

The Call of the Wild:¹ Speculations on a White Counterlife in South Africa

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If whiteness is a condition which has historically found its (moving) focus in a dialectic with wildness – as I have proposed elsewhere² – then the first point one should observe is that the term ‘whiteness’ as a sign should be seen as a trace and not an essence. This is a key qualification, at the outset, as it sets my project apart from any sense that it is possible easily or fully to capture and contain a category description as referentially fractured as ‘whiteness.’ By contrast, an acknowledgement that any installation of a referent³ must be regarded as provisional and potentially complicit in the process of erasure, paradoxically affords one a greater play of nuance and variation, a bigger range of potential meaning. For surely, in a context of heterogeneity as marked as that in southern Africa, the signifier ‘whiteness’ (along with all its proxy signifiers), despite equally persistent tropes of sameness and rock-solid marks of identity, must be regarded as a shuttling moniker, a hot potato variously juggled and differently handled, grasped, welcomed or rendered problematic across time and space. Otherwise we might find ourselves unwillingly repeating the naming game of the nineteenth, as well as the twentieth century, when the word ‘Kaffir’ (or ‘Kafir’) was similarly homogenised to the detriment, precisely, of nuance, variation and difference. The hypostasis entailed in the naming, throughout the nineteenth century, of a vast array of human specificity under the term ‘Kaffir,’ an act of epistemological violence against difference in the historical, cultural and ethnological sense, and against difference in the poststructuralist sense, created not only a stunted and sorry scene of intercultural embattlement along the South African ‘frontier’ (in my terms, the ‘seam’), but it was also literally inscribed in blood,⁴ in the untold number of murders done in its name, its essentialising will to power.

In any study of whiteness and its origins in South Africa, the country's history as a scene of significant missionary activity, a mission outpost, must surely come strongly into the picture. The 'civilising mission' to the 'Dark Continent' brought with it a signifying economy in which the terms 'light' and 'dark' were entailed in a crippling metonymy of white skin/black skin as bearers of value. Bodies, always already signs, here gained an intense signifying radiance. Just as, according to Sarah Nuttall (2006, 8), "beauty stands in an intimate relation to ugliness" [in African and diaspora aesthetics], so whiteness, in its guise as a proxy of civilisation, stands in an intimate relation to wildness (for which, read the attributes assigned to blackness), a binary shadow to which it is willingly or unwillingly wedded in its very construction of differential meaning. The missionaries, the majority of whom were Protestant, inserted into the country a patriarchal Protestantism that has marked whiteness as a site of commanding orthodoxy in what Jean and John Comaroff identify as a "moral geography" (1991, 91). This forbidding scene of principle and precept has, over the many and long years during which it marked colonial modernity in South Africa, been found restrictive and uncomfortable not only by 'native' subjects, but also by whites caught in its coercive co-ordinates: people who 'went native,' so to speak, went '*bos*' in modern parlance, people who wanted to cross over to a place, which we may want to call the 'wild,' where the rupture of orthodoxy could be defiantly celebrated. In my argument, such figures felt themselves impelled towards a white counter-life, and it is these figures who fascinate me primarily, because they help to define the paradoxical nature of whiteness, its complicity with wildness.

In symbolic terms, every mission 'field' delimits itself against a 'wilderness' in need of the arts of cultivation. In the Nonconformist missionary thrust, write the Comaroffs (1991, 75), the resuscitation of a mythic rural domain of yeomanry as a model of the British past, in Africa, becomes a blueprint for the future, a "new Eden in the wilderness." Such symbolic reconstitution of the bare earth, for the Comaroffs, entails what they call a "dualistic vision of nature in postenlightenment imagery" (75). As they suggest, the elaboration of an imagined African landscape was part of the making of modern European self-consciousness from the late eighteenth century onwards. In this thrust, the Comaroffs remind us, Africa became an "indispensable term, a negative trope, in the language of modernity," providing a "rhetorical ground on which a new sense of heroic history could be acted out" (86; see also JanMohamed 1983 and De Kock 1996). This is well-traversed theoretical and historical ground. To be white

in this staging of Africa as the foundation of a reconstituted European modernity was to carry the burden of moral rectitude – translating into a decidedly Protestant code of behaviour, a strict regime of dualistically conceived behavioural expectations. To be wild, to be of the wilderness, to step outside of the light, was to be aligned with blackness, both literal and religious-symbolic darkness. To be white, then, in a sense, was to disavow the shadow of wildness.

We see this founding dualism in one of the earliest acts of European literary imagining upon the southern African stage, as a major trope in what Stephen Gray has called “the white man’s creation myth of Africa” (Gray 1979, 15–37), in Camoëns’s Renaissance epic, *The Lusíads*. Here, the fallen titan Adamastor, in the figure of Table Mountain, gnashing his teeth venomously as the waves crash against his broken jaw, comes to stand for the Bacchanalian misrule of the African interior, a monstrous and dangerous threat, to be countered at every level by the Dionysian mastery of the European conqueror of Africa. The myth, in its life and afterlife, figures Africa as a scene of perpetual re-conquering. But it also figures Adamastor, and his unruly ways, as a perpetual threat. Mythic overlays, we know, are external symbolisations of inner struggles, and so it is by no means far-fetched to speculate that whiteness in southern Africa has been constitutively formed in a dialectical tension with wildness.

Lévi-Strauss recognised this dialectical quality in the constitutive oppositions between elements that make up myths, such as the raw and the cooked, native and foreign, edible and inedible (Lévi-Strauss 1974, 1970), and he argued for a view of myth that sees it as a way of dealing with contradictions in human culture in which opposed qualities are mediated. But they are opposed qualities that lie *within*; myth serves to externalise such intermeshing qualities symbolically. We know, too, having digested Saussurian linguistics, that the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, relying for its meaning on one term’s difference from another, on one signifier literally not being the same as another, and that this process often feeds off binary pairs, so that light is understood as such because it is conceived as a function of its not being dark, and that, in my argument, *whiteness* depends for its very meaning on *not being of the wild, of the dark*. But we also know, from the poststructuralist take on binaries, that one term in a binary is often entailed in the other in a hierarchical imposition of value, that they are complicit in each other’s ascription of meaning, and that they conceal the possibility of free play.

