

# South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction

Leon de Kock

*English, South Africa*

## 1. The Elements in Play

What I want to write about is the penetration, expansion, skirmishing, coupling, mixing, separation, regrouping of peoples and cultures—the glorious bastardisation of men and women mutually shaped by sky and rain and wind and soil. . . . And everywhere is exile; we tend to forget that now. The old ground disappears, expropriated by blood as new conflicting patterns emerge.

Breyten Breytenbach, *Dog Heart*, 1998

Introductions to South African literary culture conceived as an entity have a peculiar trademark: They apologize for attempting to do the impossible and then go ahead anyway.<sup>1</sup> This gesture, ranging from rhetorical genuflection to anxious self-examination to searing critique of others who have dared to undertake what should not be attempted lightly, reveals a significant fault line in the field of South African literary studies, although *field* is a problematic metaphor here, like almost every other metaphor one cares to use. Literary “fields”—entities, groupings—require some reason other than the mere convenience of geography for their existence: they need minimal convergence in the domains of origin, language, culture, history, and nationalism (contested or not) to become, in some sense, cohesive and inter-referential. But in the South African case each of these domains fragments

1. See, for example, Gray (1979: 13); Van Wyk Smith (1990: i–iii); Chapman (1996: xx); Wade (1996: 1–9); and Jolly and Attridge (1998: 1).

into heterogeneity the moment one looks more closely at the literary objects at hand. As I argue later in this introduction, cultural heterogeneity is nothing new or surprising in a context of globalization, but the South African case is peculiar because it remains to this day a scene of largely *unresolved* difference.

Arguments about the origins of South African “literature” still shuttle between different languages, different nationalisms, and different notions of culture, history, and belonging in mutually excluding series and genealogies. For example, a symbolic source object of the field might variously be given as the oral bushman song, the epic account of Portuguese seafaring around the Cape, the Dutch register of occupation, the English travel diary, the Xhosa praise song, the French pastoral narrative of Africa, or the Scottish romantic ballad. These objects of culture have seldom been aware of each other, despite their geographic contiguity. *And take note: the above list is not exhaustive.* In saying this, as I must, I too bend to the rhetorical necessity that marks the field as something beyond the limits of singular description.

The evidence of such referential fracture in the signifier “South African literature” is visible in day-to-day literary practice. Anthologists and writers of general histories of South African literature, because of the contingencies of publishing, markets, and marketing, tend to work within one language and to write for particular audiences. These audiences almost always exclude some of the other groups and individuals who, in the final analysis, must also be regarded as part of the thoroughly polyglot South African scene with its eleven “official” languages. It is usually with such an awareness of the complexity of the field in mind that the trademark apology is proffered. So, for example, when André Brink and J. M. Coetzee (1986: 7) published their anthology of South African writing, *A Land Apart*, they immediately genuflected as follows: “It has not been our ambition to give a full picture of the wealth and range of contemporary writing, by writers both Black and White, working in English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and the other languages of South Africa. The collection is offered as the personal choice of the editors.” Note that, even within the broadest possible description, such as that above, the telltale ellipsis remains, “*and the other languages of South Africa,*” as if not even at the level of macrodescription, not even in catalog terms, do these two doyens of South African writing feel it is possible to “cover” the field. In this case as in most others, the ritual nod to an always greater diversity occurs at a particular moment of publication and for a particular context. For Brink and Coetzee it is Faber and Faber, London and Boston. (A large proportion of the country’s English writing continues to be published outside the country, usually in the United Kingdom.) Almost always the publishing context is regarded as precluding, in a

supposedly provisional and unfortunate manner, the greater range, scope, and diversity of the *real* totality of South African literature. But always the power of the book is such that the provisional articulation, despite its apologies, becomes totemic. What the apologies and spatial gestures about *more*, *elsewhere*, and *other* tend to conceal is the fact that the body of literature is given shape—monumentalized, in a sense—not in gestures pointing to supplementarity but in the supposedly provisional selections immortalized in print, decorated between covers, and marketed from the global nerve centers of the publishing industry. In the colonies and the ex-colonies the imprints London, Boston, New York, Amsterdam, and Harmondsworth among others continue to import a considerable sense of awe and achievement. In the process the scales remain unevenly balanced against orality, as has been the case ever since the advent of print culture and colonization in southern Africa.

Historically, for reasons originating in the politics and power of the English missionary-colonial project in South Africa, English-language publishing has seen by far the greatest number of works, whether “South African” by origin, theme, or content. As a result the most *visible* corpus of South African writing occurs in the English language. This work includes, in its early phases, the imperial travelogue (e.g., John Barrow’s *An Account of Travels into the Interior of South Africa* [1801]), clearly written within and for a metropolitan gaze; English lyrical forms that seek to inscribe strange territory within pastoral or romantic verse (e.g., Thomas Pringle’s *African Sketches* [1834]); tales of otherness, in which wild animals, Boers, and blacks are depicted as the marvelous and dreaded stuff of strangeness objectified in the amber of the reasoned English tongue (e.g., Alfred W. Drayson’s *Tales at the Outspan* [1862]; Percy Fitzpatrick’s *The Outspan: Tales from South Africa* [1897]; and W. C. Scully’s *Kafir Stories* [1898]); exotic adventure stories that utilize the mythography of a “dark” and “mysterious” continent for thrilling bedtime or fireside entertainment (e.g., Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* [1886] and *She* [1887]; and John Buchan’s *Prester John* [1910]); polemical writings about slavery, settler conflicts, missionary endeavors, and the wars of appropriation and dispossession at the center of South Africa’s always violent history (e.g., Dr. John Philip’s *Researches in South Africa* [1828]; and Robert Moffat’s *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* [1842]); and early black writing in derived English forms under the tutelage of missionaries (e.g., Sol T. Plaatje’s *Mhudi* [1930]; and H. I. E. Dhlomo’s *The Girl Who Killed to Save: Nongquase the Liberator* [1935]).

The later forms of South African English writing, both before and after the formal introduction of apartheid in 1948 into genres such as the story, the novel, the poem, the play, the film script, and others, become increas-

ingly explicit treatments of a land sundered at the heart by the politics of race and tortured by impossible trials of conscience. Here obvious examples come to mind: Nadine Gordimer, Peter Abrahams, Alan Paton, Es'kia Mphahlele, Athol Fugard, Mongane Wally Serote, J. M. Coetzee, Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink, and Zakes Mda, represented by work published internationally in English, written in English, or translated into English. This, for a great many international readers, is “South African literature.” If a country’s literature can be measured by what is most visible and most obvious on the shelves of, say, the Library of Congress, then the South African example begins to look overwhelmingly English.

However, a rider attaches here: it is a literature in English that, especially in its early forms, exists to demonstrate its otherness to what may be expected in the English language. It is a literature that historically has often strained to demonstrate the variance, the strangeness, and the curiosity value of comically uncultivated people, wild animals, tragically doomed heathens, illiberal Boers, greedy prospectors—the list goes on—in a place whose otherness to the great English mainlands, whose imitativeness and backwardness, must perpetually be alleged as the literature’s very *raison d’être*. In that sense it is a literature deeply rooted in its coloniality. In addition, as I argue later with regard to the thematics of the seam, it is a literature that has been, almost by definition, *other to itself*. That is, the literature carries with it a sense of being steeped in a culturally hybrid (for Breytenbach “bastardized”) context, a context so shot through with (dreaded) intermixture that expressions of Self are often marked by a simultaneous setting apart from various Others. And yet it is precisely such attempted setting apart that marks the South African subject as fractured. So, for example, in a quintet of *South African Short Stories* published in South Africa by *Reader’s Digest* in 1973, every story narrates a key component of South African otherness from the perspective of an English speaker. Three of the narratives are about Afrikaners, one tells the story of a Zulu, and one relates the adventures of a seal. In another example, most of the short stories written by the country’s most popular English writer, Herman Charles Bosman, deal with self-deluding Afrikaner backvelders and their comical views about the “kaf-firs” and animals who surround them. In the case of the *Reader’s Digest* book, that a South African book published in South Africa feels the necessity to describe itself as *South African* short stories demonstrates to what extent the balkanized ex-colony sees its own terrain as a scene of perpetual tourism—a place in which one repeatedly encounters the marks of cultural difference and riven identity despite all attempts to step back from the scene of bastardization. Ironically, it is the very act of stepping back, with eyes mes-

merically fixed on the object of difference, that confirms the dreaded—or perhaps desired—cultural bastardization.

Literature in Afrikaans, on the other hand, has seldom wavered from a firm sense of its own, unique form of South African indigeneity, although it, too, has historically defined itself as a fenced-off terrain (usually the farm) surrounded by threatening forces in the main, hostile natural elements, British imperialists, and the various avatars of “nonwhite” otherness. Afrikaans South Africans have generally exhibited a desire to inhabit the land in a fuller and more nationalistic sense than their English-speaking counterparts. Contrary to the English-speaking establishment, Afrikaners developed a strong, self-sustaining publishing industry inside the country coterminously with the rise to power of Afrikaner nationalism. Although Afrikaans writing has received international exposure only in limited quantities (in translation), the institutions of Afrikaans power inside South Africa ensured that a robust culture of publication, criticism, dissemination, and teaching at all levels was promoted and maintained. The same cannot be said for literature in the indigenous African languages of South Africa. Various missionary and Afrikaner nationalist regimes of educational and cultural hegemony across at least two centuries have relegated African-language literature to a lesser status and deprived it of primacy in the cultural and educational domains. The importance of oral culture similarly was downgraded, as was an entire context of indigenous culture, which either was frowned upon (by missionaries) or reified in artificial Bantustans but was deprived of any real autonomy (by the social engineers of apartheid).

