

**(RE-)INVENTING OUR SELVES/OURSELVES: IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN
CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT FICTION CYCLES**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

at

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

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January 2014

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Acknowledgements

This work is based on research supported in part by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (sabbatical grant SGD13021617369).

I would also like to thank the following for their support in the completion of the project: My long-suffering supervisor, Gareth Cornwell.

The men in my life – Mike, Kyle, Baldrick, Gimli and Marley – without whom it would not be worth living.

Those friends whose warmth and humour has kept me sane: Bridget, Buzo, Carol, Karen and Minesh, Paul and Carol, and Thando, in particular. I owe a particular debt to Karen, for editing and reformatting under pressure.

My dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my parents, John and Hazel Hampton.

Ernest Hemingway perhaps wrote the best six-word short story ever but, in his recent novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, Julian Barnes devised an equally poignant two-word short story, which I repeat here: “Sorry, Mom”.

Abstract

Within and between the discourses of interacting narratives,
transversions question boundaries of identity ...

– Fiona Gonçalves (1995: 68)

In this study I focus on a number of collections of short fiction by the South African writers Joël Matlou, Sindiwe Magona, Zoë Wicomb and Ivan Vladislavić, all of which evince certain of the characteristics of short story cycles or sequences. In other words, they display what Forrest L. Ingram describes as “a double tendency of asserting the individuality of [their] components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole”. The cycle form, thus defined, is characterised by a paradoxical yet productive and frequently unresolved tension between “the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit”, between “the one and the many”, and between cohesion and fragmentation. It is this “*dynamic* structure of connection and disconnection” which singularly equips the genre to represent the interrelationship of singular and collective identities, or the “coherent multiplicity of community”. Ingram, for example, asserts that “Numerous and varied connective strands draw the co-protagonists of any story cycle into a single community. ... However this community may be achieved, it usually can be said to constitute the central character of a cycle”. Not unsurprisingly, then, in its dominant manifestations over much of the twentieth century the short story cycle demonstrated a marked inclination towards regionalism and the depiction of localised enclaves, and this tendency towards “place-based short story cycles” in which topographical unity is a conspicuous feature was as pronounced in South Africa as elsewhere. However, the specific collections which are my concern here increasingly employ innovative and self-reflexive narrative strategies that unsettle generic expectations and interrogate the notions of regionalism and community conventionally associated with the short story cycle. My investigation seeks to explain this shift in emphasis, and its particular significance within the South African context.

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Introduction: The “Storm Years” to the “Cusp Time” – Critical Responses to South Africa in Transition¹

At this moment of transformation in the country ... what we hope for is not so much fictions which imagine the future in detail, but narrative structures that embrace choice or, if you will, stories that juggle and mix generic options.

– Elleke Boehmer (1998: 51)

The early nineties in South Africa witnessed a period of intense debate, not least in cultural, literary and academic circles, as it became clear that the demise of apartheid was imminent. In these spheres, prognoses of the shape a ‘new’ literature for a ‘post-apartheid’ South Africa would take, arguments on the relevance of postmodern and postcolonial theories to the South African situation and its cultural/literary products, and re-evaluations of the relationship between politics and aesthetics were especially prominent. Though the terms of and positions adopted within these debates were not entirely new (or unique to South Africa), as some somewhat acrimoniously pointed out, there was a certain sense of *gravitas* and historical poignancy to such discussions. In this anticipatory climate, two specific interventions by local commentators, both couched as critiques of the effects of ‘protest writing’, occasioned an unprecedented response. The most controversial of these was Albie Sachs’s paper “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”, first presented to an ANC in-house seminar on culture in 1989 and published in the *Weekly Mail* in February 1990. Briefly, Sachs questioned whether, on the verge of a transition to “a free and united” country, the South African populace was not “still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination”, and he called for a ban on the instrumentalist slogan “culture is a weapon of struggle”, since it had fostered “an impoverishment of our art” (1991: 117, 118).² Berating the ‘protest tradition’ for its endorsement of a reductive polarisation of positions and “solidarity criticism” (1991: 118), Sachs pointed to this type of writing’s suppression of complexity, ambiguity and irony, and its preoccupation with oppression and trauma to the exclusion of other aspects of human experience. He appealed, then, for greater artistic freedom in terms of both subject matter and style, and his rather vague advice to artists was simply to “write better poems and make better films and compose better music” (1991: 124). Nevertheless, somewhat programmatically, he stipulated that art in the future should emulate the Constitutional Guidelines laid down by the ANC, that is, by “building national unity and encouraging the development of a common patriotism, while fully recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity

of the country” (1991: 121). Hotly debated in the media and in political, cultural and academic forums, as a result of their apparently unorthodox deviation from ‘received’ policy and practice, Sachs’s pronouncements immediately generated at least two compilations of commentary in book form.³

The second perhaps less publicly polemical intervention during this period was the appearance of Njabulo Ndebele’s *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*, in 1991. Though these essays had been published individually in magazines and academic journals from 1984 onwards, their cumulative impact in a single volume had a significant bearing on the wider debates current in the early nineties, with the phrase ‘rediscovery of the ordinary’ accruing something of the force of a maxim or *leitmotif* in subsequent years.⁴ Ndebele’s central injunction, addressed to ‘black’ South African writers, was to relinquish the “unreflective rhetoric of protest” with its obsessive focus on the ‘spectacular’ confrontation of victim and oppressor, and to turn to the specificities of the “ordinary daily lives of people ... because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions” (1991: 62, 55). In other words, rather than merely rehearsing positions predetermined by the stunted binaric logic of the apartheid state, such writers should affirm the possibility of locating agency and resistance within the realm of the quotidian, and assert the autonomy and value of ‘black’ culture in its own right.⁵ For Ndebele, then:

the greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression. Structures which can severely compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society. For writers this means freeing the creative process itself from those very laws. It means extending the writer’s perception of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing.

(1991: 65)

In particular, Ndebele drew a distinction between the propagandist and the artist, a distinction premised on the recognition that the latter, “although desiring action, often with as much passion [as the former], can never be entirely free from the rules of irony ... the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction” (1991: 67). He advised writers to choose the “*storytelling*, narrative ambience” above the “*journalistic*, informational ambience”, to draw on the resources

provided by popular, oral storytelling traditions, and to turn to the complexities of rural peasant life as a theme, instead of fixating on urban experience (1991: 31, 32-33, 19-22).⁶

In the context of initial responses to Sachs's and Ndebele's contributions, and of the more general climate of re-evaluation and anticipation in the early nineties, particularly the hope emanating from many quarters that, as Gareth Cornwell put it, in the future "better writing ... which registers response to a decentred and less symbolically simplified society" (1991: 17) would emerge, it is significant that a number of critics were identifying texts that had *already* appeared in the eighties as emblematic of such a desirable shift in perspective. In particular, four collections of short fictions – Ndebele's own work, *Fools and Other Stories* (1983), Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* (1989), and Joël Matlou's *Life at Home and Other Stories* (1991) – had almost simultaneously been singled out and welcomed as representing a fresh direction in South African writing in English. This reception was premised in part on their renderings of the politically vexed issue of identity in this country and their refusal to be constrained by the reiteration of "an epistemology in which reality is conceived purely in terms of a total polarity of opposites" (Ndebele 1991: 58). But it was also founded on a recognition of the texts' adoption of a reflexive mode of narration and their innovative use of generically hybrid formats. Michael Neill, for example, commented that, in her "remarkable recent collection", Wicomb approached a "position in which the definitions of the white power structure, with its pathology of boundaries, are simply discarded". He then pronounced *Fools* "the most radical piece of fiction to come out of South Africa in recent years", adding the rider that this was "an odd claim to make of what looks like a fairly conventional collection of interlinked stories, forming, like Wicomb's, a loose *Bildungsroman*" (1990: 172). Noting Ndebele's collection's "perversely unpolitical" as opposed to "crude[ly] polemic[al]" stance, Neill's assessment focused especially on the eponymous story's "conscious articulation of the book's implicit repudiation of the old sterile dialectic of black and white" and its "deliberate open-endedness ... [which] not only resists sentimentality but is part of Ndebele's strategy against the teleological determinations of white history" (1990: 172, 175, 177).

In the same vein, André Brink cited both Wicomb's and Matlou's volumes as evidence of "exciting signs of renewal and reinvention" (1993: 55). He claimed that the "successive chapters" of *You Can't Get Lost* "may also be read as separate stories", that *Life at Home* was "arguably the most remarkable fiction by a black South African writer in years", and that, like

Wicomb's text, the latter "can be read either as a series of short stories or as a (very short) novel" (1993: 55). For Brink, "[t]he most striking feature" of both of these texts was "the way in which personal history is story" (1993: 53). Mike Kirkwood, in his introduction to Matlou's collection, asserted that the stories invoked "harrowing riddles of identity" (1991: 8), whereas Tony Morphet described them as "the creation of an extraordinarily self-aware, disordered consciousness ... the first stories from a black writer in English which, wittingly or unwittingly, employ a profoundly reflexive authorial strategy". Morphet added that the stories came across as "the verbalized terms of the internal circuits of a person who appears not to know that there is a community of any kind beyond himself" (1992: 140). In his article, a review of *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* entitled "Ordinary – Modern – Post-Modern", Morphet took issue with Ndebele's earlier identification of one of Matlou's stories ("Man Against Himself") as epitomising a "sense of the ordinary that is the very antithesis of spectacle" (1991: 50). By contrast, he claimed, "The ultimate paradox is that [Ndebele's] evocation of the pre-modern 'storyteller' should emerge from the storms of the 1980's as a post modern 'fabulist'" (1992: 140).⁷ Earlier, in a critique of both Sachs's and Ndebele's positions, Morphet argued that their "incorporative/formalist" notions of irony were subsumed by the teleology implicitly underpinning their respectively "celebratory" or "redemptive" narratives of the inevitable "ascendancy of the ANC" or the liberation of "the Black oppressed", and were thus ultimately "revisionist/relocative" in spirit and contradictory (1990: 100, 101). In proposing a third reading of the function of irony, one which "is *translocative* across the lines of the multiple discourses that are constructing the cultural nodes and spaces of the society", he nominated Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* as the "best and most recent example ... of th[e] form of work ... [in which] the intersections of different discourses open up not only the cross-cutting tracks of history but also the problematic relations between subjectivity and location" (1990: 103).⁸

The intriguing coincidence that all of the above works were not only characterised by a sophisticated reflexivity, but also positioned somewhat ambiguously on the continuum between the miscellaneous collection of short stories, the integrated collection of linked stories or short story cycle, and the novel proper, raises the question of just *how* and *why* their representations of the relation between identity and place, community and region, and subjectivity and location might be held to capture or perhaps herald an altered sense of this nexus at the time they were produced in the eighties – a particularly intransigent decade in this country's history. Prior to this

period, the short story cycle in South Africa had largely been employed to convey an impression of the idiosyncratic attributes (both cohesive and divisive) of a particular group or community, and a verisimilitudinous impression of a specific locale. As Trudi Adendorff convincingly demonstrates in her groundbreaking study of “representative South African short story cycles” by Pauline Smith, Herman Charles Bosman, Bessie Head and Ahmed Essop, all of these earlier collections evince “a noticeable degree of integration” which may be attributed to each writer’s “evocation of a particular place or region, and its community”. In each case, Adendorff argues, “the reader’s awareness of the character of the region and its community is formed through the process of recurrence and development, a process which transforms the region and the community into the sustained personae of the cycle” (1985: 6, 2, 144). Thus cohesive or centripetal strategies are utilised to foreground notions of a unified, if internally fraught and externally threatened, collective *ethnos*, and the areas depicted frequently appear to have a compelling influence on their inhabitants’ sense of ‘belonging’. In each of these texts, then, identity, community and place are inextricably, if not deterministically in some instances, linked. Given the fact that these four writers are not the only ones to have produced collections integrated by virtue of the unity of place and community (a point to which I return later, in Chapter Two), it seems true to claim that a South African ‘tradition’ of regionalist short story cycles exists which is similar to those established in other parts of the world.

Though Ndebele’s *Fools* does feature a particular community and locale, Matlou’s, Wicomb’s and Vladislavić’s texts increasingly appear to deviate from this collectivist and regionalist paradigm. Firstly, they advertise a growing and self-reflexive awareness of the discursive and narrative foundations of identity-construction in the local context, and undermine essentialist conceptions of stable, unified subject-positions, whether single or plural. In other words, they approximate a position perhaps most succinctly articulated by Stuart Hall:

identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. ... identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside, representation. ... They arise from a narrativization of the self, but the necessarily

fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity

(1996a: 4)

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, “identities are the names we give to the different ways in we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (1990: 225). Secondly, the stories in Matlou’s, Wicomb’s and Vladislavić’s collections destabilise notions of place and ‘belonging’, by foregrounding the fact that “[p]laces are sites in which history can be negotiated” (Middleton and Woods 2000: 37) or viewing ‘place’ as a human and discursive construct, a locus of identity and meaning which may be contested. Though the terms ‘place’ and ‘space’ are sometimes used interchangeably, Yi-Fu Tuan’s distinction is helpful here: “‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place’. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (1977: 6). Thus space refers to raw or contingent reality and is, like history, “*not* a text, not a narrative ... but ... as an absent cause ... inaccessible to us except in textual form” (Jameson 1981: 35). Significantly, then, these specific texts not only deviate in certain significant respects from their predecessors in the South African context, but also reflect trends discernible in the short fiction cycle genre internationally and, of course, in fiction more generally. That is, they incorporate broadly postmodern narrative strategies and poststructuralist and postcolonial conceptions of the constitution of the subject and the mediative role of language and narrative in producing identity, community and ‘place’. Though initiated at a much earlier stage elsewhere, these trends had largely been absent from South African English fiction, and specifically short story collections, until the late eighties.⁹

This anomaly has generally been ascribed to the emphasis on ‘documentary’ or ‘social’ realism – or what Nkosi termed “the stranglehold of naturalism” (qtd in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: xvi) – in South African writing under apartheid, an emphasis dictated by the ethical imperative to ‘bear witness’ to and expose social injustice.¹⁰ By the late eighties, however, critics were registering a move away from this type of realism, and the increasingly widespread use, in local writing, of the type of metafictional strategies, “destabilizing devices” (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 126), and “defamiliarizing vocabularies” (Engle 1991: 117) commonly associated with the linguistic or “textual turn” (Attwell 1993: 1). Indeed, some were identifying not simply the need for but the emergence and confluence of new forms of theorising, reading and writing in South Africa. Kelwyn Sole, for example, announced that “Formal innovations and interesting new types of approach to the interface between the individual and the community, between the

private and the political, have been apparent inside the country for a while” (1991: 84). And Morphet maintained that, in the academy, the impact of “poststructuralist and postmodern theorisations” on discussions of “cultural practice” (1990: 102) had resulted in changed conceptions of history and agency. In the latter’s opinion, a newly emergent “settlement” or “phase in ... cultural [and intellectual] formulations” (1990: 100) was in the process of replacing both its formalist/liberal and revisionist/Marxist antecedents, a development which he associated, as indicated earlier, with the form of “translocative irony” he identified in Vladislavić’s first collection.

At roughly the same time, arguing for an “indigenisation” of imported “metropolitan theories”, Isabel Hofmeyr pointed out that “at least one life South African texts have to be part of is the swirling universe of discourse, ideas and political imaginings” (1993: 19-20). Her sentiments were echoed by David Attwell:

The fact that South Africa does not share [the essentially metropolitan experience of post-1968 disillusionment, its accommodation to the postindustrial age, and its subsequent celebration of relativist experimentation] does not mean that postmodernist techniques do not percolate through its literary culture, taking on new forms and acquiring a different animating spirit.

(1993: 21)

It is in relation to his own attempts, as a literary academic, to provide a reading of the novels of J.M. Coetzee, that Attwell identifies his “frustration with forms of revisionism ... which provided ... precious little [of use] to come to terms with such things as narrativity, representation, reflexivity and discursive authority” (1991: 130-131). As he notes, from the early seventies onwards Coetzee (somewhat idiosyncratically in the local English context) had been producing a mode of fiction which “draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation” (1993: 20). This Attwell attributes to Coetzee’s particular “intellectual biography”, on the one hand, and to his “complicated postcoloniality” (1993: 4) and “the implications of a potentially revolutionary historical situation” (1993: 26), on the other. The later adoption of reflexive narrative strategies by writers in the eighties, specifically those writers that are the focus of this study, might likewise in part be ascribed to *their* “intellectual biographies” and critical and literary influences (the latter perhaps including the precedent set by

Coetzee himself).¹¹ However, the overriding sense of urgency that characterised the political (and cultural) climate of this country in that decade, particularly under successive states of emergency (not a potential but a *de facto* “revolutionary historical situation”), produced among some what Coetzee (though in reference to other contexts) terms “reflect[ions] on the nature and the crisis of fiction, of fictionalizing” (1992: 67) in a specifically charged, localised sense. Michael Chapman argued at the time that this reflexivity was particularly evident in Coetzee’s own confrontation with “the precariousness of his own authority on the South African scene, but also of the authority of the literary imagination” (1988: 36). In a more general sense, though, as Stefan Helgesson puts it: “the 1980s brought a number of critical debates on representation, artistic integrity and political responsibility to a head ... Likewise, in the fiction published around this time – without necessarily causing or being caused by the critical debates – a sense of crisis was more than traceable” (2004: 3).

The exigencies of this interregnum Helgesson insightfully characterises as having produced “writing in crisis” in both the political and literary senses (2004: 2).¹² That is, it gave rise to fiction not only absorbed by ‘the sense of an ending’, or intimations of the imminent and immanent collapse of apartheid, and projections of the as-yet unimaginable future, but also fiction pointedly undermining its own narrative premises and foregrounding, rather than eliding, its enunciative processes. Both of these responses entailed a “paradigmatic shift” from “thinking within” to “thinking beyond”, though in the case of the move to reflexivity this shift was of a different, less temporally-defined nature:

Without moving ahead in time, a number of novels and stories also persistently constructed scenarios of the ‘beyond’, that is, of a subjective and/or social space that was not defined, circumscribed or constricted by the currently dominant force of apartheid. However, such an ambition could not be carried through – unproblematically – in terms of straightforward representation, since the forms of representation available in the English language themselves bore (and bear) the mark of the history that was to be challenged. Thus, identifying representational convention itself as part of the problem, several writers implicitly (like Njabulo Ndebele) or explicitly (like J.M. Coetzee) addressed the crisis by disrupting representational and generic expectations in their fiction.

(Helgesson 2004: 3-4)

Though persuasive and astute, Helgesson’s line of argument here, formulated with hindsight, deviates markedly from critical views of the impact of the interregnum on fiction writing that were current at the time, views which were characterised by the contrasts drawn – perhaps

somewhat reductively – between what were perceived to be the respective ‘white’ and ‘black’ responses (both political and aesthetic) to this crisis.

On the one hand, a sense of uncertainty, suspension and doom, of *fin de siècle* entropy, was almost exclusively attributed to ‘white’ writers; whilst on the other, an opposing sense of assertive group solidarity in a just struggle with a liberatory *telos* was ascribed to their ‘black’ counterparts. Mbulelo Mzamane, for example, writing of ‘black’ novels written in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising in 1976, comments that “the community as a whole is the hero in these novels. Collective concerns triumph over purely personal aspirations” (1991: 192). Michael Chapman similarly remarks that:

Where Soweto novels [Mongane Wally Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981), Miriam Tlali’s *Amandla!* (1981), Sipho Sepamla’s *A Ride in the Whirlwind* (1981), and Mzamane’s own *The Children of Soweto* (1982)] differed markedly from novels by white Africans is in their anticipation of hope: instead of dwelling on the morbid symptoms of the interregnum, they saw amid the blood the images of painful, inevitable rebirth. The organic metaphors suit the romance-epic split.

(2003: 396)

The pessimistic position ascribed to ‘white’ writers was ostensibly best captured in the tropes of a literal and/or figurative state of emergency, of apocalypse and wasteland in their work, which was characterised by Malvern Van Wyk Smith as a “literature of dread” (1990: 123). Initially adopting a disparaging view of this trend, Van Wyk Smith viewed it as a manifestation of ‘white’ paranoia (versus ‘black’ optimism), and linked it stylistically to what Stephen Slemon describes as the “apotheosis of negativity” (1989: 14) in postmodernist fiction:

the very titles of recent works (J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980, Menán du Plessis’s *A State of Fear*, 1983, Christopher Hope’s *White Boy Running*, 1987, André P. Brink’s *States of Emergency*, 1988, and Kelwyn Sole’s *The Blood of Our Silence*, 1988) suggest a white society *in extremis*, a rising sense of urgency and menace as “the colonial mind contemplates its own demise” ... The urgent defamiliarization of the South African “reality” has become a major enterprise of almost all current serious writing. Irony, satire, disoriented narratives, obsessive confessionals, fabulation, and metafictional speculation are some of the means to which contemporary white writers resort. Thus they translate the failure of the South African polity to come to humane and sane accommodations as a “failure” of traditional narrative modes, in which the author/narrator occupies a site of divine omniscience, authority and manipulation. Increasingly, therefore, modes of social realism, chronological narration and a detached point of view have been abandoned in favour of highly fragmented structures mediated by deeply destabilized mentalities. “A

state of emergency” has come to occupy the republic of white letters as well, in sharp contrast to the confidence of affirmative socio-political black writing.