Complicity and the Counterlife

It is precisely such complicity, recognised by Titlestad and Kissack (2003) as a deep seam in the constitution of identity in South African culture and letters,⁵ that urges us to consider whiteness in its off-colour moments, so to speak. This means looking at whiteness in the frame of its complicity with its perceived non-self, or anti-self, to which it is so ineluctably tied by the violence of hierarchical binary constitution. In the novelist Philip Roth's terms, any strong assertion of a particular identity that is weighted with laborious self-proclamation and obsessive self-awareness, invokes what he describes as a "counterlife." In Roth's novel, *The Counterlife* (1986), the author's fictional alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman, is compelled to deal with his brother, who has deserted his wife and children in the US to become a Zionist zealot in an Israeli settlement. Following a visit to the settlement, Zuckerman writes a letter to his brother, in which he tries to explain that deliberate enclosure within an ethnically delimited and religiously barricaded identity brings forth an equally strong compulsion to be *divested* of the burden of such enclosure, such restraining containment:

Zionism, as I understand it, originated not only in the deep Jewish dream of escaping the danger of insularity and the cruelties of social injustice and persecution but out of a highly conscious desire to be divested of virtually everything that had come to seem, to the Zionists as much as to the Christian Europeans, distinctively Jewish behaviour – to reverse the very form of Jewish existence. The construction of a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth was at its very core. [. . .] A Jew could be a new person if he wanted to. [. . .] All over the world people were rooting for the Jews to go ahead and un-Jew themselves in their own little homeland [. . .] no more Jewy Jews, great!

(Roth 2005, 151)

In the context of whiteness studies, the resonances are striking: to be divested of everything that has come to seem distinctively 'white' behaviour, and for whites to un-white themselves – to construct a counterlife that is one's own anti-myth – captures quite accurately much of the inclination of whiteness studies as it emerged and developed in the US,⁶ and surely also conveys a sense of the urgency of bringing 'whiteness' into visibility as an unreconstructed zone in post-anti-apartheid South Africa.⁷

My sense, however, is that the lure of the anti-myth, the vortex-like pull in whiteness's dialectic with wildness, is not merely a concern in the present. My argument is that it has always been at play, always kept alive by

the infinite iterability of the moral dangers attaching to being wild, to being of the wilderness. The lure of the untamed other life has therefore ironically been cultivated, or counter-suggested, in countless country sermons, untold numbers of missionary ministrations, weekly diatribes from the pulpit, endless homilies in the mouths of parents, and the numberless, internalised hegemonies of the rule-bound, 'civilised' life in the far-off colony in general, all of this unwittingly propping up the dialectical co-constructedness of whiteness and wildness, the power and the lure of the anti-myth that, I would argue, lies at the heart of the white counterlife.

We tend to look at the obvious examples of white counter-figures, emblematic personae who have left traces of their rebellions, their embrace of the counterlife: Dr Johannes van der Kemp, the first London Missionary Society emissary to the South African 'natives' in the early nineteenth century, who married a 13-year old, unconverted Madagascan slave girl whose freedom he had purchased and whose father was a Muslim imam (Elbourne 1991); Coenraad de Buys, a figure of myth and plentiful speculation, a wild white frontiersman of the nineteenth century who disregarded racial purity and whose 'impure' progeny to this day are known as 'Buysvolk';⁸ and any number of white renegades – not necessarily politically correct – who figure either in popular literature (for example, Ben Dekker, the Wild Man of the Transkei Wild Coast), or who make their appearance in 'white writing' (a good contemporary example is Alexander Fuller's character 'K' in her book, *Scribbling the Cat* [2004]). But there are also writer figures whose very personae as poets and provocateurs embrace the anti-myth of whiteness to this day. The two who immediately spring to mind are Breyten Breytenbach and Wopko Jensma. Their work, appearing during the apartheid years, shredded the pieties and the insularity of whiteness, presenting (in Jensma's case) Dadaistic pulsations of identity effects well outside the ken of socially sanctioned whiteness, and (in Breytenbach's case) a searing, lyrically cast narrative of existence quite beyond the suffocating perceptual modalities of white life under apartheid.

Further, in the whole tradition of 'progressive,' anti-orthodox scholarship centred particularly at Wits University in the 1980s, from which arose scholarly re-orchestrations of oral history and the excavations of 'history from below,' the anti-myth of whiteness was, I believe, integrally operative. When Tim Couzens turned the whole of his scholarly attention to a study of what he identified as the 'New African,' captured in histories related to the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg in the early twentieth century (and including writers such as Seloape Thema, Benedict Vilakazi, Herbert Dhlomo and others),⁹ his entire scholarly stance, never stated outright but

profoundly implicit, embraced an expansion of vision outwards, away from an exclusive concern with Dead White Male poets who, historically in the literary academy, had sanctified literary whiteness.¹⁰ The swell of resistance to this long-held white preserve of ultimate value, captured in the contested term ‘universality,’ was nothing if not a revolt against the maintenance of an ultimately ‘white’ standard of putatively transcendental cultural and literary value.¹¹ In the 1970s, historical materialist scholars grasped the nettle of ‘universality’ and exposed it for what they saw it as being: a transparent bourgeois fiction, class interest masquerading as universal interest, the idealist fallacy upheld in the service of political and class domination.¹² This critique was especially important because it suggested a hidden alignment between the English ‘Liberal’ version of whiteness, which professed itself to be opposed to Afrikaner Nationalism and therefore anti-apartheid, and the cultural-institutional formations upholding the apartheid status quo. As Dorothy Driver comments:

Despite Butler’s commitment to ‘the European-African encounter’ as a way out of the ‘crisis of identity’ of white English-speaking South Africans, and his insistence, radical for the 1960s, that English was an African language [. . .] a new generation of critics took issue with what was defined, at a volatile conference in 1974, as Butlerism: a romantic, nostalgic identification with a colonial past, and a vision of racial harmony based on individual merit rather than on radical structural changes to class and culture. Con-scious of their uneasy place in the land of their birth, but refusing the ‘crisis of identity’ as a mark of guilt-ridden liberal whites, these young – mostly white – critics began to confront the relation between culture and politics. Along with some black writers and critics remaining in the country [. . .] this younger generation initiated a local literary criticism which questioned the aesthetic criteria imported from Britain and saw writing as part of a material context.