The result of such blatantly uneven development has been that “South African literature” has shown many different faces but has seldom been regarded in its totality as an integrated field by all practitioners. At least four levels of stratification can be observed. (1) For Afrikaners, the rubric South African literature largely comprises the canon of Afrikaans literature and so continues to be taught inside the country. (2) For white English speakers, “South African literature” has often appeared to consist of its most visible monuments, mostly in English and mostly endorsed by the gaze of metropolitan approval. (3) For African-language writers the once-revered oral performance traditions, although never obliterated, were superseded to some extent by works written for the curriculum boards of education departments that needed set works for their many separate language classrooms under apartheid and after. Literary works in African languages, oral or written, have remained mostly invisible in the international profile of the field known as “South African literature” except in rare cases of trans-

lation. (4) For writers politically exiled under apartheid, both black and white, “South African literature” has been a site of struggle, often set up in contradistinction to what was perceived as the smug complacency of the uncommitted writers inside the country (although by no means can it be said that all the writers who remained in the country were politically uncommitted). In the longer view, as more recent scholars have repeatedly emphasized (cf., Gray 1979; Van Wyk Smith 1990; Chapman 1996; Smit et al. 1996), the “field” has consisted of an infinitely greater diversity of objects and forms—in many languages, in both oral and written forms, and in popular as well as belletristic modes—than any of these partial representations allow. Critically, as Malvern van Wyk Smith argues in his important essay “White Writing/Writing Black: The Anxiety of Non-Influence” (1996), it cannot be shown conclusively that South African writers who have inhabited *different* domains of culture, language, and epistemology at the same time nevertheless created their works within a consciousness of “one literature” in the way the more recent, antiapartheid critics would wish to see the field. Rather, Van Wyk Smith (1996: 83), marshaling convincing evidence to support his point, avers, “Southern African writers have deliberately [kept] their distance from cultures other than their own.”

Van Wyk Smith’s argument brings to mind the possibility that “South African literature” as a field is little more than its empirical base; that its unity resides less in its being a self-aware and interreferential field than in its being yoked together by geography and circumstance and by alphabetical-numerical arrangement. Alternatively, and this paradox surfaces frequently in South African literary historiography, the field’s greatest unity lies in its history of division (Gray 1989; Chapman 1996). In Chapman’s argument (1996: xvii), the moments of conflict and division are precisely what give the field its special character:

In looking at frontier clashes in early nineteenth-century South Africa, for example, we might want to ask ourselves whether Xhosa literature would have taken the directions it did had there been no colonial settlement in Xhosa space; obversely, whether early South African literature in English would have followed its particular course had it not encountered indigenous people around its early settlements . . . the Xhosa bard and the settler journalist, though divided by language, literacy, race and probably sentiment, were both part of the same story—a story which remains open, of course, to different interpretations.

Similarly for Gray (1989: 20–21) the key figure is the cultural translator:

A proposition: our literary system is similar to other literary systems . . . and it is different (*unlike* other literary systems, the total literary production of our system stretches across a vast spectrum of cultural manifestations, from Stone Age to

TV . . . ). *Therefore* our system does have some norms peculiar to it. For one, the writer is always forced into a position of having to negotiate between extremes, into crossing the language-colour barrier; he or she can only be a syncretist and hybridiser. And *therefore* the basic act of writing is one of carrying information across one or another socio-economic barrier, literally of “trading”. . . . I propose, thus, a new identikit portrait: the writer exists at any of several boundaries (*not* at the centre of one self-enclosed group); his or her act of making literature is part of transferring data across that boundary, from one audience to another—an act which in its broadest sense may be termed “translation.”

Many would argue that Gray’s “identikit” is idealistic; South African writers may occasionally have seen their roles in the way Gray describes, but his identikit is hardly universal. Certainly Van Wyk Smith’s own extensive researches have led him to conclude that most South African writers do not resemble Gray’s portrait. Nonetheless, Gray’s historiographical work, especially his *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979), was the first in many decades that surpassed the typical amateurish, Anglocentric survey-type approach. Seeking a suitable historiographical method for writing about southern African literature in English, Gray critiqued the various classificatory models used in the past to unify the field: those that proceed by general survey, by genre, by time periods, by alphabetical entry, and by the utterances of writers themselves. Yet he noted that in 1976 the “whole” of the literature showed precisely how divided it was. South Africa’s writers-in-exile met in Holland; South Africa’s English writers, white and black, along with their “vernacular” associates not in exile met in Johannesburg; and Afrikaans writers met in Broederstroom near Pretoria (Gray 1979: 14). To talk of “unity,” Gray felt in 1979, was chimerical. The best provisional conceptualization Gray felt able to offer at that time, in the face of such apparent division, was a cartographic metaphor that allowed a semblance of unity within disparateness—the archipelago:

The guiding metaphor for this introduction is that Southern African literature is like an archipelago. The islands with their peaks protrude in set positions, even if one does not readily see the connections between them beneath the surface. Like most archipelagoes, it is related to adjacent landmasses: in this case there are three of them—most importantly, the mainland of English literature, by language and historical circumstance; diminishingly, the British Commonwealth of literature; and increasingly, the continent of Africa which gives it its actual nourishment.

Almost twenty years later Louise Bethlehem (1998) offered a comprehensive critique of various cartographic tropes in the historiography of South African literature, including those of Gray. But Gray was one of the first to

conceive of the *possibility* of strong conceptual unity in the field, a claim, as we have seen, Van Wyk Smith's "anxiety of non-influence" argument later questioned. Nonetheless, Gray's work in the 1970s was significant because it acted as a spur to a whole new generation of scholars taking the field seriously and placing it on the South African research agenda, which, in literary studies, had until then been smugly Anglophile and dismissive of the "local." The process generated a great amount of unease about earlier models and assumptions regarding South African writing. The new generation of scholars was also broadly antiapartheid: they argued strenuously against classificatory division along ethnic-language lines, a balkanization that until then had been the most predominant form of systematization. They—in sympathy with their exiled colleagues—called for the unbanning of antiapartheid works, such as André Brink's *Looking on Darkness* (1975; originally published as *Kennis van die Aand* [1973]), and the return from exile of banned writers, such as Breyten Breytenbach, Dennis Brutus, Alex la Guma, Bessie Head, and many others, and they flew into attack against bourgeois-humanist complacencies about the universality of the (Western-modeled, belletristic) artwork in a context of political oppression and grassroots struggle. The period from the mid-1970s through to the 1990s, when formal apartheid finally began to disintegrate, therefore saw a great amount of intellectual fervor around South African literary material. Vibrant local publishing houses came into being (although often subvented by foreign donor funding), and the literature began to develop more of its own critical machinery—symposia, publication series, prizes—leading to heightened self-awareness.

With the collapse of institutional apartheid in the 1990s and the gradual disappearance of the rallying cry of political liberation, a certain energy was lost to the literature in its guise as a "site of struggle." Local publishers without links to multinational houses came under pressure as funding dried up. The breakdown of the cultural boycott against South Africa and the country's reintegration into a rapidly globalizing world led to a dissipation of that special interest associated with apartheid in the eyes of people inside and outside the country. Indeed the newfound permeability of "inside" and "outside" itself meant the literature emanating from South Africa could no longer take for granted its status as a global allegory of the struggle against racial injustice. Yet within the country's institutions, both economic and cultural, stratifications inherited from apartheid have been slow to disappear. The country's universities, with some exceptions, have continued to conduct studies in "South African literature" under the auspices of separate departments of English, Afrikaans, and African languages with separate genealogies and distinct reading lists. While this is slowly beginning



to change as universities embark upon restructuring exercises, the intellectual work of comparison, translation, and integration heralded by the 1994 conference entitled Rethinking South African Literary History has hardly begun in any significant way.<sup>2</sup> The most serious recent attempt in literary history to integrate the field, Michael Chapman's *Southern African Literatures* (1996), has been widely faulted (despite much applause) for its omissions, its foreshortening, and its assumptions.<sup>3</sup> To this day it therefore remains problematic to regard "South African literature" as a singular or unified field, although a vast amount of writing has taken place in or about the country. If anything, "South African literature" is an area of enquiry that raises a multiplicity of questions about the colonization of culture; about canonization and tradition formation; and about literary-critical historiography, identity, objects of literature, the materiality of discursive regimes, the construction of culture, and the relations of power to cultural production. Such diversity of interest, I hope, is evident in the collection of essays presented in this special issue.

## 2. Different from Ourselves

It was a dull narrow little life enough, lived there among the flat-roofed houses, far removed from the currents of life and thought of the great world beyond.

