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### A vast domain of death: decomposition and decay in Marlene van Niekerk's Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### A vast domain of death: decomposition and decay in Marlene van Niekerk's *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*

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In this article we consider the divided reactions to Afrikaans author Marlene van Niekerk's play *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* (hereafter *Anastasia W*), directed by Marthinus Basson. We give a wide-ranging overview of the various opinions generated by the drama's production and publicised in daily news media and online forums. We argue that it is a category error to read *Anastasia W* as simply feeding into discourses about crime. Through close analysis of the unpublished 2010 script and partial recordings of its production, we show that the play might be read as a performance of perceived social decomposition in which the materiality of language itself is staged as a substance which must, if it is to convey the *feel and texture* rather than the mere rational 'sense' of pervasive social decay, itself undergo a process of decomposition. We conclude that *Anastasia W* reveals a deep preoccupation with the complicity of 'ordentlike mense' [decent people] in the perceived ongoing decay of social responsibility. Finally, we argue that the play also grapples with the role of the artist in an 'excremental' state.

**Keywords:** Marlene van Niekerk; *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W*; Marthinus Basson; South African theatre; carnivalesque; nationalism; role of artist

#### Introduction

In the course of 2010 and 2011 the Afrikaans arts festival scene was graced (or disgraced, as some would have it) by a boundary-breaking 'play'. Written by Marlene van Niekerk,<sup>1</sup> directed by radical Afrikaans theatre director Marthinus Basson, and produced by TEATERteater in collaboration with the Drama Department at the University of Stellenbosch,<sup>2</sup> *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* (hereafter *Anastasia W*) ran at Aardklop in 2010, at the ABSA KKNK (Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees) in 2011 and at the HB Thom theatre in Stellenbosch in the first half of 2011, leaving audiences by turns exhilarated, alienated, divided and bemused. The title, translated loosely as 'The short shelf life of Anastasia W', refers to Anastacia Wiese, an 11-year-old girl from Mitchell's Plain, who was raped and murdered by her mother's boyfriend, Richard Engelbrecht, in March 2007. Engelbrecht hid the naked, bloodied body in the ceiling, where Anastacia's father later discovered it (SAPS Journal online).

The play is set in a funeral parlour run by the incestuous siblings Sus and her clownish, idiot brother Daan.<sup>3</sup> Their two cross-dressing employees – named Savage and Lovemore (in a vicious play on the South African construction company bearing

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that name) – left to their own devices while Sus gallivants on her episodic overseas trips and Daan languishes in a lyrical stupor, soon begin to plot a corrupt scheme to commandeer the funeral parlour's resources as a front for a dodgy trade in 'Dutch wives' – wooden blocks designed for pseudo-copulation. The play thus reads as a grim national allegory: the undertaker's front room is the play's only recognisable setting; in this room the still-white economic masters of this sadistic carnival of exploitation and insurrection take cover along with their rebellious peons, all of them implicated in a rape of the country's necrotic remains.

The funeral parlour serves as a synecdoche for the nation, in its deepest and most characteristic essence: the part that stands for the whole, a house of the dead emblematising a vast and pervasive domain of death. The funereal party-goers (the play can be construed as a 'wild party,' darkly drawn, perhaps even a wake) include Savage and Lovemore, economic underdogs who cheat and abuse their white masters in the course of the play's action. The audience, too, is clearly included as part of the wake: complimentary scripts, handed to audiences at the door, indicate that this play is a 'poging om 'n taalbegrafnis te hou vir 'n sekere soort taal.'<sup>4</sup> Every performance of the play is a performance of a funeral ritual in which the audience participates and is made complicit.

Despite winning prizes and receiving good reviews in the daily printed media, reactions to the play were sharply divided. Reviewers such as Tyrone August, Jan-Jan Joubert, Willemien Brümmer, Deborah Steinmair and Petrus du Preez were full of praise for the production, as we discuss in more detail when we consider responses to the play below. However, soundings of disaffection with *Anastasia W* held it to account for its supposedly immoderate, reactionary and overly *loud* 'protest' against the reigning political order, and for its vaunted lack of aesthetic 'taste' and political moderation.<sup>5</sup> In popular social media forums and online comments run-of-the-mill festival-goers (rather than the scholarly, belletristic prize judges) were also polarised. Some defended the play as an investigation of the manner in which the poetic impulse is stifled by crudity and violence,<sup>6</sup> while others expressed outright disgust with both Van Niekerk's play and Ingrid Winterbach's *Spyt*,<sup>7</sup> which was described as a 'walgstuk'.<sup>8</sup> Such reaction, to Van Niekerk's play at least, was perhaps inevitable in view of the way in which *Anastasia W* overturns the conventional notion of an entertaining show and presents instead a chaotic, multi-modal pseudo-*konser*t with thunderously discordant overtones, dada-esque fragments of high lyricism, both arcane and oblique, Cape ('Kaaps') street dialect, songs and overdone displays of venality. The play allowed no escape, for anyone, from co-implication in the 'mess' depicted in burlesque and darkly clownish acting, syncopated with stridently heavy metal accompaniment, and sung forth in obscurely allusive and jarring lyrical fragments.

All the characters, masters and slaves, black and white, are driven by a death-drive, a greed and will to capital accumulation so insensible to its necrotic effects on other people that Mbembe's (2003) term 'necropolitics' seems entirely applicable, given the Fanonian neo-colonial collapse of governmentality and the free-for-all 'grab' mentality characterising the 'new' South Africa as represented in *Anastasia W*. Necropolitics in this play, we argue, enters into currency as a *leitmotif* for the dealings between South Africans in Van Niekerk's representation of a *lethal* new democracy.<sup>9</sup> It stands for subjects (here in the form of stock characters, morality play figures, almost) who appear unable to prevent themselves from *fucking each other over* in a

fight to the death as a matter of course. Is there a whiff of necrophilia here, too, the perverse desire to take pleasure in seeing off the corpses with a bit of a bang, some celebratory release?

A necrotically destructive view of social relations – all the characters are up against each other, tooth and claw – is ubiquitous in *Anastasia W*'s action, its characters' (thinned-out) motivations, and its (baldly boisterous) thematics. Indeed, necropolitics in this play comes to stand in as a grotesque, deadly inversion of the now-remote ideal of (Habermasian) intersubjectivity in the current South African 'democracy.' Such an ideal continues to function as the post-apartheid (or the post-postapartheid, or post-anti-apartheid) state's best Sunday suit, in which it presents itself as a foremost proponent of enlightened modernity, especially with reference to its exemplarily 'civil,' ultra-liberal Constitution and its constitutionally guaranteed institutions of liberty and equity.

This idealised democracy, in the official version, stands in professed contradiction to the current ANC-led state's predecessor, the mad apartheid regime, with its Wouter Basson-type 'death-doctors,' its official death squads, and its toxic inner workings, under the veil of democratic modernity. Daringly and with high potential for provocation, Van Niekerk's representation of a necro-national domain in *Anastasia W* fully incorporates the post-apartheid dispensation, which is here represented as the Emperor with no clothes, as a bleak mirror condition, a joke of constitutional democracy with a kill-and-connive, counter-kill-and-connive culture as its perverse matrix for mutuality, its substitution for the Hobbesian social compact. The greater point, we submit, is not that *Anastasia W* is saying the post-postapartheid ANC state and its death-drive-conditions are in any way a 'new' phenomenon. The play, rather, is registering a voice of acute distress that such deadly dealings, and such evident relishing of death-dealing among subjects, such mutual *fucking over*, continues to characterise the apparent social body – *apparent* only insofar as the artist is able, from sources of information available to her, to establish what's afoot in the world of actuality, hence Van Niekerk's frenzied newspaper-foraging, as reported below.

The mixed reception which marked *Anastasia W*'s staging should therefore not be too surprising. In the (very loud) production of *Anastasia W* which the authors of this article witnessed in the HB Thom Theatre in the heart of white Stellenbosch, and which played out at two major Afrikaans arts festivals, the consciously Bakhtinian display of carnivalesque gallows humour and faux spectacle was grimly discordant. The kind of innocent clownishness one expects within the constraints of an arts festival was, in *Anastasia W*'s case, turned on its head. Festive 'fun' modalities get aped in the play, but they are employed to deadly effect, and appalling affect. There's little fun in corpses and coffins, in the long run. In fact, the show of harlequin death-dealing in this production created an effect which we feel can only be readily described by the term *shock*, in its ordinary meaning as a 'sudden and violent blow or impact'; a 'sudden or violent disturbance of the mind, emotions, or sensibilities,' as defined by Dictionary.com. The play is, by all accounts, including our own, an experience of both recognition and alienation, high entertainment and deep unsettlement.<sup>10</sup>

In an interview with the authors of this article in February 2012 Van Niekerk explains that her sense of rebellion at play in *Anastasia W* had to do with 'a so-called democratic government which continues, with supremely blatant bravado, to preach

humanistic precepts and ideals, while the same ideals are thoroughly negated and trampled upon by the near-unbridled avarice and corrupt dealings of governors who are often incompetent and poorly trained' (Interview). An acute sense of crisis took hold of her, she explains, as she travelled between South Africa and the Netherlands in the course of her work and her private life, and she took to reading several South African newspapers on a daily basis, trying to get some kind of grip on what appeared to be going on around her. Such feverish newspaper-foraging is something Van Niekerk also did during the states of emergency in the 1980s in an effort to make sense out of oblique and harsh political conditions at that time. Deriving from her copious news-gathering, she registered what she calls 'gruesome acts of violence, the blood-chilling indifference, the greed and shameless ostentation of South Africans, throughout the classes and colours and on all levels of the business world and government'. Importantly, Van Niekerk adds: 'It's not just people in government who are guilty of such wrongs. I think there is a general collapse in social responsibility' (Interview), thus articulating her sense of a general civic complicity in the breakdown of the social body that she perceives in South Africa.

Van Niekerk's initial response to this perceived sense of the disintegration – the *decomposing* – of the social body took shape in a series of what she calls 'tirade-like poems' addressed to the 'mourned [beweende], prayed-to and plea-laden persona of "South Africa," written in 'Brechtian lyrics' (Interview). Furthermore, Van Niekerk explains, there were 'abstract-impressionistic evocations and outpourings in which language more or less completely breaks down [verbrokkel] in more or less Old Dutch-sounding syllables [Dietsklinkende sillabes], arranged more or less according to sound and rhythm, and then there were anecdotal poems in Cape dialect, rhythmically and semantically developed from snapped-up street conversations and reports in *Die Son* and other newspapers' (Interview). All of these 'harsh but also humoristic' texts she put into a file on her computer but, Van Niekerk says, she did not know quite what to do with them.

During conversations with director Marthinus Basson at this time she began to think about structuring these pieces into some or other form of theatrical production, and started to feel 'less alone in my urgency to *do* something' (Interview). Van Niekerk's initial sense was to use a format with musical set pieces strung together by the speeches of a half-sardonic but also seriously appealing *conférencier* (traditionally the master of ceremonies in European cabaret). Van Niekerk notes, however, that she had in mind not so much German cabaret of the 1920s and 1930s as the stage 'happenings' of Dutch artist Freek de Jonge, political satires which she witnessed as a young student in the Netherlands in the early 1980s. In addition, this contemporary satirical and critical form of theatre exercised an influence on a group of women,<sup>11</sup> including Van Niekerk, who in the later 1980s in the Black Sun theatre, then in Hillbrow, put together an 'amateur cabaret' under the musical direction of Johannes Kerkorrel. 'We wanted to make a point, our small white Afrikaans point alongside all the heroic deeds of the freedom fighters and the ANC activists, whom we admired so sorely in our naive hope for a promised "new South Africa" which would one day be realised under their leadership' (Interview).