(1996, 99)

And this material context, insisted the ascendant new class of materialist literary critics such as Mike Kirkwood, had to be brought into reckoning in the otherwise cordoned-off literary-cultural sanctuary of liberal whiteness. As Jonathan Hyslop comments:

To Kirkwood’s generation, Butler was an apologist of settler colonialism and a literary conservative. To a *Marxisant* intelligentsia who saw the tradition of the Institute of Race

Relations and the Anglophone universities as merely draping an ideological fig-leaf over racial capitalist exploitation, Butler's life and work could easily be pigeon-holed in that category.

(2003, np)

Although Hyslop argues, correctly in my view, that a more nuanced view of Butler's position is called for, Kirkwood was in no mood for mincing discriminations in 1974, when he stunned the audience of the Cape Town writers' conference Driver refers to with his attack on Butler (Kirkwood 1976), until then possibly one of the most striking figureheads of benign, seemingly non-racist, accommodating whiteness. Essentially, Kirkwood accused Butler – and the whole liberal cohort of 'sensitive' and 'caring' whites along with him – of bad faith. What this bad faith consisted in, in the final analysis, was the pretence among liberal whites that they were in the middle of the South African sandwich, the blacks below and the Nats (National Party supporters) above.

This new inflection, in the 1970s, in the anti-myth of whiteness had in fact been anticipated in the latter half of the 1960s by Nadine Gordimer, always one of the most prescient of South Africa's writer-commentators. Gordimer made the same assessment in different terms in her novel, *The Late Bourgeois World*, published in 1966, which was banned for twelve years and therefore strictly speaking taken out of the country's available discourse.¹³ The phrase 'late bourgeois world' denoted a Europe-in-Africa kind of whiteness, a philosophical-liberal stance, having one's heart in the right place but maintaining a hands-off approach to activism, that had literally run out of credibility.

Beyond 'Butlerism'

For those who could not live in America, however, and for the minority of English-speaking whites who thought of themselves as progressive, it was no longer a credible position to pretend you were uncomfortably wedged between the hungry 'Africans' below and the nasty Afrikaners above. Holding on to this pretence, while continuing to live the late-bourgeois life, was precisely the implicit 'bad faith' attributed to Butlerism. Even if South African whites of a critical persuasion had not read Gordimer's banned novel (and there were of course many hundreds of thousands of 'blankes' – blanks? – in this time who simply snuggled in under the blanket of white privilege), white social critics in the academy would find it increasingly difficult to seek comfort in a 'Butlerist,' liberal stance with the new

generation of dialectical materialists now exposing this position to be as hypocritical as Gordimer, too, had already found it to be.

Some whites – a small minority – did get involved in armed struggle, but many, temperamentally unsuited to violence and the possibility of torture, detention without trial, even assassination, preferred to plant their bombs in acts of scholarly revolution, although scholars as a class were not spared assassination. (I am thinking here of Rick Turner and David Webster.) One should not underestimate the importance of this minority edge of South African whiteness. In retrospect, the subversion of a system of hegemony – in the Gramscian sense of an oppressive arrangement that has come to be felt as ‘common sense’ and ‘normal’ – was critically important and also, I would argue, ultimately effective in creating a counter-history as an alternative to an illegitimate and eventually delegitimised ‘official’ white history. Scholars who subverted whiteness from within played an important role in giving that delegitimation process intellectual substance and context. The ‘History from Below’ movement, associated with the Wits History Workshop, and the turn towards gathering oral testimony, invariably involved, as I have suggested, a turn *away* from, and a break with, the kind of received methodology associated with white privilege (history from above), from the sense of history as consisting of the doings of the usual suspects – the obvious white figureheads in the South African historical drama, along with their supposedly emasculated black counterparts. Sir George Gray versus the Xhosa chiefs in the Eastern Cape frontier. Cecil John Rhodes and the Jameson Raid. White men made history, and they were occasionally challenged by outspoken white women such as Olive Schreiner. Now, instead, history came to be conceived in the person of a man such as Kas Maine, in every way the antithesis of whiteness and its appurtenances, its modes of power and its forms of address. Here, in Charles van Onselen’s grand epic of oral-historical research, recast in a sweeping narrative of emergence, was the anti-myth of whiteness painted in bold strokes, a new South African hero, a man whose perseverance, despite the odds, to plant seed on any ground he could claim as his own, even if just for a while, cast him in stark contrast to the swaggering colonial and Boer heroes of white power, all the way from Sir George Gray and Cecil John Rhodes to Paul Kruger and H. F. Verwoerd.

This much is fairly clear. However, beneath the more obvious thematic strains of contesting the hegemony of white subjects in historical enquiry, lay an implicit desire to be other than white, to disavow whiteness, if not in biology then in ideology, in acts of writing and art, alternative ways of fashioning identity. This was part of a turn away from anything and everything exclusively white, wherever possible, away from the falsely

delimited world that, in the 1970s and 1980s, many of us among the white echelon of scholars, critics, musicians and writers felt our discredited heritage had illegitimately bequeathed to us.

The anti-myth of whiteness, then, found itself caught up in strains of alternative identity-fashioning, seeking to divest itself of overdetermined marks of being and to break out from the sense of being cornered. The desire to break out, the explosive and implosive psychic momentum of this dynamic, is the quality that I found myself drawn to, fascinated by, in Marlene van Niekerk's cataclysmic, darkly comic novel of white collapse, *Triomf* (1994; English translation 1999).

This novel draws its readers into a quite spectacular literary-symbolic engagement with whiteness, dramatising the Trojan Horse of inner instability, the wildness within, repressed and hidden, that gives the lie to whiteness as a monolithic entity, a composed and neutral zone that observes aberrations from the norm in others, but is itself unimpeachable. In this novel, wildness as an indispensable term, as the Comaroffs's "negative trope" (1991, 86), can be seen to operate as the return of the repressed, the extremity or limit condition that dogs whiteness.