Olive Schreiner, *From Man to Man*, 1926

From the above discussion it should be clear that, in telling the story of South African literature, there is greater sense in starting at the beginning than in *medias res*. Before the country's literature can be meaningfully appreciated, in other words, one needs, at a theoretical level, to understand the multiple constructions of identity in the country as a consequence of which the various literary subsystems came into existence. The rubric "South Africa in the global imaginary" was identified because it captures both the impositions, from without, of various identity-forming global discourses upon the territory and its people as well as forms of self-fashioning, from within, either in the image of a greater world "out there" or in defiance of it. In southern Africa, since the advent of colonization more than three centuries ago, identity has all too often been mediated by the sense of that bigger, more powerful domain, as evidenced by Olive Schreiner's (1926) yearning evocation, from her desk in the colonial eastern Cape, of a "great world beyond." Modern South Africans, too, have been inclined to

2. See the book that grew out of this conference, Smit, van Wyk, and Wade 1996.

3. See, for example, Crehan 1996; de Kock 1997a; Gray 1999.

signify this other, more promising place, metonymically and with no less yearning, as “overseas.” The dialectics of “here” and “there” have haunted South Africans for so long now that one may justifiably talk of it as a country that is neither here nor there but a place of “glorious bastardization” (Breytenbach 1998: 41), a country of thoroughly interstitial identities.

This is because South Africa, like so many other African states, came into existence historically within the clasp of the local and the imperial, a physically and epistemically violent conjunction that irrevocably changed the course of the territory’s history. The various acts of provisional synthesis consequent upon this conjunction—that is, the various constructions of the “nation”—have tended to compromise all identities, some more than others (see, for example, Pippa Skotnes’s account of the bushmen in this issue). To be “South African” has meant no longer fully to be something else, whether that “something else” was Xhosa, English, Zulu, Dutch, Tswana, or any of the other language and cultural formations making up the country’s brimming residual fund of identities. The scale of heterogeneity (suggested by the country’s eleven “official” languages) has tended to defeat the various statist models of social organization attempted so far; or perhaps one should say these models, in the short term, have defeated the recognition of difference. But always such defeat has been temporary. The return of the repressed is an all-too-common theme in the country’s political and cultural development. Only in 1994, after more than three centuries of repressive segregation of one form or another, and after multiple acts of human slaughter on the battlefields, on the gallows, and in the torture chambers, did a formally democratic order come about that seeks ambitiously to recognize the full extent of the region’s diversity.

In such a context it should not be surprising that *writing*—understood here as the efforts to establish an identity within the determinate socio-cultural habitus of “South Africa”—has been an extremely vexed occupation. From the earliest of times colonial authors either imported outlandish notions of the exotic as an ill-fitting template for the region’s intractable realities or struggled to become less colonial and more “South African” by expressing the integrity of the land and its people. However, for the greater part of the country’s history writers have been compelled to do this without the help of an organic matrix, such as a common notion of the nation, a common language, or a common culture (the exemplary cases here are Schreiner and Sol T. Plaatje). As suggested in part 1 of this introduction, schisms, barriers, and misperceptions have been the rule, so even today it is highly problematic to shift from the first-person singular to the first-person plural when talking South African—to move from “I” to “we” or “us.” Unlike “settlers” in certain other colonies, such as Canada, Aus-

tralia, and the United States, the South African “settlers” of European origin have remained in the minority throughout the country’s history, and they have been divided among themselves to boot. Unlike India and certain other former colonies, such as Kenya and the Congo, however, the minority “settlers” in South Africa have stuck fast, retaining key stakes in the culture and the economy and in the economy of culture.

Such unresolved heterogeneity has long been evident in the sense of crisis attendant upon writing about “South Africa,” whose very nature as a signifier has been slippery and recalcitrant. Ironically, in a country where engagement with poststructuralist paradigms has been belated and grudging, “South Africa” itself remains a sign under erasure—the question who “speaks” for South Africa is as vexed today as it ever was. Much of the violence witnessed over the past three centuries has been epistemic in nature: the many acts, during the missionary-colonial period and then during apartheid, of forcibly reassigning indigenous people’s cosmologies, identities, and cultures from one signifying system to another, as though these people were little more than bedraggled, uninvited guests in the occupied colony/union/republic. The crisis of the sign thus belongs as much in the country’s history of suffering as it does in university seminar rooms, and an exploration of South African signifying economies appears essential to an understanding of its literary and cultural production. Since none of us—I am speaking now provisionally as a “South African”—can claim an unproblematic relation to our field of reference, my comments in this section seek not to describe the country or its written culture in a plural and comprehensive sense but to sketch some of the styles and manners in which a plurality of South African identities have been represented over time. The move into metarhetorical description, in which I take a view on the concatenation of self-inscription and othering in the midst of difference, is consistent with my view that textual production has long been integral to attempts to “make” South Africa itself or different from itself.<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, to go back to the beginning then: Before the country became a “settled” state, before “it” was incorporated into the first of many colonial dependencies and subsequent statehoods, the precolonial area we now know as South Africa encompassed a diversity of oral cultures whose verbal representations may be thought of as a shifting, aural palimpsest.<sup>5</sup> The evidence of the historians points to a plurality of communities occupying

4. See my position paper, “Becoming Different from Ourselves” (de Kock 1997b), and *Civilising Barbarians* (de Kock 1996a). See also Robert Thornton (1996: 150), “The politics of boundaries, and the boundaries of the political, and of the political community, all combine in South Africa to create a discourse that goes well beyond the political to the meta-political.”

5. For an overview of studies in this regard see Opland 1983: 32.

the land of southern Africa in societies that were neither static nor necessarily egalitarian.<sup>6</sup> Writing entered the scene only after the arrival of Europeans, particularly after the first encounters with the Cape landmass in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At this point a crisis of inscription takes hold in the history of southern Africa.

From the earliest of times the South African crisis of inscription has translated into a profound insecurity or a severe arrogance among writers when performing—or not performing, as the case may be—the pronominal slippage from “I” to “we” or “us.” It has been a representational slippage—a slippery slope, one might say—that has haunted all manner of writers in and about South Africa. It is a slippage that has marked the always alluring but ultimately quixotic attempt to bring a certain order of composure, of settlement, to a place of profound difference. But no matter how much fictional composure is imported into the text, much of the writing that sets itself up as *covering* South Africa and its people, in a plural sense, remains marked by various mechanisms of homogenization and erasure.<sup>7</sup> The peculiar quality of this writing has often been a sense of overextension, enervation, fabulation, or fixity as the crisis of inscription encircles the text and renders its relation to its referent, let us say the realia and the people of southern Africa, increasingly problematic. Many of the essays in this special issue deal precisely with that crisis and its many forms over the past three centuries in southern Africa (see, for example, the articles by Jonathan Crewe and Louise Bethlehem).

One of the great examples of such problematic literary representation is the sixteenth-century epic *Os Lusíadas* [The Lusiads] by the Portuguese poet Luis de Camoens. Camoens’s text, which has been called both “our portion of the Renaissance” (John Purves in Gray 1980: 2; emphasis added) and “the white man’s creation myth of Africa” (Gray 1979: 15–37), established a classic precedent for later writers by transforming the experience of Portuguese mariners rounding the Cape in the late fifteenth century into an epic footnote to Greco-Roman mythology. In his epic narrative Camoens recasts the figure of Cape Town’s Table Mountain as Adamastor, a fallen titan. The broken-backed Adamastor has been turned to stone and left to writhe in the southern seas as punishment for his hubris in lusting after the divine Thetis, bride of Peleus. Adamastor, as various critics have noted (Crewe 1997; Van Wyk Smith 1988; Gray 1979), then comes to stand for the

6. This formulation is partly borrowed from Worden 1994: 7. It should be noted that pre-colonial cultures persisted into the colonial period.

7. See Louise Shabat Bethlehem (1998), who deals with processes of homogenization and erasure at length in her doctoral thesis on literary historiography in South Africa. See also my critiques of literary historiography that seek emphatic “coverage” (de Kock 1996b, 1997a).

pathos and brooding vengefulness of the (southern) African continent in its dealings with European explorers and settlers. Adamastor is the myth of nemesis for all those “outsiders” who dare to trespass upon the land, and many of the (mostly white) writers who followed in Camoens’s wake, making South Africa their home, have seized upon Adamastor as a rich trope for articulating a sense of ambivalence and division about their adoptive country. For Gray (1979: 18) the mythopoeic encounter with Adamastor sets up an Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy that, he says, “represents the basic tension of white-black confrontation as depicted in much of white South African literature.”

Whether or not Gray’s claim is accurate, it seems crucial to note that what several critics have seen as a founding moment in the written literature of southern Africa is in fact an intertextual fragment in a larger work that more properly belongs to Portuguese epic literature. In addition it is a fragment of literature marked by crisis and confrontation, and significantly it is a fabulous, mythic enactment of representational fixity. The scene of physical encounter in Camoens’s epic is matched by a crisis of inscription, a full-blown crisis of representation. So much is clear from the cumbersome mythical overlay that effectively erases the intended referent at this point, the Cape of Good Hope, and behind it the populous interior of southern Africa, leaving in its place a fairy-tale giant. If anything, it is *this* crisis that the supposed “white man’s creation myth of Africa” carries forward into the cultural memory encoded in South African letters: a crisis of writing in and about one of the great seams of the modern world.