Van Niekerk's impulse to structure the texts into a kind of cabaret therefore has its roots in her previous theatrical experiences. Basson encouraged Van Niekerk to write 'connecting texts,' something to make the material slightly more cohesive. Here lies the rub: as Van Niekerk comments in our interview with her, she tried to write

linking texts, but they sounded 'like the opinions that one reads and hears all the time in newspapers.' Clearly, she felt less than happy about writing in this kind of mode, even though she admits to wondering after the fact, following the sounding of much ambivalence about the pitch, tone and register of the work by Afrikaner intellectuals after it was performed, whether such a 'rational' and 'civil' discourse was not perhaps what people really wanted. Van Niekerk describes this perhaps-more-desirable métier as a 'confessional, rational, troubled and self-questioning (white) voice.' Perhaps this is what the people who found the work 'so undigestible in its eventual form' (Interview) might have preferred to hear.

Of course, being the writer that she is, Van Niekerk felt unable to conduct her art in a register of what one might call apologetic and 'civil' white self-inquiry. No, this would not do for Van Niekerk, as any serious reader of her works would know. Having written off the possibility of a conférencier for *Anastasia W*, Van Niekerk then 'tried out a structure in which I could package my opinions and feelings and which at the same time was meant to be linguistically strange and alienating.' In saying this, Van Niekerk implicitly invokes the Russian Formalists' key notion of *defamiliarisation* as an artistic technique to invoke a startling recognition or understanding of phenomena whose habitual recurrence in ordinary forms creates a glassy, near-blind familiarity. Such familiarity can mask the outlandish and/or grotesque nature of conditions which have, through brute repetition, become 'normalised,' with a deadly twist in the postcolony. In 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,' Achille Mbembe conceives of a state power which:

creates, through its administrative and bureaucratic practices, a world of meanings all its own, a master code which, in the process of becoming the society's primary central code, ends by governing – perhaps paradoxically – the various logics that underlie all other meanings within that society; [and] attempts to institutionalise its world of meanings as a 'socio-historical world' and to make that world fully real, turning it into a part of people's common sense. (1992, p. 3)

Mbembe argues further that the grotesque and the obscene are 'two essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination' (1992, p. 4). He suggests that the postcolonial relationship can best be characterised as 'illicit cohabitation' between the 'commandement'<sup>12</sup> and the people:

It is precisely this logic – the necessary familiarity and domesticity in the relationship – that explains why there has not been (as might otherwise have been expected from those so dominated) the resistance or the accommodation, the disengagement or the "refusal to be captured" ... the contradiction between overt acts and gestures in public and the covert responses made "underground". ... Instead, it has resulted in the mutual zombification of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate. This zombification meant that each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them both impotent. (1992, p. 4)

Such processes of mutual 'zombification' are evident in the action of *Anastasia W*, in which 'mutuality' consists of a contest for power over the funeral business – the profits arising from the unnatural deaths of people, fellow citizens in a generalised orgy of social violence. In this play children and old people are shown to be the most vulnerable of such fellow citizens: Savage and Lovemore mention early in the action that 180 babies died in a hospital in the 'Baai,' after the air-conditioner in the

incubators stopped working. Bemoaning the shortage of ‘babykissies’,<sup>13</sup> Savage asks what they’re going to do with all the ‘king-size upmarket kiste’ (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 13) piling up in the store. Those able to afford king-size, upmarket coffins (including the audience), the play implies, are not the people who are dying in droves, not the ones affected by the general social neglect.

The artist, in Van Niekerk’s view, cannot deal with such material in a ‘civil’ and apologetic ‘self-inquiry’ into whiteness alone (although a coruscating view of whiteness is indeed more than evident in the corrupt dealings of Sus, and the ‘retarded’ status of the Treppie-like<sup>14</sup> clown, Daan). The committed artist, rather, must rip off the mask of seeming order within such ‘zombified’ pseudo-normality. Van Niekerk herself avers that ‘what I want to write is not civil opinions. . . . I think my task is precisely to rip open the curtain of established formulas and current opinions of all kinds’ (Interview).

The structure for the play that eventually came into being was one in which the ‘set-piece fragments were knocked together in a pseudo-play with pseudo-characters, caricatures actually’ (Interview). These caricatures would then ‘embody particular positions of despair, misery, protest, exploitation, opportunism and criticism in a hyperbolic and stylised manner’ (Interview). Interestingly, Van Niekerk adds that she ‘could load them with strongly individualised language use’ (Interview), and ‘set their voices to work against each other’ (Interview). It is important to note here that Van Niekerk’s sense of political protest via theatre in this instance is not delivered (in her mind at least) from a high ground of moral-ethical or socio-political sanctity: she marks *all* the agents in the necrotic South African roadshow as complicit in what she describes as a general collapse of social responsibility. It is worth noting, too, that Van Niekerk’s narrative art was deployed subversively (explosively, in fact) against earlier generations of (white) rulers, those National Party and otherwise self-anointed patriarchs, matriarchs, political stooges and ministers of various kinds who misruled the roost in earlier times, notably but not only in *Triomf* and *Agaat*.

Such a sense of political and ethical complicity makes its mark on *Anastasia W* in its content, in its politics of mutual fucking over, a fight to the death set in a social polity conceived as, alternatively, a funeral parlour, a Dutch Wife, and a pit-latrine. This is a place where ordure and gore attach to all parties, and it renders complex the politics of the play’s reception, to which we now wish to turn in greater detail.

### **Public responses to the play**

There appears to have been a marked layering in the responses to Van Niekerk’s play, perhaps most easily characterised by their noticeable extremes: affirmative responses, both in the form of printed newspaper reviews and arts-festival awards, and less affirmative (and also less formal) responses, suggested both by reports of audience members walking out during the play’s performances at festivals, and by the unpublished but ascertainable (and publicly evident although discreet) critical disapproval of the play among certain (although certainly not all) Afrikaner intellectuals. In this section we provide an overview of publicised responses to the play in print media and online forums. These responses include the opinions of the broader public audience, reviewers, journalists and academics.

Audience responses, posted on *Die Burger* online, show markedly polarised reactions to *Anastasia W*. Many of the comments were written in response to letters

by disaffected audience members: ‘Verhoog-kruheid laat mense loop’ by Val Marsh (7 April 2011); ‘Teatergangers moes so iets te wagte wees’ by Hermien Basson (9 April 2011); and ‘Skande om dít as “kuns” op te dis’ by Teaterliefie (13 April 2011). In these comments the play is lambasted for being crude (Marsh) and ‘messy’ (Basson), and derided as ‘nonsense’ by Teaterliefie, who opines that ‘we don’t need this kind of “experimental” theatre.’ Many of the comments following readers’ letters affirm such disaffected views, although several letters show dissenting, or more nuanced, opinions. So, for example, ‘dirk.cilliers’ responds to Teaterliefie by chastising her for not ‘understanding’ protest theatre. He urges other ‘more theatre-literate’ people to see the production, proposing that it is a prime example of Afrikaans protest theatre (13 April 2011). Anton Coetzee replies to Hermien Basson’s query regarding the University of Stellenbosch’s endorsement of the production by suggesting that the University should be lauded for sponsoring experimental productions such as *Anastasia W* (9 April 2011). Similarly, ‘Lida’ defends the play as a critique of the stifling of aesthetics and empathy by materialism, commodification and avarice (9 April 2011).

Newspaper reviews of the performance, written under pressure of deadlines very soon after witnessing the production, suggest a bemused, cautious admiration, noting also that *Anastasia W* does not make for easy viewing. In this sense, the play is treated in a similar way to the reception of *Boklied*, Breyten Breytenbach’s unconventional and oblique play (also a first foray into produced drama, also directed by Marthinus Basson) which caused a storm of outrage, and much prurient curiosity, at the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) in Oudtshoorn in 1998 (Blignaut 1998), leaving critics at something of a loss for words.

Tyrone August, writing in the *Cape Times* (19 April 2011), makes the valid point that *Anastasia W* is a ‘dark and angry’ play, inspired as it is by the story of the rape and murder of Anastacia Wiese. August notes that, as people running a funeral undertaker’s business, Sus and Daan are ‘perfectly placed to bear witness to death and destruction in South Africa.’ Commenting that Sus lashes out at the country’s leadership for being more concerned about their own self-interest than about the 200,000 murders since 1994, August reports that the play is nevertheless ‘much more than a hysterical diatribe.’ It is, writes August, ‘an imaginative reflection on where we find ourselves today,’ and a ‘lush text, rich in poetry,’ complemented by what August calls ‘hauntingly beautiful music.’ *Anastasia W* departs from presenting a ‘simplistic storyline’ and is ‘engaged far more in the realm of ideas.’ The play is ‘a feast for the senses.’ Towards the end of the review, in which he praises the actors and director Marthinus Basson, August ventures the mildest of criticisms, which he quickly drops in an affirmative overall conclusion. ‘At times,’ he writes, ‘the writing may be rather shrill, sometimes even verging on the propagandistic.’ However, in the final analysis, it is a ‘bold and challenging work,’ ‘breathtaking in the range of its ambition – in both content and form.’ That single, almost fearful note of criticism contained in the word ‘shrill’ was destined to reverberate in other, less happy responses to the play.

In a richly affirmative review in the Afrikaans Sunday newspaper *Rapport* (10 April 2011) critic Jan-Jan Joubert recalls the traditions of ‘protest theatre’ in South Africa under apartheid, and asks the question whether the return of protest against conditions of social violence in the post-apartheid milieu will once again produce theatre in which the ‘artistic impact’ comes across as ‘fairly suspect.’<sup>15</sup> Joubert responds by assuring his readers this is not the case in Van Niekerk’s play.

Joubert comments on the play's linguistic richness and its intertextual range across several languages. People likely to feel 'shocked' by the play's 'strongly spiced' street Afrikaans, writes Joubert, should perhaps stay away from this piece, but one 'cannot escape the fact that the use of language in this drama is a way of protesting precisely against brutality.' In fact, he writes, if the language affronts one, it really means one is 'completely out of touch' with the everyday outrages against which the play makes its voice heard. Then comes a revealing aside: 'The opinion also exists,' Joubert writes in the passive voice, avoiding any attribution of specific agency, 'that the play offers nothing redemptive or hopeful [hoopgewend].' But Joubert immediately distances himself from this opinion: 'I disagree with this position. The hope lies precisely in the quality of the cultural protest. If one wants to protest against the gruesome barbarity of violence against children, then it is necessary to talk straight, no matter how hard this may be.'

In an interview-cum-review in the Cape Afrikaans daily *Die Burger* (18 September 2010), Willemien Brümmer writes: 'As in the case of her controversial novel, *Triomf*, one doesn't know whether to laugh or cry as one reads it. Every joke is, at the same time, like canon-shot. It's an ode to murdered children, but also an orgy of mockery.' Writing in the Gauteng Afrikaans daily, *Beeld*, Deborah Steinmair praises *Anastasia W* fulsomely: 'Marlene van Niekerk's play is a natural wonder, it steams ahead without once stumbling, and leaves no stone unturned, no holy cow untouched. The densely braided text<sup>16</sup> has echoes of Paul Celan, Breyten Breytenbach, Pieter-Dirk Uys, Reza de Wet, Ingrid Jonker, W.B. Yeats, Karel Schoeman – to mention only a few.' Sus and Daan, she comments:

are Afrikaner archetypes. She is simultaneously strong, dominating, and pathetic with her babalas [hangover] and her opinions; he sings high and low . . . like the village idiot, uses vague, German dada-language. . . . They are dinosaurs, colonists who didn't get out while they still could. . . . In their service we find Savage and Lovemore, a new, tougher species who learnt to survive in the seamless transition from one repressive regime to another, otherwise known as democracy (collective narcissism) . . . This is theatre that shoves a stick into the wound. (Steinmair 2010, p. 6)

Writing on SLiPnet following opening night at the august H.B. Thom Theatre in Stellenbosch in 2011, Stellenbosch University drama lecturer Petrus du Preez recalls playwright Athol Fugard's visit to the Drama Department at Stellenbosch, and Fugard's stated disdain, on that occasion, for 'toilet-paper-thin' protest theatre dating back to the 'struggle' years. Van Niekerk's play, Du Preez avers, is protest theatre of a different kind: '[It was] the most exciting experience I've had for years,' he comments. Just because Van Niekerk is writing for the theatre, he adds, does not mean she has to sacrifice complexity. Afrikaans South African audiences, says Du Preez, have become accustomed to 'spookasem' content (superficial and sensational subject matter such as *7de Laan* on television), and, he adds, it appears from reports emanating from the KKNK that such audiences are not always ready to accept the challenge of 'fleshy' theatre such as *Anastasia W*. Du Preez refers to the 'gesanik' [moaning and groaning] in the letters columns of Afrikaans newspapers about *Anastasia W*, noting that it is not often that a theatrical production makes the letters columns of newspapers. It happens very seldom that one sees this level of quality satire in Afrikaans, and on stage, too, he adds. Also very rare, writes Du Preez, are works in which boundaries are shifted and in which experimentation can take place.