In general terms, the anti-myth that I am talking about can be seen as playing itself out either willingly (in Roth's sense, and in the examples of alternative scholarship which I have cited), or unwillingly, as the complicit negative trope, an unexpected consequence of the self-generation of putative white purity, which is precisely the case in Van Niekerk's iconoclastic novel. Other notable literary examples can also be cited, such as Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1985), in which the shallowly submerged black body on the main character Mehring's tax-dodge farm acts as a literal and symbolic return of Africa, of that which whiteness finds unruly, wild, and ungovernable; or the similar play of truth and dare, real and unreal, in Dugmore Boetie and Barney Simon's *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost* (1969), in which authorship and truth-telling themselves get mixed up in the shadows of black-white familiarity and confidence tricksterism. But to tie up my argument I shall restrict myself to a consideration of two literary examples and one taken from historical writing. In these examples the anti-myth of whiteness is either imaginatively or historically constructed, showing an irresistible will to being. My first example is a consideration of a brief moment in the text of *Triomf*, and the second a similar snapshot-view taken from Van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine*. My final example, given slightly longer treatment, is the fascinating and exemplary case of Wopko Jensma,¹⁴ a South African poet whose life and work, his rise and fall as an artist, stand as emblematic of the white counterlife, its rebellions and its bitter fruits.

The Syncretic Man: *Triomf* and *The Seed is Mine*

The brief moment I wish to consider in the English translation of *Triomf* occurs in Chapter 13, when Lambert, the novel's oafishly oversensitive bastard child of white inbreeding, encounters a hybrid city-slick black character called Sonnyboy. In terms of the novel's play of ideas, Lambert is the catastrophic, extreme product of Afrikaner nationalism's obsession with self-determination, or 'selfbeskikking.' He is a child of incest between his mother and one of his mother's two brothers, Treppie and Pop. Mol, Treppie and Pop grew up as poor whites and their life-history runs parallel with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid. In Van Niekerk's novelistic analysis, the headlong drive towards insularity against otherness captured in the lives of the older Benades literally results in the morbid self-consumption of incest, not to mention the political and ideological backwardness signified in the stunted, retarded being that is Lambert Benade. The Benade family, who find themselves resettled in *Triomf*, the whites-only suburb built on the ruins of multiracial Sophiatown, is perhaps the most extreme example in South African literature of whiteness as a cloistered, fenced-off, and ideologically amputated zone of being. As a result, Lambert, an epileptic with no understanding of otherness except through the prism of suspicion and stereotype, bluster and blasphemy, is unable to speak any language except that in which his monotone, inbred and threadbare white identity has been forged. In Chapter 13, Van Niekerk steers her bumbling white-trash character towards a local dump. It is early in 1994 and Lambert is looking for discarded plastic wine-bags, the silvered inner skins of box-wine, which he imagines he will use to store essentials such as petrol in a hole he is digging under the surface of *Triomf*, for the family's escape to the 'North' when 'shit hits the fan' in the country (that is, when democracy finally arrives).

Once at the dump in Martindale, near *Triomf*, Lambert encounters the grind and noise of a dump-truck at close quarters. He becomes faint and feels a seizure coming on. He is saved in the nick of time by Sonnyboy, who pulls him aside and gives him some Coca-Cola. When Lambert comes to, he finds himself staring into the face of Sonnyboy, who strikes Lambert as the epitome of 'weird,' unreadable otherness. In the following passage, the third-person narrator, situated an inch or so behind Lambert's shoulder, describes Sonnyboy through Lambert's eyes moments after his near-death under the wheels of the dump-truck:

He opens his eyes. In front of him, sitting on his heels, he sees a kaffir. The kaffir's got a faded, sloppy hat on his head. And he's

wearing reflector shades. There's a cut on his cheek. His face is sharp and yellow. He looks rough, like he's a rough, loose kaffir or something. But Lambert's not sure. The kaffir's wearing a faded denim shirt with holes where the sleeves used to be. Dirty threads of denim hang down onto his arms. There's a green band around his wrist and a copper bangle around the other arm, high up, just above the elbow. Long, thin arms hang like sticks from his shirt. His pants are too short and the skin sticking out underneath is rough. As far as Lambert can make out, the man's legs are like broomsticks, with a string of beads round one ankle. Red and green and yellow. Almost ANC, he thinks. Almost Inkatha. But not quite. He wonders what this yellow kaffir's case is. He's a different kind, this one. He looks clever, and it looks like something's tickling him. God knows what's tickling him so much. He looks at the kaffir's takkies. No socks, no laces. This is not even a loose kaffir.

This, he thinks, is a tsotsi-kaffir. As thin as a wild dog. What does he want with me?

(Van Niekerk 1999, 223–24)

In this passage, the ironies of perception, lodged within disguised authorial commentary, throw up several layers of awareness, all camouflaged in a narrative voice apparently presenting nothing more than Lambert's naïve perception of what he is looking at. Lambert, looking at Sonnyboy, symbolically sees only his own image in Sonnyboy's reflector shades. What this character 'sees' on and of Sonnyboy's body and dress, that is, is his assimilation of otherness into the little he can understand about a figure such as this, while the reader, picking up on clues in the description that Lambert does not, sees quite a bit more. Sonnyboy himself, however, has clearly summed Lambert up. Lambert is readable to him in a way that he is not readable to Lambert. Further, while Lambert is confused, Sonnyboy, with the power of irony at his disposal, is amused ("it looks like something is tickling him"). In this exchange, the tables are turned. Lambert, the figure of whiteness, the apparent holder of command and power in external, social and political terms – even if only just – is shown to be the weaker of the two in the Symbolic domain, in which signifiers and language are formed and which makes up the determining context of the subject. Crucially, while Lambert brokenly tries to describe and sum the multiform Sonnyboy up, Sonnyboy emphatically enacts his own, encompassing, syncretic hybridity. The following exchange occurs after Lambert and Sonnyboy share a dagga-zol together. The passage announces Van Niekerk's version of the anti-myth of whiteness through the voice of this all-South African jester, Sonnyboy:

‘So now, where do you live, man?’ the kaffir asks when the laughing dies down a bit.