In much of this writing ... the motif of “Waiting for the Barbarians” ... has become a controlling trope for a guilty and neurotic expectation of a nemesis of dispossession about to be enacted ... All these texts competently wield the metafictional techniques of post-modernism, but in their very success they also witness to a literature of dread that increasingly inscribes its own and its culture’s imminent demise on the recorded reality.¹³

(1990: 122-123)

The perception articulated by Van Wyk Smith above – that the “metafictional techniques of post-modernism” were restricted to ‘white’ writing, and that such techniques of necessity espoused either a neurotic or a frivolous perspective – was shared by many. Because of “its alleged inability to act upon the world, its ‘self-indulgence’, its withdrawal into ‘mere’ textuality” (Brink 1998: 18) and its supposed initiation of a “cult of the merely relativist and artful” (Attwell 1993: 1), postmodern metafiction was viewed as decadent and neo-conservative or reactionary in impulse. Poststructuralist theory, too, came under attack for related reasons. Chapman, for example, claimed that “The original ‘revolutionary’ intention of the poststructuralist response ... has been emptied of social circumstance and adopted as a style, a new Eurocentric intellectual acuteness which manages quite adroitly to separate ‘art’ from the real conditions of oppressive orders” (1988: 36). This verdict he has reiterated more bluntly recently: “The danger of the poststructuralist approach ... is an endless deferral of moral consequence which, in an agonised society, can merely provoke the impatience of those for whom reality is less an elusive signifier, more a crack on the head by a police truncheon” (2003: 389). Interestingly, however, Van Wyk Smith himself was later to retract to some extent and explain what he saw as the appeal of both postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches to writing in South Africa in the transition period of the early nineties:

apartheid represents a social text that tried to write us all into a particular scenario ... the only authorised story. ... In such a context the disruptive, transgressive, deconstructive strategies of poststructuralism and postmodernism hold obvious procedural and thematic attractions for any oppositional writer. Not only can the individual witness (“my truth: how I lived in these times, in this place”) be inserted into the national story as a transgressive sub-plot, but the national narrative itself, plus all the protest narratives which have been generated in opposition to it, may now be subjected to the discontinuities, the indeterminacies, and the provisionalities of a discursive mode that fundamentally resists all master myths.

(1991: 93)

Nevertheless, Lewis Nkosi remained unconvinced, and in 1998 was still insisting that:

there exists an unhealed – I will not say incurable – split between black and white writing, between on the one side an urgent need to document and bear witness and on the other the capacity to go furlough, to loiter, and to experiment although as another outgrowth of poststructuralist thought and practice, postmodernism appears to have taken some hold in South African literature, it is a movement wholly occupied, managed, and dominated by white writers, with black writers seeming either to ignore it or not even to have heard of it. ... Much black writing ... operates in an autonomous region entirely untouched by contemporary cultural theory.

(75-77)

At exactly the same time, however, Elleke Boehmer was expressing the unorthodox opinion that fiction by both ‘white’ and ‘black’ writers in the eighties evinces the sense of suspension and pessimism generally attributed to the former category only – “the moment of the end ... a state of frozen anticipation” (Attwell 1993: 5). Moreover, she asserted that none of the texts she cites (Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* [1980], *Life & Times of Michael K* [1983] and *Age of Iron* [1990], Gordimer’s *July’s People* [1981] and *My Son’s Story* [1990], Tlali’s *Amandla* [1980], Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood* [1981], Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* [1986], and Menán du Plessis’ *Longlive!* [1989]) employs either innovative or postmodernist strategies. In her assessment, then:

what a reader picks up in more recent work – especially during the last phase of apartheid – is a suspension of vision, a hemming in as opposed to a convinced and convincing opening up or testing of options. Choices of plot and style are marked by a kind of hovering, even ... a cultural or artistic pessimism, a loss of will, sometimes also by a concern with stylistic or political orthodoxy. This sense of delimitation is perhaps pointed up most clearly at that place in the narrative which involves both retrospection and anticipation – the ending. And this at a time, significantly, when under the critical banner of ‘postmodernism’ writers elsewhere were experimenting in any number of intriguing ways with notions of provisionality and undecidability, and with a heterogeneity of narrative techniques.

(1998: 44-45)

Many, as is evident in the preceding discussion, would disagree – some, like Chapman and Nkosi, by insisting that a distinction be drawn between ‘white’ and ‘black’ writers, not only in the eighties or under apartheid more generally, but also in the years since. In 2002, for example, the latter claimed that, in South Africa: “the lack of ... ‘the shared assumptions of national culture’ has been responsible not ... for a richly heterogeneous but a monotonously rent and

schizoid literature” (2002: 241). Others, like Helgesson, maintain that, while the notion of a bifurcation between ‘black’ and ‘white’, realist and postmodern writing in South Africa might hold “as a general observation”, Nkosi’s claim that much ‘black’ writing is wholly indifferent to “contemporary cultural theory” is untenable – especially if one considers writers such as Ndebele, Wicomb, Zakes Mda, Mandla Langa, Chris van Wyk, Andries Oliphant and Johnny Masilela (Helgesson 2004: 243 n.6).¹⁴

Whether the conflicting views expressed here should or *can* be satisfactorily ‘resolved’ or not is, however, a matter outside of the scope of the present study. Rather, my interest lies in the ways in which the *inherently* provisional, undecidable and heterogeneous generic possibilities opened up by the short story cycle form were experimented with in South African short fiction collections in the eighties – and, indeed, have been since. What *is* significant, for my purposes then, in most of the critical pronouncements reviewed above is their overriding focus on novels and general neglect of short fiction – and specifically of those texts which, by definition, are *neither* (or *not quite*) novels *nor* collections of independent short stories. Commenting on the ways in which the short story has generally been overlooked in South African criticism, Chapman points out that “Although [it] is a widespread and an important form of expression in southern Africa, critical commentary remains scattered”, and his later comment is salutary if provocative: “In making a case for the short story as the resilient tradition, I am aware that in South Africa the directing hand of white literary life has granted more importance to the novel” (2003: 383 n.6, 385).¹⁵ Despite his efforts to redress this oversight, Chapman’s adherence to an opposition between “stories of the [black] collective” and stories of the “[white] isolated self” (2003: 376) means that he fails to register the reflexive negotiations and interrogations of static notions both of identity and community that are apparent in a range of authors (both ‘black’ and ‘white’) working specifically within the short story *cycle* genre, a fundamentally hybrid and ambivalent rather than monadic form. Thus, for example, Chapman is able to claim that:

an absence of the concept ‘community’ in a great deal of white writing speaks not only of ‘individualising’ modes of literary representation, but of a long history of colonial displacement in Africa. In contrast, the stories of the African Njabulo Ndebele, the Muslim Ahmed Essop and the coloured writer Richard Rive have all utilised the well-made plot of inner motivation in order to erase isolation in favour of cultural typification. In observing people in their communities in Charterston location, in Indian Fordsburg, and in the coloured District Six, respectively, these three writers have granted restorative potential to damaged identities. Their stories – like those of Bessie Head – locate the

action in the sociable setting where healing, rather than incision, reveals itself as the ancient storytelling function brought to bear on modern conditions.

(2003: 380)

Though this is certainly true of certain aspects of *Fools* (and of Ndebele's redemptive formulations and appeal to writers to "consolidate the sense of a viable, psychologically self-sufficient community among the oppressed" [1991: 71] in his critical essays), Chapman's emphasis on the cohesive, collective impetus of the stories means that he occludes the disjunctions evident both within and among the individual narratives, and the schisms within the community depicted – conflicts which are hardly consistent with the homogeneity conferred by "cultural typification". Moreover, by reducing the stories to re-enactments of "the well-made plot of inner motivation" (an argument first put forward by Michael Vaughan [1990: 188-191]), Chapman disregards the ways in which Ndebele introduces a reflexive commentary incongruent with that tradition in the conventional modern short story. Thus, though the narratives *do* install the "truncated epiphanic" plot (Rohrberger and Burns 1982: 9) which is typical of impressionistic short fiction, they also call attention to their metadiscursive engagement in a form of cultural criticism at a remove from the primary diegetic level.

By the same token, the notion of indeterminacy and the use of a variety of disparate and perhaps incommensurable narrative strategies, both of which Boehmer claims are singularly absent (though this is a moot point) in the novels from the eighties to which she refers, are more than evident in Wicomb's, Matlou's and Vladislavić's collections, as the critics cited earlier intimate, and none projects a "sociable setting" or a sense of a collective identity or community (in Chapman's terms). All of these texts, in fact, predate the kinds of fiction that Boehmer hopes will emerge in the post-apartheid era, that is, "stories which mix and juggle generic options" (1998: 51). Structurally hinged on both continuity and discontinuity, unity and diversity, they stage the intersection and co-existence of contesting narratives of self and of community, whilst resisting the teleological impetus and "type of progressive development" (Shaw 1983: 158) associated with the conventional novel, *and* exceeding the fragmentary but self-contained integrity and coherence of the modern short story. Though it might be maintained, with some justification, that the short story cycle has *always* operated in much this way, that is, by dramatising a tension between "the one and the many" (Ingram 1971: 19), the introduction of a metafictional self-consciousness and of a scepticism or 'incredulity' towards the master-

narratives and inclusionary/exclusionary mechanisms that underpin and define conventional notions of ‘community’, ‘identity’ and ‘belonging’ in these collections constitutes a departure from previous practice. Taken together, these strategies gesture towards, and enact in fictional form, the potential for new understandings of South African culture to emerge, understandings which, in Wicomb’s own terms, “take as a point of departure a conflictual model of society where a variety of discourses will always render problematic the demands of one in relation to others and where discursive formations admit of cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs” (1990: 36). Implicit within this “culture of change”, Duncan Brown and Bruno Van Dyk similarly note, will be “the notion of cultural pluralism, with no single formula or orthodoxy being paramount” (1991: x).

One of the central claims of this study, then, is that, in South Africa in the contemporary period, the short fiction cycle form has emerged as especially appropriate to a rendering of the tensions and possibilities inherent in a multifarious and ruptured society in the process of attempting to transform itself into a unified but culturally diverse democracy. As Helgesson puts it, the imperative “to imagine a fractured society into wholeness” is “an affirmative project fraught with ambiguity” (2006: 29). An essential part of this imaginative undertaking entails the dismantling and deconstruction of the shibboleths and myths of this country’s colonial and apartheid past – the “dreary binarities of logocentrism (one of whose apotheoses was the apartheid system)” (Brink 1998: 19) – but not in order to replace these with yet another “anaesthetizing normalization of South African reality” (Pechey 1998: 72). Such a project entails a recognition of shifting and imbricated identities – of “multiple belongings” (Wicomb 1998: 105) – and of “a new space, a space filled with the potential to imagine difference differently” (Attridge & Jolly 1998: 11-12). This is, of course, as Helgesson cautions above, a precarious and precious space, a “space ... of incomplete, fugitive, yet necessary reinvention” (Attwell 2005: 204) – of re-inventing our selves and ourselves.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of this study presents a brief survey of critical recognition of the modern short story cycle, given that it has been a neglected and mis-recognised genre until fairly recently. I then discuss the generic characteristics of the form and, more specifically, the productive tension

it stages between “the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (Ingram 1971: 15) – or between fragmentation and cohesion, centrifugal and centripetal forces. However, any synchronic attempt to identify the innate characteristics and potentialities of a genre needs to be balanced by a diachronic account of its evolution, an account which takes into consideration the ways in which its shape has altered over time. Thus, in the remainder of the chapter, I provide a broad overview of the emergence and historical development of the short story cycle in various parts of the world, focusing on its conventional association with regionalism, its predilection for the representation of localised and/or marginalised groups (particularly those found in settler/immigrant societies), and its intrinsic structural ability to capture the interactive relationship between individual and community.

Against this background, in Chapter Two I trace the first appearance of short story cycles in English in South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and touch on some of the most prominent examples produced prior to the 1950s. In my discussion of this early phase, I place particular emphasis on the dualistic form colonialism assumed in this country, in an effort to explain why the earliest local manifestations of the short story cycle both conform to and diverge from trends apparent elsewhere in the world. For example, though these collections are integrated in conventional terms by virtue of their regional and community focus, they evince a peculiar preoccupation with the idiosyncracies of an organic ‘home-grown’ culture which is not (ostensibly, at least) that of their writers – namely with ‘Boer’ (or nascently Afrikaans) communities rather than English-speaking ones. Arguably, however, they subscribe to a more general pattern observable in many early twentieth-century short story cycles, one in which the ‘urban liberal sophisticate’ sceptically deconstructs – or nostalgically re-constructs – the pastoral myth of ‘simple rustic folk’. Especially prominent within this general *gestalt* are depictions of rural enclaves facing external threats to their cohesiveness posed by an increasingly modernising, urbanising and deracinating wider society, a situation by no means unique to South Africa.

Self-evidently, after the advent of institutionalised apartheid in 1948, any notions of ‘organic community’ (problematic as these may be in the first place) are rendered spurious in relation to the over-determination of ‘race’ as *the* defining marker of identity and community, and to the state engineering evident especially in so-called ‘group areas’, forced relocations, and the misnamed ‘homelands’ policy. On the distinction between the subject matter available to the “post-war generation of writers” as opposed to their predecessors, Ernest Pereira, for instance,

remarks that “what could be seen as the challenging *diversity* of South African society has become mere *fragmentation*, whereby communities – and even families – are divided and driven apart” (1986: 106). Nevertheless, as I argue in the second part of Chapter Two, a cursory examination of the South African short story cycle under this oppressive regime reveals that integrated works featuring a strong identification with specific locales and communities proliferated during this period, as did those bearing witness to a profound sense of personal and collective dislocation and alienation. Once again, despite compelling arguments to the effect that these apparently mutually opposing trends reflect an ideologically insurmountable rift between ‘black’ and ‘white’ writing, respectively, on reappraisal a tension between communal identifications and individual estrangement may frequently be found to co-exist within the same text, no matter the ‘race’ of the author. In a general sense this is hardly surprising, given the ambivalence displayed, both consciously and subconsciously, towards issues of ‘identity’, ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ by many (and perhaps all) under apartheid. However, a dynamic tension between *solidaire* and *solitaire*, as Ingram succinctly puts it (1971: 38), is an *integral* feature of the short story cycle format itself, though individual texts might seem to veer towards one or other pole of the spectrum. Arguably, then, this basic feature of the genre – or what Ian Reid terms the “structural and stylistic principle” of “discontinuity-in-relationship” (1977: 48) – reaches a ‘limit case’ in relation to the arbitrarily but excessively and pathologically regimented imposition of racialised group identities in South Africa under apartheid. In other words, segregationist policies artificially, yet with acutely material consequences, created and enforced rigid notions of identity and community which were by turns both affirmed and resisted by the individuals and groups so designated.¹⁶

In the light of the above claims, in Chapter Three I compare and contrast two late-apartheid story sequences, both by ‘black’ writers, which seem to epitomise the ‘alienated’ versus ‘communal’ paradigms: Joël Matlou’s *Life at Home and Other Stories* (1991), and the linked series “Women at Work” which comprises Part One of Sindiwe Magona’s collection *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night* (1991). The former features an isolated individual who, as Morphet points out, seems totally divorced from a sense of community, whereas the latter, on the surface, asserts a sense of the solidarity which exists among a group of domestic workers thrown together in a ‘white’ suburb. In structural terms, too, these two works occupy rather different positions on the short story cycle spectrum. In Matlou’s text, the adoption of a

single narrator- protagonist-focaliser, and a temporal trajectory tracing his development from youth to adulthood, means that the stories have certain of the qualities of a *Bildungsroman*, though the disjunctions and discontinuities among the stories suggest that this *Bildung* is “disrupted” (Helgesson 2004: 81). “Women at Work”, by contrast, uses a collective, mock-oral and multivocal mode of narration to produce an aggregate narrative consisting of the individual ‘voices’ of the women in the group. Despite their differences, however, both “Women at Work” and *Life at Home* deal centrally with ‘black’ working-class experiences and subaltern consciousness, with characters from rural backgrounds thrust into urban environments, and with the “‘small’ pressures of daily survival” (Nixon 1996: 250). These pressures are, in reality, not “small” or insignificant, however, but deeply traumatising, especially as a consequence of ruptured family lives and the dehumanisation and alienation of the experience of manual work – whether on the mines (in Matlou’s text) or in ‘white’ domestic households (in Magona’s series). Moreover, though both of these story sequences invite comparison in relation to Ndebele’s precepts concerning a ‘rediscovery of the ordinary’, they also raise significant questions about the mediation and dissemination (literary *or* sociological), together with the presentation and reception, of proletarian or subaltern discourses and narratives in South Africa. These questions, I argue, ultimately relate to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the disjunction between oral/vernacular storytelling and print culture (1992: 83-107).

In Chapter Four, I examine Zoë Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and Ivan Vladislavić’s *Missing Persons* (1989) – collections which in many respects are very different, but which both evince a reflexive preoccupation with the ways in which “representation does not simply express, but rather plays a formative role in social and political life” (Wicomb 1998: 94-95). As indicated earlier, both of these volumes were perceived as particularly innovative in the late eighties. Like Matlou’s *Life at Home*, *You Can’t Get Lost* has an intensely personal focus on an individual whose ties to family, friends and lovers are tenuous, and who appears alienated from any sense of community. The similarities between Wicomb’s and Matlou’s works extend further, however, in terms of the possibilities offered by the short story cycle, since both gesture towards an “implicit” (Attwell 2005: 181) *Bildungsroman*. Thus the stories in *You Can’t Get Lost* also cohere around a single narrator-protagonist, employ a first-person point of view, and establish a chronology tracing the protagonist’s growth from youth to adulthood, and from ‘home’ to ‘exile’ to a return. Moreover, as in *Life at Home*, the main

character in Wicomb's text appears to be a fictionalised version of the actual author. Yet the hallucinatory quality of the stories in Matlou's collection points to the disintegration of a coherent subjectivity and the self-alienation or psychic fragmentation of the author-protagonist, whereas in *You Can't Get Lost* the 'narrative of self' is deliberately disrupted by contradictory plotlines and the author's sophisticatedly reflexive awareness of the discursive construction of identity, community and place – whether in fiction or reality. Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*, by comparison, is not overtly integrated by virtue of a central protagonist, a dominant point of view, and temporal sequentiality: the fictions it contains seem largely unconnected and discrete. Nevertheless, certain recurring motifs suggestively resonate across the collection, and the stories' dissolution of the boundaries between the real and the surreal, fact and fiction, the personal and the public, sanity and insanity, and innocence and guilt, produces a disconcertingly familiar projection of the absurd and grotesque character of South African mundanities and collective psychoses under apartheid in its death throes. Vladislavić's sense of the anarchically comic and horridly tragic disjunctiveness of South African reality in the eighties finds a cogent parallel in the ways in which the tantalising intimations of cohesion in *Missing Persons* are ultimately frustrated.

Stuart Hall comments that diasporic identities entail not so much "the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our 'routes'" (1996: 4). Or, as he expresses it elsewhere, "The diaspora experience ... is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives through and with, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (1990: 235). These comments seem even more apposite to Wicomb's second collection of interlinked stories, *The One that Got Away* (2008), than her first, given the ways in which the recent volume stages both local and global entanglements not only on the level of form, but also as a reflection of reality. I have therefore chosen to focus on *The One that Got Away* at some length in Chapter Five. Appearing two decades after *You Can't Get Lost*, this collection bears a number of similarities to its predecessor, but with two significant differences, the first of which is the absence of a single protagonist-focaliser and a dominant first-person point of view, and the second, the lack of temporal progression. By contrast, *The One that Got Away* contains a large cast of characters who co-exist within the same contemporary (late twentieth/early twenty-first century) time period and whose various perspectives are conveyed through limited third-person point of view. Moreover, the narratives

span two hemispheres, cities and countries – Cape Town in South Africa, and Glasgow in Scotland – and thus straddle two geographical, social and cultural contexts. However, the stories are intricately interwoven in a variety of ways: interconnections are established between the (colonial) past and (postcolonial) present, between historical and imaginary characters, between the North and the South, and between characters whose identities were shaped in very different environments. Far more playfully metafictional than *You Can't Get Lost*, the collection deliberately flaunts its use of repetition-with-variation, recurring characters and motifs, recycled or reinterpreted objects, and intratextual imbrications to tease the reader. It also foregrounds the performative rather than essential nature of identity, and presents a sustained meditation on the distinction between – or, alternatively, conflation of – narrative/representation/image and reality by vertiginously dissolving diegetic levels. The deconstruction of notions of origins and authority which results from the latter strategy ultimately relates to Wicomb's concern with freedom and determinism in relation to existential authorship. Finally, the collection's dual settings – Cape Town and Glasgow – not only reflect the author's intimate knowledge of and oscillations between both cities, but also allow for a critique of idealistic cosmopolitanism, reveal the persistence of a form of global apartheid, and suggest the ways in which interwoven urban imaginaries and “colliding worlds” (Bremner 2004) might be viewed as superseding regional or national affiliations and communities. However, I suggest that the notion of community staged in *The One that Got Away* is provisional, and centrally preoccupied with a recognition of the role of language and narrative in constructions of identity and intersubjectivity – a notion I return to in my concluding chapter.

Notes

¹ The phrases in inverted commas are Tony Morphet's (1992: 129) and Elleke Boehmer's (1998: 45), respectively.

² In an interview conducted in 2002, Lewis Nkosi claimed that in fact *he* was "the first person to say that [writers must stop saying that words are bullets] ... in an ANC journal" and that, when he confronted Sachs on the silence following his own article and the outcry following Sachs's own paper, Sachs retorted: "But I learnt from you!" This disparity in response Nkosi attributed to Sachs's prominent position in the ANC and his own relative 'obscurity'. He then commented wryly: "what I'm trying to suggest is that one may even be negative, but it is assimilated and passed on, even by people who later on seem as if they are the original articulators of those ideas" (2005: 224).

