) argues that *Tristes Tropiques* should be regarded as a literary supplement to Lévi-Strauss’s scientific work, much like the ‘subjective field diaries’ or ‘pair books’ of British and US anthropologists. Geertz would disagree

The closest predecessor to Lévi-Strauss as author-anthropologist would be his seven-year older compatriot Michel Leiris (1901–85), who also did his most significant fieldwork in the 1930s, and who moreover is the prime example, among not very many, of a literary writer approaching ethnography. Leiris was a poet, novelist and art critic, with no previous ethnographic training or experience, when he embarked on the *Mission Dakar – Djibouti*, 1931–3, and his seven-hundred-page diary from this two-year journey, *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934, 1951, 1981; Eng. *Phantom Africa*, 2017) is as much an extraordinary literary manifestation as it is the monumental work in French anthropology, equalled in importance only by *Tristes Tropiques*.²⁸ Interestingly, Leiris was one of the 'admirable models' in Michel Butor's *Répertoire* (1960), one of the manifestos for *le Nouveau Roman*. A key characteristic of the French 'new novel', represented by Butor, Nathalie Sarraute and 1985 Nobel laureate Claude Simon, but most (in)famously by Alain Robbe-Grillet, was its supposedly scientific quality.

So let us dwell on Leiris, and on the very specific environment that fostered French ethnography in the 1920s and 30s – the cradle of 'I-witnessing', according to Geertz. The idea of a 'literary turn' appears in fact as an Anglo-Saxon one. In France, where ethnography emerged as a discipline in the inter-war period, it was from the outset very intimately connected with the arts, and especially surrealism.

Clifford makes a clear distinction between ethnography and anthropology (in France called ethnology²⁹). Whereas the latter aspires to survey the full range of human diversity and development, ethnography is confined to 'diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation' (Clifford 1988:9). Moreover, this (ethnography) is a general cultural predisposition that modern anthropology shares with twentieth-century art and writing.

and so do I, although I find Debaene's important study compelling in most other respects.

28 The first edition, published by Gallimard 1934 in a series called *Les Document bleus* (The Blue Documents), had a very small circulation. It was nevertheless banned by the Vichy regime in 1941 and the few remaining copies were pulped. The publication of a second edition in 1951, with additional endnotes and a new foreword, was hence like the launch of a new book, preceding *Tristes Tropiques* by only a few years. A third edition, with a new foreword, was published in 1981, in the prestigious collection *Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines*. The English translation, 2017, is based on this 'final/terminal' edition.

29 In Sweden, as in many other countries, social anthropology and ethnology are distinct academic disciplines. Whereas the former is an offspring of sociology, the latter has its origin in folklore studies.

The surrealists were intensely interested in exotic worlds, among which they included a certain Paris. Their attitude, while comparable to that of the fieldworker who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to work in the reverse sense, making the familiar strange. The contrast is in fact generated by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange, of which ethnography and surrealism, are two elements.

(ibid.:121)

In contrast to nineteenth-century exoticism, which departed from a confident cultural order in search of temporary experience of the bizarre, both surrealism and ethnography started with a questioned cultural and social order, making modern cultural relativism possible. The 'primitive' societies of the planet were increasingly available as aesthetic, cosmological and scientific resources, and these possibilities drew on something more than an older Orientalism; they required modern ethnography.

Surrealism is ethnography's secret sharer – for better or worse – in the description, analysis, and extension of the grounds of twentieth century expression and meaning.

(ibid.:121–2)

Leiris' African journey fits perfectly into what Clifford calls a post-symbolist poetics of displacement; he was preceded by Paul Gauguin's escape to Polynesia, Arthur Rimbaud's to Abyssinia, Antonin Artaud's to Mexico and Blaise Cendrars' around the globe. They all rejected established exoticism, embodied by the generally detested Pierre Loti.³⁰ Victor Segalen, one of the major contributors to this poetics of displacement redefined exoticism as an 'aesthetics of diversity' (Segalen 2002) – the subtitle of a long essay that Segalen never finished,³¹ which calls Bruce Chatwin's never accomplished nomadology to my mind.

Like Lévi-Strauss, Leiris was introduced to an English-speaking readership only in the 1960s. In both cases, Susan Sontag played an important role as

30 Pierre Loti, pseudonym of Louis Marie-Julien Viaud (1850–1923) was a French naval officer and writer, author of some forty exotic novels and novellas. Only a few of them have been translated to English: *My Brother Yves*, 1887 [*Mon frère Yves*, 1883]; *An Iceland Fisherman*, 1902 [*Pêcheur d'Islande*, 1886]; *Turkey in Agony* [*Turquie agonisante*, 1913].

31 Victor Segalen (1878–1919) was one of France's foremost anthropologist-authors *avant la lettre*. Most of his important work was published posthumously, including *Essai sur l'exotisme : une esthétique du divers*, which was first published in 1955.

intermediary. In the same collection of essays that launched Lévi-Strauss as the intellectual hero – *Against Interpretation* (1966) – she reviews Leiris’ autobiographical *Lage d’homme*, first published in 1939 and translated as *Manhood* in 1963. *Phantom Africa* was not to be translated to English until 2017 – eighty-four years after the first French edition.³² *Manhood* and *Phantom Africa* can preferably be read in tandem, as the former gives background and setting to the latter. Leiris suffers a severe personal crisis in the late 1920s. He breaks with the surrealists in 1929 – not with surrealism proper, but with André Breton’s authoritarian leadership. At the age of twenty-seven he gets his first permanent job at the new journal *Documents*, with his friend Georges Bataille as one of its founders. There he encounters the ethnographer Marcel Griaule, an expert on the Dogon culture of Mali, and Griaule invites him to be part of the planned grand expedition across Africa, from Dakar to Djibouti.³³ Leiris accepts the challenge, largely as an escape from the literary Paris, certainly also in fulfilment of childhood dreams of romantic adventure, but more importantly in the explicit hope to learn and be freed from prejudice. Prior to embarking on the mission, he writes a programmatic essay for *Documents*, ‘L’oeuil de l’ethnologue’ (‘The eye of the ethnographer’), which states that a European cannot help but viewing an ‘exotic land’ through ‘distorting glasses’:

Without realizing it, he sees everything that comes from men of other climates or other races through his white mentality, that is, in an entirely phantasmagorical way.³⁴

The Mission is hence envisioned as a form of antidote to this inevitable distortion, which:

32 It must be more than twenty years ago that I bought the 1996 Quarto Gallimard volume *Miroir de l’Afrique*, a fifteen-hundred-page compilation on Bible-thin paper of *LAfrique fantôme* and several related ethnographic texts, but I have to admit that my French is too rudimentary; the late English version is a true revelation.

33 In 1930, Leiris had started working on an autobiographical essay, ‘Lucrèce, Judith et Holopherne’, which was to become the ‘generative core’ of *Manhood*. When he decided to join the mission, he put it aside and returned to it only after his return to Paris. By the time *Phantom Africa* was published in 1934, he was in the process of writing *Manhood*. The manuscript was delivered in 1935, although the book was published only four years later. The two very different books are hence intrinsically intertwined (Hayes Edwards 2019:26–7).

34 The quotes from the essay are from the translator Brent Hayes Edwards’ brilliant introduction to the English translation of *Phantom Africa*, 2019:5

should help to dissipate no small number of these errors and, consequently, to undermine a number of their consequences, including racial prejudice, an iniquity against which one can never struggle enough. This suffices to give this enterprise a great human significance in addition to the scientific interest.

The aim of the 'Mission', as it is rightfully called, is to collect items for the Trocadéro ethnographic museum in Paris. The journey goes mostly through French colonial territory – although a very substantial part through the yet non-colonized Abyssinia – and the expedition has a clear link to French colonial interests, of which Leiris is not unaware and to which he maintains a critical distance. He is the sole member of the expedition who does not have a clearly defined expertise, either academic or practical; he is simply a 'man of letters', assigned to document the journey and the purchased objects.

The French way of doing ethnography, personified by Griaule, is opposed to the British/American tradition of long-term immersion and participant observation; Frenchmen gather information and artefacts during short stays, work through interpreters and adopt an inquisitorial method of questioning rather than learning the local language. Leiris notes in his diary (31 March 1932):

Why does ethnography inquiry often make me think of a police interrogation? We do not come much closer to men by approaching their customs. In the wake of the research, just as before it, they remain obstinately closed. Could I claim, for example, to know what Amhara was thinking, even though he was my friend. I have never slept with a black woman. Thus I have remained European!

(Leiris 2019:316)³⁵

To Leiris, the sexual act provides the ultimate access to the intimacy of the other. In that respect, he goes explicitly much farther than Griaule or any of his contemporary ethnographer colleagues. His goal is not (simply) the revelation of the secrets of the culture under study, but communion – 'the dissolving of the self in an imagined alterity'.³⁶ Sex does not complement science, but trumps it or transcends it. As he explicitly writes in another entry from the Abyssinian part of the journey (23 July 1932):

35 This passage is also quoted in Hayes Edwards' introduction, p. 16.

36 Debaene 2014: 141, quoted in Hayes Edwards 2019:17

I would rather be possessed myself than study possessed people, and I would rather have carnal knowledge of a 'zārine' than know her ins and outs scientifically. Abstract knowledge will never be anything for me but a last resort.

This declaration is however both ambiguous and paradoxical, as we shall see when we come to his field research in Abyssinia; to our knowledge he never does transgress the border that the ethnographic discipline imposes.

The diary format was recommended by the legendary founding father of French ethnography, Marcel Mauss. In the 1981 edition, Leiris added a *prière d'insérer* – a loose-leaf sheet common in French publications – in which he refers to himself in third person:

A writer, Michel Leiris was called upon to take part in the ethnographic research, but also to serve as historiographer of the Mission, and in this regard his approach was not to conform to the picturesque standards of the classic travel narrative, but instead to scrupulously keep a travel notebook [*carnet de route*]. This approach was consistent with the views of the great sociologist Marcel Mauss, who recommended that researchers keep such notebooks alongside [*en marge de*] their inquiries in the field.

(Leiris 1981, quoted in Hayes Edwards 2019:11)

But the mentor probably did not have expected his pupil's diary to be so frank in its disclosure of intimate thoughts and fantasies, as well as of animosities among the participants.³⁷ Dreams are registered as carefully as the ethnographic interviews and objects. In Leiris' dreams, members of the expedition mix with people in Paris. Bataille is a regular character, and a lack of virility is one of the recurrent themes, for example in nightmares of being cuckolded. Among the serious reflections are the outlines for an essay on masturbation. Etc.

In describing *Phantom Africa*, Clifford uses the term self-ethnography, as opposed to auto-biography (auto-ethnography remained to be coined). He calls the book 'a monster'.

What is most inexplicable about it is not its awkwardness ... nor the persistent disappointment that the journal enacts ... but the strange childlike

37 Both Mauss and Griaule react strongly to the published version of the diary (1934) and regard it as a provocation that may jeopardize future ethnographic work in the colonies. The relation between Leiris and Griaule never recovered (*Note historiographique*, Leiris 1996:1381).

innocence emerging somehow, each time, *after* experience. It is incredible that Leiris keeps on writing, and that we keep on reading, dipping in and out of these pages.

(Clifford 1988:172)

Leiris himself would object to the term self-ethnography. He described *Phantom Africa* as a book that both marked his debut into anthropological writing and set the stage for his later autobiographical writings, which represent the core of his oeuvre and of which *Manhood* is the first. But the translator Brent Hayes Edwards prefers to view it as a ‘text that creates a *bifurcation* between anthropology and literature, a split that comes to define his entire career’ (Hayes Edwards 2019:13, my emphasis). In his endnote to the 1981 edition of *L’Afrique fantôme*, Leiris scholar Denis Hollier describes him as ‘trapped between literature and ethnography, like Odysseus between Charybdis and Scylla’ (ibid.:15). Glissant describes this in-between-position as one of neither having yet accepted the vocation as ethnographer, despite the scientific activity, nor intentionally ‘setting the stage’ for the later autobiographical writings (Glissant 2010:118). In a later essay on Leiris, Glissant elaborates his analysis further:

Although the field of ethnography should have imposed upon Leiris the most stringent objectivity in observation according to the practice of the time, in [*Phantom Africa*], he establishes rather a sustained relationship between subjectivity and reality, one which would be the foundation of his life’s work. ... Leiris does not succumb to the temptation of the generalising universal. It is not truth that he attempts to learn here, but first and foremost, his truth, limited and complex: his relationship to the other.

(Glissant 1992:22, 23)

Bifurcation – a word I immediately associate with Borges – is a returning concept in the writings about Leiris. Paradox is another keyword. The ‘principal paradox’, according to Vincent Kaufmann, is that the effort Leiris made to distance himself from literature resulted in the inverse, and only served to provide the man of letters with a second occupation – that of ethnography (Kaufmann 1989:152, quoted in Hayes Edwards 2019:8). Vincent Debaene points to the paradox of a chronicle of a metamorphosis and the act of writing daily in a diary (Debaene 2014:179).

From observer to obsessed

Yet, the Africa that appears in this meticulous diary is, in all its ethnographic detail, a phantasmagorical one – a ‘phantom’ Africa. Although ‘monstrous’

in its continuous flood of prose in medias res, the book is, as Hayes Edwards notes, a multilayered network of different kinds of writing. The second, Ethiopian, part differs substantially from the first part, insofar as the formerly distanced observer suddenly turns into an engaged, not to say obsessed researcher of the Zar cult in the Gondar region. The thorough exploration of this peculiar phenomenon extends over a period of several months. It is carried out in collaboration with the Eritrean scholar, former priest, and diplomat Abba Jerome Gabra Moussié, who not only provides the theoretical framework but serves as interpreter and assistant. ‘The famous Abba Jerome’ joins the Mission, after flying to Debre Markos and allegedly crossing the Upper Nile by swimming (ibid.:453). In fact, it turns out, he crossed the river by boat.

Gondar, north of Lake Tana, is the Mission’s first and main stop in an Abyssinia ridden by internal struggles, with the European colonial powers eagerly waiting to step in.³⁸ The principal objective is to collect – steal – church paintings and replace them with copies made by the Mission’s artist, Gaston-Louis Roux. They stay longer than planned, as they must await permission to proceed towards the final goal, Djibouti, either via Addis Ababa or Eritrea. This gives Leiris opportunity for an in-depth participatory study of the Zar cult, which supposedly originates from Harar in the South, but at the time of the expedition seems to have its centre in Gondar. The *zār*, in singular and plural, is/are demon(s) assumed to possess individuals, especially women. It is the practice of exorcising the evil spirit(s) from the possessed individual that constitutes the Zar cult. Today, this ritual is widespread in the Islamic world as a form of ‘women-only-entertainment’ (Gulley 2009:277). These current Zar gatherings, similar in form to the ones Leiris attended, involve food and musical performances, and culminate in ecstatic dancing, lasting between three and seven nights (ibid.).



I skim the first part of the journal, dipping in here and there, as suggested by Clifford. But arriving at the second, Abyssinian part, I gradually become completely immersed in the reading, reminded of my own two years in Ethiopia in the late 1980s, at the end of the long civil war that would result in Eritrea’s secession from the forced union. Although the historical northern parts of the country were in principle closed, due to the war, Gondar was occasionally

38 Ras Tafari had ascended the throne as Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930, after having been challenged by a rebellion led by Ras Gugsu Welle.

accessible by air. But I had never seized that opportunity. The closest I had got was Bahir Dar, by the southern shore of Lake Tana. Me, my wife and our one-and-a-half-year-old daughter had flown there over Easter 1988 – Chinook’s first holiday from the position as midwife tutor – and we had queued an hour before dawn to get on the boat to the church ceremonies on the island. But we were refused to go on board, referred as foreigners to an imaginary tourist boat for hire at 250 USD ... I had pleaded to the officer’s mercy – my wife humbly waiting outside the harbour office with the child on the lap – and had a fifty-birr note prepared as bribe.³⁹ To no avail. In the end I left the building in rage, mumbling ‘go fuck yourself’ as I slammed the door. The memory of this potentially disastrous confrontation comes up in shocking detail, like Leiris’ painstakingly registered dealings with customs officers and all kinds of government or state officials en route from British Sudan to an Abyssinia about to be conquered by Mussolini. The journeys are more than fifty years apart, but Leiris’ observations seem so familiar to me, as if illuminated by the timeless distance.

I was a journalist at the time, but unable to report anything. If my profession had been disclosed, I – and most probably my wife and daughter too – would immediately have been expelled from what at the time was one of Communism’s last strongholds. Yet, it was a relief not to report. The two years in Ethiopia were to bear fruit later in several books in different genres. But my perception *in situ* was one of complete alienation. I did not learn Amharic, other than the greeting phrases and everyday commands to the guards and house-maids. If the language had been Arabic, I would have been more motivated, but I could also excuse myself with the risk of drawing attention outside our immediate circle, not least for fear of exposing my informants to lethal danger. The Mengistu dictatorship had an intricate system of surveillance and imputation at neighbourhood level, implemented with expertise from the German Democratic Republic...

What surprises me most, when reading *Phantom Africa*, is that I have been completely unaware of this treasure. Not that I did not know it at the time of my own stay in Ethiopia, but afterwards, when I searched for other travel reports from the country – mostly the traces of Rimbaud in Harar, which have enticed a few brave pilgrims over the century after the poet-gone-merchant’s death. Leiris could

39 The Ethiopian birr was at the time, according to the official exchange rate, equivalent to 0.5 USD.

have been one of them; while in Gondar he states the intention to make an excursion to Harar once he's 'been sacrificed to the most pressing official duties' in Addis Ababa. My thirty-fifth birthday was celebrated in a small circle of friends at the Castelli Italian restaurant in Addis Ababa. It is a very cherished memory – one of being in the blossom of life: strong, confident, invincible, happy... But when I have later scrutinized my thirty-five-year-old self, I have perceived a rather complacent, egocentric, even arrogant person, as men – and women – in their mid-thirties tend to be, unless they have already succumbed to failure. Chinook had two cumbersome years at work, struggling with both the ministry and her own aid organization, while I, as 'dependent', adapted a bit too easily to the comfortable life of expatriate gentry... Leiris is just over thirty, but seemingly older, more mature, less self-absorbed. I can now easily identify with his concerns about not being able to get 'under the skin' and not 'letting himself go'. But that was not my perceived problem at the time. I was happy to be an observer, not an ethnographer (or reporter), but a voyeur – connoting voyage – as if on a psychedelic trip in the secluded land, not really putting myself at risk, yet never afraid to let myself go.

The second Easter, at Awash station, on the railroad from Addis Ababa to Djibouti, I had crawled out of the mosquito-net cocoon at night and walked out in the village – drawn to the lights and sounds of the church – and stood in awe for an hour, peeking in at a Coptic ritual. Decades later, when translating Borges' peculiar story *Sentirse en muerte* (Feeling in Death), this long-forgotten image flashed up in my mind as correspondent to Borges' perception of timeless eternity... If I had known, I would have tried hard to get on one of the rare flights to Gondar, to visit the supposedly intact places where Leiris had experienced the Zar rituals. I did go to Harar, to see 'Rimbaud's house', aware that it wasn't really the house where Rimbaud spent most of his last ten years – it was raised more than a decade after his death, but was probably near, if not on, the spot where the actual residence had been. I very deliberately joined the exclusive cohort of pilgrims; having visited Harar was at the time a symbolic trophy at par with my having taken yagé in Pucallpa brewed by the same brujo that had provided my Beat hero Allen Ginsberg with the psychoactive vine twenty years earlier...



Leiris finally made it to Addis Ababa, on a return trip from Djibouti, supposedly on the train that passes Awash station at lunchtime. He made a stop in Dire Dawa – where he visited a brothel – but apparently never made the detour to Harar.

His readings are, interestingly, mostly in English, partly because sometimes it was the only literature available. Even the leisure readings, like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Dickens' 'Pickwick papers', slip into the journal along with more factual prose such as *Notes and Queries on Anthropology for the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands* (Anon. 1875). In a letter to his wife, Zette (30 May 1932), he makes a self-revelatory reference to one of Joseph Conrad's protagonists:

Reread *Lord Jim* and think of me. I will always be grateful to Doctor Borel, not for a psychoanalytic cure – which is a poor thing, like all medical things and all practical things – but for having understood that it was the book that I needed, that character that I had to play. I intend to present myself to the *fitaorari* Asfao in Tchelga as Griaule's *fitaorari*. In Abyssinian the word *fitaorari* means 'he who goes before', the messenger, the envoy, he who walks at the front ... I am not afraid of megalomania. For the moment I am fully in possession of myself. What could I wish for that would be more dazzling? [...] No more poems, no more words, only events. To know how to load a packsaddle on a mule or any other beast of burden. To be responsible for a given task, in the face of anyone or anything. In some other era, I might have been a very good mercenary...

(Leiris 2019:386–7)

He sends his notes in chunks, after sparse editing, to his wife in Paris, who is told to guard a copy of the journal, protected from the scrutiny of Griaule and the fellow ethnographers. The accompanying letters to Zette add another meta-layer to his personal reflections in the diary. Along with practical instructions on what to do with the material, he discloses his thoughts on what kind of work he is in the process of producing. On 2 August, he writes:

With regard to the journal, I've thought about it and I think that what would be best is the following. Have it typed up little by little – for example in four copies (with wide margins, so that it will be comfortable for me to make corrections when I return) – and give one of the copies to Jouhandeau with the permission to send it *unofficially* to whomever he wants. On the one hand, that will spare me a great deal of work when I return, since making corrections on a typed-up copy will be much easier. On the other hand, I

would be happy to start the process of getting it published, so as to have as little as possible to take care of myself

(ibid.:464)

And three weeks later (23 August):

Now I have a third idea for a publication: the translation, with an introduction and commentary, of Abba Jerome's notebook, with the notes he has been taking during our visits with the old zār Malkam Ayyahou. I think that it would be possible to put together a surprising book that, while remaining scientific, could be written in a literary manner. The subject, too, which is as much a matter of psychiatry and psychology as of ethnography, throws many things into question.

(ibid.:484)

Two months and many letters later he returns to the theme:

It is now entirely understood (it was Griaule himself who requested it) that aside from Abba Jerome's theoretical work on the question [of the zār] (work which will be published later), I myself will have the responsibility of publishing the same research approached from a historical perspective (exactly as it happened in real time) rather than didactically. With the photos Griaule took, the field notes I kept, and the texts Abba Jerome collected directly, this will clearly make a surprising book, unique both as literature and as ethnography [...] Griaule already has an idea for an excellent preface that will condemn both ordinary ethnographic publications, too dry and systematic, and literary publications written in the idiotic style of travel narratives

(ibid.:608)

The relationship to 'the old zār Malkam Ayyahou', and not least her daughter Emawayish, is a somewhat core story of *Phantom Africa*, which condensates Leiris' dilemma and struggle with his own demons. His participation in the Zar ceremonies, with gruesome blood sacrifices and ecstatic dancing, makes him painfully aware of his inability to 'let himself go'. He reflects on the 'horrible' fate of being a European, 'disliked but respected as long as he remains walled behind his demi-god's pride, jeered at as soon as he tries to come any closer' (ibid.:487). This bitterness translates to resentment at ethnography proper, 'which forces one to take the position of the observer, so inhuman, in circumstances where it would be necessary to let oneself go' (ibid.). On 27 August, he writes in the journal:

Thinking of the old woman's incessant flashes of revelation, and the unusual aura of charm emanating from her daughter, measuring the immense value I attach to recording their words, I can no longer put up with methodical research through interrogation. I need to submerge myself in their drama, to touch their ways of being, to bathe in living flesh. To hell with ethnography! Abba Jerome's notebook – in which I make him note down everything the old woman, or her daughter, or any member of the household says – is a world of revelations, and translating it transports me, every time, into delirium.

(ibid.:490)

And in the adjoining letter to Zette, 31 August:

This time you will find things in my journal that will seem a little crazy, but don't worry, it's only a petty madness. The research in which I am immersed has taken hold of me like an ocean, and sometimes I wonder how I will find my footing again. But I always find my footing, you can be sure of it [...]
Living in the midst of squalid and lyrical madmen as I am now, I believe that I can still be proud of having enough good sense to observe it all lucidly.

(ibid.:497)

These intense weeks in Gondar are, as Leiris notes in the journal, the culminating point of the entire voyage. And he is ridden by doubts and gloomy thoughts, above all the piercing sensation of being at the edge of something whose depths he will never touch, partly for lack of capacity to 'let himself go'. When trying to analyse the motives behind this recurring mantra, he perceptively discerns 'first of all questions of skin, of civilization, of language' (ibid.:498). Yet, in a following letter to Zette, 19 September 1932, he talks about his complete isolation from his companions, who mock him for the enthusiasm with which he has given himself over to his investigation.

I must say that for me, in fact, it is no longer a matter of an 'investigation' but of a sort of 'life' analogous to the life I might lead if I were to convert to a religion. All of this also makes me pessimistic in a general sense, too. I no longer think that there is much good in the world, and everything good I see, even in the business with the zār, is hardly more than a product of my own imagination.

[...]

If you weren't there, it wouldn't matter to me if I didn't return to Europe. Not that I like Abyssinia any better, or any other country, but due to a total indifference regarding any given civilization. One comes quickly to

the realisation that no form of civilization, in itself, is worth any more than any other.

(*ibid.*:538–9)

Cultural relativism and civilization critique, but not yet an explicit critique of colonialism, although it is latent in the diary. We'll come back to that. There are also, as already noted, limits to his immersion with the other. The 'beautiful Emawayish' is reputed to be his 'fiancée', that is, he is supposedly her lover. When he moves in with Malkam Ayyahou's household in Gondar Baata, it is seen as if he is moving in with his mother-in-law. But to Leiris, it is rather a way of moving away from the Italian consulate, where the companions of the Mission are stationed. Yet, the curious courting of Emawayish stands out as the lead motif in the Abyssinian adventure. As he exclaims in the diary (19 October):

Why did she have to turn up near the end of this voyage, as if only to remind me that I am inwardly hunted by a phantom more evil than all the *zâr* in the world?

(*ibid.*:591)

His obsessive remarks clearly awake some jealousy in Zette. As he explains to his wife in a letter on New Year's Eve 1932:

I got your letters, especially the ones where you write about the 'beautiful E'. I swear to you that you have nothing to be jealous about, even in retrospect. It's only a matter of phantoms which disturbed me (I cannot deny it) but which were never anything more than phantoms to me. You don't need to be jealous of anyone. Besides, if you knew what life was like in Abyssinia (if you knew, for instance, how when you leave Abyssinia, any old forgotten corner of Eritrea feels like a Paradise you melt into), you would realize that everything that can happen to someone in such a country takes place on a plane so removed from the one you and I share that it is as though it were a separate world.

(*ibid.*:678)

One may question the sincerity of his half confessions, given the main addressee of both letters and notes. For example, he claims to having been 'chaste for two whole years', though the journal hints at occasional visits to brothels. There are no indications of moral or other scruples that would make Leiris abstain from taking advantage of his privileged position in gaining 'carnal knowledge' of the other. In Lévi-Strauss's case there is more likely a

demarcation line that he doesn't cross, not least because his then wife – Dina Dreyfus – is accompanying him on most of the South American expeditions. She was also an anthropologist and contributed substantially to the research, but she is only mentioned once in *Tristes Tropiques*, when she falls ill with a severe eye infection, like many others in the crew, and had to leave the expedition to get medical aid.⁴⁰

Yet exoticism and eroticism are almost indistinguishable in the ethnography of the early twentieth century. Inadvertently exposed in Malinowski's 'impure' diary, prudishly expressed in *Tristes Tropiques* (though apparent as a strong motivational undercurrent), and most openly and yet ambiguously revealed in Leiris' journal... I feel somehow embarrassed on their – and my own – behalf: the obscene disclosure of predatory desire, the male master fantasy. Yet I instinctively take a position of defence against anachronistic and simplistic allegations of racism, sexism, colonialism.



Anger and ease

Some time ago I went to Copenhagen for a last-minute visit to two parallel art exhibitions.⁴¹ Although apparently curated independently of each other, they conveyed the same tendentious yet nuanced message about three early

40 'Anthropologist's wives' is a fascinating theme. In the concluding chapter of *Women Writing Culture*, Deborah A. Gordon notes, in response to Clifford's challenge about women anthropologists' supposed lack of interest in experimentation, that whereas wives of prominent male anthropologists 'could write novelistic accounts of experiences among foreign people and cultures, feminist anthropologists did not want to jeopardize their incipient professionalism' (Gordon 1995:431). Dina Dreyfus probably did not aspire to be a 'feminist anthropologist', but she was a researcher – and film-maker – in her own right, and her contribution to Lévi-Strauss's formation is sadly underestimated and neglected. They divorced in 1945, partly due to their different choices during the war. Whereas Claude escaped Vichy France in exile in New York, Dina stayed in France and joined the Resistance. The case of Louise 'Zette' Leiris, with the maiden name Godon, is a completely different one. She was officially the younger sister of the famous Cubist art dealer Kahnweiler's wife, Lucie, but was in fact Lucie's illegitimate daughter. This was a well-guarded family secret that Leiris never disclosed. However, Zette's 'illegitimacy' was allegedly crucial for his choice of making her the recipient of the journal. In fact, according to Jean Jamin, the editor of *LAfrique fantôme*, she never read it (Hand 2002:130).

41 *Paul Gauguin – Why Are You Angry?*, Glyptoteket, 19 November, 2020 – 1 August, 2021; *Kirchner and Nolde up for discussion*, Statens Museum for Kunst, 21 April – 1 August, 2021.

twentieth-century artists' respective relations to the colonial and racial biological currents of their time. In Danish-German Emil Nolde's case, the connection is indisputable, as he participated in a scientific expedition to the then German colony of New Guinea – the northern half of which is now independent Papua New Guinea. His sketches and paintings bear obvious resemblances to the anthropological photographs from the same time – the heyday of colonialism before the First World War put an end to Germany's short history as an overseas colonial power. But Nolde's portraits are not entirely objectifying. His intent was not (only) to depict 'racial types', but to paint a natural and 'authentic' counter-ideal to European bourgeois culture. Hence, the portrayed natives have individuality; they look back at the observer. One may at times even sense a faint mutual curiosity, even attraction, between the painter and his model. Yet Nolde was to turn into a Nazi, an active member of the Danish division of the NSDAP. The Nazis, nonetheless, banned him. Despite his appeals to his party superiors not to be included on the black list, his modernist paintings were ironically to become the emblem of *Entartete Kunst*.

Nolde's German countryman Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was not compromised to the same extent. His studio, in the exhibition catalogue likened to a brothel, was a meeting-place for encounters across cultural and racial boundaries, and frequented by the 'savage' participants – rather, exhibits – of the 'human exhibitions' of the time. The tours of these in Europe included Scandinavia – at the Tivoli in Copenhagen and Skansen in Stockholm; the 'Colonial Exhibition' – *Kolonialutställningen* – at Skansen was as late as 1931. Kirchner's relation to his black models was surely framed by both racism and sexism, but these do not, in retrospect, appear as the significant characteristics. On the contrary, his open-mindedness very courageously defied the common attitudes of the time. The same goes, perhaps to an even larger extent, for the more than thirty years older Gauguin. Like Nolde, he had first-hand experience of the colonies, and he likewise shared the quest for a primordial, authentic ideal – not substantially different from Lévi-Strauss's more elaborated conception. Arriving in Tahiti in the 1890s he had the feeling that he had come too late. He was disillusioned by the great cultural influence of the French colonial power, which he opposed, and which as certainly despised and neglected him. His self-image was that of someone 'gone native', who lived like the locals, while at the same time of course enjoying the privileges of a Frenchman. He had in fact been inspired to travel by the colonial authority's recruitment campaign at the 1889 *Exposition universelle* in Paris, and his journey was paid for by the French state. In the video work that has given name to the exhibition, *Why Are You Angry?* (2017), two British women artists, Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy

Skaer⁴² have travelled in Gauguin's footsteps in today's Tahiti, literally looking for his motives. In the film they expose both themselves and local women with a sensual ease that meets the spectator's gaze with curiosity, rather than assertively rejecting it, as some of the exhibition's less subtle works do.



Leiris is, in *Phantom Africa*, neither a militant anti-colonialist nor a postcolonialist *avant la lettre*. He observes and reports, but he doesn't denounce per se the colonial domination that makes the Mission possible and provides it with logistical support. Although admitting and reacting to the questionable methods, including stealing of objects – 'the looting continues, as does the research'⁴³ – he sometimes offers rationalizations: the objects, once installed in the museum in Paris, would demonstrate the beauty of the civilization in question – hence, despite the force used, it would in the end be to the advantage of those looted. Yet he often expresses outrage at the hypocrisy and racism of French colonialism – at one point he talks of rottenness even beyond that of French Africa – and denounces the complicity of ethnography in the colonial enterprise. Nevertheless, these observations do not culminate in a sustained critique of the colonial system, but in what his English translator describes as 'a sort of misanthropy that is one of the threads running through the entire book' (Hayes Edwards 2019:21). At best, *Phantom Africa* becomes a critique of ethnography under colonialism, and positions it as an inevitable part of a cycle of exploitation. On 19 September 1931 he writes to Zette:

I have the strong impression that we are going in a vicious circle: we pillage the Negroes under the pretext of teaching people to understand and appreciate them – that is, ultimately in order to mould other ethnographers who will go in turn to 'appreciate' and to pillage them.

(Leiris 2019:163)

To the disillusionment and misanthropy, one might add a streak of cynicism. Griaule is a fervent opponent of the still recurrent slavery and takes runaway slaves under the Mission's custody. At one point he even engages in the slave trade, buying a pregnant mother and her little boy for the purpose of

42 They have collaborated since 2005 under the moniker Nashashibi/Skaer.

43 This observation is made in passing on 14 November 1931, in a note that also tells about 'another nocturnal pollution' and a dream of reconciliation with André Breton (Leiris 2019:210–11).

immediately liberating them. This interference with the slavery business is the main reason why the Mission gets stuck in Gondar, as slave owners conspire to get their merchandise back. Leiris comments in the diary (25 July 1932):

The anti-slavery idea only half pleases me. The bourgeois world gets indignant; but I don't see that there is such great cause to be scandalized by the existence of countries where the slave trade is currently practiced, when one thinks, for example, of the situation of workers in our own societies. Eternal hypocrisy ... This opinion of mine has earned me the disapproval of the other members of the Mission.

(*ibid.*:457)

Yet, despite the above, even after the journey, he maintains an idealized view of 'the art of the voyage' as the foundation for a

new humanism which proves to be more and more necessary every day, but which unfortunately remains entirely to be created.⁴⁴

His denouncement of colonialism is to be formulated only two decades later.

44 Leiris 1992 [1935]:56, quoted by Hayes Edwards in Leiris 2019:5.

From ethnography to poetics



On 7 March 1950, seventeen years after his return from the Mission, Michel Leiris gives a speech before the Association des Travailleurs Scientifiques in Paris,¹ in which he foresees the coming era of decolonization, when the colonized will begin to speak back to the once monologic West. Moreover, he claims that it is the ethnographer's duty not only to study the other culture, but to serve as its advocate and ally in metropole-colony relations.

We must be constantly in the position of defending these societies and their aspirations, even if such aspirations conflict with the so-called national interests...

(Leiris 1989 [1950]:113)²

Note that this remark is made at a time when both Algeria and Vietnam are beginning to seriously challenge French colonial authority. The preface to the 1951 edition of *L'Afrique fantôme*, gives a background to his radicalized perspective in a noteworthy self-critical comment.

Indeed, it is likely that the continent I dared to confront, an almost unknown and not yet domesticated Africa, frightened me and therefore took on a greater opacity in my eyes; it is also likely that I would have endured less solitude had I discovered the Africa of this end of the half-century, even if today's Africa is straining, in the majority of its territories, under the conflict that is driving an ever-increasing number of men of

1 The speech is later transformed to the already mentioned essay 'L'ethnologue devant le colonialisme', published in *Les Temps Modernes* the same year.

2 In the preamble to the 1981 edition, he sharpens this standpoint further, calling for 'an ethnography of militant fraternity' (Hayes Edwards 2019:24).

colour, who refuse to be the dupes of a mystification, to rise up against the Westerners who are exploiting the colonies. Still, I cannot deny that the Africa of the beginning of the decade before last was also quite real, and so I must lay the blame on myself rather than on the continent if the human problems already apparent there only struck me when they took the form of absolutely blatant abuse, and even then, without wrenching the dreamer that I was out of my subjectivism.

(Leiris 2019:63, 1996:92)

The 1951 edition also includes supplementary notes on some of the reflections. For example, on 20 December 1932: 'What I will never forgive the Abyssinians is that they have managed to convince me that there is some good in colonialism.' In the note he nuances the statement:

Yet it is because Abyssinia was not a 'colony' – and not only for this reason: also because it was the only place we stayed for a relatively extended period, and because its ancient Christianity renders it culturally closer to Europe than other parts of Africa – that I felt, all things considered, more in *touch* there than in the other countries we visited, countries whose inhabitants tended to present themselves to me more as shadows than as substantial partners. Whether good or bad, one has healthier relationships with free people than with people under supervision, for the relationship between master and servant can never be a fully human relationship.

(*ibid.*:66, original emphasis)

Especially the first comment above could be seen to anticipate the most substantial critique of anthropology's 'literary turn': that the focus on the fieldwork account tended to prioritise the self-reflections and activities of the ethnographer at the expense of the people that were the prime object of his research. But, more importantly, the two remarks demonstrate that the crisis of anthropology in the mid twentieth century was intrinsically linked to decolonization. This crisis was firstly felt in France, because of the Vietnamese and Algerian uprisings that both reached their zenith in the mid-1950s, and it was articulated by an ethnographically aware group of black intellectuals and poets, in the metropole as well as in the African and Caribbean colonies. The emergence of Négritude, one of the first major expressions of 'black consciousness' in modern culture, was inspired by the parallel Harlem Renaissance in the USA, but also, and as importantly, by that radical strand of French ethnography that had intrinsic links to surrealism. The latter fruitful

connection became manifest in the journal *Présence Africaine*,³ in which the Négritude writers collaborated with social scientists like Georges Balandier, Paul Rivet and Leiris.

Inspiration was mutual – dialectical, if you like. Leiris, who had written extensively about jazz and other expressions of ‘black’ culture already in the 1920s,⁴ arguably became the first Western ethnographer/anthropologist to clearly denounce colonialism. But it had taken him two more journeys to the colonies to arrive at an articulated anti-colonialist stand: the first an expedition to Côte d’Ivoire in 1945 to study labour problems, the second a research trip to Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1948.⁵ The little known and rarely discussed *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe* (1955) is in Glissant’s view perhaps Leiris’s most significant work in terms of defining the crucial position vis-à-vis ‘the other’.

[W]hen confronted with the complex reality of the francophone Antilles, what interests Leiris is not the essence of this reality (to discover or ‘understand’), but primarily the complexity itself as essence. Here, we are right in the midst of an ethnology of Relation, of an ethnology of the relationship to the other...

(Glissant 1992:23)



Eureka! I had not seen that coming. Leiris, the ‘Ethnographer of Relation’. Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* was the key reference for the second part of my diptych, *Cape Calypso* – ‘In Praise of Relation’ – where Glissant’s enthralling concept served as

3 *Présence Africaine* was founded in 1947 by the Senegalese writer and editor Alioune Diop. The journal was later expanded to include a publishing house and a bookstore in Paris’s Latin Quarter. It was highly influential not only for the Négritude movement, but for Pan-Africanist aspirations in general, and the struggle for the liberation and decolonization of the (former) French colonies. It had been preceded by another seminal journal, *Tropiques*, founded by Aimé Césaire and published in Martinique during the war years (1941–5). André Breton, who visited the island in escaping from the Vichy regime, was closely associated with the magazine.

4 One of the most oft-quoted passages in *Manhood* is a tribute to the jazz clubs of Montmartre and the parties and walks on the Avenue du Bois (Leiris 1963 [1939]:109).

5 The two islands have remained under French rule, ‘decolonized’ as overseas departments of France proper.

counterpart to ‘purity’, as elaborated in Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, the correspondent key reference in the first part. But I can’t remember that Leiris was mentioned other than in passing. Furthermore, when trying to define Leiris’s meta prose, Glissant speaks of complex procedures of contamination – semantic (the play with words and meanings) as well as geographic (collisions of places) – which are expressly related to procedures of alchemy or transmutation (ibid.:26). Although Glissant has a given place in my canon of contamination, I can’t recall previously having come across that word in his writings. Glissant’s preferred term – apart from relation – is creolization. Contamination and creolization are largely interchangeable in, for example, Appiah’s analysis (2006b). But they should not be confused with *métissage* (hybridity), which is of a different order, although often used as a synonym. The subtle distinction is lucidly defined by Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation*:

If we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable.

(Glissant 1997 [1990]:34)

But Glissant and Leiris? Things fall together when I uncover another key reference, Swedish literary scholar Christina Kullberg’s *The Poetics of Ethnography in Martinican Narratives* (2013). Glissant studied at Musée de l’Homme in the 1950s, and Leiris was his teacher. Of course!



Self and the intellectual island

In *The Predicament of Culture*, Clifford made a decisive distinction between ethnography and anthropology. Whereas the former is clearly a part of the latter, it also transcends the disciplinary confines: as a generalized method or approach, ethnography also applies to art and literature (Clifford 1988:9). Christina Kullberg takes this emancipation a step further in her study, where ‘ethnography’ is contextualized as

an ambiguous and complex reference that ought not to be confused with the academic disciplines ethnography, ethnology, or cultural anthropology.

(Kullberg 2013:9)

She subsequently avoids any attempt at coherently defining the relation between ethnography and literature. Her point, which to my knowledge had not been articulated previously, is that ethnography in the Caribbean in general, and Martinique specifically, from the 1940s onwards, was a tool for self-interrogation that gradually transformed itself into a poetics.

Why, then, do Caribbean authors use ethnography, in an area intrinsically associated with the colonial discourses of mapping and controlling the region? Evidently, ethnography has a double purpose, simultaneously mediating oppression and holding a promise of self-liberation. While, on the one hand, ethnography is seen as a reductive discourse of knowledge based on universalist and Eurocentric perspectives; on the other hand, its strong attachment to reality along with its interest in alterity provides a base for resisting that same universalism. Glissant writes, in the already cited *Poetic Intention*:

The distrust we feel towards it does not come from the displeasure of being watched, but from the resentment of not watching in return.

(Glissant 2010:122)

As Kullberg points out, the idea of ‘watching in return’ should also be read as a critique of Martinicans for not watching their own reality, and it is precisely in this sense that writers like Aimée and Suzanne Césaire before Glissant, and after him, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, use ethnography to explore and express the self. But in order to become a means for self-discovery, ethnography is radically altered, distorted into a poetics (Kullberg 2013:3–4).

Before scrutinizing this ‘poetics of ethnography’, let us dwell a little on the key role of the Caribbean in general, and Martinique in particular. André Breton and André Masson passed through Fort-de-France in the early 1940s on their way to exile in the USA. This particular stop made a strong impression on them, recounted in the book *Martinique charmeuse de serpents* (1948; *Martinique snake-charmer*),⁶ with Breton’s text and Masson’s illustrations. The two surrealists, in turn, made a great impact on the intellectual life of the island, whereas Lévi-Strauss, who was on the same boat, did not take any particular interest in Martinique and did not connect with

6 In his appreciative review of the book, Leiris noted that it acquires a truth – in its use of poetry, drawing and disconnected fragments – superior to that of ‘the descriptive style typical of the majority of specialists of the travel narrative’ (Leiris 1992:90, quoted in Dash 2003:96). Michael Dash suggests that the book could have been called *Martinique fantôme*.

the team behind the journal *Tropiques*. Lévi-Strauss's lack of interest in the Caribbean surely had to do with his hostility towards creolization. In Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot's words, the Caribbean had become a blind spot for social scientists and ethnographers, as it was not 'Western' enough to fit the concerns of sociologists and not 'native' enough to fit fully into the 'savage slot' that anthropologists prefer. Lacking a 'pure' indigenous culture, the Caribbean islands engendered 'grotesque' people of mixed breeding, bearing the marks of 'immoral' encounters between races (Trouillot 1992, quoted in Kullberg 2013:6–7). This is almost verbatim the discourse that will lay the foundation for apartheid in South Africa; the Western Cape being the Caribbean's counterpart, a correspondent hotbed of 'miscegenation'. Whereas Spanish-speaking Cuba and the anglophone islands were subject to scientific ethnographic studies, the only francophone island deemed to be worthy of interest was Haiti – that is, the French-speaking part of Hispaniola, divided between Haiti and the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic. Haiti, the world's first 'black republic', independent since 1804, appears as the diametric opposite of Martinique, which was turned into an 'overseas department' after the war and hence was a part of France and subject to a policy of assimilation. Nicknamed 'the intellectual island', it is renowned for its prominent thinkers and literary schools, from Négritude (Césaire) to Creolité (Chamoiseau and Confiant) – with Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant as the shining stars in between.

Glissant, born 1928, was too young to have been influenced by the Négritude movement, whereas the three years older Fanon attests to the impact of the Césaires. Aimée and Suzanne Césaire had returned to Martinique in 1939 and taught a new generation of writers to value a different, dissident French culture and, more importantly, an African cultural heritage in the Caribbean. Most important for the formation of both Fanon and Glissant was however their own encounter with Paris in the 1950s, and later also for Chamoiseau in the 1970s. 'Self and the City' is the witty headline of the key chapter in Kullberg's study. Aimée Césaire's experience of Paris in the 1930s and his second imaginary journey from Paris to Africa and back to Martinique seemed strangely detached from the literary scene. Only after the war does the experience in the colonial capital feature as a theme in Antillean literature. Whereas the group around *Tropiques* had resisted an overt oppressor by defining African heritage as a counterculture, the new generation aimed at defining the self and maintaining integrity at a time of assimilation with France. The encounter with the city was a crucial part of this process of self-interrogation and meta-reflection. Paris served as an inverted mirror, prodding writers to turn inward and question the foreignness within (Kullberg 2013:54).

Paris in the 1950s was radically different from Paris in the 30s. The climate was one of political and cultural change, in the wake of decolonization and the emergence of structuralism. Neither Fanon nor Glissant attached much importance to belonging to a Caribbean or 'black' community in Paris. They both questioned the formation of a self-identity based on a particular group or community. Fanon tried to formulate a general theory of black subjectivation in the ground-breaking *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952: *Black Skin, White Masks* 2020[1967]). Glissant addressed similar concerns four years later in his 'self-ethnography' *Soleil de la conscience* (1956; *Sun of Consciousness* 2020a), which in short passages resembling prose poems tell the experience of living as a colonized person in the heart of the colonial motherland. The fusion of traveller's account, self-portrait and philosophical essay is characteristic of Glissant's style. As his adoption of the term self-ethnography indicates, he was inspired by Leiris. In fact, as already noted, Leiris himself had rejected the term, and one could perhaps say that Glissant intentionally fulfilled what Leiris had only ambiguously attempted. The same year that *Soleil de la conscience* was published, 1956, Glissant wrote an article called '*Leiris ethnographe*' (1956) which highlighted the combination of self-reflection and fascination with intercultural contacts in Leiris' work, especially the recent Caribbean report *Contacs de civilisations* (1955), in which Leiris first develops his revolutionary idea of basing ethnographic studies on cultural contacts, not 'authentic cultures' – switching the discipline's focus from singled-out ethnographic objects and studies of remote 'primitive' civilizations to actual relationships between cultures as they are evolving in the present.

Whereas *Black Skin, White Masks* has become a founding text in postcolonial studies, Glissant's first book of prose received little attention and has remained a relatively discarded work in his oeuvre.⁷ *Why?* Glissant's biographer, the late J. Michael Dash,⁸ points to the subtle yet crucial difference between the two Martinican intellectuals. Both called for decolonization of the departments and their integration into the Caribbean region – in opposition to Aimée Césaire, who was to become the deputy of Martinique in France. Yet, Fanon's timely anticolonialism followed in Césaire's essentialist tradition, whereas Glissant, in defiance of the times, proposed a complex

7 It was only recently translated to English, by Nathanaël, for the New York based non-profit publisher Nightboat Books.

8 Dash is but one of several biographers. His comprehensive introduction to Glissant's work, published 1995 in the Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature series, ends with *Poetics of Relation*. Three more recent biographies of different character cover the entire oeuvre (Coombes 2018; Noudelmann 2018; Wald Lasowski 2015).

approach to socio-political realities ‘from all sides simultaneously, in terms of both the positive and the negative’, as he expounded in an article in *Présence Africaine* (1957).⁹ In his early work he preferred poetry to prose, and even spoke of the novel’s inferiority as a genre, because of its inability to reach beyond anticolonial protest (Dash 1995:10). In Kullberg’s similar juxtaposition, Fanon interprets the psychological process of articulating the self in terms of Hegelian struggles for recognition, whereas Glissant has a much more positive tone. Contrary to Fanon’s rage, *Sun of Consciousness* (2020a) is characterized by what Kullberg calls a reserved curiosity – a reaching out toward otherness. Moreover, Glissant’s narrator seems to have succeeded where Fanon’s examples fail, namely recognizing the self in the world of the other (Kullberg 2013:67).

Is this the crux of the matter? The core divider between an affirmation of creolization – or contamination – and a rejection of cultural intercourse that implicitly reinstates notions of authenticity or purity, albeit not necessarily in ethnic terms?

Dash underscores that it was only in the 1970s that the nature of Glissant’s literary enterprise was beginning to be understood, and the true recognition – canonization – came in 1989, at the age of sixty-one, with the Creole Manifesto, authored by two writers, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, and a linguist, Jean Bernabé: *Eloge de la Creolité* (In Praise of Creoleness).¹⁰ While highly appreciative of Patrick Chamoiseau as an innovative writer in Glissant’s spirit, Dash is remarkably critical of the manifesto:

It lacks the ironic self-scrutiny, the insistence on process (‘creolization’ and not *creolité*) that is characteristic of Glissant’s thought. Indeed, despite its avowed debt to Glissant, *Eloge de la Creolité* risks undoing the epistemological break with essentialist thinking that he has always striven to conceptualise.

(Dash 1995:23)

The one explicit reference to ethnography in *Sun of Consciousness* also gives a good illustration of Glissant’s style and condenses many of the themes that will recur throughout his work:

9 ‘*Le romancier noir et son peuple*’ (The black novelist and his people).

10 The manifesto was first published in 1989. Gallimard launched a bilingual edition in 1993.

[I]n the Antilles, where I come from, it can be said that a people constructs itself positively. Born of a culture medium, in this laboratory where each table is an island, here is a synthesis of races, of mores, of knowledges, but which tends toward its own unity. Can this synthesis, such is effectively the question, achieve unity? Will it be possible to observe, now that these problems are of interest to the human sciences, observe in the flesh the work of a being stirring himself, and being borne of his own will (clay that allocates, without a demiurge, its own breath?) This question that my existence asks of me, it could be said, inasmuch as I am already replying, that it poses me as being: so am I *the ethnologist of myself*? A question that was not without dramatic echoes, rendings or bewilderments, across the ages: how, in effect, could the work of synthesis and the conquest of unity not have necessitated labor (in judgments, fixations, betrayals, sectarianisms, imbecilities, caste laws...) of those who were simultaneously object and subject?

(Glissant 2020a:15–16, my emphasis)¹¹

Ethnologue de moi-même... The knowledge that Glissant seeks is as much about himself and the surrounding world as about finding a poetic expression for his experience (Kullberg 2013:59). Dash also attests to the importance of *Sun of Consciousness* with its sustained reflection on exile and *errance*, not in terms of the romantic cliché of rootlessness, but with regard to self-discovery, proposing the importance of the unfamiliar in the project of self-scrutiny (Dash 1995:12). But he does not, surprisingly, perceive the crucial impact of Leiris, who is only mentioned twice in his biography, in passing, lumped together with other influences such as Segalen, Perse and Claudel. To Dash, the predecessors in Glissant's self-chosen tradition are William Faulkner, Saint-John Perse and Victor Segalen.¹²

Glissant's discovery of Leiris is crucial not only for his 'poetics of ethnography', but for the development of his idea of 'relation', which will become the basis of his whole philosophy. The 1956 interpretation is reworked in the central *Poetic Intention* (2010[1969]) whose first chapter is named

11 Kullberg quotes this passage in her own translation, as Nathanaël's English version did not exist at the time of her writing. The two slightly differing translations are in my view equal, but I choose to quote the later version, which is available in its full context for the English reader.

12 In the later, already cited article '*Caraïbe Fantôme: the play of difference in the francophone Caribbean*' (2003), Dash does indeed acknowledge the impact of *LAfrique fantôme* on Caribbean literature, but without any specific connection to Glissant.

'Sun of consciousness.' The chapter on Leiris is called 'From the diverse to the common.' Here, Glissant envisions a kind of Caribbean ethnography. Since the world and its cultures are in constant collision and transformation, ethnography must shift mode from observation to engagement, venturing further than the apparent reality. The singularly Caribbean ethnography would be a way to capture through writing something taking place in the present, but intending towards the future, an ethnography that complies with a poetic exploration of the world (Kullberg 2013:11–12).

The poetics of ethnography, with its double scope – views from both inside and outside – gives a particular insight into the narrative construction of a self, a self that is inscribed in Caribbean reality while being constantly shaped by an outside. So Martinican authors do not borrow from ethnography in order to break with literature, understood as a singular form of sensory knowledge. Rather, they turn to ethnography to become *more* literary, to better question the self in relation to the environment.

(Kullberg 2013:17–18, original emphasis)

The grandeur of Leiris' project, according to Glissant, is in Kullberg's interpretation 'the revelation of the mysteries of language and the mysteries of the self while traveling and experiencing the other' – never disconnecting 'here' from 'there' or 'I' from 'them.' The fascination for other cultures first took Leiris elsewhere, but the dissident surrealist soon discovered that his desire for personal deliverance through otherness brought him back home. Elsewhere and home are, thus, in Leiris' experience, situated on the same level, and they share the same grounds (ibid.:61).

The idea of the shared ground – *lieu-commun* – is another Glissantian keyword that will eventually develop into the concept *tout-monde* (whole-world): a space which everyone may share yet perceive differently.¹³ Again, Glissant very sensitively identifies and fulfils ideas and intentions that the reluctant ethnographer Leiris may not have been fully aware of. In Glissant's interpretation, ethnography is not primarily about seeking knowledge about the other; it rather works as a framework for putting environments in contact with each other and has first and foremost an aesthetic impact, affecting our sensibility. By focusing on the sensuous dimensions of interaction, Glissant 'ultimately denaturalizes ethnography into poetics' (Ibid:63). In the process, he makes Leiris more Glissantian than he is, turning his interaction-based ethnography into an *Ethnography of Relation*.

13 *Traité du Tout-Monde* is the fourth title in Glissant's *Poétique* series.

In fact, it is only as poetics that Glissant can accept ethnography. Focusing on its poetic dimension, he can also refute other, more scientific sides of the discipline. In *Treatise of the Whole-World* (2020b [1997]) he explicitly creates an opposition between Leiris' ethnographic approach and theories of 'pure ethnology' that try to reveal 'elementary structures' of societies (ibid.:79, 81–3). Without directly mentioning structuralism, he clearly lets it incarnate the negative aspects of ethnography. Hence, in Glissant's synthesis, Leiris and Lévi-Strauss become opponents, even diametral opposites. Interestingly, he also links his understanding of ethnography with the – among anthropologists – generally scorned discourse of travel literature. In his view both ethnography and travel accounts have progressed from explaining the unknown using known parameters to acknowledging the richness of otherness. Yet, again, ethnography must not be confused with literature. They work in tandem. Glissant's ethnography is a form of writing that is connected to literature via travel. But it is separated from the fictional by its connection to 'the field', as a fundamentally reference-based discourse. Glissant has no interest in identifying ethnography with fiction; he prefers to draw from the tension between documentation and the imagination, between the 'real country' and the 'dreamt country' (Kullberg 2013:65).

If relation is the appealing, positive aspect of Glissant's philosophy, 'opacity' – the irreducible strangeness of the other – appears at a first glance as more provocative, with its connotations of the 'unintelligible' and 'obscure'. Dash argues in *'Caraiibe Fantôme'* that opacity stems from an uncanny encounter akin to that of objective chance, in the surrealist conception, which 'introduces a new way of conceiving otherness in terms of self-invention without being seduced or repulsed by it' (Dash 2003:99). The point is, as Kullberg (2013:71) puts it, not to see otherness as the opposite, which conforms the identity of the self, but to let otherness in and thereby put the self in motion. Self-invention instead of self-confirmation. Opacity is thus an active form of resistance to reduction – a difference that the interpreting subject cannot fully understand (ibid.).

The concepts of relation and opacity – and creolization – are elaborated in response to an imminent paradox in Glissant's thinking that he, as we have seen, addressed already in 1956:

Can this synthesis [Creole culture], such is effectively the question, achieve unity?

(Glissant 2020a:15)

His answer will be that a culture can achieve unity only if the coexistence of relation and opacity is maintained.

Dreaming creoleness

The second part of Kullberg's survey of 'Self and the city' is dedicated to Patrick Chamoiseau's essay *Ecrire en pays dominé* (1997, 'Writing in a dominated land'). Written in Martinique in the 1990s, but reflecting on his formative years as a writer in Paris in the 1970s, this autobiographical first attempt in the genre of poetics, can be read as a late response to Glissant's *Sun of Consciousness*. But as suggested by Michael Dash's critique of the Creole Manifesto, and confirmed by Kullberg's analysis, his ideas do not represent a further elaboration, or even continuation, of Glissant's project, but rather a recession into one of nostalgia and preservation. In the 'Chamoian' literary universe – essays and novels alike – ethnography is arguably not transformed into poetics but remains an element in a sense close to a conventional view on ethnography as 'realist description intended to safeguard culture' (Kullberg 2013:94).

Yet Chamoiseau, author of the excellent novel *Texaco* (1992), is an illuminating example of the ambiguous relationship between ethnography and creative writing. He started his writer's career in Paris, while studying sociology and working as a social worker in a prison. Back in Martinique, he will continue to combine social work with his literary writing.

In contrast to Glissant (and Césaire before him), Chamoiseau, born 1953, had direct personal experience of modernization and the radical change of Martinican society due to departmentalization and its deep integration into the French system – what Glissant had ironically called a 'successful colonization'. This same process tended to erase every manifestation of Creole culture unless commodified as a tourist attraction and as part of the French cultural heritage (ibid.:79). Like Glissant, Chamoiseau fervently opposed the assimilationist policies. But whereas Glissant, in the 50s, was able to 'destabilize the subject so as to attract and face the world' (ibid.:79–80), Chamoiseau's narrator suffocates under the influence of 'mental colonization'.

His subject is destabilized from the outside and then becomes assimilated into the French value system. It is this internal colonization that the Chamoian narrator tries to undermine.