I borrow the term “seam” from Noël Mostert (1992: xv), who in his large historical work *Frontiers* claims that “if there is a hemispheric seam to the world, between Occident and Orient, then it must lie along the eastern seaboard of Africa.” Nowhere else, says Mostert (*ibid.*), does one find such a “confluence of human venture and its many frontiers, across time, upon the oceans and between the continents.” More pertinently Mostert (*ibid.*) claims, “It was the Cape of Good Hope specifically that symbolized for many centuries the two great formative frontiers of the modern world,” which he characterizes as the oceanic barrier to the east on the one hand and on the other the more intangible frontier of “consciousness,” represented by Europe gaining a foothold at the tip of Africa. The American frontier, by contrast, was an optimistic one, Mostert (*ibid.*: xvi) argues, but “more than at any other settlement point during the ages of oceanic expansion of Europe, it was along the frontier line of confrontation in the Cape Colony that uneasy questioning of the dark side of universal involvement became lodged.”

No doubt many of Mostert’s claims are disputable in degree and em-

phasis. But as a scholar cum popular historian he nonetheless trenchantly rearticulates the trope of the *frontier* as a mainstay of historiographical mapping that is legend in South African written culture and has been the subject of vigorous argument among academic historians.<sup>8</sup> Partly to avoid the predictability of the frontier theme but also to make problematic its seeming stability, I choose here to explore the metaphor of the “seam,” which Mostert himself quickly jettisons in favor of the “frontier.” I believe it is the *representational* dimension of cross-border contact that has received relatively short shrift in South African studies, while the material dimensions of the “contact zone” (cf. Pratt 1992: 6–7) have been studied extensively. To see the crisis of inscription in South African writing following colonization in terms of a “seam” is to regard the sharp point of the nib as a stitching instrument that seeks to suture the incommensurate. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2d ed.) defines *seam* as a “junction made by sewing together the edges of two pieces . . . of cloth, leather, etc.; the ridge or the furrow in the surface which indicates the course of such a junction.” The *seam* is therefore the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of the suture. For my purposes, it needs to be noted that my postulate of a crisis of inscription is characterized by a paradoxical process: on the one hand the effort of suturing the incommensurate is an attempt to close the gap that defines it as incommensurate, and on the other this process unavoidably bears the mark of its own crisis, the seam.

The seam is therefore not only the site of difference (as one might say of the more traditional “frontier” metaphor), but it necessarily foregrounds the representational suture, the attempt to close the gap and to bring the incommensurate into alignment by the substitution, in the place of difference, of a myth, a motif, a figure, or a trope. (As we shall see, the trope of the binary pairing is especially prevalent here.) The seam is also the place where attempts are made to *renounce* social and cultural conjunction, as one may argue in the case of Afrikaner identity formation. But such renunciation nevertheless occurs in a constitutive relationship with the undesirable “other side(s)” to which one turns one’s back. For the seam is the site of both convergence and difference. It is a representational “ridge or furrow” whose sudden turns bring about the manifold aporia that J. M. Coetzee (1988) has shown to be characteristic of what he calls “white writing.” The suture marked by the seam—the representational “translation” of difference, or its denial—flattens out the incommensurate only by virtue of the strain that the ridge of the seam marks and continues to mark for as long as the suture holds. Not only is the strain palpable in the many instances

8. Famously, see Legassick 1980.

in which cultural inscription carries across its burden of crisis, I argue, but the act of returning to the zone of the seam appears to be compulsive. It is the place where the divided culture must return time and time again, where the impossibility of origin and unity is staged repeatedly (indeed as I myself am doing in this essay). In Afrikaner identity formation, for example, the myth of a chosen people taking possession of a promised land is a compulsive restaging of a narrative of origins (du Toit 1983). South African missionary representations, too, are obsessed with restating the founding claims of a unitary providential destiny that, by implication, flattens the (ever-recurring) marks of difference in the missionaries' midst (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 33).

I suggest then, following Mostert, that the ubiquitous South African "frontier," as much cultural and psychological as territorial, has historically constituted one of the great meeting points: a place, in my own terminology, of simultaneous convergence and divergence and where a representational seam is the paradox qualifying any attempt to imagine organicism or unity.<sup>9</sup> Further, as I suggest above, a compulsive tendency in cultural assertion appears to be the attempt to flatten the seam or to imagine it differently. Finally, I propose that the seam is the place where difference and sameness are hitched together—where they are brought to self-awareness, denied, or displaced into third terms.<sup>10</sup>

The key element in the process is desire. It is an incessant mark of desire that cultural inscription in the divided country seeks the site of lost origins, a lost or never-realized wholeness.

As suggested by John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (1997: 27), missionaries in South Africa, those bearers of a new order's signs to the supposedly benighted indigenes, were caught in a contradiction: they spoke incessantly of *removing* difference (in the guise of non-Christian cultural practice) but were part of a colonial "inscribing machine" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 7) that, in the Comaroffs' (ibid.) expression, "engraved . . . ever more deeply onto the social and physical landscape" the very difference they sought to remove. The Protestant drama of "rebirth," say the Comaroffs (ibid.: 33), was meant to be an induction into a "universal moral community" in which natives would become "sovereign citizens of empire" (ibid.) one and the same, like everyone else in the universal Protestant community.

9. Thornton (1996: 150) writes: "South African identities cross-cut each other in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. There is no fundamental identity that any South African clings to in common with all, or even most other South Africans."

10. This is the gist of Dipesh Chakrabarty's 1996 argument that difference is represented only by virtue of the violence done to its integrity by rendering it as something other than itself—a third term.

Yet this process of flattening out difference was supported by what the authors call a “grammar of distinctions” that affected the way the colonized “inhabited their destinies” (ibid.: 25).

It is worth pondering this paradox, which I regard as typical of the poetics of the seam. The “grammar of distinctions,” highly dualist in nature, is noted as evident in colonial discourse *despite* the internal complexity of colonial society. In the Comaroffs’ (ibid.) argument, colonial societies tended to be perceived and re-presented, from within, in starkly dualist and oppositional terms that solidified the singularity of, and distance between ruler and ruled, white and black, modernity and tradition. “The objectification of this order of differences,” they write, “was intrinsic to the gesture of colonization itself” (ibid.). This is despite—perhaps even because of—the observable fact that, on the ground, identities increasingly were becoming hybrid and mixed.<sup>11</sup> Such dangerous fluidity of categories was countered by the establishment of a foundational order of representation in which ironclad binaries operated as metatropes in the long and arduous process of inducing new forms of subjectivity in colonized people.<sup>12</sup> It should immediately be noted, first, that the grammar of Manichean inscription—the overwhelming iteration of an order of terms that reinvented people as “civilized” or “savage”—was resisted, negotiated, used, and transformed by African subjects and in many cases subverted from within. Second, the colonizers themselves were afflicted by the necessary partiality of their representations and by the unacknowledged but haunting sense of not being quite the universal subjects they thought they were (de Kock, 1996a: 155–159; 1997b: 224). For indigenous subjects, though, discursive resistance in the late nineteenth century was ineluctably “from within”; only within the seam could such subjects find a speaking position in colonial society. In other words, to become the so-called universal subject of God and Empire, it was necessary first to declare apparent allegiance to a binary scheme and to acknowledge that *universal* destiny (in Victorian parlance, “manifest destiny”) inhered in a partiality toward Empire’s conception of “civilization,” despite the looming paradox that such partiality was anything but universal. The only available speaking positions within the orthodox colonial order, then, where material gain, status, and political influence were to be won, demanded that

11. See, for example, the case cited by Charles van Onselen (1996: 351): “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.”

12. See de Kock 1996a.



“native” subjects speak in the language of “civilized” discourse and from within the physical conformity of Victorian apparel. Naturally a speaking position such as this was cramped into the either-or limitations of the seam as a site of self-recognition. But there was little choice in the matter. In the final frontier war of 1877–1888 in the Eastern Cape, for example, military resistance was smashed, and every subsequent act of protest, petition, complaint, or plea was necessarily mediated by the demands of the seam as a site of self-constitution, where alterity had to be transposed into third terms, stitched into something no longer quite itself (just as the colonizer’s identity was by now compromised by its perpetual, ever-recurring defense *against* difference).

The issue for colonized subjects who were seeking the necessary legitimation in colonial society to advance socially and economically therefore was no longer whether or not one’s identity would be sutured into missionary-colonial versions of personhood, no longer whether or not difference would be translated into the new representations of universal destiny, but simply the manner in which this would be done. And the manner in most cases, after the war option had been exhausted in the Hundred Years’ War on the eastern Cape frontier and in the wake of tumultuous losses of land and sovereignty, was necessarily polite. Hence Sol T. Plaatje, the first black South African novelist in English who is still revered for his acts of civil resistance against British imperialism, felt constrained to respect the ambit of his speaking position when he eulogized, on the occasion of Empire Day 1915, “the happy reign of Queen Victoria, during which they [Transvaal chiefs and a number of provincial delegates to the Transvaal Native Congress] were led from the thralldom of heathenism and their native darkness into the enjoyments of social, economic, and spiritual benefits through missionary enterprise” (Plaatje 1915; see my companion essay in this volume).