Now, however, Du Preez says, certain parties (including some ‘short-sighted’ and ‘jealous’ theatre-makers) are wondering out aloud why it is necessary for time and money to be spent on productions of this kind. ‘It seems that as theatre-makers, we cannot afford to alienate our audiences. As a theatregoer, however, I am sick and tired of sentimental [spookasem] theatre, and of the second-hand, dangerous nostalgia that gets dished up to “put bums on seats.”’ Du Preez concludes:

*Anastasia W*’s shelf life in South Africa is likely to be short. This piece may well be a critical success; audiences may turn their backs on the production. Yet I still feel that it’s an incredibly important work in Afrikaans and for South Africa. The piece was clearly born out of rage. It makes a person angry, for many reasons. And that’s where the power of theatre lies, and the power of this play. It tears something loose in one. It attacks everyone and everything – and for good reason. It protests. It screams and it makes a noise; it makes you giggle and laugh out aloud, but it’s never quite so stupid as to try and prescribe to anyone. (Du Preez 2011)

Looking at reception in which appreciation of the play’s strengths begins to shade into criticism of its density, obliquity and its various manifestations of excess, one finds some cautiously critical reviewing, one prominent instance of outright condemnation, and several reports of disaffection both among the audiences of the play and the Afrikaans intelligentsia. Diane de Beer (2011), writing for the Independent Group of newspapers, is one of the few newspaper reviewers who felt emboldened enough to express a sense of dissatisfaction about what one might call the ‘moral tone’ of the play. Referring to the fact that ‘many [people] left the auditorium,’ she added: ‘If I could wish for anything different, it would be that Van Niekerk’s anguish about violence takes me on a journey of some kind’ (De Beer 2011). De Beer then compares *Anastasia W* unfavourably with Lara Foot’s *Tshepang*,<sup>17</sup> which she says ‘gave insight’ and ‘[forced] the country to face its own role in the tragedy’ of baby rape. In the case of *Anastasia W*, however, ‘[i]t is as if Van Niekerk wanted to walk you through her anger. She opens the door, but then doesn’t take the next step.’

De Beer’s critique, implying as it does that *Anastasia W* lacks a moral compass, lacks ‘direction,’ walking one through blind anger instead of taking one on a ‘journey,’ and lacking the ‘next step,’ was to become a familiar refrain – the play is a blast of fury, an ‘immoderate’ rage without aesthetic balance and closure, and without any real sense of insight, or, dare one say it, hope. Such a response is more explicitly voiced in a deeply disaffected commentary on LitNet by well-known actor, producer and director Albert Maritz.

Maritz (2011) opens his blisteringly cynical account by recording the fact that *Anastasia W* won both the Beeld-Aartvark prize as well as the AngloGold Ashanti/Aardklop-Smeltkroes prize. Maritz mockingly characterises the festival audiences who fill the front rows to see a play like *Anastasia W* as the ‘converted.’ While the people in the front rows clap their hands for the director’s vision, the musical director’s genius, and the beautiful performance art evident on stage, members of the audience (especially older people) start walking out as a result of the play’s ‘crude language, [and] its vulgar images,’ he writes. The actors are passionate, the lighting is brilliant, the singing is a beautiful ‘chant,’ but even more people are starting to walk out, writes Maritz. ‘They’re walking out because of the content,’ he says, ‘or because the disgust at South Africa’s darkest moments is created without any attention to boundaries, especially the boundaries of time.’<sup>18</sup> Marthinus Basson, he comments

wryly, learnt from his ‘old master’ Dieter Reible to engage audiences for so long with an ‘absurd reality’ that ‘if you don’t throw up from the content, you’ll vomit because you have to sit there for so long.’

Maritz then raises the issue of the sponsored cost of the production, asking several rhetorical questions: why must festival audiences ‘get a hiding’ as punishment for ‘what’s happening on the front pages of newspapers’; why should the sophisticated festival-goer be punished, in his or her paid-up seat, because ‘people in this country, as in Australia, America, Europe and wherever else you look, are genetically imperfect’? Second, he opines, why did this text have to be produced in the first place? ‘There are many texts which are weighed and found to be too light. And artists with better texts are standing in the queue. What is the value of this investment?’ he demands to know. ‘[*Anastasia W*] spits at people and smacks them in the face. May these brilliant artists, in a future production, use their “unbelievable talent” in areas which matter to the people who are sitting in front of them.’

### Scholarly reception and Van Niekerk’s response

Maritz seems to be voicing a criticism that was, to some extent, shared by certain people in academic circles, too. Here we are alluding to a more scholarly expression of a similar kind of discomfiture, explicitly voiced in a Stellenbosch University Music Department seminar in April 2011. Given the proximity of the Afrikaans cognoscenti to each other, especially in the Cape, however, few if any of the parties involved are willing to speak out publicly against Van Niekerk, or to speak publicly about the Stellenbosch seminar. Likewise, Van Niekerk is reluctant to see any public re-enactment of the event and what transpired there, with names being mentioned, especially if this might be construed in any way as personal.

In her interview with us Van Niekerk herself has enumerated, and responded to, various points of criticism levelled against *Anastasia W* – criticism levelled both on the occasion of the Music Department colloquium and more generally, in various other forums, digital and material, informal as well as composed. In addition, many of the critical positions tend to overlap, as we shall see. Here we rely on Van Niekerk’s own register of response to this broad range of criticism. As the recipient of such criticism, she will have felt and noted it very keenly indeed, and her responses, quoted and discussed in this article, strike us as enlightening, frank and thoroughly impersonal. The critical *habitus* of these criticisms is more important than any personalised agency in relation to them. Certainly, it appears to be in the interest of scholarship to raise the issues into public debate.

In our interview we asked Van Niekerk to comment on what we perceived as the ‘performance’ of ‘linguistic materiality’ in *Anastasia W*. We did this not only on the basis of a comment she made to Willie Burger, in an extensive interview (2009a), about ‘staging’ the materiality of language, but because we felt that the *pitch*, the deliberately *overdone* ‘performance’ of language in *Anastasia W*, was one of the key factors dividing audience responses in the reception of the play. In her written (and typically erudite) reply, Van Niekerk opened her account with the following statement:

I think you are correct: it was, among other factors, the pitch that disturbed people. A whole range of people across a broad spectrum experienced the whole performance as, among other things, linguistically too intense and overwhelming, too dense with

meaning, with too many words, too much language, too much sound, too many heaped-up and braided alliterations and instances of assonance, too many rhymes and 'senseless' babble. Just too much of everything. Too much noise.

Aesthetic and critical typifications such as 'overdone', 'excessive', 'overboard', 'over-involved' ['oortrokke'], began doing the rounds after the production. It's not impossible that poor sound quality, too, may have contributed to all of this early on. Everything was too loud, and too inaudible.

The excess so experienced, with musical enhancement on top of it all, was felt by some critics to be especially out of keeping with the serious and worrisome [sorglike] subject of the text: social decomposition [verwording] and brutalisation, the violence committed against defenceless people, especially the killing and ruination of the most vulnerable – children more than any other class. It sounded as if the following well-known critical position was being taken up: how can you put up a violent, sometimes satirical and rhetorically carnivalesque, aggressive performance in words and sound with as its subject the inexpressible suffering, and the unmentionable violence in our country? How is (such a form of) poetry possible after Auschwitz? After a criminal outrage such as the Holocaust, and especially for that reason, one should, as a poet/writer, rather remain silent, this standpoint holds. (Interview)

Van Niekerk here captures with remarkable acuity – in fact expresses with greater felicity than most of her critics – the nerve struck by the boisterous and unsettling production of *Anastasia W*. Unlike her critics, she also alludes to one of the founding – and most famous – propositions about precisely the crisis embedded in the act of creating art about human suffering, or the making of art *out of* misery and affliction, namely Theodor Adorno's statement published in 1949 that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.'

Van Niekerk thus shows that, unlike the imputation by her critics that she is blindly rushing forth, she is in fact acutely aware that she is skating on the thin ice of 'poetry' and 'barbarism,' aware that she is on terrain already theorised and problematised by the Frankfurt School. Adorno's statement compels one to recall Walter Benjamin, another theorist associated with the Frankfurt School, saying that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.' Implicit in both these positions, and in the Frankfurt School's problematisation of renderings of history, is exactly the problem confronting the South African artist/poet in the face of 'inexpressible' human suffering.

Van Niekerk herself lays particular emphasis on the word 'inexpressible' in the form of the Afrikaans word 'onuitspreëklik,' used twice in a single sentence, with additional emphasis by way of the accented letters, in her interview reply to the authors of this article. Unlike most of her critics, then, she appears to be aware of the historical and philosophical provenance of the crisis faced by a South African artist when confronting 'barbarous' social conditions. In addition, Van Niekerk recalls the literary antecedent of Elizabeth Costello (in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*) who, giving a lecture on 'Witness, Silence, and Censorship,' raises the problem of the author Paul West writing about a matter (an account of the execution of the men behind Hitler's assassination) which makes her (Costello) want to discourse about the dangers of writing what should be 'off-scene' because it is obscene.

What is manifestly evident, we believe, is that it cannot truthfully be said that Van Niekerk is giving expression to 'blind' rage in *Anastasia W*, or that her use of tone and pitch are unconsidered. Van Niekerk identifies one of the tensions in the text as that

between the ‘language of opinion’ and the ‘language of chaos’ (Interview). She very clearly weighed up her options: should she use a ‘neutral’ voice, one that people could respect as ‘decent’ [‘ordentlik’], one that would have made available a ‘habitable psychological position of rational, self-reflexive, dispassionate civil oppositionality’ (Interview); or should she ‘allow chaos to come streaming in’? (Interview).

The choice spelt out above with such precise theoretical awareness by Van Niekerk makes two observations seem immediately necessary. First, any criticism, academic or otherwise, that Van Niekerk was merely consumed by anger, or that she wrote *Anastasia W* in an unreflexive rage, needs strong modification. Van Niekerk acknowledges writing the piece with a great sense of outrage, yes, but she was never unreflexive about her options for creative expressivity and aesthetic effect. Van Niekerk says: ‘*What I want to write is not civil opinions. ... I think my task is precisely to rip open the curtain of established formulas and current opinions of all kinds*’ (Interview, our emphasis).