(ibid.:80)

This is where ethnography comes in, as a means to combat the feeling of being absorbed by a dominant centre. On the one hand, it serves as a guarantee of truth; on the other, it is a mask behind which 'Chamoiseau' can hide and play with the idea of centrality and authenticity. Ethnography is a phase in his coming of age as a 'word scratcher' (*marqueur de paroles*; 'marquer' means 'to write' in Creole) and ultimately a 'warrior of the imagination'. The word

scratcher collects words, as the ethnographer collects stories and artefacts, and the change from the one to the other does not appear to be a radical shift.

Yet, Chamoiseau criticizes the essentialism of Négritude for supposedly being based on American anthropology from the 1950s – a peculiar statement as the former precedes the latter – and reacts strongly to critics who choose to regard his writer-persona as an ethnographer rather than as a creative writer. At the same time, he admits being inspired by the ethnographic approach to the world, and he confirms – in an interview with his fellow authors Bernabé and Confiant preceding the Creole Manifesto – that creoleness is an anthropological discourse that proposes a redefinition of what a Martinican is in the increasingly global world.¹⁴ In other words, ethnography is an identity discourse – and the boundary between ‘I’ and ‘we’; the self and the country – is blurred, as demonstrated in this lyrical passage, in Christina Kullberg’s English translation:

To experience in minute detail the words that have fallen voiceless while writing. To most carefully connect myself to each morsel of this earth and link together all the morsels to one another, and to catch them in their excited entirety. To try the true length of a corsair’s path. To move like these butterflies, which are haunting inextricable medicinal plants and which nothing can stop: not thorns, not knots, not sticky sap. Light, persistent, they make water, they make wind, and they foil stiffness through their fluid errancy. There is in this flight of the butterfly a light mode of knowledge. To descend into myself – into the soul of this country – in complete vigilance and with beautiful abandon.

(Chamoiseau 1997a:97–8)

His identification goes as far as obliterating the difference between the self and the soul of the country. Ethnography – not only self-ethnography but also the investigation of the environment – becomes an oneiric activity corresponding to what Chamoiseau calls ‘country-dreaming’, *rêver-pays*. It is by travelling into this imaginary landscape that the narrator is able to access

14 ‘Creolité bites’ (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant and Taylor 1997). In the manifesto, they speak of ‘anthropological affinities’ with the people of the Seychelles, Mauritius and the Reunion that are stronger than the ‘geopolitical’ ones with the Puerto Ricans and the Cubans. They thus make a relevant distinction between ‘Creoleness’ and ‘Caribbeanness’, but a peculiar assumption that the Spanish-speaking Caribbean would be less creolized than the francophone and anglophone territories (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 1993).

'the anthropological magma of the people that had gathered there' (ibid.:101, my emphasis).¹⁵

Chamoiseau's narrator literally visits himself in visionary projections. He puts himself in the place of others and fills his inner environment with people. By insisting on this interior process of creation and imagination, as opposed to documentation, Chamoiseau simultaneously narrates the emergence of the self as a writer and the emergence of Creole culture. Kullberg points to a crucial difference from Glissant, which also is a difference between Glissant and his anglophone colleague from neighbouring St Lucia, Derek Walcott. Everybody agrees that the foundational experience of blacks in America, the middle passage in the slave ships from Africa, implied a forced rebirth. But whereas Glissant sees traces of the African heritage lingering on in the Caribbean reality, Chamoiseau uses amnesia as a basis for his creation and insists. in line with Walcott's 'Adamic man,' on the necessity to break with the 'muse of history,' to be born again as a Caribbean.¹⁶ The insistence on interiority – and obsession with the imaginary – should be seen in the context of the resistance to French assimilation, which in Chamoiseau's case is so strong that by the end of *Écrire en pays dominé* he turns himself into a

15 On rereading this paragraph after completing the draft monograph, I associate this 'country-dreaming' with both the 'songlines' of the Australian Aborigines, which will be discussed Chapter 5, and the German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr's notion of *Traumzeit*, which universalized the Aboriginal Australian dreamtime. Chamoiseau does not, however, refer to any of these.

16 See Walcott's essay 'The muse of history' from 1974, with its powerful finale:

I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father. I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper 'history', for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. You were when you acted your roles, your given, historical roles of slave seller and slave buyer, men acting as men, and also you, father in the filth-ridden gut of the slave ship, to you they were also men, acting as men, with the cruelty of men, your fellowman and tribesman not moved or hovering with hesitation about your common race any longer than my other bastard ancestor hovered with his whip, but to you, inwardly forgiven grandfathers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks. I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and gift.

(Walcott 1998:64)

‘warrior of the imaginary’. This warrior, ‘bound to work upon himself’, still resembles an ethnographer, although what he is observing is his inner-field of imagination (Kullberg 2013:87–8).

What Chamoiseau strives for is authenticity. But by placing his quest in the realm of dreams and imagination, the ‘truth’ of this authenticity is not necessarily verifiable. His most famous novel, *Texaco*, which was awarded with the Prix Goncourt in 1992 and soon became a literary best-seller around the world,¹⁷ should hence not be read as a distorted – ‘magical realist’ – documentation of the shanty town of Fort-de-France that has given the novel its title, although Chamoiseau has admittedly used material gathered in his parallel profession as social worker (ibid.:92). His persistent idea of the imaginary vision as a refined – or restored – truth evokes Juan José Saer’s envisaged ‘speculative anthropology’. Saer points to the constitutive dual character of fiction, with its inevitable blending of the empirical and the imaginary. Some writers – Borges and Thomas Bernhard are the two examples he mentions – deliberately play with this duality in order to reveal the ambiguity that to a larger or lesser extent is present in all fiction, from Homer to Beckett. The paradox of fiction, according to Saer, is that if it appeals to ‘the false’, it does so in order to increase its credibility. Hence, it is not a matter of immaturity or irresponsibly circumventing the demands of truth, or turning one’s back on reality, but on the contrary, diving into the eddies of this reality and freeing oneself from all preconceived notions about how it is constituted – that is, of portraying a complexity that, if viewed solely from the perspective of verifiable facts, would be rudely reduced and impoverished. Even though they emphasize their fictionality, the significant literary works of our time therefore demand that we as readers take them at their word. However, and this is the crucial point, ‘fiction does not solicit being believed as truth, but as fiction’ (Saer 1997:12).¹⁸

17 The book had an immediate international breakthrough and was translated to many languages, including Swedish (1994). The relatively late English translation, by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov, appeared five years after the original, in 1997.

18 To illustrate his argument, that ‘fiction keeps itself at a distance from both the truth prophets and the euphoric advocates of the false’ (ibid.), Saer uses two negative examples, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Umberto Eco. Solzhenitsyn’s narrative may differ from the official socialist-realist literature in its conception of the truth, but they coincide, according to Saer, in their view of fiction as a servant to ideology. Eco’s ‘apology of the false’, on the other hand, supplants art with artifice to the point of eliminating all ambiguity, which in Saer’s view is even more despicable. For a more detailed comment on Saer’s argument on this point, see Hemer 2012:24–5.

Chamoiseau, who as a child had dreamt of becoming an ethnographer, may appear to be an inadvertent incarnation of the speculative anthropologist in Saer's sense. But we have already seen the discrepancy between his pronounced poetics and his actual writing, which is void of meta-poetic reflection on the links and differences between ethnography and fiction. There is, as Kullberg notes, an obvious anti-fictional tendency in his work (Kullberg 2013:92). As a novelist, he repeatedly refers to himself as a 'participant observer' in the field of 'real' encounters with, for example, delinquents in Fort-de-France.

In my novels I try to practise participant observation or participant clarification. This allows me to desert the place, not to enter into a transparent universalism outside of place.

(Chamoiseau 1997:62, quoted and translated by Kullberg, *ibid.*)

Unlike Glissant's *ethnologue de moi-même*, Chamoiseau directs his ethnography of the self toward the past – the urban space of his childhood – with the aim to explore and restore anthropological components in Creole culture that are in the process of disappearing under the pressure of assimilation and modernization. Kullberg detects a surprisingly sentimental tinge in his methodology. Not only in the essay *Écrire en pays dominé*, which 'is immersed in melancholy', but also in his novels, most explicitly in his first novel, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows* (1999[1986]), which has an epilogue with a 'Note of the ethnographer' in which the writer/ethnographer claims to

protect via his narrative a forgotten and nearly extinct piece of Creole culture, in this case the jobbers and the culture around the market in Fort-de-France.

(Kullberg 2013:93)

Chamoiseau's feverish productivity in the late 1980s and early 90s may be explained by this urge to rescue and reconstruct a dying culture. But even if his work is permeated by a nostalgia that borders on sentimentality, *Texaco* stands out as one of the most extraordinary novels of the exceptional 90s – the decade between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the tumbling twin towers of the World Trade Centre. Its main character, Marie-Sophie Laborieux is the daughter of a liberated slave and founder of the shanty town that is named after the nearby oil depot. This remarkable woman is the *informatrice* of Chamoiseau, the word-scratcher, whom she calls *l'oiseau de Cham* (the Cham bird). At first, he listens, takes notes and records on tape, like an ethnographer or oral historian. Then after a while, as the author discloses in the epilogue,

his informant surprisingly entrusts him with her own 'innumerable' notebooks 'covered with an extraordinary, fine handwriting, breathing with the gestures, rages, shivering, the stains of a whole life caught in full flight' (Chamoiseau 1997b:387).

Confused and honoured by her confidence, Chamoiseau systematizes the treasure, covers each item in protective plastic, and deposits it at the municipal Schoelcher Library. When transcribing the interviews, he goes back to consult his informant's written notes, which contain not only her own memories but those of her slave father, Esternome, transcribed by his daughter. Hence a multilayered history of Martinique unfolds, spanning one and a half centuries, back to the abolition of slavery.

Texaco has apparently all the characteristics of an oral-history account. Not surprisingly, one of the first academic reviews of the novel, by literary anthropologist Marie-José Jolivet, asks in its title the seemingly pertinent question of whether the notebooks of Marie-Sophie Laborieux actually exist (Jolivet 1993). A Google search on 'Marie-Sophie Laborieux' even yields a picture of an old Creole woman that supposedly could be the real-life informant of the novel. This deliberate unsettling of the border between the empirical and the imaginary certainly qualifies the novel for the contamination category; as does its clever intermingling of French and Creole. It is written in French (otherwise it would not be eligible for the Goncourt Prize), but a French enriched – contaminated – by Creole. For example, *ville* (town) is in Creole *au-vil*, and the city of Fort-de-France is in the novel referred to as *l'En-Ville* (In-city). The linguistic playfulness evokes an unsought association to Salman Rushdie, and hence also connotes Appiah's suggested contamination line – Terence to Rushdie. Although Rushdie, to my knowledge, has never explicitly referred to 'creoleness' or creolization, his idea of how 'newness enters the world' (Rushdie 1992:394) is clearly congenial to it. The Creole Manifesto, in its French and English versions, was, as it happens, published simultaneously with *Satanic Verses* and the ensuing fatwa.

But let me conclude this excursus with an anglophone book in the contamination cross-genre, which also tells the turbulent Caribbean story of slavery and creolization, although not distilled in one determined place, real or imagined, but by encompassing the entire North Atlantic basin. *The Atlantic Sound* (2000) by Caryl Phillips is usually categorized among the author's non-fiction works, but he himself has called it a 'reportage novel', a label I find very accurate.¹⁹ Phillips, currently Professor of English at Yale University, was born on the island of St Kitts in 1959 and moved with his parents to England in the early 60s. As a black immigrant, growing up in Leeds, he naturally became

19 I have previously written about it in the essay 'Writing the world' (Hemer 2005).

concerned with issues of race and racism, cultural identity and belonging. 'Home' is a key concept in his extensive work, to date comprising thirteen novels (including *The Atlantic Sound*), three collections of essays and six plays. Other recurring themes are the legacy of slavery and the 'burden of race'. All these elements are crucial in his reportage novel. The title's Atlantic 'sound' is ambiguous, but should mainly be understood in its geographical sense of the North Atlantic as an inner sea – the inner sea of the author's own biography, but also of modernity.²⁰ The story's starting point is the Atlantic crossing from St Kitts to Dover that the author first did as a four-month-old baby and now repeats as a forty-year old reporter, with recurrent references to the primordial journey. But the scope widens to a general history of the Atlantic, as the reporter continues his journey to a carefully chosen triangle of ports on both sides of the basin: Liverpool, Accra and Charleston, South Carolina – 'the Ellis Island of African-Americans'. Phillips is an intelligent and sensitive observer with a keen eye for the poignant detail, and he shares his profound knowledge in measured portions, without ever standing in the way of the reader's own reflections. It is travel writing at its best. But between the prologue and the episodic travelogues is inserted a historical novella: the story of an ambitious native palm-oil producer in the late nineteenth-century Gold Coast, who intends to buy his own steamship and is swindled by his British associates. William Narh Ocansey had transferred the money to Liverpool in good faith, and waited for a ship that of course never arrived. So, he sends his son to Liverpool, still in good faith, to discover what has happened. The novella vividly conveys John Emmanuel Ocansey's wide-eyed impressions of the British metropole and his ardent struggle for justice, which in the end is successful. The son wins the case, and has his father's associate sent to prison; but loses the money.

This exemplary piece of postcolonial historical fiction – based on a true story – is then juxtaposed with the author's own visit to present-day Liverpool, which has obvious difficulties dealing with its shameful past as a financial centre of the slave trade. From Liverpool the journey continues to Ghana, the former Gold Coast colony. Phillips does not fuse the genres. His reportage novel is not a contamination in that literal sense. But by moving between layers

20 I add 'North' because the notion of the Black Atlantic, to which Phillips' work very much speaks, largely refers to the northern part of the ocean, with the Caribbean as a principal hub. Lately, increasing interest has been given to the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, for which Cape Town was a major hub. See for example Bystrom and Slaughter 2018. The slave trade of the south differed from the traffic of the north, as it mainly transported women household slaves, as opposed to the predominantly male plantation slaves of the Black Atlantic.

of time and correspondingly changing genres, he makes the one perspective shed light on the other in a truly revealing way. *The Atlantic Sound* is neither fiction nor non-fiction, but novel, essay and reportage combined. Symbolically and literally a homecoming, it is also – although Phillips never uses that word – a sort of self-ethnography. He notes in the conclusion of a subsequent collection of essays, *A New World Order*:

After thirteen years of compulsive itinerancy, I know my Atlantic 'home' to be triangular in shape with Britain at one apex, the west coast of Africa at another, and the new world of North America (including the Caribbean) forming the third point of the triangle [...] Across the centuries, countless millions have traversed this water, and unlike myself, these people have not always had the luxury of choice [...] These are the people that I have written about during the course of the past twenty years, and as one book has led to another, I have grown to understand that I am, of course, writing about myself in some oblique, though not entirely unpredictable way.

(Phillips 2001:305)



The ways of the whole world

Four years have elapsed since I was struggling with the *Poetics of Relation*, during the delayed completion of 'Cape Calypso II' (Hemer 2020:107–9), first in Pietermaritzburg and later in Paris, and I find myself drawn into Glissant's universe with even greater fascination as I come at it from a different angle and have a fuller context. I am amazed that Glissant appears to be the natural link between the two aspects of my interrogation– 'literary ethnography' and 'contamination'. Not only is he an exemplary transgressor of genres and disciplines (poetry, prose, essay, novel, history, philosophy, ethnography), but the very subject of his multifaceted literary work is itself contamination – though Glissant uses that word in a slightly different sense than the one I am suggesting. He talks more of creolization, which moreover is a concept attributed to him. In the 1980s, Glissant and Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, independently of each other, launched 'creolization' as a decisive feature of the globalization of culture (Glissant 1997[1990]; Hannerz 2010[1986]).²¹ In Glissant's interpretation, this is an unpredictable process of

²¹ Glissant first used the term creolization in 1981, interestingly in opposition to *Creolité* [creoleness], which originated as an identity-based defense of a homogenized Creole language. Against this linguistic militancy, he proposed a definition of *Antillanité* (Caribbeanness) in which linguistic formations are but

entities in conjunction that does not ascribe to historical determinism. In *Treatise on the Whole-World* (2020b [1997]), the sequel to *Poetics of Relation* which had only recently been translated into English by leading Glissant scholar Celia Britton, he gives the most comprehensive definition:

Creolization is the putting into contact of several cultures or at least several elements of distinct cultures, in a particular place in the world, resulting in something new, completely unpredictable in relation to the sum or the simple synthesis of these elements.

One can predict the outcome of a cross-breeding, but not of a creolization. Both of these, in the atavistic universe, were thought to produce a dilution of being, a bastardization. Another unexpected fact is that this prejudice is slowly dying out, even if it remains strong in immobile, barricaded places.

(Glissant 2020b[1997]:22)

'Atavistic' cultures are opposed to 'composite' – or creolized – cultures in Glissant's universe. And unpredictability, the key characteristic of creolization, is opposed to the very idea of 'system,' with its generalizing predictability. 'Trace' is a favoured concept, both in the sense of a 'wandering that guides us' and the conventional meaning of the cultural mark that people leave behind. Place is also crucial. Not only the common place – *lieu-commun* – but, most importantly, the relation between the specific place we live in and the world in general. This is the core of the 'Whole-World': the world subjectively experienced in terms of relationality, as Celia Britton puts it in the translator's introduction. Or in Glissant's own words:

I call the Whole-World our universe as it changes and lives on through its exchanges and, at the same time, the 'vision' that we have of it. The world-totality in its physical diversity and in the representations that it inspires in us: so that we are no longer able to sing, speak or work based on our place alone, without plunging into the imagination of this totality.

(ibid.:108)

Although more sprawling and perhaps less coherent than the previous volumes, *Treatise on the Whole-World* does in many ways represent the apex of his poetics in terms of both form and content. The apparent incoherence

one of many results of the colonial encounter, and in the catalogue of such cultural realities he mentions, in passing, the 'general cultural phenomenon of creolization' (Glissant 1989[1981]:222).

is in fact congenial to its emphasis on diversity. Not only does the discursive text itself have a poetic quality; it is interleaved with poems. Characters from Glissant's novels appear in the essays, and the actual 'treatise,' which is but one part of the book, is presented as having been written by Mathieu Béluse, main protagonist of his second novel *The Fourth Century* (2001[1964]). That same Mathieu Béluse is later making 'Objections to this "Treatise"' and receives a 'Reply,' but it is not clear who the respondent is, and the exchange seems more like an author's inner dialogue than an actual dispute. These playful features may not appear very original today, in a literary context in which the unsettling of genre conventions has long been common practice. But from an academic viewpoint they remain as revolutionary as they were in the late 90s. From my personal experience it would seem that today's academic world is in fact more open than the literary industry to this kind of contamination. But it is still a hazardous venture to navigate in these waters. Glissant's case is blatant proof of this. He did not receive literary recognition of a par with either his paragon Saint-John Perse from the twin island Guadeloupe, or his contemporary anglophone colleague from the southern neighbouring island St Lucia, Derek Walcott.²² Nor was he arguably ever accepted as full member of the French intellectual *parnasse*.

Glissant is moreover a link to South Africa; in *Treatise on the Whole-World* he evokes Nelson Mandela as an incarnation of Relation and portrays the white supremacist stronghold's transition to an envisioned rainbow nation as the utmost example of creolization at work.

The Diversity of the world needs the South African experience, its success
and what it can teach us.

(ibid.:96)

But the comparison of the Caribbean and the Western Cape – the two hotbeds of creolization – is a subject that I have explored at length in '*Cape Calypso*' (Hemer 2020:37–189) and therefore choose to leave implicit here. A more obvious connotation that nonetheless deserves elaboration, however, is Glissant's dialogue with American literature, North and South, and affinity with the Americas. As he declared in a special number of *Le Nouvel Observateur*:

22 Perse and Walcott are two of the Caribbean literary Nobel laureates to date, 1960 and 1992 respectively. V.S. Naipaul, born in Trinidad-Tobago, is the third (2001), although he reluctantly would identify himself as Caribbean. Some – Glissant, not least – would add William Faulkner (1949) to that list, as well as Gabriel García Márquez (1982).

[T]he landscapes of the Americas, from the smallest island to the most staggering canyon, ‘communicate’ openness, an excess, a violent entry into space, which deeply influence our ways of feeling and thinking. It is from there that I start, only to return again and always.²³

‘The novel of the Americas’ is one of the selected essays in *Caribbean Discourse*, in which ‘confusion of time’ and the ‘explosion of space’ are identified as characteristics of the shaping literary force, and the resulting novel defined as ‘the product of a modernity that is sudden and not sustained or “evolved”’ (Glissant 1989:149). Others, like Mexico’s great novelist Carlos Fuentes, whom I read extensively and admired profoundly in the 1980s and 90s, have made similar analyses. It strikes me that the contamination tradition, of which Glissant is one of the beacons, predominantly consists of authors from the ‘New World’ and/or at the margins of a Western canon. Was it Fuentes, or perhaps the less known Catalan philosopher Xavier Rubert de Ventós, who traced the ambivalence, or rather ambiguity – *ambigüedad* – of modern literature to the Spanish chroniclers’ description of the world whose destruction they witnessed in the conquest?²⁴ This ‘wavering epic’ – *épica vaciladora* – was supposedly mirrored in *Don Quixote*, the first ‘modern’ novel, which has as accurately been called the first ‘postmodern’ novel, pointing to this inherent ambiguity at the root of modernity. White Europeans and Americans – ‘Caucasians’, as we are curiously called in the North American race typology – have difficulties acknowledging that the modern world was born in the plantations and that slavery is the underside of modernity. Such awareness may have been more common – less tacit – before the nineteenth century; the French essayist tradition going back to Montaigne clearly had a firm foundation in the discovery of the New World, which more appropriately should be described as the integration of the world as one, as an embryonic Whole-World, to use Glissant’s vocabulary.

It seems, at a first glance, difficult to find a connection between Glissant and Jorge Luis Borges, whom I am going to present as another beacon of the tradition of contamination I am attempting to discern. Yet, this common denominator – or missing link – could be spelled William Faulkner, Borges’ two-year older colleague from a different shore of the double continent. *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1999[1996]), another book from Glissant’s very prolific late career, is a combined travel account and literary essay in which the at times elusive Glissantian style attains a stunning instancy and clarity. But before preparing the intra-continental leap from the Caribbean to Rio de la Plata, let

23 Glissant 1991, translated and quoted by Michael Dash in Dash 1995:22.

24 Rubert de Ventós 2006[1987].

us take a step back and dwell a little further on the roots of the chronicle or travel account, ethnography's predecessor, companion and competitor.

Self and the others

Clifford traced ethnography's origins to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* from 1721 and Herodotus' *Histories*, written in 430 BC (Clifford 1986:2–3).²⁵ Montesquieu is already part of our emerging tradition, and we shall come back to him, but it is not entirely evident why Clifford discards the enormous number of historians and chroniclers in between, not only the eyewitness accounts of the conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires, but especially the many travellers to Brazil in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example Jean de Léry, whose *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre du Bresil autrement dite Amerique* (1557) was labelled 'one of the masterpieces of ethnographic literature' by Lévi-Strauss (1982:68–70, quoted in Mason 2015:4). Rome-based freelance scholar Peter Mason provides a thorough and intriguing exploration of the origins of ethnography in *The Ways of the World: European Representations of Other Cultures: From Homer to Sade* (2015).²⁶ As the subtitle indicates, Mason traces an embryonic anthropology, or at least 'anthropological speculation', to the Homeric *Odyssey*, which in Samuel Butler's English translation opens with the words:

Tell me, O muse, of that ingenious hero who travelled far and wide after
he had sacked the famous town of Troy. Many cities did he visit, and many
were the nations with whose manners and customs he was acquainted.

This is also in line with Dante's interpretation of the wily Ulysses' final and fatal voyage to a *nova terra*, by the desire to gain 'experience in the world / and in human vices and virtue' (*Inferno XXVI*).²⁷

25 Like Clifford, Georges Balandier (1970:3) sees Montesquieu as one of the founders of anthropology. But he refers primarily to *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), a highly influential treatise on political theory which in contrast to *Persian Letters* is without fictional elements.

26 This fascinating book is the concluding volume of a trilogy, whose preceding parts are *Deconstructing America. Representations of the Other* (1990) and *Infelicitous. Representations of the Exotic* (1998).

27 'The last voyage of Ulysses' is one of Borges' *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1982), in which he suggests that Dante identifies his own mental conflict, 'perhaps without wanting to or suspecting he had done so', with Ulysses' tragic fate. 'Dante was Ulysses, and in some way he could fear Ulysses' punishment' (Borges 1999:282, trans. E. Allen). The essay was first published in 1948. In the 1982 complete version of *Nine Dantesque Essays*, Borges has added the following postscript:

But although elements of ethnography can be traced back to Antiquity, and the existence of an ancient anthropology has even been taken for granted,²⁸ Mason is reluctant to regard even the work of Herodotus, although based on observation, as ethnography in a meaningful sense. The Greek view of the other was both concentric – Hellenocentric – and dual. The world was conceived as a system of concentric circles of increasing distance from the self; that is, of increasing otherness. Geographical remoteness is coupled to remoteness in terms of dietary practices, sexual customs and cultural faculties. But there is no real distinction between peoples who inhabit different extremes, be it Ethiopia, Libya or the regions beyond Scythia, as they are all defined in dual opposition to the self, as inversions of Greek values. And, as Mason points out with reference to French historian François Hartog, if both the Egyptians and the Scythians are the inversion of the Athenians, it is impossible to make sense of their relation to each other, since the dual interpretative framework only admits x and $\text{non-}x$ (Hartog 2009[1980]; Mason 2015:33).

Mason demonstrates, with his abundance of examples, how this framework prevails in both the Roman world view – Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* – and the cosmographies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially among the travellers to the new world, from Columbus to L ry. For example, 'indians' of North and South America are often lumped together without distinction, and even the 'hottentots' of South Africa may share their attributes in the European cabinets of curiosities. The Enlightenment represents a renewed and amended interest in questions of ethnography, as seen in the writings of Rousseau, Diderot, Sade, Voltaire and others. A curious phenomenon is the emerging genre of 'reverse representations', that is, representations of Europeans as non-Europeans or 'savages', as in Voltaire's *Essay on the Manners of Nations* (1777[1756]). Mason describes this as a process of 'Indianization' of Europe, with its corollary in the 'Europeanization' of America (ibid.:12). Yet, he is still hesitant to use terms such as 'implicit ethnography' or 'para-anthropology' to describe the ethnographic descriptions embedded in these works, as the boundary drawn by the self-definition of ethnography

It has been said that Dante's Ulysses prefigures the famous explorers who, centuries later, arrived on the coasts of America and India. Centuries before the *Commedia* was written, that human type had already come into being. Erik the Red discovered Greenland around the year 985; his son Leif disembarked in Canada at the beginning of the eleventh century. Dante could not have known this. The things of Scandinavia tend to be secret, as if they were a dream.

(ibid.:283)

28 Mason mentions two examples: Campbell 2006; M ller 1972.

– for example to separate ethnographic writing from travel accounts – is undecidable.²⁹

Interestingly, Mason does not give much attention to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. He mentions its form, the exchange of letters, as a possible inspiration for the Marquis de Sade's 'philosophical novel', *Aline et Valcour* (1795), written in the Bastille prison in the 1780s, and for the near contemporary *Les liaisons dangereuses* by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos (1782). But the second mention in passing confirms Montesquieu's pioneering role, because Mason describes the contemporary colleagues' use of ethnographical material as not primarily of ethnographical concern but as part of,

a cultural critique, probably best known through Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*

(ibid.:165)

And there are indeed specific reasons for giving priority to Montesquieu in a tradition that conflates ethnography and fiction. Clifford's choice of the Persian travellers to France as forerunners was explicitly motivated by their fictionality, which inscribed fiction in the very origin of ethnography (Clifford 1986:2). On a quite different note, in his review of *Tristes Tropiques*, French conservative liberal Raymond Aron, who shared Lévi-Strauss's cultural pessimism, emphasized the radical departure from the progressivist narrative laid out by Comte and Durkheim and claimed that the Lévi-Straussian politics had been forged 'in the crucible of *The Persian Letters*' (Aron 1955).

When I read this, I had recently spent substantial time with Montesquieu's epistolary novel, browsing an electronic facsimile of the sixth English edition from 1773, printed in Edinburgh by Alexander Donaldson, who may presumably also be the anonymous translator. Lévi-Strauss himself did not, to my knowledge, pay any special tribute to this fascinating pre-revolutionary critique of French society 'through the eyes of others', i.e. from the perspective of the two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, who travel from Isfahan to Paris. The 'novel', or fictional treatise on the contemporary world of the mid eighteenth century, is made up of 161 letters written by the two Persians and their respondents, sent from Isfahan to Paris and vice versa, but also to and from, for example, Smyrna, Venice and Moscow. The mixed bag of political satire and philosophical reflection, garnished with eroticism, made a great impact in the public sphere of the 1720s, and although it was published anonymously, as was the custom due to censorship, everybody recognized the

29 'Implicit ethnography' is attributed to Schwartz 1994, 'para-anthropology' to Harbsmeier 1986 and 2012.

author. With its stunning denunciation of despotism of all kinds, including the sexual kind, it stands out not least as a pioneering work for women's emancipation.

Rica is the younger of the two Persian travellers, an open and philosophically minded observer of the foreign culture, who dresses as a European in order to be assimilated:

I had occasion enough to be displeas'd with my taylor for making me lose all public regard and attention, for I at once sank into contemptible nothingness.

(letter xxx)

The elder, Usbek, is apparently Montesquieu's alter ego. In one letter *M. de Montesquieu* even speaks of himself in the person of the senior nobleman. As a responsible lord, Usbek is concerned about his wives in Isfahan, who rebel against the eunuch who guards the harem while the master is away. The correspondence gives a lot of attention to the relations between the sexes. Rica writes to Ibben, in Smyrna:

The French seldom or ever speak of their wives; it is for fear of talking of them before people who know them better than themselves... There is a set of very miserable creatures among them, jealous husbands.

(letter LV)

Usbek writes to the same addressee, about the Persians:

Love amongst us, brings no trouble, no fury; it is a languid passion, which leaves our souls in peace: a plurality of wives saves us from their dominion; and moderates the violence of our appetites.

(letter LVI)

Rica, enchanted by Paris, praises the French boldness in sexual relations, in contrast to the Persian Muslim culture. He argues with his travel companion in a following letter:

It appears to me, Usbek, that we never judge of things but with a private view to ourselves. I do not wonder that the negroes paint the devil in the most glaring whiteness, and their gods as black as coal; that the Venus of some nations should be represented with breasts pendant to their thighs; nor indeed that all idolaters have made their gods of human figures, and have ascribed to them all their passion. My dear Usbek, when I see men

who creep upon an atom, the earth, which is but a point to the universe, propose themselves as the immediate models of providence, I know not how to reconcile so much presumption with so much insufficiency.

(letter LIX)

It might take me too far afield to go into depths of the *Persian Letters*, but it is truly a treasure to return to, full of remarkably lucid and radical statements; for example:

The heart is a citizen of every country.

(letter LXVII)

The seemingly moderate Usbek makes the following comment on Christian double moral standards:

They destroyed the power of the nobility, by which they kept the people in subjection to themselves. They afterwards made conquests in countries where they found it was to their advantage to have slaves.

(letter LXXV)

The former imperial powers Spain and Portugal are subject to devastating scorn. Rica writes in passing to Usbek:

The only good one of all their books is that which was wrote to show the ridiculousness of all the others.

(letter LXXVIII)

A recurring theme is a plea for justice, as opposed to religious oppression. Usbek writes to Rhedi, in Venice:

Even if there were no God, we ought to love Justice. That is, we should endeavour to resemble that Being, of whom we have so amicable an idea, and who, if He exists, must necessarily be just. Freed as we would be from the yoke of religion, we would still be bound by that of justice.

(letter LXXXIV)

In a following letter, to Mirza in Isfahan, Usbek speaks of the peril of persecuting and expelling the Armenians, as previously the Zoroastrians (Guebres), who fled to India in great numbers and deprived Persia of their knowledge. The letter is a call for 'multiconfessionality' as opposed to:

the spirit of proselytism, which the Jews contracted from the Egyptians, and which from them hath passed, like an epidemic and popular disease, to Mahometans and Christians.

(letter LXXXVI)

Although sharp and radical, the cultural self-critique has a humorous tone, as seen in the quotes above, or in Usbek's reflections to Ibben in Smyrna, about the differences between France and Persia:

A man [in France] who enjoys the public esteem, is never sure that he shall not be dishonoured the next day. You see him today the general of an army, it may be the next the prince makes him his cook, and leaves him no other praise to hope for, but that of having made a good ragout.

(letter xc)

A curious theme that takes up a long discussion is the alleged depopulation of the earth. Rhedi in Venice writes back to Usbek, claiming that the world's current population is a tenth of what it was in ancient times:

This, Usbek, is the most terrible catastrophe that ever happened in the world. But we have hardly perceived it, because it hath arrived by degrees and through the course of a great number of ages, which denotes an inward defect, a secret hidden poison, a languishing disease which affects human nature.

(letter CXIII)

Usbek answers in a long series of letters, trying to explain how both Islam and Christianity have, by different means, contributed to the depopulation – Islam by polygamy and the duty of a man to satisfy all his wives, and to protect them by eunuchs, thus creating a large proportion of non-productive people; Christianity through the ban on divorces, creating barren marriages. The Christian correspondents to the eunuchs would be the priests, monks and nuns.

The practice of continence hath been the loss of more men than ever have been destroyed by the plague, or the most bloody wars.

(letter CXVIII)

As already noted, in Usbek's comment on Christian double moral standards, there is a striking recurring element of anticolonialism, *avant la lettre*. When Usbek in the discussion on depopulation turns his attention to

Africa – and America – he delivers the following verdict on the colonial slave trade:

The Barbary coast, where the Mohammedan religion is established, is not so populous as it was in the times of the Romans, for the reasons I have already given. As to the Guinea coast, it must be terribly depopulated, since for two hundred years the petty kings or village chiefs have been selling their subjects to the European princes for transportation to their American colonies.

A very remarkable thing about this America is, that while it receives every year new inhabitants, it is itself a desert, profiting nothing from the continual drain on Africa. Those slaves, transported into a foreign clime, perish there in thousands; and the work in the mines in which natives and foreigners are constantly employed, the poisonous vapours which issue from them, and the quicksilver which is continually in use, destroy them without remedy.

There is nothing more absurd than to cause countless numbers of men to perish in extracting from the bowels of the earth gold and silver, metals in themselves absolutely useless, and which constitute wealth only because they have been chosen as the symbols of it.

(letter cxx)

Hence, Montesquieu brings us back to the new world, the cradle of modernity.



The inexpressible South

What a bias it is – inherited from the practice of the oppressors – to suppose that a work of art cannot arise from the house of the master just as easily as from the shack of the oppressed. That would be as judgmental as its opposite: ‘Those savages can produce nothing civilized.’ It echoes the same old questions shouted at writers and artists like us from countries of the South: ‘Whom do you write for? Do you write for the working class? For the bourgeois? For your race? For Whites?’ These questions evade the heart of the matter: the Relation of literature to its highest object, the world-totally.

(Glissant 1999:16)

After sharing his life between Martinique, where he founded the Institut Martiniquais d'Etudes and the journal *Acoma*; and Paris, where he served as editor of the *UNESCO Courier* and played a decisive role in the attempts at establishing a New World Information Order³⁰ – Glissant was offered a distinguished professorship at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. This position, in the historically most creolized of the United States, gave him the opportunity to explore the North American dimension of a Caribbean identity. From Baton Rouge he made an excursion to Faulkner's birthplace, Oxford, in neighbouring Mississippi, the physical and imaginary location of Yoknapatawpha County, the fictional Mississippi county created by Faulkner, largely based on and inspired by the real Lafayette County, and this journey resulted in the already mentioned essay *Faulkner, Mississippi* – which by the way is dedicated to 'Oiseau de Cham, who sings the En-ville'.

Faulkner's work has had an immense influence in Latin America, possibly more so than in the USA. But he is not readily a candidate for my contamination category – that would stretch the criteria too far – and I am not going to put his work to analysis by itself. But Glissant's reading of his North American colleague – which perhaps makes Faulkner more Glissantian than he really was – brings up some relevant points for our discussion.

Curiously, I find the most accurate concise explanation of Faulkner's impact in the southern part of the double continent, and his appeal to Glissant, in Caryl Phillips' highly critical – not to say malicious – essay 'Edouard Glissant: promiscuities', which I discover in his collection *A New World Order* (2001), when I consult it for the first time in almost twenty years. *Faulkner, Mississippi*, then newly translated to English, is the most recent book under Phillips' scrutiny.

Faulkner's universe was defined by the plantation, the twilight zone where black and white met and danced a strange, often highly artificial, dance around the inconvenient fact of the other's presence. Ultimately it was a paradoxical world of strained co-existence; a world of cruelty and injustice, but a world in which both black and white had little choice but to recognise each other. At times, the validity of their very existence could only be properly authenticated by the grating presence of the 'other'. This 'fact'

30 The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), also shortened to New World Information Order, (NWIO), is a term coined in a debate in UNESCO in the late 1970s and early 1980s over media representations of the developing world. The NWICO movement was part of a broader effort to formally tackle global economic inequality that was viewed as a legacy of colonialism (Wikipedia).

led Faulkner to the structural strategy that provided the greater part of his finest writing. In such a world of vigorously and uncomfortably close relations there can never be just one story, a master-narrative to which the storyteller (or, if truth be told, the historian) can claim fealty. There is always the disruptive 'truth' of the other person's presence, the other person's story. Glissant properly recognises Faulkner's fiction as a type of writing in which 'linearity gets lost' and he admires Faulkner for it. He understood that the quest for purity, for legitimacy, was bound to fail in Faulkner's New World: in *Absalom! Absalom!* an inseparable tangle of relationships throws a dark shadow across family, in this case the Sutpens. Try as hard as they may, Faulkner's people can never view their history as simply encounter and transcendence. Southern space and Southern time deny the Sutpens and other Faulknerian families access to such reductive strategies.

(Phillips 2001:174–5)

The failed 'quest for legitimacy' is of course due to the illegitimate foundation of the South. Why, asks Glissant, does the defeat of the South not give birth to epic flux in Faulkner's work, in the manner of, say, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936)? One answer is that, according to the traditional epic principle, one finds community disequilibrium when there is a perversion of the 'root'. This perversion is tied to injustice and oppression, namely slavery and the slavery system. Faulkner's works are

a meditation upon the impossibility of the epic in this particular time and place. Or, rather, they are a frenzied struggle against this impossibility, a heroic effort to give birth to and express it from the improbability it infers. Faulkner will magnify and construct this impossibility in Yoknapatawpha, and, later, give it a name.

(Glissant 1999:122)

The narrations' presupposition – the illegitimate foundation of the South – is never formally expressed. The writer's task, in Faulkner's novels and short stories, is

to reveal this presupposition while revealing its painful parallels in the present and also making it clear that the true revelation will be put off indefinitely in [his] works.

(ibid.:139)

And, a little further on:

What is hidden makes us feel what is disclosed or revealed all the more strongly. In Faulkner's work, it is what 'we don't understand' that helps us approach the dark and luminous mass of what we think we have understood.

(ibid.:142)

Faulkner was neither a civil-rights activist nor a social reformer. By nature, and by profession, he was a conservative rather than a reactionary, not unlike Borges – though Borges, unlike Faulkner, was arguably a racist. Glissant does in fact pair Faulkner and Borges *en passant*, when talking about 'a new kind of literature, outside the frontiers of language',

one that linked together churning seas and tremulous earthquakes in a place free of brush, the enormous and well-detailed accumulations and traces and etchings of a William Faulkner or a Jorge Luis Borges.

(ibid.:232)

Faulkner was possibly not even aware of his Argentinian admirer. He was more acquainted with French literature, and he explicitly identified himself with Albert Camus, with whom he 'shared the same anguish':

Certainly not the anguish that motivates an existential thinker, but the anguish of having to conceive justice and not utter it (even if you must separate it from the truth), since to do so would be a betrayal of your own people.

(ibid.:64)

Clearly, among 'existential thinkers' Glissant himself would rather identify with Camus than with Sartre. But the main reason for Faulkner to 'suspend his judgment' of the South is that he needs ambiguous disclosure as the basis for the development of tragedy.

Literature matters more than making testimonies or taking sides, not because it exceeds all possible appreciation of the real, but because it is a more profound approach and, ultimately, the only one that matters.

(ibid.).

What Faulkner achieves, in Glissant's opinion, is to speak the impossible about the South without having to say it, to create a literature that patiently confronts everything inexpressible in this impossible – and perhaps to effect

change through the sheer force of this literature. With a reservation on the last point, though,

for if he undoubtedly brought about change, it was far away from his country.

(ibid.:151)

A keyword here is 'frontier'. The frontier creates a mental conflict between necessary humanity on the one hand and, on the other, a refusal to condemn what offends humanity in racism and intolerance. This is the uncomfortable, anguished stance of Faulkner, Camus and Saint-John Perse – Perse being Glissant's own preferred comparative reference. Of these three writers, he finds Faulkner to be the one with the strongest sense of interconnectedness, of a new poetics [of Relation]. Because, unlike the other two, Faulkner 'locks himself up in the place and confronts it'. Faulkner's world is a frontier. Not only because the whole South, and by extension the state of Mississippi and consequently its projection, Yoknapatawpha County, are frontier sites,

[b]ut also and especially because the writing Faulkner has used to re-create these places – this Place – has also literally stirred up something: movement, hesitation, transition, uncertain identities, and truths that cannot escape the charm of the possible and the impossible all mixed together.

(ibid.:227–8)

In Faulkner's world, truth is approached

through spurts of disclosure, the way water withdraws in successive waves, each following its own current, leaving behind muddy streaks and silt and spores of life from the deep.

(ibid.:238)

This is but one of many beautiful metaphors. There are some witty punchlines as well, for example on Faulkner's lack of appreciation of (black) music:

Faulkner, like so many surrealists, simply had no ear for melody, except the symphonies of his own creation.

(ibid.:154)

In *Faulkner, Mississippi*, as in most of Glissant's work – except the novels – the genres are seamlessly integrated, not juxtaposed as in Caryl Phillips'

The Atlantic Sound.³¹ Interestingly, the speaking subject is a 'we' – an 'I' and a 'she' – supposedly Glissant and his wife. 'She' is not only a travel companion, but an important interlocutor in the recurrent discussion about Faulkner and Perse, both authors of the plantation – 'two colonials, in fact, but so marginal among their own kind'. It turns out that the 'we', at least on part of the journey, comprise a group of four – 'three Antilleans and a very slight French woman'. When the group enters a restaurant in Natchez, Mississippi, on a Sunday afternoon and everything stops, 'just like in the movies', we, the readers, get a very tangible chill of the lingering old South.

This is a White habitat, and no one else, not Blacks, and certainly not Blacks in the company of a White woman, would have the foolishness to enter here. Petrified, we order food and drink, as little as possible so as to be able to leave as soon as we can. At such times, self-restraint is better than notoriety.

(ibid.:17)

The travel narrative soon gets overtaken by the readings and analyses of the works, but it remains an underlayer that comes up to the surface occasionally, in beautiful glimpses, like this one:

The river does not follow the rules of linear thought; here, one can step in the same water twice.

We also admire it when, in a plane, we fly over the landscapes it crosses, watching as it proceeds not in long loops but in a circularity that seeks and rediscovers itself, endlessly. It comes and goes in time, deviating and turning time around, in a stationary drift. An impression confirmed by the ghostly character of the gas refineries near Baton Rouge, for example, that give no hint of modernity, but, like a mirror, reflect refurbished relics and illuminated apparitions in the humid radiance of a Louisiana moon.

(ibid.:152)

This project continuously evokes cross-readings and curious coincidences. Like the reference to *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* (1997), one of the many autobiographies by former slaves that flourished at the time Faulkner began to write and which he 'no doubt consulted', although it seems that he was neither troubled nor influenced

31 This is one of the characteristics that Phillips in his review somewhat derogatively identifies as 'French', as opposed to a more rational – commonsensical – Anglo-Saxon approach.

by them (ibid.:63). Mary Prince is one of the time-traveller protagonists in Zoë Wicomb's novel *Still Life* (2020), which will be discussed at length in Chapter 4 and briefly referred to in the following interlude, 'Going to the dogs'. Amazingly, I also stumble upon the latter expression in one of Faulkner's short stories, from the mouth of an old Amerindian:

This world is going to the dogs. It is being ruined by white men. We got along fine for years and years, before the white men foisted their Negroes upon us.

(1950:31)³²

Glissant uses the quote as an illustration of Faulkner's attentiveness to the apparently impossible Relation between all the people – Whites, Blacks and Indians – who are caught in the system's trap, and also to the honour, courage and will of those, whatever their race or condition, who oppose the system, for whatever reason.³³ Faulkner often puts forth the idea that the Indians, once they are slave owners, become even more cruel than the Whites, and Glissant suggests that this unusual observation is intended, perhaps, to share the sin (ibid.:73).

Another crucial observation, on behalf of Glissant, is the contempt for creolization that Faulkner shared with most of his contemporaries – including Lévi-Strauss – as well as previous and following generations. Glissant deliberately uses the specific term creolization – not simply miscegenation – and makes a telling deviation to the parallel cases of Paul Gauguin and Lafcadio Hearn, who both spent substantial time in the Caribbean around the previous turn of the century. Hearn, of Irish-Greek descent, was charmed by the region and wrote several books with Creole motives (e.g. Hearn 1924,2015) before continuing to Japan, where he completed his literary work and 'became other' – the Japanese citizen Koizumi Yakumo. Gauguin spent a year or two in Martinique before the journey to Tahiti, where he reinvented his painting. Both, Glissant believes, 'were too embarrassed to catch the changing radiance of this Creole reality'.

32 The story, 'Red leaves', was first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 25 October 1930.

33 Glissant often uses the contested term 'Indian' for Amerindians or Native Americans, although it may be confusing in a Caribbean context, where 'Indian' is a common denomination for the large proportion of people originating from the Indian subcontinent, mostly descendants of indentured labourers.

The bliss and the suffering in their almost alchemical transmutations – Hearn in Japan, Gauguin in Tahiti – even if they were conscious of doing nothing but slumming at the limits of an alterity they hoped to influence (to accommodate, to appropriate for themselves), that was the sign that they could neither live nor tolerate the bliss and suffering of Creolization, all the more since, appearing in the Antilles out of a history of oppression and obvious renunciation, Creolization must have seemed to them capable of leading only to affectation, deterioration, and the degradation of the authentic. So Hearn and Gauguin went looking for sultrier places with thousand-year-old traditions. The time had not yet come to give serious thought to ‘what is changed by the exchange’.

(ibid.:84–5)

At the bottom of the hostility towards creolization is nevertheless the fear of *métissage* and its unforeseeable consequences. Yet, mixing itself does not corrupt. Being illegitimate or miscegenated does not make one ‘degenerate’. Faulkner seemed not to be particularly offended by racial mixing, although he thought that it was a potential ordeal for those who bear it. What he (the people of the county) especially feared was the *idea* of miscegenation (ibid.:242, emphasis in original).

The individual’s stubbornness and irreducibility aggravate the rejection of traditionally epic solidarity, already rendered impossible or unbearable by the county’s disturbed ‘origin’. They lie in opposition to any form of Creolization wherein a new epic (one of openness and sharing) could have taken root. Faulkner names this double negativity ‘damnation’.

(ibid.:242–3)



As noted earlier, Glissant uses the term ‘contamination’ in a different, more subordinate sense than I do. It appears rather frequently, often in conjunction with ‘contagion’. In his interpretation, where it is an unconscious or subliminal element of the narrative rather than a deliberate poetic strategy, Faulkner would indeed appear as a candidate for inclusion in the club. The first mention in *Faulker, Mississippi* is with reference to the women and children in the stories, who – like the author – instinctively sense the county’s troublesome past, and whose innocence makes them suffer more than others, and yet be amazed to be still standing after so many misfortunes.

Their amazement is tragic. Step by step, it takes over and proceeds through a kind of *contamination*...

(ibid.:62, emphasis in original)

Next time, when referring to the three ‘metafictional’ novels – *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying* – Glissant notes that they attract our attention because:

they mark the point where Faulkner goes to the crux of the question, knowing he must return to the realm of the uncertain, spread the *contamination*, and fling the floodgates wide open.

(ibid.:142, my emphasis)

The contaminated are elusively identified as ‘the witnesses, whose stories are a history that effectively contaminates them...’

They are, so to speak, suffering itself – suffering that questions. Therein lies the source of their wound: their terror, the extremity of their feelings, and their irrefutable taste for the void.

(ibid.:175)

The intrinsic connection with suffering is elaborated in the following passage, some ten pages later, which is the closest we get to an attempted definition.

The contamination is not spread through a sudden awareness of what the reader can have learned and what many critics have analyzed: latent incest and aborted lineage, the openly expressed horror of miscegenation, the failure to establish a foundation. No. For the people of the county, contamination is not a sudden understanding, but an acceptance of suffering. The cause is not given with the effect. What is disclosed is not a detective-story truth but a color of damnation.

(ibid.:184)

The corollary notion of ‘contagion’ is likewise intangible. When commenting on the dialogue in the major books, the replies of the different speakers are characterized as ‘sharp and pulsating, their music muffled and unhurried, and as strong as contagion’ (ibid.:213). Further on, ‘place’ is likened to ‘a contagion, an infection of the imaginary’ (ibid.:230). The word ‘infection’ is disturbing with its unequivocal connotations to disease. But a few pages

later he describes our imagining place as 'like a poetic contagion pulsing throughout the world' (ibid.:233).

Then, again, contamination reappears, with reference to a character, Shreve the Canadian, who symbolizes the 'faraway' from the county and who moreover 'prolongs the contamination, getting tangled up in its threads, carrying on his reckless conspiracies *elsewhere*' (ibid.:239, emphasis in original).

Glissant never makes an explicit connection between this nebulous contamination and the larger contamination that is Creolization, which he almost consistently writes with a capital C. But it seems in perfect correspondence with the all-permeating ambiguity, that the adversary of creolization is at the same time an inadvertent proponent of contamination – although 'damnation' is the name he finally gives the impossibility of the epic in Yoknapatawpha.

[W]e would not lend any credence to any of these stories of Blacks, Indians, and Whites – which seem so minor compared to all the eruptive changes in today's world – and we would not be convinced by any of these moonstruck farmers, Negroes with fixed stares, demented aristocrats, or stubborn old ladies, if we did not feel that what has been played out here is a game whose goal is the unlimited opening up of every identity without having anyone to give up his or her truth.

(Glissant 1999:190)

Interlude

Going to the dogs¹



Am I going to play the gender card, again? It's not quite as provocative as the race card, but is perhaps even more unsettling. I can't pretend to be black, especially not in South Africa. But I can pretend to be gay – or bisexual. Sexual preferences are not disclosed by the look. Moreover, hardly anyone, not even in South Africa, would object to a white male writer's use of a woman focalizer, straight or gay – provided that she's white. So, I or Ze? After long deliberation, I opt for the conventional solution, but keeping an arms-length distance between author and first-person narrator. I is an Other.

What I never could have imagined was, however, that, more than two months into my full-time project, I would still be struggling with Lévi-Strauss and Leiris, neither of whom were even listed in the book proposal. They were supposed to be little more than footnotes to an introductory chapter on literature and anthropology... But even before I discern my envisioned literary history of contamination, another tradition is appearing, stronger and already established, and predominantly French – perhaps distinctively French, going from Montaigne via Montesquieu to the French ethnographers of the twentieth century and the ethnography inspired poets and philosophers of the French Antilles. Montesquieu and Glissant were on my list, so the traditions do converge, but I was not really aware of how strong the ethnographic nexus was, let alone the crucial importance of French ethnography in its bud as a discipline

1 This interlude is a much shortened, differently arranged and slightly revised version of my contribution to *PARSE Journal* (Hemer 2023). In addition to my co-researchers, I wish to thank the external peer reviewers, Tobias Hübinette and Niren Tolsi, for their insightful comments and input.

in the 1920s and 30s. Between the two disasters of world wars, at a time when European colonialism was still unchecked and rising colonial powers fought for their piece of the cake, when 'racial hygiene' and social Darwinism were commonly acknowledged or even implemented as politics, French ethnography represented a beacon of humanism and tolerance, symbolized by the new Musée de l'Homme in Paris that grew out of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, a metamorphosis in its turn associated with the emerging Front Populaire. The founding mission of the museum, formulated by its first director Paul Rivet, was that humanity is one and indivisible, not only in space, but also in time. During the German occupation, the museum was one of the outspoken hubs of resistance. Rivet survived the war, in exile in Colombia, but many of the employees who stayed were charged with 'espionage' by a German court and ten were sentenced to death.² Others, like Deborah Lifchitz, an expert on Semitic languages of Ethiopia, and the only woman member of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, faced similar fates, simply for being Jewish.³

Yet, it was at Musée de l'Homme – where Lévi-Strauss was to become interim director after the war and Leiris one of the prominent researchers – that Saartjie Baartman's genitals were on display until 1974. After having been stored in a museum closet another twenty-eight years, her remains were repatriated to South Africa in one of the most symbol-laden ceremonies of the transition from apartheid to democracy.⁴

What that unfortunate woman needs more than anything is to be left alone, to rest in her warm Eastern Cape grave – although he imagines

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- 2 The seven men were executed by firing squad, whereas the three women were deported to camps. One of them, Germaine Tillion, returned from Ravensbrück at the end of the war and was put in charge of organizing pensions for voluntary resistance fighters.
 - 3 Lifchitz, whom Leiris often refers to in *Phantom Africa* – always by the Polish spelling Lifszyc – was hiding in his apartment in Paris in 1942, when the French police arrested her and sent her to Auschwitz, where she was gassed.
 - 4 Saartjie Baartman's case gained worldwide fame after being rediscovered by biologist Stephen Jay Gould in *The Flamingo's Smile* (1986). Her fate is told in Zoë Wicomb's great novel *David's Story* (2001). For a thorough analysis of Saartjie Baartman's symbolic role in the transition, see Samuelson 2007:88–9.

that she'd rather be wrapped in Parisian couture than her new shroud of native kudu skin.

(Wicomb 2020:14)⁵



March 2022

It is a relief to return to Sea Point, especially the public swimming pool, my favourite place, a disclaimer of the myth of English White Cape Town. Somebody at artist William Kentridge's innovative Centre for the Less Good Idea⁶ in Johannesburg mentioned in passing that there was a rumour a few years ago that Sea Point had gone to the dogs. 'Going to the dogs' is apparently a commonplace South African saying that I have never noticed before. I may have come across it occasionally on my previous journeys, but now I hear it all the time, an expression as casual as 'at the end of the day'. Susan Hayden, my former student and proofreader, smiles at the remark and reminds me of a book I ought to have read: *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2002), by Alexandra Fuller, a childhood memoir about white Rhodesia's conversion to black Zimbabwe. When I ask what it means, she looks bewildered, as if it were the most stupid question, or as if she never really had thought about it: 'Well, going to hell...' Writer and filmmaker Aryan Kaganof will give a more intriguing explanation, translating it to the Dutch word *beludering*. I automatically associate the Swedish word *luden* (hairy) and understand the process of becoming *luden* as something like the werewolf's transformation from man to beast, a metaphor for civilization's transition to barbarity. But when I put '*beludering*' through Google translate, it disappointingly comes out as 'cheating'.⁷

However, the animal metaphors stay with me. In the posh white suburbs on the Cape Peninsula, the imminent threat might rather be described as 'going to the baboons'. Concerned residents complain about the big monkeys becoming more and more fearless, with huge

5 Wicomb's work, including the novel *Still Life* from which this quote comes, is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 4 of this volume.

6 The name of the Centre is drawn from a Tswana proverb: 'If the good doctor can't cure the disease, the less good doctor will': lessgoodidea.com.

7 Gerrie van Noord, the Dutch copy editor of *PARSE*, will eventually remark that there is no such Dutch word. Aryan probably meant 'beloedering' (tainting) or 'verloedering' (degradation).

males breaking into the houses by simply lifting out the window frames, and others learning to detect the sound of remote keys and getting to the car before the driver. In Khayelitsha and the Cape Flats, rats are a far more severe danger, but the big rodents do not feature highly in the media.

I remember travelling in a small boat to Jane Goodall's reserve at the tip of Lake Tanganyika, passing by deserted lakeshore villages that had seemingly been taken over by baboons; on that same journey I walked back to the hotel late at night from a bar in Kigoma and was approached by a pack of dogs; they merely nudged at my behind, the leader dog biting through the trousers but not through the skin, yet this was one of the most terrifying moments I had ever experienced. Everyone who has watched wildlife porn on TV knows that going to the dogs would be the most horrific way to go, being disembowelled alive and literally torn to pieces.

When exactly does something go to the dogs? What was the tipping point for Johannesburg's Hillbrow, the cosmopolitan haven of the late-apartheid dictatorship that turned into a drug- and violence-ridden 'misunderstood area' during democracy? What is the state of transformation in today's Melville? And why do these two examples come to my mind? Again: is there a correlation between vernacular cosmopolitanism and disintegration? Where is the fine, yet critical, line that differentiates 'contaminated diversity' from the gentrified colours of Benetton? I can write back to Johannesburg and assure them that Sea Point is not going to the dogs. Not yet. Somehow there is the expectation that it eventually will.



If the cosmopolitan inner suburb is for the dogs, then what companion species is Stellenbosch for? It's my third – in fact, fourth – visit to the Institute for Advanced Study. I was there six years ago, a year after my own fellowship, to share lunch with Zoë Wicomb, who at the time was struggling with a novel that wouldn't come out – *Still Life*; now I visit Thomas, my mentor, colleague and friend since the promising early 90s. Everything is ridiculously familiar: the cleaning staff who remember me, the polite conversations around the coffee machine, the fellows, mostly elderly white men, a category to which I myself undoubtedly belong. After lunch, and a coffee with Thomas in

the Botanical Garden, I re-encounter Aryan Kaganof and Stephanus Muller at the Africa Open Institute, where the website of the Genadendal Music Archive is being launched, with representatives from the Genadendal coloured community and a secretary from the German Consulate in Cape Town. I remember passing by the former German mission with Aryan when I visited him in Greyton, either the first or the second time. After the ceremony, I walk at dusk through the dorp, this incredible pocket in time-space, an outdoor museum in another country and another century. Who is safeguarding this haven?

I recall my late discernment of the security people, cleverly camouflaged, all black; I had taken them for road workers.

The wealth of Stellenbosch is inconspicuous, invisible and insignificant in the larger picture. The university, which tries hard to conceal its crucial role in the intellectual history of apartheid, maintains its standing as one of the leading national institutions, but somehow discretely abides in the shadow of the English-speaking Universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand.