I have written elsewhere (de Kock 1996a: 105–40) of the covert, subversive potential of statements such as these, despite their seeming subservience. The more immediate point I wish to make here is that Plaatje, and many others like him, appeared deliberately to *suppress* difference, suppress the precolonial identity, and recast it into the third term—“the thralldom of heathenism and their native darkness”—in his rhetorical and, I would argue, strategic reaching after a civil imaginary (which Plaatje here characterises as the “enjoyments of social, economic and spiritual benefits”).<sup>13</sup> As the discursive site of “rebirth,” the civil imaginary is the place where a newly sutured organicism or unity is sought. But its price is a seeming suppression

13. See my essay elsewhere in this volume, which deals extensively with the idea of a “civil imaginary.”

of difference, a suppression such as that so avidly given rhetorical expression by Plaatje in the example above.

Tomes of textual evidence in the record of South African colonial history show just such an apparent stifling of difference in which, on the face of it, indigenous subjects demand, in the name of justice and equality, a paradoxical “sameness” with other subjects of empire. It is a “sameness” in the guise of equal civil opportunities as a citizen of empire, a pseudouniversality of being in which the colonized African subject seems willingly to forego claims to cultural difference. Black colonial subjects often regarded such apparent rejection of cultural difference as necessary because to be “different,” within the prevailing discourse in colonial society, meant being less than that putative universal moral subject so assiduously touted by the legions of largely Protestant missionaries and missionary-teachers in the country.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, employment and status in the civil institutions of colonial society followed from adherence to the civilizational model. In my argument Plaatje, a mission-educated subject who was nonetheless a proto-African nationalist, was thus enfolded in the colonial seam along which difference had been pressed into an uneven alignment with a pseudouniversal model of singularity. The only means open to him to legitimate claims to equal treatment for his people was via an appeal to the foundational “civil” virtues of empire that had been so closely aligned, by missionaries, with the universal reign of God.

At the same time, however, Plaatje’s appeals are embedded in an implicit knowledge of the colonial “grammar of differences”—he was at this time also campaigning against the notorious Land Act of 1913, whose basis was racist and exclusionary. This is a crucial point to keep in mind when considering the possible meaning(s) of statements by black subjects of missionary education.

Plaatje’s markedly strained position strikes me as typical of the poetics of the seam in South African cultural refractions of identity, an example of how the first-person singular begins to seek ways of slipping across or into the seam joining it with the first-person plural. The process, though, manifests a crisis of inscription. In seeming to foreclose the African subject’s difference in an appeal to universal Christian virtue, Plaatje is in fact seeking an assurance that he and his brethren will not be *differentiated against*; in other words, his very act of claiming oneness carries with it the knowledge of doubleness, a doubleness that is the defining quality of the representational seam in which Plaatje is caught. His plea is that his people will not be held to a fixed conception of their difference, despite their own disavowal of

14. For a full treatment of this subject see de Kock 1996a.

difference in favor of citizenry in the British Empire. Plaatje's enunciations therefore encode an implicit awareness of the makeshift nature of identity as constituted in cross-cultural representation. Indeed scholars have suggested that the public, rhetorical positions of figures such as Plaatje often encoded complex modalities of subjectivity, in which multiple strands of allegiance to different orders of discourse are evident, despite the fact that in speech, dress, schooling, and general demeanor they appeared to be elitist gentlepeople of bourgeois-colonial persuasion (Odendaal 1984: 17–18; Marks 1986: 100).

It seems, then, that public enunciations of identity such as Plaatje's, which professed allegiance to the terms of a sutured identity, nonetheless concealed a mobility of self that shuttled between the paradoxes created when sameness and difference are unevenly pressed together. If people who were demonstrably different from the Victorian gentleperson prototype had, at great cost to themselves, been required to put on the starched garments of such a prototype in the name of a putatively *universal* identity, then they were not easily going to allow themselves to be enclosed in social structures of *fixed* difference—in other words, discrimination or, as the Comaroffs (1997: 25) put it, a submerged or explicit “grammar of distinctions.” Such structures increasingly confirmed, for people of Plaatje's ilk and for the newly established South African Native National Congress (later to become the African National Congress [ANC]), that the promise of a universal empire of God was being degraded by a discriminating, ethnocentric conception of difference. Yet in this act of defending themselves against hypostatized, ethnocentric difference and claiming for themselves “universal” subjectivity, they were also implicitly confirming variability, adaptability, and flexibility of identity.

In the long history of civil protest that followed, the ANC tradition of unity and nonracialism was born (cf. Frederikse 1990). This tradition testified to the desire for equal treatment in the modernizing, industrial economy of the twentieth century, in which indigenous South Africans could not afford to be sentimental about a romanticized version of precolonial Africa. But also the tradition carried with it the representational strain that occurs when unity and oneness are professed in a place of disunity and difference. Nonracialism necessarily carried with it that crisis of inscription following colonization, in which difference was seemingly suppressed, first by missionaries (in the interests of universal moral destiny), then by African nationalists (in the interests of a nonracial future). But it carried with it, too, the shadow of doubleness, an unsettling sense of us and them and of here and there, a grammar of distinctions lodged in its stitches of a great world out *there*, a place of science, invention, and discovery, against a

locality *here*, a little place where claims of superstition, backwardness, and cultural aridity continued. (This discourse of provincialism was also internalized as a distinction between levels of “civilization” within the country, and it has remained with us in one form or another to the present both in relation to the “outside” world and in terms of internal stratification.) Paradoxically then, nonracialism has been rooted in, and defined by, an awareness of its opposite.

I believe that it is in the poetics of the seam where one may begin to look for continuity between preapartheid negotiations of identity and the attempted “settlement” of identities in the apartheid era proper. The continuity, that is, might be found despite a seeming reversal of the order of terms from the one period to the next. While the missionary-influenced version of a collective South African identity may have been founded on a suppression of difference in favor of the universal empire of God and Britain and while the more racist sector of colonial society sought, instead, to keep the natives in their place, the apartheid state officially *reinvented* difference in the name of equality. That this was a wholly spurious version of so-called “equality” is now common cause, but it was a representation of reality that the apartheid state nonetheless went to enormous lengths to justify in the public domain.

It remains a great irony that, in theory, the apartheid state applied what would today be called a multicultural policy of restoring difference to a collection of “nations” who, the apartheid ideologues would have argued, had been falsely homogenized in the colonial period as one and the same, as universal humans subject to a single, godly destiny. In a stark perversion of contemporary politics of difference, the white supremacist National Party of South Africa created an order of “plural nations” with “parallel destinies” in “parallel” and semiautonomous social polities. In theory the Nationalists were trying to restore South Africa to its precolonial geography, creating “homeland” states that supposedly would eventually become “independent,” sovereign political and social entities. That all this was based on a cynically skewed distribution of land and capital is common knowledge, and that it was one of the great confidence tricks of modern history is equally well known since people were abandoned to stateless labor reservoirs (“locations”) within the “white” areas of the country. Others, again, were dumped in pseudostates with no economic viability whatsoever. But the more immediate point is that the apartheid design continued the tradition of inscription, the representational crisis upon which the very existence of a *unified* South Africa has always seemed to depend. For it merely took the terms inherited from an earlier, compromised era of English liberalism and changed the pattern of the seam. It never for a mo-

ment considered rupturing the seam, restoring the country to its primordial randomness and disunity. Instead, it resutured the conception of organicity in terms of “difference” rather than “sameness.” Where an earlier, quasi-liberal era had claimed a spurious oneness whose grammar remained inflected with differentiated orders of value, the South African National Party claimed a fraudulent plurality whose inner workings nonetheless pressed people together in a singularly oppressive unitary statehood.

In the resistance to apartheid, a keen awareness of the doubleness of representation—an awareness that, I believe, implicitly anticipated later theoretical critiques of the sign—led to a deep and enduring suspicion of the idea of formalized difference. In the most influential stream of antiapartheid resistance, that of the Charterists or Alliance partners now consolidated in South Africa’s African National Congress government, nonracialism became a key policy. During the years of resistance to apartheid, an alternative, revolutionary South Africa was represented—for we are here still firmly enclosed in the seam, in the crisis of self-representation—as a place of *non*-difference, a place of equality for all, despite race, class, or gender, and a place where difference is vigorously disavowed in favor of the one, seamlessly open society. Since the country’s “negotiated revolution” and the inception of full democracy in 1994, nonracialism has remained the government’s pivotal philosophy, although it has been put under considerable strain by the demands of affirmative action, which necessarily mobilize race as a category.