The second observation is that Van Niekerk is insisting on a particular kind of *artistic* form rather than a ‘dispassionate civil oppositionality.’ She wishes to enter the political in a way that defamiliarises it precisely by throwing off the cloak of ‘dispassionate’ and ‘civil’ formulas. For Van Niekerk, we submit, the cloaking of necropolitics in a dress of ‘dispassionate’ civility is *part of the problem*. It seems richly ironic then that her intellectual Afrikaner fellows rebuke her precisely for throwing this cloak off, as if they wanted her not to make art – and especially not to make destabilising, avant-garde theatre – but to make her opinions and feelings known via discourse that is somehow still ‘decent.’ In other words, keep the shit away from my shoes! Here one must recall Adorno’s position – and it is one which Van Niekerk implicitly calls into play, in view of her own invocation of the Frankfurt School in her answer to us – that the ‘formulas’ (to borrow Van Niekerk’s expression) of ‘civil’ (dare one add, ‘bourgeois’) art too often serve to reproduce relations of domination in the social order, and that only avant-garde, formula-destroying art could break the veil of ‘normality’ in the social order.

Adorno, writing with Max Horkheimer, famously said: ‘Enlightenment is totalitarian’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944], p. 4). Using the term ‘enlightenment’ to denote a totalising rational modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that ‘with advancing enlightenment, only authentic works of art have been able to avoid the mere imitation of what already is’ (p. 13). This appears to be Van Niekerk’s position, exactly: she refuses ‘mere imitation’ of a bourgeois discourse which would culminate in nothing more than a repetition of ‘civil’ discourse already abundantly self-evident. This would be what Adorno and Horkheimer called art that ‘becomes, indeed, the world over again, an ideological doubling, a compliant reproduction’ (p. 13). Writing on his own, in *Prisms* (1983 [1967], p. 32), Adorno argues that a successful work of art ‘is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure.’

We shall return to the core matter of how, in the text and staging of *Anastasia W*, Van Niekerk seeks to do exactly this, namely *embody* contradictions without recourse to a totalising rationality or (in her own words) a ‘civil,’ ‘habitable’ position. First, however, we feel it is necessary to consider a different angle of criticism – namely that a work such as *Anastasia W* plays into the hands of a ‘mythographically’ inflated

representation of a complex social order which reduces complexity to a politically loaded, and immoderate, blame game under the problematic signifier of ‘crime.’

### ‘Discourse’ vs ‘facticity’

One way of making sense of what we have here characterised as the more scholarly objections to *Anastasia W* is to see such critique as a sub-set of the debate around representations of social violence (often signified as ‘crime’) in South Africa. In public discourse around the contested (and highly contestable) signifier, ‘crime,’ two strong positions can be identified, with many shades in between. On the far end of the spectrum one finds the oft-cited ‘fact’ that, since the beginning of ANC rule, crime statistics have ‘gone through the roof’ (phraseology in this regard is typically hyperbolic), or violent crime has ‘skyrocketed.’ In this (typically media-driven or popular) view, ‘crime’ is almost ‘out of control,’ and the social order is seen to be under severe threat.

On the other end of the range, one finds the (often but not always) leftist position that such talk of ‘skyrocketing crime’ is less fact-based than a discourse of (mostly white) anxiety based on ‘mythostats’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011) – indeed a new version of the old Black Peril narrative (Graham 2012). Position-taking on the issue of ‘crime’ in South Africa continues to find abundant expression, both in scholarly commentary and in popular communication, in print and orally, and it can be difficult to form a coherently fact-based narrative, given the variability and disputability of statistics (Kynoch 2012; Silber and Geffen 2009). In much current crime fiction in South Africa, the genre which now appears to garner more attention than any other in popular literary commentary,<sup>19</sup> the idea that ‘crime’ under the ANC government is rampant, constituting an unprecedented and urgent social crisis, tends to operate either as an explicitly stated or an implicitly held assumption.

Few people acquainted with the tenor of public debate in South Africa would dispute the prevalence of talk about ‘unacceptably’ high levels of ‘crime.’ People of all persuasions who feel disaffected with the governing order cite statistics as a matter of course about how crime levels have ‘taken off’ or ‘rocketed’ since the ANC came to power in 1994. More recently, however, dissenting voices from within the scholarly domain have begun to question the factual basis of the ‘sudden acceleration’ claims, arguing that a more even-handed look at the available statistics would show that, for example, figures for reported rape have remained more or less constant since 1994 (Graham 2012); that conviction rates in South Africa are not substantially worse than conviction rates in countries such as the US and the UK (Leggett 2003); and that statistically recorded incidents of homicide have actually dropped since 1994 (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011; this is supported by figures supplied by the Institute for Security Studies, or ISS).<sup>20</sup>

In a statistical comparison of conviction rates in South Africa, the US and the UK, ISS researcher Ted Leggett concludes that ‘with the exception of murder, South African conviction rates do not seem to be out of kilter with those of more developed countries. In addition, despite increasing caseloads, the number and share of withdrawn cases have declined, and the number of convictions has gone up’ (Leggett 2003). Gavin Silber and Nathan Geffen (2009, p. 38), writing in the *South African Crime Quarterly*, report that although South Africa’s murder rate of 37.3 people per 100,000 is high, the evidence indicates that victims are ‘disproportionately African

and coloured working-class people.’ In a consideration of available data, Silber and Geffen dispel as unfounded the ‘Brandon Huntley thesis’<sup>21</sup> that whites are disproportionately the victims of violent crime.

Crime statistics before 1994 either do not exist in any reliable form – such figures are subject to the distortions of apartheid’s pseudo-statist geography (in which Bantustans would have their own ‘national’ figures) – or they are suspect, vulnerable to the charge of distortion and the mendacity associated with the apartheid regime, a criminal junta if ever there was one. Scholars who dispute the ‘skyrocketing crime under the ANC’ contention – including the authors of this article – argue that a pronounced degree of social violence has been a feature of South African society throughout the twentieth century, and before that, too, but that apartheid policing succeeded to a great extent in keeping such violence ring-fenced within the vast black, Coloured and Indian townships shadowing ‘white’ areas across the country.<sup>22</sup>

So left-leaning or progressive scholars tend to be sceptical about attributing to the post-apartheid government a ‘new’ or unprecedented upsurge in social violence. They see this as historically invalid. They argue that a more sober assessment, free of the exaggerations of panicked white South Africans who are essentially expressing a refrain of the old ‘Black Peril’ discourse, is needed. Such an assessment will show, they argue, that while it is difficult to prove conclusively that ‘crime’ (or social violence, a better term) has increased substantively since 1994, what has increased remarkably is discourse *about* ‘crime’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011; Kynoch 2012) – and that this discourse is patently over-hyped, amped-up and hyper-anxious.<sup>23</sup> It is a discourse which points much more to fear of, and to anxiety about, black rule than it points to increased social violence *as a result of* black rule. The Comaroffs use the term ‘mythostats’ to express their sense of a discursive amplification in which mediations and representations about ‘crime’ in South Africa tend to create their own urban legends about crime ‘figures’ supposedly based on raw actuality. The Comaroffs suggest that everything ‘known’ about ‘crime’ is mediated, is a function of discourse, and that one should be analytically wary of such discourse.<sup>24</sup>

It is tempting to read such a stand-off between, on the one hand, ‘reasoned’ and scholarly discourse (indeed, reasoned meta-discourse, scholarly analyses of unreflexive discourses on the ground, so to speak) and, on the other, ‘emotional’ (or anxiety-driven) rants and ravings, into the scholarly reception of *Anastasia W*. It is quite possible to offer a reading of *Anastasia W* as an example of exactly such insufficiently reflexive, emotion-laden and anxiety-driven public, and specifically *white* (here, Afrikaner, too), discourse. Van Niekerk’s own extensive interview reply to the authors of this article would appear, at first glance, to support such a reading. Talking specifically about the public reception of the play among certain sectors in the Afrikaner intelligentsia, Van Niekerk acknowledges that ‘the intensity of the language in the play text is surely related to the intensity of my feelings about the physical and moral “slaughter” that I observe in the South Africa of today.’ Van Niekerk continues:

And these feelings and emotions, expressed, “played” and staged through intensely verbally driven characters is exactly what was found wanting. The criticism, as I understand it, derives from ideology critique or neo-Marxist aesthetic dogma (more or less associated with the philosophers of the Frankfurt School) which places the cerebral and the rational above emotion and the body, a doctrine that deeply mistrusts the

operations of voice and attitude in the expression of feeling, and also the related potential of music for visceral seduction, especially song (song, along with dance, being the most bodily of arts) – this is understandable, given the potential for exploitation of the visceral suggestibility and capacity for captivation that humans are inclined toward. (Interview)

Van Niekerk adds that such a position is also understandable given events during the Second World War, the fascist rhetorical and musical incitation and the ‘entrancement and training’ of ‘whole populations’ during this period. She refers, as further examples of this trend, to the way in which the capitalist music industry packages ‘cliché emotions’ in ‘enslaving and blunting commodity music,’ and she also refers to the foregrounding of *Sprachähnlichkeit* – ‘likeness to speech’ – as a normative watermark for opera. Interestingly, in this defence of her own ‘emotional’ voice, Van Niekerk displays an awareness of intellectual history, effectively distancing herself from facile charges that her public aesthetic ‘bad manners’ are unreflective (or unreflecting), ‘hysterical’ and intellectually ‘immoderate.’ Indeed, in the play’s script, as the audience is leaving the auditorium, Sus and Daan stand in the foyer, and sing as a coda: ‘Daar is niks so goed soos karnaval / ’n bontspul en ’n groot rumoer / om protes in weg te steek’<sup>25</sup> (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 47), thus signifying an acute awareness of the potential for a carnivalesque critique of power. However, they go on: ‘Maar as regering self ’n kermis is. . . Dan is dit regte bloed en ritueel / Waar ek u nou mee wil bespeel’ (47). In other words, when carnival is a perpetual state, when the government itself is a carnival, then the role of the artist is to confront the citizen with real ‘blood and ritual.’

The question nevertheless does arise, as it appears to have done in the more scholarly instances of disaffected reception of the play, whether *Anastasia W*, too, like capitalist pop-music culture, and like political movements of the twentieth century which openly promoted a form of emotionally laden fascism, makes itself guilty of ‘incitation’ [‘opswepery’] in a manner that does indeed mitigate against more analytical, progressive discourse about social violence in South Africa.

Our central contention in this regard is that such a conclusion, though possibly alluring to some, would constitute a fundamental misreading of *Anastasia W*. Running together contemporary Black Peril narratives (in the discourse around ‘crime’) with Van Niekerk’s play, we contend, is a category error. We will argue, in relation to the text of the play and its (partially recorded) performances, that something far more ambitious – and much more challenging to critics and readers – is at work in *Anastasia W*. This, in our reading, is an aesthetic, linguistic and theatrical performance of perceived social *decomposition* at large (not narrowly political, racial or ethnic) in which the materiality of language itself is staged as a substance which must, if it is to convey the *feel and texture* rather than the mere rational ‘sense’ of pervasive social decay, itself undergo a process of decomposition.

### ***Anastasia W* and decomposition**

In its ‘play’ with language and its deliberate performance of collapse in the structures of both mimetic language and social decency – decomposition and decay – Van Niekerk’s play can be read as a staging of the complicity of Afrikaans South Africans. This is a complicity in the ongoing neglect of the most defenceless members

of society in the face of rampant corruption and opportunism in the ‘new’ South Africa. One of the primary preoccupations of the text – excessive in both its subject matter and form – is the way in which social injustices are overlooked in the pursuit of a ‘new’ nationalism and personal wealth by *all* parties, specifically including the former ruling classes, the current ruling classes, and the newly enfranchised underclasses, who remain economically underprivileged but desperate to grab their own share of the booty. In this sense, Van Niekerk’s text can be read as a particular kind of postcolonial text, described by Joshua Esty as ‘excremental satire.’