I asked Aryan what happened to the Open Stellenbosch movement that he so meticulously documented as a fellow at the Institute, in a film – *Opening Stellenbosch: From Assimilation to Occupation* – that he was not allowed to show at his seminar.⁸ It's gone without a trace, he said and added a characteristic pun: 'as if it had been a performance'. Students performing – mimicking – a perceived act of revolution? The whole nationwide #FeesMustFall movement, which followed on from the #RhodesMustFall campaign that had ignited at UCT while I was at the Institute, seems indeed to have waned. And whereas protests occasionally flare up at other universities, blocking entrances and burning professors' cars, as happened at University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg not long ago, such outbursts are difficult to imagine in Stellenbosch.



The principal language at the public swimming pool in Sea Point is Afrikaans, but the guests are predominantly black – that is, largely Coloured and Indian, according to the apartheid typology, but it is difficult to discern the shades of pigment on suntanned bodies.

8 vimeo.com/173585724 (accessed 2 August 2024).

The water is chilly, just about twenty degrees; the fifty-metre pool is surely not heated and hence the temperature decreases from day to day – as in Stellenbosch in the ‘kind month of April’ seven years ago, when it finally got so cold that I shivered with blue lips after only one length. I realise that some redundancy is inevitable. I can’t expect readers to be familiar with *Cape Calypso* (Hemer 2020). But who is my addressee? Hardly the curious Swedish high-school student – as my first mentor at *Dagens Nyheter*, Karl Erik Lagerlöf, defined his imagined reader of the paper’s cultural section. But neither the buyer of the *Mail & Guardian*, for whom most explanations of the South African reality would be irritatingly superfluous. Am I addressing an academic or a literary public? At the coffee machine before lunch with Thomas at the Institute, one of the fellows asked me what the purpose of ‘ethnographic fiction’ was. To make the stuff more accessible, more popular? Definitely not, I replied with emphasis – although the opposite would of course not be my deliberate intention either.

Summing up the impressions from my last journey to this country for which I have such ambivalent affection, I return in memory to that revolutionary moment, seven years ago, when Achille Mbembe came to Stellenbosch to address the students. South Africa, he said, is the only country in the world where a black majority is ruling over a substantial and influential white minority. ‘The reverse from the USA.’ (Hemer 2020:164). And that was in Obama’s time. Before Trump. The core of Mbembe’s memorable talk was his definition of decolonization as the ‘decommissioning of absolute knowledges’ with the caution that this must not be confused with either ‘de-Westernization’ or ‘Africanization’ (ibid.).



October 2022

At the Kåseberga workshop, Kerry asks us to write – ‘anything’ – for three minutes non-stop. Her slot is after mine and the thoughts coming up process the critique my presentation just received: Ivan’s concern about unknowingly becoming a character in a text that is not an interview or a memoir, but a reflection in the process of writing that text; Bronwyn’s caution about expectations of genre, that you read a text very differently if you expect it to be fiction, ethnography, memoir or what-what. I claim in defence that, to some extent at least, contamination is about challenging expectations. Yet I am reminded that a genre

classification as ‘contamination’ may serve as an excuse for irresponsibility, for insufficient research, or sloppy writing, at worst.

Next exercise is to think of our projects as archaeological excavations. An excavation of *Going to the Dogs* would imply the uncovering of layers from previous journeys to South Africa, which is already done, but not only that: I would dig into other writings about places that may or may not be familiar to me. That is, library mining, not necessarily *in situ*. For example, the history of Sea Point regarding dogs, or other ‘companion species’ – baboons? rats? pigeons? A global search for the etymology of going to the dogs.⁹ Why the dogs? What about cats? What would ‘going to the cats’ imply? The big cats, as in Amitav Ghosh’s (2021a) story of the Sundarbans, the mangrove forest of the Bay of Bengal, where tigers have killed on average twenty-five humans annually, casually.

The thought on excavation recurs the following week in Berlin, with its layers on layers of troublesome pasts. What would be the pertinent animal metaphor for Europe, where fascism is now coming back with a vengeance – first, we take Sweden, then we take Italy. Going to the wolves? No, that would be an insult to the untamed canines, one of the main effigies of hate of the right-wing constituent of Sweden. Berlin, the former wolf’s den and eye of the storm – those metaphors don’t marry well – is now a haven of humanism; Germany being the only country in this continent of savagery that has come to some reconciliation with its atrocious past: the worst colonisers who, after failing to challenge the already established drug cartels of Britain and France, conquered and colonized their hinterland. Like Russia... Excavating the illiberal rhetoric of the German Democratic Republic, echoing the Third Reich propaganda, now resurfacing in Putin Russia’s war bulletins.

9 Lucy eventually points me to this clarifying explanation by Welsh writer and teacher Tim Bowen:

The origin of the expression is believed to be in ancient China where dogs, by tradition, were not permitted within the walls of cities. Consequently, stray dogs roamed the areas outside the city walls and lived off the rubbish thrown out of the city by its inhabitants. Criminals and social outcasts were often expelled from cities and were sent to live among the rubbish – and the dogs. Such people were said to have gone to the dogs, both literally in that that was where they were now to be found, and metaphorically in the sense that their lives had taken a distinct turn for the worse.

(www.onestopenglish.com/your-english/phrase-of-the-week-to-go-to-the-dogs/145674.article – accessed 28 November 2024)

At the Berlin workshop, Salomé Voegelin gives a guest lecture and exercise on 'Transversal sound studies: an affirmative troubling of knowledge'. Interestingly, when relating to the keywords 'conviviality' and 'contamination' she immediately associates the latter with contagion and more specifically with the recent pandemic and lingering Covid virus.

People tend to react strongly to the word contamination – in Germany because of its connotations to the Nazi terminology, even though it signifies an affirmation of precisely that which the Nazi ideology condemned. A similar reaction is provoked in post-apartheid South Africa, but there that possibly has more to do with the connotations of HIV/Aids and the shadow still cast by that previous pandemic over the transition. Viruses, as opposed to bacteria, are never desired companion species.

I am repeatedly asked why I prefer 'contamination' to 'creolization', if the terms are used synonymously anyway. Because it sparks such strong response, would be one answer, whereas creolization often is met by gaping silence. If the latter concept is at all comprehended, it is moreover associated with a specific region, the Caribbean, possibly Latin America and some island nations in the Indian Ocean, but surely not South Africa, although apartheid was the epitome of suppressed creolization. Attempts at introducing the creolization debate are even reduced to some identity project for the 'coloured'. Yet another proof of how deeply entrenched the apartheid categories are. Thus, contamination.



And yet, in the end, another dog metaphor is the last one standing. The character Lucy, daughter of the predatory David Lurie in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999c), talks in the novel's oft-quoted last sentence about starting again at ground level, 'like a dog' – which clearly alludes to the elusive final sentence of the executed Josef K. in Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*), as he realizes, with the knife twisted in his heart and his eyesight failing, that it is the victim who is ashamed, not the perpetrator:

'Like a dog!' he said, as if the shame would outlive him.

(Kafka 2005[1925]:210)

3

Wonderland



From the Spanish conquerors' perspective, what was to become the Argentine republic represented an outpost of the fragile empire. Only Chile – Nueva Extremadura – on the other side of the Andes was more peripheral. It is a still widespread misconception that the vast grasslands around the Rio de la Plata estuary, stretching southwards to Patagonia, were uninhabited – apart from occasional giants and cannibals. Juan Díaz de Solís, the first explorer to disembark on the now Uruguayan shore of the huge river mouth on 20 January 1516, in the belief that he had rounded the southern tip of the continent, was ambushed, killed and eaten with his group of scouts, in view of the horrified rest of the crew who had stayed on the ship. The estuary of the rivers Paraná, Paraguay and Uruguay – which Solís had given the name Mar Dulce – was at the time inhospitable and barren, plagued by insects and heavy torrents, and its few nomadic inhabitants were constantly balancing on the edge of starvation. The fourteen-year-old cabin boy Francisco del Puerto was the only survivor of the Solís expedition. He was adopted by the Charrúa Indians and had been trained as a warrior when another Spanish expedition, eleven years later, 'rescued' him. His story inspired Juan José Saer's novel *El entenado* (1983; *The Witness*, 1990). Saer is also the author of a remarkable 'imaginary treatise' about the 'river without shores' (*El río sin orillas*, 1991), from which I gather this scattered trajectory. The first Europeans to settle, another decade later, in an embryonic Buenos Aires on the western shore, soon succumbed to hunger and hardship. Only their horses survived – five mares and seven stallions, according to legend – and these bred and spread over the pampas, which in the centuries to follow were to become famous as the most fertile land in the world. This Argentinian Genesis myth, which systematically discounts an indigenous population, states the following order

of appearance: first the horse, then the gaucho¹ – and last the immigrant, who ‘descended from the boats.’²

The notion of the periphery, also in a Latin American context, has curiously remained an intrinsic part of the Argentinian self-imagination. The late Ricardo Piglia, one of the foremost writers in the generation after Borges, Sábato and Cortázar, ironically used to call his home country *el culo del mundo*, the world’s arsehole. Possibly because it at the same time still confidently assumes its role as a transplanted Europe, a beacon of civilization in a continent of barbarism; in the early 1900s one of the wealthiest nations in the world, at par with other immigrant countries like the USA or Australia. Although Argentina has been in a downward spiral of decline, economically and politically, ever since, Buenos Aires did retain its position as a cultural centre of the Spanish-speaking world throughout the twentieth century. And among the arts, its literature still has a privileged standing with few if any competitors globally.

I have already hinted at the crucial role of Jorge Luis Borges in my envisioned canon of contamination, and this chapter will largely be about his contribution.³ Borges himself would most certainly oppose my labelling – or any categorization other than his own. One of his most ingenious ideas was that a writer creates his own precursors, irrespective of national credentials. So, if we talk about an Argentinian tradition of contamination, it is clearly to a large extent, although perhaps inadvertently, a Borgesian creation.

Piglia distinguishes such ‘great Argentinian tradition’ and dates its origin to the nation’s foundational literary work, Domingo Sarmiento’s *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1845; *Civilization and Barbarism*, 2003[1868]).⁴ This monumental tract or essay about the gaucho leader Juan Facundo Quiroga

1 The gaucho is the South American equivalent to the North American cowboy, but it also has a racial connotation, as the gauchos were often of mixed race and largely adopted the ‘barbarous’ culture of the indigenous population.

2 In Spanish, *descender de los barcos* is a pun with the literal meaning of disembarking.

3 A large part of the following reflections has previously appeared in Swedish in my essay *Borgesiana* (2021).

4 The first English translation, by Mary Tyler Peabody Mann, was published in 1868 as *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; or, Civilization and Barbarism*. Mann was a friend of Sarmiento, who at the time was running for president in Argentina. Eager to present him as an admirer and ally of the United States, she cut out large parts of that which made the work distinctive for a Hispanic tradition. In 2003 a modern and complete English version appeared, in which the translator Kathleen Ross comments on her predecessor’s idiosyncrasies (Sarmiento and Ross 2003:21).

was a rant against both the ‘barbarism’ of the federal warlords in the constant civil wars of the nineteenth century and the tyranny of their vanquisher, the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas. As part of the Argentinian literary canon, it is as fundamental as José Hernández’ later epic about the deserter *Martín Fierro* (1872; 1879). Although neither Piglia nor Saer ever used that term to describe the tradition – Argentinian or not – in which they inscribed themselves, contamination is no doubt a main characteristic, if not the constitutive element. Piglia defines the example set by *Facundo* as

[t]he kind of strange book that blends essay, pamphlet, fiction, theory, travel narrative, autobiography. Books that are like condensation chambers for literary, political, philosophical, esoteric elements. Ultimately, these books are road maps to guide you in the Argentinian wilderness.

(Piglia 2001:39–40; see also, Hemer 2012:294–5)

In Argentina, as opposed to nineteenth-century Europe, the novel was from the beginning associated with seductive and passionate barbarism. Hence, there is a fundamental disdain for fiction in opposition to the true word, which is associated with civilization. But this disrespect does not prevent fiction from developing and flourishing at the very heart of the writing of truth. In Piglia’s interpretation, *Facundo* is the prime example of a work of fiction that is written ‘as if it were a work of truth’. It is this displacement that defines the form of the book and gives rise to the tradition of fragmented, exaggerated, interrupted, fantastic literature that Borges will develop to perfection (*ibid.*).

Whether Borges himself would ascribe to that genealogy is perhaps irrelevant. In the Borgean literary universe, traditions run in both directions, or circularly, and cross each other in constant new correspondences. If Borges is indebted to Sarmiento, then his work also ‘modifies and refines’ the reading of *Facundo* – as well as *Don Quixote* and all the works of the writers Borges turns into his predecessors. This seemingly simple yet ingenious idea is first formulated in his essay on Nathanael Hawthorne in *Other Inquisitions* (1964a[1952]). A substantial part of the essay is about Hawthorne’s short story ‘Wakefield’, which is based on a ‘true’ story about a man who disappears from his wife’s life and then continues to live in parallel with her, without making himself known. What was initially a kind of practical joke gradually turns into a nightmarish compulsion. Borges writes:

The circumstance, the strange circumstance, of perceiving in a story written by Hawthorne at the beginning of the nineteenth century the same quality that distinguishes the stories Kafka wrote at the beginning of the twentieth

must not cause us to forget that Kafka's particular quality has been created, or determined, by Kafka. 'Wakefield' prefigures Franz Kafka, but Kafka modifies and refines the reading of 'Wakefield'. The debt is mutual; a great writer creates his precursors. He creates and somehow justifies them. What, for example, would Marlowe be without Shakespeare?

(1964a:56–7).⁵

Borges had trouble defining the very specific genre that was to become his trademark: the fusion of essay and short story known as *ficciones*. They may, as Piglia suggests, be an offspring of a specific Argentinian sensibility, and they certainly have to do with a perceived sense of marginality that was crucial for Borges's creative fantasy. He was, as writer and literary critic Beatriz Sarlo so accurately put it, *un escritor en las orillas*. She translated this herself to *A writer on the edge*, as the title of a series of lectures held at Cambridge in 1992 (Sarlo 1995), but the Spanish word *orillas* – literally 'shores' or 'banks' – is a better concept for the borderland of contamination. *Las orillas* are the outskirts, the suburbs of an emerging metropolis that attracts fortune-seekers from the countryside and immigrants by the hundreds of thousands from across the Atlantic. Between 1869 – the first census – and 1919, Buenos Aires's population grows from eighty thousand to two million, almost three-quarters of which were immigrants from overseas. This is probably the largest wave of migration in world history.

When Borges, as a young aspiring writer, returns from Europe in the 1920s, he invents a mythical Buenos Aires and locates its origin in the inner-city suburb of his childhood, Palermo, which in his literary fantasy becomes a world of dusty streets and canteens, where succinct gauchos duel with knives; a world that had already vanished by the time he was born, if it ever existed. This borderland between country and city paradoxically combined local gaucho romanticism with cosmopolitan urban modernity – Borges's Buenos Aires is a curiously archaic metropole, as opposed to the bustling modern city of his rival Roberto Arlt. The border metaphor can also be extended to his bilingualism, due to his English grandmother, and the experience of being free to choose between the two European world languages. He reflected on the possibility of becoming an English-language writer, weighed the specific mass of the respective literatures and concluded that the English one was immeasurably heavier and more inhibiting. Spanish was less compelling, despite its historically comparable literary heritage. Surely, he realized that if

5 I have corrected Simms' English translation, which states that Hawthorne's particular quality has been created, or determined, by Kafka. But Borges might well have approved of that radical interpretation.

he chose English, he would have been banished to isolation as an eccentric 'exile writer,' without living contact with his surroundings, if he remained in Buenos Aires.

The South African writer Lewis Nkosi has pointed out that English people do not understand *Robinson Crusoe* or Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, because they cannot see themselves in them. Whereas James Joyce from Ireland, the nearest colony, had no problem with that identification (Nkosi 1975:158). An analogy with Spain and its former colonies does not really exist, because that empire is beyond living memory and because Don Quixote as a symbolic figure is the opposite of Robinson Crusoe, the epitome of rising British colonialism. It is certainly not my intention to dub Borges a 'postcolonial' writer – a label he no doubt would have rejected.⁶ But the point is that he made a virtue of his position in the periphery and on the front line, in a young nation with a literature that was still malleable, in the making. The latter applied to all Spanish-American literature, and Borges's pioneering contribution cannot be emphasized enough. One could claim, with only a slight exaggeration, that Borges invented Latin American literature – and not just in the banal sense that his own international breakthrough in the 1960s paved the way for 'el boom'.⁷ He made the entire world literature his own, in a way that would be impossible for an English or Chinese writer, and thus also created an example for his younger colleagues in Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Chile.

But the materialization of the *ficciones* has a curious and surprising background. During a very formative period of his life, in the early 30s, Borges made his living as a journalist: not in one of the respected dailies *La Prensa* or *La Nación*, which both played an important part in the cultural public sphere, but in *Crítica*, which despite its name was a popular boulevard paper notorious for its 'yellow' journalism.⁸ *Crítica's* eccentric owner, Natalio Botana, an Argentinian Citizen Kane, had the idea of launching a competitor to the weekly literary supplements of *Prensa* and *Nación*. The paper's film

6 He might, on the other hand, have tolerated 'postmodern,' although he was scarcely aware of his leading position in the postmodern pantheon of the 1980s: Ashbery, Borges, Calvino – the ABC of postmodernism.

7 'El boom' is the shorthand label for Latin America's commercial and critical heyday on the world literature arena. Four writers from different parts of the continent are primarily associated with the boom: Julio Cortázar from Argentina, Carlos Fuentes from Mexico, Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia and Mario Vargas Llosa from Peru. The Nobel Prize to García Márquez in 1982 marked the culmination of the movement and the late award to Vargas Llosa in 2010 may be regarded as the confirmation of its literary impact.

8 At the time Argentina's largest newspaper, it had a daily circulation of around 700.000 copies.

critic, Borges's close friend Ulyses Petit de Murat, was asked to edit the new *Revista Multicolor de los Sábados*, and he in turn suggested that Borges become his co-editor.⁹ Borges surprisingly accepted the proposal and Botana gave the two editors a completely free reign. During the fourteen months the project lasted, from August 1933 to October 1934, the duo edited 61 eight-page supplements in full format – and Borges himself produced far more than the contract stipulated: reviews, translations, mini-essays and small prose pieces, the latter either under his own name or a pseudonym (Alex Ander, Benjamin Beltrán, Andrés Corthis, Pascual Güida, Bernardo Haedo, José Tuntar).¹⁰

The Saturday *Revista Multicolor* seems as improbable as a *Sun Literary Supplement* and remains perhaps without parallel in its cheerful mixture of high and low, fine and popular culture; with articles on jazz, boxing and parapsychology mingled with comics, crime stories and reflections on Proust and Schopenhauer, all in a bold and remarkably modern layout. This unique and innovative journalistic experiment was a revolutionary experience for Borges and decisively influenced his writing; most importantly in the amazingly fruitful encounter between encyclopaedic erudition and yellow journalism. Natalio Botana was happy to put his employees on unexpected assignments. For example, the theatre critic as a crime reporter or the poet as a football referee. He urged Borges to write with 'great impact', that is, to exaggerate and, if necessary, to fabulate. Twenty-per-cent truth was enough for an article—and the reader should not be able to distinguish this one fifth from the four fifths of fiction. Borges embraced this concept with both enthusiasm and great skill.

All the mini-biographies and playful variations on literary models that would make up *A Universal History of Iniquity* (1935)¹¹ had previously passed through *Crítica's* Saturday supplement. Borges has explained that he never had the idea that they would become a book when he wrote them. They were newspaper articles intended for a wide audience and therefore deliberately 'picturesque.' The merit of these playful pieces was, as he himself attests, that

9 The story of Borges' journalistic career is taken from Petit de Murat's book *Borges. Buenos Aires*, which was originally published in 1980 and republished, with a lucid foreword by the editor Nicolás Helft, in 2019.

10 A compilation of his articles in *Crítica*, 1933–4 that had not previously been published in book format was released for the centenary of Borges' birth (Borges 1999a).

11 A revised version of the original *Historia universal de la infamia* was published in 1954. The first English translation, by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, appeared in 1972 as *A Universal History of Infamy*. In 1998, all Borges' fictions were published in new translation by Andrew Hurley and my quotes in the following are consistently from that volume.

they were exercises in storytelling. His previous writing had almost entirely been poetry and critical essays; with *A Universal History of Iniquity*, the short-prose writer Borges appears, and many of the themes he sketchily outlines in the unforced newspaper format will return in elaborate form in his *ficciones*. At the time he does not yet know what to call the new genre in the making. But the crux is, as writer Alan Pauls notes in his concise and clever *El factor Borges* (2004), that the exercises in *Crítica* transform Borges's writing, by making it operate in two different frequencies simultaneously. To Pauls, this is almost the basic principle for Borges's continued writing:

To say A and B at the same time, to tell a story X while telling the story Y, to write a story and an essay simultaneously: Borges' work excels in this kind of duality.

(Pauls 2004:134)

The journalist career continues after the employment at *Crítica*, but more modestly, in the women's magazine *El Hogar* [Home], where he edited a section on 'books and foreign writers' and continued to write columns until 1958.¹² Note that the subjects Borges writes about for the broad newspaper audience are the same ones that he discusses in his essays for the high-brow *Sur* journal: Zeno's paradoxes, Gödel's theorem, the mystery of time, eternity, nominalism etc. Nor is the way of writing different. When he introduces Joyce to the readers of *El Hogar*, he is as Borgean as ever; writing in the very special terrain that Pauls calls *terra borgeana* – 'between two registers, two perceptions, two ways of reasoning, two languages'. Again, the border metaphor! Curiously, thinking and writing about Borges tends to be circular, like his own work; perpetually revisiting the same themes. The encyclopaedia was a source of both knowledge and inspiration for the self-taught Borges. He deeply deplored their decay; that the abbreviated articles in later editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* deleted such information as, for example, Swedenborg's habit of drinking milk at night when the servants saw him talking to angels and demons.

A second formative factor was, as already mentioned, his bilingualism. Mainly for the special meaning that the double belonging gives to the translation, both literally and figuratively. The fact that he first reads *Don Quixote* in English and then, when he reads the original, finds the translation superior, cancels the boundary and hierarchy between original and translation. All literary works are in Borges's view translations. Here is the root of his

12 His essays and reviews from *El Hogar* are gathered in Borges 1986.

genre transgression; Pauls calls it *el corazón del vértigo borgeano* (the eye of the Borgean vertigo):

All the categories that support common sense – before/after, cause/effect, primary/secondary, original/copy – seem distorted by a strange, unknown wind and immediately begin to sway, as in Moebius' rings or M.C. Escher's impossible figures.

(ibid.:118)

The revolutionary literary fruitfulness of this idea is illustrated by 'The approach to Al-Mu'tasim', a bibliographical note on a book of the same name by a certain Mir Bahadur Alí, published in Bombay in 1932, which interestingly compares the methods of the detective genre with the experiences of mysticism. The note was originally published as a kind of postscript to the essay collection *Historia de la eternidad* (1998[1936])¹³ and everything indicated that it was a bibliographical note, like the countless short reviews Borges wrote in the mid 30s. Five years later, he decides to include it in *The Garden with Forking Paths* (1941), his first collection of short stories, which together with the subsequent *Artifices* (1944) will make up *Ficciones* (1944), and become his major literary breakthrough. The apparent bibliographical note is converted into a short story. This transformation perfects the very genre of *ficciones*. The crux of the matter here is that the text is unchanged in the two books, five years apart. Borges often reworked his texts in different versions and added newly written texts to old books in new editions. But in the case of 'The approach to Al-Mu'tasim', he does not change the text, but the context. Is it essay or fiction? There is no unequivocal answer to that question, or the answer is flexible, disturbing, wavering – in the sense that the written is not defined by any attributes of the text itself but by the relationship it attains with the various contexts in which it happens to appear. To the author's various tools is thus added one that often leaves no trace but nevertheless has an extraordinary artistic potential: the ability to manipulate contexts.

Pauls provides another illuminating example. In his *Obras completas* (1969), Borges includes a poem in the debut collection *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923) written in 1966. It is called 'Lines that I could have written and got rid of around 1922'. Borges was exceptionally self-critical and deleted entire books from his collected work – for example the essay collection *Inquisiciones*, a prequel to his key work *Otras inquisiciones*. But instead of completely erasing or cleaning out parts of a youth work with which he is not particularly

13 'A History of Eternity' was never translated to English, but most of the essays are included in *The Total Library* (Borges 2000).

satisfied, he chooses to add a poem, written more than forty years later, which challenges the other poems in the collection and transforms the entire context.

A third ingredient is humour, without which the intricate games with fictions within fictions would risk coming across as cold if perfect intellectual constructs — which is certainly what many detractors claim. As a polemicist, Borges was sarcastic and ironic, but his fictions are often characterized by a kind of controlled madness that sometimes overflows its banks. Take 'Pierre Menard, author of the *Quixote*', in which he pushes the contextual thesis to its extreme. Pierre Menard is a fictional French writer whose work is divided into two categories, the visible, which consists of about twenty monographs, translations and prefaces, and the invisible, which according to Borges is 'perhaps the most significant of our time.' The latter consists of chapters nine and thirty-eight in the first part of *Don Quixote*, as well as a fragment of chapter twenty-two. Menard did not intend to write a new, modern *Don Quixote*, but rather 'the' *Quixote*: producing a few pages that word for word and line for line coincide with those of Cervantes. In a letter to Borges dated Bayonne, 30 September 1934, he declares that his novel is as revolutionary as the final term of a theological or metaphysical proof. The sole difference is that while the philosophers publish the intermediate stages of their deduction, which explain how they arrived at the conclusion, he has decided to delete all the drafts. In conclusion, Menard writes:

Composing the *Quixote* in the early seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary, perhaps even inevitable undertaking; in the early twentieth, it is virtually impossible. Not for nothing have three hundred years elapsed, freighted with the most complex events. Among those events, to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself.

(Borges 1998:93)

In his comparative reading, Borges concludes that Menard's fragmentary *Quixote*, despite all the difficulties, is more subtle than Cervantes's. He takes as one of his examples a passage from the ninth chapter:

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor.

(ibid.:94)

Written in the sixteenth century, by the layman Cervantes, this enumeration is merely a rhetorical tribute to history. Whereas Menard, a contemporary of William James, astonishingly defines history as the mother of truth, that is, not as an exploration of reality but as the origin of reality.

The contrast in styles is equally striking. The archaic style of Menard – who is, in addition, not a native speaker of the language in which he writes – is somewhat affected. Not so the style of his precursor, who employs the Spanish of his time with complete naturalness.

(ibid.)

Sometime in the 1960s, a French philosopher, who was particularly interested in the history of madness, happened to read another text by Borges and dropped his jaw in astonishment. The philosopher was Michel Foucault and what he happened to read was ‘The analytical language of John Wilkins’. Unlike Pierre Menard, John Wilkins is a historical figure: a clergyman and natural philosopher in sixteenth-century England, and one of the founders of the Royal Society. He was a mediator between religion and science, an advocate of a natural theology based on rational arguments and of tolerance as a basic political principle. His most famous work is *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668), in which he proposed, among other things, a new universal language to replace Latin. This can be read in *Wikipedia*, but for some reason no longer in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The latter remarkable fact is the reason Borges takes a particular interest in him.¹⁴ Ostensibly, ‘The analytical language of John Wilkins’ is an essay; the context is the essay collection *Other Inquisitions* (1964a), in which Borges also writes about odd figures such as J.W. Dunne and P.H. Gosse. He refers to authoritative sources and gives a pedagogical account of Wilkins’s proposal for the universal analytical language:

Wilkins divided the universe into forty categories or classes, which were then subdivisible into differences, subdivisible in turn into species. To each class he assigned a monosyllable of two letters; to each difference, a consonant; to each species, a vowel. For example: de means element; deb, the first of the elements, fire; deba, a portion of the element of fire, a flame. [...]

The words of John Wilkin’s analytical language are not stupid arbitrary symbols; every letter is meaningful, as the letters of the Holy Scriptures were meaningful for the cabalists. Mauthner observes that children could learn Wilkin’s language without knowing that it was artificial; later, in school, they would discover that it was also a universal key and a secret encyclopaedia.

(Borges 1964a:102–3)

14 Consulting the 1967 EB, I note that John Wilkins is still missing; he has possibly been reintroduced in later editions.

Borges continues the presentation of Wilkins's categories, respectfully, albeit with reservations regarding certain ambiguities and incompleteness in the classification of, for example, 'stones' and 'metals'. Something is obviously deranged in Wilkins's theory. But instead of defending or trying to explain what now seems incomprehensible, Borges completes the madness through an absurd association:

These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies recall those attributed by Dr. Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled 'Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge'. On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.

(ibid.:103)

Having come this far in the reading, Foucault bursts into laughter. It is a guffaw that will echo in both literature and philosophy. What happened? The question is not what Borges wants to say, but what it is that makes the whole story implode... Out of this reading experience came *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (1973[1966]), one of Foucault's most influential works, and his acknowledgment in the foreword was probably as important for the canonization of Borges as the Formentor Prize five years earlier, which had marked his definitive international breakthrough.¹⁵

Borges first wrote about John Wilkins in *El Hogar*, 1939. Like so many other of his characters, fictional or not, he can thus be traced to the journalistic production of the 30s. It is obvious that the humorous side of Borges flourished in the light, unpretentious newspaper format – and in the collaboration with others. The friendship with Ulyses Petit de Murat was crucial, although its

15 *Prix Formentor*, named after the town Formentor on Mallorca, was established by the Spanish publisher Carlos Barral in 1960 and was awarded in the years 1961–7. The prize had the ambition of reaching a prestige on a par with the Nobel Prize and was backed by leading European publishers. At the first awarding, the jury was divided into a southern European phalanx that supported Borges and a northern European one that favoured Samuel Beckett. The compromise solution was to let them share the prize. After a long break, the awarding was resumed in 2011, and among the recent awardees are the two Argentinians Ricardo Piglia (2015) and César Aira (2020).

importance has tended to be overshadowed by the later close friendship with Adolfo Bioy Casares.¹⁶ The fourteen-year-younger Bioy took over the role of closest friend and partner, and humour was one of the fundamental elements of their collaboration. Bioy's wife and writer colleague Silvina Ocampo testifies to the boisterous laughter that often echoed from the study where they worked together, almost daily during the periods they were both in Buenos Aires.¹⁷ But their joint creations, usually under the pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq, are mostly regarded as a kind of diversion alongside the 'real' work, just like the 'light-hearted' part of Borges's journalistic production. Critics still seem to have difficulty reconciling the serious Borges with the frivolous one; they have been seen as diametrically opposed, almost as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, instead of seeing Jekyll in Hyde and vice versa.

The journalist Borges may appear as a contradiction. But the academic Borges is an as flagrant oxymoron. Although he taught literature at the University of Buenos Aires and developed special courses in Old English, he lacked academic degrees and basically remained an autodidact. Many critics and scholars have wondered from where – apart from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – he retrieved his knowledge. As for one of the favourite subjects, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he was undoubtedly very deeply informed, as demonstrated by his *Nueve ensayos dantescos* (1982), but he was nevertheless a layman. In his essays he does include footnotes with references, and to some of the longer texts, for example the title essay in *A History of Eternity*, he appended lists of his often capriciously chosen sources, sometimes simply what he happened to have on his bookshelf. But, as a rule, he takes academic precision quite lightly – and the reader can seldom be sure whether the cited works and authors are historical, apocryphal or entirely figments of the author's imagination.¹⁸ In a 1952 issue of *Sur*, there is a contribution by one Maria Rosa Lida de Malkiel with the title 'Contribución al estudio de las fuentes literarias de Jorge Luis Borges', and not everyone understood that the gravely serious article was an offspring of Borges's expansive sense of humour. But when Saúl Sosnowski, the undisputed expert on Borges and the Kabbalah (Sosnowski 2017[1972]), asks him how he could know so much about Jewish

16 Bioy's posthumously edited 1,600-page diary-biography *Borges* (2006) is an almost unimaginably rich source for anyone interested in Borges.

17 Silvina Ocampo (1903–93) was the younger sister of Victoria Ocampo, and a writer of short stories who has posthumously been recognized as one of the great Argentinian authors. She is portrayed in *La hermana menor* (2018), a fine biography by writer and journalist Mariana Enríquez.

18 Pedro de Agrigento, mentioned in his talk on 'Immortality' in *Borges Oral* (1979) is such a figure that I took some pains to trace in vain.

mysticism without mastering Hebrew, Borges reveals in his answer a detailed account of how he worked when he immersed himself in a subject. The starting point was his youth's reading of Gustav Meyrink's novel *Der Golem*, but the most important source was *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) by Gershom Scholem, the founder of modern research on the Kabbalah and the first professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Borges had read it several times when he visited Scholem in Jerusalem in 1969. They had a long conversation that was taken up again on Borges's second visit to Jerusalem two years later; Scholem is not only his most important reference but also becomes a personal friend.¹⁹ Then, Meyrink and Scholem are supplemented by additional sources: Longfellow's version of *The Divine Comedy*, in which a couple of pages are devoted to the Kabbalah; a book by Joshua Trachtenberg on Hebrew superstitions surrounding the golem concept; books by Arthur Edward Waite, Henri Serouya and Adolphe Franck; and, of course, the article on 'Kabbalah' in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He could probably also have mentioned Christian Knorr von Rosenroth and Christian David Ginsburg who appear, along with Waite, in the story 'Unworthy' from 1970 (Borges 1998:352–7) ...

Unlike the prosperous Bioy and other writers from the upper class, who did not have to lift a finger for their livelihood, Borges faced the choice that most writers have: the media or the academy.²⁰ But whereas many see their subsistence occupation as a necessary evil, if not a choice between plague and cholera, and struggle not to be stylistically corrupted, Borges never seems to have worried about adaptation or compromise. To the extent that he at all reflects on the various writing practices, he respectfully ignores the conventions of genre – including the intra-literary hierarchy between 'real' literature and genre literature – and merges them into his own incomparably wayward practice, which is one, if not the, epitome of contamination.

Borges the ethnographer

But what about Borges and ethnography? The question is not as far-fetched as it may appear at a first glance. To begin with, he had an early interest in folklore, especially the urban folklore represented by the tango. One of his

19 Borges mentions him by name in his poem 'Golem' in the collection *El otro, el mismo* from 1964 (Borges 1977:206), according to his own account because Scholem was the only rhyming word for golem.

20 From 1955 until his retirement in 1973, he had the position as chief librarian of the National Library, which of course was in many ways and in every sense a perfect base for his writing.

first books of prose, *Evaristo Carriego*,²¹ was intended as a biography of the poet by that name, a friend of his father and a legendary character in Palermo who died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-nine.²² While immersing himself in the local history of Palermo, and Buenos Aires, he abandoned the initial focus on Carriego's person and the final result was a concoction of biography, ethnography and literary analysis, unlike anything he wrote before or after. Although he later expressed dissatisfaction with it, he did not delete it; on the contrary, it was one of the books that he extended in a later edition. The added text is the crucial 'Historia del tango' (1955), a condensation of his ethnographic findings in the search for the origins of this emblematic Argentinian artistic expression. Borges's relation to tango was ambivalent. He detested the popularized 'sentimental' version, which he blamed on the influence of the national icon Carlos Gardel; whereas, he idealized the raw tango that was intrinsically linked to the honour culture of the gaucho turned *compadrito* (a 'loud-mouth', a man inclined to quarrel) that had emanated from the brothels of the suburbs. In 'History of the tango' he confesses his own feelings, when listening to tangos like *El Marne* or *Don Juan*; how he remembers in detail a both stoic and debauched apocryphal past: in which he fought and challenged people, only to finally fall, without a word, in an obscure knife duel.

Perhaps this is the tango's mission: to give Argentines the belief in a brave past, in having met the demands of honour and bravery.

(Borges 2000:397, trans. S.J. Levine)

And, in the final stanza of the long poem 'El tango', in the collection *El otro el mismo* (1964):

... The tango creates a past
which never existed but is nonetheless true,

21 It was first published in 1930. The extended 1955 version is In *Obras completas 1* (Borges 1996:101–70).

22 Carriego published only one book, *Misas herejes* (Heretical masses), with motifs from a vanishing Palermo that he was too young to have experienced. To Borges he represented a sort of *payador*, that is, a gaucho troubadour who improvises verses accompanied by a guitar. He was moreover an anarchist, and making this humble figure the subject of a biography was a kind of political statement in support of the radical inclusive *criollismo*, as opposed to the nationalism of Leopoldo Lugones and other leading intellectuals (who leaned more and more towards the fascist right). *Misas herejes* was published in 1908 by Establecimiento Gráfico de A. Monkee. It is available in full text at several virtual libraries, for example Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes and Biblioteca Virtual Universal.

the impossible memory of having died
fighting in a suburban streetcorner.

(Borges 1977:209, trans. by the author)

One of the most recent of the many works by Borges that have been retrieved after his death is *El tango: Cuatro conferencias* (2016). These lectures on different aspects of the tango were addressed to a tiny Buenos Aires audience in 1965, and would most probably have been forgotten if they hadn't been recorded by an attending Spanish Borges admirer. The cassette recordings eventually ended up in the possession of the Spanish – Basque – writer Bernardo Atxaga, who wrote a story about their trajectory. After confirmation by Borges's widow Maria Kodama that the recordings were authentic, they were transcribed and published and are today the most vivid testimony to Borges's vocation as ethnographer. But the ethnographic dimension of his work goes further than this, and in a different direction that might literally ascribe to the term 'speculative anthropology'.

Among the latest and most intriguing contributions to the wild genre of Borgesiana is a book called *Borges: Los pueblos bárbaros* (2019) by the late Horacio González, one of Borges's successors to the prestigious position of head of the national library.²³ The allure of barbarism is an overlooked sub-theme in Borges's work, according to González. He is not referring to the obvious if ambivalent fascination with gaucho culture and its offshoots in the raw suburbs of Buenos Aires when he defines Borges head-on as a cultural relativist: a label that surely both surprises those who immediately associate his work with a classical Western canon and angers those – often the same persons – who unreflectively take the allegation as an insult.

To support his thesis, González analyses three examples. The first is the closing title story of *Brodie's Report*. The construction is typically Borgesian: a manuscript, in English, that the narrator/editor found tucked into a copy of a rare edition of the first volume of Lane's translation of *Thousand and One Nights*. The handwritten document, 'in colourless English', is a report by Scottish missionary David Brodie about his stay with a people in Central Africa he calls the Yahoos,

23 Borges held the position from 1955 to his retirement in 1973, and was appointed by the military government that toppled the first Peronist regime. Exactly fifty years later, in 2005, González was appointed by the Peronist government of Néstor Kirchner – a symbolic act of opposed political overtones – and remained on the post until 2015. Gonzalez, like Beatriz Sarlo, was among those who had an ambivalent relation to Borges and therefore wrote most interestingly about his work. He died of Covid in 2021.

lest my readers should forget the bestial nature of this people (and also because, given the absence of vowels in their harsh language, it is impossible to transliterate their name exactly).

(Borges 1998:402–3)

The nod to Jonathan Swift is accentuated in the opening descriptions of the outlandish beliefs and customs of the Yahoos: they eat reptiles and drink milk from cats and bats, they hide and close their eyes when they eat, but do everything else in front of everyone, ‘like the old cynics.’ The boy child who is chosen as king has his eyes burned out and his hands and feet cut off, ‘so that the world will not distract him from wisdom.’ He then lives locked in a cave (castle) to which only the four wizards and the two slave girls who smear his body with dung have access. The queen lives in another castle (cave) and is never allowed to see her king, but instead offers herself to the sorcerers and slave hunters (‘generally Arabs’) whose caravans pass through her kingdom. Brodie was also honoured with this favour, but ‘his cloth and his habits’ caused him to decline. The report’s catalogue of outlandish excesses also contains refined sarcasm, as when Brodie chides the Yahoos for their cannibalism, that is, the habit of consuming the flesh of dead kings and wizards, saying it’s to ‘embody their virtue’ while simultaneously touching their bellies and their mouths,

perhaps to indicate that dead men are food as well, or perhaps – but this is no doubt too subtle – to try to make me see that everything we eat becomes, in time, human flesh.

(*ibid.*:403)

Brodie’s report, recorded in Glasgow and addressed to the Queen of England, is however more than a Swiftian pastiche or parody of early nineteenth-century anthropology. What it describes in awe is a world that defies our logic by its complete absence of symbols; verbal language has been replaced by gestures, such as throwing a handful of mud or rolling around on the ground. What Borges shows, according to González, is that even under the most rudimentary living conditions, there is nothing that prevents a group of people from considering themselves the bearers of civilization.

Although he remains an apostle of faith, pleading for the salvation of the Yahoos, Brodie’s experience opens him up to the possibility that there are conceptions of the world other than his own: thousands of conceivable worlds with equally legitimate claims. At the end of his report, he writes:

The Yahoos, I know, are a barbarous people, perhaps the most barbarous of the earth, but it would be an injustice to overlook certain redeeming traits which they possess. They have institutions, and a king; they speak a language based on abstract concepts; they believe, like the Jews and Greeks, in the divine origins of poetry; and they sense that the soul survives the death of the body. They affirm the efficacy of punishment and reward. They represent, in a word, culture, just as we do, in spite of our many sins...

(ibid.:407–8)

In ‘The immortal’, in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (1949),²⁴ written a couple of decades earlier, we also have access to an original manuscript in English, this time found in the last of six antiquarian quarto minor volumes of Pope’s *Iliad*. The manuscript reproduces the Roman soldier Marcus Flaminius Rufus’ account of his arduous expedition to the City of the Immortals. Almost at the goal, he wakes up as if from a nightmare with his hands tied, in a village inhabited by naked and shadowy creatures. They are dumb and, like the Yahoos, feed on snakes. He recognizes them as ‘the bestial lineage of the Troglodytes, who infest the shorelines of the Persian Gulf and the grottoes of Ethiopia.’ They are ‘childlike in their barbarity’, repulsive but harmless, and help him neither live nor die; to survive he must steal his ‘first abominated mouthful of serpent’s flesh.’ Flaminius does not know how many days and nights pass among the troglodytes, but as he continues his journey to the City of the Immortals, he notices that one of them follows him from a distance, ‘like a dog.’ He names him Argos, after the dying dog in the *Odyssey*, and tries in vain to make the troglodyte learn the name.

I recalled that it is generally believed among the Ethiopians that monkeys deliberately do not speak, so that they will not be forced to work; I attributed Argo’s silence to distrust or fear. From that vivid picture I passed on to others, even more extravagant. I reflected that Argos and I lived our lives in separate universes; I reflected that our perceptions were identical but that Argos combined them differently than I, constructed from them different objects; I reflected that perhaps for him there were no objects, but rather a constant, dizzying play of swift impressions...

(ibid.:189)

24 The first English translation, by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, was published in 1970. I am however consistently quoting from Andrew Hurley’s new translation of the *Collected Fictions* (1998a: 183–95).

Then, one night, when the heavens open and the locals emerge from their dens to ecstatically indulge in the violent rain, the companion suddenly stammers out these words, with gentle wonder and tears streaming down his face: *Argos, Ulysses' dog. This dog lying on the dungheap*. When the perplexed Flaminius asks Argos how much of the *Odyssey* he knows, he answers with difficulty in stumbling Greek:

Very little. Less than the meagerest rhapsode. It has been eleven hundred years since last I wrote it.

(ibid.:190)

The fact that civilization and barbarism do not constitute diametric opposites for Borges, but rather varying aspects of a continuum, appears even more clearly in 'Story of the warrior and the captive maiden', also in *The Aleph and Other Stories*. It differs from the two examples above and from Borges's other stories in what he himself calls the genre of fantasy, since, as he emphasizes in the afterword, it 'attempts to interpret two supposedly real occurrences': one from the early Middle Ages, the other from his own family history. The 'warrior' is the Longobard Droctulft, who, during the siege of Ravenna, abandoned his own tribe and died defending the city he had previously attacked. As a reward, the grateful people of Ravenna gave him a burial place in a temple with an inscription that emphasized the contrast between his terrifying look and his gentle mind. This fragment of the history of the barbarian who died as a defender of Rome has been rescued from oblivion by Paul the Deacon, Borges in turn becomes aware of it through the Italian literary critic and philosopher Benedetto Croce, one of his oft-quoted sources. Reading the story of Droctulft, he finds himself enormously moved,

and I was struck by the sense that I was recovering, under a different guise,
something that had once been my own

(ibid.:209)

Eventually he remembers a story he heard as a child from his English grandmother, Fanny Haslam. In the 1870s she had lived in the border areas of the provinces of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe, as the wife of the governor Francisco Borges Lafinur. When she, half in wonder, half in jest, had remarked one day upon her fate as an exiled Englishwoman at this far end of the earth, she was told that she was not the only one. Some weeks later she was pointed to an Indian girl strolling across the town square. The young woman was barefoot and wore Indian clothes, but the roots of her hair were blond, and her eyes were 'that half-hearted blue that the English call grey'. In faltering

English, which she has not practised in fifteen years, the woman tells Borges's grandmother that she is from Yorkshire, that her parents had emigrated to Buenos Aires and that she had lost them during an Indian raid. Now she was the wife of a minor chieftain, to whom she had already given two sons.

Moved by outrage and pity, my grandmother urged her not to go back. She swore to help her, swore to rescue her children. The other woman answered that she was happy, and she returned that night to the desert.

(ibid.:210)

What is the connection between these two stories, each of which may appear to be the other's opposite? Borges reflects on the mysterious impulse, more pervasive than reason, that takes possession of both the barbarian who is dazzled and converted by the beauty of the city and the European woman who chooses the wilderness: an impulse that causes both to obey a calling they were not able to explain.

It may be that the stories I have told are one and the same story. The obverse and reverse of this coin are, in the eyes of God, identical.

(ibid.:211)

Civilization and barbarism are not only interchangeable sides of the same coin; they also condition each other. Droctulft was called an apostate and traitor by the Longobards, who a couple of generations later did as he did, becoming Lombards, that is, Italians. Borges imagines that one of Droctulft's clan, the Aldigers, became a forefather of Dante Alighieri. The immortal Homer, on the other hand, was among those who for unknown reasons abandoned their Eternal City to live in caves. The missionary David Brodie imagines that also the Yahoos are a degenerate culture whose communication by means of gestures and actions is peculiarly reminiscent of a written language. In each of the examples, one finds a breaking point, a kind of revelation or a mystical experience that, regardless of which 'culture' it is, involves a break with a previous 'natural' order. We can call it cultural relativism or a farsighted civilizational critique: an undermining of Western arrogance and an openness to other world views that also largely permeates Borges's essays, where he discusses the *Kabbalah* and *Thousand and One Nights* as frankly as Neoplatonism or Buddhism.

A fourth example of the alleged allure of 'barbarism', which Horacio González does not mention, is a very short story, almost a prose poem, in the mixed poetry and prose collection *Elogio de la sombra* (1969; *In Praise of Darkness*, 1974). The title is 'The ethnographer' and Bioy's biography reveals

that it is also based on 'a real story' that Borges heard told on one of his trips to the USA. The main character is a student at an American university, who has been advised to study Native American languages; the narrator thinks his name was Fred Murdock, but there is nothing special about him, 'not even that feigned singularity that young men affect'. He is asked by his professor to do fieldwork in a remote reservation to study the esoteric rites and try to find out the secret that the shamans reveal only to the initiated. When he returns, he can write his thesis and the university will ensure that it is published.

Fred Murdock follows the call and, as an exemplary anthropologist, spends two years in dire straits on the prairie, where he learns all the cultural customs of the tribe. He goes so far as to dream 'in a language that was not that of his fathers' and to think in a fashion that the logic of his mind rejected. After a determined period of time, the shaman asks him to remember and tell his dreams, and the secret he has been harbouring is finally revealed to him. But the moment he is initiated and accepted, when he has thus successfully achieved his goal and figuratively speaking become an Indian, he leaves the reservation without saying a word to anyone. When he returns to the city, he seeks out his professor and tells him that he has learned the secret and has decided not to reveal it.

'Are you bound by your oath?' the professor asked.

'That's not the reason,' Murdock replied. 'I learned something out there that I can't express.'

'The English language may not be able to communicate it,' the professor suggested.

'That's not it, sir. Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it in a hundred different and even contradictory ways. I don't know how to tell you this, but the secret is beautiful, and science, our science, seems mere frivolity to me now.'

After a pause he added:

'And anyway, the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself.'

(*ibid.*:335)

The professor then asks dejectedly if he intends to return to the reservation and live among the Indians. Murdock replies that what the prairie men have taught him is good anywhere and for any conditions. Whereupon the narrator laconically concludes the story with the statement:

Fred married, divorced, and is now one of the librarians at Yale.

(*ibid.*)

When I read ‘The ethnographer’ I had spent five years researching the apparent paradox that fiction is the way to a truth that is not accessible in any other way, and the story of Fred Murdock became, in a way, the condensed conclusion of my entire artistic research project.

The story has, as Chilean literary scholar Idelber Avelar notes, all the characteristics of an allegory, except that we don’t really know what it means. Read from an anthropological perspective, it seems to be about meeting and knowing ‘the other’ and then being able to translate that experience back to oneself. Murdock’s initiation suggests that such transparency would be possible. But the clue is that Borges also suggests that Murdock did not write his thesis precisely because his experience as an anthropologist had been too perfect. That is, he describes anthropology’s moment of perfection as its moment of definitive collapse (Avelar 2004:55). To decide not to write the thesis, Murdock must be able to do so, and it takes him several years of arduous work to get to that stage. So, while ‘The ethnographer’ is a critique of science – our science – it simultaneously ascribes anthropology ‘the privileged space for that kind of interrogation to arise’ (ibid.:56). That is, to the extent that Borges had any deliberate intention at all, it was perhaps an analogy with the literary creation process. Anthropology, like art, requires a certain amount of imperfection. If the ethnographer really succeeds in his intention to become the other, s/he cannot then return to being his former self. Complete success in such a sense would likewise imply the collapse of art and literature.

The multilayered elusive allegory of ‘The ethnographer’ also reminded me of my interview with Horacio González a year earlier, and a reflection he made in passing, that one almost should not talk about fiction, because the ultimate investigation of it would be like revealing a very important secret about the world (Hemer 2012:450–1). I found this ‘almost’ enormously inspiring. It was, in a sense, this ‘almost’ that my whole project was about. Unlike Fred Murdock, I wrote my thesis. And if I had no mother discipline to begin with, I felt I had found it in the end. Anthropology suited me decidedly better than, for example, comparative literature, because it shares a very important secret with literature itself: it can encompass (almost) everything.

The cipher

Interestingly, when returning to Borges some ten years later, I came across ‘The ethnographer’ again, in a slightly different context. One of the most useful maps to *terra borgeana* is, as already hinted, to be found in Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah. If only metaphorically, it is a given that the idea of writing as a cipher must have fascinated Borges – as did the search for the Word, formed of the right letters, that is the key to Creation. The golem is nothing less than a human-generated being, whose unfortunate creation

is vividly described in the poem of the same name, which Borges himself in conversation with Sosnowski (1972) describes as ‘perhaps the best poem I have written.’ The idea that the world is a divine script and each person a cipher with a definite meaning is also found in Léon Bloy and Thomas Carlyle, two oft-cited precursors in Borges’s personal canon. But although Borges is fascinated by the Kabbalah’s notion of the absolute text, the secrets of which can be revealed to whoever studies each letter minutely, he simultaneously revolts against the limitations of theology and tries to find openings through language. The analogies between Borges’s motivations and the methods of the Kabbalah also have an important catch:

While the Kabbalists risked their eternal destinies through hermeneutic processes, Borges only risks his (and the lucky reader’s) entertainment. For Borges, it is a given to reconstruct imaginary worlds (if everything is already thought out in advance); to the Kabbalah initiate it is possibly being given a momentary vision of a world that belongs only to God.

(Sosnowski 2017[1972]:42)

In addition to the direct references in lectures and essays, there are numerous overt, masked or covert references to the Kabbalah in both poems and stories. The most striking examples are perhaps ‘The library of Babel’ and ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’, both in the *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), whose title also contains a clear allusion. ‘The circular ruins’ in the same book is a variation on the golem theme. The subsequent *Artifices* (1944) is also full of allusions, above all in ‘Death and the compass’, where the protagonist Erik Lönnrot’s detective work follows something like a Kabbalistic matrix. Apparently, all of the *Fictions* are impregnated. In *The Aleph*, the allotment is already in the title. A (aleph) is the first and most powerful of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For the Kabbalists, it is one of the three *imoth*, which literally means ‘the mothers’ and corresponds to the three basic elements; the other two are M (mem) and S (shin). The first letter cannot be pronounced, but is the root, the beginning, of all articulation. It includes not only all the other letters of the alphabet but all human communication and all that can be expressed about the universe. In its inarticulate form it includes every relationship with the universe and, ultimately, the universe itself. The aleph is consequently a favoured theme in Kabbalistic literature, which unanimously acknowledges its magical power. This power also extends outside the theological context – to, for example, Borges’s work. Apart from the title story, there is above all one story in *The Aleph* that has a clear Kabbalistic connection – Sosnowski refers to it even as an ‘aleph’ for the entire authorship: ‘The writing of the god.’

In brief, it is the story of a Mayan man named Tzinacán, priest of the Pyramid of Quaholom, for years locked in a cell under the pyramid that was burned down by the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. In the dark, Tzinacán tries to remember everything he knows and after years of effort he remembers one of the god Quaholom's traditions.

On the first day of creation, foreseeing that at the end of time many disasters and calamities would befall, the god had written a magical phrase, capable of warding off those evils. He wrote it in such a way that it would pass down to the farthest generations and remain untouched by fate. No one knows where he wrote it, or with what letters, but we do know that it endures, a secret text, and that one of the elect shall read it.

(Borges 1998a:251)

Sosnowski notes the curious – paradoxical – fact that the priest uses rational methods to approach the secret. After years of pondering, he understands that the formula is written in the spots on the jaguar that 'with secret, unvarying paces measures the time and space of its captivity' on the other side of a wall that runs right through the prison vault. Every day at noon, when a hatch is opened and a rope is hoisted down with a jug of water and pieces of meat, he can see the jaguar for a moment, and he gradually learns the shape and order of the spots. After another year of vacillating between hope and doubt about being able to decipher the text, he has a terrifying dream.

So far, Tzinacán's arduous path to insight has almost to the letter coincided with the Kabbalist's. But here, at this crucial point, they differ diametrically. Having achieved contact with the divine nature, the Kabbalah initiate is supposed to return to humans with his acquired new consciousness, enriched with elements derived from God. By contrast, the protagonists in Borges's stories, who also aspire to the divine realms, return terrified to their human littleness if they do not understand what they have glimpsed. They prefer human chaos, because it is human, to a divine order that does not fall on them. Even the escape-proof prison is blessed by Tzinacán when he awakens from the dream that revealed infinity.

Sosnowski, surprisingly, also includes Fred Murdock in this crowd of Borgean truth-seekers – he who, after being entrusted with the esoteric secret of the shaman (the priest) of the prairie, returned to everyday life and became a librarian at Yale. But the analogy between Tzinacán and Fred Murdock falters. For Murdock, the initiation is hardly a terrifying experience. In my view, he is more like a Kabbalist who returns, enlightened by his insight, but chooses not to announce it. However, we do not know the motives for his

choice. Borges didn't know them either. He was, perhaps, to travesty himself, an unwitting mystic.

Barbarians at the gate

But let us return to Horacio González and the theme of 'los pueblos bárbaros,' the barbaric peoples. The ambiguous title of his book should also be read with emphasis on the second term, the 'people'; that is, in Argentina's case, the roughly half of the population that forms the base of Peronism. When Borges turns the ethnographic gaze towards contemporary 'barbarians' who, so to speak, knock at his own door – the Peronist mob – the parody takes on a different edge. The flip side of the coin, to borrow Borges's metaphor, is in González's analysis the short story 'La fiesta del monstruo' that Borges wrote with Bioy Casares in 1947, during Perón's first regime. It circulated underground as an anonymous manuscript until 1955, after Perón's fall, when the Uruguayan journal *Marcha* published it under the then new pseudonym H. Bustos Domecq.²⁵ It is an important text for both authors – Bioy's diary notes refer to it repeatedly – that, however, has remained strangely unnoticed, perhaps simply because it is impossible to translate and is even difficult to digest for an Argentinian reader. Its concoction of slang expressions and pure neologisms creates, with undoubted linguistic sensitivity, a contrived but plausible gibberish. The setting of the story, 'the feast of the monster,' is one of the great mass demonstrations in front of the government building in the Plaza de Mayo, where the general (the monster) summoned his hordes of followers to the heart of the city. These 'invasions of *cabezas negras* [black skulls]' or 'zoological floodings' as the unblemished racism branded them, were new and, for the upper classes, terrifying features in the segregated city centre. The storyteller, one of the monster's foot soldiers, recalls to a Nelly – a name that signals lower class – his tumultuous journey on overcrowded buses from Tolosa towards the city, and in the throng of the crowd at the entrance to the Plaza de Mayo. It is a dense text, narrated as if in a single uninterrupted flow, congenial with the chaos it reproduces. The linguistic playfulness brings an unsought association to James Joyce – whom Borges admired.²⁶ One can really hear the contrived laughter as the writers passed the whimsies between them, while also sensing the underlying anger; hatred was an important driving force for both during the Perón era. Towards the end of the story the

25 It was first published in book form in 1977, in *Los nuevos cuentos de Bustos Domecq*. The first collection of the duo's collaborative texts was translated to English as *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq* (Borges and Bioy Casares 1976).

26 He and Ulyses Petit de Murat were even on the verge of becoming contracted as translators of *Ulysses*.

mob passes a synagogue. An elderly Jew is allowed to pass unmolested, while a young student, bespectacled and with a stack of books under his arm, is requested to show the monster due respect. When the Jew defends himself, saying that everyone has the right to their opinion, he is lynched; and this sequence is described in detail, yet as in passing, in the same register as the previous swagger. It's a chillingly horrid and remarkably realistic scene; it could have been taken from *Kristallnacht* in Germany barely a decade earlier.

The association is natural. Perón was pro-Nazi during the war and anti-Semitism was widespread in an Argentina – and Buenos Aires – that had one of the world's largest number of Jews among its citizens, many of whom were refugees from pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. Figures such as Diente de Leche, Nene de Tonelada and Tabacman, who could turn into a carefree lynch mob at a moment's notice, were undoubtedly among Perón's militant supporters. The 'monster's' use of language was also strikingly brutal. In the speech that Borges refers to in another text from the same polarized era – 'L'illusion comique' in *Sur's* celebratory special issue after the downfall of the first Perón regime²⁷ – the hard-pressed Perón called on his followers to meet violence with more violence: 'When one of ours falls, five of them shall fall!' This was later reformulated into a popular slogan that would resonate throughout the 60s and 70s: *Cinco por uno / no va a quedar ninguno* (Five for one / we'll kill everyone). Nonetheless, 'La fiesta del monstruo' appears as a crude caricature of Peronism, a repudiation of the subtle irony that characterizes the depictions of 'Yahoos,' troglodytes and other barbaric peoples. That discrepancy reveals what Horacio González sees as Borges's Achilles heel.