I shall return in due course to the present-day representation of South Africa as a place of *non*-difference; however, two ancillary points demand mention. First, South Africa as a “case” seems to offer one of the most acute examples of the crisis of the sign in colonial and postcolonial identity formation in the wake of imperialism. Historically “South Africa” as a third-person singular entity came into being only by virtue of tumultuously clashing modalities, the modernity of a globally expanding Western culture intermeshing with an irreconcilable heterogeneity of cultures and epistemologies. It required a series of extraordinarily violent ruptures—genocide of the bushmen and massive slaughter of Nguni speakers in the frontier wars of the nineteenth century, to name just two examples—before hegemonic political entities preceding the creation of “South Africa” could come into being.<sup>15</sup> But the violence witnessed on the grounds of the territory was equaled by a violence of representation,<sup>16</sup> a violence of such proportions that no wonder contemporary South African cultural politics has experi-

15. For a general history see Peires 1981, 1989 and Mostert 1992.

16. This is the underlying theme of de Kock 1996a.

enced what Louise Bethlehem (elsewhere in this issue) calls the “rhetoric of urgency,” a pervasive attempt to weld signifier to signified, to bypass the fraudulent contingencies of the sign and seek a place where things mean what they say. On a primary level the country has witnessed enormous volumes of crassly ethnocentric cross-cultural representation of the kind common to colonial occupations and racist mentalities. In that sense the sign has all too often been used as a stabbing needle. On a secondary level a more subtle and unavoidable doubleness has inhabited every representational act ever made in the efforts to stitch difference into sameness (as in the missionary-colonial example) or to pretend that sameness—equality—actually inheres in formalized difference (as in apartheid ideology). My postulate is therefore that a crisis of representation has been endemic to the geographical and cultural conjunction that has become South Africa and that “it,” the country conceived as a third-person singular entity, is a seam that can be undone only at the cost of its existence. Its very nature, its secret life, inheres in the paradoxes of the seam.

Second, it follows that in a place of such interstitial identity, literary culture—the everyday, quotidian texts of self-constitution as well as the more belletristic traditions—will also be characterized by doubleness and representational crisis. That these two elements characterize the work of the country’s foremost self-reflexive novelist, J. M. Coetzee, is therefore no accident. Indeed it is only those South African authors who “hit the seam” as directly and truly as Coetzee and a few others have done (among them Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, Es’kia Mphahlele, Dennis Brutus, Athol Fugard, Mongane Wally Serote, Breyten Breytenbach, and André Brink) who get taken up in the world of letters at large—who become global South African writers. Perhaps to be a “South African” writer in the full sense requires imaginative inhabitation of the seam as a deep symbolic structure. Indeed what has at times disparagingly been referred to as the white South African English “canon”—Thomas Pringle, Olive Schreiner, Roy Campbell, Pauline Smith, Guy Butler, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee—usually consists of writers who have been intensely preoccupied with cultural doubleness, either of the home (Britain) versus outpost (South Africa) kind or related to the tortured politics of Black and White and here and there (the *here* of gender and racial oppression and the *there* of a larger, more liberal-cosmopolitan world). Writers in non-English languages, whether Afrikaans or the Sotho or Nguni languages, have not been taken up into global consumption unless their work is available in translation and speaks to the great South African themes of duplicity and social conflict. Seams and boundaries predominate, and hence prominent writers are aware that social and cultural divisions are so deep as to make the organicism of a

“national” literature impossible (Gordimer 1976: 118–19) and a “great South African novel” unlikely (Coetzee 1983: 74–79).

It therefore should not be surprising that South Africa has been a fertile ground for foundational binary inscription, a place of blatant dualisms, such as the civilized and the savage, settler and indigene, White and Black, oppressed and privileged, rich and poor. Given the slippery treacheries of signification and identity formation I have suggested, as well as the inherently paradoxical divisiveness of the seam as a site of self-constitution, the binaries always have been to hand. The literature of “settlement” that comes in the wake of Adamastor struggles to reconcile opposites and irreconcilables. Olive Schreiner’s South African classic *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), for example, finds its form in seeking to conjoin the ameliorative spirit of the liberal novel with a degrading, rapacious colonial society; Pauline Smith’s *The Beadle* (1926), as another example, displaces the unsayable conflicts between white and black anterior to land “settlement” onto the divisions between Boer and Briton (Anthony 1998). During the period of apartheid rule, writers of any note were by definition “dissident,” and like their predecessors’ view, their view of things was starkly divided into home as a scene of debasement, of deformity and misrule, against the bigger picture internationally, a more capacious conceived humanity, to whom writers could make appeals and to whom they bore witness of an internally unfolding series of social and governmental crimes. Often South African authors were in exile, following the forced division of the country’s literature into a home component and an exile counterpart, an inside-outside polarity (Brink 1996: 146; Gray 1979: 1). Writing in 1998, Lewis Nkosi still saw what he called an “unhealed . . . split between black and white writing” (1998: 75). In her essays and appeals to the world, the apartheid era’s most influential literary opponent for many years Nadine Gordimer frequently called upon a standard of universal decency: the country’s progressive forces wanted South Africa to cease being exceptional, different from the rest of the “civilized world”; they wanted it to be the same, to belong again to the family of nations.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the cleavages of “local” and “international,” of home and exile, became deeply engraved by the cultural boycott of the 1980s (Nixon 1994: 155–72). Ironically, in the decades of isolation from the world at large ushered in by Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd’s sundering of South Africa from the British Commonwealth in 1961, “South African” literature and publishing began to flourish as a result of the artificial hothouse environment created by enforced isolation. Our writers could assume a sense of grave importance by virtue of writing from within one

17. See, for example, Gordimer 1989: 90–91.

of the great crisis points of the world. They were witnesses to one of the final, most embattled scenes of a global struggle against neocolonialism. South Africa became one of the world's great allegories of racial strife, of the struggle for humane justice in the wake of successive waves of imperial, colonial, and neocolonial misrule.

To return to my main point, then: doubleness and representational crisis have been endemic not only to the higher callings of literature but also to the most everyday acts of identity formation. The country, in all of its various guises as a collective "state," has been dogged by a crisis of naming, either a naming of people as other than what they might conceive themselves to be or a naming of oneself in a constitutive (oppositional or identificatory) relation to others. Whether the naming of people was to strip them of one order of difference, in the name of a universal and providential destiny, only to impose a new grammar of *differentiation*, as I suggest happened in the colonial era; whether people named themselves as a singular entity of hardened difference and therefore as a rule unto themselves, despite convergence, as in Afrikaner identity formation; or whether the naming of people was to enclose them in fraudulently hypostatized categories of difference in the guise of equality, as evidenced in the apartheid era, one of the results has been an overwhelming desire, in the struggle against apartheid, for a unitary political identity and for the *suppression* of difference. This desire has been formally translated into the new South African constitution, which does indeed enshrine equality for all regardless of race, gender, or class, does make us all the "same" legally and constitutionally. In the television broadcasting revolution that ran parallel to the country's democratization, "oneness" became a national jingle: "*Simunye*—We Are One!" The "*Simunye*" slogan, selling the oneness of the new nation, was heard incessantly on one of the country's main television channels, telling us everyday that we are one and the same.

But we are not, as President Thabo Mbeki sought to remind South Africans in his "two nations" speech to the South African Parliament in 1998 (cf. Krog 1998: 15).<sup>18</sup> Racial and class cleavages persist. Political rivalries of the past, with accompanying atrocities, continue to reemerge.<sup>19</sup> Debates about affirmative action and employment equity cannot but mobilize racial

18. Results of the most recent South African census—the first since the 1994 elections—show what the Johannesburg newspaper calls "a land still divided" (*Johannesburg Star*, October 21, 1998). Releasing the results, former South African president Nelson Mandela was reported as saying the statistics showed "a society in which the lines between rich and poor [are] the historical lines of a racially divided society."

19. In just one two-week period during 1998, for example, at least thirty people were assassinated in Richmond, KwaZulu Natal, for political reasons (*Johannesburg Star*, July 20, 1998: 3).



particularity as a category of identity.<sup>20</sup> University campuses and workplaces have continued to witness clashes of a physical and philosophical nature predominantly about the assertion of *black* entitlement, where *black* is broadly defined in the South African manner (Black, Coloured, Indian), but nonetheless exclusionary, black *as against* others.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, the assault is led by the campaigners for *Afrikaner* identity, *Afrikaner as against* other forms of identity. Or we have those who see themselves as connected to an “English” world, either the old motherland England or one of its newer ex-colonies (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States), whose shores continue to beckon for thousands of émigrés and would-be émigrés. We are, I believe, still fully in the seam, still restaging our identities in a place of converging difference—a place where neither oneness nor difference can be maintained without reference to the knowledge of its double, its constitutively cross-hitched character. In such a context representation must bear the strain. “Simunye—We Are One” will necessarily be met with a snort of derision or an impatient switch to the next channel. The “rainbow nation” will necessarily become the butt of acidulous comments by citizens, intellectuals and writers alike. Protestations of primordial *Afrikaner* exclusivity will be regarded with wry irony, as will claims to liberal innocence among English speakers. People will know better. What endures, it seems, is not a successful suppression of difference—whether to be *one* or to be *none but oneself*—but that shadow of doubleness, that ingrained weariness with unitary representation, with national narratives, whether they offer a singularity of representation insisting on a glorious unity within difference (the “rainbow” narrative) or differentiated oneness despite convergence (the argument for cultural exclusivity). What endures, it seems, is a sense that identities can never be that singular, that our representations of ourselves will always carry the mark of the seam.