In his comparative study of scatological discourse in Irish and West African novels, Esty notes that those novels ‘written under historical circumstances that are . . . connected by the potent presence of a new nationalism’ might be regarded as a ‘genuinely postcolonial phenomenon’ (1999, p. 48). Following David Lloyd, Esty argues that ‘nationalism itself – as a political form – constitutes a baleful residue of colonialism’ (p. 47). In South Africa this residue of colonialism might be read into the continued maintenance of wealthy elites among the ranks of the governing party, and the neglect of the poor masses amid social conditions marked by visibly tortuous conditions of precarious life.<sup>26</sup>

Esty goes on to suggest that:

It seems fitting in this light that postcolonial writers use excremental terms to confront the problems inherent in building a new political culture from the institutional byproduct (Fanon’s national bourgeoisie) and the ideological residue (nationalism) of an alien regime. (p. 47)

For such writers the system ‘stinks,’ and it produces ‘shit’ – via excessive digestion and consumption – instead of equitable growth or organic development. Esty points out, however, that while postcolonial nationalisms might be ‘derivative discourses,’ they have also been ‘potent and necessary forms of collective identity’ (p. 47). ‘In times of disillusionment or ambivalence about national excess, postcolonial scatologists are, in a sense, adapting the “matter out of place” formula. Excremental satire, in other words, expresses the partial misconception (or anal birth) of postcolonial nationalism’ (p. 47).

Esty draws on Anthony Appiah’s identification of a post-independence ‘first wave’ of African writers, whose ‘largely realist texts . . . project a version of Africa’s “usable past” that tends to naturalize or legitimize nationalism’ (Esty 1999, p. 24). Authors of the ‘second wave’, on the other hand, ‘distrust nationalism and disrupt realism with shifting perspectives, disjunctive episodic structures, and hallucinatory bouts of nonmimetic or surreal description’ (p. 25).

Despite Van Niekerk’s European influences, she is clearly identifiable as a ‘second wave’ postnationalist African writer. In fact, Esty’s own study fruitfully reads the work of Irish modernists such as Joyce and Beckett as ‘scatological satire,’ and compares it to the work of ‘second-wave’ African writers. Furthermore, one might argue that Van Niekerk has already established herself as a ‘postnational’ writer, given the treatment of Afrikaner Christian Nationalist ideology in her novels *Triomf* and *Agaat*. As Willie Burger points out, in *Triomf* the character Treppie constantly highlights the way in which language ‘lies’ about the thing that it represents (Burger 2009b). In a passage particularly revealing of the disingenuous names assigned to lower-income housing developments by the apartheid government, Treppie muses

that ‘people think they’ve got a licence to bullshit,’ to ‘lie to themselves’ when ‘you take a place like this, full of pre-fab wagon-wheels and aloes, rotten with rubble and then give it a name like Triomf [Triumph]’ (Van Niekerk 1999, p. 92). Similarly, in *Agaat* the lack of genuine communication between those with power and those without is foregrounded. The way in which the discourse of those with power makes it impossible to know the ‘other’ becomes clear in *Agaat* (Burger 2009b, pp. 11–12), where Milla’s death-bed desire to know Agaat is thwarted by the fact that Agaat persists in reflecting Milla’s own language back at her (Burger 2009b, p. 12).

Seen as part of a ‘postnationalist’ tendency in Van Niekerk’s oeuvre, then, it seems that *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* might be read very productively when understood within the framework of ‘excremental satire’; in such a reading the play reveals an excremental residue of colonialism – or excremental neo-colonial corruption – in the supposedly revolutionary or democratic ‘new’ dispensation. Formally, the play also conforms to characteristics of ‘second wave’ African writing as set out by Esty.

In its highly stylised, expressionist influences, its modal cross-overs, its vignette-like structure and its defamiliarised language, the play certainly disrupts any sense of realism. The text moves freely between different variations of the Afrikaans language itself: Daan’s Old Dutch, Germanic-sounding Afrikaans, Sus’s business-like, bossy Afrikaans, and Savage and Lovemore’s Kaaps, which they significantly abandon in favour of a ‘nice, plain civilized Afrikaans’ [‘mooi algemeen beskaafde Afrikaans’] (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 41) for the sake of selling their product at the end of the play. The play thus performs the fluidity of Afrikaans, and this very fluidity allows the speaker to adopt a suitable identity at any given moment. The reader or viewer is compelled to move through this shifting landscape of Afrikaans, briefly occupying the differing subject positions associated with each variation.

The shifting of perspective and problematising of subject positions also manifests in the treatment of the four characters (Sus, Daan, Savage and Lovemore). Van Niekerk explicitly states that she intended these characters to articulate a critical opinion of the South African situation while simultaneously making themselves guilty of utterly reprehensible behaviour (Interview). The viewer or reader is brought into a confrontation with the critical discourse of social commentary as it manifests in the Afrikaans news media.

There is a sense when following newspaper headlines across the country, but especially in the Western Cape, that there is a ‘seepage’ of the violent and grotesque into the everyday ‘domestic’ reality of South Africa. The Afrikaans-language newspapers in particular are often guilty of a hysterical, sensationalising approach in their reporting. An event like Johan Kotze’s alleged murder of his stepson and violent torture and orchestrated rape of his wife in Modimolle was turned into a macabre soap opera by the Afrikaans newspapers, who dubbed Kotze the ‘Modimolle Monster’ (see, for example, Van Wyk, 2012, p. 13). The tabloids also provide revealing examples of the strange, often surreal violence and excesses faced by people every day, but also encountered in South Africa’s public discourse, its linguistic landscape. For example, a 2004 headline from *Beeld* read: ‘Man dood na quicky tussen die volstruise’ [‘Man dies after quickie amongst ostriches’] (Meyer 2004); and from the tabloid *Die Son* (2012): ‘Ontdek lyk by poefplek’ [‘Body discovered at poo-spot’]. These headlines suggest that South Africa is a place where people encounter the visceral (dead) body on a daily basis, but in the sense that

people encounter these newspapers and their billboards in public spaces, they are also in themselves evidence of the way in which South Africans in general encounter language that has to do with the excesses of the body. The characters in *Anastasia W* articulate these self-same discourses, with which many viewers or readers will be familiar, and with which they may very well identify and may indeed occupy earnestly.

However, in aligning themselves at any moment with the characters' discursive positions, the reader/viewer must then also own the more reprehensible actions of the characters, thereby exposing the viewer's or reader's own complicity in the very injustices being criticised. Thus the reader/viewer constantly shifts through these various perspectives, unable to settle comfortably into identification with any one position. Each of these positions is *one* extreme position of several that one can occupy at this moment in South Africa, as human, as citizen, as artist. Van Niekerk states that none of these are roles she would necessarily choose for herself, but that she must put these characters out there, in order to stimulate her own thinking toward a possible alternative (Interview).

Frustratingly for many, as we have seen above, she refuses to spell out the alternative in the text: it is up to the reader to figure it out, 'that is, if the reader can get past his own outrage' (Interview). For the reader or viewer to work through these alternatives also requires a working through the myriad of intertextual references, particularly to Van Niekerk's own recent work. These references open up the text to an extended network of meaning and positions (especially the ever-shifting position of the artist in South Africa), which leaves the play wide open to interpretation, and demands active participation on the part of the viewer or reader.

*Anastasia W* also foregrounds a critique of South Africa's 'New Nationalism' overtly, in the very first Act, thus setting this critique of the excesses of nationalism as the framework within which the action is to be read. The play opens at night, in a 'house on the Cape Flats' (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 1), with Sus and Daan trying to recover a corpse from the dark ceiling in order to prepare it for burial. Savage and Lovemore act as a type of chorus, commenting on the initial action from the side-lines. As the corpse of a girl-child finally tumbles from the ceiling, Savage and Lovemore announce the title of the play: 'Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W.'

Savage and Lovemore struggle to get the body into a coffin, and the head comes loose. In a macabre soccer game, they kick around the head of the corpse while rapping in 'Kaapse' Afrikaans – printed phonetically in the script – thus adding to the density of sound and language in the play. In their rap they criticise the 2010 Soccer World Cup, which was hosted by South Africa and generally promoted as a unique opportunity for nation building and economic growth. In a sense the Soccer World Cup could be read as a performance of the success of the 'new' democracy. As several commentators have pointed out, though, the World Cup's 'success' was bought at the cost of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable (see the online entries by Feinstein 2010, De Vos 2010 and Sikhakhane 2010). In their rap Savage and Lovemore situate the perceived exploitation of ordinary South Africans by FIFA and the government as the latest in a long history of exploitation, a 'three-hundred-year window of opportunity' (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 7), beginning with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, the 'squarehead from the motherland 1652' and extending to the present, with Zuma, the 'showerhead of the fatherland 2010' (p. 7).

Querying why the World Cup, of all things, had to ‘work,’ Savage and Lovemore provide a litany of things that aren’t ‘working’: the government ‘hasn’t been working all along’; the hospitals and schools and courts and police aren’t ‘working’ (p. 7). The government is accused of ‘jiving in parliament’ as though they have something to celebrate other than the ‘arms deal,’ whose submarines are ‘ducking’ in the dry dock, while fighter planes stand grounded with no pilots to fly them (p. 7).

The position articulated here by Savage and Lovemore arouses the suspicions of Sus, and she says: ‘Hold it boys, who are you really working for?’ (p. 7). This suspicion might be articulated for the sake of the audience, to alert them to the fact that occupying any discursive position is in essence a performance: Savage and Lovemore are opportunists who articulate whichever position suits them at a particular moment. It might also serve to suggest that those who ‘speak truth to power’ are immediately suspect and duly silenced by the ruling classes. In any case, Sus’s particular formulation of her suspicion turns out to be deeply ironic, since Savage and Lovemore are in fact working for themselves, plotting to use the funeral service as a front for their own little entrepreneurial game.

Indeed, the issue of opportunities for entrepreneurs in South Africa is addressed by Savage and Lovemore in their rap, particularly on the matter of FIFA’s ‘exclusion zones,’ which were set up around the stadiums to prohibit informal traders from selling their goods near the showcase event (Feinstein 2010, online). Savage and Lovemore ask: ‘Why did the World Cup have to work, with all those lights and fanfares and imported fly-by-nights, if I couldn’t hawk my poems, my rap, my chilli samoosas at the gate? Not even *Die Son* could post it for promotion on the billboards’ (p. 7). The critique seems clear enough: opportunities for real economic advancement of informal traders in South Africa are limited by the government’s accommodation of the logic of the rights of private corporations and branded marketing.

However, Dawid de Villiers, in his analysis of Ralph Ziman’s 2008 film *Jerusalema*, suggests that for the entrepreneur as represented in Ziman’s vision of the ‘new’ South Africa, the past is a ‘tableau of facts available for exploitation’ (2009, p. 15). This representation of the entrepreneur sees him mediating ‘present possibilities in the face of an undisclosed future and a past that is a domain of dead facts’ (p. 15). As entrepreneurs and opportunists, Savage and Lovemore adopt the rhetoric of anti-corporate critique and a tone of moral outrage to serve their own ends. We see this ‘exploitation of available facts,’ this easy movement from one type of language to another, throughout the play.