³ *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom*, edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press (1990), and *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition*, edited by Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk (1991). The perception that writing was impoverished or deformed under apartheid was widespread, and had perhaps been most contentiously expressed by Nkosi as early as 1965 – in *Home and Exile*. In the eighties, however, this sense intensified: André Brink, for example, referred to "the cultural sterility caused by apartheid" (1983: 87), and J.M. Coetzee characterised South African literature as "a literature in bondage ... less than fully human" (1987/1992: 98). In response to Sachs's articulation of this view, however, a range of opinions were expressed: Stephen Watson commented that "South African literature is a very grim one indeed" (1991: 90), whereas Dikobe wa Mogale claimed that "literature of note was nevertheless produced" (1991: 47), and Lionel Abrahams similarly commented that certain works were "too spiritedly imaginative, humorous and near the pulse of reality to suggest a grey, sombre, shut-in world" (1991: 2). Stephen Gray's assessment was somewhat anomalous: "I think that apartheid (and this is a hideous irony) which has done everything to kill a true and vibrant response, has in fact produced a fine literature. But you can't go on from that to say that the fine literature in some ghastly way justifies any detail of the system" (1991: 30).

⁴ This is evident, for example, in essays such as Brink's "Reinventing the Real" (1993) and Graham Pechey's "The Post-Apartheid Sublime: Rediscovering the Extraordinary" (1998). In 1998, Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly commented that "Ndebele's now famous call for a rediscovery of the ordinary, made over a decade ago, seems more important now than ever. For if one is to combat the sort of social imagination that insists, deterministically, on viewing differences within set hierarchies – just as postcolonialism tends to see nationality or race as the determining factor – a sense of how subjectivity is exercised in everyday instances, in all of its complexity, needs to be conveyed" (12).

⁵ Ndebele appears to use the terms 'black' and 'African' synonymously, an equation congruent with the Black Consciousness philosophy with which he critically engages in many of his essays, especially "Black Development" (1972: 13-28), "Redefining Relevance" (1991: 58-73), and "Iph'Indlela? Finding a Way through Confusion" (2007: 127-138). In unproblematically both citing and using racial designations in this study I am confronted by a dilemma, however. On the one hand, it is self-evident that in a racially-divided context such as South Africa the

application of racialised terminology has had very grave material, socio-economic and political consequences, which have been and are reflected in cultural schisms. On the other, in recognising the discursively and socially-constructed nature of ‘race’ – that it is “a cultural rather than a biological phenomenon ... [and] lacking in objective reality” (Ashcroft et al 1998: 205), yet deeply implicated in the binaric modes of thinking and acting which underpin power relations – it seems imperative *not* to uncritically reproduce such terminology. In this, then, I am guided by the reflexive practice adopted by Stefan Helgesson in *Writing in Crisis*, and repeat his motivation here, which I endorse:

I consistently regard the categories ‘black’ and ‘white’ as provisional. My choice of writers forms part of an ambition to cut through the compartmentalisation of ‘white’ and ‘black’ writing. This is not to say that the terms ... and their various synonyms, are devoid of social significance (they are, of course, entirely disqualified as *racial* categories) in the sense that they have determined at base level the status and options of each individual in South Africa – a determination that was formalised and exacerbated during the apartheid era. ... To constantly foreground the constructedness of the terms ... while just as insistently acknowledging their conflictual social significance is therefore even more important when dealing with writers and texts that try to move ‘beyond’ the conceptual horizon of apartheid South Africa.

(2004: 7)

⁶ Many of Ndebele’s sentiments echo those Nkosi expressed in his essay “Fiction by Black South Africans” in *Home and Exile*, which he opened with the controversial claim that “With all the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa” (1965: 131). He then proceeded to denounce “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (1965: 132).

⁷ In the review, Morphet (1992: 139) does register that Ndebele’s views on Matlou’s work were first expressed much earlier than the publication of *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. They were in fact based on an excerpt from “Man Against Himself” that was published in *Staffrider* in 1979, and were first aired when Ndebele presented the essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa” as a keynote address at a conference in London in 1984. Morphet’s own assessment, by contrast, is of Matlou’s entire collection, published considerably later in 1991.

⁸ The latter term, as Morphet uses it, is not synonymous with ‘place’, but refers rather to the “location of the voice” that speaks (1990: 99) and to the question: “From where [and with what license/power] does the author speak?” (Pechey, qtd in Morphet 1992: 139). It is therefore closer in meaning to ‘position-ality’ than the more prosaic ‘place’, and includes within its ambit issues relating to legitimacy and authority.

⁹ They were evident, however, in earlier Afrikaans writing by authors such as John Miles, Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink, Etienne Van Heerden and Etienne Le Roux.

¹⁰ Nkosi's own essays "Fiction by Black South Africans", in *Home and Exile* (1965: 131-138), and "Southern Africa: Protest and Commitment", in *Tasks and Masks* (1981: 76-106), together with Nadine Gordimer's "Relevance and Commitment" and "Speak Out: The Necessity for Protest" in *The Essential Gesture* (1988 : 111-119; 73-86), were seminal deliberations on this obligation. Though Nkosi's and Gordimer's positions were by no means identical, neither disputed the urgency with which literature was required to engage with the socio-political realities of South Africa.

¹¹ The fact that both Wicomb and Vladislavić are university graduates, intellectuals and cultural commentators, and that the former is also a literary scholar and academic of note is no doubt pertinent here. But the question of 'influences' is something of a red herring. Vladislavić, in an interview with Christopher Warnes, comments on being interested in Eastern European writers and Irish writing, and on the influence studying Afrikaans at university had on him, especially the excitement generated by studying books "in the same year in which they'd been published" (2000: 274). On being questioned on the "strong element of postmodernism in [his] work", Vladislavić admits to having been "incredibly excited" by the Afrikaans writers of the seventies, Breytenbach specifically, and by the American writers, Barthelme, Barth, Brautigan and Vonnegut, whom he read as a student and who were dealing with "postmodern questions, although postmodernism wasn't yet current as a set of ideas" (2000: 276). Coetzee, he says, he encountered at a later stage. However, he adds, "I like to think that my own writing interests flowed as much from processes afoot in the world as from my reading of fiction or theory. ... the elements in my work that may be postmodern come as much out of the world, and out of my reading of other fiction, as out of theoretical concepts" (2000: 276). In an interview with Eva Hunter, Wicomb refers specifically to her admiration for Gordimer, Coetzee and Ndebele, and then explains: "you can't separate yourself from the products of your culture even if you do write in reaction to certain things" (1993: 82).

¹² The well-known characterisation of this period as an interregnum derives from Nadine Gordimer. She used the following quotation, in slightly modified form, from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* as the epigraph to her novel *July's People*, published in 1981: "The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms". (Interestingly, John Fowles used a different translation of the same quotation as the epigraph to his novel, *Daniel Martin*, published in 1977.) In "Living in the Interregnum", a speech first delivered in New York in 1982, published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1983 (see Clingman 1988: 274), and subsequently reprinted in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (1988), Gordimer expanded on the relevance of Gramsci's idea to the prevailing conditions in South Africa: "The state of interregnum is a state of Hegel's disintegrated consciousness, of contradictions. ... the unadmitted fear of being without structures. ... The interregnum is not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined" (1988: 22). Subsequently the concept was to gain considerable purchase in local literary usage, from analyses of Gordimer's novel itself, such as Nicholas Visser's essay "Beyond the Interregnum: A Note on the Ending of *July's People*" (1990), to Brink's more general assessment that, "in the last few years, as we entered the interregnum between the darkness of apartheid and the as yet undefined future, there have been startling changes in the writer's position" (1993: 50). Mike Kirkwood similarly refers, in his introduction to Matlou's collection, to "the dark hours

between” (1991: 7) and observes that “the nightmare of the apartheid years still presses on the dawn that must exorcise it” (1991: 10). The binaries evident here (old/new, known/unknown, discarded/undetermined, darkness/light, nightmare/dawn) implicitly convey a sense that a period of ‘transition and rupture’ or ‘in-betweenness’ – an interregnum, however imprecisely defined – is one of ambivalence. It is not only a time of uncertainty, contradictions and fear, of “morbid symptoms” and violent upheavals, but also, potentially, of reappraisal, reconstruction and experimentation. Some, such as Gordimer herself, Attwell and Chapman, view the interregnum as having begun in the seventies, with the advent of a militant trade unionism, strikes in the Durban area in 1973, the rise of Black Consciousness, the Soweto revolt of 1976 and the Nationalist government’s draconian response. Others use the term to refer specifically to the eighties, and particularly the declaration of successive states of emergency from 1985 onwards.

¹³ In addition to the fictional texts Van Wyk Smith cites here, literary-critical works, such as Brink’s *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege* (1983), Nkosi’s “South African Writers at the Barricades” (1986), and Chapman’s “The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Expression in a State of Emergency” (1988) and “The Critic in a State of Emergency: Towards a Theory of Reconstruction” (1991), also reflected the prominence of the notion of a literal and figurative state of emergency. Despite this, however, it is perhaps too literal a reading to assume that all of these titles evoke a sense of ‘menace’ and ‘dread’, and even more debatable that all of these creative and critical texts – and their authors – were ‘pessimistic’ in outlook.

¹⁴ Nkosi, however, does note the “critical interventions” of Ndebele in his essay “White Writing”, first published in 1989 (2005: 292).

¹⁵ This imbalance is not a peculiarly South African phenomenon, of course. It has been insightfully discussed by Mary Louise Pratt (1981) and Dominic Head (1992), in particular.

¹⁶ Ironically, the short story cycle might potentially be seen to epitomise both the divisive *and* collaborative impulses implicit in the very words “apart-heid” and its opposite, “een-heid”, together with the elaborate(d) fictions/discourses of identity and community subtending both (the latter of course including the larger fiction or ‘imagined community’ of the nation).

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1.1 Introduction

Love affairs, literary genres – everything blossoms and decays does it not?

– John Barth (1969: 108)

Literary forms are not like tyres or razor blades, things that possess a fixed and predictable period of life that is a function of normal use, i.e., a certain number of miles or number of shaves. Literary forms have no such predictable life span, and mere frequency of use has nothing to do with their durability or obsolescence. Literary forms become obsolete when they no longer tell, or are thought to tell, the truth about the world, and there is no predicting how long it may take for this perceived failing to overtake a particular form.

– Gerald Graff (1981: 153)

In “The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It”, Mary-Louise Pratt emphasises that “Genres are not essences. They are human institutions, historical through and through” (1981: 176), and she comments that certain qualities which have come to be associated with the short story are “not an empirical necessity but rather a fact of literary history” (1981: 184).

Dominic Head argues similarly:

Any attempt to define a literary form has to mediate between conflicting requirements. The impulse to provide a terse, aphoristic description, based on empirical formal characteristics, must be tempered by an historical understanding: literary forms are continually evolving, even when they rely heavily on conventional gesture and device. Thus a *single* definition of the short story is both inaccurate and inappropriate: the diachronic perspective should always qualify the synchronic observation. The valid, historical definition of a literary form, therefore, examines *prevailing tendencies* rather than essential qualities ...

(1992: 2)

Both statements are equally applicable to the short story cycle, since the danger posed by a strictly synchronic approach is that it may be reductive and prescriptive. My discussion of the cycle in this chapter is therefore premised on the assumption that it is essential to complement notions of genres as autonomous entities displaying a more or less fixed set of identifiable traits or “constitutive conventions and codes” (Abrams 1999: 109) with a perspective tracing trends and emphases current in particular periods and places.

In any event, the fact that the literary histories of the modern short story and short story cycle have been inextricably intertwined since the mid-nineteenth century problematises any discussion of the latter genre as discrete from the former. An additional complication arises from the ways in which both are invariably (and asymmetrically or hierarchically) positioned as subordinate in relation to the novel – the dominant or “more powerful and prestigious” (Pratt 1981: 180) member of the general category of prose fiction. As a result of this bias, the short story and the cycle are evaluated in terms dictated by conventional

knowledge of novelistic practice. However, all three of these narrative genres have reflected the broad aesthetic movements and practices that have characterised the modern era. So, even though, as Linda Wagner-Martin comments, contemporary criticism continues to view texts in terms of their generic characteristics, “critics of modernist and postmodernist writing know that defining a work arbitrarily on [that] basis ... is to devalue [other] work that should be considered”. She then quotes Cary Nelson’s claim that narrow generic categories “consistently falsify the history of aesthetic innovation” (1995: 25).

In terms of “the history of aesthetic innovation”, David Lodge identifies three rather than two “modes of modern writing” which have altered the shape of narrative fiction since the nineteenth century, modes informed by changing conceptions of “the relationship between signs and reality” (1977: 40) or between “the world and the book” (Josipovici 1971). To modernism and postmodernism (mentioned by Wagner-Martin above), he adds a third category which he terms antimodernism – an extension or modification of the traditional realism of the nineteenth century. Lodge argues that modernist and antimodernist kinds of writing “persist throughout the modern period, but ... we can map out alternating phases of dominance of one kind or another” (1977: 41). A pendulum effect is thus created, since “what is foregrounded by one generation of writers becomes background for the next”, and “[l]iterary innovation is achieved by reacting and contrasting with the received orthodoxy ... a return in some measure to the last orthodoxy but one” (1977: 42). Moreover, in Lodge’s view, this oscillation is premised not only on responses to external contextual factors, such as socio-political and economic circumstances, but also on an inclination towards what Roman Jakobson identifies as either the metaphoric or metonymic poles of language (1977: 42). In contrast to the modernist (metaphoric) and antimodernist/realist (metonymic) modes, however, postmodernist writing “tries to defy [the law of similarity or contiguity] by seeking some alternative principle of composition”. These alternatives Lodge enumerates as “Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess and The Short Circuit” (1977: 43). Nevertheless, not all postmodernist writing adopts such radical narrative strategies. Linda Hutcheon maintains, for example, that some texts both install *and* subvert the conventions associated with realist and modernist writing: “postmodernism denaturalise[s] both realism’s transparency and modernism’s reflexive response, while retaining (in its typically complicitous critical way) the historically attested power of both” (1989: 34).

All of the above perceptions have suggestive implications for any attempt to trace the poetics and history of the cycle form, and the ways in which it both reflects and is a product

of the dominant aesthetic and social preoccupations of the modern era. This chapter, then, opens with a brief survey of critical recognition of the genre, followed by a discussion of its largely formal attributes. I then provide an overview of the modern short story cycle's historical development, beginning with a consideration of its roots in oral storytelling traditions. In the next three sections I discuss successive waves of innovation which have occurred within modern, written variants of the genre, and link these to developments within prose narrative more generally. In outline, these entail the shift from romance to realism in the nineteenth century which witnessed the emergence of the modern short story and story series, the establishment of the modernist short story and story cycle as dominant forms in the early to mid-twentieth century, and the proliferation of postmodern and postcolonial generic hybrids from the second half of the twentieth century onwards. Since such a broad synopsis cannot claim to be inclusive, I have attempted to synthesise the insights of many critics in order to identify general trends which have some bearing on my particular focus on the theme of identity and community in short story cycles.

1.2 Critical Recognition

All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon
 – D.H. Lawrence (qtd in Lodge 1977: 39)

Though cyclical collocations of tales, in both poetry and prose, have existed since antiquity, the emergence of the short story cycle or integrated collection of specifically *modern* short stories occurred roughly contemporaneously with the advent of the modern short story proper in the mid-nineteenth century, and is traced to the publication of Ivan Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1852) in Russia and Alphonse Daudet's *Lettres de Mon Moulin* (1869) in France. Modern short story cycles appeared later in the English-speaking world: by critical general consensus the first recognisable examples are James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Although, specifically in discussions of Anderson's collection, the form achieved some early unelaborated recognition from critics such as Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley in the late forties, it was only comprehensively researched and definitively established as a genre in its own right by Forrest L. Ingram, whose pioneering and influential study, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*, was published in 1971.¹ Described as "a seminal attempt at a systematic definition of the genre" (Nagel 2001: 11), Ingram's survey focused specifically on *Winesburg, Ohio*, Franz Kafka's *Ein Hungerkünstler* and William Faulkner's

The Unvanquished, and also, in somewhat less detail, on Joyce's *Dubliners*, Albert Camus' *L'Exil et le royaume*, and John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven*. In addition, however, he referred in passing to numerous other twentieth-century short story cycles, from disparate parts of the world, in irrefutable support of his central thesis:

in every kind of twentieth-century short story cycle, one characteristic remains constant – the dynamic pattern of recurrent development. ... this cyclic pattern clearly appears as a publicly recognizable aesthetic design which differs markedly from the design of a novel and which is totally absent from the “mere” collection of stories. On the basis of this persistent formal distinction ... the ever-increasing body of short story cycles [should] be recognized for what it is: a unique literary genre.

(1971: 203)

Ingram's insights were subsequently adopted by Ian Reid, when he discusses the form in a chapter entitled “Brevity Expanded” in his monograph on the short story, and the short story cycle genre in its own right received concentrated scholarly attention in America in a number of unpublished dissertations in the late seventies and eighties, no doubt as a direct offshoot of Ingram's work (see Luscher 1989: 149 n.2, 153 n.10; Mann 1989: x, xiv-xv, 21; Kennedy 1988: 24, 25 n.3). In these discussions, a number of alternative labels were suggested: “short story composite”, “integrated collection of short stories” (Alderman 1985: 135), “short story sequence” (Kennedy 1995, Luscher 1989: 149), *rovelle*, “novel of interrelated stories”, or “unified volume of stories” (Curry 1980: 240), and “related sketches”, “related short fictions” or “interrelated stories” (Litz 1980: 359, 360). Towards the end of the eighties, J. Gerald Kennedy and Robert M. Luscher contributed important essays, “Towards a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle” (1988: 9-25) and “The Short-Story Sequence: An Open Book” (1989: 148-167), to a special issue of *Journal of the Short Story in English* devoted to the form and to Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellen Clarey's *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, respectively. As a result of this “surge of critical interest” (Luscher 1989: 150) a number of full-length studies then appeared in print: Susan Garland Mann's *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and A Guide* (1989), Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris's *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (1995), and Kennedy's compilation of diversely-authored essays, *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities* (1995). In each of the latter the overriding emphasis falls on American writers, and particularly on the “modernist proponents of the genre” (Giles 2002: 494) in roughly the first half of the twentieth century. Mann's fairly representative study, for example, includes authors such as Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and John Updike, in addition to Joyce and Anderson, and her appendix, comprising an annotated

list of more than a hundred twentieth-century short story cycles, contains a mere handful by writers outside of the United States. Most of the abovementioned major American writers of the WASP canon, who produced the “great works of American modernism” (Nagel 2001: ix), are also represented in the essays in Kennedy’s collection, together with Henry James, J.D. Salinger and John Cheever.

However, the appeal of the cycle form to writers representing marginalised or demographic minority communities in America in the early twentieth century is noted by Linda Wagner-Martin and John Lowe, two contributors to Kennedy’s collection who focus on the African-American writers, Jean Toomer and Richard Wright, respectively, but also refer to many others who similarly employed the form, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Sarah Orne Jewett, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Hamlin Garland, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. In a discussion of the “African-American voice” in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, another contributor, John Carlos Rowe claims, points out that:

In the quest for literary forms appropriate to African-American culture and experiences, African-American writers have often written short story sequences and other works that should be considered to broaden and enrich any generic definition. [These works] ... resist consciously the canonical literary forms (especially the novel) and embrace more collective and folkloric modes of narration in the interests of building community.
(1995: 97 n.18)

Elsewhere, in an essay significantly entitled “Expanding the Canon of American Realism”, Elizabeth Ammons compares the Chinese-American writer Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) to cyclical texts by the authors mentioned above, and comes to strikingly congruent conclusions: “the effect of the work as a whole ... is to send a complex message about the relationship between individual and collective identity. ... The emergent group focus ... implies an aesthetic and a definition of realism that privilege community and place the issue of culture itself at the center of narrative ” (1995: 107).

The critical concentration on American story cycles from the early to mid-twentieth century, in most of the literature available, is telling. For example, despite the extensive list of more recent American works that Kennedy, in his editorial preface, cites from the 1970s to the date of publication in 1995 (viii), only Raymond Carver’s *Cathedral* (1983) and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984) are actually discussed in any detail in two of the essays in the compilation. Furthermore, though he acknowledges that “the proliferation of story sequences is truly a global phenomenon” (1995: viii), and mentions Alice Munro, Angela Carter,

Gabriel García-Marquez and Italo Calvino in this regard, Kennedy nevertheless (and rather chauvinistically) asserts that:

American writers have been notably productive in the story sequence. ... the pragmatic affinity for short stories that shaped the literature of the United States decisively in the nineteenth century seems to persist in our national avidity for organized story collections. Perhaps the very determination to build a unified republic out of diverse states, regions, and population groups – to achieve the unity expressed by the motto *e pluribus unum* – helps to account for this continuing passion for sequences.²

(1995: viii)

Similar sentiments confirming the prominence the form continues to occupy in the United States are expressed by Nagel: “The American experience, is, after all, the process of making one out of many. ... there could be said to be an equivalence between an analysis of the themes that unite the stories in contemporary cycles and the ideas that consolidate American society” (2001: 258).

The sheer number of short story cycles emanating from the United States might indeed lead to the conclusion that the genre is a quintessentially American form. Importantly however, Mary Louise Pratt draws attention to the fact that the short story cycle emerged concurrently in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in other settler- colonial or formerly colonial contexts that which were experiencing cognate processes of regional or national identity- formation to those occurring in America at this stage. Though, as evidence, she cites works by Stephen Leacock and Alice Munro from Canada, Horacio Quiroga from Argentina, and Jose María Arguedas from Peru (1981: 187), numerous other examples from different parts of the previously colonised world support her contention.