‘Just there, the other side, in Triomf,’ he shows with his hand.

‘Triomf,’ says the kaffir.

‘Yes, Triumph,’ he translates for the kaffir.

‘Triumph, I see,’ says the kaffir, and he gives a little laugh.

‘And you,’ he says, ‘where do you live?’

‘Me? Ho, ho, here, there, everywhere. Sonnyboy, hy pola everywhere,’ says the kaffir.

‘I see,’ he says, And then, after a while: ‘A rambling rose.’ Then they laugh some more.

‘I mean, where do you come from?’ he asks next.

‘Wat scheme jy, my mate,’ says the kaffir, smiling.

‘Well, um, it’s hard to say,’ he says.

‘How come, hey?’ says the kaffir. ‘Jy moet mos sommer aan my kan sien, hey, boss?’

‘Um, it’s not so easy,’ he says.

‘Nee, now you must please explain, my man, want ek’s mos maar net a damn kaffer.’ He knows he’s being teased. But he doesn’t mind. The kaffir’s his pal. He likes him.

‘Well, jy’s te geel,’ he says, ‘en jy praat annerste as ’n kaffer, miskien is jy net ’n hotnot.’

‘Hear, hear!’ says Sonnyboy. ‘Hierie whitey kannie my classify nie!’ He leans over to Lambert as if he wants to tell him a secret.

‘Kyk, daai’s nou my luck in Jo’burg gewies, nè! Ek’s ’n Xhosa, ek kom van die Transkei af. En ek’s maar so.’ He touches his face. ‘Toe dag die Boesmans ek’s ok ’n Boesman, toe kry ek ’n room in Bosmont tussen hulle. En hulle praat met my regte coloured Afrikaans. En toe leer ek maar so on the sly en ek sê fokol, want hoe minder ’n Boesman van jou af weet, hoe beter. Dis ’n bad scene, die Boesmanscene. Hulle lê dronk en suip en steel en steek jou met messe en goed [. . .].’

(Van Niekerk 1999, 227–28)

At the point in this exchange where Lambert invites reciprocity, asking Sonnyboy the same question that Sonnyboy asked him (“where do you live?”), it becomes clear that Habermasian intersubjectivity, assuming a prior reciprocity, is simply not possible. Sonnyboy immediately has the measure of Lambert’s situation, laughing at Lambert’s translation of Triomf as ‘Triumph,’ laughing, indeed, at the whole white sham of pretending that the loss of Sophiatown and all its varied life, in favour of the etiolated negative image that is Triomf, cast in the ghostly white of a darkroom print, can in any way be seen as a ‘triumph.’ The exchange, conducted in the

vertigo of dagga, sees Sonnyboy teasing Lambert about his supposed white mastery. When Lambert says to him that it's "hard to say" where Sonnyboy comes from, the trickster-figure from the dumps replies in tones of the purest irony, the kind of knowing irony that his life has taught him to master: "Jy moet mos sommer aan my kan sien, hey, boss?" or, in the UK version of the translation, "You're supposed to be able to tell just by looking at me, hey, boss?" (Van Niekerk 1999a, 275). This further leads to Lambert's confusion and Sonnyboy's dark jesting ("now you must please explain, my man, want ek's mos maar net a damn kaffer"), until Sonnyboy finally finds the triumphal note, the real 'triumph' or 'triomf,' in the Symbolic order: "Hear, hear! [. . .] Hierie whitey kannie my classify nie!" ("This whitey can't classify me" in the UK version [1999a, 275]). The extent to which this crowning moment of symbolic mastery turns the tables on whiteness, or the orthodox version of Apartheid whiteness for which Lambert is a proxy, cannot be overstated. The whole project of whiteness, its cultivation and classification of the wilderness, eventually including the 'Bantu peoples,' was built on a taxonomy of overmastering knowledge, a scientific racism¹⁵ in which classification was the key element. Knowledge was always power in South Africa's intercultural history, and classificatory knowledge was its edge. But in this moment in the text of *Triomf*, whiteness comes up against its own blindness: "Hear, hear," Sonnyboy exclaims jubilantly, as if in celebration, "[h]ierie whitey kannie my classify nie." Here, at the far end of the colonial segregationist exercise, and the apartheid creation of human camps, all in the name of a masterful whiteness, the ultimate, inbred white child of this history can no longer classify anything but his own image. He is trapped in a mirror-phase of self-identification. His white world has shrunk into its own self-willed, deep isolation.

This deep isolation, this loss of mastery, is the nub of the matter. It amounts to an inability to extend outwards into a greater Symbolic order of other languages and other signifying systems in a society that, in its diverse totality, eclipses and dwarfs the kind of whiteness that remains agog at the reflection of its own image. In Van Niekerk's novel, it is the obverse of this deep ontological isolation that emerges as one of the strongest statements of the anti-myth of whiteness. And who could be a more fitting counter-image to whiteness than Sonnyboy, a man with astonishing fluidity of identity, who commands all the tongues he needs to survive as he crosses from one South African camp to the next. In the UK version of the above scene, Sonnyboy says: "I'm a Xhosa, I come from the Transkei, and some of us are yellow [. . .] That's why the bladdy Bushmen thought I was one of them, so I got a room in Bosmont right in among them. And they began talking real

Coloured Afrikaans to me. So I got the hang of it on the sly, and I didn't say nothing, 'cause the less a Bushman knows about you, the better. It's a bad scene, the Bushman scene" (Van Niekerk 1999a, 275). Sonnyboy's description of himself is an enactment of the multiplex identity into which he has been inducted in the course of surviving outside of South Africa's white camps, and having to traverse the other, rougher encampments along the way. Sonnyboy can talk Xhosa (and, in all probability, other indigenous languages too), and when addressing Lambert he can adjust his lexicon to an Afrikaans in which he both mixes in English ("luck," "on the sly," "room," "bad scene") and in which he distances himself from what he calls "Coloured Afrikaans," a dialect he is telling Lambert he picked up "on the sly" while pretending to be a Coloured as a result of the yellowish pallor of his 'Xhosa' skin. By contrast, Lambert can speak only Afrikaans and broken English, and he is at a complete loss the moment he steps outside of his white backyard. He is the archetypal backyard boy. (In a separate scene in the novel, when he walks around in the coloured township of Bosmont, the locals also make fun of the helpless, hapless figure he cuts as soon as he removes himself from his unmixed element.)