The end of the play implies that the language of this logic of corporate greed is ‘mooi beskaafde Afrikaans’ [nice civilised Afrikaans]. As Savage and Lovemore are about to launch their new business, Lovemore warns Savage that they stand before a niche market that they must not rub up the wrong way. ‘We must speak their language’ [‘Ons moet hulle taal praat’] (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 41). To this injunction, Savage replies: ‘Yt hoeveel keelgatte moet ek nog kak spin, bra?’ [‘From how many throats do I still have to spin shit, bra?’], suggesting that he appropriates a different throat (and by implication a different subject position) every time he ‘spins shit’. Lovemore replies: ‘Net mooi algemeen beskaafde Afrikaans, jy kan nie jou produk hier verkoop as jy koeterwaals uitslaan uit die riool nie’ [‘Just nice, plain civilised Afrikaans, bra, you can’t sell your product here if you break out caterwauling from the sewer’] (p. 41). As Savage then proceeds to read off the brochures, misreading or

improvising certain key phrases, Lovemore snaps: ‘Lees wat daar staan, poephoh, die dae van improvisasie is verby. Ons is nou korporatief.’ [‘Read what it says, arsehole, the days of improvisation are over. We are corporate now’] (p. 41). Thus, ‘mooi beskaafde Afrikaans’ is represented as the language of corporate ‘success.’<sup>27</sup>

As the play comes to a close, Savage invites the audience to partake of the ‘hoenderpastei en stoweperskes’ [‘chicken pie and stewed peaches’] (p. 42) that Sus and Daan have been preparing, in a ritual<sup>28</sup> of participation which emphasises the audience’s complicity in these actions, its *consumption* of the ‘fruits’ of business as usual, a point discussed in more detail below. Significantly, ‘hoenderpastei en stoweperskes’ is a dish traditionally associated with Afrikaans funeral rituals. At the start of the play, the audience is offered ‘nagmaalwyn’ [communion wine] and bread, while an organist plays church music, in an enactment of the ritual of holy communion, the symbolic act of participating in a community of believers. The play is thus bookended by these rituals of participation, in which the audience becomes complicit. As Izak de Vries notes in his blog entry on *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* (2011), these rituals serve to make the audience part of the performance, ensuring that the experience lasts well beyond the spatial and temporal parameters of the event. For De Vries the chicken pie served at the end of the play allows the audience to participate physically in the funeral rites – a funeral for ‘everyone.’ The end of the play announces a new order, one where ‘chicken is used to keep the poor subdued. Note how often Nando’s or KFC is distributed at community rallies’ (2011, online). De Vries quotes an *Umkhonto we Sizwe* veteran as saying: ‘When you go to a meeting with some comrades to ask crucial questions, KFC appears. While you are eating, you see the cars [of the leaders] leaving’ (2011, online). For De Vries, the seemingly ‘Boerse’ appearance of the ritual is misleading – the serving of chicken symbolises the continuation between the new dispensation and the old one.

The ‘postnationalist’ critique in the text also serves to foreground the question of the role of the artist in the ‘new democracy’. Esty suggests that all protagonists of excremental discourse face the same predicament: ‘the wish to escape history – to step away from horrible social conditions, to *not* write the Great [Nationalist] Novel – is met by the countervailing demand to forge the uncreated conscience of a new nation’ (52). Indeed, as Esty notes, this is the very conflict at the root of James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, another ‘excremental satire,’ which ‘famously narrates a struggle to disengage from the norms of language, nation and religion’ (1999, p. 51). It seems that Van Niekerk, in her desire to allow chaos to come streaming in, to allow her synapses to make new connections, is perhaps with *Anastasia W* answering the demand that asks her as artist to ‘forge the uncreated conscience of a new nation.’

The language in Van Niekerk’s play is excessive in its foregrounding of sound and also in its grotesque imagery. The material reality of most South Africans, especially those in the urban areas, is one of extreme, visceral excess: sewage and rubbish in the streets, open, live electricity cables, lack of sanitation, hunger, regular encounters with death, on the one hand, and on the other, the material excess of the middle classes, the wealthy and the politicians. At one level, the play seems to be grappling with the pressures that these kind of material excesses place on language, and the role of the writer or artist in registering and representing these pressures and their effects.

In her interview with Willemien Brümmer, Van Niekerk articulates a position for the artist that is very similar to that which Esty describes above. Commenting on the

‘poetic nonsense’ language of the character Daan in the play, Van Niekerk states that this use of a poetic nonsense language has to do with her ‘issue’ with poetry:

The whole piece is full of meaning and political arguments. The lyrical figure is searching for a different space in language, that is not so much preoccupied with meaning, as with sound. He [Daan], desires to proceed without meaning – this would be his paradise. He actually tends toward the a-political [‘politieke onbetrokkenheid’]. I knew he wouldn’t speak a language like any of the other characters. He has a different agenda with language and poetry and lyricism. He doesn’t even have my agenda. He is the one I write when I am not thinking . . . [Sus] has the agenda closest to mine. . . . I like Daan the most, but my situation has more to do with the character of Sus. (Brümmer 2010, p. 10)

Here, of course, the issue of the materiality of language arises, as does the *performance* of such estranging, or defamiliarising, materiality. In addition, the play’s ‘decomposing’ language breaches the limits imposed by conventional, ‘legible’ or linear language and literary structure. As Lara Buxbaum (2011) comments in a review of *Die Sneeuslaper*, ‘Van Niekerk explores the limits of form, structure, language and the new possibilities for writing opened up by such experimentation.’

Brümmer astutely compares the use of ‘poetic nonsense language’ to the type of language encountered in Breyten Breytenbach’s *Boklied*.<sup>29</sup> In his account of the play and the ‘almost bewildering media storm’ that blew up around its reception, Charl Blignaut suggested that what *Boklied*:

really goes for . . . is the whole poet thing. ’n Wrede nasie verloor sy digters (a cruel nation loses its poets). But if *Boklied* is indeed an angry call to respect and understand the place of the poet in society, then perhaps the author could have taught us so in a way that is slightly more understandable in the first place. (1998)

Such reaction shows just how effectively *Boklied*’s tactic of performative linguistic defamiliarisation actually seems to have worked – in the extent to which it alienated its audiences – if that is in fact what it was seeking to achieve, as we would suggest is indeed, or at least partly, the case. Similarly, in *Anastasia W*, the ‘success’ of Van Niekerk’s estranging techniques of (non-)signification, her nonmimetic disruption of ‘clarity,’ seems to have worked to great effect in unsettling her audience, in many cases to the point of them deciding that such an excremental display of loud ‘rubbish’ amounted to an act of aesthetic immoderation, a failure of ‘taste.’

As we have shown above, the critique levelled at *Anastasia W* by those individuals who shared the views of Albert Maritz, Diane de Beer and Val Marsh, was one decrying precisely its lack of ‘moderation’; that the ‘lesson’ the play was perceived to teach should have been framed in a manner that was slightly more ‘understandable’ to the audience. In her refusal to frame an ‘alternative’ to her surreal, grotesque vision of the South African social body, Van Niekerk insists that it is the individual audience member’s responsibility to engage the text(s) and deduce the alternative for themselves. Formal aspects of the play, such as the offering to the audience of a glass of communion wine as they enter the theatre, direct address to the audience during the play, and the invitation to partake of the chicken pie and peaches after the play, all force the viewer into a ritual of participation. The play seems to suggest that the viewer/reader is deeply complicit in the ongoing decomposition of the social order in

South Africa, occupying seemingly socially conscious, critical-discursive positions while self-servingly consuming the ‘benefits’ of economic policies that merely serve to entrench already existing inequalities. Thus the viewer/reader finds him/herself in a state of excremental complicity, involving a mutual or simultaneous act of ‘getting one’s hands dirty’ and trying to ‘wash one’s hands’ of all the shit that’s flying about. The text’s waywardness of signification is therefore appropriate for such mutually contradictory but simultaneously performed gestures.

Part of the complicity of the Afrikaans theatregoer, the play suggests, is the prevalent, often unarticulated nostalgia for the past (see endnote 23). Standing on his sister’s shoulders, groping at a decomposing corpse, Daan tells Sus: ‘I told you we should take the ladder and rise up to Oma, for chicken pie and stewed peaches, cockadoodleoo, in our heaven with our little song’. Savage’s aside, ‘Native nostalgia,’ is an ironic reference to Jacob Dlamini’s book, *Native Nostalgia* (2010), which opens an argument about whether nostalgia by black South Africans for aspects of the past under apartheid is possible or appropriate. By invoking this intertext, Van Niekerk seems to be suggesting that the Afrikaner is also experiencing a kind of ‘native nostalgia,’ not only for times that seemed ‘better’ under apartheid, but for a space and a language outside South Africa that is somehow ‘better’ – an apolitical/depoliticised space where the writer may indulge in her ‘Orphic deeds’ (Van Niekerk 2011, p. 167), ‘in heaven’ with her little ‘song,’ without the pressure of confronting the corpse in the ceiling or the shit in the pit latrine and the responsibility of providing social commentary, to boot.

In the same way that Savage and Lovemore criticise the World Cup from one ‘throat’ while plotting corrupt and violent dealings from another, Sus rages against the ‘new’ nationalism and the violent murder of the elderly, but she is constantly absent, revoking her responsibilities in lieu of international travel. Significantly, although Sus feels safe overseas, free from the perpetual state of anxiety that she experiences when in South Africa, this feeling makes her feel unwelcome [‘ontuis’]. She feels like a stranger at the gate waiting in vain for the trauma that is always deferred (Van Niekerk 2010, p. 23). On the one hand, Van Niekerk’s oeuvre repeatedly registers the tension created by the desire of the writer for a pastoral solitude and peace, a ‘heimat.’ Once again, *Triomf* offers a good example of this: Treppie writes a poem, ‘This is not wallpaper,’<sup>30</sup> about the experience of spring at the Westdene dam, which ends with the lines ‘it’s spring, yes it’s spring / at the old Westdene dam – / and, not least, / at last there is peace’ (1999 [1994], p. 303). Treppie, with his ambivalent relationship to language, can find the peace to write only in the setting of the pastoral, can write only when his subject is the pastoral.

On the other hand, Van Niekerk’s writing also reveals a continuous confrontation with the ‘unheimliche’: Her poem, ‘South Africa,’ in the anthology *Letter to South Africa*, asks ‘what is a rose at a home / with shut doors? / And what are we?’ (2011, p. 173) [‘wat is ’n roos sonder ’n huis / met oop deure? / En wat is ’n mens?’ (165)] Again, these lines underscore a sense of unbelonging in South Africa. That which was familiar and comforting has become defamiliarised and frightening. The speaker in ‘South Africa’ asks: ‘South Africa, how am I supposed to give serious social commentary / and play my lyre at the same time?’ (p. 168). In the character of Daan, Van Niekerk seems to be grappling with exactly this sense of the ineffectuality of the artist or writer in South Africa.

Daan is presented as a sensitive imbecile, completely harmless, babbling in an idiolect that is rich in sound texture, but which remains quite impotent: he can neither make Sus stay, nor can he articulate the violence that he experiences in his own domestic sphere. Throughout the play Daan is described as ‘speaking in tongues’ (p. 5), as a ‘fokking makwerekwere’ (p. 5), and his poems are called ‘delirious dietse reflections’ (p. 21). His opaque language is therefore neutralised by attributing it to a religious possession, a delirium, or by comparing it negatively to foreign African languages. In all three cases, he is relegated to a liminal position, and deemed incomprehensible.