But perhaps the most significant development in relation to commentary on the short story cycle in recent years is the critical recognition that much contemporary post-colonial, diasporic and ethnic minority (especially women’s) fiction rewards recuperation from the generic perspective of the short story cycle and the options it offers for representations of identity and community. Hertha D. Wong suggests as much, in her essay (mentioned above) on Louise Erdrich in Kennedy’s collection, but more seminal contributions have been made by Rocío G. Davis, in a series of articles culminating in *Transcultural Reinventions: Asian American and Asian Canadian Short-Story Cycles* (2001), and by James Nagel, in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (2001). Cumulatively, once again a formidable and diverse tally of writers emerges: Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Edwidge Danticat, Julia Alvarez, Susan Minot, Grace Paley, Mavis Gallant,

Jamaica Kincaid, Tim O'Brien, Robert Olen Butler, Alice Munro, Gloria Naylor, and Jhumpa Lahiri. In fact, Davis makes the broad claim that "The short story cycle of the new literatures in English may ... be considered the formal materialization of the trope of doubleness as the between-world condition is presented via a form that itself vacillates between two genres [the novel and the short story]" (1997: 2). And Nagel asserts that "the story sequence offers ... a vital technique for the exploration and depiction of the complex interactions of gender, ethnicity, and individual identity" (2001: 10). He adds that the genre has never "been used with greater force or variety than in the American fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, when it became the genre of choice for emerging writers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds" (2001: 17). It appears, then, that the earlier emphasis placed on the major writers of the WASP canon in America, and on modernist short story cycles, has currently been superseded by a greater awareness of the ubiquity of the form, and its capacity to embody hybridity or "cultural duality" (Nagel 2001: 258) and to represent, indeed in its very structure *perform*, both compositely and singularly, the complex interweavings of identity, community and place. As Kennedy trenchantly remarks: "the genre continues to diversify and proliferate, perhaps because the aggregation of disparate narratives obscurely resembles the multiplicity of modern culture itself" (1988: 24).

As mentioned earlier, in terms of the short story cycle's recognition within the South African context, Trudi Adendorff produced a pioneering dissertation, in the mid-eighties, on the representation of region and community in a cross-section of South African short story cycles: Pauline Smith's *The Little Karoo* (1925/1930), Herman Charles Bosman's *Mafeking Road* (1947), Ahmed Essop's *The Hajji and Other Stories* (1978), and Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* (1977). Basing her discussion on some of Ingram's arguments, Adendorff lucidly demonstrated how, in each of these collections, the community and the region depicted – the 'Boer' inhabitants of the 'Aangenaam Valley' in the Karoo and the Groot Marico, the Indian population of Fordsburg and Lenasia, and the Bamangwato tribe of Serowe Village, Botswana, respectively – emerge as "the central 'character'" (1985: 5), a 'character' that is "both particularised and generalised" (1985: 143). She thus recognised that a South African tradition of integrated collections exists, and that, in these collections, regionalism and a collective identity – or what she adroitly termed a "community persona" (1985: 76) – feature prominently. However, although she maintained in her concluding

chapter that “The cycle can ... be seen to offer new possibilities to South African writers, many of whom, because of financial and ideological considerations have turned to poetry and short prose rather than longer fiction forms”, and suggested that “many other South African works can most successfully be approached through the paradigm of the short story cycle” (1985: 149), her discussion of necessity precluded the more experimental works which emerged after her study was completed and which are my focus here.

Coincidentally, my own interest in the short story cycle developed concurrently with Adendorff’s, but was initially centred on generically indeterminate works from other parts of the world, and specifically those that had appeared from the seventies onwards by authors such as John Fowles, Milan Kundera, Italo Calvino, John Barth and Manuel Puig. Having discovered Ingram’s groundbreaking survey and, as a result, a ‘vocabulary’ with which to approach narrative texts which were “not quite” novels *or* short story miscellanies, I examined what appeared to be a modal shift from modernist to postmodernist narrative strategies in contemporary variants of the cycle form. In particular, it became evident that the indeterminacy of the cycle form lends itself to the type of experimentalism and reflexivity associated with postmodern writing generally – as Luscher comments, the innately ambivalent “generic border crossings” of the cycle format have been appropriated by or subsumed within “recent experimentation with the novel” (1989: 153). By the late eighties, similarly experimental narratives were emerging in South African manifestations of the short story cycle genre. And, in the years since, readers and critics have become attuned to these kinds of cross-generic fictions – as is evident in the preceding short literature survey and the general recognition now accorded the form.

1.3 Poetics: “A Hybrid Organism”

1.3.1 Definitions and Dualism

The spectrum of short story cycles include[s], at one pole, collections whose strands of unity are hidden. ... At the other end of the spectrum, we find cycles whose strands of unity are so apparent that critics have welcomed them with open arms into the crowded kingdom of the novel.

– Forrest Ingram (1971: 201-202)

Luscher describes the short story cycle as a “generic renegade” (1989: 152), and Kennedy similarly sees it as “a hybrid occupying an odd, indeterminate place within the field of narrative” (1988: 14). Though Timothy Alderman points out that the cycle “has developed through a long history predating and then coexisting with the novel and, more recently, with the unintegrated collection of stories” (1985: 135), more often than not, like the short story,

the genre is dismissed as marginal or inconsequential in relation to the novel. Boris Tomashevsky, for example, provides a general description of cycles as collections that are “arranged according to some unifying principle” (1978: 82), but then claims that “[i]f the stories in a cycle are brought closer together they will become a single literary work – a novel” (1978: 84). Walter Allen, in *The Short Story in English*, disparagingly relegates what he refers to as “a number of disparate stories linked together by a setting in place and time common to all” to “a minor category of the novel in the twentieth century” (1981: 12). As a result of this critical disregard and neglect, advocates of the genre lament the general confusion it elicits, and the ways in which short story cycles are misconstrued as aberrant novels. Nagel, for instance, bemoans the fact that, lacking awareness of the cycle’s rich legacy, commentators and reviewers consistently judge such texts “within the normative expectations of [the novel]” (2001: 9), whereas Kennedy remarks that “[a]part from Ingram’s pioneering study ... the poetics of the short story cycle has remained a curiously neglected problem in the field of narratology” (1988: 24).

Though, as indicated in the previous section, Ingram’s interventions have meant that the cycle has increasingly received greater recognition, commentators disagree on the label that should be assigned to the form, how broadly it should be defined, and the relative importance of the manner in which its constituent parts are collated. Nevertheless, there is considerable unanimity on the genre’s most conspicuous and characteristic feature: its innate dualism, or the ambiguity occasioned by the tension between individual stories and the larger whole. Thus, for example, Ingram’s initial definition of the short story cycle is that it is “a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (1971: 15). To this definition he adds the requirement that the components of the “larger unit” should be “*short stories* in the modern acceptance of the term” – that is, “condensed fictional narrative[s] in prose, having a definite formal development” (1970: 10) – and that they should have been arranged in a single volume by their author, rather than an editor (1971: 16). Alderman, by contrast, describes what he terms the “integrated collection” more inclusively, as consisting of “separate stories (sometimes novellas, sketches, or parables, sometimes interspersed with poetry or even essays) that form a dynamic relationship with each other and with the reader”. Like Ingram, however, he emphasises that the form “is known above all for its tension between cohering, centripetal forces and separating, centrifugal forces” (1985: 135). In related vein, Susan Garland Mann insists that “there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated” (1989: 15), and Helen

Mustard characterises the “‘cyclic principle’ underpinning modern fictional cycles” as “the idea of establishing such relationships among smaller entities as to create a larger whole without destroying the identity of the smaller entities” (qtd in Nagel 2001: 6).

The fact that, in such texts, the component narratives are both independent *and* interdependent has a significant bearing on the ways in which they are conceived and published. Frequently, for example, certain individual stories appear in magazines before being included in an integrated volume, and often this is the form in which they first achieve wide recognition – as is evident in the number of single stories from cycles which have become well-known and widely anthologised in their own right.³ In addition, writers may modify stories that they have already written, and perhaps published, and compose others before assembling them all in a single, unified collection. Indeed, Ingram views this process of compilation as seminal, and distinguishes between the different methods authors adopt in writing and collating the narratives that go to make up a short story cycle. On this basis, he identifies three basic types: the “arranged”, “completed” and “composed” cycle (1971: 17-18). The first of these – usually, he claims, the most loosely structured – consists of stories which the writer has compiled in such a way that they “illuminate or comment upon one another by juxtaposition or association”, the guiding principle for such an arrangement being the recurrence of a theme, a single character, or a group of characters representative of a family, generation, place or period (1970: 9). The “completed” cycle, by contrast, consists of stories which may originally have been written and previously published as independent units, but which are subsequently collated once the author becomes aware of the “unifying strands which he may have, even subconsciously, woven into the action of the stories” (1971: 9-10). This process of completion may entail the addition of new stories, the revision of those already written, and the arrangement of the entire set (1971: 9-10). Ingram’s third category, the “composed” cycle, comprises a collection the author originally envisages as an entity, and is thus one in which each story is “governed by the demands of some master plan, or at least by a unifying directional impulse” (1970: 9). Such cycles tend to display greater coherence than the previous two types, and are the most likely to be mistaken for novels (1970: 9). Nevertheless, despite their initial conceptualisation as cohesive wholes, the narratives they contain may require both rearrangement and completion (1971: 18).

A number of critics object to Ingram’s focus on authorial intention in the above typology, their counter-argument being that such authorial motivations and procedures are frequently, if not by definition, obscure, unavailable or irrelevant to the reader. In their view, it is ultimately the reader who perceives and, in effect, *produces* the coherence of the whole –

or does not. Irving Malin, for example, asks whether “any ‘composition as explanation’ [can] ... ever be fully (dis)closed” (1996: 23), and Kennedy comments that “any definition of genre based on the genesis of the work rather than its manifest form runs aground in cases where the composition history remains ambiguous or unascertainable” (1988: 13). The latter points out that

Ingram’s scheme of classification ... relies upon an arbitrary specification of authorial intention (ignoring the controversial status of intentionality itself); and it privileges completed cycles – which supposedly best illustrate the development of a unifying concept – at the expense of the more numerous arranged cycles ... [or] stories brought together after the fact by “an author or editor-author”.

(1988: 12)

Kennedy concludes that “Responsibility for the formulation of a collection may indeed remain as unclear as the logic of its organization” (1988: 12).⁴

Nonetheless, and despite the vexed issue of the intentional fallacy, there is considerable evidence that certain authors *do* provide intimations of the coherence of their works in various ways. This may occur extratextually, for example, in interviews and letters to publishers or other acquaintances, or intratextually, by means of a unifying title and/or titular story, or the inclusion of forewords, tables of contents, subdivisions and groupings, epigraphs, maps and family trees. Mann argues, in this regard, that titles, in particular, are key “generic signals”, and may foreground spatiotemporal unities, and continuities provided by a main protagonist or a group of characters or a dominant theme (1989: 14). Indeed, Kennedy himself refers to collections which “bear the title of a component text which presumably epitomizes the content of the other stories”, or which announce “a collective geographical scene” or “a condition of being” (1988: 15). Both he and Mann point out that unintegrated collections of miscellaneous stories conventionally take the title of one of the stories (often the best-known or the author/editor’s choice) followed by the phrase “... and Other Stories”, but in Kennedy’s opinion this strategy does not preclude the possibility that there may be “more deeply embedded connections” (1988: 14). Moreover, though a reader may not have access to a writer’s private communications, comments such as “arranged in this order/as here arranged”, “a series (of stories)”, “tied together ... by”, “meant to be received ‘all at once’ and as here arranged” and “variations” in Prefaces and Authors’ Notes clearly signal a deliberate design or alert the reader to a collection’s recursive structure.⁵

No matter the relative importance they attach to authorial intention and compositional method, most critics, after Ingram, accentuate the role of the reader in recognising the tension

in a cycle between the “individuality of the components and the unity of the whole” (Brada-Williams 1). Although self-evident, this is not an insignificant point, since the vagaries of the reading process – whether all the stories *are* read and/or in the order arranged and presented, for example – affect the extent to which formal integration may be perceived. Moreover, attempts to discern the centripetal patterns within collections run the risk of treating the individual stories solely as parts of a whole, and not severally and singly. Ingram, for example, has been criticised for his focus on unity and neglect of the disjunctive aspect of many (if not all) collections, an emphasis which predisposes him towards those types of cycles which display overtly recuperable cohesive features. Along these lines, Kennedy maintains that Ingram mistakenly views “the ostensible unity of [the works he analyses] as an intrinsic feature of the writing rather than as a function or product of his own reading ... One might argue that, according to Ingram’s approach, it is the critic whose ingenuity creates the cycle by perceiving connections which imply a unified plan” (1988: 11). By contrast, he argues that:

unity is a contestable and elusive criterion; works which we intuitively perceive as short story ensembles may rely as much upon fragmentation and discontinuity as upon unifying associations. Recurrent features may disclose differences as much as similarities. ... [The New Critical] insistence on unity has produced a restrictive and conservative theory of form which has canonized certain collections while ignoring others. ... [It] sheds little light on ... heterogeneous works [which defy assimilation on this basis].

(1988: 11)

Elsewhere he reiterates his sense that, “[r]ooted in the holistic assumptions of New Criticism, most theorizing about the sequence has underscored the formal unity implied by interdependence. Attention to textual discontinuities may, however, offer more productive insights into the cultural significance of the form” (1995: 195-196). The cycle’s fundamental duality thus has significant implications for the ways in which such texts are processed by the reader, since arguably an ‘ideal’ reading would entail a *simultaneous* recognition both of the self-sufficiency *and* interrelationship of the components – a simultaneity perhaps impossible to achieve or sustain in practical terms. Nagel, for example, emphasises that the stories in a cycle need to be considered both as isolated units *and* in terms of their “significance in the context of other stories”, but then understatedly observes that “[i]n some instances the interpretive consequences can be substantial” (2001: 248).

The short story cycle clearly demands different kinds of reading strategies – strategies which are both like *and* unlike reading either a novel *or* a short story. Nevertheless, the latter

two genres provide useful points of comparison. With regard to the novel, Nagel comments that “the subordinate units ... its episodes or chapters, are incomplete in themselves, dependent for artistic completion on the other units that comprise the whole” (2001: 15). In a short story cycle, however, “each component work must stand alone (with a beginning, middle, and end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories. In contrast to the linear development of plot in a novel, the cycle lends itself to diegetical discontinuities” (2001:15). It is here that the question of nomenclature becomes problematic, since different critics place varying degrees of emphasis on whether or not the stories in a cycle unfold consecutively or sequentially. Luscher, for instance, prefers the term “short story sequence” to “short story cycle”, since the latter has connotations of circularity and recurrence which de-emphasise sequentiality (1989: 149). His definition of a story sequence, then, is:

a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader *successively* realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme. Within the context of the sequence, each short story is thus not a completely closed experience. ... [the reader is invited] to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact. ... Since the reader's dominant experience as he negotiates the text and tentatively assembles its patterns is sequential, the term *short story sequence* is thus more accurately descriptive ... its unity derives from a perception of both the successive ordering and the recurrent patterns, which together provide the continuity of the reading experience.

(1989: 148-149)

Kennedy similarly motivates his use of the term “sequence”, rather than “cycle”, in order to “emphasize [the former's] progressive unfolding and cumulative effects” (1995: vii).

However, once again a reservation arises, in that a linear or progressive reading of the stories in an integrated collection (indeed, in any collection of short fictions) is not as mandatory as undoubtedly is the case in respect of the chapters in a conventional novel. Moreover, as Nagel remarks, “in most such collections, ‘sequentiality’ is the least important aspect of the groupings of stories within a volume. The relationships among stories in a short-story cycle are far more complex than the simple following of one another in a sequence”. Still, he adds the rider that “it should be stressed that the term ‘cycle’ also carries misleading suggestions, at least in its workaday sense of ‘circularity’” (2001: 12). Perhaps Kennedy's assessment of the complexities involved in reading integrated collections is the most nuanced: “Such a fusion of modes imposes new strategies of reading in which the movement from one story to the next necessitates reorientation, just as the uneasy reciprocity between part and whole conditions the ongoing determination of meaning. ... story cycles produce composite

meanings” (1988: 14). Such “composite meanings” are of a different order to those encountered in a novel.

The ways in which the individual stories in a short story cycle are processed as self-contained units by the reader (at least initially and not necessarily in sequence *or* as parts of a whole) are obviously conditioned by generic expectations specific to the short story *per se*. However, despite the fact that the short story is generally analysed via the conventional narrative elements associated with the novel (plot, character, point of view and so on), many writers of and commentators on short fiction maintain that the genre is more closely aligned with the lyric poem.⁶ Suzanne Hunter Brown explains this affinity by arguing that the “magnitude” of a work is crucially important in determining its meaning and the ways in which it is read. In her view, the conciseness of a short story predisposes it to being read “locally”, or in such a way that immediate attention to detail is possible:

Close verbal associations are made possible by brevity; thus short stories with intricate, tight verbal structures are likely to please us because they reward the tendency to process brief works locally. Verbal echoes are much easier to perceive if they occur close together; a short story, like a lyric poem, can exploit this effect and generate a corresponding verbal density. ... Short stories are actually curious hybrids. Like novels, they exhibit features which would allow a reader to process them “globally”, according to plot, but like lyric poems they are brief and so enable local processing, close attention to verbatim text structure, and need not rely on overarching narrative schemas to be retained at all.

(1982: 36)

Brown therefore associates a synchronic, nonchronological or configurational reading with the short story, and a diachronic, chronological or episodic reading with the novel (1982: 36), and claims that the conciseness of the short story inclines it to what Seymour Chatman terms the “plot of revelation”, whereas the novel’s length predisposes it to the “plot of resolution” (1978: 39).

Brown’s claim that the short story is a schizophrenic form with allegiances both to lyrical poetry and to narrative prose is suggestive since, by implication, the short story cycle is an even more ambiguous genre. This is because, in the latter, what are arguably the two major indices of the short story – brevity and unity of effect or impression – are displaced or deferred.⁷ In other words, these qualities in individual narratives are disrupted or dislodged by cohesive or integrative patterns which draw the separate stories into a larger whole, however perceived. Nevertheless, this ‘unity’ is in turn rendered unstable by the disjunctures and discontinuities between the constituent parts. The tension that obtains, then, between the claims of closure in single stories and the continuity or coherence of a collection in its

entirety, between discrete or self-contained “monadic texts” (Trussler 2002: 600) and a holistic design, means that both synchronic and diachronic, associative and progressive hermeneutic procedures apply. Though, in a sense, this might be true of all fiction, the cycle form foregrounds these dual processes: indeed, they are its most definitive characteristic.

1.3.2 Genre Conventions and Clusters of Characteristics

A commonplace of genre criticism holds that the category in which we place a work of art affects an audience’s perception of the art ... Moreover, one appreciates a work differently by apprehending how the author uses genre conventions. ... to read [these] stories as an integrated collection is to perceive a different book, one that uses the conventions of the genre in a particular way for particular results.

– Timothy Alderman (1985: 135-136)

Genres can be characterized not by an unambiguous discovery procedure for classifying texts, but by a cluster of characteristics and tendencies, only some of which may be present in a given text ...

– Mary-Louise Pratt (1981: 178)

In announcing his discovery of specifically twentieth-century short story cycles, Ingram makes the important claim that, in these texts, “the devices by which the ‘many’ become components of the pattern of the ‘one’ are *more subtle*, generally, than the devices used in past ages” (1971: 19, emphasis added). This claim is premised on the distinction he draws between the “outer (static) and inner (dynamic) patterns and laws of short story cycles” (1971: 26). The former category consists of what Alderman terms “explicit framing devices” (1985: 136), such as frame-stories, prologues and/or epilogues, interchapters, chapter numbers or titles, and incremental variations in length (Ingram 1971: 20). The latter category, which comprises “dynamic patterns of *internal* structure” (Ingram 1971: 20, emphasis added), not only sets the modern short story cycle apart from its antecedents, but potentially embraces every aspect of narrative technique: “settings, themes, motifs, gestures, characters, symbols and style. ... structures, narrative devices, chronology, and rhetoric” (1971: 200). For Ingram, the most conspicuous pattern here is that of “recurrence and development” (1970: 10), which entails a process of ‘repetition-with-variation’ in which significance accrues incrementally but is perhaps only perceived with hindsight. He explains that the pattern of recurrence and development entails

the repetition of a previously used element ... in a modified form or content, in such a way that the original usage takes on added dimensions in the later context. Also, the original usage is itself affected (in retrospect) by its new relationship to an expanded context. This typically cyclic pattern often amplifies and deepens the significance of the repeated element to such an extent that it becomes a symbol.

(1971: 200-210)

In Ingram's view, therefore, the modern short story cycle is characterised by unobtrusive but significant intratextually cohesive devices which illuminate the concerns and presentational surfaces of the stories both individually and compositely. These balance dissociating forces in the collection to establish a network of contrapuntal effects – "patterns and rhythms, directions and movements, parallels and contrasts" (Ingram 1971: 12). As he elaborates:

Recurrence and development usually operate concurrently like the motion of a wheel. The rim of the wheel represents recurrent elements in a cycle which rotate around a thematic center. As these elements (motifs, symbols, characters, words) repeat themselves, turn in on themselves, recur, the whole wheel moves forward. The motion of the wheel is a single process. In a single process, too, the thematic core of a cycle expands and deepens as the elements of the cycle repeat themselves in varied contexts.
(1971: 20-21)

The wheel metaphor here captures both the cumulative and sequential aspects of integrated collections. Moreover, the resonances established by the patterns within and among stories seem to correspond with Joseph Frank's notion of spatial form in modernist writing. In other words, a network of internal verbal relationships and intrareferential motifs, symbols and metaphors is characteristic not only of individual narratives, but extends beyond them to traverse an entire collection.