Perhaps what is to be desired is that the value of difference be fully recognized in its guise as *différence*, as a representational differential offering liberation from imprisoning fixations of identity rather than as an imputation of fixity (being told *how* one is different, *how* one is the same). Once the representational basis of the ongoing crises of identity in South Africa is acknowledged, we may be able to shift from disputing *what* it is our fellows

20. The recently promulgated Employment Equity Act, for example, introduces racially defined employee quotas for large businesses.

21. See, for example, the comments of Peter Vundla, a leading black South African executive in the media industry. Vundla is quoted in *After Hours* (supplement to *Business Day*, July 24–26, 1998: 7) as saying: “Apartheid was about racial domination in all spheres and race was at the cornerstone of the apartheid policy. How do you undo that without making race a cornerstone of transformation?”

say we are to *how* it is that they say such things in the first place. In that case we may qualify the perception of ontological crisis (identity fixation) with the memory that identity has always been contingent upon representation and is likely to remain so. This requires a mobile sense of language and its referential complexities. It strikes me as a great irony, therefore, that anti-intellectualism is rife in South Africa and that the Plain and Simple English movement finds fertile ground for its campaign to install a public discourse of monosyllabic banalities.<sup>22</sup> Instead, we need to cultivate the very mobility of selfhood and representation that I have suggested was evident in the mannered and ambivalent language of Sol T. Plaatje and in many of his compatriots, of all races and persuasions, in the long history of discursive struggle in South African history. This mobility of identity may also account for the seeming contradictions in such a figure as Nelson Mandela, who conjoins a reverence for things British and missionary education with a continuing engagement in polyglot cultural traditions and the politics of postcolonial emancipation.<sup>23</sup> In cultural politics we need to be wary of the teleology of liberal justice, which seemingly culminated in the democratic elections of 1994, holding us to oppressive fixations of oneness and sameness.<sup>24</sup> Nor should we hold ourselves to be absolutely different and therefore occlude mobility of identity or glorify blackness in the way whiteness used to be sanctified, except as a specific contingency of affirmative action consciously adopted as a medium-term measure. Now that representational tyrannies of racial essentialism have been eradicated from the statute books, we should not forget the lessons we have learned about the paradoxes and complexities of representation in a place of continuing convergence and difference. Ironically, in a country where historical materialist intellectuals have sought to belittle the poststructuralist critique of the sign as irresponsible to the demands of “real” struggles, the sign has been an exceptionally contested and abusive item of exchange.<sup>25</sup> If ever there was a need for vigilant skepticism about the verities of reference and for that vigilance to continue beyond the illusions of revolutionary unity, it is here, enfolded in the convergence of identity and difference, every protestation of singularity

22. See, for example, Jane-Anne Hobbs, “Say It in Plain and Simple English,” *After Hours* (supplement to *Business Day*), June 19–21, 1998: 1. The strength of this movement is dubious, but the fact that its opinions were given front-page prominence in a leisure supplement to a national daily is evidence enough of the attractiveness of its ideas to media executives.

23. See my discussion in de Kock 1996a (195–96 and Note 4).

24. See my discussion of this problem in de Kock 1997a.

25. See, for example, Nicholas Visser (1993: 19), who sees “postness” as “purely gestural,” “[substituting] textual for practical political endeavour”; and Kelwyn Sole (1997: 147), in whose opinion South African postcolonial scholars allow “areas of structural conflict” to be “downplayed.”

(whether of difference or of sameness), every representational fixity is felt in the seams of language, which is perhaps after all our only common *doppelgänger*, our most persistent, most betraying comrade. And so my only recourse to the first-person plural, my only path from “I” to “we” or “us,” is via this knowledge. “We” is a tenuously created category, stitched together with deep ambivalences of signification. May “we” at least remember *that*, if nothing else? May “we” be different from ourselves, if South Africans are allowed to be; if they are to be the sole arbiters of their identities? But the global imaginary will come back to haunt them. Just as South Africans have, over the past three centuries, fashioned themselves in response to projections of a bigger world out there, so their collective struggles have come to assume a certain allegorical significance for that world. At a colloquium on the theme “Living Difference: Towards a Society of Communities” at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in August 1998, such figures as Richard Rorty, Nancy Fraser, and Jörn Rüsen forcefully suggested to South African delegates that they, as South Africans, *needed* a master narrative, a “rainbow nation” type of governing motif that would frame everyone’s energies within the miraculous new nation. At one point the venerable Professor Rüsen thundered, “It is imperative for us that you succeed!” And therein lay the key. For many reasons, it is imperative for *others* that South Africans succeed at the democratic, multiracial miracle that *they* (the non-South Africans) have yet to see realized in their own countries. South Africa must carry this burden of moral example, just as in earlier times it carried the burden of having to be a moral pariah of the larger world. And so the dismay on the faces of international guests at the colloquium was palpable as South African speaker after speaker, black and white, expressed disillusionment with or sounded warnings about precisely the new master narrative that the assembled global academics were pressing on them. This master narrative amounted to little more than the project of the “new nation” in South Africa. For the South African speakers at the colloquium, the memory of master narratives (the grand designs of colonialism, of apartheid, and of other forms of forcible conjunction or separation) were nothing short of bloody nightmares, literally. But the South African delegates had misgivings about a virulent (“affirmative”) counterracism, about corruption, and about the new intellectual orthodoxy of the “African Renaissance,” which for some looked like a prelude to a one-party state, a government by wealthy elites that abandons the poor to market forces in a relentlessly globalizing economy. These and other concerns about the direction the new nation was taking were regarded by the international delegates as misstruck, mistimed notes in that otherwise euphonious symphony of the democratic “miracle” in South Africa. And so returns the specter of oppressive representational

singularity governing perceptions of the country. The *desire* from without to believe in that unlikely “miracle” can be marshaled in support of a frightening orthodoxy within the country, in which “those who are not with us are against us” and in which the totalizing fictions (and factions) of the nation are given credence above the other lessons South Africans by now should have learned: namely, that they have been constituted in a fold, a doubleness of representation that should forever give them pause about any form of imagined singularity. Let doubt return. Let the tatty, patchwork “rainbow nation” (in Breyten Breytenbach’s description, a “pot of shit”) become once more, in representation, the normal thing that it is in the streets, the shacks, and the bloody intellectual parlors of the old “new” South Africa.

### 3. Contributions to This Issue

As if to confirm the predominant position of the contested object of representation in South African cultural life and the impossibility of reducing it to any particular master narrative of national meaning, Pippa Skotnes, in “‘Civilised Off the Face of the Earth’: Museum Display and the Silencing of the /Xam,” illustrates to what extent representations of identity can, in the South African context, eclipse the country’s “reality” almost completely. In the case of the bushmen, arguably the “first South Africans,” this is a literal truth. Bushmen were all but wiped out by the late nineteenth century in an orgy of ethnocentric massacre (they were hunted down and shot like dogs), and the continued existence of a bushman culture—the trace of its memory—swiftly became a matter of intermediation and written record. Skotnes’s essay shows how South Africa’s “seamed” condition ineluctably came into play the moment an attempt was made to rescue something of the near-destroyed culture: it took two European intermediaries, working across entirely different language systems and transposing orality into the written medium, to make the attempt to resuture bushman culture into a semblance of its previous state. Symbolically this is perhaps one of the most central gestures of the “South African” condition: the attempt (as described earlier in this essay) to bring a certain order of composure, of settlement, to a place of profound difference. However, as Skotnes so carefully explains, the strain of this particular act of suturing would always be felt. It would be felt in the wretched politics of cultural (mis)appropriation, in the misrecognition of identities, and in the uneven alignment of people and power held together by the precarious fabric of (selective) cultural representation. Skotnes’s essay is crucial because, to a large extent, it conveys a sense of a root condition in South African cultural practice from time immemorial to contemporary engagements.

In a similar vein Peter Merrington's essay, "A Staggered Orientalism: The Cape-to-Cairo Imaginary," presents a detailed case history in which global discourses effectively wipe clean all indigenous signifying systems in southern Africa and provide instead a new imaginary overlay or, in the author's words, a "colonial projection." This immense and quite spectacular imposition, which Merrington describes in terms of fantasy and pageant, is also ultimately an act of longing for a "national sign system." Yet even here multiple threads and lines of influence challenge the metanarrative in Hegel's tableau of history as a march of progress from civilization to civilization and from continent to continent. Merrington's essay demonstrates in great detail just how copious and varied were the cultural fantasies that re-configured South Africa in terms of a global imaginary and how pervasive the representational catalogs of imperial imposition were, so the Cape-to-Cairo idea continues to exercise a hold even on contemporary imaginations. Yet the Cape-to-Cairo route remains essentially symbolic rather than feasibly geographic. It has long functioned as a kind of code for imperial signifying systems that imprinted themselves so deeply upon the face of Africa that nothing could ever remove them entirely.