As Sus is desperately packing for yet another trip to Holland (an escape from the grotesque reality that is already inside her parlour), promising to write, Daan tries to capture her attention, playing on his harmonica, and pulling his clippings from his pockets, strewing them all over the stage, in ‘shuddering recitation’ [‘hortende voordrag’], struggling for words, masturbating his codpiece and saying: ‘Kom, hartverniegtende arkbitter nag van Februarie, waar junkman en blöd aan mekaar verkiel is in ’n gewrog van onbespiegeldheid’ (p. 5). This sentence does not seem to belong to any existing language. Instead, it draws on sound to evoke particular words from Dutch and Afrikaans, which are then strung together in a melancholic, poetic-sounding ‘nonsense’ sentence. The words ‘hartverniegtende,’ ‘verkiel’ ‘gewrog’ and ‘onbespiegeldheid’ are not ‘real’ words, but their sounds evoke concepts like ‘hartverniegtende’ [heart-destroying], ‘verkiel’ [chill, chilling], ‘gewroeg’ [struggle/agonise], and ‘onbespiegeldheid’ as a made-up negative or inversion of ‘bespiegel,’ which means ‘to speculate’ or ‘to reflect.’ Thus, Daan’s sentence might roughly be ‘translated’ as: ‘Come, heart-wrenching ark-bitter night of February, where young man and blood are cooled to each other in a struggle/agony of unreflectiveness.’ The (grossly distorted) image evoked by this sound patterning suggests a tortured individual, alienated from his environment, his body and his psyche. An extreme and fragmented version, perhaps, of the individualist writer?<sup>31</sup>

Aside from such sound patterning, Daan’s language is also riddled with free associations and irruptions of the body, such as sobbing and sighing and singing. As Sus says to him: ‘You sob, you sigh, you rhyme [Jy snik, jy sug, jy rym]’ (p. 6). These irruptions in language are coupled with compulsive physical acts: he obsessively rubs his codpiece, he strews his newspaper clippings all over the stage. This recurring image of the newspaper clippings throughout her work seems to evoke Wopko Jensma’s ‘I must show you my clippings’. As critics like Ashraf Jamal and Michael Titlestad have shown, for Jensma ‘any new subject position and consciousness presupposes the forfeiture of stability and the immanence of negotiation’ (Jamal 2003, p. 15) and consequently the ‘i’ in Jensma’s verse ‘lodges fleetingly in diverse sites of meaning while it simultaneously unravels in unceasing dissemination’ (Titlestad 2004, p. 113). Titlestad quotes Sheila Roberts as noting that Jensma ‘writes in various “voices,” from English and Afrikaans to Tsotsi and Gammattaal’ (p. 115).

It is therefore very telling that Van Niekerk links Jensma directly to Daan, when she says in our interview that Daan is yet another manifestation of her ‘basis-ego’ projection of the ‘overly sensitive, handicapped’ back-room or cellar figure, whose demise is brought about by his own intensities and the failure of his ‘artistic’ defences against brutal environments (Interview) [‘oorgevoelige gehandicapte wat aan sigself en sy eie intensiteite en aan sy (haperende, min of meer “artistieke”) verweer teen

brutale omgewings kapotgaan’]. Daan is more thoroughly disconnected than the other characters. He is in the long-drop, ‘kniediepindiekak’ [Knee deep in shit], ‘as Wopko Jensma would have it’ [‘Volledig onskadelik is Daan, net meer grondig uitgehaak as die ander karakters. Hy is in die *longdrop*, kniediepindiekak soos Wopko Jensma dit sou sê’] (Interview). In Jensma’s concrete poem ‘Kniediepindiekak,’ Van Niekerk recognises the situation of the artist as embodied by Daan, trapped in an endless cycle of shit that allows nothing but a repeated description of the situation.

During the course of *Anastasia W*, Daan is repeatedly confined to the pit latrine by Savage and Lovemore while Sus is away, and Lovemore describes Daan and Sus as ‘knee deep in shit and halfway into the coffin’ [‘Kniediep in die kak en halflyf in ’n doodskis, a heavenly pair for the dancefloor’] (p. 21), suggesting that the artist represented by these two characters – the artist as split into a Daan and a Sus – is also mired in shit, and half-dead. This idea is underscored by another intertextual reference to the poem ‘South Africa.’ Savage and Lovemore raise Daan up from the pit-latrine in which they have imprisoned him, while he recites one of his nonsense rhymes. As Daan reaches the surface, Lovemore says: ‘Orfeus uitie longdrop’ [‘Orpheus emerging from the long-drop’] (p. 21). Here again one sees Daan associated with the role of an inspired poet and singer. In Van Niekerk’s poem ‘South Africa’ the speaker rants: ‘When will I be able to commit my Orphic deeds / without bodyguard or alarm in the nocturnal hills of my home?’ (2011, p. 167). [‘Wanneer kan ek snags in die heuwels van my huis / my Orfiese dade pleeg sonder lyfwag of alarm?’ (160)] In the poem the writer clearly feels her sense of vulnerability acutely as a barrier to her creativity. In *Anastasia W* the role of the writer or artist is represented as futile, confined to the long-drop.

However, the play also evinces a self-reflexive critique of ‘high art.’ Temporarily reunited with Sus, returned from her travels, Daan recites one of his macabre poems to her. Contemplating the scene, Savage quips: ‘The stuff high art is made of, hoor hoe stil is die audience, Lovemore’ [‘The stuff high art is made of, note how quiet the audience are, Lovemore’] (p. 21). Clearly this is a moment of deeply wry self-reflection, most surely underscored by the fact that at this point in the play many of the audience members would have walked out of the theatre. The statement begs the ever-recurring question of the valuation of art: What *is* the stuff of high art, if not incest, shit and distorted images of violence? What *should* the ‘stuff’ of high art be?

Daan’s language registers brutality and horror in an unsettling lyrical mode, where the names of children who have been the victims of violence become a litany, interspersed with surreal images of blood and gore, all of it made opaque by the oblique meanings that manifest through a haze of associative sounds. His language is a performance of what happens to the pastoral/lyric form when it encounters the language of the South African news headlines.

For example, when Daan bemoans the death of Adilson Cassamba,<sup>32</sup> he sings a little song (p. 25):

Cassamba Cassamba  
 Labamba bambino  
 Bloetsproetsel geschpritztes  
 Ghot lickt dine skedel

The musical score for this particular song, arranged by Braam du Toit, is included in the script, allowing the reader to ‘read’ the script in a musical mode as well – yet another example of the multi-modality of the play and the layering of effect. The inclusion of the score, juxtaposed with the script, foregrounds the sound value of the words in particular. In the extract above, the murdered child’s family name, Cassamba, is linked through assonance to ‘Labamba’ and ‘bambino,’ evoking a Latino influence, but these words are also linked to the third line, ‘bloedsproetsel geschpritztes’ through the dominant cretic trisyllabic stress pattern – a relatively rare form of meter. The Latino sounds are therefore linked to the Germanic sounds through the meter. A resonance is also set up in the lines ‘Schiembamba kakkerlakske / Schiembamba in’t sloet’ (Van Niekerk 2010, 25). These lines clearly refer to the traditional Afrikaans lullaby ‘Siembamba’ with the ambiguous lyrics:

Siembamba, mama se kindjie  
 Siembamba, mama se kindjie  
 – draai sy nek om, gooi hom in die sloot  
 trap op sy kop dan is hy dood.

[Siembamba, mommy’s little baby  
 Siembamba, mommy’s little baby  
 – twist his neck around, chuck him the ditch  
 step on his head to make sure he’s dead]

Whatever the origin of this lullaby might be, danger and violence clearly enter the domestic sphere and the everyday in these lyrics. Daan’s song for Adilson Cassamba registers the same sense of menace in the image of the ‘bambino’ with ‘bloetsproetsel,’ where the phrase ‘bloedsproetsel geschpritztes’ suggests something like ‘spritzed with bloodfreckles’ – the strange delicacy of the image serving to underscore the extreme horror of the child beaten to death with an iron pipe.

Through Daan, Van Niekerk pursues language beyond meaning, language purely for its sound value. On the other hand, she also identifies with Sus. Van Niekerk *splits* her ‘authorial voice’ between the articulations of different characters. These are distinct but different impulses in her authorial onslaught. Daan registers the material decomposition of sense and coherence. Sus, on the other hand, registers the ‘census’ function of the writer, the avid newspaper reader and recorder of social ills, all the ‘bad shit’ that’s going down. The one creates an index of social ills, the other throws any idea of coherence in ‘clarifying’ matters into great doubt. How does one go about ‘sorting out’ shit? In Daan’s world one drowns in it, singing as one sinks. However, this seems to place the writer/artist in the position of Daan, with his lyrical but idiolectic, incoherent poetry and his autoeroticism, who obsessively reads through the newspapers and cuts out the names of the victims, but is ultimately himself a victim.

As mentioned above, Van Niekerk identifies her own situation most with that of Sus, who is the ‘record-keeper,’ constantly leaving for the Netherlands. In Act One Sus states:

Ek is ’n vuurvlieg. Ek trek my konklusies by my eie lig. My geheue speel my nie parte nie, my rede vier hoogty. Moorde, verkragtings, oorvalle, voorvalle, ek is Sus Sensus, my

logboek is vol, ek het oorsig, ek is sardonies, ek gaan weg, ek is die buitevrou, kleef my nie aan nie.

[I am a firefly. I draw my own conclusions by my own light. My memory does not deceive me, my reason reigns supreme. Murders, rapes, attacks, incidents, I am Sus Census, my logbook is full, I have the birds' eye view, I am sardonic, I am leaving, I am the outside-woman, do not cling to me.] (p. 4)

Sus describes an outsider status here: she creates her own light, draws her own conclusions, is comfortable in her sardonic distance from the world, and is always leaving. Van Niekerk seems to be using this character to comment on the position of the writer as an objective outsider and individualist, an observer who like the conferencier in cabaret, performs an objective gaze of sorts, presenting events coolly, dispassionately and ironically. The role of Sus appears to problematise the notion of an intermediary who might take up a 'defined position' ['duidelike posisie'] (Interview), or who presents a 'coherent choice.' Sus is the one who catalogues the murders, the rapes, the incidents, the accidents.

In a promise that emphasises her desire for distance, Sus tells Daan: 'I will write, letters through the air, I am white, I am the distance, I work with Excel' ['Ek sal skryf, briewe deur die lug, ek is wit, ek is die afstand, ek werk met Excel'] (p. 5). Meanwhile Daan, whose idiolect does not allow him to coherently verbalise his pain and anxiety, tries to draw her attention through an expressionist enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. He also throws his newspaper clippings – short reports on the deaths of children – into the air, scattering them on the floor. The 'distance' that Sus desires seems to be a distance from this horrible, abject body: the tortured body of Christ, and the raped, murdered body of Anastasia W – indeed, the body politic.

Despite her self-proclaimed objective omniscience, Sus remains blatantly ignorant of the events in her own parlour, and her frequent absences allow Savage and Lovemore to abuse Daan, imprisoning him in the pit-latrine while they scheme. So, in a sense the price of her 'objectivity' – her distance – must be paid by Daan, the one who does not have the luxury of frequent, or regular, escape. He is mired in the shit. And he has his face shoved into it by the vengeful, acquisitive, and entitled former underclass. This characterological split might be read as the impasse faced by the socially aware writer – the observer who both seeks distance for indexical recording, but who must also register enmeshment in the deep shit that's going down, and who must in fact also remain mired in it as a condition of writerly existence in this excremental overall condition from which the 'play' emerges.

Ultimately, it appears that in avoiding recourse to a 'civil,' 'habitable' position, the play embodies the contradictions of the artist's position in South Africa in this impasse, registered by the characterological split. The reader/viewer is enjoined to occupy continually a shifting position which, like Jensma's 'i,' 'lodges fleetingly in diverse sites of meaning while it simultaneously unravels in unceasing dissemination.' Van Niekerk's text performs a vast spectrum of the many discursive positions available in Afrikaans in the 'new' South Africa, none of which, ultimately, is able to articulate a redemptive position. In this world carnival *is* Ndebele's oft-cited 'ordinary,' and the language of the play registers the rupture and fragmentation of language under the ever-mutable energies of the carnivalesque.