Though many critics retain elements of Ingram's terminology to describe the strategies used and effects achieved by individual short story cycles, Kennedy presents a more narratological account of the ways in which such texts produce ambiguous and multi-faceted or composite meanings. One category Kennedy identifies is that of "textual structure", "formal organization" or "physical architectural aspects" (1988: 18), by which he means "the physical arrangement of stories and those devices ... used to signal relationships and divisions" (1988: 15). To the static frames listed earlier, he adds three "strategies of arrangement" among stories: progression, combination, and juxtaposition. The first of these – "progression" – denotes the sequential and incremental unfolding of the narratives which, despite discontinuities, may "imply a developmental scheme" (1988: 15-16). "Combination" refers to embedded clusters of narratives or internal groupings which generate meanings "related to, but separable from, the global signification" (1988: 16). And "juxtaposition" signifies "conjoined narratives" whose "differential relationship ... generates supplemental meanings distinguishable from those of the collection as a whole" (1988: 16-17). Though, as Kennedy points out, in a general sense juxtapositional effects are produced by *any* two adjacent stories in a collection, "certain pairs may be yoked by formal or thematic features so that they comment explicitly upon each other" (1988: 17).

Kennedy then presents an itinerary of “intertextual” (more accurately, intratextual) signifying systems, which he labels “topical”, “spatiotemporal” and “functional”. “Topical” signs include motifs, narrative *topoi*, themes, and images – any element which “calls attention to its figurative status in a collection through sheer recurrence or special emphasis”. These signs correspond to those elements which readers “perceive as ‘symbolic’ in the traditional sense – that is, as signifiers of a truth or reality not otherwise immanent in a text” (1988: 19). “Spatiotemporal” signs, on the other hand, relate to milieu or setting, and “provide generally consistent, circumstantial indices” (1988: 20). However, Kennedy maintains, the “fictive ‘world’” represented is not simply reducible to allusions to place and time, that is, to conventional notions of setting, but generates “an awareness of conditions which can alter our understanding of narrative action” (1988: 20). In many conventional cycles topographical unity, a sense of place, and an “imaginative geography” comprise the dominant unifying devices, and “[c]ontextual indices [may] become so plentiful and so charged with signification that the city or town figures as a character, even the subject of the cycle” (1988: 20). Temporal markers, though a less prominent feature, may likewise provide indices of the ‘mood’ of a particular period. And “functional” signs, Kennedy’s final category, refer to the roles or narratological functions played by characters and the elemental types they represent, as identified by theorists such as Propp and Greimas. In related vein, Kennedy suggests that a narrative deep structure may be recovered from a text, and he draws on Genette’s distinctions between *histoire* (story), *récit* (text) and *narration* (the act of telling) (1988: 22). Thus, in his view, “every collection, especially those by a single author, may be expected to reveal elemental narrative structures, resembling grammatical chains, which generate the individual stories and account for similarities and differences among them” (1988: 23).

Ultimately, however, the dualism of the cycle form – the dynamic and unresolved structural tension it displays between coherence and disjunction – by definition renders its identity unstable and ambivalent. Kennedy, for example, comments that:

To be sure, our perception of a given book of stories as an ensemble depends upon the recognition of an associative rationale – else the volume seems a hodgepodge of random narratives. But our sense of connectedness may result from a variety of signs and signals, even (or especially) from the differences among the stories and the gaps which divide them. Perhaps we need a different generic term to accommodate narrative groupings now dismissed as insufficiently or belatedly unified.

(1988: 13)

Though unable to suggest such a term, or one less vague than simply “short story collection”, Kennedy does convey a sense here that the disjunctions and lacunae between narratives in a

cycle are as significant as their overt connections. Similarly, despite the fact that Ingram maintains that a systematic approach to short story cycles enables readers to perceive “the *claritas* of the whole ... as a function of the *integritas* and *consonantia* of its parts” (1970: 12), he points out that certain texts confound such a perception of coherence, especially when “the individuality of most of the stories almost demolishes the cohesion of the larger unit” (1971: 19). And Alderman argues that centrifugal forces may exist which work to override or disrupt the cohesive elements and sever the stories from each other. Such disruptive aspects may include “the discontinuities of the stories, with or without interchapters; the reader’s sense of closure in each story; the variety in types or genres of stories ... and sometimes the sheer number of stories. The collection may seem too complicated or chaotic to be apprehended as a meaningful association” (1985: 136). Both Ingram’s and Alderman’s comments here suggest that excessive complexity and diversity may prevent certain collections from being perceived as integrated, whereas Kennedy views such ‘heterogeneous’ works as inviting a different approach, rather than exclusion from the category of short fiction cycle. These differences of opinion become especially pertinent in relation to many postmodernist short fiction cycles, which display exactly this evidence of discontinuity, contradiction, excess and ‘chaos’ – or what Ingram terms “the move to incoherence” (1971: 24).

1.4 History: An “Ancient and Avant-Garde” Literary Form

The cyclical habit of mind emerges with greater or less frequency and intensity in different epochs and in different cultures.

– Forrest Ingram (1971: 7)

Probably the impulse to combine individual tales into larger wholes has its origin in the very nature of imagination itself, a “coadunating” power as Coleridge described it.

– Ian Reid (1977: 46)

1.4.1 Precursors: “Collectors of Tales”

It is perhaps true to claim, as Louise Erdrich does, that the “storytelling cycle is in [the] oral traditions of all cultures” (qtd in Nagel 2001: 255). The earliest recorded examples of such cycles, in both verse and prose, date from pre-history, and derive from such ancient cultures as the Orient, the Asian and Arabic worlds, and Classical Greece and Rome. Prominent examples, in this regard, are the *Book of Sindibad*, *A Thousand and One Nights*, the *Panchatantra*, *The Book of Dede Korkut*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*. In addition to possessing genealogies that are frequently

difficult to trace, these “old story-clusters” (Reid 1977: 46) bear witness to a cross-fertilisation and commingling of the mythologies and folklores of three continents over many centuries. What Ingram terms the “cyclical habit of mind” (1971: 7) re-surfaces in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, most conspicuously in the chivalric romance cycles (Tristan and Iseult, Gawain, Charlemagne, Amadis, Palmeria and the Arthurian legend), but also in popular Italian *novella* collections of the fourteenth century, such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and the *Gesta Romanorum*.⁸ In England, the influence of these European trends is apparent in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and, later, Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Lord Berners’ *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeux* and John Skelton’s *Merie Tales*. By the eighteenth century in Europe, however, the novel as a bourgeois, realist form had superseded both “the old-fashioned romances” (Frye 1957: 10) and the novella cycle.⁹ It was only in roughly the middle of the nineteenth century that the modern short story, characterised by what is in fact a somewhat ambiguous shift from romance to realism, emerged as a distinctive new literary genre – particularly in France, Russia and America. And, in what is a significant, through frequently overlooked synchronicity, prototypical examples of the modern short story cycle simultaneously made their first appearance.

In differentiating between modern and older variants of the cycle form, Ingram highlights the oral roots of the latter, and their compilers’ recourse to a reservoir of pre-existent, perennial and itinerant tales of various types, a resource available to but, he argues, less frequently utilised in the modern short story cycle. Indeed, he claims, “story cycles probably originated this way” (1970: 9). In Europe this ‘narrative pool’ included folk and fairy tales/*märchen*, medieval romances or *gestes*, and tales with a satiric, didactic or moralistic purpose, such as *fabliaux*, *exempla*, parables and animal fables. Moreover, as Reid points out, the “constructive method” employed in many older cycles is that of “external framing” rather than “internal linking” (1977: 46). He classifies these early precursors of the modern form, then, as “framed miscellanies” (1977: 50), rather than ‘short story cycles proper’, and defines the distinction in the following terms:

Whereas the parts of a cycle are woven into an integral unity, these ancient framed collections comprise a miscellany of narrative types, diverse and discrete. Instead of the *sense of community* that usually permeates a cycle, linking story to story, a framed miscellany often situates its communal principle in the *Rahmenerzählung*: a group of pilgrims riding together to Canterbury, or a sophisticated company of young raconteurs taking refuge from the Florentine plague. ... it is not in the group of narrators as such that any miscellany’s real unity lies. The framing device is often more or less perfunctory, a

conventional pretext for assembling different items. Holding such collections together in a more pervasive way is their author's fascination with the manifold roots and branches of narration itself.

(1977: 50; emphasis added)

Reid refers to the explicit framing method as having produced "some composite narratives of courtly and epic quality", but points out that "in those early cycles there was often a lack of *firm structural unity*, and the constituent parts were *hardly short stories in the modern sense*" (1977: 46; emphasis added).¹⁰

Some of Reid's comments above evoke Walter Benjamin's ideas on the disjunction between oral and print culture, and the ineluctable alienation of writer from reader – or the fact that, in written narratives, "the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force" (1992: 83). Benjamin claims that "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all [oral] storytellers have drawn", and he distinguishes between two fundamental types of such storytellers: the traveller or "trading seaman" and the peasant or "resident tiller of the soil" (1992: 84). The former relays "the lore of faraway places" and tales of the foreign and exotic, whereas the latter conveys "the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place" – that is, stories that concern the local and traditional (1992: 84-85). Benjamin claims, however, that the "art of [oral] storytelling is dying out", and he views its demise as

a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. ... The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the [oral] story ... is its essential dependence on the book.

(1992: 86-87)

Pratt, too, points out that "The conspicuous tradition in the novel has always been toward writing and bookishness", and that "the novel was born affirming its own written-ness". She maintains that, though the novel *may* include techniques intended to conjure up the illusion of orality, such strategies are likely to be more prominently on display in the short story:

orality is [a] consistent trend in the short story, ranging from the incorporation of oral-colloquial speech forms in the language of narration ... through instances where an oral narrative is embedded in the story ... to instances where the whole text takes the form of represented speech, often first person narration in an oral setting ... Oral style and formats are common not just in regional or "folk" trends in the short story ... but also at the cosmopolitan end of the scale

(1981: 189)

For Pratt, then, “The lesser authority of speech is redeployed in the ‘lesser’ genre, supported [not only] by ... literary antecedents ... [but also,] in many cases, by living (or dying) oral narrative traditions” (1981: 189). Nevertheless, both “short stories in the modern sense” and modern short story cycles are written not spoken products: they depend for their reception on a literate readership rather than an oral audience, and the reading experience itself is solitary and private. Kennedy astutely notes, in this regard, that:

If [in Philip Selznick’s terms] the sense of community “begins with, and is very largely supported by, the experience of interdependence and reciprocity” ... then the modern short story sequence poses a provocative analogy to this basic social structure. Assembling narratives about diverse characters to form a composite text, such collections curiously resemble the gathering of a group to exchange the stories that express its collective identity. ... Yet, as a written artifact, a product of print culture, the story sequence always assumes an ironic relation to the scene of communal story-telling that it obscurely simulates.

(1995: 194)

Thus, though Nagel claims that “[f]ar from being a modern ‘hybrid’ form, a compromise between the story and the novel, the cycle is an ancient construction [which] anticipates the novel by centuries” (2001: 255-256), modern, published cycles are not interchangeable with their oral antecedents – or, indeed, with contemporary oral equivalents – in any unproblematic way. In other words, while oral stories and cycles may be premised on “the effort to create a community of tellers and listeners who share a nucleus of concerns and values inherent in the tales of the culture” (Nagel 2001: 256), written cycles, by definition, cannot reproduce this reality and may allude to it only via literary sleight-of-hand. As Kennedy, again, comments:

At once old and new, the short story cycle (like the short story itself) looks back to oral traditions of narrative while embodying signs of its undeniable modernity. Claiming such precursors as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, cycles emulate (at times explicitly) the gesture of storytelling, the effort of a speaker – or speakers – to establish solidarity with an implied audience by rehearsing a series of tales linked by their intrinsic content or by the extrinsic conditions of their iteration. In quite a different sense, however, published cycles belong to the modern age and reflect the commodification of narrative which began in earnest in the nineteenth century.

(1988: 9)

1.4.2 Nineteenth-Century Realism: “Short Stories in the Modern Sense”

[I]n a short story, it is better to say not enough than to say too much.

– Anton Chekhov (qtd in Luscher 1989: 152)

Definitive description of the essential qualities of the ‘modern short story’ is problematic given the protean variety within the genre. Walter Allen remarks, for example, that “any definition of the short story must be tentative, allowing for many apparent contradictions and many genuine ones” (1981: 8). And Suzanne Ferguson similarly maintains that “‘Intuition’ or even ‘experience’ may tell us that the ‘short story’ exists, but defining it has proven surprisingly resistant to critical effort ... there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that the critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions” (1982: 13). Nevertheless, there is general consensus not only that the modern short story as an identifiable and distinct genre emerged in roughly the mid-nineteenth century in various parts of the world, but also that one of the most prominent features distinguishing this new form was the adoption of realism as a narrative style or set of conventions. Allen highlights this shift in mode when he remarks that “the short story, before the modern short story came into being, was a manifestation of the romance” (1981: 5). He points out that:

the relation of the modern story to the older parallels that of the novel to the romance. In other words, we assume in the short story, as in the novel, that probability and realism, truth to psychology and to history, are pre-conditions of its being. In fact, as a form it was a later development in prose fiction than the novel.

(1981: 8-9)

However, this transition from romance to realism, or from ‘tale’ to ‘modern short story proper’, is not as abrupt and clearly defined as literary historians might wish it to be, and is associated less with the early American originators of the short story – Irving, Hawthorne and Poe – than with their Russian counterparts – Gogol, Turgenev and Chekhov.¹¹ Indeed, Turgenev, in a much-quoted tribute (“We all came out from under Gogol’s overcoat”) implicitly nominated the latter’s most famous story the ur-text of the new genre. H.E. Bates further underlines Gogol’s importance:

Gogol marks the switch-over from romanticism to the thing which, for want of a better expression, we call realism; he marks the beginning of the wider application of visual writing, of vivid objectivity, of [a] particular faith in indigenous material. ... Gogol, like all good writers since, looked outside his back door ... and saw a life that clashed within itself with such remarkably diverse virility that there was no need to look farther. That

act of Gogol's was of supreme importance to the short story: for until someone did that, the short story as we know it to-day had no existence.

(1972: 26-27)

Bates's emphasis not only on realism but also on "indigenous material" in the citation above is significant for two reasons – one relating to narrative form, and the other to narrative material or subject matter. The first of these is that the Russian writers, in pursuing the quotidian, the local and the psychologically plausible, formally evolved narratives which appeared 'plotless' in conventional terms. In other words, these were stories whose plot structures diverged from "the principles of temporal ordering and causal connectivity" associated with the traditional Aristotelian "tripartite sequence" or symmetrical "three-phase action" (Reid 1977: 5-6) of "conflict, sequential action, and resolution" (Reid 1977: 59). This shift saw the privileging of insight over action and event, and of 'showing' rather than 'telling'. Ferguson, for example, claims that "Turgenev and Chekhov, among the Russians, display in particular the foregrounding of setting, the reduction of physical action, and the elevation of mood changes to the status of plots" (1982: 22), traits which she associates with what she terms impressionist (alternatively modernist) fiction. In both Britain and America, however, the rejection or adaptation of the 'well-made plot' was for the most part deferred until the second decade of the twentieth century, and is generally associated with writers such as Joyce, Anderson, Toomer, Woolf and Mansfield, rather than their forerunners. It is largely as a result of this temporal disjunction and its continued ramifications that short story commentators identify a bifurcation in modern story types originating in the nineteenth century. Rohrberger and Burns, for example, distinguish between "the traditional story pattern ... and the truncated, epiphanic plot" (1982: 9), and Eileen Baldeshwiler's corresponding terms are the "epical" and the "lyrical" story (1976: 202). Dominic Head provides a useful synopsis of this distinction:

A critical commonplace in short story theory is the notion that there are, essentially, two types of story, differentiated by their differing dependence on 'plot', or external action ... generally, plot is here seen as part of a formal pattern, but even in this capacity it is not held to be a fundamental factor in some stories. The plotted story, of which Maupassant is seen as a figurehead, is set against the less well structured, often psychological story; the 'slice-of-life' Chekhovian tradition. It is to this tradition that the stories of the modernists (those of Joyce, Woolf and Mansfield in particular) are usually said to belong.

(1992: 16)

Though commonplace, these assumptions are significant in relation to the fact that many nineteenth-century story sequences, from America and elsewhere, are not viewed as modern

short story cycles, since there seems to be an implicit recognition that *certain* stories are in some sense ‘more modern’ than others.

The second trend identified in Bates’s earlier comment, that is, the shift to “indigenous material”, raises the question of what that term might mean in contexts other than Gogol’s Russia – or Europe, more generally. Significantly, in this respect, in many other parts of the world nineteenth-century writers of sketches, tales and short stories produced collections linked by a common frontier or rural setting, but, as mentioned earlier, it is Turgenev and Daudet who are credited with producing the first regionalist modern short story cycles. Ingram, for example, claims that Turgenev, in particular, exerted a seminal influence on subsequent writers in America: “when writers of this century saw what Turgenev achieved ... – how he preserved the integrity of the more condensed form while incorporating his stories into a single overall design – they could not be averse to trying the form themselves” (1970: 8).¹² Reid similarly points to the importance of these two writers:

Go Down Moses, Winesburg, and numerous other modern short-story cycles such as Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples* and John Steinbeck’s *The Pastures of Heaven* locate their unity of place in some rural region. In this they follow the most notable nineteenth-century prototypes, Turgenev’s *A Sportman’s Sketches* and Daudet’s *Lettres de Mon Moulin*.

(1977: 49)

He subsequently writes that Daudet “evokes piecemeal the life of a regional community in Provence with much the same kind of cumulative effect as Anderson conveys in *Winesburg, Ohio*” (1977: 53).

However, it is debatable whether, in reality, these European precedents had such a determining influence – in the United States, especially, or elsewhere for that matter. The huge popularity of the short story itself in America in the nineteenth century was initially established by the widely-circulated magazines and annuals which first emerged in the 1830s. In part these publications were a response to low-cost reprints of English novels which functioned to the detriment of longer fiction by American writers, the merit of which was often considered questionable by comparison. At the time, Nathaniel Parker Willis described this situation in disparaging terms: “We must either write books to give away, or take some vein of literature where the competition is more equal – an alternative that makes almost all American authors *mere* contributors of *short papers* to periodicals” (“short story” par. 18, emphasis added). In time these “short papers” evolved from the sketch into the short story and, later in the century, into linked series of stories reflecting the local and particular in

terms of both character and place. Writers especially associated with this trend include Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, and Stephen Crane. A. Walton Litz's appraisal of the contribution of these nineteenth-century 'local colour' and early regionalist writers points to a legacy inherited and improved upon by subsequent writers:

Often the writing is distressingly provincial. ... But in the case of those writers with an ear for actual speech and an eye for significant detail ... the colloquial style opened new literary frontiers. ... Hemingway and Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson ... found their task that much easier because the "regional" writers had broken through the genteel tradition to record the rhythms of everyday speech.

(1980: 256)

Implicit in this breakthrough seems to be a recognition of emergent identities and communities that were not – or no longer – modelled on inherited or imported English or European traditions.

Adendorff points out, however, that the shift to regionalism in American short stories initially entailed a mixture of modes:

In American literature the emergence of regionalism was an early sign of a general change from romanticism to realism. Nevertheless, it is a feature of the [nineteenth-century] regional tales that, although they employed realist methods in presenting details of setting and modes of existence, they were descended from the romantic tradition of narrated exploits, often extravagant in content and in the manner of the telling, and containing elements of the marvellous. The fact that regional stories were often set in new, unexplored territories tended to give them an exotic flavour.

(1985: 9-10)

The link between the short story and marginal, unsettled experiences and population groups is most famously articulated by Frank O'Connor in *The Lonely Voice*: "Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society ... an intense awareness of human loneliness" (1963: 19). In his view, however, the form's appeal is predominantly romantic rather than realist:

we can see in [the short story] an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups. ... The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community ... but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.

(1963: 20-21)

Reid adopts and extends O'Connor's insights in arriving at the conclusion that, "since the emergence of the short story as a fully-fledged genre in Europe and America coincides ... with the burgeoning of that protean cultural phenomenon known as Romanticism, there

would seem to be a broad basis for the common remark that the short story is in essence a Romantic form: *the Romantic prose form*” (1977: 27-28). Given the influence of Romanticism on English literary culture, but relative paucity of short story production in that country over the same period, he maintains that:

unlike the novel, which was urban, urbane and bourgeois in its origins and which was concerned chiefly with manners, marriage and money, the short story found its province more often than not among small groups of working men, especially in those many areas of the American continent which by the early nineteenth century had come to consist of regional settlements still lacking cohesion.

(1977: 28-29)

Litz, too, remarks on the combined effects of Romanticism and pioneer experience on the emergence of the short story in America:

it was the product of a special confluence of literary and cultural forces [which] came together with particular urgency in early nineteenth-century America ... [the] American “inventors” ... were led to the short story in part by what Henry James would have called the “thinness” of American life, its lack of a rich and complex social texture: the brief poetic tale, rather than the sprawling novel of manners, seemed the natural form for their intense but isolated experiences. At the same time they were acutely responsive to the developments of English and European Romanticism. This collision of local and fragmented social experience with a cosmopolitan artistic vision proved ideal for the growth of the short story.

(1980: 3-4)

Though the arguments above are specifically directed at the American short story, they have a wider relevance, since elsewhere, and particularly in other colonial or formerly colonial territories, the short story was being used for purposes similar to those in America – in other words, to reflect an ‘indigenous’ or localised experience and “to make a national literature and achieve an authentic voice” (Stevick 1985: 14). And in such locales, too, the romantic sketch was to modulate into realism as more stable regional and national identities took shape. Pratt, for example, having discussed Bret Harte’s rejection of English models in favour of a depiction of, as he put it, “the rough and uncivilized masses who were making his country’s history” (1981: 187), comments that:

In other parts of the world we similarly find the short story being used to introduce new regions or groups into an established national literature, or into an emerging national literature in the process of decolonization. ... It is in such regional (*i.e.* marginal with respect to some metropolis) writings that one sees most clearly the short story’s relations to the sketch, a genre which it has now subsumed, and which was, as Ray West describes it, “a romantic means of catching the atmosphere of remote places”.