If a kind of multiform agility of identity, and its ironic mastery of tongues and camps, its dexterity in the wild, unpredictable spaces outside the anaemic precincts of whiteness, is a key expression of the myth of anti-whiteness, then a similar trope appears in Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* (1996). This work implicitly turns away from the scene of whiteness in order to understand the life of a single, complex and syncretic man who has been compelled to forge a life for himself and his family well outside of the camps of whiteness. One scene in the book describes the following collocation of individuals:

Jack Adamson was an 'English' Afrikaner and Kas Maine an Afrikanerised MoFokeng. Paul Molapo, Piet Phopho and Jantjie Nku, respectively a MoTshweneng, a MoTswana and an umXhosa – as their first names and religious affiliations indicated – were already partly deracinated and Afrikanerised. As usual on Highveld farms, time and social isolation undermined notions of cultural purity.

(Van Onselen 1996, 351)

Here, if not a romanticised alter-nation, is a scene, presented from within the ranks of whiteness, the largely white-led 'history from below' movement, that evokes a bigger picture of, and perhaps an idealised opening out of, South African life. There is an unmistakable sense in Van Onselen's great

epic that the full weight and diverse complexity of the bigger South African story can be found only outside the self-enclosed isolation of whiteness, in a break-out precisely of that self-enclosure.

The Anti-Myth as a Schizophrenic South African Poet

Wopko Jensma's poetry is something of a shock to the mind and the senses. Here is one example:

!batter a fences down
 enter, i coshed'm down
 cup ma head in ya bloodbeat
 !fence ya aint no more
 baby-black ya eyes a croon
 i eat ya, a lashy streak
 ?fence dont shadow me
 aint we nobody's business?
 nobody knows da trouble i see
 ?fence ya aint killin me
 Days's a down'n out, yea
 zombies coon my creoltown
 !fence buzz off in a blue
 aint ya business, daddy-o?
 ya aint foolin me no more
 !batter a fences down

(1973, 7)

Jensma's poetry has been more hailed and discussed than that of most poets in South Africa. His condition of clinical schizophrenia, formally replicated in the Dada-ism evident in his verse, has been described as consonant with the multiplication of selves in his poetry and the struggle to be a more-than-unitary South African person. As Stefan Helgesson writes, "[t]he tension

between self-annihilation and self-multiplication has been read as Jensma's intensely personal struggle to negotiate an impossible identity in South Africa, frequently in terms of psychosis or 'schizophrenia' (Jensma himself uses the term 'schizophrenia' in 'Spanner in the What? Works') produced by the morbid pressure of apartheid on the coherence of language and social being" (2006, 83).

A contemporaneous critic and fellow writer in the 1970s, Peter Wilhelm, memorably commented as follows on Jensma: "This is the clue to Jensma. He stays together, in shape, alchemically combining enormously diverse cultures and experiences. He is a terrifying, new sort of human. He is the first South African" (qtd. in Gardiner 2000). The idea that Jensma is "the first South African," or an alchemical fusion of whiteness and various forms of non-whiteness, alternatively a negation of race altogether, comes through in much of the commentary on this poet. Lionel Abrahams had the following to say: "At a time when people are more than ever aware of their colour, even in the arts, Wopko Jensma is the only South African artist in any medium who has transcended the barriers. His work is neither English nor Afrikaans, Black nor White" (qtd. in Gardiner 2000). Reviewing Jensma's volume of poetry, *Sing for Our Execution* (1973), Mary Morison Webster writes:

The reader's initial and, indeed, lasting impression is that Jensma is an African – possibly of Sophiatown. Use of words and phrases nevertheless seems, at times, that of an American Negro rather than of a man from the Transvaal. [. . .] Surprisingly, it turns out that this versatile poet (he writes with equal facility in both official White languages) is a European in his mid-thirties (son of a Dutch father and an Afrikaans mother) who has so closely identified himself with the African and his cause that he thinks and feels as a Black man.

(Qtd. in Gardiner 2000)

Similarly, Cherry Clayton wrote that "[t]he consciousness of [Jensma's] poetry is a suffering, uttering Black organism. [. . .] His poetry is almost pure outcry, as if the very earth were black, weeping and protesting when trodden on. It is an amazing feat of identification, achieved instinctively rather than as a calculated poetic technique" (qtd. in Horn 1994, 107). Stephen Gray writes: "It is now time to assert clearly that Wopko Jensma is as important a creative artist as anyone produced by South Africa. His book is not only a collection: it is a phenomenon. It stands at the centre of South African life" (qtd. in Gardner 2000).

It is noteworthy that one here sees white critics, who show a distinct inclination to embrace and construct an alternative to whiteness, actively heralding Jensma for his South African *centrality*, and that such centrality consists in his being other than white, in his unusual, indeed extraordinary purchase on blackness, or Africanness, his access to a way of being that presented itself as near-mythical to many whites who felt it to be inaccessible, constrained as they were by ethnicity, race and cultural-linguistic formation. Jensma, for them, is a white anti-hero. He embodies the anti-myth of whiteness to which they implicitly aspire. It is noteworthy, too, that both Jensma's form of writing (influenced by Dada, syntactically nonlinear, semantically chaotic and diffuse) as well as his form of living (disabling schizophrenia, destruction of his immediate family life, becoming a tramp, followed by disappearance and early presumed death), speak of a kind of wildness, of living beyond the pale of whiteness.¹⁶ Gardiner (2000) writes that Jensma, who put himself beyond apartheid laws by entering into a mixed-race marriage, eventually landed up living alone after trying unsuccessfully to co-exist with his wife and children in Swaziland and Botswana. Gardiner describes Jensma as an "exploded self" who "sought to incorporate the whole country in a single being," and he asserts that there were "undoubtedly family and individual origins to his schizophrenia." Gardiner personally encountered Jensma at the Salvation Army Men's Home in Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, where he lived in "a cubicle amid other unwashed, down-and-out men." Jensma had assumed the identity of a tramp, Gardiner writes, a derelict and a lost soul. To this day, uncertainty surrounds his presumed death, the stories of which include the discovery of a headless body suspected by some to be that of Jensma (see Van Wyk 2007; disputed by Cummskey 2007). The Jensma story, to some extent, is a sobering tale about the bitter fruits attendant upon exiting whiteness, and it runs counter to any tendency to romanticise the anti-myths of whiteness.