González relies to a large extent on the critique that has already been convincingly presented by Juan José Saer. In 'Borges como problema,' one of the main essays in the collection *La narración-objeto* (1999), Saer takes one of his examples from a text that is usually considered to mark the apex of Borges's unrepentant stance against Nazism, 'A comment on August 23, 1944,' originally published in *Sur*, later included in *Other Inquisitions*. The date marks the liberation of Paris, but the text is not so much about the euphoria of the Allied success as about 'the enigmatic and obvious enthusiasm of many who were supporters of Hitler.' This contradictory reaction, which Saer calls opportunism, belies the main thesis of the article: Hitler, the Nazis and the Fascists are also Westerners, and they cannot possibly be for the downfall of

27 The issue (237, November – December 1955) had the headline *Por la reconstrucción nacional* – 'For national reconstruction' – which ironically was going to be the mantra of the military junta that toppled the second Perón regime in 1976. The title of Borges' text alludes to the play by Pierre Corneille from 1636.

the West. Thus, if Hitler lost the war, it was because he fundamentally knew he was wrong and therefore wanted to be defeated. The text's conclusion begins with some openly frank sentences that Saer finds vaguely horrifying:

[For] Europeans and Americans, one order – and only one – is possible: it used to be called Rome and now it is called Western Culture. To be a Nazi (to play the game of energetic barbarism, to play at being a Viking, a Tartar, a sixteenth-century conquistador, a Gaucho, a redskin) is, after all, a mental and moral impossibility.

(Borges 1964a:135)

These two remarkable sentences summarize Borges's unsophisticated political world-view and anticipate his later positions. In the first, it is established that Western culture represents civilization and all the others barbarism. In the second, gauchos and Indians, who were exterminated by Westerners, are equated with the Nazi barbarism that, invoking its 'Aryan-Greek' heritage, saw itself as the incarnation of Western supremacy (Saer 1999:121) etc. The polemicist Borges was, in Saer's view, truly a kind of inquisitor, quick to pass judgment. Or, with his exquisite metaphor, like the slightly over-refreshed man at the amusement park who shoots down one after another of the cardboard figures rolling by. All would be well and good if the categorical judgments had been well substantiated, but more often than not they were the result of whims and prejudices, or indeterminate and contradictory feelings that over time turned into manias and solidified into rigid and predictable positions (ibid.:116–17). From the beginning of the 60s, or perhaps as early as the middle of the 50s, the gap between the public persona and the literary work grew, and the former eventually completely overshadowed the latter. But here I raise an objection to Saer's analysis. The public persona is also contradictory: both 'gentle bard' and 'veritable militant'. Is Borges a wolf in sheep's clothing – or the other way around?

Fortunately, Borges is far more nuanced and composed as a storyteller than as a polemicist. And precisely in the case of 'La fiesta del monstruo', I find González' critique unfair, or at any rate one-sided. To begin with, the year of creation, 1947, is important. The Second World War was fresh in memory and Peronism in many ways represented a continuation of the fascism that had just suffered global defeat. Covert literary criticism of the Perón regime in the days of its power was perhaps not associated with danger to life – even if the text initially circulated as a kind of *samizdat* – but nonetheless it was a completely different matter than criticizing the regime after its fall, as in 'L'illusion comique' (Borges 1999b:55–7). *Sur*'s special issue 'for national reconstruction' leaves a bland revanchist aftertaste and the journal's owner

Victoria Ocampo's close personal contacts with the military regime were downright offensive. 'The feast of the monster' is however written *in medias res* but with a yet uncertain outcome. The rare streak of realism that appears in the brutal story is, in my view, its specific quality. If one can overlook the less memorable things Borges later said and wrote, it is difficult not to read 'La fiesta del monstruo' as the literary tour de force that it first and foremost is.

Have we deviated too far from the subject? This chapter has certainly flooded its banks, but even if the attention given to Borges may seem disproportionate, it is a necessary detour to arrive at – or return to – Saer and the devious concept of fiction. So, let us dwell in the fringes of *terra borgeana* and look at some other configurations of contamination.

Remembering the cannibal order

In *Diálogo* (Piglia and Saer 2011[1995]), a series of conversations with friend and colleague Ricardo Piglia, four years his junior, Saer notes that Borges is clearly the master for all Argentinian writers after him, but a little further on in the conversation he adds:

For my generation, as for all generations, there was an element of patricide in relation to Borges ... In order to create one's own work, it is necessary to distance oneself from the authors one likes the most.²⁸

This ambivalence in relation to Borges's legacy is a prominent feature of Saer's oeuvre, which consists of novels and short stories as well as poems and essays. His internationally most well-known novel is the already mentioned *El entenado* (*The Witness*), which we will return to shortly. If Borges was the transgressor, Saer's attribute is perhaps rather the reversion of genres: his collected poems are called *El arte de narrar* (*The art of storytelling*) (2008[1977])²⁹ and he had a never-accomplished ambition to write a novel in verse. Another common style or personality trait is the deadly sarcasm in judgments and comments about contemporary colleagues. For example, Umberto Eco was, in Saer's eyes, a writer of 'entertainment for executives to read between airports' (Saer 1997:14); and García Márquez – whom he referred to as 'a certain Caribbean writer' (Saer 1999:77) – a Faulkner epigone, completely lacking the qualities of his idol. Whereas, on the other hand, he acknowledged Faulkner's influence in three 'great Latin American writers', namely Juan Rulfo from Mexico, Juan Carlos Onetti from Uruguay – and

28 The conversations took place in 1990. The quote is from Corbatta 2005.

29 It was first published in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1977. An extended version comprising all his poetry was published in Spain 2008.

Borges. Faulkner is, as previously noted, an interesting, perhaps surprising common denominator. Borges was one of those who introduced Faulkner to a Spanish-speaking audience with his translation of *The Wild Palms* in 1940, only a year after the original, and Saer liked to quote his characterization of Faulkner's novels: 'we don't know what happens in them, but we know that what happens is terrible.'³⁰

Saer was indeed Borges's main successor, in terms of literary weight, but at the same time his foremost critic, in the best sense of the word. In *El concepto de ficción* (1997), three of the essays deal specifically with Borges. In 'Borges francófono', Saer reads the fictional Pierre Menard as the Anglophile Borges's ambivalent confrontation with the entire French literary tradition, and notes the irony that the French took him to their hearts and attributed to his work the very qualities he parodied. 'Borges novelista' is about why Borges never wrote a novel and almost coquetted with not doing so. The opposition to the novel was rooted mainly in his distaste for realism. But here, as always with Borges, Saer finds a fundamental ambivalence: his entire work is at the same time permeated by an admiration for and aspiration towards the epic. To resolve this paradox, Saer uses Walter Benjamin's distinction between narratives and novels. The narrator is the nomad, the traveller, whereas the novelist is the resident; that is, the narrator is the one who explores, while the novelist rests securely in a historical place that no longer has anything to do with reality, in forms that are emptied of meaning. Assuming, *nota bene*, that the novel is defined as a genre whose historical epoch is clearly delimited: it begins with *Don Quixote* and ends with Flaubert's *Bouvard & Pecuchet*.

If the novels of the twentieth century hence are not to be considered novels and if Borges did not write any novels, it is because he believes – and his entire work underlines this – that the only possibility to be a novelist today is not to write novels.

(Saer 1997:281)

The preference for the short format also had more prosaic explanations. The aggravating blindness from the mid-50s played, of course, an increasingly limiting role. Before that, it was perhaps partly a kind of professional injury from his years as a journalist, combined with 'a basic aggressiveness in his

30 Saer in conversation with Piglia, quoted in Corbatta 2005. Saer does not disclose any source but may likely have heard it in conversation with Borges himself. As a translator, Borges was 'idiosyncratic'. In the above cited *Diálogo*, Piglia compares his version of *The Wild Palms* with the original and finds them to be radically different.

temperament'; Saer surmises that Borges simply lacked the patience that a novel would require. The third essay is a review of *El hacedor* (1960; *Dreamtigers*, 1964b) which Saer considered to be Borges's last work of significance.³¹

But Borges is also a central reference in the title essay. That fiction is not necessarily the opposite of truth may seem like a trite observation, but Saer is one of those who have most profoundly argued for fiction's claim to truth. It is in this seminal essay that Saer finally arrives at the tentative definition of fiction as speculative anthropology. Curiously, his novel *El entenado* (1990[1983]), which had been published six years before the essay, can be read as a form of speculative historical ethnography. Only now do I discover that the not very long-sought connection between the two texts has already been thoroughly explored, by literary scholar Gabriel Riera, in an article that asks head-on whether the fiction of Saer is a 'speculative anthropology' (Riera 1996).

The Witness is not an appropriate translation of the original; it ought to be '*The Stepson*'. The English title is not unjustified, but its connotation of judicial testimony sidelines the key themes of orphanhood, bastardy and adoption, and reduces the opacity of the novel (ibid.:374).³² The narrator is not merely a witness to brutal or incomprehensible events, a surviving victim, but also a participant observer who, sixty years afterwards, reconstructs from memory – or the memory of a memory – a world that was destroyed with his complicity. As mentioned at the opening of this chapter, it is inspired by the story of the cabin boy Francisco del Puerto, the sole survivor of the first Spanish expedition to Rio de la Plata. But it is not an attempt to recover the 'true' story. The narrator is anonymous, although he discloses his identity by stating *en passant* that 'his captain' was the one who discovered the Sweet Sea (*Mar Dulce*). There is however a reservation, as the storyteller on his return to Europe has spent many years with an ambulating theatre company, touring the continent with tales of his adventures among the cannibals. The rumour of the tragic fate of the Solís expedition had spread widely and he might be a jester who invented his own role within it.³³ In fact the stories of the 'sole survivor'

31 That Borges's later works would mostly consist of tired repetitions is, in my firm opinion, an unfair judgment that has also been passed by J.M. Coetzee (2001:173).

32 The Swedish translator – or publisher – chose as the translated title the completely mistaken *Upptäckaren* ('*The Discoverer*'), possibly due to the publication in 1992 and an explicit link to the 500th anniversary of Columbus's 'discovery'.

33 Whether Francisco del Puerto returned to Europe is not known. According to one legend, he continued as an interpreter on another expedition up the Paraná River, and eventually collaborated with the Indians in a surprise attack against the Spaniards.

get further and further removed from reality; in the end they are reduced to pantomime, when the narrator leaves the company and lets the theatre director's nephew take over his role. But it would be difficult to dismiss the detailed accounts of the vanished Amerindian community's life and customs as mere fantasies. As readers we are immediately thrown into a hallucinatory account of a literal carnival, when the corpses of the narrator's murdered compatriots are cut up, barbecued and devoured by ecstatic villagers in a feast that gradually turns into a violent sexual orgy, including children and elders, leaving many maimed and dead. This is a yearly ritual that the narrator shall witness ten times, without being expected to partake in the carnage. Every year he is accompanied by another spared youth, from a neighbouring tribe, who is treated well during the cannibal feast and, after the orgy, sent back in a canoe to his community to bear witness. The reason why the narrator must stay for ten years is that nobody knows where to send him 'home' – until the rumour of another Spanish expedition reaches the village. That is how he is eventually found, lying exhausted face-down in a canoe.

As opposed to Borges's fabulation in the guise of David Brodie, one can be confident that Saer is well acquainted with the classical anthropological – heterological – tradition. The novel opens with a slightly distorted quote from Herodotus about the Androphagoi who inhabit the most distant region, beyond which there is only desert,³⁴ but there are also hidden references to Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre du Bresil* (Riera 1996:374–5). Whether Saer has consulted more recent anthropological studies – Clastres or Lévi-Strauss, for example – can be left an open question. But Montaigne's famous essay '*Des cannibales*' from 1580 is clearly another implicit reference, also in terms of the narrative style or voice. The witness speaks to us over the centuries as a contemporary, in a manner reminding of Montaigne, as opposed to most nineteenth-century scholars of the human and social sciences. Before Descartes and Darwin there was seemingly more openness and less prejudice in the relation to 'the Other'. Montaigne's relativizing account of cannibals was however a secondary or tertiary version,³⁵ whereas the narrator in Saer's novel is indeed a first-hand witness to the daily life in the Amerindian community that had temporarily adopted him.

'The ethnographer' in Saer's tale is however not the narrator but Father Quesada, the priest on the rescuing and revenging expedition, who takes him under his wing and eventually, on their return to Spain, adopts him as

34 I have tried in vain to detect the exact quote in the fourth book of *Histories*, where Herodotus writes about the peoples beyond Scythia.

35 For an illuminating discussion of Montaigne's *Des cannibales*, see Mason 2015:81–5.

a stepson. Father Quesada teaches him to read and write in exchange for information about his experience.

Father Quesada would ask me disconcerting questions and note down the answers, often making me repeat them in order to glean further details. Did they have a form of government? Did they own property? How and where did they defecate? Did they barter handcrafted objects with neighbouring tribes? Were they musical? Did they have a religion? Did they wear jewellery on their arms, in their nose, round their neck, in their ears or any other part of their body? With which hand did they eat? With the information he gathered, Father Quesada wrote a very brief treatise which he entitled *An account of the adventures of a child lost to the world* in which he set down our dialogues. I should say, however, that at the time I was still stunned by what had happened to me, and my respect for Father Quesada was so great that I felt too intimidated to speak to him of many essential things his questions failed to elicit. I remember that once, during one of his meetings with his friends, he smiled and shook his head and I heard him say that the Indians were sons of Adam, doubtless unacknowledged, but sons of Adam for all that and therefore they were men like us. I clearly remember thinking to myself that night that for me the Indians were the only men on this earth, and that since the day they had sent me back, with the exception of Father Quesada I had met only strange, problematic beings whom only custom or convention dignified with the name of 'man.'

(Saer 1990:109)

Riera detects two noteworthy things in this passage. First, although the account of the orphan validates the veracity of the reported events through the presence of the 'legitimate survivor' and thereby sustains the classical heterology,

[b]y leaving out the 'essential things' from the sphere of the paternal, dialectical, communicative writing, *The Witness* questions the modes of authorization of the classical ethnographic interview as a form of representation of the other.

(Riera 1996:383)

Second, although Father Quesada's recognition of the man-eating Indians as 'sons of Adam' apparently alludes to an idea of the *bon sauvage*, the narrator treats the character of the cannibal in a register that is neither moral nor anthropological. He refers to them as 'the only men on this earth,' in contrast to the questionable humans he has encountered on his return to 'civilization.'

And yet, in another passage, he reflects on the fact that they – the Indians – were lacking something that he could not discern. As Riera notes in an earlier comment:

Cannibalism is articulated from an unmentionable lack; the problem of nominating this lack is not random. To the Indians, the articulation of the name of the lack is impossible; it can only be conceded in the form of the cyclical return of the act of eating the other, whose most notorious effect is the absolute amnesia after the excesses and transgressions. *For the narrator, by contrast, the attempt at articulation generates more fiction, or – the effect of speculation – allows the account to sink into the bottomless ‘mirror’ of fiction.*

(ibid.:378, my emphasis)

The critique of ethnography is then complemented by the assessment of the equally distorted representation of comedy. On Father Quesada's death, the narrator leaves the monastery, after seven years, and becomes a vagabond. At a roadside guesthouse he happens to cross trajectories with the above-mentioned theatre company – two men, the director and his nephew, and four women, whom the nephew calls cousins. On the tours the women double as prostitutes, and the youngest will bear a long line of children that the narrator eventually adopts, marking the continuity of a lineage of orphanhood and step-parentage. As he knows both Latin and Greek, and 'had some knowledge of both Terence and Plautus',³⁶ he is adopted in this new family and assigned to play the role of the 'authentic survivor'.

It was not hard. I simply left all truth out of the verses I wrote and if the odd scrap slipped through by mistake, the old man would make me cross it out, less concerned with the exact details of my experience than with his audience's expectations. When it was written, he gathered the company together for me to read it to them. After I had finished, my select audience, who had put on their sternest and most intelligent expressions to listen, crowded round me, congratulating me on the prosodic perfection of my verses and the mathematical precision of the plot. We began to rehearse: the old man played the part of the captain, his nephew the rest of my companions, and the women were savages. Naturally, I was to play the one role that was left unfilled, myself.

(Saer 1990:114–15)

36 Note the reference to Terence, the alleged father of contamination!

So, we have the testimony of the 'direct witness' on the one hand, and the comedy of the 'authentic survivor' on the other, construed by the expectations of the ethnographer and the 'public taste', respectively. Neither representation is near the narrator's real experience in 'the cannibal order', as Riera calls it. Let us return to his reflections on the role he was assigned by the Indians and the name they had given him, 'Def-ghi', which has many meanings, some of which are contradictory.

After long reflection I decided that the reason they had given me that name was because they wanted me to share some common essence with everything else that was *def-ghi*. They wanted me to reflect like water the image they gave of themselves, to repeat their gestures and words, to represent them in their absence, and, when they returned me to my fellow creatures, they wanted me to be like the spy or scout who witnesses something that the rest of the tribe has not yet seen and retraces his steps and recounts it, meticulously. Threatened by everything that controls us from the dark and keeps us outside in the open until the day we are plunged by one sudden capricious gesture back into the indistinct, the Indians wanted there to be a witness to and survivor of their passage through this material mirage; they wanted someone to tell their story to the world.

(*ibid.*:144).

Once he has left the cannibal order, Def-ghi is the survivor-testimony-narrator. Note that when he writes what is supposed to be read as his 'memories', the Indians have long been exterminated by the Spaniards. The testimony of this supposed witness is in other words the testimony of an absence. Which raises pertinent questions such as: Is it at all possible to be the witness of an absence? Is it possible to give testimony so many years after the events in question? Saer's multifaceted novel is more poetic and philosophical than ethnographic, but Riera's close reading finally arrives at the conclusion that it – as speculative anthropology, that is, fiction – embodies a more original approach to the Other than classical heterology, one that is branded by its indescribability, 'that indescribable memory' disclosed in the eyes of the Indians. Amnesia, the recurrent rupture in the narrative and displacement of speculation, is in the beautiful finale mirrored in a lunar eclipse.

Coming as I did from the ports, where so many men depend on the sky for survival, I knew this was an eclipse. But knowing is not enough. True knowledge is recognizing that we know only that which condescends to reveal itself to us. Since that night I have always sought the shelter of cities. Though not out of fear. That night, when the blackness could grow no

blacker, the moon little by little began to shine again. The Indians dispersed, returning to the village as silently as they had come, and went to bed almost satisfied. I remained alone on the beach. What came after that, what I call 'years' or 'my life', was the sound of seas and cities, the beating of human hearts, whose current, like an age-old river that washes away the useless paraphernalia of the visible, deposited me in this white room, to write, hesitantly, by the light of some almost spent candles, of a chance encounter that was both among yet with the stars.

(*ibid.*:166–7)

The date of the publication of the novel inevitably opens up a political interpretation as an allegory, or reassessment, of the recent military dictatorship's extermination campaign against the revolutionary left, and the fate of the more than fifteen thousand 'disappeared'. In 1983 the newly elected democratic president Raúl Alfonsín appointed a truth commission, Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (Conadep) led by Ernesto Sábató,³⁷ and called for a reassessment of recent history and the construction of a new narrative of the 'Dirty War'. This is the frame for the literature and human-rights scholar Kerry Bystrom's reading. She sees *The Witness* as a variation of what Linda Hutcheon has termed 'historiographical metafiction' – that is, fiction that:

'problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge' by representing the act of narrating history itself and 'refus[ing] to recuperate or to dissolve' the tensions between fact and fiction, past and present.

(Bystrom 2007:37, quotations from Hutcheon 1988:106)

Precisely by focusing on a period of history other than the recent national trauma, Saer's novel functions as a meta-commentary on the ways in which violent events have been documented or obscured in contemporary writing of history, and on the implications of such forms of remembrance and amnesia for a transitional Argentinian society (*ibid.*:39). Bystrom's reflections on the possibility of constituting a 'new' democratic nation on such violent origins ends on the question: 'Is there another way to bear the memory of the tribe?' (*ibid.*:45).

There is indeed one striking metaphor that supports the analogy: the floating bodies of dead Indians that accompany the Spanish ship's return journey down the river inevitably evoke the bodies of the disappeared who

³⁷ Its report, *Nunca más*, was published in 1985 and would reach sales of more than 500,000 copies, of which some 45,000 were translations (Crenzel 2008:18).

were sedated and dumped alive in the river mouth and adjoining sea. But as much as I appreciate Bystrom's lucid analysis of the novel, which I used as a reference for my own thesis,³⁸ I now find this approach, which also largely was mine at the time, to be as delimiting as the more common attempts to link it to the 1992 Columbus anniversary. When I reread it now, other aspects and qualities call my attention. But then, that is almost the default definition of good literature; Saer's own advertent or inadvertent intentions are secondary. Moreover, even if it was published in 1983, when democracy was beginning to be restored, it had been conceived during the dictatorship, which came to a sudden and unexpected end in 1982, and the association with Alfonsín and Conadep is anachronous.

Living (with) the nightmare

Saer's subsequent novel, *Glosa* (1986; *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington*, 2010), however, directly addresses the state terror. Partly written in a tense that could be called the future perfect, it stands out as one of the subtlest and strongest embodiments of the nightmare of the 1970s.³⁹ Like most of Saer's novels, it takes place in an imaginary space of the country and province of his birth, Santa Fe.⁴⁰ A gloss, as a literary genre, is an interpretation or explication of an obscure or unintelligible text, and *Glosa* is indeed one of Saer's most complex and evasive novels. The narrative frame is a conversation between two reunited friends, Angel Leto and *El matemático*, during a walk along Calle San Martín in the capital city of Santa Fe on an early October morning in 1961. The Mathematician has recently returned from Europe and the fresh memories from that journey pop us as they walk. This is but one of the many layers of time that interfere with the narrative present – the exact one hour it takes to walk the twenty-one blocks. The main piece of conversation is the two friends' attempt at reconstructing what really happened at the birthday party – which none of them attended – of another recurrent Saer character, the poet Washington Noriega (from whom derives the intriguing title of the English translation). The actual events are never clarified, but retold in

38 Kerry Bystrom and I share the unusual research interest in Argentina *and* South Africa. We were simultaneously doing research on pretty much the same material from similar perspectives, and have been collaborating on several projects ever since.

39 The following discussion is largely recapitulating the analysis of *Glosa* in my dissertation (Hemer 2012:326–8).

40 *El entonado* may seem like an exception to the rule but, curiously, there is a single name that designates the extinguished Indian community, a name that the narrator mentions in passing to his Spanish rescuers – '*colastiné*' – which discloses the identity of his hosting community and locates it to the area of Santa Fe.

fragments, in layer upon layer of hearsay and rumours. But the mystery of the novel is in the interspersed temporality, a future perfect, eighteen years ahead, when the Mathematician will remember this same walk, knowing that Leto a year earlier, in 1978, had killed himself after being ambushed by the police. This other layer of the future fate adds a resonance of horror to the walk through the empty streets. Beatriz Sarlo chooses *Glosa* as her main example for illustrating how literature ‘so hostile to being constrained by limitations of truth’ still presents ‘the most accurate images of the recent past horror and of their fabric of ideas and experience’ (Sarlo 2005:163). In her analysis, there is one specific detail that stands out as a condensation of this horror: the capsule of cyanide that the militants were provided with by their organizations as ‘death insurance’ in case they were captured. In *Glosa*, in the future perfect of Leto’s years of militancy, the sordid capsule of venom becomes:

a talisman that represents the all-or-nothing of a struggle and gives the violent action a sort of negative metaphysical shine: an assured Nothing.

(ibid.:166)

Saer, living in voluntary exile in Paris since the 60s, had a marginal impact on the public sphere in Argentina and *Glosa*’s chillingly exact depiction of the social solitude of the militant went largely unnoticed. The contrast could not be sharper to the enormous public impact of his friend Ricardo Piglia’s first novel *Respiración artificial* (1980; *Artificial Respiration*, 1994), which is perhaps the most significant book written in Argentina in recent decades. This was at least a widely supported opinion among the writers and critics I interviewed for my thesis in 2008. Piglia had long had to carry the yoke as Borges’s supposed heir – and probably handled it better than most would have done. Unlike many, if not most, of his colleagues, he remained in Buenos Aires during the dictatorship. Some contemporary accounts by writers in exile spoke plainly about the ongoing holocaust, but *Artificial Respiration*, which only subtly alludes to the political situation, is, along with exiled Manuel Puig’s prescient *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976; *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, 1980), the enduring reference to this evil time. Argentinian friends testify to how Piglia’s novel literally made it easier to breathe, by showing that it was still possible to write in the Argentina of the military junta; that literature still had meaning.

Piglia, who died of cancer in 2017, was a café intellectual in the best sense of the word; one who reflects by discussion. I personally experienced his *esprit* on two occasions, in cafés – possibly the same one – near La Placita in Palermo; the first time in 1992, the second and last time in 2008. What I particularly remembered from the first interview was his story about his return to Buenos Aires, from one of his sojourns as a visiting professor at

Princeton University, a few months after the military coup. The bus stops had been renamed *zonas de detención*, and Piglia believed the new signs literally marked assembly points for those arrested to be taken to the concentration camps. This surreal experience is also recounted in the book *Crítica y ficción* (2001), which consists of interviews in various newspapers and magazines from 1976 to 1998. The main part of the conversations is from the mid-80s, after the fall of the Junta, but before the Sábato Commission had documented the systematic state terror. The period of transition gives special relief to the fundamental idea in Piglia's analysis, that fiction is the material from which society is woven. During the dictatorship, the medical metaphors flourished: the national body was infected with the gangrene of terrorism and the military were the only ones capable of performing the necessary surgical procedures, sometimes without anaesthesia. The euphemisms served to gloss over the real bloody operations and maimed bodies, while explicitly alluding to them. Like a horror story. The state fabulates, as Piglia put it, sometimes more inventively than the authors, and the primary task of literary fiction is to expose these fictions of the powers that be. Yet, according to Piglia, the exemplary counter-narrative to the horror story of the criminal state was not to be found in any contemporary novel, but in the story of *las madres de Plaza de Mayo*.

Nevertheless, *Artificial Respiration* was a sufficiently effective literary act of resistance. Borges is a consistent reference, which may perhaps seem surprising considering his dubious political stance at that time, but both the novel's characters and the ingenious composition with parallel narratives, timelines and shifting subjects bear a clear kinship with Borges's fictions. One can read the novel as an allegory of the dictatorship, a tract on internal and external exile, an ironic counterfactual examination of what still appears to be the Argentinian enigma – how one of the world's seemingly best-equipped countries, abundant in natural resources and with a relatively small and well-educated population on a gigantic land area seems doomed to a spiral of economic and political crises. Among the unmistakably Borgean elements is a supposed meeting between Kafka and Hitler at the Café Arco in Prague sometime in the period that remains mysteriously blank in the Führer's biography, between October 1909 and August 1910: an encounter that would have been of decisive importance to both.⁴¹ But in all its playful irony, the novel is at the same time permeated by the presence of the unspeakable. As

41 The idea that *Artificial Respiration* is like a novel by Borges has been proposed by, among others, Idelber Avelar:

Piglia's reader is often struck by the feeling that the spot from which s/he has decided to look at the novel proves to be a phantasmic mirror reflection produced in advance by the novel itself, as though critical

the exiled Pole Tardewski puts it, in conversation with Piglia's alter ego Emilio Renzi, referring to two of the twentieth century's literary icons:

Joyce? He tried to wake up from the nightmare of history so as to perform a pretty juggling act with words. Kafka, however, woke up every day to enter that nightmare and tried to write about it.

(Piglia 1994[1980]:213)

This particular quote evokes the partly contradictory statement by Beatriz Sarlo:

Literature does of course not dissolve all the problems posed, nor can it explain them, but in it a narrator always thinks *from without* experience, as if human beings could take control of the nightmare rather than just suffer it.

(Sarlo 2005:166)

Both during and after the nightmare of the dictatorship, literature emerged as the most important medium for portraying and understanding this trauma, which continues into the present. Interestingly – and here one can at least indirectly trace Borges's influence – a common denominator for all significant works about the recent past in Argentina is that they are not witness literature, but rather the opposite. The latter – the opposite of witness literature – is a particularly accurate description of the two completely central but very different novels that depict the single event that brought down the dictatorship: The war in the winter of 1982 – the summer in the northern hemisphere – over the windswept islands in the South Atlantic known as las Malvinas in Spanish and the Falklands in English. Fogwill's *Los pichiciegos* (1983; *Malvinas Requiem*, 2007) and Carlos Gamerro's *Las islas* (1998; *The Islands*, 2012) mercilessly puncture the national self-image; the heroic myth of the victorious Malvinas campaign as well as the diametrically opposed victim myth that followed the defeat, and which also served to absolve both the public and the militant left of responsibility for the previous dictatorship.⁴²

language were being led into a deceitful and bottomless abyss. In that sense Piglia ... wrote the novels that Borges never did.

(Avelar 1999:87)

Note the metaphor of the bottomless mirror/abyss of fiction that was also used by Gabriel Riera to describe Saer's speculative anthropology in *El entenado* (Riera 1996:378).

42 For thorough analyses of these two novels, see the chapter 'Islands of oblivion' in my thesis (Hemer 2012:356–79), and the interview with Carlos Gamerro, 'Fiction

I could continue the catalogue of brilliant contemporary Argentinian novels – defying the assumption that Borges had taken literature to its end – but in order not to move too far astray from the discussion of ‘speculative anthropology’, I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of one now-living author and one specific work that ingeniously inscribes itself in the Argentinian – American – tradition of contamination.

Freaked-out ethnography

I have been aware of César Aira’s extremely prolific and deeply original work, but something – a different focus – kept me from engaging with it. Until I finally read *Emilia, la cautiva* (1981; *Emilia the Captive*, 2016), which had been on my bookshelf since the early 90s. It was published the year after Piglia’s *Respiración artificial*, while the military junta was still in power, by a publisher of non-fiction books with mainly national themes that found it pertinent to broaden its catalogue to include fiction. Aira was thirty-two years old at the time and this was his second novel; he had made a discreet debut six years earlier with *Moreira* (1975), a sort of surrealist pastiche of a gaucho novel. Since then, he has produced well over a hundred novels, mostly the size of novellas, at an average rate of two or three every year. Some twenty-five of them have been translated to English, either separately or compiled in collections. He has moreover produced an impressive number of discursive texts, including acclaimed critical essays about the poet and generational colleague Alejandra Pizarnik, and a comprehensive *Diccionario de autores latinoamericanos* (2001).

Nineteenth-century Argentina, in a more or less distorted projection, is a preferred setting, as, for example, in *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter* (2006 [2000]), freely based on the German artist and Humboldt disciple Johann Moritz Rugenda’s expeditions in Chile and Argentina. Aira’s two geographic anchor locations are the hometown of Coronel Pringles in southern Buenos Aires province, near the border with Patagonia, and the Flores district of the capital city, where contemporary stories often take place, such as *Las noches de Flores* (2004), an opera-buffa-like comedy among pizza vendors in the wake of the 2001 economic breakdown.

Against the backdrop of Borges’s pronounced distrust of the novel, it is remarkable, and of course not a coincidence, that Aira insists on calling even

to me is a life un-lived’ (ibid.:380–90). For a comparison of the literary processing of the war experience in Argentina and the UK respectively, see my chapter ‘Islands in Distress’ in Bystrom and Slaughter 2018:144–64.

short stories novels.⁴³ His writing method has been compared to that of a free improviser; in practical terms, he sits down every morning in a café and writes a sort of running diary or column. When he can't push a story any longer, it's done – hence the varying scope of the novels. At the same time, he consistently sabotages the conventional novel form. He is, in the words of Beatriz Sarlo, a master of abandoning intrigue. When the often meticulously constructed narrative plot is abandoned, any illusion of probability that may have been established is destabilized from end to beginning: including the notion of an order of events and the idea of consistent individuals – modern subjects. In such fictions, which challenge the very idea that things lead somewhere, literally anything can happen (Sarlo 2007:476).

These fictions ... pass into the 'freaked-out' [*disparatado*], which is a way of observing or fashioning events. Starting with a meticulous reconstruction (of what is invented or what is observed), this construction is then disarmed, not little by little like the classic irruption of the fantastic in the story, but at once, as if it were, rather, a matter of the *marvellous*. The 'freaked-out' is *marvellous* in the sense that the reader and the text are always in a disposition to accept more. In the case of the fantastic, by contrast, everything must happen with the minimum, keeping invention at a distance from excess. The fantastic closes the story; the marvellous madness takes it out of bounds. There is no going back. The fantastic must conclude by deliberate acts of fictional will (see the efforts of Cortázar or the extreme and economic tension of Borges); the freaked-out is inconclusive and can therefore, in other dimensions, be 'ethnographic': let's go for a walk in the world where there is no scenario but a sum of funny episodes.

(ibid.)

As a full-length novel, *Ema the Captive* is not a typical Aira story, and the 'freaked-out' element is embryonic rather than fully-fledged; yet it appears to me to be a cornerstone of his authorship. The captive alludes not only to the young Englishwoman in Borges's story of the warrior and the captive maiden, but to an entire literary genre in the formation of the Argentinian national self-understanding, for which *el desierto* – the desert or, rather, grassland – and the myth of *la cautiva* were essential elements. The white woman abducted by Indians first appeared as a protagonist in Esteban Echeverría's epic poem *La cautiva* (1837), in which a symbolic settler family – María, her husband Brián and their little daughter – are captured by Indians. The epic is about their

43 He has, however, also published collections of short stories (*cuentos*), for example, *Tres historias pringlenses* (2013) and *El cerebro musical* (2016).

struggle to escape the savage abductors and return to civilization. Maria is the tragic heroine who defends her honour and eventually manages to rescue herself and Brián – note the English name, although with a Spanish accent mark – but the husband is then too weak to survive. María also succumbs, after learning that the Indians have killed their daughter. Echeverría is, as Mary Louise Pratt notes, one of the first to dramatize the violent indigene-European confrontation in the contact zone, ‘albeit in the rather mystified mode of romantic racial and family allegory’ (Pratt 2008 [1992]:182). Whereas stories of captivity traditionally have been narrated from the perspective of a survivor who has returned, hence reaffirming European and colonial social orders, *La cautiva* tells the other story, of the ones who did not succeed in engendering a white order. The epic of *The Captive* appeared a few years prior to Sarmiento’s *Civilization and Barbarism*, with its very similar depiction of the Indians who ‘descend like a swarm of hyenas on the cattle grazing in the fields and on the defenceless settlers.’⁴⁴ This irreconcilable view of the savage other stands in stark contrast to earlier attempts at forming alliances with Indian chiefs in the struggle for independence, and paves the ground for the genocidal *Campaña del desierto* in the late nineteenth century. But Pratt also points to Sarmiento’s ambivalence towards the mixed-race gaucho of the Pampas. Although he despises its ‘barbarism’, he is fascinated by the gaucho culture, and recognizes that it supplies uniquely ‘Argentine’ elements which exert tremendous force on the decolonizing Creole elites.

In a way unimaginable in Europe, the arbiters of culture in the emergent Argentine metropolis seized on gaucho culture as the source of a fiercely androcentric aesthetic of authenticity.

(ibid.:183–4)

But besides the elusive gaucho, the symbolic role of the abducted white woman was non-ambiguous in the emerging nation-state obsessed by defining borders, not only between civilization and barbarism but between those to be integrated in the fatherland and those to be excluded:

(T)he body of *la cautiva*, whose reproductive capital is contaminated by the blood of the savage, is the symbolic arena where the destiny of the Fatherland is played out, because it is there the drama of miscegenation, of forced deterritorialization and of extreme transgression is concerted.

(Semilla Durán 2014:2)

44 The quote from *Facundo* is translated by Pratt (Ibid.:183).

This highly eroticized image of the captive woman as a symbol of threatening contamination – the bearer of mixed children – remains a token in Argentinian cultural representations throughout the century and well into the next. Borges is, according to above quoted literary scholar María Semilla Durán, the first to break the canonical order by giving not only agency but self-determination to the supposed victim of savagery and rape. His abducted English maiden chooses her new destiny, to become the other. But although she is neither romanticized nor sexualized – as women seldom, if ever, are in Borges’s tales – there is an intriguing element of alienation. After refusing ‘rescue’ and proudly returning to ‘the desert,’ she will only make one more appearance in Borges’s grandmother’s life, some indefinite time later, when Fanny Haslam is out hunting:

[A]longside a squalid hut near the swamplands, a man was slitting a sheep’s throat. As though in a dream, the Indian woman rode by on horseback. She leaped to the ground and drank up the hot blood.

(Borges 1998:211)

Metamorphosis completed. The grey-eyed Yorkshire girl reappears as the vampire-like ‘Indian woman.’ Borges adds his own reflection to the grandmother’s tale:

I cannot say whether she did that because she was no longer capable of acting in any other way, or as a challenge, and a sign.

(ibid.)

But it is César Aira who offers the radical break with the entire myth complex of *la cautiva* and the desert. In *Ema the Captive*

the frontier is an empty concept, because it is continuously crossed and displaced, but above all because the stereotypical virtues and defects that were attributed to each side are dislocated, their contradictions mocked, bifurcations and impertinencies multiplied, capacities and potentialities interchanged, by turning the Indians into refined and decadent aesthetes and the whites into bloodthirsty savages.

(Semilla Durán 2014:3)

The *historiola*, as Aira labels it with a neologism on the back cover, is also set sometime in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but the situation is almost reversed. After strenuous travel on a prisoner transport from Buenos Aires, through a desert that is all but empty, Ema arrives to one of the forts in

the south – Pringles – on the border of a vast, flamboyant, tropical Patagonia ruled by a loose federation of Amerindian kingdoms.

In the first part of the novel, about the journey through the desert, the focalizer is the French engineer Duval who is an expert on the money press, an industrial tool that will eventually be disclosed as the secret of the Indian kingdom's prosperity. Ema's first appearance, some forty pages into the novel, is in the eyes of Duval:

The woman was wearing the tattered remains of two different dresses and she was so small, so thin and wasted, that she could have been taken for a child. Under a thick layer of filth, her features looked African, and her hair was short, bristling and greasy.

(Aira 2016:41)

Duval becomes her lover. But the men come and go in Ema's life. She brings a baby boy at the outset, and she is the mother of four children by different fathers when the novel ends. Duval disappears on arrival at Pringles. At the fort, she is given to one of the officers, but he abandons her when his fiancée from Europe arrives. Then she couples with Gombo, a gaucho, with whom she has her second child, a daughter. As a captive woman, she is currency – a recurrent concept – but she also takes native lovers and goes on exploring expeditions in the surrounding forest. Until one night the peaceful family life in a hut outside the fort is shattered by an Indian raid, and she is among the booty of women. The next time her appearance is described, it is through the eyes of an Indian prince:

His eyes lingered on a young white woman, the newest of his half-wives, who had been with him no more than a few weeks. She was nursing a naked little girl, two or three months old. She didn't look European and was barely different from the Indian women sitting around her. He couldn't remember who had told him that she was white. Some fragments of her history had reached his royal ears.

(*ibid.*:140)

A little further on, the mystery of her 'whiteness' is explained:

Although she was no different from the Indian women, with her dark skin and Asian features, she was categorized as white because of her history, and not just as a white woman but a captive: a romantic title that inflamed the savage imagination. The chiefs, however, were perfectly blasé: hundreds of

captive women passed through their hands each year, and only a bizarre inventiveness could excite them.

(ibid.:148–9)

Emá, whom the author on the back cover calls ‘my miniature self’, is clearly what the South African apartheid typology would call ‘coloured’, although with the coveted capacity to ‘pass as white.’⁴⁵ She is a survivor who cunningly climbs the Indian court hierarchy, an explorer of the refined ‘savage’ culture, driven by unadulterated curiosity, and a truth-seeker whose reflections in the course of her adventure become more and more prominent.

As time went by, Emá was gradually overtaken by an urgent desire whose futility exceeded all measures but the circumference of the universe itself: a desire to grasp the secret of the present, to penetrate the eternal unity of life and see the system’s undulating veil, since in the world of the savages systems had the insubstantiality of the hummingbird’s song and the iridescence of its plumage, while their manifestations were immutable as archetypes. There had to be a point at which reality, perfect incongruence, would get through to humankind. She asked Evaristo Hugo if she was on the right track.

The real, said the minister, was the State. And the supreme proof of that was the way it delegated its one inalienable function – the issuing of currency – to private individuals. Each citizen had a right to freedom, as long as that freedom was so complete as to exclude thinking.

(ibid.:167)

In the end she becomes a bold entrepreneur in the ecologically devastating business of breeding giant pheasants, for the supposedly insatiable market in the capital (Buenos Aires) and possibly overseas.

What do we make of this unrelentingly fascinating and surprising story, with countless allegorical entries? Aira calls it a *historiola*, but even though historical figures such as the Indian chief Catriel and the Argentinian war minister Alsina appear in the margins, it can hardly be categorized as ‘counterfactual history’, one of the alleged subcategories of ‘speculative fiction’. It is simply too fantastic, or ‘freaked-out’. Fantasy would be more accurate – but then a fantasy that is all the time on the verge of imploding.

Aira has not, like Saer, felt the need to rebel against the father – or grandfather – to find his own way. He is, as his writer colleague Juan

45 I will come back to the analogies between Argentina and South Africa in the next chapter.

José Becerra has expressed it, 'Borges and more'. In the tradition Aira has stubbornly created, Borges is included as an obvious predecessor, as well as the too early deceased Chilean generational colleague Roberto Bolaño – Latin America's most influential writer during the early twenty-first century and, perhaps, Aira's closest literary soulmate.

Concluding this chapter with Aira, one may rightfully wonder whether we have come to literature's end. Proceeding any further in that same direction would undoubtedly be difficult. It may be more fruitful to speculate on what the freaked-out ethnography may entail. Apparently more than just the 'reverse representation' in new disguise. Let us end on a sample from *Ema the Captive*, a reflection on a performance of Patagonian tightrope walking, in Australian poet Chris Andrews's lucid English translation:

Tightrope walking, the only one of the traditional European circus arts that the Indians had also developed, was a response to the various levels of the forest. An Indian travelling through the Pillahuinco would often come to a boundary where the land began to slope away: everything was transformed and diminished, becoming part of a panorama. This was one of the experiences that had led the Indians to develop their superhuman conception of the world.

The superhuman condition entails a theatrical or pictorial gaze, the all-embracing gaze that gathers everything under one umbrella. That's why there are so many parasols in the iconography of the explorers, not because they are needed as shelter from the weak sun of the pampas, so watery it can be hard to discern the pallor of the light from that of the shadows. Likewise the parasol-hats in Darwin's sketches of the Indians, crude vignettes that always show them about to mount a skinny horse with a human face. Humanity is always the key to interaction with savage peoples: negating, verifying, or expanding the human, transporting it to a world where it does not belong, which is invariably the world of art. Anthropologists tend to get lost in a transparent labyrinth, not unlike the ropes of the aerialists, soaked in a shiny resin. That intricate web reflected only the scintillations of the atmosphere.

What exactly was it that they were suspending in the air? The Indians were not always impressed by this art of walking on ropes. They accepted it indifferently. Occasionally a very fat man, like a sumo wrestler, would pass swiftly overhead, accompanied by laughter. Bad taste was always latent somewhere in their improvisations. Maybe everything they did had bad taste as its point of departure.

(*ibid.*:189–90)

Idleness in the Western Cape



I don't know when it ceased, and I doubt that it will ever begin again, but I used to dream of boarding the Aerolíneas Argentinas flight from Buenos Aires to Auckland over the South Pole. I have never crossed the South Atlantic, although I have metaphorically made that journey dozens of times, as Argentina and South Africa have become my two preferred points of reference. Seemingly very different, even diametrically opposed in some respects, they are both hubs of enormous literary creation, and share the experience of a traumatic near past that has strongly affected cultural and intellectual production. In my comparative study of the respective transition processes of the last three four decades (Hemer 2012), I was amazed by the similarities in the literary processing of the troubled past, and by the proactive role that literature – contrary to common prejudice – played in both countries. But I was not aware of the extent to which the similarities are reflected in a longer history, going back to early European colonization. When delving into the Argentinian mythology of 'the desert', I had reason to revisit Mary Louise Pratt's seminal *Imperial Eyes* (2008[1992]) and discovered her comparison of the 'contact zones' in southern America (Argentina) and southern Africa. Pratt appears as a perfect bridge for our metaphorical crossing from Patagonia to the Western Cape. Let us dwell a little on her theoretical approach and some of her key concepts.

The fundamental one, already mentioned above and in the previous chapter, is 'contact zone'. That is, in Pratt's definition:

the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.

(Pratt 2006:8)

A second key term is 'anti-conquest', by which she refers to

the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony.

(ibid.:9)

A third concept, to which Pratt gives a slightly different definition than the one it has later attained, is 'autoethnography' or 'autoethnographic expression'. These interchangeable terms refer to:

instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's terms ... in response to or in dialogue with metropolitan representations.

(ibid.)¹

Pratt's case studies are in South America and Africa, but her point of departure is eighteenth-century Europe, more precisely the year 1735, and two parallel events that would revolutionize the European conception of the world and of itself, allegedly creating the 'planetary consciousness' that underpins modern Eurocentrism. One is the publication of *Systema Naturae* (The System of Nature) by the Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné, known by his Latin name Linnaeus, which laid out a classificatory system for all plant forms on the planet, whether known or yet unknown to Europeans. The matrix for categorization was soon to be extended to minerals and animals – and, eventually, humans.² The other event was the launch of the first major international scientific expedition, intended to determine once and for all the shape of the world. The expedition under French leadership is known to history as *L'expédition La Condamine* – after one of its survivors, the geographer Charles de la Condamine – and the conundrum it set out to

1 Autoethnography in Pratt's sense would, for example, include the 'slave autobiographies' that boomed in the mid-nineteenth century, often co-written with a known abolitionist, as in the pioneer case of Mary Prince (Prince 1997).

2 Linné's Swedish origin is significant in more than one way. Sweden was a relatively small power with a neutral position in the competition between emerging and decaying colonial powers. Writing in Latin was a way to underscore this neutrality and gain impact across cultural and linguistic borders. But Pratt also interestingly suggests another reason for his success. Swedish state bureaucracy and citizen control was possibly the most advanced and efficient in the world at the time, and this was allegedly mirrored in Linné's system. His taxonomy lists bore striking resemblance with the Swedish church books (ibid.:25).

solve was whether the earth is a sphere, as Cartesian geography claimed, or a spheroid flat at the poles, as suggested by Newton. This hugely ambitious expedition chose to focus on Spanish South America, hitherto forbidden territory for foreigners. It would be ridden by disasters, and its scientific outcome was dubious, yet it sparked the proliferation of a new genre of inland-travel reports, in contrast to the previous centuries' sea voyage accounts.³ Even more important in this respect was the exploration of the natural world that followed on the Linnaean taxonomical revolution. Linnaeus' disciples literally spread all over the planet in order to categorize its flora and fauna. One of them, Anders Sparrman, sailed for the Cape of Good Hope in 1772, joined James Cook's expedition to Australia three years later and came back to the Cape for a second sojourn before returning to Sweden in 1776. Sparrman is one of four examples in Pratt's Southern African case study, which demonstrates the 'Linnaean watershed' by comparing a sequence of northern European traveller's accounts from the Cape in the eighteenth century. The first is German astronomer Peter Kolb's *The Present State of The Cape of Good Hope* from 1719 (Eng. 1731).⁴ This remarkable book is the most substantive ethnographic source on Khoikhoi (Hottentot) society and culture, and has the following declaration on the title page:

A Particular Account of the several Nations of the Hottentots: Their religion, government, Laws, Customs, Ceremonies, and Opinions; their Art of War, Professions, Language, Genius, &c together with A Short Account of the Dutch Settlement at the Cape.

Although based on several years of contact with different Khoikhoi groups, these encounters are not narrated; nor does Kolb report his travels to the interior of the Cape. Following the still prevailing navigational paradigm for travel writing, he only narrates his six-month sea voyage to arrive at the Cape, complete with storms, sickness and threats of attack on the high seas (ibid.:42). But he vividly describes the Khoikhoi forms of government, religious beliefs and ceremonies, cattle management, medicine etc. Pratt chooses as an example the description of how the Khoikhoi make butter, either for anointing their bodies,

3 The mapping of the continent, in the wake of the expedition, arguably also inspired the South American liberation from Spain half a century later. The continental *libertador* Simón Bolívar would famously pay homage to La Condamine and Humboldt as his forerunners.

4 His German name was Kolbe, but he has gone down in history as Kolb.

or for sale to the *Europeans*; for the *Hottentots*, unless in the service of *Europeans*, eat no butter.

(Kolb 1731, quoted *ibid.*)

This last sentence is telling, as it frames both ‘Europeans’ and ‘Hottentots’ in the kind of everyday interaction that goes on in the contact zone and moreover reverses the usual Euro-colonial exchange and cultural value. Kolb was clearly trying to exonerate the Khoikhoi from negative stereotypes that had been attributed to them by earlier writers; but his humanism, which affirms the Hottentots as primarily cultural beings, provides an even greater contrast with his successors. By the end of the century, as modern racist categories emerged, as European interventionism became increasingly militant and as Khoikhoi society was broken up and indentured by colonists, the humanist stance disappeared as a discursive possibility (*ibid.*:44). Linnaeus’ classification erased the anthropological categories, as non-European ‘subsistence societies’ ceased to be describable in European terms of government, professions or genius; these were replaced by the derogatory ‘governed by caprice.’ In Sparrman’s *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope* (1971[1783. Eng. 1785]) and the contemporary Scottish naturalist William Paterson’s *Narrative of Four Voyages in the Land of the Hottentots and the Kaffirs* (1980[1789]), the indigenous culture is non-existent, the native population either invisible or a disturbing element in the flora and fauna of the virgin nature. The landscape is written as uninhabited, unhistoricized and unoccupied, even by the travellers themselves. Pratt likens the Linnaean naturalist to Adam alone in the garden of Eden – before the creation of Eve.

The Hottentots do exist, but not as cultural beings. Sparrman’s portrait of them begins with five pages devoted to body parts, especially genitals. One might argue that the radical change in attitude from Kolb to Sparrman and Paterson reflected the almost complete disruption that Khoikhoi society had undergone in that same half century, but as Pratt notes, there is no reflection whatsoever on possible historical changes in their lifeways; in the Linnaean perspective the African indigenous peoples have no lifeways at all.

A paradox to be noted, though, is that whereas Kolb’s humanism embraced the cattle-breeding Khoikhoi, who as providers of meat to the Dutch East India Company were spared from enslavement, he took slavery as an institution for granted. Pratt cites from his gory description of the public torture and execution of a group of escaped slaves that had murdered and mutilated a white man. Sparrman, on the other hand, was a known abolitionist, who inspired the Scottish South African settler-poet Thomas Pringle (Attridge 2017:141). Pringle will reappear below.

But if there is an element of innocence in the Linnaean naturalist's 'anti-conquest', the imperial ambitions become blatantly clear in Pratt's fourth example, John Barrow's *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa* (1801). It also consists overwhelmingly of landscape and nature description, but as an emissary of British colonial interests, Barrow scans the territories of exploration for resources to be extracted and infrastructure to be developed.

Here the textual apartheid that separates landscape from people, accounts of inhabitants from accounts of their habitats, fulfils its logic. The European improving eye produces subsistence habitats as 'empty' landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a capitalist future and of their potential for producing a marketable surplus.

(ibid.:60)

Interestingly, for Barrow the 'unimproved African present' includes not only the Khoikhoi (Hottentots), the !Kung (Bushmen) and the Nguni (Kaffirs), but also their Afrikaner (Boer) exploiters and competitors. The Afrikaner settlers, whom Sparrman and Paterson hailed for their hospitality, are in Barrow's account disparagingly defined by their lack of taste, comfort and spirit of improvement. Needless to say, in the interest of British imperialism any prior Dutch claims, and one-and-a-half centuries of Dutch colonialism, had to be discredited. Yet, as J.M. Coetzee notes in his pivotal essay book *White Writing* (1988), not only British but European travellers in general often condemned the Boers in much the same terms they used to condemn the Hottentots, with 'indolence' and 'idleness.' Both groups were subjected to wilful misunderstanding of traditional lifeways in southern Africa and the Afrikaners presented a particular challenge to European bourgeois values, as they might

stand for a rejection of the curse of discipline and labour in favour of an African way of life in which the fruits of the earth are enjoyed as they drop into the hand, work is avoided as an evil, and leisure and idleness become the same thing.

(Coetzee 1988:32)

The reference to Coetzee is not incidental. In her reading of these early travel reports from the Cape, Pratt is largely leaning on Coetzee's analysis of the same books. Following her example, I return to *White Writing* as an appropriate inroad to South Africa, and to the writer whom I regard as the foremost now living representative of contamination in my understanding. I wrote quite extensively about Coetzee's work in my thesis, but then with a

primary attention to the novel *Disgrace* (1999c) and its controversial depiction of the New South Africa in the making.⁵ I shall leave that discussion aside here and focus instead on his early work, with its anthropological angle, and some of his latest books, which most clearly elaborate the contamination as cross-genre between literature and philosophy.

But let us dwell on the wider historical context and first approach the subject from a slightly different yet parallel perspective.

Refusing the apartheid typology

The Western Cape is the region in the world with the greatest genetic variation. It has been a cultural crossroads for centuries, if not millennia: Southern Africa's ancient history is only beginning to be revealed.⁶ In the colonial era, it was a global hub for slave traffic, second only to the Caribbean – although the slaves traded across the Indian Ocean and in the South Atlantic were mainly female household servants as opposed to the predominantly male plantation workers of the North Atlantic slave trade (Hofmeyer 2007). Yet, although modern South African culture, not least music, is a living vestige of creative global *mélange*,⁷ 'creolization' as a concept never attained an intellectual property in South Africa that even faintly resembles its influence in the Caribbean. This might be further proof of the divide between the New and Old World colonies, although more likely immediate explanations have to do with the time of colonization and the cultural and religious background of the colonizers – before and after Enlightenment and the Linnaean watershed, Dutch, German and English Protestants vs. Spanish, Portuguese and French Catholics.

Notwithstanding, racial segregation has been particularly strong in South Africa, and it was cemented long before apartheid, through the reification of 'race' and 'tribe' forged by the British system of indirect rule (Meskell and Weiss 2006). Even a liberal like Olive Schreiner, who fervently opposed the colonial savagery of Cecil Rhodes, advocated a federal 'multicultural' South Africa that would in practise seem compatible with the later apartheid motto of 'separate development'. Mixing was not an option, either for white or black South African intellectuals. Sol Plaatjie, one of the founders of black South African letters, warns through the main protagonist in his key novel *Mhudi* (1978[1930]) against the Bechuana's alliance with the Boers, as the latter will

5 See the chapter 'Amazing disgrace', Hemer 2012:221–43. See also the second part of *Cape Calypso* ('Waiting for Sr. C') in Hemer 2020.

6 See, for example, the works of archeologists Martin Hall and Peter Mitchell.

7 See French musicologist Denis-Constant Martin's pivotal study *Sounding the Cape* (2013), which was a main reference for *Cape Calypso* (Hemer 2020).

take Bechuana women to wife and, with them, breed a race of half man, half goblin and they will deny them their legitimate lobola.

(Plaatje 1978 [1930]:174, quoted in Wicomb 2018:54)

Breyten Breytenbach, the ‘albino terrorist’,⁸ is a sole exception. He affirmed the bastard origin of the Afrikaner nation and launched Zuid-Afrikanerdom in opposition to the purist Afrikanerdom (Breytenbach 1982), although in his later writings he also tended to lean toward the word’s derogatory meaning by claiming that, at least regarding their respect for nature and for animals, ‘the Afrikaners aren’t such reprehensible bastards after all’ (Breytenbach 1993:80; Hemer 2020:58–9).

Even Coetzee has a blind spot when it comes to creolization. In the introduction to *White Writing* he clarifies on the one hand that the title does not imply the existence of a body of ‘white writing’ different in nature from ‘black writing’. But then, in the end, he defines this ‘white writing’ as being ‘generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African’ (Coetzee 1988:11). As if it were a matter of transition, even a ‘qualitative leap’, between two distinct stages or bounded entities. Either ‘European’ (white) or ‘African’ (black), not a fusion or cross-breeding of the two, not the emerging of something ‘new’, as utopia-minded Latin American writers have defined their culture. In the essay about the novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin,⁹ Coetzee lucidly analyses the horror of miscegenation as articulated in the immensely influential *God’s Stepchildren* (1924), whose genealogy depicts black blood as a form of defilement, a degenerate seed that threatens to erupt and retrospectively expose all the preceding generations of its carriers as frauds, false whites (ibid.:141). Yet in *Boyhood*, the first in his autobiographical trilogy, narrated in third person, the young John is upset by the alleged defilement of white blood in the genealogy of the Cape Coloured.

8 As an opponent to apartheid, Breytenbach (born 1939) was compelled to leave South Africa in the early 1960s for France, where he married a French woman of Vietnamese ancestry, due to which he was not allowed to return to South Africa. On an illegal trip to his country of birth in 1975, he was arrested and sentenced to nine years in prison for ‘high treason’. *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984) tells the experience of his imprisonment. He was released in 1982 and returned to France.

9 ‘Blood, taint, flaw, degeneration: the novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin’. This essay and the one about the *plaasroman* and farm novel that will be discussed below were both awarded the Thomas Pringle Award, administered by the English Academy of South Africa, in 1988 and 1982, respectively.

Coloureds were fathered by the whites, by Jan van Riebeck, upon the Hottentots, that much is plain, even in the veiled language of his school history book. In a bitter way it is even worse than that. For in the Boland the people called Coloured are not the great-grandchildren of Jan van Riebeck or any other Dutchman. He is expert enough in physiognomy, has been expert enough as long as he can remember, to know there is not a drop of white blood in them. They are Hottentots pure and uncorrupted. Not only do they come with the land, the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been.

(Coetzee 1997a:62)

‘Pure and uncorrupted.’ Surely not an affirmation of cultural *mélange*, let alone creolization –or, ‘even worse,’ contamination. This is the self-assured statement of a boy, and a revelation of what the boy understands to be a public lie. In other words, an inopportune and highly radical standpoint in its context – which half a century later will be curiously echoed in the identity politics of militant *khoi-san* activists who refute the association with the mixed-race ‘coloured’ and claim their rights as a ‘first nation,’ on a par with Native Americans and Australian Aborigines.