(1981: 187)

She indicates, moreover, that such contexts were also to provide a breeding ground for the short story cycle:

On the other side, and perhaps moving to the panoramic potential of the novel, it is also here on the regional periphery that the short story cycle has been most likely to make its appearance. ... To some extent, such cycles do a kind of groundbreaking, establishing a basic literary identity for a region or group, laying out descriptive parameters, character types, social and economic settings, principal points of conflict for an audience unfamiliar with the region itself or with seeing that region in print.

(1981: 187-188)

The strong association of the short story cycle with regionalism is therefore obviously a function of the fact that many cycles “locate their unity of place in some rural region” (Reid 1977: 49), and this topographical unity lends itself to the evocation of details of ‘local colour’. For example, Rohrberger cites Robert Rhode’s contention that, “if successfully used, local colour strengthens the setting by adding to the impression of actuality”, and concludes that regionalism, understood to signify “fidelity to a particular geographical section carefully and truthfully depicting the region and manners and morals of the people living there”, is in turn allied with realism and with Henry James’s concept of “solidity of specification” (1985: 147-148).

The link between the cycle form, realism and regionalism is made explicit by Valerie Shaw, in her discussion of “Places and Communities” in the short story: “The device of grouping tales and stories set in the same location [creates] a persuasive effect of realism” (1983: 158). In such collections, she maintains, “the reader is acclimatized to conditions in a circumscribed locality and so becomes familiar with a particular way of life” (1983: 159). Implicit here is the assumption that metropolitan rather than ‘home-grown’ readers are initially the target of texts from the colonies/margins – that is, until such texts are adopted and recognised domestically as ‘authentic’ expressions of local or regional identities, and as contributing towards an emergent national literature. Nevertheless, the coherence of these regional and national cultures is problematised by their existence as “imagined communities” (1991: 6), to borrow Benedict Anderson’s celebrated phrase. Indeed, certain phrases in the discussion above, such as Pratt’s “seeing that region *in print*” and Rhode’s “the *impression of actuality*”, to which might be added Rohrberger’s “a specific *literary* geography” (1985: 158; emphasis added), implicitly recognise and draw attention to the fictionalisation and narrativisation of a common locality and its inhabitants – that is, to their existence as literary and linguistic constructs. Moreover, the apparently unifying or incorporative (narrative)

project of affirming community and located identities in reality occludes the exclusionary processes at work and glosses over the internal fractures and differences, divisions and contradictions, subsumed within such collective identifications.

1.4.3 The Modern(ist) Short Story Cycle: “Queer Small Town People”/ “Sad City Folk”

If there is one thing certain about the “organic community”, it is that it is always gone.

– Raymond Williams (qtd in Sole 1983: 47)

[T]here was nothing like a crowd ... for making one feel lonely.

– Henry James (qtd in Hocks 1995: 16)

Despite the proliferation in nineteenth-century America of short story series unified by a shared provincial or frontier setting and a common set of characters, it is Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) that is widely recognised as the first modern short story cycle. Just a few years prior to the appearance of *Winesburg*, however, James Joyce had published *Dubliners* (in London in 1914 and New York in 1916), though apparently Anderson had not read Joyce’s collection (see Curry 1980: 236-240). Notwithstanding the fact that *Dubliners* has an urban setting and represents perhaps the first of “a minority of cycles [that have] a metropolitan context” (Reid 1977: 49), Martha Curry observes that these two authors “independently of each other ... were writing books remarkably similar in structure, narrative technique, and theme” (1980: 240). In particular, she claims, *Dubliners* and *Winesburg* “introduced British and American readers to volumes of short stories that are structurally very different from previous collections ... the first representatives in modern English of ... ‘the short story cycle’” (1980: 240). Moreover, their authors “were among the first in the twentieth century to write what has been called the ‘new’ short story, a story which de-emphasizes plot because it strives to be ‘true to life’, not literary stereotypes” (1980: 242).

Both Joyce and Anderson hinted that their collections were integrated in various ways. In correspondence Joyce not only indicated that he had chosen Dublin as the setting “because that city seemed ... the centre of paralysis”, but also that the stories were deliberately arranged in a sequence involving “childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life” (qtd in Curry 1980: 241). It is largely as a result of these comments that Head maintains that the impulse to identify coherence in *Dubliners* has dominated and obfuscated critical readings of the volume:

a focus on visual metaphor and on simplified symbolic effects are the main elements of a predominant, reunifying reading of *Dubliners*. ... There are various comments by Joyce which are frequently quoted in support of the simple paralysis reading, and these have given this approach a spurious and enduring validation ... Joyce's share of this correspondence – which *invites* a simplistic unifying approach to the book – is usually taken at face value.

(1992: 37-41)

However, in foregrounding a structural tension between coherence and disjunction as an “integral aspect” (1992: 37) of the modernist character of the *individual* stories in *Dubliners*, Head overlooks the ways in which such ambiguity is equally characteristic of the short story cycle. This is particularly apparent, for example, in his quotation of Mikhail Bakhtin's comment that “Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance” (1992: 67). Thus, though Head uses the Bakhtinian notion of a “*dialogized* narrative” (1992: 68) to support his analysis of the ambivalence within individual stories in *Dubliners*, this notion is not, in the final analysis, incompatible with a recuperation of the entire collection as a cycle. Interestingly, for example, Richard Hocks argues that, like Henry James's *The Finer Grain* (published roughly contemporaneously in 1910), *Dubliners* is “open-ended and contingent ... integrated rather than formally ‘unified’”. Its modernist tenor disallows the kind of closure suggested by a concept like organic unity” (1995: 15).

Of the integrated character of *Winesburg*, Anderson wrote the following in his *Memoirs*:

The stories belonged together. I felt that, taken together, they made something like a novel, a complete story ... I have even sometimes thought that the novel form does not fit an American writer, that it is a form which had been brought in. What is wanted is a new looseness; and in *Winesburg* I had made my own form. There were individual tales but all about lives in some way connected.

(qtd in Curry 1980: 243; Ingram 1970: 8)

It was Malcolm Cowley who, in his introduction to the 1960 edition of *Winesburg*, first suggestively termed this “new looseness” a “cycle of stories”:

In structure the book lies midway between the novel and the mere collection of stories. Like several famous books by more recent authors, all early readers of Anderson – like Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses*, like Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* and *The Pastures of Heaven*, like Caldwell's *Georgia Boy* – it is a cycle of stories with several unifying elements, including a single background, a prevailing tone, and a central

character. These elements can be found in all the cycles, but the best of them also have an underlying plot that is advanced or enriched by each of the stories.

(Anderson 1976: 14)

The centrality of Anderson's text within the modern short story cycle tradition is underscored by many other critics. Reid, for example, writes that the collection

stands as an obvious paradigm of the modern short-story cycle. Its form is clearly between an episodic novel and a mere collection of discrete items. The setting is fairly constant in place and time, and many characters appear in more than one story, with George Willard being present in all but a few. But the tight continuous structure of a novel is deliberately avoided; Anderson said he wanted "a new looseness" of form to suit the particular quality of his material. His people are lonely, restless, cranky. Social cohesion is absent in their mid-western town. Even momentary communication seldom occurs between any two of them. Winesburg is undergoing a human erosion caused by the winds of change blowing from the cities, by the destabilizing of moral codes, and by the intrinsic thinness of small-town life. The "new looseness" of *Winesburg, Ohio* can convey with precision and pathos the duality that results: a superficial appearance (and indeed the ideal possibility) of communal wholeness, and an underlying actual separateness.

(1977: 47-48)

Like Reid, Ellen Kimbel focuses on the ways in which – despite the unifying presence of the central character, George Willard – the form of *Winesburg* differs from that of a novel (even a fragmented *Bildungsroman*), and on how notions of community are undermined by the acute solitariness of the characters:

Anderson's method ... is by nature anecdotal and episodic, lacking that sustained momentum and integration of material essential to novelistic structure. Further, the focus on individual lives at a given moment of time – the very substance of these stories – is inappropriate to the longer form with its requisite sequentiality and connectedness. The book is, in fact, a story cycle, the first of many in American fiction ... But in Anderson, the emphasis is not on growth to maturity and wisdom of the unifying character (as in Hemingway and Porter), but rather on a succession of separate, isolated lives. ... All are marginal types, those strange unhappy beings who are increasingly to inhabit the American short story: men and women withering in the face of perplexing circumstances, unfulfilled capacities, atrophied emotions, and terrible loneliness.

(1985: 64)

Kennedy, too, points to the obsessive, frustrated and solipsistic quality underpinning Anderson's "panoramic view of [the] collective life" (1995: 194) of *Winesburg*. He then draws on Thomas Yingling's suggestive argument that Anderson set the collection temporally in the late nineteenth century in order to portray the "end of collective experience" in America – the estrangement among the characters deriving less from puritan repression than from the "alienation from social relations that occurs in an economy dedicated to

commodity production” (qtd in Kennedy 1995: 200). Thus small-town cohesion and an “oral culture of proximity” have been irrevocably altered by the age of industrial capitalism, mass production, modernisation and consumerism (1995: 201). Kennedy concludes that Anderson’s collection initiated a “critique of communal life” (1995: 197) in America, and that “the precarious semblance of community in American story sequences since *Winesburg* ... function[s] as a residual, ironic sign of the disintegration of communal life ” (1995: 202).

Significantly, then, the ‘sense of community’ or affiliation earlier identified by Reid as permeating modern short story cycles is problematic and, at best, equivocal and unstable – as he himself acknowledges. In a comparison of Anderson’s text with the Australian writer Frank Moorhouse’s *Futility and Other Animals*, Reid writes:

Discontinuity- in-relationship ... is as much a structural and stylistic principle of [Moorhouse’s] writings as it is their theme, and the cycle is accordingly his natural form. A large Australian city in the 1960s may seem a far cry from a mid-western town in the early years of this century, but Moorhouse’s fiction and the *Winesburg* stories express fundamentally a similar sense of groping search by isolated characters (“lives flowing past each other”, in Anderson’s phrase) for an elusive feeling of community.

(1977: 49)

The similarities between Anderson’s and Steinbeck’s depictions of rural enclaves and Joyce’s urban *Dubliners* are remarked upon, too, by Ingram:

in establishing his Dublin as a “centre of paralysis” Joyce has created a mythic kingdom, a microcosm, not unlike Winesburg, Ohio, or the Pastures of Heaven. His Dublin is a city of moral, spiritual, and intellectual paralytics, a living Spoon River cemetery-society, a community of hollow men who inhabit a symbolic wasteland landscape.

(1971: 33)

As Kennedy points out, though “The analogy between communities and story sequences becomes inescapable [in works] ... which represent specific population groups or identified enclaves ... ironically, sequences like *Dubliners* – in which characters inhabit the same locality – often evoke the sharpest sense of mutual estrangement; textual divisions correspond to absolute boundaries between one life and another” (1995: 194-196).

The allusion to T.S. Eliot is unmistakable in Ingram’s comments quoted above. Indeed, Hocks discerns structural and thematic correspondences between *The Finer Grain*, *Dubliners* and *The Waste Land*. He argues, for example, that “What Eliot achieves ... is an ideological ‘unity of disunity’ ... which seeks to express the core of modern life”: likewise, James’s and Joyce’s collections project “the tangential, fragmentary nature of modernity itself” (1995: 12, 16). The question of how such a sense of modernity is conveyed relates to

the view, expressed by a number of the critics cited earlier, that Anderson's and Joyce's texts consist of stories fundamentally different in sensibility and construction from those which preceded them – in the English-speaking world at least. In other words, rather than projecting a sense of coherent and secure individual identities or subjectivities (“personality ... defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness” [Watt 1957: 21]), characters are revealed to be “confused silent people” (Curry 1980: 249) or “strange unhappy beings” (Kimbel 1985: 64) who are fragmented, alienated, atrophied and largely uncomprehending of their predicaments. These qualities are epitomised in Joyce's word “paralysis” and in Anderson's description of Winesburg's inhabitants as “grotesques” and “queer small town people” (Curry 1980: 239, 247). Moreover, the rare occasions on which insight is awarded such characters or (more accurately) the reader, Joyce termed “epiphanies” and Anderson “significant moments” or “distillation[s]” (Curry 1980: 244-245). Both these writers, in revolting against “plotty stories” (Head 1992: 64) and “The Poison Plot” (Curry 1980: 243), contemporaneously devised a ‘new’ approach to plot structure. Kimbel explains:

In Anderson, the representational mode, the tripartite structure, the assumption of verifiable patterns of behavior and the moral concomitant disappear. In their place is a form at once more allusive and epigrammatic, more mystical and poetic, and more psychologically suggestive than anything that had gone before it in American fiction. The effect is that of the Joycean epiphany in which a single gesture, a perception, or a bit of dialogue is caught, rendered permanent, and although never interpreted, dissolves into a myriad of implications for the reader. Fundamental to this form is that it shows a life, not in process, but revealed by a moment's flickering light in its quintessential meaning. “I have come to think,” Anderson was later to write, “that the true history of life is but a history of moments. It is only at rare moments that we live”.

(1985: 62-63)

Though, as Kimbel comments, “The theory is not original. ... Woolf's novels are the consummate expression in British fiction of the way in which life is composed of a series of ‘moments’”, she asserts that “Anderson is the first writer to articulate this vision in the American short story, allowing the ‘moment’ to reveal a hidden and not altogether flattering element in American experience. ... it is as though a new genre had been born. The influence of [*Winesburg*] cannot be overstated: as a consequence of its publication, the American short story was never to look the same again” (1985: 62). Joyce and Anderson, then, were among the initiators, in English at least, of what Pratt terms the “classic example” of the “moment-of-truth” narrative structure, a structure which, she maintains, was to become the “canonic form of the modern short story” (1981: 182).¹³

Kennedy describes *Dubliners* and *Winesburg* as “exemplary texts” which “epitomize the type and herald a remarkable outpouring of such collections in the twentieth century”, notably from “the era of high modernism” (1995: vii). Cowley’s explanation for this “outpouring”, specifically in America in the first half of the century, is relayed by Ingram:

Writers of genius ... realised the fuller possibilities of the cycle form and began conceiving their narratives to fit such a pattern. In other words, the existence of popular [nineteenth-century] story-series tended to encourage in writers like Faulkner and Steinbeck that “cyclical habit of mind” of which we spoke earlier.

(1971: 25)

With its recourse to rather nebulous notions of ‘genius’ and distinctions between ‘great’ and ‘popular’ art, however, the above claim elides the obvious question of the relation of both the modern short story cycle and the ‘new’ short story (the innovations associated with Joyce and Anderson) to modernist modes of writing in general, rather than to an earlier, less adept brand of local colour. The fact that modernist fiction as a whole reflected a changed perception of identity or subjectivity (and, by extension, of community) is succinctly argued by Ferguson:

Imitation of how things “feel” or “seem” to the characters became the preferred subject of fiction rather than the imitation of “how things are” in the “real” world. ... the subjectivity of “reality” now became the prevailing mode of understanding, and the exploration of subjectivity became the elusive “object” of fictional imitation. ... This emphasis on subjectivity inevitably affects the typical themes of modern fiction: alienation, isolation, solipsism, the quest for identity and integration. The characters, the experiencing subjects, are seen as isolated from other experiencing subjects, with only rare moments of communion or shared experience possible to them. Frank O’Connor’s contention that the modern short story deals with outsiders, lonely individuals cut off from society, is true, but that theme is equally typical of modern novels.

(1982: 15)

Interestingly, here, certain (though by no means all) of the reasons adduced for the particular appositeness of the short story and short story cycle to the representation of ‘frontier’ societies, or societies in which social cohesion is absent or under threat, coalesce with those put forward to explain the fiction, both long and short, emanating from the Post-World War I metropolitan experience of “alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation” (Jameson 1984: 61).

Nevertheless, modernism as a narrative mode was in part both a response to postwar and early twentieth-century experience, and a fusion of nineteenth-century Romanticism and realism and their extensions, symbolism and naturalism. In its literary manifestations, it reached a peak in the English-speaking world in the first quarter of the twentieth century –

the period, significantly, that witnessed the emergence of the canonical form of the modern short story and story cycle. Tellingly, too, those authors most frequently identified as amongst the foremost modernist fiction-writers produced novels, short stories *and* short story cycles: Anderson, Joyce, Stein, Woolf, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Camus and Kafka, to name but a few. Thus, though Head claims that “the short story shows itself, through its formal capacities, to be a quintessentially modernist form” and that “the genre ought to be seen as centrally involved in the modernist revolution in fictional practice” (1992: xi), this assertion is somewhat tautological, given the authors whose short fiction he discusses.¹⁴ Despite this, it is worth quoting his summation of the grounds for this claim at some length:

[The] coincidence between the modernist preoccupation with form and the capacity of the story is significant, and is only one of several such correspondences. The modernists’ compression of time and dependence on symbolism are the two most obvious parallels: the short form often implies the typicality of a specific episode, while narrative limitation demands oblique expression through image and symbol.

Beyond these obvious parallels, the artifice of the story, particularly amenable to the artistic self-consciousness of the modernists, has further implications for the presentation of material: reception and analysis proceed from a grasp of pattern, of juxtaposition and simultaneity. ... The artifice of the short story facilitates another modernist preoccupation: the analysis of personality, especially a consideration of the fragmented, dehumanized self. ... An inevitable corollary of these factors is a generic tendency towards paradox and ambiguity, another modernist hallmark: authorial detachment and the resulting emphasis on artifice and structural patterning (paradigmatic elements) give rise to an uncertain surface [syntagmatic] structure.

(1992: 7-8)

All of the above qualities are reminiscent of the more elusive and ‘subtle’ techniques Ingram identifies as characteristic of the twentieth-century short story cycle, and compatible with his idea that the form displays its own *internally* established correspondences, dynamics and logic. Significantly, too, Head maintains that modernist short stories display a tension between unity and disunity, or a “resonant dissonance between order and disorder” which “needs to be addressed” (1992: 11, 24) – that is, without misrepresenting the latter characteristics by occluding them within an imposed unifying order. Moreover, as pointed out earlier, such narratives frequently evince a “dialogized style ... as an integral part of their disruption and complication of narrative”, and a “conflict of voices” rather than “a variety of coexisting voices” (1992: 33). The above are all attributes associated specifically with the modern short story cycle. The overriding conclusion, then, is that ultimately the ‘modern short story cycle’ is in fact the ‘*modernist* short story cycle’ – the guise the genre took under

that particular ‘mode of modern writing’ and admittedly the form which dominated at least the first half of the twentieth century.

This would explain to some extent why ‘unity of place’ and ‘local colour’ *per se* are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for a cyclical text to be labelled a ‘modern short story cycle’: in other words, why ‘place-based’ nineteenth-century story series are often excluded or viewed as ‘inferior’ by commentators. In effect, then, it is only those short story cycles which display not simply a ‘modern’ but *modernist* approach to narrative technique, and a concomitant shift in perceptions of human subjectivity, of time, and of place, which are viewed as fully exploiting the cycle’s potential. However, Philip Stevick views this shift in mode, specifically in American regionalist short fiction, more prosaically as a shift from sentimentalism or nostalgia to realism as a result of changed material conditions. He outlines the contrast between a nineteenth-century “bucolic, idyllic, pastoral ideal”, which he labels “counterrealistic” since “the idyllic is embraced, with sentiment and without reservation”, and the “realism” of the early twentieth century:

the bucolic place is understood, perhaps even loved – a frontier farm, wilderness, midwestern town – but not embraced, because no one, writing realistically in the twentieth century, can imagine the happy village, circumscribed, devoid of railway tracks, factories, and the intrusion of an often meretricious technology.

(1985: 14-15)

Obviously, however, such processes as urbanisation, industrialisation and technological change were occurring on a world scale at this time, and Stevick’s sentiments therefore hold not only a regional but also a global resonance. The particular prominence of the short story cycle from the early twentieth century onwards may thus be viewed as a product of a significant convergence between its generic potentialities, aesthetic/modal shifts, and socio-historical/contextual influences – both local and global.

1.4.4 Postmodern and Postcolonial Short Fiction Cycles

[A]lmost every renaissance or notably rich period has come by revolt against pseudo -classic bigotry as to just what a drama, a narrative, or a poem must or must not be.

– Warren Beck (1943: 57)

Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness.

– John Barth (1969: 113)

1.4.4.1 Postmodern Cross-Generic Fictions

In the concluding chapter of *The Modernist Short Story*, subtitled “Contemporary Issues”, Head asserts that “the modernists’ innovations in the short story continue to influence fictional practice, even while these innovations appear to have become subverted, in turn, themselves” (1992: 200). He then asks whether

[i]n postmodern short stories ... the formal dissonance of the modernists may have become not merely the governing principle of composition, but the sum total of the comment on offer: is this a fictional style which pushes to an extreme the connection between literary form and social context, where a crisis of organization and direction is common to both?