In view of this long history of skewed signification, it is not surprising that the literature of political engagement under apartheid manifested a desire to bypass the contingencies of the sign. Indeed as Louise Bethlehem argues, a "rhetoric of urgency" came to characterize South African literary criticism: what Bethlehem describes as the "trope-of-truth" quickly becomes the "trope-as-truth." Bethlehem's essay provides a long-overdue critique of the widespread attempt to effect closure between the word and the world in South African literary criticism—in Bethlehem's description, a "stenographic bent" that delivers a practice of "representational literalism." Such a practice has debilitating consequences in that the mediatory function of language is made to atrophy in the interests of social agency. Dangerously, History becomes a stable referent. The agendas of Marxist and/or liberal critics are seemingly safeguarded by the retrieval of History as an unmediated referent, but in the process language is once again instrumentalized. Bethlehem's quite revelatory critique brings one to the realization that the earlier, imperial fantasies of imposition are not all that far removed from supposedly "radical" attempts by critics of apartheid to "weld" signifier to signified and to circumvent the lateral slopes of signification. However, Bethlehem persuasively reads the "Need" of South African English literary criticism to invoke the "immediately compelling, compellingly unmediated" as "Desire": in this case, the desire for a kind of ethical agency in criticism that is not overly involved with the complexities and that cannot countenance the possible opacities of representation as understood

by poststructuralism. Yet this fear of the vertiginous possibilities of a further deferral of meaning renders such criticism blind to the greater faults in and complicities of the field as a whole.

My own essay, "Sitting for the Civilization Test: The Making(s) of a Civil Imaginary in Colonial South Africa," explores precisely some of the complicities of the "English" project in colonial South Africa. The essay reviews the paradox that acculturated black South Africans under the colonial order were compelled to look to English as a site of universal selfhood in the image of Empire, lest they be consigned to "native" or "tribal" backwardness by the prevailing registers of social Darwinism. English was the site, I argue, of a civil imaginary, yet it also encoded a potentially damaging colonizing ideology. How, the essay asks, did educated black South African subjects navigate their way between a more global imaginary of freedom and universal justice, implicit in the claims of empire on the one hand, and on the other a colonizing ethic inherent in the actual deployment of English rule in the empire's territories. The essay argues that conventional notions of postcolonial oppositionality are unable to provide an adequate explanation for this paradox, in which identity politics were often based on the *desire* for Western acculturation instead of resistance to it. However, such an identification with the "colonial mirror" reinvoked the founding claims and the millenarian promise of the project of "civilization" in such a way as to act as a site of antagonism and a more subtle edge than outright opposition. In this way some of the brutal dualities of segregationist discourse were undermined.

The "colonial mirror" is also seen to provide a few nasty surprises in Jonathan Crewe's articulate response to a white psychoanalyst's reading of the "mind" of a black subject in South Africa in the early part of the century. Crewe's essay, "*Black Hamlet: Psychoanalysis on Trial in South Africa*," delineates a deeply ironical situation in which a universalizing Freudian psychoanalysis, while apparently placing a native subject's mind under scrutiny, actually puts itself on trial not only methodologically and epistemologically but politically and morally as well. In Crewe's analysis, under South African conditions analytic interrogation comes uncomfortably close to police interrogation, and as the anomalous position of the analyst in propounding a global, universalizing discourse in a situation of acute repression becomes more pronounced, the tables are turned. The human recognition putatively conferred on the black subject, concurrent with a Hamlet identification, increasingly becomes the recognition sought by the analyst as an alien. "In the very act of invoking a Eurocentric, universalizing psychoanalysis," Crewe writes, "to which [Frantz] Fanon would later object for its erasure of cultural and political difference, [Wulf] Sachs [the

analyst-author] subjects the universal to powers of cultural contingency, mobility, and even locality.” The results, in Crewe’s conclusion, are revelatory in a way that speaks volumes about the paradoxical refractions of global discourse under conditions of unexpected cultural contingency.

In the South African context, where grim and lasting attempts were made to legislate contingency out of existence, important work has been done by Breyten Breytenbach’s “translation” of the institutional monolith of Afrikaans power—both into English and back into Afrikaans’s bastardized origins. This is the view of Simon Lewis, whose “*Tradurre e Tradire: The Treason and Translation of Breyten Breytenbach*” carefully sketches the background, context, and significance of Breytenbach’s Afrikaner dissidence. If translation is betrayal, as the Italian idiom *tradurre e tradire* suggests, then the question, according to Lewis, is whether or not betrayal can be an act of translation. For the author, Breytenbach’s work exemplifies a condition of cultural/political appropriation facing all Afrikaans writers. To write in Afrikaans is to be “seen as” belonging, to have one’s work assimilated to a compromised signifying system. Although Breytenbach continued to use Afrikaans, he also began “translating” Afrikaans content into English prose as an act of betrayal against appropriation by monolithic cultural and political forces. Lewis concludes that Breytenbach has performed meaningful work in his various acts of stripping away and reassembling notions of identity as an Afrikaans dissident writer.

Dirk Klopper, in “Narrative Time and the Space of the Image: The Truth of the Lie in Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” considers the possibility that South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) may have operated in a manner not dissimilar to Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” in that an incapacitating melancholia (fixation on the wreckage of the past) characterizes its dream of a redeemed mankind. The angel of history, Klopper argues, both invokes and punishes the desire for imaginary plenitude, endlessly reiterating the catastrophic events severing him from paradise. For Klopper, one of the most interesting points of splitting in the discourse of the TRC occurs in the testimony of Winnie Makidizela-Mandela, former wife of Nelson Mandela, who was associated with grave crimes in the course of South Africa’s political struggle against apartheid. Two frames of reference became evident, argues Klopper: an appeal to familial/tribal/ethnic plenitude on the one hand and on the other, the assumptions surrounding the modern subject, amenable to narrative and rational logic. By means of a linear teleology, the TRC narrative tried to bring closure to this threatening ambivalence and in so doing sought transcendence for the fragmented South African body politic. However, Klopper raises the possibility that

the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's ruling party, was compelled to sacrifice Makidzela-Mandela in its quest to heal this rupture. In her silence, he writes, the ANC found its speech. But in such a process the specter of the double does not disappear, and reconciliation is compromised. Returning to the notion of melancholia, Klopfer concludes that perhaps only through elegy can melancholia be turned into mourning. However, where the sense of loss exceeds verbalization, there is only what Derrida calls "an incinerating blaze where nothingness appears."

It is to the postapartheid scene of competing popular cultures that Loren Kruger and Patricia Watson Shariff turn in their essay, "'Shoo—This Book Makes Me to Think!': Education, Entertainment, and 'Life-Skills' Comics in South Africa." As the authors argue, the clear-cut opposition between "state" and "the people," so sustaining to the earlier political struggle, has given way to varied forms, practices, and habits of consumption, such that the designation "the people" has become acutely problematic. South Africans, the authors argue, now have the opportunity to redefine the popular dimension of education and entertainment and to mediate in different ways between the understanding of cultural practices as global, metropolitan, or urban. The essay looks at the use of comics—two projects in particular—in nonformal education, and it raises important issues concerning the deceptive binary of "local" and "global." Kruger and Watson Shariff argue that "theoretical" or "global" implications of "local" conditions should not be seen to eclipse the "local" as though it were merely a site for "empirical" material. Indeed the virtue of Kruger and Watson Shariff's essay is that it shows that educational literacy is hardly a panacea or "passport to success" but rather a means of reinventing identity through mediation and intervention. Localizations such as "rural" and "urban" or "global" and "local" often fail to account for unpredictable choices actually made by people who shuttle discursively between and around such imaginary locales. In their examination of the "edutaining" graphic story, the authors draw attention to a significant degree of tension between manipulation and communication and between critical intervention and outside imposition in the staging of projects that seek to conscientize people via popular media. Ultimately, they argue, the production, distribution, and consumption of these goods contribute to a more differentiated understanding of modernity.

The final essay in this volume, Sonja Laden's "'Making the Paper Speak Well,' or, the Pace of Change in Consumer Magazines for Black South Africans," also finds its focus in forms of popular culture, here the consumer magazine targeted at black middle-class South Africans. Laden regards such magazines as significant "cultural tools" in which urban, middle-class repertoires are codified, disseminated, and legitimized for and by black



South Africans. Examining magazines such as *Drum*, *Bona*, *Tribute*, and others, Laden makes the case that consumer magazines facilitate and help define sociocultural identity and change. The “sociosemiotic work” of such magazines, Laden argues, goes far beyond their immediate or apparent use value. Neither should such magazines be regarded as a form of cultural imperialism. Instead, argues Laden, they constitute a kind of “local knowledge.” Because they enable one to trace practices that may be regarded as part of a social “unconscious,” the magazines offer more acute insight into the dialectical workings of sociocultural entities than do, for example, overtly political publications. Moreover the manner in which magazines combine verbal and visual modes of representation provides a means for integrating and transforming oral traditions, such as public debate, oral poetry and song, storytelling, and historical narrative, into literate modes of print culture.

Laden’s argument, like that of Kruger and Watson Shariff, consolidates a frequent theme in this issue as a whole: that the dialectics of South Africa in the “global imaginary” speak of reversals and paradoxes rather than straight development. Several of the essays in this issue demonstrate a persistent rejection in South African life and cultural practice of simple binaries or trajectories of “global” influence vis-à-vis “local” culture, despite the fact that, as a colonial dependency, the country in its earlier forms came into being in the clasp of the predictable imperial dichotomies. If this issue helps invigorate revisionary perspectives on less obvious complexities of cultural articulation in a global frame and on the specificities of the South African case, then it will have served a useful purpose.

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