Race is apparently an issue with which whites in general, and white South Africans in particular, are uncomfortable. So, let us, without restaging a black-white dichotomy, first turn to the other South African born author in my contamination canon, Zoë Wicomb, who explicitly and persistently has challenged the still so pervasive racist agenda. In the wake of the reaffirmation of both black and white political identities, cultural sociologist Zimitri Erasmus made an important, yet sadly so far not very influential attempt at ‘forging a new humanism for South Africa’ (Erasmus 2017).¹⁰ She is one of the scholars that have tried most insistently to introduce a creolization perspective to the South African debate. Erasmus famously refused to tick the box ‘coloured’ in the compulsory form provided by the HR department at Wits University and remains ‘unclassified’ in their register. This refusal of the apartheid typology is shared by Zoë Wicomb,¹¹ whose oeuvre consists to date of four novels, two collections of short stories and a large body of essays, most of which have been compiled in the volume *Race, Nation, Translation: South African Essays*,

10 I discuss it at some length in *Cape Calypso* (Hemer 2020:139-142; 152-162).

11 Erasmus paraphrases Wicomb when stating that:

my blackness draws its meaning from multiple, overlapping and contradictory belongings and not-belongings [...] *This Blackness defies attempts to give Blackness a general, monologic and definitive meaning.*

(Erasmus 2017:24)

1990–2013 (2018).¹² Born in Beeswater in the rural Cape in 1948, the year the Nationalist Party took power and introduced the term ‘apartheid’ to the world, Wicomb was sent to an English school in Cape Town and proceeded to the University of the Western Cape in Bellville,¹³ but left South Africa for Britain in the early 1970s and has – with the exception of three years in Cape Town in the early 90s, teaching at UWC, and regular visits after 1994 – been living abroad ever since. She is currently Professor Emerita at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Her Scottish-South African double bind is the subject of the first academic anthology about her fiction (Easton and Attridge 2017). But let us begin with her own words. When asked in 2013 by the *2paragraphs* entertainment news site to present her writing in two paragraphs, she made the following self-declaration:

I squirm at the question ‘who do you write for?’ I suspect it of nudging me into the nauseating reply of ‘for my people, my kind.’ No, I say without hesitation. I write *for* nobody, since the process of writing – of struggling not only for words but also with how to shape fragments or inchoate ideas into a story – precludes the question of reason or readership. Not even for myself do I write: an impossibility, since in confronting the blank page there seems to be no pre-existing self. (The self I know would rather slouch in a hammock, sipping something or other.) Rather, eerily, in that process of forging a narrative, of discovering what I am writing, a strange self seems to wonder at the text that is painstakingly being formed. If writing is something you do, have to do, it seems to balk at being harnessed to a prepositional phrase like ‘for...’.

Yet in the previous paragraph she had already qualified that statement:

... I can’t conceive of writing without also addressing social, cultural and national distinctions; my fictions try to show how these surface in everyday interactions, in spite of our cherished liberal-humanist beliefs. The challenge is to capture marginal voices, thus not only a matter of *my* voice but, rather,

12 The initiative to produce the collection was taken by Dorothy Driver, and it was edited by Andrew van der Vlies, both of whom are now associated with the University of Adelaide.

13 UWC was founded in 1959 as a college for ‘coloured’ students – and was derogatorily referred to as a ‘bush university’ – but it early on became a radical stronghold and had already in 1982 officially rejected apartheid. After the transition it has attained a position as one of the most high-profile universities of South Africa.

one of polyphony, the many different, even contradictory, voices that engage with each other. My fictions are primarily set in South Africa, a country still divided like any other by race, class and economics, and my project includes the recovery of minor, neglected or disparaged peoples and events.¹⁴

I have written quite extensively about Wicomb's work (Hemer 2012:132–44, 2020:91–7), but although I intend not to repeat here what I have already said elsewhere, some redundancy is inevitable. Because *David's Story* (2000), her first novel, is not only one of the outstanding artworks of the South African transition, but also a major example of fruitful scholarly-literary contamination. It courageously deals with several taboo issues that the transition tended to gloss over: the complex, mutually distrustful relation between 'blacks' and 'coloureds'; the abuse of women by their male comrades throughout the liberation struggle; the torture of dissidents in political correction camps – and general lack of democracy within the resistance movement. First and foremost, it is a lucid exploration of a little-known aspect of South Africa's history and present past. The frame story is set in 1991, the first year of truce and negotiations of the political transition.¹⁵ The novel's main protagonist David Dirkse, a former MK guerrilla from Cape Town,¹⁶ engages a woman ghost writer to help him tell his story. The chosen amanuensis – the reflective narrator of *David's Story* – is 'coloured' like himself and sympathetic to the struggle, but not a member of the organization, and hence not entrusted with all information. So, she must not only figure out the purpose of her task, but also fill in some significant blanks: most importantly about David's relation to the mysterious Dulcie, an MK comrade who had for unknown reasons fallen into disgrace with the leadership.¹⁷ David's wife Sally – originally Saartjie – was also an MK cadre before becoming a mother and is likewise elusive. She jealously waits at home in Cape Town while David is out travelling to 'find himself', as Sally scornfully puts it; she believes that he is covering up an affair. But David's soul-searching is in fact a quest for his own Griqua ancestry. There are diverging opinions as to whether the original

14 2paragraphs.com/celebs/zoe-wicomb (accessed 20 August 2024).

15 The period of hope between the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 and his installation as South Africa's first democratic president in 1994 was also one of the most violent in the country's history, with more politically motivated casualties than during the preceding State of Emergency.

16 *uMkhonto weSiswe* (MK) was the military arm of the ANC, founded by Nelson Mandela in 1961 and operating until 1993.

17 The name Dulcie very clearly connotes the ANC activist Dulcie September, who was murdered in Paris in 1988 under still unclarified circumstances.

Griqua were predominantly Khoikhoi or mixed Khoikhoi and Dutch, but the common aim under their first leader Adam Kok was to escape bondage in the Cape colony and set up their own independent state inland. They were joined by runaway and freed slaves, and a few whites, who all assumed the Griqua identity.¹⁸ Moving north through Namaqualand and the Northern Cape, they finally crossed the Orange River and settled at Klaarwater in what was to become – and still is – Griekwastad (Griquatown).

The Griqua journey in search of a promised land is like a mirror of the Boers' Groot Trek to escape British colonialism, and the two migrant communities had not only Christian mythology and religion in common; they shared the creolized Dutch that would develop into varieties of Afrikaans. The crucial difference was their racial identity. Whereas the Boers became increasingly concerned with confirming their whiteness, the Griqua at the outset consisted of multiple ethnicities and regarded racial mixing as an acknowledged part of Griquaness. Yet although the mirror counterpart to the stern Boer republics may have appeared as an embryonic 'rainbow nation', this vision of an alternative future eventually proved to be a mirage. *David's Story* sketchily reconstructs the various Griqua migrations and settlements, north, west and east on the Cape frontier, from the early 1800s to the 1930s, when the late charismatic leader Andrew (Andries) Le Fleur struggles to establish a separate homeland for a separate Griqua race, thus conforming to an ethno-nationalist logic that would later cohere with apartheid and portend the 'shameful' coloured vote for the National Party in the first democratic elections.

The novel's fascinating, seemingly fantastic story of the Griqua rebellion is in its general outlines faithful to documented facts. Yet David and his amanuensis deliberately distort the history: firstly, by insinuating that David is a descendent of Andrew Le Fleur and thereby also the Kok clan into which Le Fleur married; secondly, by jumping a century and bringing the French 'Father of Biology' Georges Cuvier into the Kok-Le Fleur genealogy. Cuvier is, in South Africa, forever associated with the fate of Sarah 'Saartjie' Baartman, 'the Hottentot Venus', who had toured Europe as a curious blend of vaudeville actress and ethnological museum exhibit before ending up with Cuvier and being exposed as 'an exemplary specimen of the back race' at Musée de l'Homme in Paris, where her genitals, brain and skeleton remained on display until 1974. This future national icon's entry into David's story occurs when the narrator asks him to write about Dulcie, as he seems unable to speak of her. He

18 The slaves had been brought from Mozambique, Madagascar, India, Malaya and Indonesia, the trade route of the Dutch East India Company.

reluctantly agrees, but when he hands over the notes it turns out that Dulcie has been replaced by Saartjie Baartman.

Thus he brought along the meticulously researched monograph, complete with novelistic detail: Saartjie's foolish vanity, the treachery of white men, the Boer mistress who would not let her go, whose prophetic words rang in her ears, the seasickness on the ship, the cage in London decked with leopard skins, and, on the catwalk of her cage, the turning of the spectacular buttocks, this way and that, so that Europeans would crack their ribs with laughter. And the bitter cold of northern winter that lasted all year long. There are quite enough of these stories, I say impatiently. I believe ours can do very well without. Besides, what on earth has Baartman to do with your history?

But it's not a personal history as such that I'm after, not biography or autobiography. I know we're supposed to write that kind of thing, but I have no desire to cast myself as hero, he sneers. Nothing wrong with including a historical figure.

But she may not even have been a Griqua.

David gives me a withering look. Baartman belongs to all of us.

Ergo, we are all Griquas, I laugh.

A good editor would know what to do with this material, he persists. There is no point in arguing; it is clear that the Baartman piece will have to stay.

And Dulcie? I ask.

He waves a helpless hand.

(Wicomb 2000:134–5)

This short excerpt gives a good sense of Wicomb's novelistic style, not least the irony and wit, which are also a key signature of her non-fiction writing. Reading her compiled essays from the last decades is revelatory, as it sheds new light on the transition and post-apartheid South Africa.¹⁹ Her perspicacity is as illuminating, whether in the role as literary critic – making for example the subtlest readings of Coetzee – or as defiant public intellectual. Andrew van der Vlies poignantly notes that she consistently speaks truth to power – even to the liberation movement whose aims she supported (van der Vlies 2018:19). She can do that with the authority of her immense learning, which is as deep

19 I follow Andrew van der Vlies' suggestion to write 'postapartheid' as one word (rather than post-apartheid), to mark an era that is by now its own period, one that not only comes after apartheid, but is forever in apartheid's long shadow (van der Vlies 2018:5–6).

as it is broad; but as importantly, I believe, by virtue of her double-outsider – or intermediate – position, both as an expatriate, based in Scotland, and as ‘coloured’, precisely because she refutes the apartheid categories. Clearly, as a ‘non-white’ – another moot classification – she can voice critique from within blackness, in a way that a white South African with whatever radical credentials could never do. Her essays from the early transition intrepidly address the patriarchal conservatism of the emerging cultural politics, how the reactive tends to become reactionary by ossifying certain traditional forms of black African culture as the official national culture. She early on denounced how the apartheid logic tended to be reproduced and perpetuated in resurging Africanism and other forms of identity politics, but her harshest critique targeted the postapartheid propensities in ‘her own’ community. The themes in the essays all resonate in the fiction, but the closest ‘pair’ to *David’s Story*, if we tentatively apply Pratt’s notion of ‘paired books’ in this context (see Chapter 1, p. 22), would be ‘Shame and identity; the case of the coloured in South Africa,’ 1998.²⁰ Like Coetzee, Wicomb gives crucial importance to Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *God’s Stepchildren* and its eugenicist view on miscegenation as a blood-borne infection, which can be kept at bay, at best, but never cured. The novel even suggests that Millin’s English missionary, Andrew Flood, as Griqua progenitor is copied on Andrew Le Fleur’s French grandfather Eduard. Yet in Wicomb’s reversal of the tragedy of blood, it’s not the degenerate seed that threatens to erupt but the infection of shame. Saartjie Baartman is another recurring topic. The essay takes its starting point in the debate about the return of her remains to South Africa. Like the novel, it was written before France finally acceded to Nelson Mandela’s request, which was one of the first he made as a president. The burial in 2002, in the Gamtoos river valley in the Eastern Cape, was turned into a spectacle of nation-building (Samuelson 2007:88–9) and Saartjie Baartman herself into one of the icons of the New South Africa.²¹ All but contributing to this mythmaking, Wicomb carefully deconstructs it.

20 First delivered as an address at the African Literature Association conference in Columbus, Ohio, in March 1995, it was originally published in Attridge and Jolly 1998.

21 David’s confusion of Saartjie Baartman and Dulcie has another twist, that Dorothy Driver reflects on in the afterword. Whereas Baartman’s remains will be brought to South Africa to be buried on home ground, Dulcie’s abused body refuses burial:

Dulcie’s story is a story of what has not yet been said about violence and betrayal, political commitment and love, about writing and representation and truth. For David, Dulcie remains at a stage of unrepresentability, not least because certain aspects of her treatment cannot be faced, since

Perhaps the most pertinent question is whether her burial would also bury black woman as icon of concupiscence, which is to say bury the shame of having been the object of the European gaze, but also the shame invested in those (females) who have mated with the colonizer. Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race', concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial of shame.

(Wicomb 2018:115)²²

In the novel the paradoxical coloured conservatism is represented by David's father Dawid, who vehemently rejects the son's association with *kaffirs*, and whose identification as 'decent coloured' suppresses every trace of a Khoisan or Griqua ancestry, while at the same time denying any connection with slavery. *Slaamse*, from 'islam', is the derogatory term for the descendants of Muslim slaves from the east (Malaya and Indonesia), some of whom had been political prisoners.²³

David's Story both entertains and discloses the Griqua myth. David's quest for an origin, an authentic identity, is vain, yet it is radically opposed to his father's reactionary stand, and despite her scepticism towards all forms of ethnic identification, the narrator is amused if not enthralled. Ambivalence is a state that comes to mind. And self-irony. Besides 'concupiscence', the other tongue-twisting word that obsessively recurs throughout the novel is 'steatopygia', the term for the Khoisan and Griqua women's bountiful behinds. All female characters seem equipped with this preference, including the amanuensis whose 'steatopygious figure' is bumping and bruising as she walks.

facing them would force him to confront his own past not only as victim but also as victimizer.

(Driver 2000:232)

22 The Kleurling Weerstandsbeweging vir die Vooruitgang van Bruinmense (Coloured Liberation Movement for the Advancement of Brown People), KWB, was founded in 1995 by Mervin King, a former trade unionist and member of the ANC. The name's echo of the extreme right-wing Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, AWB, may have been incidental but nonetheless manifests the conservative identification as 'Brown Afrikaners', by which the National Party successfully drew in the coloured vote in the 1994 elections (ibid.:124).

23 Afrikaans was first written in the Arabic script. It is one of the great South African ironies that this Creole language, shared by Boers and Griquas, should become the language of apartheid.

Translocal disalienation

Wicomb's 'commuting' to the country of birth from the residence abroad gives her the rare ability to combine the outsider's analytical acuity with the insider's intimate knowledge. This specific quality could be labelled transnational. She is, however, not moving between the UK and South Africa in general, but between Scotland and the Cape – especially Namaqualand. Moreover, her critique of the very concept of the nation, as in 'national culture', makes 'translocal' a better term to describe her writing position and world-view. 'Translocal' connotes cosmopolitanism and conviviality, as Dorothy Driver and Abdulrazak Gurnah point out in their respective contributions to the already apostrophized anthology *Zoë Wicomb & The Translocal* (Easton and Attridge 2017). Driver reveals how it allows a strong postcolonial take on both Scotland's and South Africa's past and present. By reaching back in time as well as across space, the translocal produces a complex picture of duplicity and complicity, from the time of the missionaries into the anti-apartheid struggle – which David fatally realizes on his journey to Glasgow. The boldest gesture of *David's Story* is in Driver's view the deft connection of two seemingly disparate themes: on the one hand, the increasingly racist Griqua identity, and, on the other, some ethically – and ethnically – unconscionable practices of the ANC and MK.

To invest the search for truth with such ambiguity is an immensely provocative position for Wicomb to take in a novel that deals with the final years of the anti-apartheid movement.

(Driver 2017:18)

The translocal also implies a tension between the local and the global, between rootedness and travel, as illustrated in Wicomb's story collection *The One That Got Away* (2008), which like her first collection *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) is a sort of fragmented or exploded novel in which the short stories are interrelated. Gurnah, the Nobel laureate-to-be, takes the title story and its counterpart 'There's the bird that never flew' as starting point for his reflections on Wicomb and cosmopolitanism. Putting her work in dialogue with Gilroy and Bhabha and their slightly differing takes on vernacular cosmopolitanism, he suggests Fanon's notion of 'disalienation' – the vernacular as a process of reversing the alienation of the colonized – to be a point of intersection (Gurnah 2017:39). The evocation of Fanon is not incidental; the closing lines of *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!' is the epigraph of *David's Story*. Gurnah's meandering essay finally arrives at a poem by John Ashbery that provides a surprising solution – a third alternative – to the ambivalence

at the outset between travel as cosmopolitan experience and the privileging of the local as a kind of integrity, namely that of ‘experience as a fulfilment in itself’. The phrase from Ashbery is ‘the urge to nowhere’, which Gurnah has also chosen as title for his reflections.²⁴ The ‘Ashbery figure’ that evokes the association is the wandering poet Outa Blinkoog in Wicomb’s second novel, *Playing in The Light* (2006), who is ‘heading nowhere, fulfilled not by the moment but on the verge of movement’ (ibid.: 45).

One of the recurrent historical figures in *The One That Got Away* is Scottish poet Thomas Pringle (1789–1834), who spent an important part of his life in the Cape colony and has gone down in history as ‘the father of South African poetry’. Pringle is also the central character in Wicomb’s latest novel, *Still Life* (2020), which had been a work in progress for some time already when the anthology on the translocal was produced. *Still Life* is a story about an author with writer’s block who attempts to write Pringle’s biography. She hires two of the real characters from Pringle’s life to help with the task: Hinza, his adopted Tswana son whom he brought to Britain, where he died of tuberculosis; and Mary Prince, a former slave from the West Indies whose autobiography he co-wrote – their joint book project played an important part in the abolitionist struggle.²⁵ These two historical figures are eventually accompanied by a purely fictional one, Nicholas Greene, the seasoned time traveller who appears twice in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*, first as a poet in the Elizabethan era, contemporary with Shakespeare and Marlowe, and later as a literary critic in the Victorian nineteenth century. The three assistants set out on a time-journey in their more and less reluctant attempt to come to grips with Pringle’s elusive persona.

To give a flavour of this breakneck literary experiment, here is a passage from the colonial poet’s awakening to a new century, and to the project in which he is the supposed hero.

24 The poem, ‘Sunrise in suburbia’ from the collection *The Double Dream of Spring* (Ashbery 1970 [1966]:49–52), reads in its entirety:

A light wilderness of spoken words not
Unkind for all their aimlessness,
A blank chart of each day moving into the premise of difficult
visibility
And which is nowhere, the urge to nowhere,
To retract that statement, sharply, within the next few minutes.

25 Mary Prince, born in Bermuda around 1788, was the first black British woman to escape from slavery. Her *History*, ‘Related by Herself’, was published in London and Edinburg in 1831. A new, revised edition, edited by Moira Ferguson, appeared in 1997. Hinza Marossi, ‘the Bechuana boy’ in Pringle’s poem, has on the other hand left few other traces in the records; in his case the author has filled in the blanks.

He has had quite enough of neck-wrenching, of having turned first this cheek then that to the men of the master classes, be they political or literary. Practised in forbearance, and having survived so many constructions in the colony, both in life and in death – well, if this turns out to be yet another pooh-poohing, would that a final death follow. But thanks to the faithful protégés who have taken up the cudgels he is ready to give it a go, even in this baffling new world. The question, however, arises: what then is his role? The slipperiness of being a subject, for instance, will he as a white man be expected to step aside? What to do about this talk of a dead white man that he doesn't understand? He has prided himself on his dealings with all manner of men, but had never before come across the category of white man. He is somewhat tickled that a woman of her kind – 'of colour', as they say – has taken on the task (how the world has changed) and, of course, the idea of vengeance cannot entirely be ruled out. Will he have to gird his loins for the new and unexpected ways in which to be dwarfed? Och, faith, he admonishes himself, the doubting Thomas must be cast out. Perhaps they could come to some kind of agreement, a contract of sorts.

(Wicomb 2020:17–18)

Derek Attridge, who wrote his essay 'Lost and found' while *Still Life* was in an embryonic stage – 'she is reported as planning a novel that "departs from the historical novel form, encompassing as it does the animation of marginal, indigenous figures from Pringle's poems"' (Attridge 2017:134) – points to Wicomb's affinity with Pringle, a man 'of both the North and the South' like herself. Curiously, the translocalism was in Pringle's case detrimental in the sense that he did not receive full recognition in either location. In the UK his literary reputation is, at best, that of a minor romantic poet, and even his importance in the abolitionist struggle has somehow tended to be downplayed. While acknowledging his role in the publication of *The History of Mary Prince* and the defence in court of its veracity, Moira Ferguson, the editor of the new edition, reproaches Pringle for colonial attitudes that could not entirely be excused by the zeitgeist. In South Africa, where he had spent only six years as a colonist in the Eastern Cape, and to which he never returned because of his early death, his reputation is, as Attridge notes, polarized between reverence and critique (ibid.:135). In the 1980s of the State of Emergency and culmination of the anti-apartheid struggle, an attempt was made to align Pringle to the resistance and revise his image as 'the father of English South African poetry' to that of a pioneer 'African' political writer (Pereira and Chapman 1989). Coetzee's review of *African Poems of Thomas Pringle* was not so impressed. To his mind, Pringle remained a derivative poet who essentially inserted African details into a European, usually Romantic,

idiom (Coetzee 2001:250–4). Attridge is more appreciative of Pringle’s poetry and, above all, of Wicomb’s unusual reception of it, ‘atypical of metropolitan ignorance and condescension, and of South African over-veneration and critique’ (Attridge 2017:144).

Wicomb’s Pringle is an intertextually coded, personal historiography that understands the broken-off narratives and longings for connection and re-connection that in the wake of imperialism’s legacies of migration, leave a trace of literary pathos.

(ibid.:144–5)

A further reason for Wicomb’s identification with Pringle may be precisely a common sense of ‘broken-off’ marginality, which perhaps inevitably comes with the translocal. She is not a writer chosen to represent South Africa at book fairs or literary festivals. Her fiction is published in small editions by small publishers, preferably a feminist press in New York, and her essays are mostly in academic journals and anthologies with a very limited and specialized readership. Her role as public intellectual has hence not, by far, been as influential as it ought to be. But that is of course also due to the limitations of the South African public sphere, which is fragmented or even inexistent in a proper sense of the word. Asked, in conversation with Derek Attridge, whether she considers herself a South African writer and to what extent she feels Scottish, her conclusive answer is:

I appear to be accepted as South African by its literary establishment. I am too much of an outsider to be a Scottish writer; I am largely unknown in England, which doesn’t matter; but I would mind terribly if I were not known in South Africa.

(Easton and Attridge 2017:214)



Zoë Wicomb is not an ethnographer. In fact, she is an opponent of what she calls the anthropological turn in critical theory: the ‘scramble for alterity’ and idealization of the other (Wicomb 2018:136).²⁶ Her academic filiation would be philosophy and history, although with ironic ethnographic elements – the

26 The canonized Deleuze and Guattari are among the targets: ‘[Postmodern] theorists like Deleuze and Guattari may reject the term, but their aestheticized discussion of the minoritarian, located within a metaphor of territory and linked

teasing fascination with steatopygia, the recurrent references to the supposed lethargy of the *hotnos*.²⁷ Based on thorough research and, as already noted, essentially true to historical fact, both *David's Story* and *Still Life* are novelistic explorations of little known parts of South African history – South Africa being the centre of gravity for her translocal universe – as well as outlines of alternative, if not counterfactual, histories. *Still Life* contains yet another element that typically is associated with speculative fiction: time travel. A phantom motley crowd moves between centuries and continents, with tragicomic entanglements and misinterpretations. Yet the novel experiment, largely located literally in the fictional author's creative mind, escapes classification. Wicomb's young writer colleague Masande Ntshanga is perhaps coming closest in the blurb on the cover by describing it in passing as a 'spectral historical novel'. 'Spectral anthropology'?²⁸ I leave that association as an open end.

But by way of concluding the first part of this chapter I choose to go back to Wicomb's essays and the final paragraph of her latest and shortest contribution to the volume, 'Remembering Nelson Mandela' from 2013. What she evokes in this quintessentially South African scene is a meeting between the president, Mandela, and the widow of the former prime minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, the 'architect of apartheid' under whose government Mandela was imprisoned.

But what did Nelson Mandela say to the widow Verwoerd? In the scramble for alterity that followed the demise of apartheid, forty unreconciled Afrikaner families, led by Verwoerd's son-in-law, retreated to Orania, an exclusive enclave established in the Northern Cape. It is here that Mrs. Betsie Verwoerd retired. In Orania, people led pure white lives, unsullied by blacks, which is to say free even of black workers and servants, a lesson they had surely learned from the failure of apartheid and from the example of virtue that Mandela had garnered in isolation. Here Nelson Mandela visited the unprepossessing widow Verwoerd, in 1995. We know that tea, coffee and the iconic Afrikaner *koeksisters* were served, presumably by lily-white hands.

with a process of becoming, deftly blends the colonial and the psychoanalytic other (Ibid., 'Five Afrikaner Texts and the Rehabilitation of Whiteness', 1997–98).

27 *Hotnos*, from Hottentot, is the still prevalent racist denomination of the Khoisan – and the 'coloured' – at par with *kaffir* for the black Africans – and *boer* for the Afrikaans-speaking whites.

28 My editor comments that it already exists. He evokes the connotation to Derridean 'hauntology' and points to a recent title – *Spectral Borders: History, Neighbourliness and Discord on the Polish-Belarusian Frontier* (Joyce 2024).

Then Mandela was left alone with the widow. Almost certainly they spoke in Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, as it was dubbed by blacks in the Struggle era. Mandela learned the language in prison, while children in Soweto protested against its imposition as medium of education in schools. What passed between them? Mandela reported nothing. Tight-lipped Betsie Verwoerd never spoke of it. (She died, aged ninety-eight, in 2000.) Were her lips sealed throughout the meeting? In the Karoo, there is no point in speaking about the weather, because it never varies. The meeting in Orania must remain the stuff for fiction.

(Wicomb 2018:129)

Dusk to dust

To most of his audience around the world, J.M. Coetzee is primarily, if not exclusively, known as a novelist. Yet his other practice as essayist and critic has been just as important throughout his fifty-year career, and the relation between the two practices is moreover a core thematic in his work. In *White Writing* he excels as an interdisciplinary essayist, combining the history of ideas, art history and comparative literature in reflections on, for example, the Afrikaans farm novel, the picturesque and the sublime in South African landscape painting, or the roots of white South Africa's horror of miscegenation. It was published during the culmination of the repressive 'State of Emergency', as the apartheid regime was starting to crumble – although its imminent fall was as unpredictable as that of the Berlin Wall. That same dramatic period would shortly later see the publication of *Age of Iron*, Coetzee's only naturalistic commentary on contemporary South Africa before *Disgrace*. But, following the analogy with Pratt's paired books, the fictional counterparts to *White Writing* would be his two first novels, *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1976). Reading the second part of *Dusklands* in conjunction with the introductory essay on 'Idleness in South Africa' – the one that Pratt refers to – perfectly demonstrates the correspondence between the parallel modes of writing. Or, in his biographer J.C. Kannemeyer's words (2012:232), how the creative work and the literary criticism frequently stand in osmotic relation to each other.

My own first acquaintance with Coetzee's work was the Swedish translation of his international break-through novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). At the time an aspiring arts journalist on a temporary position at *Dagens Nyheter* in Stockholm, I was fortunate to be given the book to review – actually, I remember now, as consolation for missing out on some more well-known author. The clarity and depth of the laconic prose immediately appealed to me,

but also something else that struck a chord of not only admiration but also affinity, which I am still unable to define more exactly. Later, I was entrusted to review the Swedish versions of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Age of Iron* (1990), and I have ever since read almost everything Coetzee has written as it has been published. But for some reason, it was as if his authorship had started with *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the two first novels remained unread. It is certainly a different experience to read them 'in retrospect', with the entire oeuvre as backdrop. Maybe all writers' works ought to be shuffled and reread, not necessarily in reverse chronological but rather centrifugal order, for the core themes to be distilled differently. But whichever way I approach this immensely impressive authorship, I feel like the child trying to embrace the oak tree. The burgeoning Coetzee scholarship is beginning to assume the proportions of the Borges secondary literature, and I am inclined to quote Horacio González as he stepped 'with imagined confidence into a temple where all the prayers have already been said and all the tributes set in print':

You simply have to bite the bullet, because it would be unworthy to apologize.

(González 2019:16)

'Idleness in South Africa' is a critique of 'the rudimentary ethnographic discourse of travel literature' (Coetzee 1988:21), or the 'protoanthropologists', as he calls them, to whom the Hottentot promises so much in the way of difference and yields so little. What their recurrent reflections on idleness infer are 'the Hottentot's refusal to live up to the expectation as Anthropological Man' (ibid.:22). Interestingly, Coetzee finds a direct correspondence with the preceding and contemporary denouncement of beggars and vagrants in Europe. Yet the 'true scandal' in the later travel reports is, as already noted, the idleness of the Boers. Not only the farmer but the burgher of Cape Town was allegedly afflicted with 'the lapse into sloth'. The harshest remarks were however reserved for the Boers of the frontier – the contact zone. The above quoted John Barrow suggested that

the Colony will not become productive until this 'nature' [of sloth] is changed, or, failing that, until the Boers are replaced with more industrious and enterprising settlers.

(ibid.:29)

But why does 'idleness' provoke such reactions of repulsion? Why were the Khoikhoi not viewed in the same way as the 'noble savages' of the New World? To answer that question, Coetzee evokes 'a landmark of anthropological writing', Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), where the Hottentots are specifically mentioned to exemplify Man in his savage state, 'solitary, indolent [*oisif*] and perpetually accompanied by danger'. To Rousseau, the first revolution in human culture is the invention of tools, which lifts Man out of primitive savagery and permits an easier, less perilous life. In fact, the intermediate phase between savage indolence and the second cultural revolution that will come with the invention of metallurgy and agriculture, is defined by Rousseau as 'the happiest and most stable of epochs'. He goes so far as to suggest that 'all subsequent advances have in reality [been steps] towards the decrepitude of the species' (*ibid.*:24).²⁹ It was this primordial sustainable society that Lévi-Strauss sought, and claimed to have found the remnants of, in the Amazon. Coetzee notes that Rousseau's concrete description of this 'happiest' epoch in human history, based on reports from Amerindian peoples, just as well could be a panorama of Hottentot life. So, the question remains: what is the crucial difference that prevents the Hottentot from being admitted to the golden age? And the recurrent answer in the circular argumentation is his idleness: s/he spends (wastes) his 'free' time sleeping instead of engaging in self-improving industrious activities. In line with Enlightenment thought – which arguably never reached the Cape – Rousseau sets idleness in opposition to 'leisure' (Roman *otium*, Greek *scholē*).

Leisure holds the promise of the generation of all those differences that constitute culture and make man Anthropological Man; idleness holds no promise save that of stasis.

(*ibid.*:25)³⁰

Dusklands is a diptych that consists of two novellas, 'The Vietnam project' and 'The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'. A common denominator of these disparate first-person narratives is the indictment of the brutal inhumanity that marked two historical events: the USA bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and 70s, and the expeditions into interior south

29 Coetzee quotes from the English translation (1913:169, 195–9).

30 In the introduction Coetzee points to another, more fundamental, reason: Whereas the New World introduced the explorer to people 'in a state of original innocence', Africa was part of a known Old World, and the Cape the farthest extremity of the Old, a Lapland of the South, peopled by natives who occasionally evoked curiosity or disgust, but never admiration (*ibid.*:2).

and south-west Africa by white hunters/explorers some two hundred years earlier. Coetzee was thirty-four at the time of its publication, but the mature debut novel had a long incubation time during his first exile overseas – Britain, 1962–5, and the USA 1965–71. In this decisive decade he married his first wife, had two children, and combined an aspiring academic and professional career in the unusual combination of English, Linguistics and Mathematics. He supported himself and his family first as a computer programmer, then as a university lecturer, while finalizing a Ph.D. thesis on Samuel Beckett. The crucial years of this formative period were arguably those spent in Austin, Texas. He has summarized them in the essay ‘Remembering Texas’ from 1984, which is included in the pivotal collection of essays and interviews *Doubling the Point* (1992), an imperative reference for anyone interested in Coetzee’s writing.³¹ Another key source is the already apostrophized J.C. Kannemeyer’s magnificent seven-hundred-page biography *J.M. Coetzee: A Life in Writing* (2012),³² which came as a late surprise present for all scholars and fans who had tried hard to crack the secretive and reserved persona behind the fabulous works. In Texas, he begins to feel an unexpected longing for the country he very deliberately left behind. What he misses is ‘a certain emptiness, empty earth and empty sky, to which South Africa had accustomed me’, and ‘the sound of languages whose nuances I understood’ (Coetzee 1992:52). Turning the attention to his native Western and Northern Cape – a different entity than South Africa – he writes a paper on the morphology of the Nama, Malay and Dutch languages that had historically impacted on each other in the Cape colony’s contact zone.

In the library I came upon books unopened since the 1920s: reports on the territory of South West Africa by its German explorers and administrators, accounts of punitive expeditions against the Nama and Herero, dissertations on the physical anthropology of the natives, monographs by Carl Meinhof on the Khoisan languages. I read the makeshift grammars put together by missionaries, went further back in time to the earliest linguistic records of the old languages of the Cape, word lists compiled by seventeenth-century seafarers, and then followed the fortunes of the Hottentots in a history written not by them but for them, from above, by travellers and

31 The 1969 dissertation remains unpublished, but *Doubling the Point* opens with a section named ‘Beckett’, including three essays on different aspects of Beckett’s work, and the autobiographical ‘Remembering Texas’.

32 Kannemeyer (1939–2011) was the foremost and most prolific Afrikaans literary critic. His magnum opus, written in collaboration with Coetzee and translated to English by Michiel Heyns, was published posthumously.

missionaries, not excluding my remote ancestor Jacobus Coetzee, *floruit* 1760. Years later, in Buffalo, still pursuing this track, I was to venture my own contribution to the history of the Hottentots: a memoir of a kind that went on growing till it had become absorbed into a first novel, *Dusklands*.

(*ibid.*)

A memoir that gets ‘absorbed into a novel.’ We’ll come back to that process of contamination, in which the historical – ethnographic – record transforms into fiction. ‘The Vietnam project’ – written later but inserted as the first part of the diptych³³ – is more obviously linked to the years in the USA, with its commentary on the escalating Vietnam war. The narrator, a Californian communication officer³⁴ by the name Eugene Dawn, is the author of a report supposed to constitute a fundamental part of a greater project, ‘New life in Vietnam’, led by a demanding superior officer referred to as Coetzee. The report outlines a radical improvement of the US propaganda services in Vietnam, in order to secure the eradication of the terrorist insurgency. As a ‘motto’ on the title page, ‘The Vietnam report’ has a quote from the infamous nuclear war strategist and US government consultant Herman Kahn:

Obviously it is difficult not to sympathize with those European and American audiences who, when shown films of fighter-bomber pilots visibly exhilarated by successful napalm bombing runs on Viet-Cong targets, react with horror and disgust. Yet, it is unreasonable to expect the U.S. Government to obtain pilots who are so appalled by the damage they may be doing that they cannot carry out their missions or become excessively depressed or guilt-ridden.

(Armbruster *et al.* 1968)

Kannemeyer provides some little-known background to the report: ‘Misconceptions’, a Swift-like satirical text that Coetzee submitted as a ‘letter to the editor’ of *The Daily Texan*, in response to an opinion article in the same newspaper that had called the Vietnam war ‘a blunder’ and ‘a crime’. The ironic argumentation for the perfect rationality of the US war strategy was

33 Coetzee first tried, without success, to publish ‘The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’ on its own. ‘The Vietnam project’ was added later, possibly with the primary purpose of obtaining a full-length novel format. The combined *Dusklands* was, however, also refused by all approached US and British publishers, and all the ‘normal’ South African ones, until it finally was accepted by the small, progressive Ravan Press.

34 His field of expertise is defined as ‘Mythography’.

so subtle that many readers misunderstood its anti-war position. This mock polemic letter appears as an early articulation of the character Eugene Dawn. It concludes:

Why this carefully calculated strategy should be thought a 'blunder' eludes me. History may well show the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson as marking the beginning of the consolidation and perhaps even expansion of US world interests following the setbacks of the years following World War II. As for 'crimes' in Vietnam, doesn't an arrow in the stomach kill just as dead as a face of napalm?

(Kannemeyer 2012:162)³⁵

Although ambivalent to America, to put it mildly, Coetzee enjoys the academic environment in both Austin and Buffalo and strives hard to get a permanent residency – not least because he dreads a forced return to apartheid South Africa when his visa expires.³⁶ Hoping to prolong his stay in Buffalo, he turns down possibilities to go to Canada (Vancouver) and Hong Kong. But he probably burns his chances for a US citizenship by participating in a sympathy action for the student war-protests on campus. The year in limbo, while awaiting the verdict for himself and the other forty-four faculty members that were charged, is a watershed moment. It is easy to imagine a counterfactual Coetzee who would stay in America and pursue a brilliant academic career. Instead, he seizes the 'free' time to start writing his first novel, without knowing at the outset what it will be. In an interview more than a decade later, after the release of his fourth novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, he will explain that the first book, *Dusklands*, was the most taxing to write, 'because I didn't know what I was doing' (ibid.:203).

In a way one might say that the story of his namesake and ancestor brought him back to the fatherland he had wanted to escape at all costs, even before he boarded the plane to South Africa in May 1971. So let us now look more closely at the narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, 'translated' by J.M. Coetzee and 'edited' by the translator's father, the late historian S.J. Coetzee, who has also written an Afterword. The 'Translator's preface' refers to the 1951 edition of *Het relaas van Jacobus Coetzee, Janszoon*, published for the Van Plettenberg Society. That volume consisted of the text of the original *Relaas*

35 The letter is part of the material that Coetzee provided Kannemeyer with personally. It has no date of publication.

36 As it would be difficult for himself to assume the role of political refugee, he evokes the difficulties that his children, who are US citizens, would suffer by being exposed to the segregated South African school system.

in Dutch and an introduction in Afrikaans drawn from the editor's lectures at the University of Stellenbosch between 1934 and 1948. In the present volume's 'integral translation' to English, the son has taken the liberty to turn his father's introduction into an afterword.

An observant reader will already here realize that s/he is in a quagmire. Neither the Van Plettenberg Society nor the invoked volume from 1951 ever existed. The real J.M. Coetzee's father, Jack Coetzee, was not a conservative historian, but an attorney of questionable reputation whose drinking and gambling habits put his family in dire straits – and strongly contributed to the son's desire to escape South Africa. Even the appendix, the 'Deposition of Jacobus Coetzee', the very brief summary that a hack writer at the governor's castle hastily jotted down and which the reviewers have taken for the only 'authentic' residue of the original document is, as Kannemeyer notes after having consulted the authentic source, distorted by deliberate mistranslations, additions and omissions (ibid.:221). 'The narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' could, as shown, perfectly have passed as one of Borges' *ficciones*, and although that association may not have been specifically made in the perplexed reception of *Dusklands*, Borges was often mentioned as a literary ally, along with Nabokov and others.

But let us first look at the testimony of Jacobus Coetzee and its interpretation as a piece of 'speculative anthropology' in a vein similar to our previous reading of Saer's *The Witness* (1990[1983]). The discussion above may indicate that Coetzee's attitude towards anthropology is ambivalent, if not outright hostile. Which is logical in a country where the local understanding of the discipline, *Volkekunde*, was the principal ideological – ostensibly scientific – foundation of apartheid.³⁷ Yet, heterology is a crucial element in Coetzee's entire work, and anthropologists have plausibly embraced him, to the extent that the journal *American Anthropologist* in 2006 dedicated a special issue to 'the lessons of J.M. Coetzee.'³⁸ The approach to 'the other' may be philosophical rather than ethnographic, as in the miraculous *Foe* (1986), his playful variation on the Robinson Crusoe theme and something of an 'aleph'

37 The German Werner Eiselen was the Dutchman Hendrik Verwoerd's closest collaborator in the Ministry for Native Affairs. They were among the most fervent Afrikaner nationalists. Eiselen had previously held the chair as Professor in *Volkekunde*, 'the science of physical and cultural anthropology', at Stellenbosch University. I discuss his legacy at some length in *Cape Calypso* (Hemer 2020:57–8, 158–9).

38 'In Focus: cruelty, suffering, imagination: the lessons of J.M. Coetzee', *American Anthropologist* 108(1). The 'lessons' refer specifically to the novel *Elisabeth Costello* (2003), structured around the fictional character's lectures on a variety of burning topics.

to the entire authorship.³⁹ But the account of Jacobus Coetzee's expeditions into the previously unexplored Namaqualand contains some subtly ironic paraphrases of ethnographic description.

The Hottentot camp was laid out on the bank of one of the streams that feed the Leeuwen River. It consisted of perhaps forty huts arranged in a rough circle with outliers, plus five set quite apart across the stream. These would be the huts for menstruating women, who during their flux are permitted congress with neither husbands nor cattle. The huts were of uniform construction: bark mats and animal skins spread over hemispheres of supple branches that had been thrust into the ground and lashed together at the apex. The apex is open, allowing the Hottentot abed a barred view of the night sky. It has led to neither a special relationship with the sky-gods nor a Hottentot astrology. It is nothing but a smoke-hole.

(Coetzee 1998[1974]:70)

The fictional Jacobus Coetzee thus narrates the encounters missing in his German precursor Kolb's report. He and his servants are reservedly received in the secluded Namaqua village. But soon after arrival, the elephant hunter falls ill and is obliged to spend innumerable days in one of the 'menstruation huts', rudimentarily nursed by the Hottentots. His more and less delirious meditations take up a large part of the narrative. Here the voice is hardly that of a rude eighteenth-century explorer; it is rather a destabilized modern subject that speaks:

I meditated and perhaps even dreamed on the subject of dreams. Might I hope that all the misfortune that had befallen me since I set eye on the Namaqua was a bad dream? Were the Namaqua merely demons? Was I become a prisoner of my own underworld? If so, where was the passage that led back to daylight? Was there a charm I had to know? Was the charm simply 'I am dreaming' ejaculated with conviction? If so, why did I lack conviction? Did I fear that not only my sojourn among the Namaqua but all my life might be a dream? But if so, where would the exit from my dream take me? To a universe of which I the Dreamer was sole inhabitant? But had I not hereby arrived by a devious passage at the little fable I had always kept in reserve to solace myself with on lonely evenings, much as the lost traveller in the desert keeps back his last few drops of water, choosing to

39 Robinson's relation to his maker Daniel Defoe is also the theme of his Nobel lecture, 'He and his man': www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/lecture (accessed 21 August 2024).

choose to die rather than die without choice? But did this little fable on the other hand not take much of the spice out of life?

(ibid.:78)

Obviously, this anachronous reflection is not to be found in the original source. Following the fiction of authenticity, it must be ascribed to the 'integral translation,' and here is another, perhaps inadvertent wink to Borges. In his essay on the Dutch poet Gerrit Achterberg in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee declares that 'the reading of a text is in essence translation, just as all translations are in the last instance literary criticism' (Coetzee 1992:90). Taking cue from this formulation, Kannemeyer suggests that 'the reading and "translating" of the eighteenth-century founding text becomes a rediscovery and rewriting of a hidden fragment of history' (2012:221).

Moreover, by reading between the lines, so to speak, imagining not only the inner monologue but also acts and events that have been omitted, deliberately or not, the 'son' translator corrects – 'kills' – the 'father' historian's elevation of Jacobus Coetzee as one of the heroic founders of the Afrikaans nation. The 'absorption into fiction' thus implies a 'truer' version of history, in which the forebear appears instead, in all his self-absorbed brooding, as a prejudiced and slow-witted revenger. After having recovered from his illness and escaped the humiliation of helplessness among the natives, he returns on a second expedition to the village where his 'bastard' and 'house hottentot' servants had abandoned him, to avenge each and every one who may have disclosed his humanity. Now he is a murderer who takes delight in his atrocities, assuming the role as executor of God's irreprehensible judgment, or a 'tool in the hands of history' (ibid.:106). The revelation is gradual and yet comes as a surprise, like Eugene Dawn's parallel makeover, as kidnapper and molester of his own son, although the stroke of insanity in the highly strung Dawn's case is apparent on the outset.

This element of madness is a theme that will recur in Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*. Its immediate 'pair' text in *White Writing* would be the essay 'Farm novel and *plaasroman*'. The latter became a dominant genre in Afrikaans literature of the 1920s and 30s.⁴⁰ Again, there is a divide between the New World and Old World colonies. Whereas the garden myth in America was associated with paradise and had a utopian motivation, the South African pastoral art was essentially conservative, looking back to

40 Interestingly, it had a European counterpart in the German *bauernroman* of the inter-war period, which arguably played a similar role in the build-up of Nazism as the *plaasroman* did for Afrikaner nationalism.

the calm and stability of the farm, a mediating point between the wilderness of lawless nature and the wilderness of the new cities.

In the literature of such unsettled settlers with so uncertain a future as the whites in South Africa, the retrospective gaze of the pastoral has understandably proved more reassuring than the prospective gaze of its twin genre, the utopia. [...] Afrikaans novelists elaborated models of the garden-farm as bastion of trusted feudal values or cradle of a transindividual familial/tribal form of consciousness.

(Coetzee 1988:4)

The English-speaking colonists had arrived later than the Boers, but they of course shared the precariousness of the settler predicament, and the great precursor of the genre was Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), one of the touchstones of South African literature, with a readership far beyond the colony's borders.⁴¹ Paradoxically, because Schreiner is known as 'the great antipastoral writer in South Africa,' and her farm 'mimics the idleness, ignorance and greed of colonial society' – 'To Schreiner the Cape Colony, and perhaps all colonies, are in truth anti-Gardens, dystopias' (ibid.).

In the Heart of the Country can be read as a paraphrase of a *plaasroman*, grotesquely distorted. All the ingredients are included: idleness and ignorance, isolation, incest – at least, incestuous fantasies – and insanity. It is set in the barren, desert-like Karoo in the heart of the Western Cape – 'in the middle of nowhere,' as the novel's title is repeatedly varied in the text. The time is never specified, but certain markers indicate the span of a year or two sometime in the 1920s. The plot basically revolves around four characters: the white farmer and his daughter, and the brown servant and his young wife. But the novel is also, and more importantly, a rewriting of the genre that points towards a later masterly variation such as Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2008[2004]).⁴² The main character and narrator, the daughter Magda, is all but a conventional female *plaasroman* character. Although a spinster, suppressed under patriarchal law, she is a woman of obvious intellectual capacity and with the ability to express herself in exquisite literary language.

41 Anne McClintock writes extensively about Schreiner in her lucid study *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995). Sweden's foremost writer, the late Lars Norén, had a catchy line in one of his early poems about confusing the Doctors Mabuse and Marcuse. I have constantly confused *Imperial Leather* (McClintock) and *Imperial Eyes* (Pratt).

42 Its first English edition was under the title *The Way of the Women* (2008).

The story is narrated in 266 numbered paragraphs of varying length, some only one or a few sentences. The fractured structure, on the model of a screenplay, eliminates narrative hauls – the ‘connective tissue’ of the traditional novel – and allows the repetition of sequences from different angles.⁴³ But what really happens in the novel is not easy to discern, as the border between ‘reality’ and fantasy is blurred, not to say erased. In the opening scene the father brings home his new wife,

clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul. Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible.

(Coetzee 1999a:1)

A little later, in paragraph 38, the scene is repeated, but now with the servant Hendrik, coming ‘clip-clop across the flats in a donkey-cart’. In-between these two scenes, Magda has slain the father and the new wife in bed with an axe and wondered what to do with the corpses. The more plausible version is that the father has taken Hendrik’s wife, Klein-Anna, as his mistress and that Magda, in a fit of jealousy and what appears to be an attempt at killing the illicit lovers, fires a gun and fatally wounds the father.

116. The bullet rests snug in its chamber. Wherein does my own corruption lie? For, having paused for my second thoughts, I will certainly proceed as before. Perhaps what I lack is the resolution to confront not the tedium of pots and pans and the same old pillow every night but a history so tedious in the telling that it might as well be a history of silence. What I lack is the courage to stop talking, to die back into the silence I came from. The history that I make, loading this heavy gun, is only a frantic spurious babble. Am I one of those people so insubstantial that they cannot reach out of themselves save with bullets? That is what I fear as I slip out, an implausible figure, an armed lady, into the starlit night.

(ibid.:64–5)

Magda is an unlikely, apparently not very likeable, character, barren like the isolated farm, possibly abused by her father, whose feet she used to wash

43 Although it assumes a film format, Coetzee stresses in *Doubling the Point* that the novel is not a screenplay. Which was confirmed by the fact that the film version – *Dust*, starring Jane Birkin as Magda, directed by Marion Hänsel – ‘retains virtually none of the sequence divisions and indeed none of the quite swift *pacing* of the novel’ (Coetzee 1992:60, original emphasis).

in the evenings after work. Yet her meditations reveal frustrated desire, both emotional and intellectual, ‘a hole yearning to be whole’, as she describes herself. After burying the father/master’s body, she and the two servants form a pact that will invert the master-servant relations. Boundless in her unleashed passion, Magda gives herself to Hendrik, who clearly abuses her.

The novel’s most controversial part at the time of its publication were the explicit sex scenes between Magda and Hendrik. Apartheid censorship was as vigorous as ever – interracial sexual intercourse still being on top of the taboo list, a position challenged by depictions of police brutality – and Coetzee was aware of the imminent risk of being banned for obscenity. As opposed to Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and many other white writers – not to speak of the black colleagues – he had so far escaped censorship, and one can sense that he deliberately pushes the boundaries here. There are three paragraphs that he himself identified as the most sensitive and which he would consider eliminating if it came to negotiations, especially this one:

221. He turns me on my face and does it to me from behind like an animal.
Everything dies in me when I have to raise my ugly rear to him. I am
humiliated; sometimes I think it is my humiliation he wants.

(*ibid.*:122)⁴⁴

We have in the first part of this chapter discussed the theme of miscegenation in some depth. Let us discard that for now and instead focus on the element of passion – or the interplay of reason and passion that recurs through Coetzee’s entire oeuvre. Reading Magda’s story in retrospect, another female protagonist comes forth from the future-present: Elisabeth Costello, the author’s mature alter ego. In discussion with David Atwell, Coetzee makes an interesting remark on the difference between discursive prose and fiction regarding ‘the strange logic’ of passion.

44 After the usual embargo, the novel was however released without censoring, as it was deemed to be a book for an exclusive literary audience, which would never reach the general public. *In the Heart of the Country* was the first of Coetzee’s novels to be published outside South Africa (in the UK, and later the USA). A curious detail is that he made a bilingual version for the South African market, in which the dialogue is in ‘patois’ Afrikaans, which, in Coetzee’s own words, ‘stands in roughly the same position to literary Afrikaans as the speech of Faulkner’s crackers and poor Negroes to literary American English’ and which was difficult to translate to a suitable colloquial English (Kannemeyer 2012:288). The limited bilingual edition must be an antiquarian rarity.

When a real passion of feeling is let loose in discursive prose, you feel that you are reading the utterances of a madman (think of Vaslav Nizhinsky's diaries). The novel, on the other hand, allows the writer to *stage* his passion: Magda may be mad (if that is indeed your verdict), but I, behind her, am merely passionate.

(Coetzee 1992:60–1, original emphasis)

What Magda in her insanity, or boundless passion, expresses is, moreover, the author's attachment to the farm of his childhood – Voëlfontein in the Karoo – and the love of the landscape, not only its nature but also the people in it. The farm motif will come back in both *Life & Times of Michael K*, where the protagonist grows pumpkins on an abandoned farm in an allegorical Karoo, and in *Disgrace*, where the daughter Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape becomes refuge for the disgraced David Lurie, and where the former power relations between master and servant are likewise inverted. But these two Booker-awarded novels are so thoroughly discussed and analysed that I find little, if anything, to add.⁴⁵

Coetzee and Borges

Let us instead end this preliminary discussion of Coetzee's contribution by an imaginary return across the South Atlantic, to ponder on the already twice suggested parallel to Borges. There are several obvious similarities. The bilingualism, for one. Coetzee is of profound Afrikaner ancestry,⁴⁶ although his family remained distanced from the most fervent nationalism; but English is literally his mother's tongue, and he grew up with a certain disdain for his Afrikaner heritage. Also, it was on his return from a long sojourn abroad that his literary authorship 'took off', in the rediscovery of the homeland he had distanced himself from. One might claim that he invented an allegorical South Africa in a way that corresponds to Borges's invention of a mythical Buenos Aires. Coetzee may perhaps not acknowledge a direct influence, but he writes perceptively about Borges in the essay collection *Stranger Shores* (2001).⁴⁷ There is an interesting passage about the relationship between the essayist

45 On *Michael K*, see for example Helgesson 1999; on *Disgrace*, see Attridge and McDonald 2002; Bell 2007; Boehmer 2006.

46 Asked to provide some personal data for the blurb of *Dusklands*, he wrote to his publisher:

As for my family background, I am one of the 10,000 Coetzees, and what is there to be said about them except that Jacobus Coetzee begat them all?

(Kannemayer 2012:246)

47 *Stranger Shores* and the later *Inner Workings* (2008) are collections of his articles for *New York Review of Books*.

Borges and the writer of fiction that has a clear correspondence with what Coetzee has said about his own writing.

Reading the essays side by side with the fictions prompts what is perhaps the central question about Borges: what do the operations of fiction offer this scholar-writer that enable him to take ideas into reaches where the discursive essay, as a mode of writing, fails him? Borges's own answer, following Coleridge, is that the poetic imagination enables the writer to join himself to the universal creative principle; following Schopenhauer, he would add that this principle has the nature of Will rather than (as Plato would say) of Reason. 'In the course of a lifetime dedicated less to living than to reading, I have been able to verify repeatedly that aims and literary theories are nothing but stimuli; the finished work frequently ignores and even contradicts them.'

(Coetzee 2001:171)⁴⁸

The designation 'scholar-writer' is questionable in Borges's case, but otherwise 'the central question' is the same that the scholar-writer Coetzee seeks answers to in his own writing. In *Doubling the Point* he explains to the interviewer and editor David Attwell why he feels a greater freedom in his thinking when writing fiction than when writing criticism.

One reason is that, as I have said before, I am not a trained philosopher (and contemporary criticism has become very much a variety of philosophizing). Not only that: I tend to be rather slow and painstaking and myopic in my thinking (in fact, in most things I do). I don't think or act in sweeps. It would be pointless for me to try to rethink Dostoevsky in Derridean terms or – what would interest me more – rethink Derrida in Dostoevskian terms, because I don't have the mind for it, to say nothing of the philosophical equipment.

Another reason has to do with the two discursive modes. Stories are defined by their irresponsibility; they are, in the judgment of Swift's Houyhnhnms, 'that which is not'. The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something

48 The closing quote is from 'Nathaniel Hawthorne' in *Other Inquisitions*. The continuation reads:

If there is anything to be expected of an author, no purpose, however futile or wrong it may be, can exert a malevolent influence on his work. A writer may be afflicted with absurd prejudices, but if his work is genuine, if it corresponds to a genuine vision, it can never be absurd.

(Borges 1964a:57)

that has yet not emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road. When I write criticism, on the other hand, I am always aware of a responsibility toward a goal that has been set for me, not only by the whole philosophical tradition into which I am implicitly inserting myself, but also by the rather tight discourse of criticism itself.

[...] To put it in another way: I am concerned to write the kind of novel – to work in the kind of novel form – in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas.

(Coetzee 1992:246)

During the years he made a living as a university teacher in Cape Town, critical writing ran parallel to fiction, as separate yet prolifically communicating vessels. But in his later work he will, as we shall see, fusion them in breakneck ways – for example, in *The Lives of Animals* (1999b), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and, perhaps most delicately, *Diary of A Bad Year* (2007). The latter's ironic self-portrait of Señor C. is not least an example of the element of parody and self-parody that Coetzee also points out in the essay on Borges:

The voices that speak the *Other Inquisitions* are much like the voices of the narrators of the fictions; behind the essays is a persona whom Borges had already begun to call 'Borges'. Which Borges is real, which is the other in the mirror, remains dark. The essays allow the one Borges to dramatize the other. In practical terms, this puts in question the distinction between fiction and non-fiction used by Borges's American publishers.

(Coetzee 2001:172)

I am not necessarily implying that Borges served as a model for Coetzee in this respect. But the correlation, which I hadn't fully noticed before, is hereafter evident.



Rostrevor

Before the excursion to Alice Springs, Chinook and I were house-sitting in the home of John and Dorothy, some ten kilometres from the city centre, at the foot of the Adelaide Hills. I had met John and Dorothy in Stellenbosch eight years ago, when we were fellows at STIAS. They stayed only for a week, but it coincided with the last of my three months, so that John and I attended each other's seminars. He presented the book *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction*

and *Psychotherapy* (Coetzee and Kurtz 2015), which he had cowritten with psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz and which at the time had only appeared in its Dutch translation.⁴⁹ That unexpected encounter is one of the narrative clues of *Cape Calypso* and I leave what I wrote then without further comment.⁵⁰ But the point is that although we never met before or after, and only have had some brief mail exchange, a connection was somehow maintained. When I wrote to Dorothy to explore the possibility of being invited to Adelaide for the finalization of this project, she immediately responded and facilitated the necessary contacts, and moreover offered me to house-sit while she and John were away (in South Africa) in January and February.

So, I wrote a major part of this chapter in the house where John has written all his 'Australian' novels, so named by Kannemeyer simply because they were conceived there, in Rostrevor – a place that has proved to be immensely favourable for Coetzee's literary creation.⁵¹ The neighbour who handed over the keys remarked in passing that John uses to say that this is paradise on earth.

We relished in the lush shade of the Spring Gully and went for daily walks in the nearby Morialta Park, spotting koalas in the mornings and kangaroos at dusk. Occasionally, we took the bus into town, sometimes continuing to the beach. Already after a week we had established routines that resembled our everyday life on the other

49 It may seem like an eccentric whim that Coetzee since 2002 – the year he moved to Australia – has had almost all his books published in Dutch translation before the English original. But it is due to his own strong affiliation with Dutch as a translator, the close connection between Dutch and Afrikaans and the fact that English to him is an 'acquired language'. It is also a tribute to his Dutch publisher, Eva Cossee, and allegedly an affirmation of the presumption that Dutch brings out the humorous side of his writing better than English. Most importantly, though, it has attained the character of a deliberate remonstrance against the supposedly detrimental influence of global English. Lately, Spanish has taken over as his primary language of publication. The last novel in the Jesus trilogy first appeared as *La muerte de Jesús* (2019) and the Argentinian translator Elena Marengo's interpretation was moreover appointed to be the original version, the mother of all further translations. His latest novel, *El polaco*, has been out on the Spanish book market since August 2022, more than a year before *The Pole and Other Stories* appeared in October 2023.