(1992: 205)

Implicit here is a sense that a ‘social crisis’ and a ‘crisis in modes of expression’ – indeed, a crisis in the “legitimation of knowledge” (Lyotard 1984: 37) – are indistinguishable. Just as the decade of the First World War is viewed as amplifying a change in consciousness or sensibility, together with a concomitant ‘revolution’ in aesthetic practices, which broadly came to be termed “modernist”, the contemporary or postmodern era is largely seen to have arisen in the wake of the Second World War, particularly with knowledge of the Holocaust and the nuclear bomb. Paraphrasing Julia Kristeva’s arguments with regard to the scale of violence of the war and its aftermath, Chesca Long-Innes argues that “what is at stake following the cataclysmic events of recent history (of which the colonial legacy and wars of decolonisation are part), is not so much the material and human levels of destruction wrought by the events themselves ... but the damage to our systems of perception and representation” (1998: 178). In Kristeva’s own terms: “Both religious and political, the crisis finds its radical rendering in the crisis of signification” (qtd in Long-Innes 1998: 179). As Walter Truett Anderson points out, subsequently the “psychedelic, academic, racial and political upheavals” (1996: 7) of the sixties, together with the impact of the Vietnam War, growing evidence of wholesale ecological destruction, and the arrival of mass consumerism and the

‘global village’, all contributed to what Lyotard famously pronounced as “the postmodern condition”.¹⁵

Of writers’ responses to this condition, Philip Roth was to contend that “The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one’s own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents” (1977: 34). Not only in the United States, however, but in many other parts of the world, the shape and concerns of both longer and shorter forms of fiction were to alter as a result of this sense of a shift in the *zeitgeist*, and were to severely disturb convictions as to what constitutes either a novel or a short story. Stevick, for example, claimed in 1971 that the term “short story” was a misnomer in respect of many of the innovative short narratives of the time, and he coined the term “anti-story” to describe the ways they deviated from what had become the dominant model:

They are “short prose works”, “pieces”, “fictions”, “sketches”, “fables”, anything but “stories”, since that word, the word that most easily and naturally names the classic genre of short fiction, inevitably carries connotations of narrative ease, facility, the arched shape, the climactic form, all of these being qualities generally avoided in new or experimental fiction.

(xv)

Though Stevick argues that “It is easier to say what [the anti-story] is NOT than what it IS” (1971: xiii), he nevertheless provides an inventory of some of its characteristic features: the subversion of mimesis by metafiction and fabulation, the absence of an overtly recuperable theme, the substitution of the extraordinary or extreme for the average and ordinary, an emphasis on absurdity, and the evocation of the phenomenal world – or what Fredric Jameson terms the “whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch” (1984: 55) – through a plethora of contingent or undecipherable detail or ‘drek’. In certain cases even conventional notions of length are jettisoned in favour of the “minimal story” (1971: xxii) – that consisting of a sentence, a paragraph, or a page of fragments. Most characteristic of these “anti-stories”, for Stevick, however, is the complete lack of epiphany:

there is no feature of the classic twentieth century short story so carefully avoided by writers who wish to do something new with short fiction. Characters ... do not learn. There are no insights. Relationships are not grasped in an instant. Structurally, the stories are flat, or circular, or cyclic, or mosaic constructions, or finally indeterminate or incomprehensible in their shape – they are not climactic. What we start with is pretty much what we have at the end. No epiphanies.

(1971: xiv)

All of the above strategies contribute towards a refusal to establish conventional significance and, consequently, a frustration of the reader's expectation that definitive meaning can be retrieved from the text. In Douwe Fokkema's words, radical indeterminacy, discontinuity and arbitrariness "challenge the literary code that predisposes the reader to look for coherence" (1984: 44). Moreover, any attempt to read a collection of such dissonant fictions as a modern short story cycle is perplexing, since such strategies would seem to suggest that the dominant model of that genre, as with the short story, has little purchase here – or alternatively that different procedures pertain.

Rohrberger and Burns, referring specifically to Donald Barthelme's "fabulations", attempt to capture the recalcitrance and strangeness of postmodern fiction:

characters are two-dimensional collages of real and imagined people, historical and literary personages; plots are minimal – often apparently random accumulations, bits of the contemporary scene – three-dimensional, spatial or kaleidoscopic, rather than operating in conventional space-time and cause-and-effect relationships; settings are bizarre, consisting of "reality," "fantasy," "hallucination," "dream," all presented as if on the same plane of experience.

(1982: 11)

In M.H. Abrams' terms: "Many of the works of postmodern literature ... so blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, that they resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics" (1999: 168). And, as Hutcheon remarks, "The borders between literary genres have become fluid ... who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection ...?" (1988: 9). Characteristic of many postmodern "cross-generic fictions" or "hybrid mixes" (Stevick 1985: 30-31) is the teasing generic duality or indeterminacy they display, a duality typically associated with the inherently schizophrenic cycle form but extended and exploited in enigmatic and/or ludic ways. Arguably, then, Ingram's spectrum of possibilities has expanded to include 'deviant' or unorthodox novels, collections of short fictions of the most extreme and bizarre type that seem structurally unmotivated in conventional terms, and cyclical collections that initially appear to be written in a primarily realist or modernist mode but which self-consciously subvert, disrupt or interrogate the narrative conventions associated with these modes.

However, the use of metafictional strategies to short-circuit the boundaries between fiction and reality, to foreground the textuality of both the world and the text, and to explore the dynamics of the writing and reading process is a feature of most postmodern fiction. Stevick, for example, defines the distinction between postmodern and previous narrative

modes as “not a difference of historical setting, or style, or technique, or subject, or tone, or mode, although it involves all of these. The difference between the two goes to the roots of what it means to tell” (1977: 187). Similarly, Hutcheon identifies the ways in which “the entire notion of the relation of language to reality – fictive or historical” is problematised, since “we can only know ‘reality’ as it is produced and sustained by our cultural representations of it” (1988: 14, 121). In a general sense, then, postmodern fiction’s self-conscious intratextual interrogation of the arbitrary, artificial nature of linguistic and literary usage is premised on a questioning of the ability of human-made systems of signification to refer to anything but themselves. Robert Scholes neatly sums up this perception:

Once we knew that fiction was about life and criticism was about fiction – and everything was simple. Now we know that fiction is about other fiction, is criticism in fact, or metafiction. And we know that criticism is about the impossibility of anything being about life, really, or even about fiction, or, finally, about anything.

(qtd in Graff 1979: 60)

Nevertheless, postmodern fiction, in highlighting narrativisation as “a central form of human comprehension, of imposition of meaning and formal coherence on the chaos of events”, frequently embodies the notion that “The conventions of narrative ... are not constraints, but enabling conditions of possibility of sense-making” (Hutcheon 1988: 121). Story-telling is thus an essential analogue for human experience or, as Johan Degenaar laconically puts it, “We tell stories because we *are* stories” (1987: n.p.).

In certain contemporary generic hybrids the ancient story cycle format is employed – or perhaps redeployed – via a reworking of the myths and stories of former eras, as in Italo Calvino’s *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *Invisible Cities*. This strategy contradicts the general view that twentieth-century works rarely recall the repertoire of older cycles, and seems to indicate a return to what might be termed the roots of narrative in the archive of myths and the collective memory of various cultures. It is also particularly effective in evoking a sense that archetypal figures and narrative structures form a *langue* or grammar out of which individual *paroles* are fashioned in potentially infinite permutations. Another technique that harks back to *The Arabian Nights* is the use of frame narratives to achieve the impression of self-generating ‘stories-within-stories-within ...’ or the ‘Chinese box effect’ of infinite regression. Often conveyed through motifs such as mazes/labyrinths, libraries and mirrors, such embedded self-replicating narratives not only operate as *mises en abyme*, but also foil the reader’s attempts to locate either a unified origin or a primary level of mimesis, and they withhold the satisfaction of closure or certainty. A related device is that of

palimpsestic erasure, in which multiple narrative dissolutions de-authorise previously established diegetic levels, producing rivalling stories which again problematise the search for an 'authorised' source. Such consecutive frame-breaks and delaying tactics have implications for the implied author and reader, since ultimately they may suggest that they, too, are characters in someone else's story, or 'authored' within a framework of narrative codes and conventions. Moreover, these strategies may be extended beyond individual, supposedly self-contained texts (short fictions, novellas, *or* novels) to include others that form, for example, a trilogy or quartet, as is the case in D.M. Thomas's *Russian Quartet* or Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*. However, though the category of cycles may be expanded to include multi-volume series – as, for example in the *roman fleure* or saga novel, which consists of a series of self-contained narratives tracing the history of a particular community, region or family over several generations – in postmodern variants such panoramic and/or genealogical connections are uncommon. Instead, alternative generative procedures are sought within the 'space' of representation itself.

In certain cases, the disintegration of the distinctions between individual texts finds a parallel in the collapse of the conventional boundaries between different media – as, for example, in the inclusion of visual or graphic effects in addition to verbal text. Such paratextual devices implicitly challenge the authority of the verbal, and the assumed autonomy of fiction, and are perhaps taken to extremes in graphic novels, a term which includes comic short fiction anthologies and series. In addition, a variety of typographical fonts may be used to foreground different categories of discourse (narrative, academic, cinematic, for instance) and, on occasion, footnotes or stories narrated by characters may swamp the primary narrative, serving as both distraction and tacit commentary. The effect achieved, then, is of interweaving and contrastive discourses, none of which is privileged and all of which are, by implication, accorded the status of fiction. Indeed, apparently different discourses or diegetic levels may interpenetrate to the extent that they become altogether indistinguishable from one another – a feature of Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, in which the initially alternating *recits* and chapters begin to infiltrate one another at a certain point.

Some contemporary cyclical texts attempt to overcome the presumption of a sequential reading process by offering alternatives. For example, indexes may be provided which suggest several contrasting 'routes' or 'methods' that may be used to negotiate the text, but frequently these are appended at the end, forcing a retrospective reappraisal of what has already been (differently) read. In extreme cases, writers may aim to jettison conventional

notions of narrative structure, plot and character altogether in favour of contingency and randomness or arbitrariness – as in certain forms of aleatory fiction.

A persistent feature of many more recent integrated collections (as in postmodern fiction generally) is the appearance of characters who emerge as replicated sets of doppelgängers and triads, and whose identity and integrity as autonomous subjects in the conventional realist sense are therefore undermined. Frequently, too, such characters emerge as author- and reader-surrogates within the text, and reader figures are confronted by an enigma, quest or crime which they are required to unravel, complete or solve, but to which no satisfactory ‘resolution’ exists – or, at least, not one sanctioned by any kind of certainty. Thus “allegories of textual production and reception within the narrative plot” (Hutcheon 1988: 84) may foreground and subvert the ratiocinative hermeneutic procedures readers apply in deciphering meaning in texts, a trend especially prominent in anti-detective narratives. Moreover, as is the case in Fowles’s *The Ebony Tower*, unsolved mysteries may ultimately point to the paradox that, as Leonard Michaels puts it, “It is impossible to live with or without fictions” (qtd in Lodge 1977: 43).

Though authors may provide hints of a recursive design in more orthodox forewords, often such authorial directives or disclosures are displaced from their usual position and relocated to the end of a volume to function as a coda or postscript, or situated at any point within the narrative(s). Even more overtly, however, the reader may be directly addressed from within the fiction by the ‘author’/auctorial narrator, or the illusion may be created that the author has infiltrated the text him/herself as a protagonist or ‘author-character’.¹⁶ A related device, too, is that of making characters themselves aware that they are fictional constructs and do not have an autonomous existence outside of the words of which they are composed and the narrative which contains or imprisons them. This ontological realisation of being ‘written’ reflects on characters’ unfreedom, on authorial control, and on the larger issues of determinism, legitimacy and power.

While reflexivity is a ubiquitous feature of postmodern fiction generally, not all texts that might be considered contemporary short fiction cycles adopt overtly experimental or radical narrative strategies and many use certain metafictional and fabulatory techniques selectively. Thus, recognisable milieu, identities and communities may be represented, interlaced with a reflexivity that disrupts the façade of realism. Hutcheon, for example, claims that much postmodern fiction, though it is “both intensively self-reflexive and parodic”, also “attempts to root itself in that which both reflexivity and parody appear to short-circuit: the historical world” (1988: x). Labelling this type of writing “historiographic

metafiction”, she explains that “its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs ... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past”, and that it “always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them” (1988: 5). In particular, a theoretical awareness of how notions of identity and community, ‘persons’ and ‘places’, are mediated by and grounded in language and narrative, may be used to expose and undermine the ways in which more conventional cycles *appear* verisimilitudinally to reinforce or even install such concepts. From a certain perspective, of course, *any* conventional cycle’s composite depiction of a community and place is, in literary terms, always and by definition a linguistic and literary construct – a fictionalisation or aesthetic invention. As Lionel Abrahams remarks, topographical unity in this sense is “a geographic phantom, an aesthetic invention. The regionalism, the realism of [the] stories is only apparent, a cloak, a sort of ectoplasm to render visible a population of creatures whose native home is the author’s imagination” (1981: 10). However, though this is true in both a literal and literary sense, more recent short fiction cycles may foreground the notion that, *in extra-textual reality*, identity, community and place are also discursively produced.

Certain contemporary cyclical works do not adopt any of the overtly experimental or reflexive strategies or approaches mentioned above, however, but nevertheless present a critique of the vacuous, simulacral and alienating tendencies in/of postmodern culture and ‘lived experience’. Thus Kennedy argues that Raymond Carver’s use of ‘pared down’ realism and minimalist spatiotemporal markers in *Cathedral*, “rather than developing a topographical focus instead projects a flat, post-modern placelessness, in which references to TV shows, alcoholism, and divorce construct a minimal temporal scene: the despairing seventies and eighties” (1988: 21). Whilst he acknowledges that some of the stories in the collection affirm moments of compassion, such moments are evanescent, “fleeting encounters in lives still largely devoid of communal attachments” (1995: 205). If Carver’s earlier collections presented characters living lives of quiet desperation and “stasis in an indifferent place” (Lutwack 1984: 224) – or “Hopelessville, USA” (Stull, qtd in Kennedy 1995: 203) – Kennedy maintains that, in *Cathedral*, Carver “seems to complete the project initiated by Anderson, portraying the apparently irreversible disappearance of community in America” (1995: 203). Additional evidence of this demise is to be found in the pervasive sense that “all postmodern places may be finally alike” (Kennedy 1995: 210). Moreover, he argues, if self-abusive drinking and rootlessness are both the cause and effect of dis-eased and dislocated lives in Carver’s stories, then addictive television viewing is another, since television “encourages withdrawal by creating the mere illusion of human connection and community”.

In other words, “Television may indeed figure as the comprehensive sign of postmodern life in its flattening of experience into meaningless, illusory images as it sucks human energy out of passive viewers” (1995: 211). Kennedy comments, then, that “postmodern experience ... in its preoccupation with television and other modes of escape, is exposed as superficial, spectatorial, and solipsistic”, and “communal action or collective praxis” is conspicuous by its absence (1995: 213). Nevertheless, he suggestively concludes that, in certain of the stories, Carver intimates that “we recover a sense of connection only when we attend to each other’s narratives and affirm the communal desire of storytelling. In this sense *Cathedral* tacitly manifests that nostalgia for community that, at least since Turgenev, has shadowed the writing of short stories and the modern ascendancy of the story sequence” (1995: 214).

1.4.4.2 Postcolonial Cycles

Everybody needs a home, so at least you can have some place to leave, which is where most folks will say you must be coming from.

– June Jordan (qtd in Kazanjian & Kassabian 1993: 33)

[P]lace is a starting point for the negotiation of identity and community. The role of the writer becomes doubly important when ... the community has been scattered by history.

– Rocío Davis (2010: 332)

Kennedy importantly charts the residual semblance of community in mainstream American cycles from Anderson onwards as a nostalgia for a sense of identity rooted in a particular place, and a sense of community which has in effect been undermined by what Robert Bellah calls a “culture of separation” premised on individualism and materialism (qtd in Kennedy 1995: 202). A pessimistic appraisal of the results of this process, and literary representations thereof, is supported to some extent by Leonard Lutwack’s study of an increasing sense of placelessness or place-loss in modern literature in general. However, though Lutwack believes that “[l]iterature of the first half of the century reflected the pain of placelessness”, he maintains that, in the second half, writers expressed “less regret over the loss of place and more willingness to discover substitutes” (1984: 226). Such substitutes, he suggests, included motion (the ‘on the road’/freeway motif), tourism, and hallucinatory or drug-induced experiences. In addition, the theme of apocalypse – heightened by the threat of nuclear holocaust and ecological disaster – acted as a powerful expression of premonitions of “the end of all places” (1984: 231) and, by implication, all identities and communities. Still, he observes that “the importance of place in human affairs” may have been overemphasised, and that “migration is the common experience of all peoples” (1984: 237). More optimistically

than Kennedy, then, he views technology as potentially connective rather than divisive: “In the world today it is possible for technology of communication to replace shared locality as the principal means of maintaining a high degree of community life” (1984: 237).¹⁷

Though their opinions diverge significantly, both Kennedy’s and Lutwack’s ideas are relevant to the ways in which the short story cycle has increasingly been employed to deal with contemporary postcolonial themes. Moreover, the idea that the links between identity, community and place, as conventionally understood, have become increasingly attenuated in the postmodern era has an ironic poignancy for those writers whose cultural identities have long been ‘decentred’ as a result of the legacy of colonialism in the modern era. As bell hooks wryly comments: “Yeah, it’s easy to give up identity when you got one” (2001: 2482). As noted earlier, short fiction cycles are a feature of much postcolonial writing, and have become increasingly popular in representations of the immigrant, borderland or exilic condition, of experiences of cultural dislocation, duality and difference, and of attempts to define and assert marginalised identities and communities in resistance to a dominant culture and its discourses. In particular, critics note that short story cycles are particularly well-suited to a polyphonic or multivocal representation of a multiplicity of voices representative of the simultaneous heterogeneity and cohesion of ethnic minority groups. One of the reasons for this appeal, Pratt suggests, is related to ways in which the short story itself often incorporates oral styles and formats:

The tradition of orality in the short story has a special significance in cultures where literacy is not the norm, or where the standard literary language is that of the oppressor. ... In such contexts as these, the short story provides not just the “small” place for experimentation, but also a genre where oral and non-standard speech, popular and regional culture, and marginal experience, have some tradition of being at home, and the form best-suited to reproducing the length of most oral speech events. Orality can be counted as one of the important factors behind the flourishing of the short story in the modern literatures of many Third World nations and peoples, where, not incidentally, it is taken much more seriously as an art form than it is elsewhere.

(1981: 190)

In addition, the fact that composite or aggregate narratives have a certain affinity with the cyclical character of the oral narratives of many traditional, indigenous or submerged cultures, lends them to attempts to resuscitate, reaffirm or rework these traditions. And, finally, a further attraction is to be found in the cycle’s renegade status, and the ways in which it may work to subvert the dominant status of the novel within Western culture.

Hertha D. Wong, for example, comments on the appropriateness of the concept of a web or constellation of short stories to contemporary Native American or First Nation

writers' attempts to reproduce the structures of indigenous oral story clusters, whilst incorporating narrative strategies associated with European and American modernism. In her view, many recent such works reflect "the cyclical and recursive nature of stories that are informed by both modernist literary strategies (for instance, multiple narrative voices) and oral traditions (such as a storyteller's use of repetition, recurrent development, and associational structure" (1995: 172). Arguing that "multivoiced, achronological" narrative structures more closely approximate the "inherent nonlinearity" of communal oral storytelling traditions, Wong remarks on the ways in which the image of the spider's web is used in many of these traditions to "convey the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. ... Such an interrelationship is fundamental to oral traditions where a storyteller and an audience create a community, a 'web of responsibility'" (1995: 172-173). She admits that this calls to mind Benjamin's views, citing the "loss of the intimacy of direct human contact when stories moved from storyteller to text, from voice to print, from cycle to sequence, from interactive to isolated experience" (1995: 173). Nevertheless, she asserts that "many Native American writers have been engaged in a counter movement, recreating the spoken word in written form, suggesting (even rekindling) a relationship between writer/teller and reader/listener, and restoring voice to their histories and communities" (1995: 173). Louise Erdrich's story sequences are a case in point, since they "chronicle the centrality of one's relationships, tenuous though they may be, with one's land, community, and family; and the power of these relationships, enlivened by memory and imagination and shaped into narrative, to resist colonial domination and cultural loss and to (re)construct personal identity and communal history on one's own terms" (1995: 173). Indeed, Wong maintains that the cycle has a particular appeal to women writers 'of colour', who "seem to have returned to local roots – family, community, and ethnicity – as sources of personal identity, political change, and creative expression. Telling one's story or the story of one's people as an act of self-definition and cultural continuance is a strong collective impulse" (1995: 184).

As noted earlier, the relevance to the short story cycle of Bakhtin's notion of polyvocality is self-evident – that is, his differentiation between "monologic, single-voiced works in which a given culture's dominant ideology contradicts subordinate textual voices" and "dialogic, multivoiced texts that allow numerous voices to emerge and engage in dialogue with one another" (Wolfe 2002: 97). In postcolonial writing the appeal of a heteroglossic form has an obviously charged political dimension. Wong, for example, cites Paula Gunn Allen's contention that traditional Native American oral narratives have "the tendency to distribute value evenly among the various elements", a tendency which reflects

an “egalitarian” rather than hierarchical social and narrative structure (1995: 173). In contemporary works which seek to emulate this heritage, “such a collective protagonist does not reflect fragmentation, alienation, or deterioration of an individual voice, as is often suggested by modernist and postmodernist explanations, but the traditional importance of the communal over the individual, the polyphonous over the monovocal” (1995: 173). Wong points out that:

With modernism, often associated with the disintegration of communities, and the subsequent alienation and fragmentation of individuals, writers fractured multiple plots into multiple narrative voices as well ... [but] ironically, despite a history of colonialism, Native use of multiple narrators often has little to do with alienation and loss and much more to do with the coherent multiplicity of community.