## Notes

1. Van Niekerk is the author of formally unconventional and discursively explosive works such as *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het*, *Triomf*, *Agaat*, *Memorandum* and *Die Sneeuslaper*.
2. In a letter in *Die Burger* (9 April 2011) Mrs Hermien Basson of Wellington suggests that in supporting the production, the University of Stellenbosch has failed in its educational function, and that the production is a misuse of the donor money provided by the L.W. Hiemstra Trust and the Het Jan Marais Nationale Fonds.
3. Sus and Daan are two characters who will be well known to those readers/viewers who read the Afrikaans 'Sus en Daan' children's books (comparable to the 'Dick and Jane' books), a foundation phase reader series which has been in use since the 1950s. There is a dual significance in Van Niekerk's choice of names. First, these characters served as 'alter egos' for children learning how to read and speak Afrikaans, as Elbie Henning illustrates in her article 'Finding the real culprit' (2011). The names would thus be very familiar to some audience members and readers, and would also evoke an association with the act of learning language – a significant device in a play that performs a 'language funeral.' Second, as can be seen in Jan-Jan Joubert's comment in his 10 April 2011 review in *Rapport*, these names are associated with memories of a carefree childhood. They are therefore also a catalyst for nostalgia, which, as we argue, is a central preoccupation of the play.
4. An attempt to hold a language funeral for a certain kind of language.
5. In a letter to *Die Burger* (7 April 2011) Val Marsh of Groot-Brakrivier writes about her experience of seeing the play. She describes the audience members streaming from the auditorium in an 'almost-tsunami,' and her decision not to be a 'victim' of such 'verbal and visual crudeness' leads to her 'fighting back with her feet' and also walking out. Marsh suggests that not a single audience member was unaware of the horrendous crime statistics in South Africa, or the moral bankruptcy of South African society, and that they were unwilling to be 'raped' by theatre. Marsh's response is typical of those by audience members who considered the production immoderate and tasteless.
6. See the reader's comments under the online letters 'Teatergangers moes so iets te wagte wees' (*Die Burger* 9 April 2011) and 'Verhoog-kruheid laat mense loop' (*Die Burger* 7 April 2011).
7. Like *Anastasia W*, *Spyt* is a sexually explicit piece that debuted at the ABSA KKNK in 2011.
8. Sordid, vile, offensive. See Andries Bezuidenhout's blog on Versindaba.
9. Van Niekerk, in her interview with the authors of this article (personal communication, 27 February 2012), describes 'the serious and worrisome [sorglike] subject of the text: social decomposition [verwording] and brutalisation, the violence committed against defenceless people, especially the killing and ruination of the most vulnerable – children more than any other class'. She adds: 'Perhaps, in the wake of the bureaucratised, consciously administered "holocaust" of apartheid, we are now living in a kind of *umbureaucratised*, *unadministered* "holocaust" – a natural "holocaust," or a "holocaust" of "spontaneous" or "helpless" or "irremediable" oppression, and the question arises whether, as a writer, one should/could remain silent in the face of this oppression. The situation is indeed "unspeakable," if one considers the behaviour of the government, the growing class differences, crime statistics, AIDS statistics, road accident statistics and child deaths against the values and ideals set out in the [South African] Constitution. Murder and mayhem, destruction, neglect, accidents and illness might be read as symptomatic of a country that is finally paying back – in the form of a tragicomedy of an apparently unavoidable and fatal neo-colonial grab, batter, rape and destroy – the debt incurred by rampant, violent and ongoing colonisation.'
10. In one of the printed media interviews about *Anastasia W* Van Niekerk comments that the play is 'merske [*sic*] snaaks, dis die effek wat ek op die gehoor wil hê! Hulle moet die heelyd voel ha-ha-ha, en dan moet hulle dink o-o-o! Dis baie naby aan die goed wat in *Triomf* aangaan. Jy lag jou dood, maar dis eintlik *terrible*'. ['It's terribly funny, that's the effect I want to have on the audience: throughout, they must feel ha-ha-ha, but then they

- must think o-o-o. It's very close to the kind of thing going on in *Triomf*. You laugh yourself to death, but actually it's *terrible*.'] (Brümmer 2010, p. 10).
11. In her interview with us Van Niekerk lists the other members of this writer's collective: Ena Jansen, Irna van Zyl, Hanlie Malan, Johann Pretorius and Marianne de Jongh. She notes that they were all 'bourgeois girls', all 'lesbian women', 'fully and unanimously out of the closet', most of them working in academia or the arts industry (personal communication, 27 February 2012).
  12. Mbembe uses the term 'commandement' 'in the way it was used to denote colonial authority, that is, in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey them, without, of course, discussing them' (1992, p. 30). While democratic South Africa might appear to be beyond colonial structures of power and coercion, continuing police brutality, the mooted Protection of Information bill and the continued exploitation and marginalisation of the poor by the political-economic power elites, suggests that the logic of the 'commandement' persists in contemporary South Africa.
  13. Baby coffins.
  14. Treppie Benade is one of the Benades of Van Niekerk's novel *Triomf*. Shaun de Waal describes the Benades as a 'violent, incestuous, alcohol-saturated family', who 'represent the "poor whites" courted and favoured by the Nationalist government' and given new houses in the suburb of Triomf which, 'with its hubristic name, was . . . famously built on the ruins of the demolished Sophiatown' (De Waal 1999). Treppie is 'poetic' and has a 'huge problem with nominalism and realism'. De Waal also quotes Van Niekerk describing Treppie as 'representative of the bloody-minded anarchist strain within the Afrikaner bosom'.
  15. Gareth Cornwell suggests that the 'problem of evaluation' when dealing with 'protest literature' is that we tend to dismiss as 'inferior' literature which 'actively seeks some sort of moral or political conversion' (2007, p. 185). In his reading of the poetry of James Matthews, Cornwell argues that literature that serves a social function acquires value through its fulfilment of that function, but that value is necessarily provisional and contingent: 'we have ultimately to acknowledge that this is "short-term" writing, sustained only by its topicality, and destined to perish alongside the social and political system of which it is so urgently expressive' (p. 189).
  16. Miki Flockemann notes that the development of what she calls the 'staging of complicity' in South African theatre is shaped by three 'broadly defined performance modalities which shape current engagements with complicity. These modalities are identified by the adjectives "thick" (as in densely layered, complex, deep), "reflective" (as in reflecting upon as well as revealing), and "hard" (in the sense of direct, uncompromising, difficult to penetrate)' (2011, p. 129). Flockemann, adapting the term 'thick description' as employed in the work of Clifford Geertz, describes the first modality, 'thick theatre', as 'theatre that is richly layered, attempts to give physical expression to unspoken and half-recognised experiences, draws on local histories and vernacular traditions, and often incorporates multimedia performance styles that unsettle surface realities and "given" knowledge. In the process the spectator can become a co-author of meanings generated, and the relationship paradigms between those situated as host, or guest, or stranger, become blurred . . . At the same time, the term "thick" in the sense of deep and difficult to access also refers to experimental theatre characterised by its search for a new language of artistic expression and for finding expression for the 'inner life' of the unconscious' (p. 133).
  17. It is interesting that De Beer should compare the play to Foot Newton's *Tshepang*, also a tale about baby rape, since, as Lucy Valerie Graham argues in her article "'Save us all": "baby rape" and post-apartheid narratives', *Tshepang* (the new name given to the raped girl-child, meaning 'hope') as well as Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi*, 'present sacrificial characters whose suffering becomes elevated in redemptive national narratives' (2008, p. 105). There is, then, a sense of redemption and a hope for the rehabilitation of the deeply damaged social body in *Tshepang* that is completely absent in *Anastasia W*, which ends with the confirmation that the South African social order is beyond redemption.

18. This issue with the length of the play does also raise the question of time in the play. In his discussion of Ralph Ziman's *Jerusalema*, Dawid de Villiers suggests that the film represents a post-1994 South Africa that is the 'eternal present of the *eschaton*, the new world which is also the last world. In logical terms this world is irredeemable, for the simple reason that it has already been redeemed' (2009, p. 12). Van Niekerk's play seems to register the present moment in South Africa with this same sense of the 'eternal present of the *eschaton*', a futureless world which offers economic opportunity and no redemption.
19. Crime fiction, however, generally does not crack the nod for the major South African literary prizes, an indication of how the polarised views around the notion of 'crime' can be seen to be making their mark even in the 'economy of prestige' – a phrase borrowed from James F. English – that is entailed in literary prize-giving. English's book, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005), deals with the exchange or 'intraconversion' of symbolic capital and economic capital.
20. Johan Burger (2009, p. 4), in an Editorial in the *South African Crime Quarterly*, reports that '[t]he good news about the murder rate is that it achieved an overall decrease of 44 per cent since it peaked at 67.9 per 100 000 in 1995/96'. The Institute of Security Studies (ISS, www.iss.co.za) has its head office in Pretoria, with branches in Cape Town, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, and Dakar.
21. Huntley, a white South African, was granted political asylum in Canada – later revoked – on the grounds that criminals were targeting white South Africans more than other groups and that the state could not guarantee the safety of whites in the country.
22. Kynoch (2012, p. 3) argues that '[h]igh crime rates have been a feature of life in many black townships and informal settlements for the past hundred years or more,' noting that this is a history which has been charted in a significant number of scholarly works in which an urban African population is victimised by police, criminals and politicised conflicts. Kynoch cites Charles van Onselen's *New Nineveh* (1982), Clive Glaser's *Bo-Tsotsi* (2000) and Don Pinnock's work on street gangs in Cape Town, *The Brotherhoods* (1984), among others.
23. In a wide-ranging analysis of white narratives about crime, Kynoch (2012, p. 20) concludes partly as follows: 'The crime epidemic is the most visceral reminder for whites of their diminishing status and protestations against crime provide an outlet for articulating anxieties about the new order without openly resorting to racist attacks.' Kynoch (2012, p. 20) cites Antony Albeker, a respected writer about policing in post-apartheid South Africa, as commenting that the 'fear of crime has sometimes become a conveniently "apolitical" vehicle through which a disenfranchised elite can mourn its loss of power without sounding nostalgic for an unjust past' (cf. Albeker 2007, p. 64).
24. Points attributed to the Comaroffs are drawn from notes on a talk given by Jean and John Comaroff at Stellenbosch University's Department of English on 9 May 2011 entitled 'Crime and Writing.'
25. 'There's nothing quite like carnival / its hotchpotch and its big hubbub / in which to hide your protests.'
26. In her collection of essays, *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler argues for an ethics of vulnerability, where dislocation from First World privilege allows one to 'reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways' (2004, p. xii).
27. This has an interesting historical resonance with the history of Afrikaner nationalism: in his seminal work, *Die Afrikaners*, historian Herman Giliomee recounts that in 1975 the Afrikaner Broederbond's Executive Council 'noted with alarm that Afrikaner businessmen were no longer attaching great value to nationalist goals.' It said that Afrikaner businessmen 'considered economic growth and materialist considerations a higher priority than the freedom and sovereignty of the Afrikaner people' (2003, p. 544).
28. In his unpublished MA thesis Petrus du Preez (2003) discusses the power of ritual in theatre. Du Preez suggests that structured performances such as those in theatre owe their existence to ritual (p. 63).

29. See Petrus du Preez's comprehensive essay 'Babel en Breytenbach' (2004), in which he traces the different possible ways of creating meaning or understanding of the seemingly 'incomprehensible' dialogue in *Boklied*.
30. The title refers to Treppie's loathing of the wallpaper depicting pastoral scenes that he sees when he spies on the girls in his neighbourhood. The poem registers the desire for an encounter with 'real' or 'natural' beauty, as opposed to the simulacrum offered by the wallpaper pastoral.
31. The disintegration of language as an image of a tortured and alienated individual is not new to Afrikaans literature – similar devices might be found in Breyten Breytenbach's plays *Boklied* (1998) and *Die Toneelstuk* (2001), for example.
32. Three-year-old Adilson Cassamba was beaten to death with an iron pipe in October 2006 in the township of Philippi, just north of Cape Town. His father's girlfriend, Cynthia Buyiselwa, accused Adilson's father, Angelino Cassamba of the murder. According to reports, Buyiselwa was seen walking around Philippi with the body of the dead child, and was therefore charged as an accessory to murder. Buyiselwa and Cassamba were acquitted of the murder in March 2010. The judge, Siraj Desai, acknowledged that the system of justice had failed Adilson Cassamba and his mother, Cynthia Hendricks, in not being able to conclusively prove alleged guilt (See reports by Serra 2010 and Schroeder 2010, online).

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