50 'Señor C'; Hemer 2020:128–33.

51 The first novel Coetzee wrote after settling in Adelaide was *Slow Man* (2005). When Kannemeyer finished his biography, he had also published *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Summertime* (2009). He was yet to write his Jesus trilogy and is still, at the age of 83, as productive as ever.

side of the globe, fifteen thousand kilometres and nine and a half time zones away. It was like imagining a paradisiac shadow life – a parallel life un-lived. One of many potential lives at a limited number of locations that I – we – might consider. Buenos Aires would be one, Cape Town another, Cádiz or some other place in Spain... Adelaide is definitely on that list from now on; Australia appealed to us to the extent that after three weeks in Rostrevor, we seriously discussed the possibility of migrating, considering whether our pensions would suffice, and how to eke out whatever capital we might be able to bring from Sweden.



A Global-Southern purview

J.M. Coetzee is no longer a ‘South African’ writer – if he ever was.⁵² But neither is he ‘Australian’, even though he carries an Australian citizenship. British philosopher and author Andrew Gibson, most well known for a study on *Misanthropy* (2017), categorizes him as a ‘global-Southern novelist with a global purview’ (Gibson 2023:26–7). His latest book, *J.M. Coetzee & Neoliberal Culture*, is a refreshing attempt at shifting the paradigm for the analysis of Coetzee’s work, and for comparative literary studies in general.

The global financial crisis of 2007–8 supposedly spelled a decisive end to the period of dominance of ‘deconstruction and the various postmodernisms already on the wane’ that had been key to major earlier works on Coetzee (ibid.:12). As Gibson rhetorically puts it: The most salient development over the past four decades has been the triumph not of postmodernity, but of neoliberalism. Our daily experience has been determined far more comprehensively by the Chicago School of Economics than by Derrida or Deleuze (ibid.).

Gibson started writing his book seven years ago and a main worry was, as he explains in the preface, that what he had begun by defining as ‘neoliberal culture’ would have changed markedly by the time he had finished and might even be obsolete. It is easy to understand that worry, given the seemingly drastic changes on the world scene since 2016: Resurging populism (Trump, Brexit etc.), the climate crisis, the Covid pandemic, and on top of that Putin’s war. But eventually his worry ceased, and the more adequate concern seemed to be why neoliberal culture has so far proved to be resilient to all the four

52 In his early literary career, while living in South Africa, he resented being identified as a writer from the colonial periphery, and he maintains distance from any national affiliation.

factors above – just as it survived the financial crisis a decade earlier, although without the intellectual justifications it might earlier have claimed to have (ibid.:13).⁵³

The current, seemingly stable, global predicament has been described as ‘contingent neoliberalism’ or ‘precarity capitalism’. Without competitors, neoliberalism has entered a period of ‘deep indeterminacy’ and ‘severe crisis’. We are in an ‘age of entropy’ in which different disorders coexist and reinforce each other (ibid.:14).⁵⁴ In such grim scenario, it may indeed seem that literary theory and criticism has been sidelined as politically insignificant. But Gibson’s point is not to declare the impotence of literature and criticism but, rather to the contrary, the resurgence of critique, by reasserting their role in their legitimate sphere, which is culture, yet avoiding a collapse into ‘cultural studies’.

At some level, serious literature disputes or enters differences with the extant forms of the culture around it. That [...] is the solid worth of literature: it endlessly exclaims, as Coetzee very patently does, against a world for which there is always chronically too little to be said. But [...] it does so in its own way, in a manner that is not reconcilable with any political theory, doctrine or programme. Its mode of political engagement is *sui generis*, often, as in Coetzee, subtle, oblique, piecemeal, paradoxical. It is also non-totalizing, in that the distribution of its points of entry or address is likely to be partial and sporadic. It’s therefore modest (or cautious) in intention, and calls to a criticism that will elicit that.

(Gibson 2023:14)

The quote above almost answers the question – what all this has to do with Coetzee’s work? Gibson’s justification for choosing Coetzee as an example and counterposing him to neoliberal culture is, in short, that he is the preeminent English-language novelist of our time, and that the growth of his worldwide reputation has coincided with neoliberalism’s rise to global dominance. Already in the portrait of Eugene Dawn in *Dusklands* and clearly

53 Gibson refers to Adam Tooze’s *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (2018). I remember the quite common assumption, at least in Latin America, that the financial meltdown in Argentina in 2001 – *El corralito* – would signify the demise of neoliberalism, just as the fall of the Berlin Wall became the symbol for the end of Communism.

54 Gibson is primarily leaning on German economic sociologist Wolfgang Streeck (2016:12–13, 34). Other references are: Azmanova 2020; Davies 2014; Davies and Gane 2021; Plehwe, Slobodian and Mirowski 2020.

from the 1980s, a marked strain of criticism of neoliberal democracy appears in Coetzee's writings, though its manifestations are often indirect, embedded, bracketed, nuanced: Coetzee does not share any conviction of the self-evident superiority of the West's regime of neoliberal democracy (ibid.:24).

Thus, the 'Global-Southern' perspective that has become more and more pronounced. South Africa may have served as the touchstone in Coetzee's work up to *Disgrace*,⁵⁵ but his orientation was from the outset in large part global, thinking on a world-historical scale. After moving to Australia, the country of his birth has become a reference among others. During a period of four years, 2015–18, while holding a professorship at Universidad de San Martín in Buenos Aires, he initiated a remarkable 'South-to-South' project, bringing three successive cohorts of writers from Australia and Southern Africa to Argentina for seminars and public performances.⁵⁶

The Costello turn

Coetzee is a scholar-writer; but the emphasis is always on 'writer', however the companion discipline may be defined. Anthropology was an interlocutor in his early novels. Psychoanalysis has had an increasing although marginal prominence, as in the conversation with Arabella Kurtz. When I meet him again, in Adelaide, he is opening the Writers' Week in a lucid conversation via Zoom with psychoanalyst Paul Williams in Los Angeles, sixteen time zones yet only four hours away.⁵⁷ But his closest affiliation, as expressed by himself in the previously quoted conversation with David Atwell in *Doubling the Point*, is no doubt with philosophy. Gibson notes in the preface:

55 Read in this light, *Disgrace* is not least a critique of postapartheid South Africa's turn to neoliberalism, and the problems that 'the country's impeccably democratic new constitution' were unable to address (Atwell 2015:215).

56 'Cátedra Coetzee – Literaturas del Sur'. Invited authors were Ivan Vladislavić, Zoë Wicomb, Antjie Krog and Mia Couto from southern Africa, and from Australia, Gail Jones, Nicholas Jose, Delia Falconer and Ivor Indyk. The professorship was terminated by the right-wing government of Mauricio Macri, but a follow-up event was organized in Sydney in 2019: 'Writing from the South: Writers in Conversation', hosted by the State Library of New South Wales and Western Sydney University. Kim Scott, whom I will discuss in the next chapter, was one of the Australian participants. Among the overseas invitees were Yewande Omotoso and Marlene van Niekerk from South Africa, and Mariana Dimópulos and Anna Kazumi Stahl from Argentina.

57 Williams is the author of, among other major works, *The Authority of Tenderness: Dignity and the True Self in Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 2022), which was the main subject of the discussion.

I try everywhere to read Coetzee's work as proposing and developing a kind of thought, a thought of equivalent value to that of a major philosopher. He is not a philosopher, of course, and his thought does not read like a philosophy, but it has a rigour comparable with that of philosophy, sharing the philosopher's founding break with inert certainties which have attained the status of self-evidence, where there is, philosophically, no self-evidence at all.

(ibid.:7)

But what does a merger of the 'scholarly' and the 'fictional' imply? What is the characteristic of contamination in Coetzee's exemplary case? Let us look at some concrete examples. Although published in 2003, *Elizabeth Costello* is not one of the 'Australian' novels, but most critics will agree that it marks – or accentuates – a reorientation in the authorship that coincides with the physical move from South Africa to Australia. Coetzee's infamous female alter ego, Elizabeth Costello, had appeared already in 1996, when he delivered a lecture at Bennington College in Vermont, USA, under the title 'What is realism?'.⁵⁸ He did it in the guise of the well-known Australian writer Elizabeth Costello, a performance that he would more notoriously elaborate a year later at Princeton University, when he was invited to speak as part of the Tanner lecture series on human values. He then surprised both the audience, his hosts and the invited interlocutors by giving his two addresses in meta-fictional form, as a lecture within the lecture by Costello, who is invited to give two honorary talks at a fictional Appleton College in Waltham, Massachusetts, and who chooses to address 'the crime of stupefying proportions' that she and her academic colleagues commit daily: the abuse of animals.

I have written about Elizabeth Costello and *The Lives of Animals* previously (Hemer 2012:236–40), but as already noted, some redundancy is inevitable, and the staging of the dialogue between philosophy and fiction in the Tanner lectures is crucial to my argument about contamination. Published the same year as *Disgrace*, *The Lives of Animals* (1999b) was often regarded as a companion piece that examined some of the novel's thematic strands from a

58 A first version of the lecture was published under the title 'What is realism?' in the journal *Salmagundi* (1997b). It was later incorporated as the first 'lesson' in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), which among its eight lessons includes the Tanner lectures that form the main body of *The Lives of Animals* (1999b) plus four other previously published texts.

radical philosophical perspective,⁵⁹ but it differs fundamentally from Coetzee's previous discursive writing.

Who is Elizabeth Costello, to begin with? The Bennington lecture encloses a comprehensive introduction: She is in her late sixties at the time of the lecture – twelve years older than Coetzee. She is the author of nine novels, two collections of poetry, one book on the bird life of Queensland and a large body of journalism. She was born in Melbourne, where she still lives (at the time of the lecture), after having spent twelve years abroad, 1951–63, in England and France. She has been married twice and has one child by each marriage – her son John, who accompanies the elderly writer on her journeys in the USA, teaches physics and astronomy at Appleton college. Her literary breakthrough came with the fourth novel, *The House on Eccles Street* (1969), whose main character is Marion Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, the main character in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. She has been widely honoured, at home and abroad. There is even an Elizabeth Costello Society based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, which puts out a quarterly *Elizabeth Costello Newsletter*.

Despite the distancing by nationality, age and gender, there are obvious parallels to Coetzee's own trajectory. But unlike her publicly timid creator, Elizabeth Costello – which by the way is her maiden name – is a woman of 'strong opinions', who does not hesitate to provoke her audience. Her lecture at the Appleton College about the abuse of animals even draws a parallel to the Holocaust and the way Jews were abused in Nazi Germany:

[W]e are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.

(Coetzee 1999b:21)

This comparison does of course not stand undisputed. The fictional embedding of the lectures is largely about the repudiation that Costello's apparently extremist position evokes, not only among her academic fellows but also in her own family. Her daughter-in-law, Norma, is her fiercest adversary, and her son becomes embarrassed about having prompted the lectures at his own University College. One of the colleagues, the elderly poet

59 For example, Michael Bell saw the animal theme in the two books as a Trojan horse designed to deconstruct the authority of conviction, and to test the power of persuasion, in relation to all fundamental and morally urgent life issues such as the Shoah or apartheid (Bell 2007:231–2).

Abraham Stern, is so goaded by the Holocaust analogy, which he condemns as blasphemous, that he refuses to attend the dinner after the presentation. He explains in a note:

If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead.

(ibid.)

The contamination of fiction and philosophy goes even further, as *The Lives of Animals* consists not only of the fictionally embedded academic lectures but also the comments by the four scholars with widely varying disciplinary backgrounds that had been invited to Princeton for the occasion: the literary critic Marjorie Garber, the biologist and moral philosopher Peter Singer, the historian of religion Wendy Doniger and the anthropologist Barbara Smuts, specialized in animal ethics. Amused and puzzled as they are, all of them, with the significant exception of Garber, seem to take for granted that Elizabeth Costello is expressing the author's own views and respond as is expected of respondents in a regular academic seminar. It would lead us too far astray to give a detailed account of the discussion, which is staged as a debate between philosophy and poetry, and which philosophy apparently wins.⁶⁰ Garber, the only one receptive to the meta-narrative form that lets the literary undermine and topple the dominant academic discourse – not as more often happens, the other way around – delivers an interesting and somewhat congenial discussion on the academic novel, which she finds to be 'one of the most brilliant minor genres of our time (ibid.:76). I would, however, hesitate to place Coetzee in that tradition – Garber mentions Kingsley Amis, Randell Jarrell and David Lodge as distinguished predecessors⁶¹ – but rather compare his take on the 'academic' novel(la) with the late and barely remembered US writer and critic Ronald Sukenick.⁶² Coetzee's elaboration of the Socratic dialogue is however far more sophisticated than Sukenick's witty but rather schematic 'narralogues'. And the inclusion of the unwitting respondents in *Lives of the Animals* adds a second – or third – meta-dimension that, in a way, unsettles the one(s) embedded in the narrative itself.

60 The titles of Costello's lectures are 'The philosophers and the animals' and 'The poets and the animals'.

61 Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and Randell Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (both 1954) and David Lodge's *Changing Places: A Tale Of Two Campuses* (1978).

62 His key argument was that we can judge the truth of fiction in the same way that we can consider the persuasiveness of any argument (Sukenick 2000:6). For further discussion of Sukenick, see Hemer 2012:29–30.

This truly innovative extra dimension is absent in *Elizabeth Costello*, where the focalizer appears as a more conventionally fictional character whose collected 'lessons' take the form of a continuous albeit not linear narrative. Some critics found this enclosure in a purer and formally self-conscious fictionality to flatten the discomfiting edge of the Tanner lectures and even bear resemblance to an 'emptily postmodern game' (Bell 2007:219). Such critique is in my view beside the point, as the gains are as important as the loss. *Elizabeth Costello* not only adds several nuances to the portrait of the main character – for example the relations to her son John (lesson 1), and her intriguing sister Blanche, who has devoted her life to be a missionary in KwaZulu-Natal (lesson 5) – but also elaborates on the controversy around her Appleton lectures (lessons 2 and 3) in the chapter about 'the problem of Evil' (lesson 6). There she polemically confronts a writer colleague at a conference in Amsterdam, the very real Paul West, author of *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (1989). That book's account of the elaborately cruel execution of the Wehrmacht officers who conspired but failed to kill Hitler is one that, according to Costello, ought not to have been published or even written, as the engagement with such evil inevitably will contaminate the viewer/writer/reader. (She doesn't use the word contamination, but here it appears, in its most sinister sense, as the adequate term.) Discomfitingly beset by the fictional madwoman, the novel character Paul West abstains from answering her allegations.⁶³

Marjorie Garber observes, in *The Lives of Animals*, that Coetzee's version of the academic novel is suffused with pathos rather than comedy. That would apply to *Elizabeth Costello* as well, although there is unmistakably an important element of humour and self-irony that goes with the pathos in all Coetzee's writing. I have already made the comparison between Elizabeth Costello and Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, whose 'madness' was a staging of her author's passion. Elizabeth Costello may likewise be mad, or obsessed, and her commitment to the cause of animal liberation serves perhaps as a vehicle for Coetzee's 'merely passionate' engagement. But unlike Magda, she is not only a character in a novel, and not any character; she is the novelist, yet not the author herself nor even always the focalizer. In *The Lives of Animals*, the central consciousness is that of her son, who by arriving late to the first lecture deprives the reader of its beginning. In *Elizabeth Costello*, plurivocality gives room for other prominent characters, such as the stern sister Blanche or the Nigerian writer Emmanuel Egudu (lesson 4), to step in the foreground with their ideas. Egudu and Costello have had a long and not uncomplicated relationship that is

63 West did respond later in the article 'The Novelist and the Hangman' in *Harper's Magazine* of July 2004.

only revealed in hints. In her arguments with him about ‘the African novel’ and with her sister about ‘the death of the Humanities’ it is not self-evident which point of view Coetzee favours. As Gibson comments:

Coetzee’s texts do not provide us with or nudge us towards the comfort of answers, resolutions, fixed positions. They engender a deep discomfort or perturbation.

(Gibson 2023:190)

After the phenomenally successful *Disgrace* and the likewise acclaimed *Youth* (2002), the second of Coetzee’s autobiographical ‘scenes from provincial life’, *Elizabeth Costello* was received with some reserve. Sometimes even devalued as a ‘scrap-book’, as it mainly consisted of previously published texts, it was generally assumed to be an intermediate digression. But some reviewers were enthusiastic, and the most insightful reading was made by writer colleague Marlene van Niekerk, in the Afrikaans-language weekly *Rapport* (30 November 2003):

What we have here is a moving, indirect or pseudo-self portrait of J.M. Coetzee, a portrait of the artist as an old woman. If *Boyhood* and *Youth* were a form of autobiography of authorial origins, then I read this book as a kind of meta-autobiography of the writer as philosopher of the self, one who reflects on what being a writer – perhaps a last dubious manifestation of the divine and salvation – could mean in this era.

[...]

It is a book in which a fragile and passionate rationality is set up against the impoverished reason of self-assured science and dogmatic religiosity.

It is a rationality that seeks to show the defenceless value of spirituality in the light of human mortality, a rationality that incorporates its own differences and internal contradictions by revelling and dissipating itself in the unstaunchable masquerade of fiction. That is why it can be a kind of ‘confession’ and ‘testament’ without once lapsing into a soggy sopiness, public sulking and scolding or a beating of the breast or simply the boring recounting of self-cherishing data.

[...]

Elizabeth Costello contains more of evocation, ideas, ingenuity, authorial good manners and chill brutality than many writers of ‘ordinary’ novels can scribble up in a lifetime. In fact: who wants to read an ‘ordinary’ novel if you can read this book?

(Van Niekerk, quoted in Kannemeyer 2012:549, 551)

Van Niekerk's analysis curiously appears almost as a premonition of Gibson's reading two decades later. The erudite Gibson, whose wealth of associations resembles Peter Mason's, makes a thorough assessment of Coetzee's entire oeuvre, in seven chapters that preferably let seemingly different works enter unexpected dialogue, for example *Dusklands*, *Age of Iron* and *The Childhood of Jesus* in a chapter entitled 'Countenancing grace'. The chapter dedicated to *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* has the headline 'The refusal of theodicy'.

A theodicy is, he explains,

a structure of assumptions amounting to a metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical belief that evil is a secondary or subordinate phenomenon, that it is contained within, kept in proportion or justified by the truth of a greater good.

(Gibson 2023:167)

The trust in the world's disposition to the good is a fundament for neoliberal culture, whereas Coetzee's work calls this trust in question from beginning to end. The refusal of theodicy is, in Gibson's view, a cornerstone of his art (*ibid.*). Applying the narrative economy of *Elizabeth Costello*, I skip Gibson's historical recapitulation from the Pelagians over Leibniz to Hegel and jump to his assumption that our time sees a resurgence of theodicies – religious as well as humanistic – and, most significantly, recent, largely American, 'secular' ones, with roots in cognitivism, neuroscience and contemporary psychology. He identifies two paradigmatic figures, Dacher Keltner and Steven Pinker.⁶⁴ Especially the latter, and his influential book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), with its central thesis that we are presently living in the most peaceful and best world in our species' existence, is mercilessly scrutinized.

If one had to seek out Coetzee's antithesis in contemporary culture, Pinker might not seem a bad choice.

(*ibid.*:179)

Again, I skip the lengthy argument but recommend the interested reader to go to the source for the amusement of seeing an inflated edifice of inconsistent presumptions disintegrate. The contemporary theodicies, with

64 Mexican-born Keltner is Professor of Psychology at the University of California and founder and director of The Greater Good Science Centre. Pinker, of Canadian-American origin, is the Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, with a specialization in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics.

their explicit ties to business, commerce and free-market 'ethics' come, in Gibson's verdict, close to turning philosophy into Prozac (ibid.:183). Coetzee's writing on the other hand,

speaks truth to power, but above all to cultural power, the normalization of contentment, comfort and ease that allows other forms of contemporary power to continue and flourish as they do.

(ibid.)

Let us dwell a little on his – and Costello's – dealing with the question of evil. Peter Singer suggests, in his comment in *Lives of the Animals* that Coetzee may be correcting Costello or detaching himself from his protagonist's analogy between Shoah and the industrial slaughtering of animals, that it might not just be a matter of nuance between passion and obsession. Gibson finds such conclusion to 'fall a bit short'. Even if the offended Abraham Stern is right to accuse Costello of thinking crudely by way of analogy, he himself is thinking myopically by way of the singular incident. His insistence is in the concept of the unique or pre-eminent evil, evil as the exception. Gibson points to the coincidence that the poet Stern is given the same name as the leader of the paramilitary Zionist Stern Gang – supposedly not to conflate the two Sterns, but obliquely reminding us that there can be Jewish monsters too. Because there are no exceptional types, whether species, races, cultures, peoples, classes or elites (ibid.:186). Yet, if Stern cannot think beyond the unique or exceptional moral theme, Costello likewise has a unique theme: animals. And Coetzee is in the end neither 'with Stern' nor 'with Costello'.

In the long run, Coetzee is rather on the side of the fuller anti-theodicean knowledge of, say, Agamben, who declares that the Holocaust, the horrors of the last century in general are not simply past, but remain the 'hidden matrix of the politics in which we are still living', 'the bloody mystification of a new planetary order', or Derrida's great anti-theodicean assertion, that ours is a condition in which 'there is a holocaust for every date, and somewhere in the world at every hour'

(ibid.:187)⁶⁵

Elizabeth Costello's confrontation with Paul West (lesson 6) is different and even seemingly contradictory. West here apparently bears the brunt for the recent vogue for heavily research-based historical horror stories, with

65 The quotes are from Agamben 1998:12, 175 and Derrida 1994:50.

historians Anthony Beevor and Timothy Snyder as more prominent examples.⁶⁶ Costello's concern is whether, for all its usually uncomplicated sense of being on the side of the good, this is a literature that is truly advancing the cause of the good. At a deeper level, her critique of West is a meditation on the limits to an anti-theodicean perspective that may either shade into a cheap, reactionary and ultimately vulgar pessimism, or sustain post-war triumphalism and the moralism it bred, and thus finally rescue theodicy (ibid.:194, 195). Interestingly, Costello's meditation is also on her own complicity – a crucial concept for Coetzee. The word 'Obscene!' that she wishes to fling at West is indeed also aimed at herself and

at 'the committee of angels that watches impassively over all that passes,' and therefore at the theodicean mindset.

(ibid.:196)

Señor C. recalled

Elizabeth Costello appears again in *Slow Man* (2005) and, with her two children, in the 'other stories' that make up a substantial part of Coetzee's latest book, *The Pole and Other Stories* (2023). But I leave her here, with Andrew Gibson. In the Australian novel *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) the 'strong opinions' are taken over by the celebrated writer JC – or *Señor C.* as he is called by the 'Filipina' neighbour Anya, who becomes his typist, transferring his recorded reflections on miscellaneous subjects from tape to paper. They live some ten floors apart in a high-rise apartment building in Sydney. She is twenty-nine, the daughter of an Australian diplomat and a Philippine model, gorgeously attractive and self-confidently flirtatious. He is seventy-two, hence some five years older than Coetzee, and of poor health, but apparently with a close to identical background in South Africa, although one of his other neighbours on the same floor believes he is from Colombia. The 'strong opinions' he is articulating are on commission for a German publisher, Mittwoch Verlag on Herderstrasse, Berlin. They are reflections on current political affairs, 'terrorism', 'al Qaida', 'Guantanamo Bay', 'asylum in Australia' etc., but also philosophical contemplations on topics like 'Zeno' – with reference to Borges – and 'probability'.

Anya's involvement with his work evolves into a triangular drama between Señor C., herself and her jealous partner, Adam – a forty-two-year-old Aussie in the finance business, who may appear as the incarnation of neoliberal

66 For example, Beevor, *Stalingrad* (2011) and Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010).

culture.⁶⁷ The drama culminates when JC invites Anya and Adam to celebrate the termination of the project, and a drunken Adam seizes the opportunity to both humiliate his host and embarrass his girlfriend. This event, eventually revealed as the novel's peripety, is followed by a 'second diary', which is not commissioned by Mittwoch Verlag, and contains 'soft' opinions of a more intimate kind, on for example 'ageing', 'authority in fiction', 'the erotic life' and 'my father'. These brilliant pieces are among the most personal – and self-critical – that Coetzee has written. He imagines his father's never disclosed opinion of him:

A selfish child, he must have thought, who has turned into a cold man; and how can I deny it?

(Coetzee 2007:135)

Or, in a following reflection on 'mass emotion':

As a young man, I never for a moment allowed myself to doubt that only from a self disengaged from the mass and critical of the mass could true art emerge. Whatever art has come from my hand has in one way or another expressed and even gloried in this disengagement. But what sort of art has that been, in the end? Art that is not great-souled, as the Russians would say, that lacks generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love.

(ibid.:138)

Yet, *Diary of a Bad Year* is in my view the most humorous of all Coetzee's novels. It is innovative also in its graphic form, with three narrative registers running in parallel on the pages: JC's opinions are in the second layer complemented with his reflections on the adorable Anya; and in the third by her thoughts about the grumpy but sweet old man and her quarrels with Adam.⁶⁸ And the story of Anya's relationship to Señor C. certainly defies the assumption that Coetzee's work would lack generosity and love. One of the most important yet perhaps overlooked elements in his art is the subtle eroticism, the keen eye and ear for the seductive play between man and woman; in his later work increasingly between the old man and the young woman, although the by no means sexless Elizabeth Costello controverts any banal or predictable stereotype. His to date latest novel, *El polaco* (2022; *The*

67 Curiously, Gibson does not dedicate any of his chapters specifically to *Diary of a Bad Year*, but it is a recurrent reference throughout his study.

68 This demanding structure is impossible to transfer to an e-book – as I was to learn when I attempted a similar form with two parallel registers for *Cape Calypso*.

Pole, 2023), is as surprising as moving story of love and passion between a middle-aged Catalan housewife and an elderly Polish pianist.



The bad year obviously alludes to the dark times that are reflected in JC's opinions; the aftermath of the disastrous intervention in Iraq that for decades to come has compromised 'the West' in the eyes of 'the Rest.' To some extent it clearly also reflects a personal crisis, although that predicament is more vague, other than the awareness of ageing and approaching death. This book is being written with the backdrop of even darker times – Putin's war and the resurging nationalism bordering on fascism in ever-increasing parts of the world, including Sweden where a conservative government is dependent on the support of a radical right-wing party with neo-Nazi roots. Although fortunate by many standards – a successful project coming to conclusion – this has truly also been a bad year at a personal level, in fact one of the worst. I deliberated on whether to make that crisis contaminate this interrogation – doubtful as to whether it would be evitable – but I decided to leave my 'diary of the bad year' for another occasion, even though that implies sticking to a more conventional format than I had anticipated; one that may be less congenial with the subject. Let me just conclude this chapter with a humble bow to the master of contamination. There is not much to add.

The heart of Country



February – March 2023

This bus has covered four million kilometres on this road, says our first driver, who prefers the night leg between Adelaide and Coober Pedy – he will drive me on the way back as well, skilfully dodging the kangaroos that freeze in the headlights. Something about travelling in a half-empty bus at night evokes deeply buried memories of so many other journeys through foreign lands; sitting up in half-sleep, trying in vain to find a comfortable position, waking up at strange stops in the middle of nowhere, or by the turns and brakes in empty towns; although along this route there are only petrol stations with adjoining ‘roadhouses’ that are closed at night. Already, at the desolate Central bus station in Adelaide, it feels like embarking for another country. Most of the other passengers are black, they speak a language that we – my wife Chinook and I – don’t associate with any tongue we have heard before. They keep their distance in a not unfriendly yet clearly discriminating way, which reminds me of my Swedish countryman Sven Lindqvist making that same observation in one of his last and best books, *Terra Nullius* (2012[2005]), a sequel to *Exterminate All The Brutes* (1996[1993]). The last passengers, picked up at an empty stop in the middle of the night, are a prototypical Aboriginal family sitting waiting among a pile of belongings; the last bundle to be loaded on to the bus is a sleeping child, who awakened unfolds as a slender boy of seven or eight.

We wake up at dawn to a flat landscape, with unbroken horizons in all directions, but surprisingly lush: light green, silver grey and purple spinifex against the brick-red earth and deep-blue sky, the shrub occasionally turning into low lofty forest. The bus cruises at 100, Wild Pink in my earphones when I’m not reading or just sitting

in silent contemplation. The tarmac road is like a surgeon's cut, but rough and bumpy, though free from potholes. Rest areas are every fifty or hundred kilometres, with open sheds under tin roofs and a water tank, at best.

Around the state border to the Northern Territory the scenery slowly changes. Long ridges appear in the far distance to the west. As we approach Alice Springs the landscape begins to undulate; we will find to our surprise in the coming days that the heartland stretching in a triangle from Alice westwards to the Petermann Ranges and southwards to Uluru, formerly known as Ayer's Rock, is more like the green highlands of Scotland – where none of us have been – than the Mars-like red desert we had imagined.



What am I doing here? *Qu'est-ce que je fais ici?* Rimbaud's open question in one of the letters from Harar, which Bruce Chatwin adopted as his mantra,¹ recurs in my thoughts now that I am – at last – following in Chatwin's trail to the heart of the austral continent. *The Songlines* (1987) was arguably the apex of an authorship that resembled Rimbaud's in the sense that it ended abruptly, although not by choice but by Aids – the truth was silenced in the very last, behind the smokescreen of some mysterious Chinese fungus infection. Now that I finish rereading it, on the second leg of the nineteen-hour Greyhound bus ride from Adelaide to Alice Springs, I'm struck by how little I remembered – except for the very first paragraph:

In Alice Springs – a grid of scorching streets where men in long white socks were forever getting in and out of Land Cruisers – I met a Russian who was mapping the sacred sites of the Aboriginals.

(Chatwin 1998[1987]:1)

In my review of the Swedish edition, I had called that introductory paragraph 'a wonder of exactitude.' The late Swedish sociologist and renowned stylist Johan Asplund, an essential interlocutor at the time, was not so impressed, but I maintain that it is a classic intro – not least the poignant detail of Land Cruisers, not Land Rovers. For several years in the eventful period from the mid 80s to early 90s, Chatwin was one of my literary idols. I read everything, from the breakthrough *In Patagonia* (2005a[1977]) to

¹ *What am I doing here?* is the title of Chatwin's last collection of travelogues and mini essays.

the posthumous *Anatomy of Restlessness* (1996), which included most if not all of the unpublished manuscript *The Nomadic Alternative* and some other scattered texts portending his never accomplished magnum opus on nomadism.² The notes for that life project form an important part of *The Songlines*; they even tend to take over the book, as if the Australian journey were the mother of all Chatwin's journeys, or simply because he knew that it was the last one. In fact, *The Songlines* was his testament, dedicated to his wife Elizabeth, because he finalized it in the awareness that he was dying. That added, of course, a special sombre quality to the book, and to the myth of its author, who, before the announcement of his imminent death, had gone from 'cult' to 'bestseller writer'.

And maybe this is the synthesis, apparently an exemplary contamination in its inconclusive fusion of travel book, novel, memoir, and layman philosophical and palaeontological speculation. His publisher, Jonathan Cape, had been confused about how to market it. Chatwin was adamant about not having it labelled as a 'travel-book', in which case it would be slotted beside 'the Cyclades Islands on 5 dollars a day', whereas in the fiction section 'it would be beside Chaucer' (Shakespeare 1999:486). When it was shortlisted for the Thomas Cook Travel Award he asked for it to be withdrawn from the list, with the argument that 'the journey it describes is an invented journey, it is not a travel book in the generally accepted sense' (ibid.:487). This genre indefinability, which would become fashionable some ten years later, was quite unusual at the time, especially in the bestseller circuit. It was generally hailed by both colleagues and critics, although there were also serious objections. An amused Mario Vargas Llosa made the comparison to Borges.

So, what kind of work is it? In the book itself, the narrator/protagonist 'Bruce' explains:

My reason for coming to Australia was to try to learn from myself, and not from other men's books, what a Songline was – and how it worked.

(Chatwin 1998:12)

Cocky as he admittedly is, he realizes that he needs help and guidance, and so he asks to get in contact with an 'expert', the 'Russian', Arkady Volchok, who becomes his mentor and the storyline's other main character. Bruce follows Arkady on tours to the west and north of Alice Springs and meets some of Arkady's Aboriginal acquaintances, as well as other whites – lawyers, healthcare workers, anthropologists – who are engaged in the Aboriginal

2 The *Nomadic Alternative* was his first work, written twenty years before *The Songlines*. But he never managed to find a publisher.

Land Rights Movement. It is mainly through conversations with these barely disguised informants turned novel characters that Chatwin attempts to capture the unique oral knowledge system that is archived as corridors or pathways in 'Country', the Aboriginal generic term for the land. I gather this comprehensive definition not from Chatwin but from another *Songlines* (2020), which I am reading in parallel. When I was asking for Chatwin's book in Adelaide, the young bookshop assistant assuredly pointed me to that other *Songlines* with the subtitle *The Power and Promise*, co-written by Australian curators and researchers Margo Neale and Lynn Kelly. And I realized that Margo Neale was the curator of the landmark exhibition *Songlines: Tracing the Seven Sisters*, which I had happened to stumble upon at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin in October and found overwhelming.³ So the pieces began to fall together – and I eventually also found a 'vintage' pocket version of Chatwin's *Songlines* in the same 'indigenous' section of the bookshop.

Yet, I reread it after thirty-five years with a sense of 'heart in mouth'. Ahead of its time as it was in many respects, I had an inkling that in the end it may not have stood the test of time. When discussing creative writing with young Swedish university students in the early 2000s, it astonished me that hardly anyone had even heard of Chatwin. His star had clearly fallen by the close of the millennium, and he was indeed somewhat obsolete already in life; an incarnation of the last 'adventurer', a waning species of eccentrics and romantics that are almost by definition male and white, often, if inadvertently, with a tinge of Empire. (I was always disturbed by the association to Sotheby's.) Now I soon make a note in the margin about a mannered 'world traveller's jargon' that now and then inflicts the signature clear and precise prose, and a certain 'complacency', for lack of a better word, that I didn't recall from my first reading.⁴ Nor did I react to the casual use of the word 'half-caste' or – which surprises me more – the remarkably sexist, not to say misogynous, descriptions of women, black and white. Encounters with Aborigines are likewise often depicted in an unembellished style that would seem unthinkable today, but in the latter case I find the unconcerned self-exposure quite

3 It was inaugurated in Canberra in 2017, and has been on a world tour ever since, with Paris (April – July 2023) and Tampere, Finland (October 2024 – March 2025) as forthcoming stops.

4 Christine Nicholls, whom I will come back to below, articulates my concern about complacency when she analyses the relation between 'the two Bruces', the omniscient narrator and the protagonist in third person who is seemingly an exact avatar of the 'real' Bruce Chatwin. This 'real Bruce', she notes, engages in discussion with other (mostly white) people, and in almost all cases his predominant conversational style is competitive rather than cooperative (Nicholls 2019:30).

refreshing. Yet, I keep reading, and despite my reservations I still find *The Songlines* compelling. But there are some serious ethical issues that cannot be dismissed. When confronted with inaccuracies and misunderstandings, and misuse of informants' trust, Chatwin resorted to the common infallible defence: that it is fiction. For sure, this is not a 'self-reflexive fieldwork account'. Chatwin was an accomplished novelist and travel writer, but he was not a scholar, although he had been a mature archaeology student in Edinburgh. His philosophical speculations about nomadism and the allegedly inherent human 'wanderlust' are those of a layman. This is certainly not necessarily a disadvantage for a writer, but compared to Borges, for example, another distinguished autodidact, Chatwin's speculations appear rather shallow, conventionally ethnocentric and – complacent.

The ethical concerns are however more troublesome. I have already referred to writer colleague Nicholas Shakespeare's biography from 1999, which although loyal to its subject is surprisingly critical. It tells, for example, of the disappointment of all the people who helped Chatwin in Alice Springs. The most telling example is that of Toly Sawenko, the real person behind the character Arkady Volchok:

I was completely floored by *The Songlines*. I had no inkling before during or after that Bruce had chosen to write a book about his adventures in Alice Springs. I had one postcard from Paris of a Picasso. After the book came out I never heard from him again. He didn't send a copy.

(Shakespeare 1999:489–90)

What was in reality only a three-day journey thus became an unauthorized 'biography' of Toly Sawenko, and for at least a decade, and possibly many years after Shakespeare interviewed him, Sawenko had to endure a stream of backpacker pilgrims knocking on his door.

The most devastating critique of *The Songlines* comes from one who declined the offer to be Chatwin's informant. Linguist and anthropologist Christine Nicholls was at the time of his visit working and living in a Worlpiri settlement in the remote interior north-west of Alice Springs. Chatwin contacted her and asked her to host him, but she didn't feel comfortable about interacting day and night with a complete stranger and said, kindly, no. An 'unwittingly prescient' decision, as she says in retrospect, with reference to what she found out about Chatwin's methods.

To put it bluntly, Chatwin did not put in the hard yards necessary to come to more than a superficial understanding of the ideas with which he was putatively grappling.

(Nicholls 2019:24)

Basically, her critique is that his assumption that the Aborigines are nomads is completely flawed, and that his conception of the songlines just serves as a projection of his own personal long-term obsessions.⁵ She even uses the term ‘roguery’, suggesting that *The Songlines* represents a form of epistemological violence vis-à-vis the Aboriginal people, whose voices barely register in the book. I will not go into further detail of Nicholls’s ‘reconsideration’ of Chatwin’s book three decades after its publication, but I recommend anyone interested to take heed of her forceful argumentation.

Notwithstanding, Neale and Kelly credit Chatwin for coining and popularizing the term ‘songlines’ (a qualified truth!) and, contrary to Nicholls, clearly believe that the worldwide attention that his book stirred was more beneficial than detrimental for the Aboriginal cause. Neale, now head of the Centre for Indigenous Knowledges at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra, is herself of Irish-Aboriginal descent – her Aboriginal surname is Ngawagurrawa.

The Aboriginal and Irish mix was ‘deadly’, both genetically and socially. We had a lot in common: both oppressed peoples and both fringe dwellers of the British Empire with a larrikin humour that was a key tool in our survival kit.

(Neale and Kelly 2020:21)

5 They were hunter-gatherers, typically travelling light, accessing water, harvesting fruits and vegetables and hunting game, out of economic necessity. Leisurely ‘walking’ in the desert would be lethal (ibid.:40). In recent years there has been a vivid discussion about the classical Aboriginal economy, inspired by the book *Dark Emu* (Pascoe 2014). The author, Aboriginal historian Bruce Pascoe, argued that the Aboriginal society was ‘more sophisticated’ than previously presumed, resembling the farming communities of ancient Europe. This highly influential thesis, and its underlying assumption that farmers are a priori more ‘advanced’ than hunter-gatherers, is resoundingly rejected by anthropologist Peter Sutton and archaeologist Keryn Walshe, who conclude, in agreement with Nicholls, that classical Aboriginal society was a complex and sophisticated hunter-gatherer society (Sutton and Walshe 2021).

It could also be adduced to Chatwin's defence that he never really attempted a definition, but rather a personal literary approximation.⁶ Neale and Kelly warn of overly simplistic explanations of a term that attempts to translate what is essentially undefinable and whose meaning will always harbour ambivalence, imprecision and elusiveness (ibid.:43). Yet they make an illuminating parallel to the ancient Greek orators whose memory system also built on the landscape, and 'most likely evolved from the oral tradition of their forebears long before writing' (ibid.:95). Our present-day acquaintance with the ancient memory techniques comes through the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*,⁷ a textbook that taught the orators to create something resembling the songlines, that is, a method of using locations for memory, the method of loci. The same highly efficient technique is now curiously employed by participants in contemporary memory championships (ibid.:97).

Instigated by Chatwin or not, the revelation of the songlines has implied a major shift in views of Australian history, from the 'newest' continent – a *terra nullius* until it was colonized by Europeans less than two hundred and fifty years ago – to the by far oldest living culture on Earth, dating its archive more than one thousand generations back; an estimation tending to become established as fact suggests sixty-five thousand years.⁸ From having quite generally been regarded by early explorers as the extreme Other, the most primitive of savages, doomed to extinction and subject to salvage efforts only for archival documentation, the Aborigines are now on the verge of finally becoming fully recognized as First Nations by 'official' Australia. The red and black flag with the yellow sun flies side by side with the national Commonwealth banner on official buildings. Every public event is preceded by an acknowledgement of Country and an allegiance to the local indigenous

6 John Bradley, an Australian anthropologist who really 'put in the hard yards' – living three decades with a Yanyuwa community, adopting the language and learning to understand their *kujika* (songlines) – gives Chatwin credit, not only for drawing popular attention (including Bradley's own) to Aboriginal culture: 'Although not well based on ethnographic study, [*The Songlines*] was a marvellous attempt to capture something of the role of *kujika*, though Chatwin did not know that.' (Bradley with Yanyuwa families 2010:14).

7 This book of rhetoric, written around 80 years bce and dedicated to a now forgotten man by the name Herennius, was originally attributed to Cicero, but later research points to another, anonymous author.

8 According to linguist Ghil'ad Zuckermann this figure is not substantiated by evidence. The relevant approximation would be 50,000 years, which is impressive enough (Zuckermann in conversation with the author). It reminds me of the supposedly 30,000 'disappeared' in Argentina during the latest dictatorship. The real figure is closer to 15,000, but the larger number has become an untouchable 'truth' (Hemer 2012:263n3).

custodians of the land. A crucial event for this astonishing, if perhaps tenuous, change was the late apology, in 2008, by then prime minister Kevin Rudd, to the ‘stolen generation’ – the victims of the policy of assimilation and forced removal that was implemented in the 1930s and continued to the end of the 1960s.⁹

In 2015 a Constitutional Convention and a Referendum Council was set up and thirteen First Nations regional dialogues held all over Australia, resulting in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart. This manifest is the platform for the political campaign for an indigenous voice in parliament, culminating with a referendum in October 2023.¹⁰ If, at last, a treaty is signed that formally recognizes Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as First Nations, it will be an event of great and not only symbolic significance. ‘The event of my lifetime’, as one representative activist interviewed on TV put it, and although they are incommensurable entities, my associations go to the 1994 elections in South Africa that brought Nelson Mandela to the presidency.¹¹ Although there may

9 The apology did not encompass the stealing of the land and the massacres in the ‘frontier wars’ that decimated the indigenous population by ninety per cent. However, on 3 June 1992, the High Court of Australia had recognized that all indigenous people of Australia held traditional ownership (‘native title’) to their land. This landmark overturning of the legal fiction of *terra nullius* is known as the Mabo decision, named after Torres Strait Island leader Eddie Mabo, who challenged the state of Queensland over property rights to Mer (Murray Island).

10 A ‘voice’ would give formal advice at all levels of government, and both parliament and government would be obliged to consult it on matters that ‘overwhelmingly relate’ to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, according to *The Guardian’s* continuously updated ‘explainer’, first published in August 2022 (www.theguardian.com/australia-news/indigenous-voice-to-parliament+tone/explainers – accessed 40 December 2024).

11 As I wrote this, in March 2023, there seemed to be a general expectation that the voice to parliament would pass, although narrowly. The result of the referendum on 14 October turned out to be a huge disappointment for the ‘yes’ campaign, attaining only 39.9 per cent of legal votes, and not coming near a majority in any of the Australian states – although winning the Capital Territory (Canberra). This unexpected setback passed almost unnoticed in the world media, because it coincided with the recent disastrous Hamas attack on Israel and the ensuing human catastrophe in Gaza. But a detailed analysis of the vote, published shortly after the referendum (28 November), gives a nuanced and less somber view of what the result actually implies. The report, which is available online, concludes:

The data suggests that Australians voted no because they didn’t want division and remain sceptical of rights for some Australians that are not held by others. The data suggests that Australians think that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians continue to suffer levels of disadvantage that is both caused by past government policies and that

be reason for caution about the lip-service paid by many white Australians, a new, previously unheard voice is already being clearly articulated in the public sphere. This other voice confidently provides an alternative understanding, visualized in the public space as a supplementary 'magic' map. Next to our hotel in Alice Springs there is a conspicuous guide-post titled 'Caterpillar Dreaming,' and the explaining text reads:

The low ridge in front of you is known as Ntyarkarle Tyaneme to the Arrernte people of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and is one of the first sites created by the Ntyarlke caterpillars. The ridge is the point where they crossed the river during their travels. As you will notice, the 'tail' of the caterpillar is missing, run over by Barret Drive. Unfortunately, an agreement could not be reached between the government and the traditional custodians, on how to protect the site before the road was constructed in 1983.



The grid of streets is as scorching as ever, with temperatures ranging between 35 and 40, but men in long white socks are conspicuously absent. The males outdoors at noon are mostly black and rugged; women and children, black, white and Asian, seek shelter in the air-conditioned shopping malls around Woolworths and Coles. The atmosphere is laidback and uptight in a strange concoction. To buy wine in the bottle shop I must pass an oral exam, explaining to the armed guard where I am from, where I live, whether I intend to share the wine with someone, where it is going to be consumed... Lately, Alice Springs has made the headlines for unprecedented outbursts of street violence: angry youngsters assaulting pubs and bottle shops in protest at tightened alcohol restrictions. The protests have been countered by severer constraints in a spiral of escalated violence and distrust. Later, I will learn that there is a rise in inbreaks and petty crimes every summer when the whites leave town and schools and youth facilities are closed, but this summer was worse than usual. After returning the rental car at the airport, I get a ride back to town with an elderly woman, about my own age – of Polish-Latvian

justified extra government assistance. They did not see the Voice model put to them as the right approach to remedy that disadvantage.

(Biddle, Gray, MacAllister and Qvortrup 2023)

ancestry, she explains, when I ask if she's from Alice. She looked me over before convening the hitch, says she usually doesn't pick up strangers. She's from Melbourne but has lived twenty-five years in Alice. 'It used to be a lovely place,' she says, discretely detecting my reaction in the silence that follows. 'What happened?' I ask, and get, after a second's hesitance, the not very surprising answer: 'Too much money on people who do nothing.' 'Black people,' she clarifies, in case I'm dumb. I let her talk, neither assenting nor objecting. 'Because of high unemployment?' 'No, not at all!' she exclaims. 'There is plenty of employment, but nobody wants to work! Not when the welfare check is higher than the minimum wage.'



Spencer & Gillen

But my principal motive for coming to the town called Alice, besides following in Chatwin's tracks, was to visit the telegraph station some five kilometres north of the town centre. It is now a major recreation area, with trails for walking and cycling in the beautiful hilly landscape around the waterhole that was erroneously taken for a spring (the original Alice's spring, named after Alice Todd, the wife of Charles Todd, who headed the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line's central repeater station in 1871, around which the first white settlement in Arrernte Country and Central Australia was founded).

The settlement is meticulously preserved and restored, with furnished living rooms, made beds, set kitchen tables and the actual telegraph office in 'function,' so that the visitor can push a button and send a pretend cable to Darwin. The pioneers – Todd and his companions Little, Patterson and Mitchell – are displayed on photographs and cartoons, and as life-size cardboard figures, all based on the same iconic portrait photograph, posing like beat poets. Their accomplishment was indeed remarkable: to connect Adelaide and Darwin through a 3,000 km cable across the continent, which from Darwin continued underwater to Singapore and onwards across the Eurasian landmass all the way to the metropole. A message from Adelaide that previously had taken months to reach London, by boat, could now be transmitted in five hours. The telegraph was a qualitative leap in communication history on par with the internet.

But fascinating as the story of the telegraph may be, it is not what I am searching for. I look for vestiges of one of the major events in the history of anthropology and the social sciences, which took place in the backyard of the telegraph station between November 1896 and January 1897, hosted by the then manager, Frank Gillen. The young girl in the combined museum

reception, café and shop has never heard of it. Frankly, I would probably not have had a clue about it either, if I hadn't read the already apostrophized *Terra Nullius*, my preparatory reading besides *The Songlines*. So, let us follow in Sven Lindqvist's tracks now.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the fate of Australia's Aboriginal inhabitants seemed to be sealed after the report of *The Horn Scientific Expedition*. This first exploration of the nature of Central Australia, conducted from May to August 1894, was sponsored by the three universities of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide in liaison with the pastoralist and mining magnate William Austin Horn. Its object was the natural history of the region, which included 'the central Australian Aborigine', and the report's collective portrait of 'him' (generally always described as a male) bears a striking resemblance to the depictions of the 'hottentots' in Southern Africa, although the genocidal wish is here completely untarnished. I quote from Lindqvist's quote:

He has no written records and few oral traditions. In appearance he is naked, hirsute savage, with a type of features occasionally pronouncedly Jewish ... He has no traditions and yet continues to practise with scrupulous exactness a number of hideous customs and ceremonies which have been handed from his fathers, and of the origin or reasons of which he knows nothing ... Thanks to the untiring efforts of the missionary and the stockman, he is being rapidly 'civilized' off the face of the earth, and in another hundred years the remaining evidence of his existence will be the fragments of flint which he has fashioned so rudely.

(Horn and Spencer. 1896:iv, in Lindqvist 2012:38)

The Arrernte people, whose crucial goodwill and assistance to the expedition was rewarded by the above description, were surely never informed about the report. But the leading men obviously understood its implications and realized that something had to be done in order to break through the wall of white miscomprehension. So, they contacted Frank Gillen, who was not only the most powerful man in Alice Springs, but one that moreover had shown an unusual interest in the Arrernte culture. Gillen listened to their request and contacted, in his turn, the biologist Baldwin Spencer, who had come to Alice with the Horn Expedition and stayed when the others moved on.¹² Spencer was a respected academic with international contacts, whereas Gillen had the local knowledge and connections. An ideal match and, as it

12 Spencer was in fact one of the writers of the report, although presumably not of the paragraph quoted above.

would turn out, a win-win situation for all involved. The Arrernte granted the two whitefellas the privilege to witness a seven-week cycle of ceremonies that normally should have taken place in Imanpa, some 200 km south-west of Alice, on the way to Uluru. For the sake of the white guests' convenience, they moved it to the telegraph station's backyard. It was in fact a staged performance, with short cuts and abridgements, and there were moreover inevitable misunderstandings due to the language barrier; Spencer and Gillen did not speak Arrernte and the interpreters mastered only a poor pidgin English. Nevertheless, the documentation and summary of the ceremony, which Spencer published in *Nature* four months later, and the subsequent monograph that he wrote with Gillen's assistance, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), caused an immediate international sensation. Malinowski, who ten years later conducted the research for his likewise groundbreaking *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines* (1913), is regularly quoted for having said of Spencer and Gillen that

[s]ince the publication of their first volume, half of the total production in anthropological theory has been based on their work and nine-tenths affected or modified by it.

(*ibid.*:42)¹³

It also had an impact far outside of the anthropological discipline. Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud were admittedly inspired by Spencer and Gillen, and the anarchist ideologist Pyotr Kropotkin took Aboriginal culture and society as evidence for his theory on mutual support and voluntary cooperation. Interestingly, however, Spencer himself remained convinced that he was documenting a culture doomed to extinction. As Lindqvist laconically notes:

13 For a more thorough exploration of the anthropological debate, see, for example, Kuklick 2006. Anthropology's role vis-a-vis the Aborigines continued, however, to be ambiguous. One of the many hair-raising quotes that Lindqvist provides is from George H.L.-F. Pitt-Rivers in *The Clash of Cultures* (1927):

In fact, the Native Problem might well be defined as 'the problem created by the survival of those native races or their hybrid descendants that have not been exterminated by the "blessings of civilization"'. That is to say there is no native problem in Tasmania, and for the European population in Australia, the problem is negligible, for the very good reasons that the Tasmanians are no longer alive to create a problem, while the Aborigines of Australia are rapidly following them on the road to extinction

(Pitt Rivers, in *ibid.*:37)

He failed to notice that the natives he viewed as study objects were in fact using him as an instrument in one of the most successful publicity campaigns in history.

(ibid.)



Spencer and Gillen became like a trademark, and Spencer especially capitalized on his celebrity status, securing a position as one of Melbourne's most prominent citizens. Two years after the publication of *Native Tribes*, they made an expedition across the continent northwards, ending at the Gulf of Carpentaria, which resulted in a second monograph, *Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904). It was supposed to be a sequel, but according to journalist and historian Dean Ashenden, it turned out to be more of a rerun, with the Warumungu around Tennant Creek playing the central role given to the Arrernte in the first volume (Ashenden 2022:57). In *Telling Tennant's Story* (2022), which will be discussed in more detail below, Ashenden points to an interesting discrepancy between the two authors: Spencer was and remained a man of Empire, nowadays discredited at his own former faculty at the University of Melbourne, where students and staff have demanded that his name be erased from official premises along with those of other 'racist colonialists'.¹⁴ Gillen, who was Irish and from a working-class background, had in contrast a strong animosity against British imperialism and expressed opinions that were clearly anti-colonialist before the term existed. In a letter to his associate, after a discussion of the Irish question, he stormed at what he pungently called 'that arrogant assumption of superiority so characteristic of your Nigger annihilating race' (ibid.:53).

I am intrigued by Gillen, whose letters to Spencer and journal from the expedition are displayed in the rare books collection in the Adelaide university library. The diary, or as the subtitle says, 'the camp jottings of F.J. Gillen', was first published in 1968 by the Libraries Board of South Australia in what appears as a facsimile of the typewritten notes. It is a personal account, far from the polished prose in the later monograph, and I try to read it as a literary or proto-literary text, seeking some possible resonance with the 'auto-ethnography' of Leiris some thirty years later. That is of course an unfair comparison, Gillen was a postal messenger, not a writer, although the process of writing exhilarated him, as Ashenden puts it. But he was a critical witness

14 Whereas the Richard Berry Building was renamed, the Baldwin Spencer Building still stands, although it is usually referred to as the Old Zoology Building or Building 113.

to the gross violations at the frontier – the contact-zone – and a defender of the Aborigines, remarking on their utter demoralization and misery, and the vicious ignorance and cruelty of the white pastoralists and missionaries. He was a proto-pluralist who tried to see both the Aborigines from the white point of view and the whites from the Aboriginal perspective, whereas only one of these viewpoints was of interest to imperial anthropology, and hence to Spencer (*ibid.*). In 1891 he had even very courageously recommended that the notorious Mounted Constable William Willshire be charged with murder.¹⁵ Given my expectations, however, the diary is a disappointment. There is little, if any, critical self-reflection. The personal notes are mainly about contacts with the ‘little wife’ at home in Moonta. He is only on leave from the post office there and will return to the Yorke Peninsula after the expedition, abandoning the ethnographic career and further collaboration with Spencer for the unglamorous life of postmaster and family father. He dies ten years later, only in his fifties.

What is interesting in the diary is however the detailed account of how ceremonies are recorded and sacred items collected, in a shameless manner that does bear resemblance with the looting of the Dakar-Djibouti mission. The French and the British colonial syndicates were equally vile kleptocracies, and anthropology served as a pretext for the pillaging. This is a representative excerpt from the diary (3 April 1901):

During the morning the blacks performed a sacred rain dance called ‘Kurnara’ which is one of the ceremonial dances of the Intitchiuma or Rain making ceremony. We succeeded in getting two kinematograph records and a number of interesting photographs. The kine films will have to be sent to Melbourne for development and so far as we can learn the only man there who has had experience in this work is an officer of the Salvation Army. In return for a bag of flour and some tea sugar and tobacco we obtained the 7 head sticks beautifully decorated and used in the ceremony those will be packed and sent through to Melbourne where all material collected by the Expedition is to be stored. Dreamt last night that our house at Moonta was completely gutted by fire which originated through kitchen chimney catching alight. Awoke in a terrible state of excitement and the unpleasant impression did not altogether leave me until I received a wire from the little wife saying that all was well – I have a horror of chimney fires and only yesterday wired Dick enquiring if he had chimney swept.

(Gillen 1968:18)

15 Willshire got off, of course, but this extraordinary act gave Gillen lasting respect among the Arrernte.

The Aborigines, here called 'blacks', are sometimes referred to as 'Niggers'. It would be easy to dismiss both Spencer and Gillen as racists. They were undoubtedly men of their time, but in relative perspective even Spencer was humane and open-minded. Although they regarded the Aborigines as representing an earlier stage of development, in social and cultural terms, they strongly opposed the common conception that they would exemplify an earlier biological stage, even a 'missing link' to modern human's hominid ancestors. Spencer, the biologist, shows in his photographs a respectful, even affectionate approach. His gaze receives smiles in return from women and children, whereas the men seem unbothered by his presence. Ashenden, who is ambivalently fascinated by the two of them, adduces three arguments in their defence. Firstly, the documentation and the records. The 'collected' artefacts were preserved, and some have been returned to the communities and are now at display in local museums such as the one of the Warumungu in Tennant Creek. Secondly, they made anthropology widely known and contributed to the long labour of undoing other and worse expressions of racism. Thirdly, and most importantly, they were pursuers of truth (or truthfulness) through carefully documented observation – which at the time was the only accepted way to get at the truth. They could tell both the armchair theorists in Europe and the local haters that their views were simply not consistent with the known facts.

Yet he notes a change in Gillen's attitude – which I can sense in the diary – from the young 'proto-pluralist' and 'anti-colonialist' who had coined the term 'dreamtime', to the mature explorer 'fitted out with anthropology's lenses' (Ashenden 2022:64). Although anthropology – or particular anthropologists – will continue to play a crucial role in advocating Aboriginal rights during what Ashenden calls 'the great Australian silence', Spencer and Gillen were, perhaps inadvertently, crucial for drawing that veil of silence over the human catastrophe that had preceded their observations.

Their impact came less from the words they used to describe what they saw than from what they chose to see, from their angle of view. They thought it best to 'draw a veil' over the events that had so troubled the young Gillen, but their anthropology was even more effective than a veil. Don't look *here*, it urged. Look over *there!* It was a way of not seeing and, what's more, it was authorized by science.

(*ibid.*:63, original emphasis)

From annihilation to assimilation

Chatwin doesn't mention the telegraph station and was possibly unaware of its history. Lindqvist, on the other hand, makes no attempt to explicate the songlines. Chatwin is outspokenly unacademic, leaning on his fictionalized mentors, but he does intermingle with Aborigines on his short excursions from Alice Springs. Lindqvist is well read and properly prepared and gives a vivid history lesson. But on his one-man journey around literally half the continent, driving from Adelaide to Alice to Darwin to Perth and back to Adelaide, he doesn't interact in any deeper sense with a single black Australian. There is a reason for that discrepancy, though: strict rules had been applied that demanded advance written permission to 'visit an Aboriginal settlement, photograph an Aborigine or reproduce what an Aborigine says' (Lindqvist 2012:45). Lindqvist acknowledges the limitation and comments:

Why should a long-despised people, now that it is no longer faced with certain annihilation, go about longing to socialize with its former annihilators and despisers?