It is instructive that while Jensma's poems are a-referential and percussive, refusing the lure of saying what they mean, and refusing liberal-realist modalities of reference, South African critics have seized on their value as statements about identity, statements that come across as almost too obvious, and very unlike the centrifugal semantic dissipation of Jensma's own poetic voice. As we have seen, for several white critics, Jensma's work gains a special resonance in their seeming transcendence of the restrictions of whiteness. Sheila Roberts, a veteran South African writer and critic, makes the bold statement on the back-cover blurb of Jensma's *I Must Show You my Clippings* (1977) that this poet is "the first wholly integrated South African," for which read the first writer-figure in whom it becomes possible

to recognise the possibility of escaping whiteness and inhabiting a cultural and political identity which includes everything that whiteness has historically excluded. Flora Veit-Wild obliges us with yet another example, asserting that Jensma's work evinces the impulse to "explode the shell of white-dominated South Africa" (1996, 71), a conclusion that she draws from Jensma's following lines:

yes, open the sluices, suck me into the crowd!
 It's long been time – time's long overdue
 i jensma, I have come to blow all that boodle
 i jensma, i the incarnate of vincent van gogh
 i jensma, i am also a so called real artist

(1996, 71)

Taking issue with Veit-Wild's reading, the radical poststructuralist critic Ashraf Jamal (2003) reads Jensma into an argument about syncretism. "The pronominal and percussive 'i jensma, i,' Jamal argues, "undermines the reified self and releases the self's openness and fluidity." For Jamal,

[t]he syncretic, here, implies both the figuration and abolition of the self as an integrated identity formation. For Jensma any new subject position and consciousness presupposes the forfeiture of stability and the immanence of any negotiation. The self – in the most partial and constructed sense – is a sluice, a conduit, rather than a reified ideal. Refracted rather than whole, the self becomes the syncretic locus in and through which the world is not perceived at a manageable distance but challenged in the immanent moment of perception in which the very meanings and representations that make up the self and the world are revealed as ceaselessly fraught signs.

(2003, 15)

Here, Jamal contests the liberal critic's impulse to see Jensma as *incorporative* of a singular South African identity (for example, Roberts's "first integrated South African" and Wilhelm's "first South African"), one which, in a sense, can draw into a stable category the impossibly heterogeneous otherness that rattles the cage of whiteness. Instead, Jamal offers an alternative view of the kind of syncretism that has the potential to blow whiteness apart. It is a "subject position" that "presupposes the *forfeiture of stability*" (15). *That*, Jamal implies, is Jensma. The self, a partial and constructed thing rather than an essence, becomes for Jamal a "syncretic locus" in which the "meanings and representations that make up the self and

the world are revealed as ceaselessly fraught signs” (15). Similarly, Titlestad (2004) and Helgesson (2006) offer far more nuanced readings than are evident in the initial appropriation of and praise for Jensma. Titlestad (2004, 118–19) sees in Jensma what he calls “ontological migrancy,” while Helgesson (2006, 71–92) offers probably the most incisive reading of Jensma on record, disputing ‘South Africa’ as the symbolic locus of Jensma’s work and re-situating it within a cosmopolitan, transnational context of print culture.

Both the liberal critic and the poststructuralist critic, then, see Jensma’s work as a syncretic force which breaks the bounds of singular, partial or reified identities such as whiteness is seen to enforce, but while the liberal view tends to appropriate Jensma into the very system of logocentric naming (“*the first*,” “*the integrated*”) that his work effectively appears to undermine, the poststructuralist view sees his work as expressive of a refusal of singularity not only as a category, but as a process of signification itself. This is the force, in my view, that the rebellion against whiteness contained in various forms of wildness has invariably catalysed: a refusal of the harness of naming itself, not only of the *name*, the category, the label, but also of the mechanisms of signification which in their very hierarchical composition *oppose* white to black, cultivation to wilderness, whiteness to wildness, and in doing so, with the assistance of legal naming and governing systems, compel people into crippling dualisms of identity which are unable to contain an inner heterogeneity, an inner anti-self, an inner wildness and otherness. And so the anti-myth of whiteness is compelled into being in the symbolic domain, in which the individual imaginary connects through language with cultural constructs of meaning.

In the development of the white anti-myth among scholars and writers who might be seen as occupying more liminal positions within whiteness, there appears to be a progression from a belief in what Louise Bethlehem (2001, 378) calls a “resolute empirical dominant” (largely among the materialist scholars), to a modified stance in which both the efficacy of signs and their functioning within signifying economies associated with whiteness are called into question. This stance has emerged among scholars who are inclined towards poststructuralist critiques.

The framing of the critique (materialist, poststructuralist) reflects the changing vocabularies in the critical community within the category we call ‘whiteness’ (including, to a large extent, white scholars and writers who