(ibid.)

There is yet another history associated with the telegraph station, of which the girl in the reception was well informed. To compensate for her ignorance of the Spencer and Gillen project – which is in fact mentioned on a board, with a photograph from one of the ceremonies, but without the context – she points us to the rich and pedagogically displayed material on the stolen generation, with moving testimonies of some of its surviving members. In 1932, the telegraph station was turned into the Bungalow and became one of the hubs in the White Australia campaign that in fact attempted to secure fulfilment of the Horn Expedition's prediction, not by annihilation but assimilation.¹⁶ The immediate concern was the many 'half-caste' children, almost exclusively the result of white men's sexual intercourse, forced or not, with Aboriginal women. The rationale behind the policy is unashamedly explicated in the permanent exhibition's display of official documents from

16 It is estimated that when the British arrived in Australia, the Aboriginal population was between 750,000 and 1 million. By the end of the nineteenth century, it had been reduced to a tenth of that figure and the predicted extinction seemed indeed to be imminent. When it didn't happen, and the indigenous population started to recover – it is today estimated to be back at the original numbers – there was bewilderment in the government as to how to respond to the unexpected situation, and the answer was 'assimilation' (Peter Sutter in panel discussion at the Adelaide Writers' Festival, 2023).

The Commonwealth Department of the Interior. Under the headline 'Half Caste – Australia's Tragedy', the text reads:

So grave has the problem become in recent years, with 800 half-castes now in the Territory as against a diminishing population of between two and three thousand whites, that the Commonwealth government, in prudence and humanity, has been forced to decisive action. During the last seven years the rising generation has been gathered in by the police patrols, from all the camps and stations from Port Keats to the Petermann Ranges, to be housed and educated in institutions.

[...]

Under the best conditions, they are to be given every opportunity to outgrow their heredity. They will be encouraged to live white, think white and to marry, if possible, into the white race, or failing that with each other.

The authors of this official document were not completely insensitive to possible negative reactions, in the white community:

Humane, parental and exceedingly optimistic, this scheme frankly appals many residents of the Territory, who openly state that it is not only quixotic and a moral cruelty to the half-castes themselves to sever them from their own Country and their own people, where their man-power can be of infinite use, but the deliberate concentration of a large coloured element in the settlements and railway thoroughfares that can only result in untold chaos and disaster.

A vitally interesting national experiment, it will require the passing of at least 20 years to write the end of the story.

The statement documents are supplemented with photos from the Bungalow, but it is not entirely clear whose voice is speaking in this documentation. One photograph picturing a black child with blonde hair has the caption:

Neither black nor white – unwanted and with neither Birthright nor Heritage. The plight of the half caste is a sorry one and an urgent problem in the interior.

With another picture of a group of children and two women:

Some of the occupants of the Alice Springs 'Bungalow'. These kiddies are all half castes and quadroons. Some are almost white (see photo 51). The dark half caste woman on the right is herself the mother of 2 of these. Thus have the original 14 half castes in this shameful structure now increased to 70.

The Bungalow buildings at the telegraph station have been erased, and there have to my knowledge never been any intention to reconstruct them as they were.

The comparison to South Africa is inevitable, though the 'miscegenation' in the Cape goes back a century longer. In Australia, the official norm was 'separate development', which in South Africa was the presentable synonym of apartheid. But the Australian post-war state policy shifted towards 'assimilation', whereas the South African apartheid ideologists stubbornly strived for perpetuated segregation. The 'coloureds' were defined as a racial category of their own – although assimilation through 'whitewashing' was an option, as the criterion for classification was the colour of the skin.¹⁷ In Australia the justification for the assimilation policy was 'race equality'; that all inhabitants should be granted the opportunity to become white Australians in the long run. Not only 'half-castes', but also Aboriginal children were taken from their mothers and placed in mission institutions like the Bungalow, although with small, if any, prospects of ever becoming 'white', i.e. genuine Australians. In its implementation, the assimilation project was a crime against humanity fully comparable to apartheid, but whereas the South African regime was eventually condemned across the world and subject to sanctions, hardly anyone protested the White Australia policy that lasted until the 1970s¹⁸ – with some very few but significant exceptions, even in Australia itself – and only at a late stage, when the damage was already done. Today, however, it is one of the burning issues in Australian letters, to the extent that one may even predict a 'boom' resembling the *'auge de memoria'* in Argentina in the 90s and early 2000s, and the so-called TRC literature in South Africa from the latter part of that same period. I shall come back to some literary and scholarly approaches to 'the great Australian silence' below. But let me end here with an observation on another disparity between South Africa and Australia, that may at least to some extent be explained by the subtle yet significant difference

17 Zoë Wicomb's novel *Playing in the Light* (2006) explores the 'play-white' phenomenon and its absurd consequences: for example, that two full siblings could end up on different sides of the crucial divide between 'white' and 'non-white'.

18 The policy also stipulated that only white immigrants, preferably from Britain or English-speaking countries, were allowed citizenship.

between assimilation and apartheid. The above quoted Margo Neale would in South Africa have been categorized as 'coloured'. The same goes for a large part, if not the majority, of Australia's current black writers and artists, many of whom are descendants of the stolen generation. Melissa Lucashenko, Sally Morgan and Alexis Wright, to name but three outstanding representatives, all regard themselves as Aboriginal writers, and the surviving communities welcome them back to Country without reservations.¹⁹ So, assimilation now works in the reverse. And the social engineers of White Australia must turn in their graves just as much as the apartheid architects.

Breaking the great silence

Tennant Creek, along the telegraph line, road and railway between Alice Springs and Darwin, appears in Lindqvist's *Terra Nullius* as the Australian town with the greatest density of drinking establishments – but also a town where Aborigines have declared war on alcohol. The Julalikari Council, representing sixteen different language groups in ten different suburbs, called the unregulated sale of alcohol 'a state sanctioned act of genocide against Aboriginal people' (Lindqvist 2012:58).²⁰ Dean Ashenden spent his boyhood in this frontier town, and when he left Tennant Creek in 1955, at the age of thirteen, he did not believe he would ever return. 'I just hated the joint,' as he expressed it in the panel at the Writers' Week in Adelaide. Yet he did go back, after fifty years, and returned several times thereafter, to tell Tennant's story. He chose his birthplace as a case for the greater Australian story of black–white relations – a story that from white Australia's perspective is defined by its absence: guilt suppressed by silence. Ashenden recalls the trucks that, just before the movie started, delivered young boys and girls to a side section of the outdoor cinema to watch, mostly, American Westerns. He shamefully admits that as a child he never reflected much on who these other children were or where they came from. When, decades on, he met age mates raised on the surrounding missions who had been to the same movies, they told him that the gunshots had frightened them. *Telling Tennant's Story* is a merger of memoir and indictment: a systematic recapitulation of the background and failure of the White Australia project. The analysis is structured around ten crucial years, the first being 1860 and the last 2005, with Tennant as the main reference point and the central role of anthropology a recurring theme.

19 Hardly any Aborigines today are 'full blood'. Many are more white than black in appearance. But intermarriages or interrelations with whites are less common now than in the early days of the colony (Ghil'ad Zuckermann, in conversation with the author).

20 For a detailed account of Tennant's fight with 'the grog,' see Ashenden 2022:145–8.

The 1901 chapter, which I have already referred at some length, is about Spencer and Gillen. They were ethnographers but not proper anthropologists. Gillen returned to the position as postmaster, and Spencer remained a professor of biology, although he made futile attempts to form an anthropology department in Melbourne. The first academy anthropologist in Australia was A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, appointed as ‘foundation professor’ in 1926, with financial support from the USA, though not in Melbourne or Adelaide, but in Sydney. The ‘headstrong’ and ‘flamboyant’ ‘lower-middle-class lad from Warwickshire’ made a momentous impact but stayed only five years in Sydney before moving on to Chicago (Ashenden 2022:73). His successor, Adolphus Peter Elkin, who said that he was ‘given the helm of a sinking ship’, was on the other hand to stay in Sydney for the rest of his long life,

making it the capital of a growing empire of anthropology and retrieving Spencer and Gillen’s efforts to make anthropology the definitive and most influential of Australia’s stories about the Aborigines.

(ibid.:74)

Apart from the shared interest in the Aborigines,²¹ Elkin was in most respects Radcliffe-Brown’s antithesis. The latter, a disciple of Durkheim, is regarded as one of the founders of structural functionalism, whereas Elkin was empiricist with an eclectic view to theory. He was moreover a reverend, spending Friday to Sunday in his parish in the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney. As a missionary he advocated protection for the Aborigines, not primarily from their own ‘barbaric customs’, as most missionaries did, but from the lethal pressure by pastoralists and miners. When the last known officially sanctioned pogroms occurred, in Kimberley 1926 and, most infamously, the Coniston massacres in 1928, he was among the most protrudent protesters.²² His proposed strategy to ‘bring the vast frontier zone to heel’ appealed to the national government, and when the then minister for the interior in 1938 launched ‘a new deal for Aborigines’, with the goal of ‘assimilation’ at its centre, it was very much an implementation of Elkin’s ideas (ibid.:79).

21 Radcliffe-Brown had done fieldwork in Western Australia 1910–12 with legendary Irish-Australian writer and journalist Daisy Bates as a ‘scientific handmaid’. Bates was convinced that the Aborigines were bound for extinction, yet literally dedicated her life to their support and welfare (see Lindqvist 2012:151–4).

22 In reprisal for the spearing of a white dingo hunter on Coniston station, north-west of Alice Springs, dozens of Warlpiri men, women and children were hunted down in police-led vigilante raids (ibid.:77–8). Official records admit 31 casualties but estimates of the real figure range to as high as 200.

Although there were certainly changes in nuance from the eugenic interpretation before the war, ultimately aiming at eradicating the Aboriginal genes, to welfare- and equality-motivated arguments in the 1950s and 60s, assimilation was the hegemonic and almost undisputed paradigm throughout what Ashenden calls 'the second silence' of 1920–65. The systematic practice of uprooting children from their families and cultures was to be condemned as genocide by international conventions, regardless of motives. Arguably, anthropology served as a scientific warrant for 'assimilation', just as *Volkekunde* had underpinned 'apartheid'. However, in Australia anthropologists were also the most ardent critics of assimilation. The very notion of the 'great Australian silence' was coined by Elkin's fourteen-year younger colleague and adversary Bill Stanner. In one of his radio-broadcasted Boyers lectures from the early 1970s, Stanner made a survey of all that had been written in the field of Australian history from 1939 onwards, and found in every case the same gaping hole. 'Inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness,' he noted rhetorically, before drawing the oft-quoted conclusion:

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned into habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale.

(*ibid.*:127)²³

Stanner, who died of Parkinsons in 1981, only two years after Elkin, is Ashenden's hero. Born in 1905, he was also a man of his time, that is, a man of empire, who had been stationed in Kenya in the 1960s and learned from the decolonization process there. But perhaps precisely due to his international outlook, he saw through the 'fiction' of white Australia's relations with the Aborigines. The false assumption – fortified by anthropology – was that Aboriginal society is an unchanging structure, fragile to the touch, whereas in Stanner's understanding, their culture was neither in decay nor collapsing, but undergoing a profound change in which the Aborigines themselves were playing an active part (*ibid.*:105–6). His solution to the puzzle of continuity and change was 'self-determination' as opposed to forced assimilation. It is, however, worth noticing that many Aboriginal leaders were in favour of the 'race equality' aspect of assimilation.

23 The lectures are gathered with other key texts in Stanner 1979.

I shall not go into more detail on the political history of Australia, or on history as discourse and discipline. Let me just state in passing that there have been other dissident voices that have defied the monolithic consensus and struggled to dismantle the silence. Historian Henry Reynolds had started exploring ‘the other side of the frontier’ already in the 1970s and has, at the age of eighty-five, produced a monumental list of works that fill the ‘gaping holes’ in previous Australian histories. Another giant contributor of knowledge is linguist and anthropologist Peter Sutton, whom I have briefly referred to for his courageously controversial part in the previously mentioned ‘Dark Emu’ debate. Sutton shared the panel with Ashenden at the Writers’ Week and quietly pointed out that historians still fail to listen to anthropologists.²⁴

Listening to these two distinguished gentlemen, I am keen to know whether there are *literary* attempts at dismantling the great silence. Curiously, I seem to have found what I’m looking for the next day, in a panel with the *Guardian* journalist and writer Paul Daley, who is interviewed about his novel *Jesustown* (2022). The critics’ praise of the novel is strapped across the cover:

An unflinching examination of the truths white Australia refuses to acknowledge.

A searing dissection of the arrogance of white history and generations of moral failure.

A challenging statement about the mythology of Australian colonial history. It confronts the hard questions with intense sensitivity and a smattering of humour.

Jesustown is nothing less than the history of Australia, but with the distance between its ‘story-ist’ myths and harsh and human reality laid bare. A brilliant novel.

This is a story – a great story – with all the tragedies and lies that is colonial Australia. Our circle of tragedy.

And, singled out below the title on the front page:

²⁴ Sutton’s own main contribution to the debate is the seminal *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus* (2009). A third important scholar who has lately played an important part in public debate is political scientist Sarah Maddison, author of *Beyond White Guilt* (2011) and *The Colonial Fantasy: Why White Australia Can’t Solve Black Problems* (2019).

At long last, here is a novel that looks Australia's brutal, murky frontier – one that left generations traumatised – straight in the eye.

As a writer, I would feel uncomfortable with such expectations. As a reader, I inevitably approach such a book with an extra critical eye. But I soon realized that this is indeed an ambitious and well-written novel of high relevance for our purposes. Like Ashenden, the fictional I-narrator, Patrick Renmark, returns after decades to a place of his youth, which he thought he would never see again. In this case it is the fictional Jesustown on the remote Arcadian coast – that is, somewhere along the Gulf of Carpentaria on the border between Queensland and the Northern Territory in real Australia. He is coming there in a state of shock after a personal tragedy, with the aim of writing a book about his deceased grandfather, the legendary self-taught anthropologist Nathanael Renmark – Renny to the Aborigines – who had allegedly saved the local community, with his own life at stake, from government-approved extermination. Searching through the unsorted material in his grandfather's archive, Patrick, however, makes some disturbing discoveries that distort the myth of the saviour, especially regarding his role as the leader of an American-Australian Scientific Expedition after the war, which plundered the community of artefacts and even human remains.²⁵

Patrick Renmark appears as Daley's self-ironically boosted alter ego. He is a successful journalist and bestseller writer who has specialized in what he calls 'story-ism': a cross-genre of fiction and popular accounts of historic Australian characters, preferably war heroes. His breakthrough, which sold over a hundred thousand copies, was a book about the martyr-heroes of Gallipoli, 1915. He is cynical, full of self-contempt, vulnerable but nonetheless genuinely dislikeable. Living a jet-set life in London with beautiful and equally successful Cate, he's having an affair with a twenty-year younger woman, Merridy. We know already on the outset that this will lead to disaster – not only the end of his marriage, but the death of Patrick and Cate's son. The exact circumstances are revealed in parallel with the revelation of ambiguities in grandfather Renny's estate. The intended dramaturgy is perhaps all too obvious, yet clever,

25 Plundering burial sites was a lucrative semi-clandestine business in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when unscrupulous collectors as well as Western museums wanted to salvage evidence of the dying Aboriginal race. Sven Lindqvist dedicates a large part of *Terra Nullius* to it. Daley explains in the concluding author's note that the incitement to write his novel was a visit to the 'room of the dead' at the South Australian Museum, where boxes containing the remains of 4,600 Aboriginal people are stacked in boxes on utilitarian wooden shelves (Daley 2022:360). Adelaide was, he notes, 'the ground zero in Australia for body-snatchers'.

exploring the grey zones – a recurring term – of good intentions, messianic hubris and moral morass. But it doesn't really work in practice. Why? Interviewed on stage by black journalist, and friend, Jack Latimore, Daley explained that he represents the blacks through white eyes – 'because he didn't feel the right to inhabit them.' Yet, the black characters are more alive than the cliché whites, including the self-reflective and self-pitying Patrick. The story of his personal tragedy, however horrible and credible in its brutal banality, is simply not engaging enough to match the apparently 'true fiction' of the white saviour, who, inadvertently or not, betrays his protégées to American trophy hunters. A simple Google search indicates that the model for 'grandpa' Renny is the eccentric self-taught anthropologist Charles P. Mountford, who led an American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem land in 1948, and who was regarded with both reluctant admiration and great scepticism by Elkin – Angleton, in the novel – and the academic anthropologists in Sydney.²⁶ His story, especially the account of the first encounter with 'the People', recorded as a testament before his probable suicide, is the more interesting – in my view the novel's great literary accomplishment.

The title of the panel at the Writers' Week was 'Truth in Fiction', and Daley gives some good arguments for his choice of fiction as means of truth-telling. He did not want to geolocate the story, therefore calling the community 'the People' and the town 'Jesustown' or 'J-town' in short, 'because what happened there happened everywhere in this country'. Possibly, the fiction-novel form reaches an audience for which a 'historical' or 'documentary novel' about a fictionalized Mountford would have had less appeal. And the format allows for interesting elements of what one might call a 'speculative meta-anthropology' in Patrick's reflections on what to do with the randomly archived material of photographs, diary entries and confessional tape recordings. But in the latter case, the fiction is clearly also a restraint. Not knowing whether this material is at all 'authentic' unsettles my engagement. And Renny's obviously fictional capacity as feared grandfather of the narrator – in a lineage of tragic fatherhoods – distracts from the much more interesting general story that largely remains untold. I am even more disconcerted by the concluding author's note, where Daley states that everything in the novel is a product of his imagination and that Renny is:

26 Some other members of the infamous expedition are also easily identifiable. The booty of their looting largely ended up as exhibit material on the Smithsonian institute in Washington. I was appalled to learn that 'bodysnatching' was not only continually practiced on a large scale as late as 1948, but openly and unashamedly supported by respected public and private institutions. This is the dark secret that Daley's novel reveals.

something of an enigmatic composite of various ‘adventurers’ and anthropologists who were fascinated by First Nations people and intruded into their worlds.

(Daley 2022:361)

Maybe this is an unfair reading on my part of an ambitious novel on an important subject. Maybe I am overly sensitive to the author’s disclosure that the book took six years to write and twenty drafts – the final revision being made on request by his black informants. There is something deeply sympathetic about such forms of ‘participatory’ or ‘collective’ writing, which certainly borders on ethnography, but it also lends a notion of anxiety and reservation to the writer’s authority. Daley almost excuses himself for telling a story that ought to be told by one of ‘the People.’ Maybe my reservation in the end is simply due to the fact that, just before *Jesustown*, I read such novel, which precisely tells the story of Australia’s silenced near past from the other perspective.

The first white man born

Look at us, stuck out in the sky, like branches from which the rest of the tree has been cut and carted away.

(Scott 1999:145)

The perception of ‘the great Australian silence’ is relative. There have been voices and testimonies for anyone to hear, although white Australia has certainly turned a deaf ear to them. I must shamefully admit that I haven’t listened to these other voices either on my previous journeys to the continent. Although my focus then has been on other things, such as web-based pedagogy, I have been on the lookout for contemporary Australian writers, and it astounds me that I didn’t come across the name of Kim Scott before. His novel *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) is exactly what I am now looking for: the story of extermination and assimilation told from within, and in a novel form that fulfils the contamination criteria, at that! It appears to be more than a coincidence that it was published almost simultaneously with Zoë Wicomb’s *David’s Story* (2000).

Benang is an extended family history over four, five generations, set in the south-western corner of the continent, in Noongar country, some 300 km south-east of Perth. The narrator is ‘the first proper white man born’ in a lineage of systematic ‘assimilation.’ The unsettled chronology and immense character gallery is confusing at first, but I am helplessly sucked into the alluring narrative of constant suspense and surprises. The first-person

narrator constructs his story from scattered memories and photographs. Leafing through his grandfather's photograph album:

Captions to the photographs: *full-blood, half-caste (first cross), quadroon, octoroon*. There was a page of various fractions, possible permutations growing more and more convoluted. Of course, in the language of such mathematics it is simple; from the whole to the partial and back again. This much was clear; I as a fraction of what I might have been.

(Scott 1999:26)

The grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, is a white construction worker who comes to the small town of Gebalup²⁷ sometime after the frontier-war massacres and takes on the responsibility of the new government native policies. He marries an adopted 'half-caste' girl with fair complexion, only to later marry ever-younger wives and spread his white genes by impregnating every fertile woman that comes in his way, including his own progeny. His 'fucking everyone in the family' literally includes his own grandson, the narrator, whom he declares to be the crown of his grand breeding enterprise; looking for remaining dark spots where the sun doesn't reach, he can't help penetrating the young boy's anus. At the narrative present, Ern is paralysed and mute, and the grown-up grandson gently tortures him in retaliation.

In fantastic passages, the narrator flies over sea and land – simply indulging in his propensity to drift, rising and falling on currents of air like a balloon (ibid.:162). Looking back from his distanced viewpoint across space and time, the 'I' sometimes assumes a communal 'we', as when he watches the train deporting his maternal ancestors.

Some of these are heading, inexorably, toward the first proper white man born. The others, irrespective of caste or fraction, will mostly make a different future. I fear I have lost them. I fear it is being proved once again, I am so much less than I might have been. I fear that once were we, and now there is only I.

(ibid.:90)

One layer in the novel is a road trip to places of memory, with his uncles Will and Jack. In bits and pieces, Scott recounts the history of the region and the fate of the Noongar people, including a rather recent massacre, although only hinted at and never revealed in gory detail. He works with subtle means,

²⁷ The barely fictional Gebalup – Kupalup in Scott's later novel *Taboo* (2017, see below) – corresponds to the small town of Ravensthorpe on real-world maps.

in a prose saturated with poetic imagery, smelling of sea salt and sweat, sensually surreal. Many dramatic occurrences are left unexplained, as loose ends congenial with the branches from which the rest of the tree has been cut. And he is careful never to let history take over the storytelling. When more than sufficient background information is provided, the narrator intrudes:

But, I digress. This is a simple family history, not a treatise on the economy.
(*ibid.*:207)

Benang is certainly more than 'a simple family history'. It is an exploration by means of fiction into 'the final solution to the Native problem', as Auber Octavius Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigenes in Western Australia, interpreted the early version of assimilation policy that he meticulously implemented in his area of jurisdiction: to let the 'full-bloods' die out while 'absorbing' the 'half-castes' by successively diluting the Aboriginal blood. This required the active participation of volunteer white males like Ernest Solomon Scat, most of whom, unlike Scat, rarely assumed any responsibility for the offspring of their indulgencies, sweet or not. And the aspiring 'quadroons' and 'octoroons' were of course required to break all contacts with their Aboriginal past in order to be accepted as low-caste whites... I was frankly surprised to learn of this systematic strategic miscegenation by British subjects, as the Victorian empire to me always has stood out as an exemption from the promiscuity of its French, Dutch, Spanish and – most notoriously – Portuguese predecessors and competitors. Although probably unknown to the Australian Commonwealth bureaucrats, the model for the assimilation policy had been expounded in detail in Spanish colonial records already in the seventeenth century. The Jesuit José Gumilla provided schemata for degrees of mixture across generations, according to which blackness and indigeneity could be 'diluted' to complete whiteness already in the third generation (Erasmus 2017:82–3; Hemer 2020:143). Among the loose ends in *Benang* are the complicities of some cut-off branches; family members internalizing the government policies and even participating in the killings of their own people. Neville, and his contemporary colleagues at national and local level, are important protagonists in *Benang*, although they only appear in official letters and documents interspersed between chapters. But Scott intriguingly incorporates these documents into the narrative itself:

I found the notes of all these various inspectors among Grandad's research files. I fairly made them rustle about my ankles as I hovered in that room, kicking my legs amongst them to disrupt their order. Perhaps it was unfair, even petty of me.

When I write like this – of railways, and fences, and of extensive pages of notes – I give a nod to my grandfather; to his lines and his discipline, to his schemes and his rigour. And I further acknowledge, and nod to, the demands of Historical Fiction. And I nod with the resentment which those I will call my people felt, still feel. Nod nod nod.

I hope you are not falling asleep.

Sometimes, my grandfather's chin used to drop to his chest even as I spoke to him. He snored, and I recited in the brief and relative silences of each inhalation. Such a strange rhythm it gave my prose.

(ibid.:323)

In the acknowledgements, Scott reveals his sources and explains his method.²⁸ To what extent the novel is in fact a family story is illuminated further in the sequel supplementary book *Kayang & Me* (2005), co-written with his elder Hazel Brown, 'Aunty Hazel'. Their interwoven memoirs, transcribed from taped recordings, comprise a compelling and monumental history of the Wilomin Noongar people that also give a side reflection to the novel and its conception.

Researching *Benang*, I was also looking into family history, and one phrase that kept appearing: 'the first white man born' in such and such a place. It was in countless local histories, and in my notes I reduced it to the ugly initials FWMB.

A book written by an early twentieth-century authority on Aboriginal matters – A O Neville – offered a visual variation on FWMB in a photograph of three figures captioned:

Three generations (reading from Right to Left). 1. Half-blood - (Irish Australian father; full-blood Aboriginal Mother). 2. Quadroon Daughter - (Father Australian born of Scottish parents; Mother No. 1). 3. Octaroon Grandson - (Father Australian of Irish descent; Mother No. 2).

It could almost be a family photograph, but what family would describe itself that way?

Perversely, the phrase 'first white man born' energised me. As alienating and hostile as the words were, I was familiar with the language.

I detected another recurring phrase: 'the last full-blood aborigine' ... LFBA [...]

28 The Neville quotes are mainly drawn from two publications: Neville 1947 and 1995.

FWMB, LFBA: the two sets of initials littered my notes. They seemed to insist on a boundary, a demarcation; the end of an old story, the beginning of a new one – and the concept of race was at the centre of it.

I must have dozed off in the archives, fallen like a mote of dust among the loops and wriggles on dusty parchment, because I remember feeling as if I had just surfaced and – blinking, looking around with watery eyes, suddenly too warm and solid in the stuffy air-conditioning – wondering where I was.

Who I was.

‘The first white man born?’

(Scott & Brown 2005:27–8)

Kim Scott’s fifth novel, *Taboo* (2017), can be read as a companion piece to *Benang*. Some of the characters, or rather their descendants, reappear in

what might be called a trippy, stumbling sort of genre-hop that I think features a trace of Fairy Tale, a touch of Gothic, a sufficiency of the ubiquitous Social Realism and perhaps a tease of Creation Story.

(Scott 2017:283)

After taking in this dense, rich and demanding novel, and compellingly starting again from the beginning which coincides with the ending, I find the author’s attempt at genre explanation to be very accurate. The intriguing conflation of messiness, magic and poetry seems congenial with the violent and abstruse reality of the present-day Noongar community, struggling with memory, identity, alcohol and abuse. Scott’s afterword stresses the fictionality – the novel form – yet provides the historic background to the trauma at the heart of the narrative. The ‘taboo’ is in the first instance the suppressed truth about the massacre, hinted at in *Benang*, that still casts its shadow over Noongar country. It was triggered by the execution of a European settler, John Dunn, at Cocanarup Station in 1880. In accordance with Noongar customary law, Dunn had been sentenced to death for the rape of a thirteen-year-old ‘untouchable’ indigenous girl. In response to this extra-legal assassination, the white settlers at the station were granted licence to shoot the natives for a period of one month, ‘during which time the fullest advantage was taken of the privilege’ (ibid.:285).²⁹ More than thirty men, women and children

29 Scott quotes an article in the *Western Mail* from 1935. To my surprise, this licensed mass killing is not mentioned in the catalogue of frontier-zone massacres in archeologist and historian Josephine Flood’s comprehensive *The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal people* (2006).

were rounded up and slaughtered by a squad of armed settlers led by Dunn's brother. The place of the massacre, near the town of Ravensthorpe, has ever since been haunted no-go territory for the recovered Noongar community; in *Benang*, by-passers rolled up their windows when driving through Gebalup.³⁰ For the local white community, the forefathers' crimes on the frontier have been long buried deep in denial and amnesia, as an exemplary vestige of the great Australian silence. But in 2015 a Kukenarup memorial was set up to commemorate both the assassination of John Dunn and the ensuing massacre.

In Scott's novel, Dan Horton, the present-day owner of the Kokanarup estate³¹ and third generation descendant of the assassinated William Horton, invites the Wirlomin Noongar mob to his farm. This act of reconciliation is in fulfilment of Dan's newly deceased wife Janet's last wish. She was the initiator of the plans for the Peace Park nearby. A busload of more and less assimilated Aborigines heed the call with hesitance and curiosity, and travel to the Caravan Park in Hopetoun, where a festival of workshops, performances and excursions is organized. At the centre of the motley cast of characters is the teenage Matilda, Tillie, daughter of Jim Coolman.³² The latter has spent most of his life in jail – abuse of Tillie's white mother being but one of his vicious felonies; but he is also reconciled with his ancestral heritage, learning the ancient songs and teaching his young inmates the fragile Noongar language. As a child Tillie had been adopted by the Horton family, but she has grown up elsewhere, presumably in Albany, or even Perth. It is the dying Jim Coolman's wish that his daughter be brought back to country, and he asks his cousin Gerry to take her to the Peace Park inauguration. Gerald, who has served time for raping young girls, has a twin brother Gerard, the bus driver – Tillie can't tell the difference between her uncles. She has herself managed to escape a destructive drug-addict-sex-slave relationship with her former stepbrother, Dan Horton's son Dougie, a petty dealer who surprisingly returns as the Prodigal Son for the Peace Park opening – he had obeyed his father's ultimatum 'my way or the highway' and been gone without a trace for years. The content father's conception of reconciliation is to let Tillie and Dougie inherit the farm together... This brief summary of just a part of

30 In *Taboo*, the town is written Kecalup, but the pronunciations of k and g and of p and b are the same in Aboriginal tongues.

31 Cocanarup is the spelling of the name on official maps, but Scott writes Kokanarup. 'Cocanarup is a real place. Kokanarup is not, although I am perhaps trying to make it so.' (ibid.:284).

32 In *Benang*, it is suggested that the twin brothers Daniel and Pat Coolman had played a collaborative role in the preceding massacre. *Taboo* does not reveal Jim Coolman's relation to these close ancestors.

the plot gives a hint of the confusion of interconnections and ambiguities that, more perhaps than any novel I have read, connotes Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's notion of contaminated diversity. The scattered Noongar community is portrayed as a dysfunctional family, but with the good-humoured warmth of someone – a communal 'we' – who knows and shares its most intimate secrets and complicities. One can tell that Scott has actually been to prison, working with inmates in his Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project. It is a 'narrative of identity', void of embellishment or simple morality, that in its dismal realism conveys surprising optimism and hope. The inclusive tone is set already in the novel's third paragraph:

Our people gave up on that Payback stuff a long time ago, because we always knew that death is only one part of a story that is forever beginning.
(ibid.:3)

This forever beginning story is illuminated by the inaugural and concluding scene of a runaway truck loaded with wheat that turns over in the town of Kepalup, like a stranded whale. Scott depicts the opening act in meticulous detail, and then steps back to reflect.

We thought to tell a story with such momentum; a truck careering down a hillside, thunder in a rocky riverbed, a skeleton tumbling to the ground. There must be at least one brave and resilient character at its centre (one of us), and the story will speak of magic in an empirical age; of how our dead will return, transformed, to support us again and from within.

One may as well begin, 'Once upon a time' ... Except this is no fairy tale, it is drawn from real life. We remember Dan Horton. He will seem a stereotype, even a caricature, this stooped and elderly man in faded towelling hat, sensible clothes and lace-less boots. Real life has its stereotypes and caricatures. Dan Horton was one of those rural men who, in the middle of conversation, will suddenly crouch and, clearing a little plot of dirt with the heel of his hand, draw diagrams with a stick or calloused finger.
(ibid.:7–8)

The brave and resilient character in this Creation story is the rescued Tillie Coolman, crawling out of the truck while the undead rise from the riverbed. Land and language are, as Scott also notes in the afterword, crucially intertwined in narratives of identity. *Taboo* is written in modern Australian English, for which the 'default country' is England, 'narrow, green and wet'. Whereas Australia is the opposite. Scott's Western Australian landscape is

somehow painted in a proto-Creole language that has absorbed the local ancestral grammar.



The one who stayed behind

The glimpses from the identity workshops in *Taboo* have a special resonance with my own recent experience as participant observer in a similar event: a workshop with the Aboriginal community in Port Lincoln, 600 km from Adelaide. I had the privilege of joining Israeli-Australian linguist Ghil'ad Zuckermann – he could have been my Arkady Volchok – on one of his tours to Barngarla Country on the Eyre peninsula, stretching from Port Augusta (Goodnada) to Port Lincoln (Galinyala). Of more than four hundred Aboriginal languages at the time of the arrival of 'the first fleet', only twelve remain vital today. Neither Noongar nor Barngarla is among the twelve. Noongar was listed as 'extinct' in 2009 but updated to 'living' in 2015, and it remains 'endangered', although it has a growing number of some four hundred speakers (ibid.:286). Barngarla's last living speaker passed away in the 1960s. Ghil'ad Zuckermann chose it as his case for resuscitation precisely because of the great challenge. That it can be revived at all is thanks to the German missionary Clamor Wilhelm Schürmann, who recorded *A Vocabulary of the Parnkalla Language* in the 1840s (Clendon 2015). In Germany Schürmann was considered a failed missionary, one who hadn't saved any souls, but he may go down in history as a saviour of Barngarla culture. Building on his glossary and the experience of reviving Hebrew into Israeli, a hybrid language with elements of ancient Hebrew and modern Yiddish, Zuckermann has systematically worked with the Barngarla communities of Port Lincoln, Port Augusta and Whyalla to reclaim the ancestral language.³³ The workshop I witness is the first that is not led by Zuckermann himself. It represents a breakthrough also in the sense that some of the participants are teachers who are eager to make Barngarla language training a subject in the local primary school. Even the local-history museum seems suddenly open to incorporate a Barngarla perspective into its storytelling – in contrast to the elderly colleagues in Cowell, two hours' drive to the north, who repeatedly have manifested a compact ignorance and lack of interest in all things Aboriginal.

33 The groundbreaking method is elaborated in Zuckermann 2020.

Ghil'ad warns me that although things seem to be going in the right direction, one should not be fooled by the 'wokeness'. There may easily be a backlash, just as in Europe or the USA. There is something about his own openness that opens other people. When we check out the rental car in Adelaide he starts talking to the girl behind the counter, Florencia, who turns out to be from Uruguay and has a friend in Malmö. She goes and fetches her *máte* to show us and informs me about where to buy *yerba*. At the lunch restaurant in Port Lincoln he likewise establishes immediate contact with the waitress, Marieta, who comes from Latvia and has married a fifteen-year older Aussie. I suggest that the openness has to do with the immigrant culture, that almost everyone has a story that they want to tell. He says that the Anglo-Aussies are not as open, but I think they are compared to most Europeans, although it may be the American kind of superficial openness.

After the workshop, I have Lavinia – Auntie Lavi – as my dinner partner. She is one of the stolen generation, two years younger than me, who was taken from her mother – her father was German – to be raised by a white family in Alice Springs. She is now doing a distance course in creative writing at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. The theme of her exam work is 'The one who stayed behind' – a story about her brother who was not abducted, whose trauma is not acknowledged. She promises to send me a draft before submitting it.

Carrier bags and partitioning



After an immersion in the cross-Atlantic metamorphosis of ethnography into poetics, and proceeding to various literary takes on genre fusions around the Southern world, it may be pertinent to now take a step back and look at contamination from the more hands-on anthropological perspective. Kirin Narayan, of mixed Gujarati and German American descent, is a key informant here. Not only is she one of today's principal anthropologist-authors, she has also cleverly pondered on the relationship between literature and anthropology (Narayan 1999). But let us first make a more general survey of contemporary writers in this rather exclusive, though possibly growing, intersection.

From its original focus on the writing process, and engagement with literary methods and formats, the emerging field of literary anthropology soon diversified to also encompass the reading of literary texts, including fiction, as ethnographic data. Jane Austen's novels have, for example, been consulted as ethnographies of marriage, kinship and class in nineteenth-century England (Handler and Segal 1990), and Scottish anthropologist and philosopher Nigel Rapport's research in the English country village Wanet matched E.M. Forster's fictional accounts of the location with his own ethnographic observations (Rapport 1994). He was also possibly the one who coined the concept 'literary anthropology' (Rapport 1997). Inspired by the *Writing Culture* debate, many anthropologists have openly turned to fiction and/or aspired to be recognized also as authors in a literary sense: Michael Jackson, John Stewart, Timothy Knab and Margery Wolf, to name some of those mentioned by Narayan (1999), with an admitted bias for anglophone colleagues. More recently, Hugh Raffles, Paul Stoller and Steven Robins have developed an exquisite style resembling the literary essay, yet clearly within the confines of non-fiction.¹ British-

1 I have previously written about *Letters of Stone* (2016), Steven Robins's ingenious book about his Robinski family history in Berlin and Riga and his father's last-

American Raffles's book *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (2002), awarded with the Victor Turner Prize in Ethnographic Writing, can arguably be read as a counterpart to both *Tristes Tropiques* and Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, to which the title perhaps inadvertently alludes. His latest monograph, *The Book of Unconformities: Speculations on Lost Time* (2020), is a compelling mix of auto-ethnography, travel account and philosophical treatise. It opens with this breathtaking paragraph:

In December 1994, my youngest sister Franki died unexpectedly in Edinburgh, haemorrhaging during childbirth while giving birth to twins. Three months later, my eldest sister Sally killed herself near London, carefully stuffing the exhaust pipe of her car. Soon after, I started reaching for rocks, stones and other seemingly solid objects as anchors in a world unmoored, ways to make sense of these events through stories far larger than my own, stories that started in the most fundamental and speculative histories – geological, archaeological, histories before history – and opened unmistakably into absences that echo in the world today, absences not only mineral but human and animal, and occasionally vegetable, too.

(Raffles 2020:5)

The Nestor among English-language literary anthropologists, Australian-born Michael Taussig, made a late contribution to the *Writing Culture* debate (Taussig 2012),² and is by all standards one of the greatest living anthropologist-authors, with essayistic feats like *My Cocaine Museum* (2004) and *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (2006).

France clearly maintains a central position in literary anthropology, with the legacy from Lévi-Strauss and Leiris and, in the generation after them, Pierre Clastres, whose important work was unfinished and scattered at his

minute escape from Nazi Germany to South Africa (Hemer 2020:100–1). Robins curiously got his anthropological formation at the department in Stellenbosch that had been the very cradle of *Volkekunde*.

- 2 'Excelente zona social', about a camp of peasants forced off their lands in Northern Colombia, was written for the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Writing Culture* and first published in the special issue of *Cultural Anthropology*. It has later been republished in Starn 2015 and Taussig 2015. The original journal article had the following abstract, which has been left out in the later book chapter versions:

Writing culture suggests (1) allowing writing to take up the burden of theory, (2) practice Walter Benjamin's idea of *denkbilden*, or thought-images, (3) create culture as well as describe and analyze. Thus, this little sketch I call 'Excelente zona social'.

(Taussig 2012:498).

premature death in 1977, only 43 years old. He is most famous as a political anthropologist, for the essay collection *Society Against the State* (1977[1974]), but his signature work in this context is *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* (1998[1972]), which was translated to English by novelist Paul Auster, who found Clastres' prose to 'combine a poet's temperament with a philosopher's depth of mind'(Clastres 1998:vii).³ A very significant role in the French discussion was played by the already mentioned book series *Terre humaine*. The collection's emphasis on 'the lived experience' did provide room for indigenous voices and 'inside reports' from native societies. Pierre Clastres wrote enthusiastically about *Yanoáma*, the autobiography of a Spanish girl kidnapped by Amazonian Indians (Valero and Biocca 1970), that 'for the first time, we are able to slip into the egg without breaking the shell' (Debaene 2014:289). Outside of the academic anthropological realm, Nobel laureate J.M.G. Le Clézio would be the contemporary French writer with the closest affiliation to anthropology. He spent four years, 1970–4, among the Embera-Wounaan in Panama, and Amerindian culture has been a recurring inspiration in both his fiction and non-fiction work. In 1983 he defended a PhD thesis in History about the Spanish conquest of the Purépecha community in the present-day Mexican state of Michoacán (Le Clézio 2010). With his own French-Mauritian background and his marriage to a Moroccan woman, currently sharing residence between France, Mauritius and New Mexico, Le Clézio is also a living exponent of 'cosmopolitan contamination'.

In Latin America, the combination ethnographer/novelist used to be quite common, not least among *indigenista* writers such as José María Arguedas from Peru, author of *Los ríos profundos* (1998[1958]); *Deep Rivers*), one of the finest novels about the Andean world and the troubled coexistence of *criollos* and *indios*.⁴ Like his Brazilian colleague, Darcy Ribeiro, primarily a sociologist and anthropologist but also a Lévi-Strauss-inspired novelist, Arguedas played an important part in the articulation of a Latin American cultural identity, with its literary culmination in the 'boom'. One of the boom writers, Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa, undertook pioneering anthropological research in the Peruvian Amazon for his great novel *La casa verde* (1965; *The*

3 Literary qualities aside, it was criticized by anthropologists – Geertz, among others – for romanticism and 'Rousseauian primitivism' (1998). Although a disciple of Lévi-Strauss, Clastres was not a cultural pessimist but a radical anarchist, whose ideas on the stateless society have been an inspiration for the libertarian left.

4 *Criollo* is curiously the established term for the descendants of the Spanish settlers who only reluctantly would admit to having mixed blood, whereas *indio*, as a derogatory term, often also includes mestizos. In the Andean countries the ethnic divide is more strikingly significant than in other parts of Latin America.

Green House, 1984).⁵ Other contemporary writers, although not ethnographers by training, contributed to the documentation and reevaluation of indigenous cultures, for example Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba) and Juan Rulfo (Mexico) – not to mention Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, whose influential reflections on the mestizo identity (Paz 1961[1950]) have been a challenge for visiting anthropologists doing fieldwork in Mexico.⁶

Little may persist today of *el latinoamericanismo*, but the *crónica* genre – a literary essay or reportage – maintains a strong standing in Spanish America, with pioneer works such as *La noche de Tlatelolco* (*Massacre in Mexico*), Elena Poniatowska's (2007[1971]) oral-history account of the massacre preceding the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico, or Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación Masacre* (1986[1957]), a fictionalized documentation of a signature case of state terror in Argentina, which preceded Tom Wolfe's 'new journalism' by more than a decade.

In North America, Tony Hillerman, briefly referred to in Chapter 2, combined his work as an anthropologist among the Hopi, Zuni and Navajo of the Nevada desert with writing detective novels about the Navajo tribal police. Before him, Oliver La Farge had written several works of fiction about the Navajo: *Laughing Boy* (1929), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1930, was based on his field work for his master's thesis at Harvard. Kurt Vonnegut, another aspiring anthropologist, had a novel – *Cat's Cradle* (1963) – accepted as his master's thesis in cultural anthropology at the University of Chicago in 1971. Vonnegut had been accepted as a graduate student already in 1945, and had made several failed attempts at writing a more conventional thesis. According to literary scholar James S. Whitlark, all Vonnegut's books have grown from his graduate work in anthropology. He was particularly inspired by the concepts of cultural relativism and the 'folk society', as developed by his tutor at Chicago, Robert Redfield (1940).⁷ Vonnegut's half-hearted attempts

5 The 22-year old Vargas Llosa did the 'fieldwork' in 1958, accompanied by a Mexican anthropologist. This was more than a decade before Peruvian anthropology started to take interest in the region. See Sarlo 2014:152–5.

6 On anthropologists' puzzlement with Paz, see Norwegian anthropologist Marit Melhuus' contribution to the seminal collection *Exploring the Written* (Archetti 1994). For a comprehensive overview of 'Literature and Anthropology in Latin America, from the writers' perspective', see Colombian anthropologist-writer Juan Carlos Orrego Arismendi's article 'Literatura y antropología en América Latina: la versión de los escritores' (2012).

7 Redfield, who did pioneering fieldwork among peasant communities in Mexico, was an early critic of the notion of cultures as bounded entities. In fact, he opposed the dichotomy between an idealized primitive 'folk society' and urban culture, and proposed an interdisciplinary anthropology. Not only Vonnegut, but also

at traditional theses were deemed to be too 'simple' – or, rather, simplistic (Whitlark 1989:77). Freed from the academic straitjacket, he was creatively inventive and intricate in his fiction, full of black humour and a sense for the absurd, with resonance in his horrific life experience as prisoner of war in Dresden during the fire storm in February 1945, which forms the core of his most famous novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1991[1968]). Although he may fall beside our contamination focus, Vonnegut represents a tradition or genre that is no doubt of utmost relevance for the relation between literature and anthropology: science fiction, nowadays often replaced by the wider term 'speculative fiction'. The latter encompasses not only science fiction in its traditional understanding, but also the subgenres 'fantasy', 'horror' and 'counterfactual history'. In fact, the scope of speculative fiction has become so wide as to make the term nearly void of meaning. Isn't all fiction speculative? ... Margaret Atwood, undoubtedly one of today's champions of the genre, prefers a narrower definition of 'a "no Martians type" of science fiction, about things that really could happen' (2011:6).

Though not an ethnographer herself, Ursula K. Le Guin – daughter of the legendary pioneer in American anthropology, Alfred L. Kroeber – often applied anthropological perspectives in her works of speculative fiction. She is also the author of a tiny, ten-page pamphlet, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (2019), which has been widely influential in feminist circles.⁸ The title alludes to the 'carrier bag theory of human evolution' (Fisher 1979), which suggests that humankind's earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier.

[W]e've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the things to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.

(Le Guin 2019:29)

Nobel laureate Saul Bellow, were, according to Vonnegut himself, a 'product of the Anthropology department at the University of Chicago'. Bellow had originally intended to study literature but found the English department 'Anti-Jewish' and chose sociology and anthropology instead (Vonnegut 1981:103). Anthropology's influence on Bellow's work is most evident in the novel *Henderson the Rain King* (1966).

8 It was first published in the volume *Women of Vision*, edited by Denise Dupont (1988). The 2019 edition has an introduction by Donna Haraway as extensive as the main text.

Applied to fiction, this theory replaces the 'killer story' about the hero with the 'life story', which also has been told for ages in various ways, but always tended to be overtaken by the hero narrative. Even the novel, a 'fundamentally unheroic kind of a story' according to Le Guin, has adopted a logic of competition, conflict and conquest, whereas

the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.

(ibid.:34)

In her concluding remarks on science fiction, Le Guin arrives at a revision that seems very much in line with Margaret Atwood's understanding – and Atwood may of course very likely have been inspired by Le Guin:

If one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic ... one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.

(ibid.:36)

Where is the border?

Kirin Narayan is neither a writer of speculative fiction nor a pronouncedly feminist anthropologist, but her work fits the carrier-bag theory well, with its focus on women's experiences, everyday creativity and spirituality. Commenting on the book based on her Ph.D. thesis, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (1989), she said that in many ways it represented, not so much a discovery of the exotic, as a deepening of the familiar (Bruner 1993:7). Born and raised in Bombay, she had moved to the USA in 1976 and then returned to India as a cultural anthropologist. She arrived at postgraduate studies in Anthropology from a BA in Creative Writing, and it is evident from the autobiography *My Family & Other Saints* (2007) that her primary ambition always was to become a writer, which she certainly is. Yet, although surprisingly 'apprenticed' to the Russian playwright and short-story writer Anton Chekhov (Narayan 2012:x), she quite clearly identifies herself primarily as an ethnographer. *My Family & Other Saints* is essentially an ethnography of her extended family, and her one novel to date – *Love, Stars and All That* (1994) – is partly building on her fieldwork in India, although it is mainly a story about the experience of being an Indian-

born American. She reflects on the difference between the fictionalized account and the ethnographic raw material in the article 'Ethnography and fiction: where is the border?' (1999), which is exactly an attempt at discerning a boundary, although one that is gradual and shifting: 'a matter of orienting landmarks rather than electrified barbed wire' (Narayan 1999:143).

In this seminal text, she distinguishes four practices as 'points of orientation': (1) disclosure of process, (2) generalization, (3) the uses of subjectivity, and (4) accountability. Although fundamentally affirmative of the enriching experience of travel between ethnography and fiction, she warns against the perils of erasing borders and claims that 'to assert the existence of a border is also to emphasize the enrichment that can come from travel' (ibid.:144). As Geertz, among others, have noted before her, there is cause for caution for anthropologists when embracing fiction, whether as ethnographic data or as a method of exploration.⁹ There is clearly a difference and even conflict here, depending on which side of the elusive boundary you are writing from. Anthropology differs from other academic disciplines in its interpretative search for 'the native's point of view' and its building of theory in dialogue with informants as much as in discussion with other academics. Hence, the natural affinity and common ground with journalism and literature. Yet, inclusive as it is by academic standards, anthropology cannot encompass everything. Whereas literature by its nature is, allegorically speaking, cannibalistic – it can incorporate all other genres, arts and disciplines. This could translate to a divide between what we may call 'ethnographic fiction' on the one hand and 'contamination' on the other. Narayan stresses the importance of maintaining borders and possibly fusing but never confusing the genres: contamination

9 Geertz solemnly declares, in *Works and Lives*:

It is not clear just what 'faction', imaginative writing about real people in real places, exactly comes to beyond a clever coinage; but anthropology is going to have to find out if it is to continue as an intellectual force in contemporary culture.

(1988:141)

Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in his contribution to the collection *Exploring the Written* (Archetti 1994), similarly concludes that literature and anthropology are relevant to each other only as long and in so far as they remain aware of their fundamental difference (Eriksen 1994:192). In our conversations, Eriksen has however nuanced, if not abandoned, this standpoint, which primarily had been motivated by his concern that aspiring anthropologists would too willingly adopt literary ambitions and inadvertently confirm the mocking epithet of 'failed novelists' (ibid.:194). Lately, he has himself made a convincing cross-genre contribution in the collaborative part of this Conviviality and Contamination project: 'Naturecultural permutations' (Eriksen 2023).

can be disrespectful, not to say ruthless, regarding any accountability towards the world outside the text. For the anthropologist, academic legitimacy is at stake; the literary writer abides principally to the intangible yet as demanding criterion of literary/artistic quality.

Although our concern is primarily with the literary writer's perspective, there is reason to keep Narayan's conclusion in mind: 'to do away with a border and altogether blur ethnography and fiction would entail a loss for both sorts of writing' (1999:134).

We might even claim that awareness of this boundary, of the differing disciplinary conventions, is a prerequisite for fruitful contamination. But now, at last, is the time to qualify this tenuous category. When Appiah drew the line from Terence to Rushdie, he was thinking of transgression and fusion of genres within literature – the blending of comedy and tragedy, as the concept implicated in ancient Rome. Although Appiah's modern general conception of contamination was wider, arguably synonymous with creolization,¹⁰ Salman Rushdie is still a writer that moves within the traditional confines of literature. I wish, as I hope to have demonstrated, to reinterpret the concept as a transgression of these same confines, in dialogue and possible convergence with other, traditionally academic approaches – science and fiction, if you will – and not only, perhaps not even primarily, anthropology. History and philosophy are as important players at these crossroads. In my suggested revision of Appiah's merely hinted tradition, Rushdie is not the principal contemporary representative, although he is certainly one of the imperative writers. Besides the candidates I have already discussed in previous chapters, I would highlight another Indian author in the generation that appeared in the wake of the international success for *Midnight's Children* (1981).¹¹

Dwelling-in-travel

Amitav Ghosh, born in Calcutta in 1956, hence nine years younger than Rushdie, stands out with superb distinction in the rare category of anthropologists and novelists. He holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Oxford and has a record of extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt. But he is primarily known as one of the Indian subcontinent's most prominent and prolific novelists. His second novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), is a literary exploration of the disastrous Partition of India in 1947, and hence, although never spelling

10 Appiah never mentions 'creolization', but the name of the chapter in which he outlines his tradition is 'Cosmopolitan contamination' (2006:101–13).

11 One might even talk about a 'boom' for English-language Indian writers in the 1980s, similar to the preceding Latin American boom, with names like Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh and, a decade later, Arundhati Roy.

it out directly, a lucid exploration of ‘contamination in reverse.’ But let us come to this later, by way of his ethnographic experience in Egypt, which is the core of another pioneering – unclassifiable – book, *In an Ancient Land* (1992).

I had read *The Shadow Lines* many years ago, when writing what I then labelled an ethnographic fiction about Bangalore, and seriously considering more in-depth research on the memories of the Partition.¹² But I soon realized that truly digging into the complexity of the subcontinent would be a life commitment, and then other pending subjects came in between. So, Ghosh fell into the background, until I stumbled upon him in a different though related context. James Clifford’s *Routes* (1997), the fragmentary yet fascinating sequel to *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), takes its point of departure in an autobiographical short story by Ghosh, ‘The Imam and the Indian’ (1986, 2002), which serves as a parable for the themes that Clifford grapples with, namely ‘travel and translation in the late twentieth century’.

For Ghosh, a revelatory experience during his fieldwork in a small Egyptian village is its vernacular cosmopolitanism, although he doesn’t use those words.¹³ The men of the village had ‘all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge’; some of them with ‘passports so thick they opened out like ink-blackened concertinas’ (Ghosh 2002:5).¹⁴ The rural village as an airport lounge... Clifford nods in amusement at what appears to be a striking metaphor for postmodernity. But that turns out to be a hasty conclusion as he continues reading, because none of this is new. The villagers’ grandparents and ancestors had travelled and migrated too, in much the same way as Ghosh’s own ancestors on the Indian subcontinent:

it was as though people had drifted here from every corner of the Middle East. The wanderlust of its founders had been ploughed into the soil of the village: it seemed to me sometimes that every man in it was a traveller.

(ibid.:6)

Whereas anthropological fieldwork, ever since Malinowski and Mead, has been based on intensive temporary dwelling in delimited ‘fields’, Ghosh’s fieldwork account from Egypt is, as Clifford notes, less a matter of localized

12 ‘Bengaluru Boogie’ (Hemer 2015, 2020).

13 The concept ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ was coined a few years later by Homi K. Bhabha in ‘Unsatisfied: notes on vernacular cosmopolitanism’ (Bhabha 1996). It has also been famously applied by Appiah (1998) and Gilroy (2004).

14 The tale was first published in *Granta* 20 (1986), later republished as the title piece in the collection *The Imam and The Indian: Prose Pieces* (2002). The story is also told, in varied form, in *In an Ancient Land* (1992).

dwelling and more a series of travel encounters: 'Everyone's on the move, and has been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel.' (Clifford 1997:2).

An important element here is the fact that Ghosh is Indian, not European nor North American. This very clearly informs his experience; the way he is received by the villagers and the access he is granted as the *Hindi dóktor*. There are several humorous encounters when he for the umpteenth time must explain the incredible rumours that the people in his country worship cows and burn their dead. Ghosh is deliberately trying to link his everyday experience to a precolonial history of contacts across the Indian Ocean; this juxtaposition will be the theme of *In an Antique Land*. But the moral of the tale about 'the Imam and the Indian' seems somewhat discouraging. In an angry shouting match between the researcher and a traditional healer he hopes to interview, the two men come to loudly dispute whose country is better, more 'advanced'. Both end up claiming to be second only to 'the West' and suddenly the narrator realizes that:

despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I: we were travelling in the West. The only difference was that I had actually been there, in person: I could have told him about the ancient English university I had won a scholarship to, about punk dons with safety pins in their mortarboards, about superhighways and sex shops and Picasso. But none of it would have mattered. We would have known, both of us, that all that was mere fluff: at the bottom, for him as for me and millions and millions of people in the landmasses around us, the West meant only this – science and tanks and guns and bombs.

(Ghosh 2002:11)

At a deeper level, the moral of the tale is however a sharp critique of all quests for pure traditions and discrete cultural differences. Contamination is, and has long been, the norm.¹⁵ This is the recurring theme in all Ghosh's work, fiction and non-fiction and the hybrid in-between, *In an Antique Land*, which cleverly links his experience as an Indian in Egypt to the imagined experience of an Egyptian traveller to India in the twelfth century. The Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yijû is a historical figure, whose life story is partly known through a letter, with the catalogue number MS H.6, in the National and University Library of Jerusalem. The letter had, with thousands of other

¹⁵ Ghosh doesn't use the term contamination and nor does Clifford, who talks in this context of 'intercultural connection' – but I can hardly think of a better Illustration of the concept's historical bearing than Ghosh's 'history in the guise of a traveler's tale'.

documents, been safely stored almost a millennium in the synagogue in Cairo and was discovered in a chamber known as the Geniza in 1942. As a young student in Oxford in the late 1970s, Ghosh – who had never heard of the Cairo Geniza – came across a collection entitled *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, translated and edited by Professor S.D. Goitein of Princeton University. This is how he learned about Ben Yiju, who travelled from Fustat to Aden and ended up in Mangalore. But what especially catches his attention is the mention of a slave – ‘the slave of MS H.6’ – whom he manages to trace to the kingdom of Tulunad in today’s Indian state of Karnathaka.

Mnemonic peregrinations

In the monograph *Amitav Ghosh* (2007), literary scholar Anshuman Mondal focuses especially on two of Ghosh’s works: *In an Antique Land* – his ‘ground-breaking and perhaps most important work’ (2007:11) – and *The Shadow Lines*, which supposedly represents his ‘most direct confrontation with nationalism and national identity’ (ibid.:87). These two seemingly very dissimilar works were both informed by the anti-Sikh communal riots that followed on the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. This event shook Ghosh deeply, and it took a long time for him to address it. The frame story of *In an Antique Land* is the narrator/researcher’s stay in Egypt in the early 1980s and his revisits to the villages of Lataifa and Nashawy in 1988 and 1990 – the latter a short stop at the outbreak of the first Iraq war. But the story in the present also includes a journey to Mangalore, in search of vestiges of the Tulunad culture, of which both Ben Yiju’s wife Ashu and Bomma, the slave turned business companion, had been part. He traces an old cult of a deity known as Bobbariya-bhuta, according to legend the spirit of a Muslim mariner and trader who died at sea. Some Bobbariya shrines have survived along the Malabar coast, usually a simple pillar and platform of stone and an adjoining wooden mace. When the narrator sets out to visit one of them, he comes across a large, modern building, modelled after a Hindu temple. Its walls bear the posters of a fundamentalist Hindu organization. Inside the building, the mace and the pillar have been replaced by an image of Bobbariya-bhuta, like a Hindu god, standing beside the image of Vishnu.

I had to struggle with myself to keep from applauding the ironies enshrined in that temple. The past had revenged itself on the present: it had slipped the spirit of an Arab Muslim trader past the watchful eyes of Hindu zealots and installed it within the Sanskritic pantheon.

(Ghosh 1992:274)

Less ironic is the attempted visit to another shrine, on his first revisit to Egypt: the tomb of Sidi Abu-Hasira, a local medieval saint, near the neighbouring village of Damanhour. As Sidi was Jewish, his tomb became a tourist attraction for Israeli visitors after the peace treaty with Egypt. Being neither Israeli nor Jewish nor Egyptian nor Muslim, Ghosh is not only denied access to the tomb but arrested and, after thorough interrogation, put on a train back to Cairo. Ghosh comments the conversation with the puzzled senior police officer:

it struck me, suddenly, that there was nothing I could point to within his world that might give credence to my story – the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago [...] It was then that I began to realize how much success the partitioning of the past had achieved; that I was sitting at that desk now because the mowlid of Sidi Abu-Hasira was an anomaly within the categories of knowledge represented by those divisions. I had been caught straddling a border, unaware that the writing of History had predicated its own self-fulfilment.

(ibid.:339–40)

The choice of the word 'partitioned' is crucial here. To all inhabitants of the subcontinent, it connotes the Partition of India in 1947, the holocaust that came with independence, when millions of people woke up to find that they were on the wrong side of the border that Cyril Radcliffe and his Boundary Commission had hastily drawn without leaving the office in Delhi, and by using out-of-date and inaccurate maps. Twelve million were displaced and almost a million killed in the horrendous communal violence unleashed by the Partition; yet this huge trauma has been largely suppressed and silenced on both sides of the new national borders between Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan.¹⁶

Ghosh's academic affiliations are with history and anthropology.¹⁷ Seemingly, he keeps his academic and literary vocations separated as distinct

16 There have been literary accounts by authors who were witnesses to the calamities, *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh, *Tamas* (1973) by Bisham Sahni, and short stories by the great Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto, all gathered in the volume *Memories of Madness: Stories of 1947* (2002). The most systematic oral history attempting to disclose the shamefully suppressed past is made by feminist writer and publisher Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (2000[1998]).

17 He studied History for his BA and Sociology for his MA, before going to Oxford for his Ph.D. in Social Anthropology.

approaches and genres, but there is clearly a subtle yet very deliberate contamination. As postcolonial and world-literature scholar Neelam Srivastava notes, the quest for an alternative history and anthropology – cultural syncretism in strategic opposition to the historicism of nationalistic discourse – has led Ghosh to emphasize the narrative and even the fictive element of both these disciplines.

In An Antique Land transforms the classic field account, with its transparency of representation and ‘scientific’ style, into an unsettling dialogue with the culture of the observed Other, thematizing the intersubjective ‘contaminations’ – the noise in transmission, as it were – between the anthropologist and his human object of study.

(Srivastava 2003:79)

Interestingly, the book is sometimes even classified as a novel,¹⁸ and there is only a subtle demarcation between fact and fabulation in the unveiled history of Ben Yiju and Bomma, which bears a semblance to a Borgesian ‘fiction’. But the narrator is evidently the researcher Amitav Ghosh, ‘*ya Amitab*’ to his Egyptian informants. In *The Shadow Lines* the narrator is anonymous, born 1952, hence four years older than the author, although they share some significant traits: he has grown up in Calcutta, spent a large part of his life in the UK, and holds a Ph.D. in an unspecified discipline. Although clearly a novel that emphasizes its fictionality, *The Shadow Lines* is also informed by elements of historical and ethnographic method. The collection of characters is lavishly abundant, with several focalizers, and the time and setting are equally complex, with three principal narrative frames: Calcutta in the early 1960s – and Dhaka across the border in East Pakistan; London in 1939 and the first years of the war under German bombardment; London – and New Delhi – some forty years later, when the narrator is a doctoral student. These layers are seamlessly and sometimes confusingly intertwined, as it is seldom made precisely clear when and from where a current episode is being narrated. The destabilization of the reader’s sense of time is supplemented by a corresponding disorientation regarding space. The novel moves freely between the three major locations – Calcutta, Dhaka and London – and events in one place are reflected in the others. The mirror and the looking glass are recurrent metaphors. Late in the novel, in a reflection on his motives,

18 Homi Bhabha called it a novel, Ghosh told me when we met for a chat at the Gothenburg Book Fair 2022, but he did not remember Bhabha’s argument for doing so.

the narrator describes his venture as a voyage into a land of looking-glass events (Ghosh 1988:247).

Mondal defines it as a novel about memory, and the interwoven layers as 'mnemonic peregrinations' (2007:10). It would lead too far into detail to unravel the patchwork of these mirroring peregrinations, but let us detect the three most significant relationships from the narrator's perspective. First, his grandmother, Tha'mma, a stern nationalist and link to the colonial past; she was born in Dhaka in then British India and wanted as a young woman to be part of an anti-British terrorist group. Secondly, his beautiful and candid cousin Ila, who he admires and secretly loves; they are the same age, but she is touring the world as a diplomat's daughter and embodies a cosmopolitanism that Tha'mma detests.¹⁹ Thirdly, and most importantly, his favourite uncle Tridib, the novel's elusive key character, who went to London with his parents in 1939, at the age of eight, and stayed there throughout the war. The skilled storyteller Tridib is an idol for the twenty-years younger nephew and, like Ila, a window to the world, although Tribid's travelling is mainly in the mind: yet his accounts from London are so detailed that the narrator is able to easily navigate in the former imperial capital when he arrives there in the late 1970s.

The narrator's secret crush on Ila is mirrored in Tridib's infatuation with May Price, the daughter in the English host family. Although they were both infants and hardly knew each other in London, he starts courting her some twenty years later with a 'pornographic' love letter. She, surprisingly, accepts his invitation to visit him in India and is destined to play a crucial part for the pivot around which all the mnemonic peregrinations revolve: Tridib's death at the hands of Muslim rioters. The fulcrum is in fact not just one but two events in January 1964, which the narrator only decades later will relate to each other: an anti-Muslim riot in Calcutta from which he is evacuated by the school bus, and a simultaneous anti-Hindu uprising on the other side of the border, where Tridib succumbs in what at the time is officially declared to be a car accident. This mirroring outburst of communal violence – certainly one of numerous repercussions of Partition in 1947 – has been erased from public memory, completely overshadowed by India's short war with China two years earlier. The oblivion is so complete that the narrator begins to doubt his own recollection of that frightful bus ride through the deserted city. At this point, late in the novel, the narrative register suddenly changes. Now the historian, or investigative journalist, takes over; he goes to the archives, digs out documents, reads through press clippings of both national and local

19 In fact, Ghosh comes from a diplomat family and spent a large part of his formative boyhood abroad, in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Sri Lanka and Iran.

newspapers, and this is where the strange journey into the land of looking-glass events begins.

Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence. It is a struggle I am destined to lose – have already lost – for even after all these years, I do not know where within me, in which corner of my world, this silence lies. All I know of it is what it is not. It is not, for example, the silence of an imperfect memory. Nor is it a silence enforced by a ruthless state – nothing like that, no barbed wire, no checkpoints to tell me where its boundaries lie. I know nothing of this silence except that it lies outside the reach of my intelligence, beyond words – that is why this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words.

(Ghosh 1988:240)

The whole novel unfolds around this ‘crater of a volcano of silence’ (ibid.:254). The exact circumstances of Tridib’s killing are only revealed at the very end, in two partly diverging testimonies, by his brother Robi and May, who were with him in the car that was attacked by the mob in the outskirts of Dhaka, where they had been on a rescue mission for a stranded old relative. May has asked herself ever since whether she was to blame for his death, by insisting that they intervene to stop the killing of the old man instead of saving their own lives. The narrator leaves her question unanswered, when, on his last night in London, she reveals her secret, and they sleep together. Yet he impels the reader to interpret Tridib’s hopeless interference as a sacrifice, a ‘redemptive mystery’.

The novel’s title alludes to borders, physical and imaginary: at the immediate level, the national and religious boundaries between India and Pakistan. On the fatal rescue mission to Dhaka, Tha’mma had expected to see the border from the airplane but disappointedly realizes that there isn’t any visible demarcation.

But if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn’t something in between?

(Ghosh 1988:167)

Yet the collective identities are real and imaginary, material and immaterial, and hence the borders that separate them are shadow lines. But the 'shadow lines' of the novel encompass personal and subjective identities as well as collective social and political ones, linked by the recurrent mirror metaphor and several corresponding symmetries, and what the novel does is to 'enact the transgression of these shadow lines' (Mondal 2007:10).

The Shadow Lines, Ghosh's second novel, understandably evoked some controversy in India, and it remains the most analysed of his books. In two critical volumes published in 2003 (edited by Brinda Rose and Tabish Khair respectively), it is the subject of seven essays. One of them, by literary scholar Jon Mee, makes a compelling analysis of the character Tridib in the light of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's pivotal book *Provincializing Europe* (2000). Just as Chakrabarty attempts to think through differences without assimilating them to some higher 'master code', Tridib purportedly thinks across cultures rather than beyond them and his 'global' imagination respects differences even as he traverses them (Mee 2003:91). Echoing Mee, Mondal further develops the parallel to Chakrabarty; in fact, he dedicates a whole chapter in his monograph to it.²⁰ In short, the baseline in *Provincializing Europe* is that history is intimately tied to Eurocentrism, even when it doesn't seem like it. Writing history involves inscribing onto the past some local variant of the themes of European modernity: hence, all other histories – Indian, Chinese, Kenyan etc. – tend to become variations of a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'. With this assumption as a starting point, what Chakrabarty attempts is 'the task of exploring how [European] thought – which is now everybody's heritage, and which affects us all – may be renewed from and for the margins' (2000:16).

In all his works, Ghosh has attempted to retrieve lost or suppressed stories from the 'other' pasts that have yielded to the meta-narrative of history, the 'barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world' in order to recover the 'tiny threads' that are 'woven into the borders of [its] gigantic tapestry' (Mondal 2007:131). The quotations are from *In An Ancient Land*, with its exemplary recovery of the forgotten history of the medieval Indian Ocean trade, before the rise of the European colonial powers – which in Ghosh's later 'Ibis trilogy' (*Sea of Poppies*, 2008b; *River of Smoke*, 2011; *Flood of Fire*, 2015) will be likened to competing drug cartels. Mondal's primary example of his method of reversal is however the essay 'Empire and soul: a review of the Baburnama' from 1997, which is precisely a re-view of the autobiography of India's first Mughal emperor, Zahiruddin Mohammad Babur (1483–1530) – a work shamefully little known to Western readers, yet 'one of

20 'Tiny threads, gigantic tapestries' (Mondal 2007:130–62).

the true marvels of the medieval world' that 'belongs with that tiny handful of the world's literary masterpieces that can accurately be described as unique' (Ghosh 2002:90).

Mondal underscores that Ghosh's reversal stratagem is not a simple inversion of the Eurocentric perspective, as in many nativist anti-European or anti-colonial discourses. Rather, it is a series of gradual recalibrations that effectively shifts the balance of emphasis away from Europe (Mondal 2007:134). To start with, he points out that Babur's 'narrative of self-discovery' long predates the celebrated European 'discovery of the self'. Then follows the series of minor reorientations: a geographical recalibration of the 'centre', presenting Samarkand as the epitome of civilization and urbanity; a rehabilitation of Jhengis Khan, often thought of in the West as the epitome of barbarity; an observation that the women in the Baburnama, contrary to Western prejudice of 'backwardness', are strong-willed and independent etc.

To suggest that Ghosh echoes Chakrabarty defies common sense, as all the works cited above precede *Provincializing Europe*, but the correlations are indeed striking, and Ghosh himself was so inspired by reading his Bengali colleague's book that he initiated a fascinating mail correspondence (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002). They are both from Calcutta, a few years apart, and have several common acquaintances, but they had never met. Their conversation is a rare example of highest-level intellectual debate between two writers of excellence, one literary, the other scholarly. This exchange across the genre and disciplinary shadow lines also demonstrates that dialogue truly is a form of contamination.

Writing the planetary crisis

Amitav Ghosh's early work, discussed above, has tended to be overshadowed by the success of his later books, especially the Ibis trilogy, which elevated its author to the international bestseller circuit. The story of the schooner Ibis, which trades in opium and indentured labourers across the Indian Ocean in the 1830s, leading up to the first Opium War, is like a grand culmination of the attempt to retrieve lost or suppressed stories from the 'other' pasts that have yielded to the meta-narrative of history (Mondal 2007:131). Ibis is a cosmopolitan microcosm, whose passengers from widely different social and cultural backgrounds meet for the first time and share their life stories. It is built on thorough historical, anthropological and linguistic research, and provides, not least, a compendium of pidgin varieties that makes the trilogy a true challenge for any translator. It is also – *I am about to write first and foremost' but I don't wish to privilege one of the intertwined assets before the others* – a forceful indictment of European colonialism, and especially the unscrupulous drug cartel that in essence constituted the British Empire.

I shall not go into further analysis of the Ibis trilogy, but instead focus on three of Ghosh's most recent works, which largely build on the same historical material but explicitly address the current planetary crisis. In these three different yet closely connected books, Ghosh steps forward as a leading public intellectual, incessantly prompting us to face reality and take action, to avert, or at least delay, the disasters ahead.

The Great Derangement (2016), with the subtitle *Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, is divided in three parts – 'Histories', 'History' and 'Politics' – that illuminate the core thematic from different angles. In the first section, which takes up half the book, the perspective is largely philosophical and the conundrum as to why the current climate crisis is so little reflected in contemporary art and literature. Ghosh imagines that readers and museum-goers in a substantially altered future world, who in vain try to find traces and portents of the world of their inheritance, will conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight: 'Quite possibly, then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement.' (Ghosh 2016:11).

The challenge that the climate crisis poses to the author is, Ghosh argues, partly to do with the very conception of the modern novel and its relation to probability. Novels are necessarily built on a scaffolding of exceptional moments – if not, 'writers would be faced with the Borgesian task of reproducing the world in its entirety' (ibid.:23). But the irony of the 'realist' novel is that the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real (ibid.). Ghosh uses as an example a personal experience that he has tried but never been able to make use of in any of his novels. On the afternoon of 17 March 1978, walking through an unfamiliar neighbourhood in North Delhi, he got caught in a sudden, unprecedented, very local cyclone that killed thirty people and wounded seven hundred; and he escaped without injuries, also by complete chance. If this story were in a novel – a scene where a character is walking down a road at the precise moment when it is hit by an unheard-of weather phenomenon – it would not only be deemed as improbable, but it might cause the eviction of the author from the mansion of serious fiction,

to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house – those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as 'the Gothic', 'the romance' or 'the melodrama', and have now come to be called 'fantasy', 'horror' and 'science fiction'.

(ibid.:24)

We shall come back to the discussion of subgenres and cross-genres. But let us first dwell on the implications of the second part of his key argument: The challenges to the author,

derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth.

(ibid.:7)

The 'History' section dismantles many of the myths of Western modernity, for example its false insistence on its own uniqueness. In fact, the early modern era – the seventeenth century, which also was a period of global climatic disturbances known as the 'Little Ice Age' – nurtured not one or two but multiple modernities. Even the use of fossil fuels has a long non-Western history. The world's first oil industry was in Burma, but it was seized by the British, who erased its precolonial history from the records. British colonial rule also effectively shut down budding Indian competition in the area of steam technology, because 'the emerging fossil-fuel economies of the West required that people elsewhere be prevented from developing coal-based energy systems of their own, by compulsion if necessary' (ibid.:107).

A recurring argument is that the focus on capitalism as a driver of climate change often overlooks geopolitics, which not only is a factor of at least as great importance, but one that is more difficult to overcome. This is the core theme that he will pursue in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), with the subtitle *Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. It takes its point of departure on the Banda Islands, in what is now Indonesia, in April 1621. One of the islands was the original home of the nutmeg tree, producing one of the most highly prized goods in an era when nutmegs, cloves, peppers and other spices were the chief merchandise of world trade.²¹ The rising European colonial powers were hence fighting what has wittily been called a 'spice race' to secure monopoly over the natural riches. Monopoly was however an alien concept to the Bandanese, who were used to trading indiscriminately with merchants from near and far. They stubbornly resisted the pressure from, first, the Portuguese, then the Spanish and finally the Dutch. But the Dutch did not take a no for an answer. Under the command of Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen, they exterminated the recalcitrant natives and replaced them with Dutch colonists and enslaved workers from the trade route of the Dutch East Indian Company.

21 In the late Middle Ages, a handful of nutmegs could buy a house or a ship in England (Ghosh 2021:9).

This massacre, on the night of 21 April 1621, is barely recorded in history, because it was just one of so many. It coincided with the ongoing colonization of the Americas, which in large parts of the double continent implied not only the complete or partial extermination of the original population and replacement with European settlers and African slaves, but the ‘terraforming’ – that is, ecological and topographic transformation – of the landscape into environments that would simulate Europe. Settler colonialism implied the exportation of ‘neo-Europes’ to all the corners of the world: first the Americas, then Southern Africa and parts of Asia, and finally Australia and New Zealand (ibid.:52). Ironically, some of the areas of the world that are now most severely affected by climate change – South East Australia, California – are precisely those that were terraformed by their European settlers.

Ghosh illustrates his geopolitical argument with a lucid analogy between the trade in spices in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the later extraction and world trade in fossil fuel. It is a commonly held assumption that the centre of gravity of the world’s economy is now moving from the (North) Atlantic to the Pacific. But the fossil world economy is centred around the Indian Ocean, just as the spice world economy was. Five of the ten largest oil exporting countries are located around its shores, and this is also where the most critical ‘choke points’ of world trade are still to be found. According to US American historian Michael Klare, the second Iraq war of 2003 marked the transformation of the US military into ‘a global oil protection service, guarding pipelines, refineries, and loading facilities in the Middle East and elsewhere’ (Klare 2008, quoted in Ghosh 2021:106).

Five centuries of colonial history – going back to geopolitical rivalries over the control of cloves, nutmeg and pepper – have given the world’s most advanced countries a strategic interest in perpetuating today’s global fossil-fuel regime. This goes especially for the ‘Anglosphere’ – USA, Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand – whose strategic hegemony rests on the foundation of fossil fuels. Conversely, this history has given rising powers like India and China an important strategic incentive to move towards renewables – although they are both for the moment leaning on their BRICS partner Russia’s supplies of oil and gas.

Business as usual and resistance to mitigatory measures may give the impression of a world in denial. But Ghosh underscores that it would be a grave error to imagine that the powers that be are not preparing for the disrupted planet of the future: ‘It’s just that it’s not preparing by taking mitigatory measures or by reducing emissions: instead, it is preparing for a new geopolitical struggle for dominance.’ (ibid.:128).

The prospect is hence even more dismal: a world deliberately or wearily going towards disaster, in the conviction that only the dispensable masses will

suffer, whereas the global elite will somehow survive – *by moving to Mars, as the ultimate resort*. Ghosh writes the book during the Covid lock-down, sitting isolated in his studio in Brooklyn, one of the pandemic's epicentres. In his journal of a bad year, he notes and finds some comfort in the fact that the virus, contrary to expectations, hits advanced countries like Italy and the USA harder than poor countries in Africa and Asia. He traces hope in the Black Lives Matter movement and in examples of an emerging 'vitalist' politics that regards Earth as Gaia, that is 'a living, vital entity in which many kinds of beings tell stories': 'Never have these perceptions of the Earth mattered more than at this moment when the mechanically ordered world of modernity is disintegrating before our very eyes.' (ibid.:212).

He is however very careful to differentiate his idea of 'vitalism' from prevalent forms of eco-fascism that are embraced by parts of the radical right. In *The Great Derangement* his hope leaned on the increasing involvement of religious groups and leaders – most prominently Pope Francis – in the politics of climate change. The formal political structures are incapable of confronting the crisis on their own for the simple fact that their basic building block is the nation-state, 'inherent to the nature of which is the pursuit of the interests of a particular group of people' (Ghosh 2016:159).

But, back to the analogy with the seventeenth century: utopias were an early form of science fiction and also a companion genre of colonialism in that they imagined alternative worlds built on supposedly 'empty' spaces. Jan Pieterszoon Coen had – unlike his contemporary Francis Bacon – the real opportunity to create a 'new Atlantis' on the island that he had emptied with the massacre of 1621. But he and his subordinates were practical men, not philosophers, and the system they put in place was for the great majority of its inhabitants a grim dystopia – an early form of industrial agriculture, enveloped within a racially stratified society in which a small number of European-descended planters ruled over a majority population of enslaved workers (Ghosh 2021:217–18). The native Bandanese were wiped out, except for a few who managed to survive by escaping to remote islands. Yet, in time 'a vibrant, deeply rooted culture came into being in the Bandas,'

and this was due neither to contractual abstractions, nor to the inventions of myths of primordial connections with the land. Instead it was the vitality of the landscape itself that helped to forge a sense of rootedness among the people.

(ibid.:219)

Ghosh refers to Australian anthropologist Phillip Winn, who did extensive fieldwork in the Bandas in the 1990s, and noted that the islanders not only

accepted that they all had roots elsewhere, but also insisted that they were a hybrid group of ‘mixed people’ – *orang campur* (Winn 1998, quoted in *ibid.*). Yet, this ‘conviviality’ sadly ended by the turn of the millennium, when rumours of communal conflicts in far-away Jakarta spread on mobile-phone networks across Maluku, pitting Christians against Muslims and instigating riots that drove the Christian minority off the islands. Again, as in the Caribbean and elsewhere, the fluctuations of creolization vs fundamentalism played out as part of the grander history of colonialism. Ghosh rarely if ever uses the term ‘creolization’ – as South Asian, he is more inclined to talk about ‘hybridity’. Neither has he adopted Appiah’s interpretation of ‘contamination’, nor Tsing’s concept ‘contaminated diversity’, but nutmegs and mushrooms are clearly communicating in his universe, and I am not surprised to find Tsing among the innumerable references.

The good story

Neither *The Great Derangement* nor *The Nutmeg’s Curse* are examples of contamination in the sense that I am privileging in this study. They are hybrids of essay, memoir, travel reportage and political treatise, indisputably falling under the category ‘non-fiction.’²² The form may be dictated by the urgent political purpose, especially evident in *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, and the priority to reach out to a wider and more influential audience than the readers of his novels. The Ibis trilogy is largely addressing the same colonial history in fictional format, the preceding *The Hungry Tide* (2004) was like a spooky premonition of the tsunami later that same year, and the non-fiction books can well be read as companions to the novels. But they are also marked by their literary quality, the signature of the accomplished novelist and academic. *The Great Derangement* is exquisite in style, whereas the parables of *The Nutmeg’s Curse* have a more hurried and impatient character, certainly due to the circumstance of being written at the height of the pandemic. The anthropologist Ghosh reappears in one of them, doing an improvised minor field study among Bangladeshi migrants in Italy in 2016. The big migration wave to Europe in 2015–16 supposedly consisted of refugees from war-torn Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but Ghosh noted in the news footage that many of the refugees had South Asian features like himself. So, on a visit to Italy, he interviewed a sample group with the assumption that they might be defined as ‘climate refugees.’ Although none of them would adopt that label, awareness of the disastrous impact of climate change was clearly one of the contributing factors behind their decision to leave Bangladesh. This is also one of the book’s

22 In *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, the notes and references make up 62 of the 323 pages, that is, a fifth of the book’s volume.

important conclusions: from the perspective of the Global South, climate change is but one of the aspects of the planetary crisis. At the heart of it lie geopolitical problems, and inequities of power, inherited from the era of colonization – issues that cannot be wished away.

As many indigenous voices have reiterated again and again, the present phase of the planetary crisis is not new at all: rather, it represents the Earth's response to the globalization of the ecological transformations that were set in motion by the European colonization of much of the world. Those processes have now escaped the boundaries of the three colonized continents and have become planetary forces, in no small part because Western settler-colonial culture is no longer confined to the settler colonies ... It is those settler-colonial practices that are now being implemented by China, in Xinjiang; by Indonesia, in Papua; by India, in Kashmir and in many of its forest regions.

(Ghosh 2021:167)

But let us leave the political implications aside and go back to what Ghosh says about the literary responses to the crisis. He assumes polemically that the mere mention of the subject is enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction, 'as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extra-terrestrials or interplanetary travel' (Ghosh 2016:7). Although he makes some thorough and very interesting reflections on how and why science fiction was separated from the literary mainstream, as part of modernity's partitioning of nature and culture, and the scientific from the imaginative, I find his turning-table apology for the supposedly slighted science fiction genre surprisingly blunt. His envisioned 'new hybrid forms' do not seem very innovative either. These would not be new hybrid literary texts of the kind I have focused on in this interrogation, but rather new hybrid media forms, such as the graphic novel – which is the only example he gives (ibid.:84).

Yet, between the two non-fiction books Ghosh published his to date latest novel, *Gun Island* (2019), which inevitably demands to be read as his take on a novel that does reflect the current multiple crises. *Gun Island* is not science fiction, but it has elements of other 'lesser' genres such as the detective and the adventure stories. It is narrated in the first person by a protagonist that has some obvious features in common with the author. Dinanath Datta, with the childhood nickname 'Dinu' Americanized to 'Deen', is a rare book dealer of Indian origin who lives in Brooklyn but travels to Kolkata every year to escape the New York winter. On one of the visits to the town of his birth, he is persuaded to make an excursion to the Sundarbans, the mangrove jungle of

the Bengali delta between India and Bangladesh, to record a mouldering, little-known temple. It is supposedly a shrine to Manasa Devi, goddess of snakes and other poisonous creatures, and the nemesis of the merchant Chand – the gun merchant – in one of the Bengali legends that had fascinated Dinu as a child. About to return to Brooklyn, the sexagenarian Deen reluctantly agrees to make a day excursion to the jungle, and that is the beginning of a ‘strange journey’, which will take him to places that are in different ways affected by the planetary crisis: from the Sundarbans to Los Angeles and lastly Venice, which may likely also have been the final destination of the legend’s merchant on his odyssey to escape the curse of the goddess who had tried to turn him into her devotee. When Deen – or Dino, as his Venetian friend and mentor Cinta calls him – uncovers the historical background to the legend, the two journeys seem to miraculously converge, with a surprise ending that I don’t wish to spoil.

The novel displays a gallery of more and less elaborated characters: the already mentioned Cinta, a jet-set academic who tours the world as to give keynotes at important conferences; the oceanographer Piya, expert on whales and an adamant rationalist; her foster son Tipu, a carefree petty entrepreneur in human trafficking, who, after being bitten by the custodian cobra in the Sundarban shrine, attains shamanistic receptivity for visions and premonitions, and who himself eventually ends up as one of the boat refugees in the Mediterranean; Rani, guardian of the shrine and possibly descendant of the historical merchant’s companion, who after saving the life of Tipu becomes his lover and eventually follows him on the strenuous overland journey towards fortress Europe. The chronological storyline encompasses roughly a year, with several digressions in space and time, from Deen’s and Rani’s encounter in the Sundarbans to their chance reunion in Venice, in a neo-fascist Italy. Many of the themes from the non-fiction books recur in the novel, in dramatic occurrences – fires around Los Angeles, dolphins beaching in the Sundarbans, hailstorms and floodings in Venice – but mostly in discussions between the protagonists. Reading the novel after the other books may make it appear overly didactic, as an example and implementation, but I can’t entirely escape the association to ‘edutainment’.²³ Thereby, *Gun Island* inadvertently illustrates a dilemma that may seem banal and yet unsolvable: literature does not readily lend itself to a purpose, however well intentioned.

23 Edutainment, or education-entertainment is a prominent tool of varying efficiency in the area of communication for development and social change.

Postlude

I Love Chris



My meandering world tour to detect the cross-genre ‘contamination,’ borrowed from Appiah but refashioned beyond recognition, may seem to have come to its conclusion in Adelaide. But there is a competing term that I have all the time had in mind to explore – competing, not in the sense that they would be incompatible, but rather complementary – and that is the notion of ‘theoretical fiction.’ I came across it in US literary scholar Joan Hawkins’s afterword to her compatriot Chris Kraus’ epochal book *I Love Dick* (2006 [1997]), which had its great global breakthrough a decade after its original publication, and a second peak with the TV adaptation by Joey Solloway another ten years later (2017). In a way I am pursuing the southern route all the way to the antipodes, because Chris Kraus, born in 1955, grew up in New Zealand before she returned to New York as an aspiring experimental filmmaker in the late 1970s.

Theoretical fiction, in Hawkins’s understanding, is

not fiction that is merely informed by theory or which lends itself to a certain kind of theoretical read – like Sartre’s *Nausea*, for example, or the *nouveau romans* of Robbe-Grillet – but the kind of books in which theory becomes an intrinsic part of the ‘plot,’ a mover and a shaker in the fictional universe created by the author. In Kraus’ ‘novels’ debates over Baudrillard and Deleuze and meditations on the Kierkegaardian Third Remove form an intrinsic part of the narrative, where theory and criticism themselves are occasionally ‘fictionalized.’

(Hawkins 2006:247)

Some of these theoretical references, explicit or implicit, are topical of the time of creation – the postmodernity discourse of the 1980s and early 90s – such as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s idea of the hyperreal (the ‘simulacrum’) and his compatriots Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘intensification.’ Kraus’s supposedly innovative idea, which the novel’s project sets out to try, is that one would be able to use the former in order to get at the latter (ibid.:254). The ‘project’ sparks as a whim which at the outset is shared by Chris Kraus and her then husband Sylvère Lotringer, another French – ‘European’ – philosopher.¹ The whim is ‘a stupid sexual infatuation,’ as Kraus will call it later. When the couple is visiting Dick, a friend and colleague of Sylvère, in his home in Antelope Valley, north of Los Angeles, the host suggests that they spend the night because of forecasted bad weather. Nothing happens during that night, but Chris starts fantasizing about Dick and writes, the day after, the first love letter to him. Sylvère is thrilled and in the beginning they both write letters and faxes to Dick, day and night, in their vacation house in Crestline, California (not, as in the TV series, at the actual location of ‘Dick’s institute in Marfa, Texas). The letters are not sent, but after a while, when the material is already nearing a hundred pages, Sylvère faxes his friend introducing the ‘art project’ and inviting him to participate. In the first part of the novel, the story of the couple’s frenzy is recapitulated in third person, with the letters, faxes and recorded conversations as exhibits in a trial.

The stated desire of Sylvère and Chris is to fictionalize life and surpass the real, but although the book is full of more and less inventive reflections on contemporary art and cultural critique, most reviews discarded the theoretical discussions and focused solely on the barely fictionalized one-sided extra-marital infatuation, the ‘perverse’ creative collaboration of the wife and the ‘cuckold’ husband, and the identity of the involuntary object of desire. In the novel itself, Dick’s identity is never revealed. Sylvère states that the fact that he doesn’t return messages somehow turns him into ‘a blank screen onto which we can project our fantasies’ (Kraus 2006:13). Kraus later explained in an interview that Dick was intended to be ‘every Dick ... Uber Dick ... a transitional object’ (Hawkins 2006:254). Although it may have seemed quite

1 Lotringer (1938–2021) was born in Paris as the son of Polish-Jewish immigrants. After emigrating to Israel with his family in 1949, he returned to Paris and became a leader of the left-wing Zionist movement Hashomer-Hatzair. In 1967 he attained a Ph.D. in ‘the sociology of literature’ at Sorbonne, under the supervision of Roland Barthes. He moved to America in the 1970s and was initially based in New York and then later in Los Angeles and Baja California, Mexico. He was the founder of the journal and publishing house *Semiotext(e)*, which has attempted to synthesize French critical theory and American avant-garde movements in literature, visual art and architecture.

transparent, given the book's explicit autofiction/autoethnography character, it was only *New York Magazine* that disclosed that 'Dick' was Dick Hebdige, the British-born former leader of the Birmingham school of Cultural Studies, who moved to California in the early 1990s to work as director of different experimental art projects, currently at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Rumour had it that Hebdige tried to block the publication by threatening to sue Kraus – which seems plausible given his final verdict on the 'courting', disclosed as an epilogue. True or not, disproportionate attention was focused on his character. Although Kraus in a more recent interview, at the launch of the TV series, claimed that 'all the facts are true',² the novel character is certainly a virtual Dick – although arguably coming out as a real 'dick' in the end. Hebdige's works are given fictitious titles and some alleged quotes clearly come from other sources. It seems, moreover, obvious that the intimate encounters between Chris and Dick that are described in the novel are nothing but wishful fantasies. This may of course, as Joan Hawkins suggests, have been measures to further blur the real Dick's identity in order to avoid a lawsuit. Curiously, however, the camouflage continually refers back to Kraus and Lotringer themselves: for example, Kraus quotes extensively from the book *Aliens & Anorexia*, in which Dick confesses to being 'slightly anorexic', and wraps up with a comment that it is 'one of the most incredible things I've read in years' (Kraus 2006:121). Dick Hebdige never published a book called *Aliens & Anorexia*, whereas Chris Kraus will, three years after *I Love Dick*. In it she will include a passage that is partly a verbatim repetition of the quote she had earlier attributed to 'Dick'.

[A]norexia is not evasion of a social-gender role; it's not regression. It is an active stance: the rejection of the cynicism that this culture hands us through its food, the creation of an involuted body ... Synchronicity shudders faster than the speed of light around the world. Strawberry shortcake, mashed potatoes.

(Kraus 2000:163, quoted in Hawkins 2006:255, the repeated formulations underscored by Hawkins)

As an explanation to the blurring of original and citation, Hawkins interestingly suggests that Kraus, by attributing her own language to 'Dick', acknowledges what she explicitly states elsewhere in *I Love Dick*, that it is

2 Interview with Elle Hunt, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2017. Kraus continues: 'What makes something fiction is not whether it's true or not – it's whether it's bracketed in time, how it's treated and edited, and whether it's construed as a work of fiction.'

through her love for him that she finds her own voice and begins to write, and that he hence also can be seen as an 'author' of her first book.

But this doubling up of language and self-referentiality is also an elaborate part of the 'game' – a reminder that even (or perhaps 'especially') critical texts are unstable, are signifying chains which feed off themselves. Even critical texts can/should be seen as 'fiction'.

(Hawkins 2006:256)

Lonely girl phenomenology

Only in the second half of the book does Kraus settle into the first-person pronoun, and then the novel also changes character. The letters are partly or fully replaced by a diary and the headings 'Dear Dick' are usually abbreviated as DD, which also can be read as 'Dear Diary'. The diary entries on the road gradually turn into a mix of memoirs and essays. She reflects on her early writing efforts in New York in the late 1970s and early 80s, 'when I was 24, 25', which somehow portend the 'novel' she is now writing: tiny ballpoint letters about subjects such as George Eliot, molecular chemistry, Ulrike Meinhof and Merleau-Ponty.

I believe I was inventing a new genre and it was secret because there was nobody to tell it to. *Lonely Girl Phenomenology*.

(Kraus 2006:121, my italics)

While Sylvère now is relegated to a background role, other important characters appear, although they do not take part in the plot. Like Jennifer Harbury, 'who single-handedly brought down the Guatemalan military government' by disclosing the CIA's involvement in the genocide of the 1970s and 80s – 'Dachau south,' as Kraus calls it (ibid.:133). Chris travelled to Guatemala in the footsteps of Harbury and clear-cut impressions from that trip, juxtaposed with her present journey along Route 126 in the USA, form an important element of the novel's narrative. The eminent art critic Kraus also steps into the foreground, giving special attention to three fellow artists that Chris for different reasons feels acquainted with: R.B. Kitaj ('Kike Art') and Hanna Wilke ('Monsters'), and in the final chapter ('Add it Up'), Katherine Mansfield, with whom she shares the New Zealand background.³ Wellington is hence also affectionately put on the narrative map.

3 Kraus' theoretical non-fiction is collected in the volumes *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and The Triumph of Nothingness* (2004), *Where Art Belongs* (2011) and

These latter elements of the novel are completely absent in the TV series *I Love Dick*, a very free adaptation for which Kraus however had been enrolled as a consultant. Here, we are back in the triangle drama of Chris (Kathrine Hahn), Sylvère (Griffin Dunn) and Dick (Kevin Bacon); the latter now given a surname – Jarret – and effectively disguised as somebody other than Dick Hebdige. He is an artist and the head of his own art institution in the Texan desert, to which Sylvère is invited as a fellow along with other artists/researchers who likewise play parts in the plot. In the above quoted interview in *The Guardian*, Kraus declared that the book was written ‘in a delirium’ two years after the crush, her meeting with Dick Hebdige in December 1994, and that the one-sided correspondence is more or less exactly as she wrote it – with an interesting observation in passing, that today it would have been a series of emails, with or without exchange, that would have been over and forgotten in a couple of days. She envisioned the book as:

part romantic comedy, part *anthropological case study* of adolescent infatuation as experienced and articulated by a middle-aged woman.

(*The Guardian* 2017, my emphasis)⁴

That description – in the novel ironically referred to as ‘The Dumb Cunt’s Tale’ – applies quite well to Solloway’s clever interpretation, which also emphasizes another element that is not as explicitly demonstrated in the novel, although it was of course highlighted by Joan Hawkins: the homosocial ‘bromance’ element in the relation between Sylvère and Dick, which overtrumps any heterosexual fling between Chris and Dick. One of the added TV episodes, in which the two men get drunk and make a deal that Dick shall fuck Chris in order to end the obsession, is labelled ‘The Barter Economy’.

...it deconstructs the classic heterosexual love triangle and lays bare the degree to which – even in the most enlightened circles – women continue to function as an object of exchange.

(Hawkins 2006:253)

Although deliberately and not necessarily ironically exposing herself as the ‘dumb cunt’ – which caused consternation and even outrage among

Social Practices (2018), all published by Semiotext(e). In 2008 she received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism from the College Art Association of America, CAA.

4 She was 39 years old and, in her own words, a failed experimental filmmaker (ibid.).

women critics in the early reception of the novel – there can be no doubt about the feminist edge. As, for example, in Chris’s reflection on the ‘male’ subjectivity in ‘serious’ fiction.

The ‘serious’ contemporary hetero-male novel is a thinly veiled Story of Me, as voraciously consumptive as all of patriarchy. While the hero/anti-hero explicitly is the author, everybody else is reduced to ‘characters’. Example: the artist Sophie Calle appears in Paul Auster’s book *Leviathan* in the role of a writer’s girlfriend. ‘Maria was far from beautiful but there was an intensity in her gray eyes that attracted me.’ Maria’s work is identical to Calle’s most famous pieces – the address book, hotel photos, etc. – but in *Leviathan* she is a waif-like creature relieved of complications like ambition or career (Kraus 2006a:56).

Rereading Coetzee’s *Diary of a Bad Year* and Kraus’ *I Love Dick* in a row, as I have done, reveals some striking similarities and differences. They are both recapitulations – ‘diaries’ – of a delimited time of crisis or change, with a more or less explicit autofictional character. The ‘adolescent infatuation’ of the middle-aged woman (Chris) has a correspondent in the mature ‘platonic’ infatuation of the old man (JC). But whereas the character Chris is seemingly identical with the author Chris Kraus, JC is clearly a distorted ironic portrait of the author John Coetzee. And there is, as US philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear notes in a ‘strategy’ for reading *Diary of a Bad Year*, a crucial difference between the two.

JC is willing to publish his ‘Strong Opinions’ as a free-standing book; John Coetzee is not. Coetzee is only willing to publish the opinions as authored by JC in the context of a novel in which those very opinions, as well as the act of writing them down and publishing them, are questioned by JC himself and by Anya and are mocked by Alan: Not only that: JC and his book are embedded in a larger book (by Coetzee) that includes JC’s personal musings (from a diary?) about his attraction to Anya and his growing sense of infirmity.

(Lear 2010:67)

I shall not go further into Lear’s lucid analysis, as I have now shifted focus to Chris Kraus, but this quote reveals a difference that to an important extent undoubtedly has to do with gender. Kraus takes no precautions in her self-exposure. Coetzee is in no way prudish, but he would never write about sex as

candidly as Kraus and some women writers in her wake.⁵ I should immediately qualify the assumption to 'women and gay or bisexual men'; Kraus mentions William Burroughs' novel *Queer* (1985) as one of her models of inspiration, but adds that writing *I Love Dick* was an experience that she would never repeat.⁶

The anthropology of unhappiness

Yet, if Kraus is bawdily self-revealing, what remains enigmatic is Sylvère Lotringer's part and complicity. As Joan Hawkins formulates it: 'What would drive a couple to do such a thing?' The answer to that question is an oblique underlying theme in Kraus's third novel, *Torpor* (2017a [2006]), published nine years later, just before the second edition of *I Love Dick* had gone to press. Hawkins briefly refers to it in her afterword as both a prequel and a sequel – 'a nod to some distant maybe-future' (Hawkins 2006:258). Ending where *I Love Dick* begins, *Torpor* opens at the time of the Eastern European revolutions, 1989–90, when Jerome Shafir and Sylvie Green, the fictionalized Sylvère and Chris, are travelling through the former Soviet satellite states 'with the specific goal of adopting a Romanian orphan.' This is the frame story around which other stories, past and present, unfold. Jerome's history as a 'hidden child' in France during the Nazi occupation is the primal trauma that haunts the couple on their journey from Berlin to a post-revolutionary Romania.

Torpor indeed provides a deeper understanding of the odd and complex couple, especially Jerome/Sylvère with his background as an immigrant Polish Jew and survivor. Like the novelist Georges Pérec, whom he knew as a child, he had fled Warsaw for France when Poland fell to the Nazis; both boys' fathers had been arrested in Paris and deported to Auschwitz.

5 Maggie Nelson immediately comes to mind. Her mixing of philosophical theory and memoir in *The Argonauts* (2015) is arguably a variety of 'theoretical fiction'; it was often reviewed in comparison to *I Love Dick*. There are of course also erotically outspoken women predecessors, like Anaïs Nin, and in Kraus' own generation, Kathy Acker, whose biography she later wrote (*After Kathy Acker*, 2017b).

6 *Queer* was published in 1985, but written between 1951 and 1953, partially as a sequel to the novel *Junky*, which first appeared in 1953, initially under the pseudonym William Lee. Kraus quotes from Burroughs's introduction to *Queer* to illuminate her own writing experience:

While it was I who wrote *Junky*, I feel that I was being written in *Queer*. I was also taking pains to ensure further writing, so as to set the record straight: writing as inoculation. ... So I achieved some immunity from further perilous ventures along these lines by writing my experience down.

Again, an unclaimed association to Coetzee and his reflections in *Doubling the Point* on how 'writing writes us', by revealing what we didn't know that we wanted to say in the first place (Coetzee 1992:17).

During their student years, he and Georges had founded a magazine called *Le Ligne General*. They hated French humanism and loved American movies (Kraus 2017a:124-5). Jerome maintained a hatred towards everything French, including his philosopher colleagues who were born into wealth and privilege. Yet, in the USA he became their publisher and unofficial agent – ‘French theory’s wandering pimp’ (ibid.:230).⁷ Félix Guattari is sketchily portrayed in *Torpor*, in a not very favourable light. Among the many memorable flashback scenes is the interior from Guattari’s Paris apartment in 1990, when he hosted a marathon viewing of ‘the first televised revolution’ in Romania.

I remember the moment very well, although I never saw the TV footage; we were on our way home from Ethiopia, via Madagascar, and the first tabloid front page we saw in five months cried out the execution of the Ceausescus ...

In the TV version of *I Love Dick* Sylvère is presented as ‘the Holocaust guy’. On the welcome mingle at Dick’s institute, one of the other invited fellows admiringly exclaims: ‘Oh, I love the Holocaust.’ Just how much his whole life is determined by his childhood experience and the fate of his family becomes disquietingly tangible in *Torpor*. Sylvie half-jokingly says that Jerome will write a book about the war and call it ‘The Anthropology of Unhappiness’, but that seems indeed to be the most adequate title of the unfulfilled project he is carrying around, and it spills over in their marriage, a *mésalliance* doomed to fail and yet more resilient than anyone would guess. *Torpor* is the marital metonym.

Sylvie sees her marriage to Jerome as a love story that could be summed up in just three lines. *There was emptiness. It frightened her. She tried to fill it.* She guesses it’s no better or no worse than any other.

(ibid.:145)

It’s this void that they are trying to fill with the Romanian orphan. Some important parts of the childless couple’s past that were hinted at in *I Love Dick* – Chris’ three abortions and Sylvère’s complex relations to his former wife and daughter – are here revealed as explanations. The orphan project is Sylvie’s idea, a compensation for the forced abortions, but Jerome consents, aware that it’s not going to happen. They both know it’s not only a crazy but an abominable project, and it takes them to the shady backside of the Eastern

7 Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard and Paul Virilio were all introduced and promoted by Sylvère Lotringer’s *Semiotext(e)*.

European transformation, which appears as a return of history rather than a revolution. The ethnographic observations on their road trip are distanced, cold and precise, mirroring their own state as orphans in the orphanage of the reborn nations.

The afterword to the second edition of *Torpor* is written by the Australian-born philosopher McKenzie Wark. A few years younger than Kraus, she arrived in New York in 2000, when its mystery had 'long since been depleted'. Wark does not use the term 'theoretical fiction', but defines Kraus' writing methodology in a very similar way, describing her novels as 'theory-books which – uniquely – describe and analyse the means of production of theory, its extraction from situations, from lived time' (Wark 2017:276).

With that characterization in mind, I try to detect examples of how this extraction works in practice. Here, a reflection en passant, with Jerome as the focalizer:

Being stoned – especially at work – gave him possession of a special, secret knowledge. It occurred to him that smoking pot might be to the Holocaust what TV was to independent cinema: an infinitely repeatable reduction of something that was once essential, highly-charged. Survivor Knowledge was so much more exacting and select than stoned epiphanies and hippie babble.

(Kraus 2017:173)

Or, a perhaps more universal yet equally surprising analogy:

The Balkan wars were wars of images, wars of language, fairy tales and history. Fought by tiny former feudal states, they were the twentieth century's last call for holding onto singular and national identities. Already, these identities existed only in the past, based on memories of events that stretched back 500 years. Like Jerome, the Balkan nations were struggling to maintain the singular unhappiness of their own histories.

(ibid:187)

That theme recurs in the concluding note:

Sylvie understands that her anonymous and finite, 'discrete' sexual encounters are to true romance what the blank and open LA landscape is to the old European grid of history, warfare and causality. There are no ancient tribal feuds, no wounds, no blood.

It is less absolute, perhaps. But better.

(ibid.:273)

The time – tense – in the novel is likewise very intricate. Kraus explicitly refers to the medieval literary form of the literary method of parataxis: old epic stories handed down by storytellers, flashing back and sideways, fracturing old familiar and heroic tales into contradictory, multiple perspectives. The story cannot move forward without returning to the past, and so the past both predicates the future and withholds it (ibid.:70). Wark uses the somewhat clumsy term ‘future anterior tense’ and my immediate association goes to Saer’s not exactly synonymous ‘future perfect’. *Torpor* is indeed both a prequel and a sequel to *I Love Dick*. Although the two novels can be read independently of each other, supposedly as the first and third novel in a loose trilogy,⁸ they form a perfect diptych. *Torpor* is the darker part, and that is possibly a reason for the use of pseudonyms: not necessarily to raise the level of fiction, but to reinforce a certain *verfremdung*. Jerome and Sylvie ‘have become a parody of themselves, a pair of clowns’ (ibid.:35). Note also that it is only in the second part of *I Love Dick* that Chris is able to move from third to first person. The transfer from Sylvie to ‘I’ is the process of becoming a writer – no longer the failed experimental filmmaker.

The sequel includes the separation from Jerome and one – or two? – return journeys to Romania: 1998 and/or 2001. In the clarity of the future perfect tense, they will remember their trip to Romania ‘as it really happened’.

When Sylvie is overcome with shame at having come so close to being a Third-World baby grabber, when she tries to understand the falseness of their project and what it says about their lives, Jerome will try and comfort her.

‘It could have been worse,’ Jerome will say.

(ibid.:261).

Sylvie/Chris comes through the two books in a curious and very sympathetic mix of humbleness – ‘putting her candle under the bushel,’ as the Swedish proverb says – and complete self-disclosure, not to be confused with exhibitionism. Her ‘recreational sex’ experiences are as casual as her neurotic ‘kikeness’. Both Hawkins and Wark underscore the picaresque element – even the tragic part is more humorous than lugubrious – and this strikes me as the key link between ‘theoretical fiction’ and contamination, which in Appiah’s and Terence’s original notion was the blending of comedy and tragedy.

In Kraus’s latest novel to date, *Summer of Hate* (2012), the autofictional element remains, but the ‘theoretical’ is downplayed for a more thriller-like narrative style that in the end appears to be a revival of what used to be

8 The middle novel in the trilogy is *Aliens & Anorexia* (2000).

called 'dirty realism,' with a clear socio-political edge. Yet the self-irony is adamant. Kraus's alias Catt Dunlop describes her small core of devoted fans as: 'Asperger's boys, girls who'd been hospitalized for mental illness, assistant professors who would not be receiving their tenure, lap dancers, cutters and whores' (Kraus 2012:16).

And there are several sneers at the art world:

Still, she knew the drill: write a few pages about the artist's work; compare him with some more famous contemporaries; then, throw in some quotes from a couple of cultural theorists – their names mostly started with 'B' – the trick was to pick the right ones. Benjamin, Baudrillard, Bourriaud were too dated. Better go with Badiou.

(ibid.:108–9)



At a seminar in Adelaide, I asked the speaker, a guest researcher from Belgium, how she related to 'theoretical fiction,' but my question had no resonance in the room. Joan Hawkins's suggested genre description apparently never stuck. The subject of the seminar was 'lab lit' – for 'laboratory literature' – a current fashionable term with probably less potential to last. Lab lit, with its focus on the powers of science and the lab as a creative space, appears to me as a subgenre of a refashioned science fiction – perhaps 'science in fiction.'⁹ The renascent focus on the natural sciences – climate change, biological extinction, the human vs. other-than-human, artificial intelligence and genomics – rather than social theory and cultural critique, signals an altered or, at best, widened perspective in line with Gibson's (2023) re-view of Coetzee's work. I prick my ears when Amitav Ghosh is mentioned as one of the leading proponents of this supposed paradigm shift. It makes sense. Ghosh surprisingly followed up *The Shadow Lines* with *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), an innovative blend of science fiction, thriller and postcolonial allegory that received the Arthur C. Clarke Award and in retrospect may constitute a subtle missing link between his earlier and later work.



9 For an overview and discussion of 'the new generation of science novels,' see Farzin, Gaines and Haines 2021.

Before wrapping up this inconclusive interrogation with some final remarks, I need however to add an appendix to this deviation about 'theoretical fiction'. At that same seminar in Adelaide, I was approached afterwards by Stephen Muecke, Emeritus Professor of Ethnology at the University of New South Wales, and main promotor of a vanguard cross-genre that he calls 'fictocritical writing'. This obvious variation on theoretical fiction has, he claimed, been prominent in Australia for decades. He gave me his own book *Joe in the Andamans* (2008), which I read with great interest on my return to Sweden, but only after I had already concluded the first draft of this book. I regret that I hadn't come across it on one of my previous trips to Australia, because it is a funny and innovative essay collection of many clever observations. Moreover, and most importantly, it discloses another parallel trajectory at the crossroads I am examining by introducing the crucial work of Michael Taussig, which, I am ashamed to admit, I was only faintly aware of before. Taussig would undoubtedly have deserved a chapter of his own. But this book has already by far exceeded its intended format, so I save Taussig's contribution for another interrogation and another context, or hereby make an appeal to other writers to take over the baton.

Points of no return



So, where does this leave us? At a dead-end? I don't wish to think so, although the times we are currently living do incite despair rather than hope. Ghosh's indictment of art and literature for complicity and concealment is indeed a grave one, as he is not only referring to commercial mainstream culture but the self-assured vanguard writers and artists. But is he right? Or, is it perhaps the gravity of the current planetary crisis that makes the supposed lack of radical critique more conspicuous than the dominant complacency of previous times of crisis and change?

The suggested literary tradition that I have tentatively outlined in this study is, and will remain, a marginal one; and although the writers I have chosen as examples are, if not dead, of about my own age or older, I am confident that it will have a continuance in younger generations. And contrary to Ghosh, I hold that the dichotomy of 'serious' versus genre literature is long since overruled. Let me just briefly give two examples from the two countries whose literatures I am most familiar with.

South African Masande Ntshanga's second novel *Triangulum* (2019) is a profoundly original depiction of a near-future dystopic surveillance state. Although clearly identified as South Africa, it could be almost any place on the planet; but the novel is at the same time an exploration of a very specific and little-researched part of South Africa's modern history. The main protagonist grew up in one of the apartheid Bantustans, the supposedly independent Xhosa enclave Ciskei in Eastern Cape, as the daughter of parents that were 'collaborators' with the homeland regime. *Triangulum* is presented as a message from the future, and it was, as Masande Ntshanga has explained in a

public seminar, the uncanniness of his childhood experience that inspired him to both read science-fiction stories as a boy and to later deploy the genre in his literary approach to the memories of Ciskei.¹

My second example is Argentinian former journalist Mariana Enríquez's ambitious novel *Nuestra parte de noche* (2019; *Our Share of Night*, 2023), which mixes the horror genre with elements of anthropology. The novel is about a secret order that worships the dark. Juan Peterson, coincidentally the son of Swedish immigrants in Misiones, is an involuntary medium for the evil forces and tries to save his unwitting son Gaspar from the same cruel fate. Gaspar's mother, Rosario, one of the narrators of the novel, is the daughter of the order's most unscrupulous leader, but also an anthropologist who has done field studies of occult practices among the Guarani Indians in Misiones and Paraguay. The story takes place alternately in the psychedelic London of the 1960s and the Argentina of the 70s, 80s and 90s – with the horrors of the military dictatorship as a sombre background. The Gothic theme, with more than hinted connections between occultism and murder, brings an unsought association to Ernesto Sábato's last novel *Abaddon* (2000[1974]), which foreshadowed the dictatorship's genocidal politics and traced an undercurrent to the esoteric orders of Nazi Germany; here the evidence points instead to the British overclass and the dark recesses of colonialism in West Africa. The Swedish word *gastkramande* – literally 'ghost-hugging' – is perhaps the most congenial description of the novel's hands-on exploration of a sinister occult reality, with literal inferno walks.

As indicated by the short summary, Mariana Enriquez is also following in the predominantly Argentinian, or Latin American, tradition of 'speculative ethnography' – Saer, Aira, Bolaño – and hence bringing us back to the crossroads of literature and anthropology. During this exploration, the historical nexus between the two seems to have proved more solid than I had anticipated, and there is good reason to believe that it will become even stronger and more evident in an unpredictable future. As indigenous world-views and interpretations of the relation between the human and the other-than-human are given more prominence, anthropologists have a unique ability to serve as interpreters and intermediaries. One of Ghosh's favoured exponents of a new 'vitalist' politics is *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (2013[2010]), written in collaboration between the Brazilian shaman and spokesperson for indigenous rights Davi Kopenawa and the French anthropologist Bruce Albert, and with a foreword by Jean Malaurie (who

1 See 'Farewell to the rainbow nation?'; a discussion between Masande Ntshanga, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, Ivan Vladislavić and myself in *PARSE Journal*, issue 16,

last year turned 100, joining Lévi-Strauss in the exclusive centenarian club). There is an abundance of other examples, not only in the Americas but also Australia, some of whom have been mentioned in previous chapters.

What if?

I have deliberately confined my interrogation almost entirely to the literary side of the elusive border and left the still lively intra-anthropological debate largely without comment. I am neither an anthropologist by training nor a literary scholar; my 'home' perspective is that of the literary writer. But I am happy to conclude this journey by referring to one of the most ingenious recent contributions to a debate without beginning or end: *Fictionalizing Anthropology: Encounters and Fabulations at the Edges of the Human* (2017), by the Canadian professor of Anthropology and Global Studies, Stuart McLean. Taking the literary turn for granted, McLean brings it into dialogue with anthropology's more recent 'ontological turn', that is, a radical methodological openness to difference of all kinds, be it 'cultural' and epistemological or natural and ontological; in short, not only a cultural but a natural relativism: 'the ontological turn proposes that worlds, as well as world-views, may vary' (Heywood 2017).

Fictionalizing Anthropology is what McLean himself describes as a 'comparative essay', spanning over diverse subjects such as ancient Near Eastern archaeology, classical and Norse mythology, medieval and early modern European witchcraft, Siberian and Native American shamanism... The catalogue is in fact a travesty of McLean's characterization of the wide-ranging scope of the controversial German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr, with whose 'challenge to the ethnographically oriented particularism' he feels particularly acquainted (McLean 2017:147–8). With a planetary perspective, but a certain geographical gravity towards the North Atlantic – Iceland, the Orkney Islands – McLean brings an equally diverse congregation of writers and thinkers into dialogue, such as Knud Rasmussen, Bruno Latour, Antonin Artaud, Henri Bergson, James Joyce and, more predictably, Deleuze and Guattari. The interdisciplinary comparativism and wealth of references and associations resemble the previously cited works of Peter Mason and Andrew Gibson.

The core argument is that anthropology – situated as it is, in the interface between the humanly conceived worlds and the other-than human materials that are their indispensable precondition and unsurpassable limit – is 'nothing more or less than an art of fabulation, an art of third personification, an art of the between' (ibid.:95). Its most radical potential has, moreover, always rested in its capacity to undermine conventional distinctions between documentary and fiction. McLean's radical suggestion is to fully realize this potential and,

instead of regarding anthropology as a social science, affirm its status as a 'fabulatory art' that extends its scope and practice from the familiar spaces of ethnographic encounter and intercultural comparison to:

the thresholds of emergence or dissolution of the human, where the travails of human world-making unravel into the becoming of a universe that has, finally, no need of humans to observe, interpret or affirm it

(ibid.:xi)

He is aware that such a claim may seem to indicate a turning away from a reality that has apparently become intolerable and a 'withdrawal into writerly self-absorption,' in other words a stance of non-engagement akin to that which Ghosh accuses contemporary art and literature of. But, as he suggests in the open-ended prologue, it may just as well point in the opposite direction.

What if the material universe's very indifference to our inextricable involvement in it were a potential source of hope – a hope that things might turn out differently and perhaps better? What if the 'real' world routinely invoked by our politicians and media as the limit of human possibility were but one possibility among many? What if these multiple realities were also the same reality – the reality of difference? What if making manifest this unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity were precisely the difference that anthropology makes? What if invention, undertaken as a collective project, were the most powerful rejoinder both to the constraining pretend-pragmatism of much mainstream politics and to the dogmatically asserted 'alternative facts' of populist, right-wing demagoguery? What if giants, shape-shifters, and the hosts of the dead as well as bio-power, neoliberal governance, and technoscientific assemblages? What if poetry? What if...?

(ibid.)

Indeed, the stakes of posing these questions have never been higher. And 'what if?' seems a suitable motto for speculative anthropology, regardless of its practitioners' provenance.

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