have consciously, if implicitly, been concerned about whiteness and the socio-political implications thereof). This critical community, despite being marginal, played a key role in bringing into view what in my argument is a dialectic within whiteness at large, a dialectic between whiteness and its constitutive binary shadow. The shadow was prefigured as the domain of the 'non-white,' which included everything feared and/or reviled, and perceived as dark, wild, rebellious or unruly. The project of whiteness tried, impossibly, to banish such unruliness from within itself. However, the repressive violence required to keep the hierarchical and binary poles of the dialectic apart proved to be whiteness's undoing. That is its lie, and circumstances have repeatedly given the lie to whiteness (for example, the physical violence required by policemen to keep 'agitators' at bay; the torturers of John Vorster Square and any number of local police stations employed to quell the 'black peril' in its many guises; the lies and propaganda circulated in the interests of the 'truth'; the untold numbers of sexual assaults by white men, who went to Protestant churches on Sundays, on black women, not to mention consensual contraventions of the 'Immorality' Act; and the many, many moments of indecency over many, many years in the process of upholding 'white civilisation,' first in the segregationist years of colonial and neo-colonial English dominance of the political system, and then under apartheid). The deep isolation, and the deep complicity, we see in Lambert Benade and his incestuous family is a result of such forcible division, both in the material realm and in language and subjectivity, in such artificial restraint on the multiple vectors of human becoming. Briefly, I think this process, during whiteness's most inglorious years in the guise of segregationism and then apartheid, was engaged in both material and signifying economies, and that both critiques, materialist and poststructuralist, should be seen, ultimately, as making distinct and important contributions to its undoing, its loss of credibility and sovereignty. I do also think, however, that the liberal, and to some extent the materialist, critique's investment in a stable and transparent signifying economy, a clear view into the real world through which a 'whole' South African identity can be retrieved, whether in terms of liberal principle or class analysis, perhaps misses the real chaos out there, so to speak, the dissonance and instability of a world and self made up of Jamal's "ceaselessly fraught signs." This, finally, is what the case of Jensma suggests.

NOTES

1. The allusion in my title to Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* (1903) is not accidental. This novel presents a domesticated dog in whom primordial instincts are reawakened after he is drawn into service as a sled-dog in the wilderness of the frigid

Yukon during the nineteenth-century Klondike gold rushes. My argument draws on a similar tension between ‘domesticated’ whiteness and a certain, perhaps primordial, wildness within. I am aware, also, that one of the motifs in the myths of white settler writing is the romanticisation of the ‘wild’ in frontier tales, but this is indeed a domesticated wildness, one that is recuperated in the civilising agency of the hero, whereas the ‘wildness’ I argue for in this paper is something different, something beyond domestication.

2. See “Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies – A South African Connection?” (De Kock 2006).

3. On the important problem in postcolonial literary approaches of regarding referents with suspicion in colonialist texts but re-installing them strategically as a way of serving the interests of the formerly colonised and voiceless, see Slemmon (1990).

4. As I argue in “English and the Colonisation of Form” (De Kock 1992).

5. Titlestad and Kissack rely on Mark Sanders’ notion of “complicity” (Sanders 2002) and my proposed poetics of the “seam” (De Kock 2001) in combination with each other. In relation to the character Camagu in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, the authors conclude the following about constitutive dyads such as ‘light’ and ‘dark’ in South African discourse:

In particular, though, he [Camagu] rejects the totalising theories on which the dyad is based by resisting any unexamined recourse to *modernity* and *tradition* as transcendental signifiers. For it is this hermeneutic turn to a transcendental value and its capacity to stabilise systems of belief and unbelief, that is the basis of both intellectual affiliation and doctrinal fixity. [. . .] Whether Said’s secular criticism, De Kock’s seam or Sanders’s complicity, postcolonial intellectuals are seeking ways out of the totalizing theories of interpretation that foreclose debate by prohibiting access to other communities of meaning. Blame, all would concur, causes an intellectual impasse because it derives from undervaluing interconnectedness and perpetuates a blunt affiliated intellectualism. It makes enquiry instrumental. We need, it follows, the possibility that our intellectual apparatus will be taken by surprise, that a “stranger” will arrive in its midst and disrupt its otherwise relentless efficiency in (re)inscribing difference.

(Titlestad and Kissack 2003, 267–68)

6. I provide a summary of this scholarship in “Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies – A South African Connection?” (De Kock 2006).

7. This is a move that, in South Africanist scholarship, was inaugurated by Melissa Steyn (2001).

8. For a preliminary description of De Buys and the legends around him, see De Kock (2002).

9. See Couzens’s account of H. I. E. (Herbert) Dhlomo for an extraordinary focus on literary endeavour in South Africa that occurs outside the parameters of whiteness

but is nonetheless integrally related to it (1985 and 1985a). Couzens was also one of the first scholars to bring back to public attention the figure of Sol T. Plaatje (Couzens 1974 and 1971).

10. One should recall the context in which Couzens was operating: an English department (one of many across the country, similarly inclined) which was morbidly wedded to the Great Tradition of English Letters to the absolute exclusion of what was disparagingly thought of as ‘local writing,’ which was regarded as infinitely inferior and utterly unworthy of serious attention, despite the campaigning in earlier years by Guy Butler in particular, among others (such as A. C. Partridge, Dora Taylor, Jack Cope and assorted figures; see Barker 2006, 176–248).

11. This white radiance, whiteness writ large as the literary-cultural standard-bearer for ‘civilisation’ in South Africa, emerged from the nineteenth-century civilising mission. In that tortuous endeavour, what we might now think of as ‘whiteness,’ supported by its military firepower and combined with the cultural hegemony of ‘English,’ created the conditions for a discursive orthodoxy that was complicit in the winning of the Hundred Years’ War on the Eastern Frontier. In the long run, English, and by implication a very powerful version of whiteness, was won by blood (see De Kock 1992).

12. See, for example, the powerful collection of critiques in the special edition of *Critical Arts* (3.2 [1984]) devoted to a massive onslaught against the fallacies of universality in South African English departments (with articles by scholars such as Nicholas Visser, Michael Green, Michael Vaughan and others). For a recapitulation of this history, see De Kock (2008).

13. According to Michael Wade, writing in Albert Gerard’s multi-authored history, *European-language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa* (1986), *The Late Bourgeois World* was “the first novel to confront the destruction of the post-war liberal-left-black alliance,” and it opened “the possibility of Africanness” to “those whites still interested in becoming aware of their personal-historic reality” (1986, 240). This reality, as it is framed in the novel, includes a recognition that the White Left of the early 1960s was no match for the police-state machinery of the National Party, and that the embrace of dissent against other-hating, insular whiteness would henceforth of necessity involve engagement in armed struggle, at some level, and at considerable personal risk.

14. For a fuller consideration of Jensma’s life and work, See Lewis (2001), Horn (1994) and Gardiner (2000).

15. On Scientific racism, see Dubow (1995).

16. See, however, readings of Jensma – such as those of Helgesson (2006), Jamal (2003) and Titlestad (2004) – that disavow any singular South African centrality, any unitary anti-myth, in his work.

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