(1995: 174)

This disjunction obviously raises the questions of implied readership, of different cultural assumptions, practices and backgrounds, of hegemonic versus marginalised paradigms of identity and community, and the complex interactions between cultural “tradition” and “translation” (Hall 1992: 309). All of these are complex questions, as Wong admits, and prey to essentialist notions and formulations. Nevertheless, Stuart Hall’s view is illuminating here: “Cultural identity ... is not a fixed origin ... Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something* – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories – and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past ... is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (1990: 225).

Wong’s observation that many writers from ethnic minorities, and especially women, are drawn to the cycle in order to “remember and retell, not the continuous, unified narrative of dominant history, but the discontinuous narratives of individual survivors ... not ethnographic artefacts but living narratives derived from family and community” (1995: 187), suggests that such counter-narratives serve as something of a corrective. In other words, they not only resist the grand metanarratives of authorised history, but also co-option, manipulation and suppression by academic, anthropological discourse (1995: 187) – a point somewhat similar to that made by Ndebele in his essay “Turkish Tales” (1991: 24-26). In addition, Wong claims that this emphasis on storytelling, rather than being conservative in impulse, is “related to the emphasis in postmodern society on local political struggles” (1995: 184), in opposition to global or hegemonic systems. The trends here also suggest that complacent ‘melting-pot’ theories on the prominence of the cycle form in America

conveniently gloss over the specificities of the experiences of the cultural groupings supposedly subsumed under the rubric of the larger imagined community of the nation.

If “community – with its attendant sense of place (geographical, cultural, and social) – and personal identity are irrevocably linked” (Wong 1995: 182), then this nexus is especially relevant to the short story cycle: “In the history of the genre, the most persistent continuity in the form has been in setting, so that all of the shorter works constituting a cycle occur in the same general location, with prominent landmarks recurring throughout, tying the events to *an enduring sense of place*” (Nagel 2001: 17, emphasis added). However, postcolonial diasporic identities, premised on *dis*-placement and *dis*-location, are reflected in short story cycles which focus specifically on memories of a past ‘homeland’ or the community attached to a place which has been left behind, as well as on new places and exilic/immigrant communities forged within a different context. Rocío Davis explains, for example, that:

a major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place that the process of subjectivity can be conducted. [These writers’] principal manifestation of both the postcolonial immigrant double perspective and their own insight on binary categories of belonging thus comes through in their emphasis on geographical location. Setting has particular valency for postcolonial subjects since their home locations have been historically constructed as peripheral.

(1997: 3)

Davis points out that, in a general sense, “The negotiation of place and the attempt to recreate a home through memory and writing has proven to be a frequent undertaking of many writers of the new literatures in English”. However, she maintains that the short story cycle has proven “a particularly apt mode for the mediation of identity and community in between-world writing, since “[s]tory cycles enable writers to work, often with subversive irony, in a form that is not the dominant genre in the overwhelming cultures ” (1997: 1). Indeed, she argues that, in itself a hybrid, “The specificities of the form work to make the short story cycle an especially pertinent vehicle for the distinctive characteristics of postcolonial fiction in general” (1997: 1). In particular, Davis highlights the ways in which such cycles negotiate diasporic cultural identities:

On different levels, postcolonial short story cycles may project a desire to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective: this type of fiction explores the character and history of a group as a reflection of a personal odyssey of displacement, and search for self and community. The between-world writer’s situation is the reworking of questions that ultimately refer to issues [such] as oppositionality, marginality,

boundaries, displacement, and authenticity: a process rather than a structure, requiring constant variation and review. This process is not different from that involved in the appreciation of a story cycle, in which the evolution and gradual unfolding of the themes, a discovery of a new unity in disunity, integrates the essence of the form.

(1997: 2)

Hall's comments, specifically on Caribbean postcolonial cultural identities, are helpful in capturing the reasons the cycle form might be especially apposite to a representation of such identities. He distinguishes between two different definitions, the first of which is broadly essentialist in nature in viewing the identity of a cultural group as a function of

one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' ... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence....

(1990: 223)

In Hall's terms, narrative is especially important here, since this conception of cultural identity not only entails recovery, a practice grounded in "archaeology", but also an imaginative rediscovery, production and *re-telling* of the past. In this sense, narrative contributes towards "an act of imaginary reunification ... [it is] a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" (1990: 223). Narrativisation also acts as a resource enabling the assertion of "resistance and identity" – a counter(-narrative) to "the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been reconstructed within the dominant regimes of ... representation of the West (1990: 225).

Hall's second view of cultural identity, however, is premised on a recognition that, "as well as the many points of similarity [within a self-identified grouping], there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* – ruptures and discontinuities" (1990: 225). He sums up the two views:

We might think of ... identities as 'framed' by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture. ... identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives us some grounding in, some continuity with, the past. The second reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity.

(1990: 226-227)

The structural dynamic of the short story cycle is particularly well suited to emulate this “dialogic relationship” in narrative form. However, with some justification it might be argued that this not only applies to postcolonial identities. Thus, though Davis claims that the short story cycle may act as “a metaphor for the fragmentation and multiplicity of postcolonial and immigrant lives ... an articulation of between-culture position and the complex process towards self-definition” (1997: 11), her statement would seem to have a wider application than perhaps intended. This is especially so given that a decentring/fragmentation of the self, multiple identifications, widespread migration, and various kinds of diasporic identities and “cultures of hybridity” (Hall 1992: 310) are all ubiquitous features of contemporary postmodern global culture.

1.5 Conclusion

Whereas in other kinds of discourse there is a move toward the final truth of a situation ... literature ... displays that the truth of a human situation is the itinerary of not being able to find it.

– Gayatri Spivak (1987: 72)

[M]ore is always at stake in story-telling than the story told.

– David Carroll (1987: 76)

Ingram’s notion of a spectrum within the short story cycle form – with one pole occupied by collections that consist of discrete and fundamentally unrelated stories and the other by collections of stories that cohere to such an extent that they seem to constitute a single, unified or composite narrative – finds something of an analogue in critical responses to the genre and the ways in which it deals with the theme of identity and community. That is, the very ambivalence of the form, its inherently hybrid dualism, seems to be reflected in the opposed ways in which critics interpret it. These readings depend on the degree of emphasis placed on a disjunctive, discontinuous, fragmented multiplicity, one in which internal divisions and contradictions point to essentially monadic identities, or on formal integrity and the ‘coherent multiplicity’ of community (or, alternatively, a ‘whole’ that is not necessarily coherent but nevertheless has a strategic purchase). On the one hand, then, short story cycles are viewed as increasingly charting the radical disintegration of community and of the self, the alienation of modern and postmodern experience, and the “atomistic tendencies of modern technological culture” (Kennedy 1995: 213). On the other, composite texts in which identity is collectively defined are viewed as asserting the continuing value of (narratives of) community, of the ‘local’ over the ‘global’, of ‘minority’/marginalised cultures over ‘mainstream’/hegemonic culture, and of counter-narratives to the grand (meta-)narratives of history. The first position is articulated in Mann’s assertion that “Because cycles consist of

discrete, self-sufficient stories, they are especially well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century characters experience” (1989: 11). The second position, by contrast, is expressed in Wong’s claim that, in many contemporary short story cycles, “writers construct stories that create community and challenge readers to broaden their understanding of both narrative and community” (1995: 187).

Gayle Sato provides an interesting perspective on both these positions. In comparing the relatively little-known Japanese-American writer Toshio Mori’s *Yokohama, California* (1949) with Anderson’s influential *Winesburg, Ohio*, on which the former was to some extent modelled, she comments that the “[n]arratological and thematic similarities” between the two texts mean that Mori’s collection may be read “within the paradigms of self and community” that inform *Winesburg*. However, she suggests that Mori’s depiction of a pre-World War II Japanese community in America cannot be properly understood “without moving outside of the cultural frameworks in which *Winesburg, Ohio* has been conceived and read” (2000: 129). More specifically, this entails taking cognisance of the Japanese “social practice and discourse of [(self-) indulgent] dependency called *amae*” (2000: 130) or ‘passive love’ – the opposite of self-reliance or independence. Thus, though both Anderson and Mori depict “intersubjective relationships through episodes of listening”, in *Winesburg* the interlocutors are existentially alienated from one another, whereas in *Yokohama* listening is represented as “a form of enabling dependency” (2000: 130) – a contrast Sato ascribes to “different cultural assumptions about the nature of self and others” (2000: 130). In this respect, she argues that, in *Winesburg*,

Anderson’s unifying signification of the self’s relationship to community is ... a “grotesque”, a condition of psychological deformity that represents the wasting and distortion of human lives through the obstruction of a need for emotional, spiritual, and creative expression. In *Winesburg* deterioration into grotesqueness always revolves around a failure *to speak to and be heard by other people*. ... The absence of indulgent listening in *Winesburg* is marked by the presence of grotesque speaking.
(2000: 135, emphasis added)

Sato thus draws a distinction between “the presence or absence of indulgent listening, and whether speaking becomes therapeutic or dysfunctional” (2000: 136). The motif of speech and listening in *Winesburg* is particularly important, but so is that of hand movements – embodied, gestural forms of communication which equally ‘eloquently’ convey frustrated attempts at human intimacy and connection. Reid comments, for example, that “hands are a perfect focus for Anderson’s main theme: they suggest fluttery impulses towards human

contact, thwarted both by the individual's timidity and by others' failure to understand and respond" (1977: 48). By contrast, Sato argues, in Mori's collection there is an affirmation "of the collective existence of Yokohama as a domain of particular others who are bound together by relationships of accommodation ... a community where various kinds of embodied difference are accommodated" (2000: 142).

What is especially significant, however, is that in both these texts there are artist figures who are aspirant writers. In *Winesburg*, George Willard is a local reporter who eventually leaves the town to join a newspaper in a large city. For Willard to succeed as a writer he must leave Winesburg for the city, and Sato, like Yingling, indicates that, in a general sense, his departure signifies "the demise of pre-industrial communities like Winesburg, where face-to-face interaction provided the structural foundation for community" (2000: 140). Moreover, in terms of Benjamin's arguments, Willard's departure also signifies the alienation of writer from audience/reader, or as Sato puts it, "[t]he association of artistic ambition with separation" (2000: 138-139). In the story "Toshio Mori" in *Yokohama*, the main character Teruo appears as a surrogate for the author himself, a character who reveals Mori's views on "the relationship between self and others, including the self as artist" (2000: 140). Unlike the other characters and narrators in the stories, Teruo attempts in vain to find an 'indulgent listener'. But, given the identity between character and author, this lack of success transfers that obligation to the implied reader, who is required then to 'listen'. In Sato's terms: "this 'failure' [in Yokohama's circuit of communication] transfers a plot and ethics of listening from within the narrative proper to the world inhabited by the reader" (2000: 141). As a result, she maintains, Mori's "vision of community, which encompasses the artist's own social relationships as well as the act of creating art, questions hegemonic cultural assumptions about the development of 'self' that ground the narrative of *Winesburg, Ohio*" (2000: 143). Her arguments here recall Kennedy's comment that "we recover a sense of connection only when we attend to each other's narratives and affirm the communal desire of storytelling" (1995: 214) – an implicit reference to compassionate or 'indulgent listening'. They also relate to Lyotard's distinction between "obliged" and "autonomous" subjects, and to the ways in which an emphasis on the latter means that relationality and obligation (that is, a *lack* of autonomy in reality) have "been repressed in Western philosophy and narrative" (Carroll 1987: 98).

Sato's discussion of *Yokohama*, of course, circles around the dilemma suggested by Benjamin, and captured in the various ironies underpinning the astute subtitle of Kennedy's compilation of essays: "Composite Fictions and *Fictive* Communities" (1995; emphasis

added). On the one hand, ‘fictive’ may signify the ways in which the representation of community in a short story cycle can only, by definition, gesture towards that which it mourns the loss of – that is, its lack of oral immediacy. As Kennedy claims:

Th[e] condition of alienation that grounds the practice of the modern writer transforms the short story sequence ... into something more than a commercial strategy or a formal exercise in arrangement. On some level, it also marks a social or cultural gesture, a tacit protest against the estrangement of writing, the crafting of texts destined for mechanical reproduction and impersonal dissemination. ... the obscure or victimized figures populating the story sequence comprise an imaginary confederacy, a cast of loners and losers gathered to create the semblance of community in the face of the storyteller’s irrevocable separation from a living audience.

(1995: 195)

On the other hand, the productive and dynamic tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces in the cycle form at some level *does* discursively enact the “discontinuity- in- relationship” (Reid 1977: 448) or unity- in-diversity within the social space.

Notes

¹ In the previous year, Ingram published an article in the *New Orleans Review*, “The Dynamics of Short Story Cycles”, in which he presented a synopsis of his findings.

² *E pluribus unum* (“out of many, one”) is the motto on the face of the Great Seal of the United States, and was suggested by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in 1776. The seal was adopted in 1782.

³ Pratt observes that short stories *generally* are published initially as discrete or independent units, and therefore that it might be more useful to think of the short story as ‘not being a complete book’, rather than as ‘being able to be read at one sitting’, the latter phrase deriving from Edgar Allen Poe’s early comments on the modern short story in his famous review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842 (1974: 7-11). Pratt explains that:

a novel constitutes a complete book (or books), while a short story never does. A short story is always printed as part of a larger whole, either a collection of short stories or a magazine, which is a collection of various kinds of texts. Except in schools, perhaps, individual short stories are usually read as part of a larger reading experience. Though this is not a determining factor, it is likely that the fact of not being an autonomous text reinforces the view of the short story as a part or fragment.
(1981: 186)

⁴ Though this claim seems contradictory in respect of Ingram’s own comments on composed cycles, Kennedy bases his opinion on the actual cycles that Ingram analyses in detail, all of which are of the completed variety.

⁵ The phrases quoted here are a pastiche of remarks made, in various ways, by authors such as Joyce, Anderson, Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Barth, Kundera and Fowles. Interestingly, Anderson initially titled his most well-known collection *The Book of the Grotesque* (now the opening story), but was persuaded by his publisher, Ben Huebsch, to change this title to *Winesburg, Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small Town Life*, perhaps as a result of the success of Joyce’s *Dubliners*, published in the first American edition by Huebsch (Curry 1980: 239). Mann indicates that Faulkner objected strongly when the first edition of *Go Down, Moses* was published as *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories*: subsequently the title was changed (1989: 14).

⁶ Poe compares the effects achieved by the short story with those of lyric poetry, in his view the “highest order of true poetry” (1974: 7). On being asked why he chose to write short stories as opposed to novels, Frank O’Connor responded that the short story is “the nearest thing I know to lyric poetry” (qtd in Brown 1982: 41). Peter Taylor similarly claims that “A short story is to a novel as a lyric poem is to an epic poem” (qtd in Glick 1987: 58), and H.E. Bates writes that “the short story is to fiction what the lyric is to poetry. In its finest mould the short story is, in fact, a prose poem” (1972: 12).

⁷ These twin attributes derive from Poe’s famous early pronouncements on the genre. However, as Dominic Head convincingly argues, ‘brevity’ is an elusive and subjective criterion (1992: 4, 9). Moreover, “the ‘single effect’ doctrine” (1992: 2) or “unity aesthetic” (1992: 14), though it has persisted as an item of belief in much short story theory subsequent to Poe, is somewhat misleading, especially when it is applied to the multivalence and

ambiguity of the *modernist* short story (1992: 9-24) – and, one could add, postmodern short fiction. Other critics similarly argue that this characteristic is neither definitive of nor restricted to the short story form. Reid, for example, points out that “while symmetrical design of some sort will frequently be present in a short story, it is patently not a property that belongs to that form in any distinctive indispensable way” (1977: 59). He also comments that “if ‘unity of impression’ is to be interpreted flexibly enough to include [examples] of multiplex narrative, it can hardly be denied to novels too: unity is not so simply correlated with brevity as Poe suggests” (1977: 55). Indeed, Poe himself is rather vague on this point: he states that “We need only here say, upon this topic, that, *in almost all classes of composition*, the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance” (1976: 46; emphasis added).

⁸ The *novella* is a short prose form characterised by “its function as part of a cycle of stories” (Lowe 1982: 70) or of “a larger unity” (West 1957: 533). Typically, the *novella* collection employed a frame or proem, and contained miscellaneous short narratives (each approximately ten pages in length) of a mythological, chivalrous, moral and satirical nature. Though many of these tales presented stock figures (cuckolded husbands, unfaithful wives, jealous lovers, errant priests) in both serious and scandalous situations, they nevertheless are credited with a certain realism as studies of human foibles and temperament (see Gibaldi 1975: 94-96; Lowe 1982: 70-75).

⁹ Both the *novella* and the romance have been cited as precursors of the novel, the former most obviously providing the new genre with its English name, whilst the equivalent European term, *roman*, is derivative of the latter.

¹⁰ Nevertheless, perhaps a distinction needs to be drawn between the ancient epic cycles and those of the Renaissance. Tomashevsky, for example, remarks of *A Thousand and One Nights*, that “None of the tales has anything to do with the teller. Only the motif of the act of narration is needed as a frame story and it has no bearing on what is going to be narrated” (1978: 83). Both Ingram and Reid point out, however, that both Chaucer’s and Boccaccio’s use of the frame-tale was not simply as a “supporting framework” and “barely developed since it has no independent function” (Tomashevsky 1978: 83). Ingram comments that in these composers’ works (and in some of the Romance cycles) there is “a delicacy in the handling of symbolism and a subtleness in presenting scenes and characters and even character motivation. Motifs, themes, and phraseology [in earlier narratives] echo in later ones. Situations recur, gestures are repeated until they become signs of characters” (1970: 7).

¹¹ Any effort to establish a common lineage among certain ‘national traditions’ of short-story writing is disputable, however. A. Walton Litz, for example, comments that “the modern short story has some claim to be called an ‘American’ art form; the genre may have reached its finest expression in such European writers as Flaubert and Chekhov and Joyce, but it can best be understood through an examination of its American ‘inventors’, Irving, Hawthorne and Poe” (1980: 4). As Philip Stevick sagely comments, “We make our own ancestors” (1985: 30).

¹² In support for this contention, he somewhat disingenuously quotes O’Connor’s comment that “*A Sportsman’s Sketches* may well be the greatest book of short stories ever written. Nobody, at the time it was written, knew quite how great it was, or what influence it was to have in the creation of a new art form” (1970: 7). The “new art form” in question here is clearly not the short story cycle, and O’Connor makes no reference to the latter.

¹³ The notion of the centrality of an epiphanic approach to character, theme and plot structure in the modern short story is pervasive. As Head points out: “The Joycean epiphany (as it is commonly perceived) ... is the archetypal model of the single-effect doctrine in short story theory since Poe: the epiphany technique has become a central principle in short story composition, as well as a key term in short story criticism” (1992: 48-49). However, Head draws attention to the indiscriminate and inaccurate literary use of the term, which Joyce used rather to refer to actual or ‘real-life’ experiences (1992: 213). Reid, too, notes the prevalence of the ‘moment-of-truth’ notion in short story theory – frequently understood as a moment “at which [a] character undergoes some decisive change in attitude or understanding” (1977: 56). He then goes on to register complications, however, which include the possibility that the epiphany may be “for readers only” and that the character him/herself is “uncomprehending” (1977: 56, 57). In other words, though an epiphany *may* involve dawning realisation on the part of a character, it may equally be restricted to the *reader’s* sudden perception of significance. Thus, characters may be self-deceived or “lack the strength to force the moment to its crisis” (Reid 1977: 57). Reid goes on to point out that “numerous stories do not raise the action, external or internal, to any momentous peak” (1977: 57), and that, though a realisation may take place “subliminally” in a narrator or character’s consciousness, the nature and significance of this realisation may remain obscure or inaccessible to the reader (1977: 58). Certain stories, then, may be deliberately anti-epiphanic, since no decidable revelation occurs (1977: 58). Head pursues the latter observation further in his notion of the “*non-epiphany principle*” in Joyce, his principle objection to critical harping on epiphanies in *Dubliners* being that the notion of a revealed ‘truth’ is impossible to sustain, since indeterminacy – a “*lack of illumination*” – rather than intelligible meaning emerges: “This is the predominant mode of *Dubliners*: an enactment of the ambiguity and uncertainty of personality through a disruption of structural and narrative unity” (1992: 49-53).

¹⁴ Joyce, Woolf, Mansfield, Wyndham Lewis and Malcolm Lowry. A similar criticism might be levelled at Ingram, who writes on Joyce, Camus, Steinbeck, Kafka, Faulkner and Anderson.

¹⁵ Anderson draws a distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism(s), “the first being the time (or condition) in which we find ourselves, the second being the various schools and movements it has produced” (1996: 6-7). Teresa Dovey cites Simon During’s similar distinction: “the former designat[es] the political and economic character of the period, the latter the forms of cultural resistance to the conditions of postmodernity, forms necessarily inscribed by these conditions while attempting to achieve a critical distance from them” (1993: 129). During himself remarks that “it is just as rewarding to construe literary postmodernism as an enemy of postmodernity as to consider it as its expression and helpmeet” (qtd in Dovey 1993: 133). His suggestion both of critique and complicity here correlates with Hutcheon’s views (1998: 23).

¹⁶ Two notable examples are Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, which opens with the words: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought” (1982: 9), and the ways in which Barth’s narrator in “Frame-Tale”, in *Lost in the Funhouse*, lambasts the reader in a style reminiscent of Laurence Sterne:

You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it’s you I’m addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You’ve read me this far, then? How is it you don’t go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall ...? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where’s your shame?

¹⁷ Lutwack quotes Allen K. Philbrick's views on the diminishing significance of place in a world shrinking as a result of technological innovation:

We will increasingly understand that objects and established patterns are not just relatively located objects in a culturally defined concept of space. We will regard things and the patterns of things as events in time-space. We will witness increasing negation of the significance of place – we will overcome the tyranny of place.

(1984: 237)

Written over a quarter of a century ago now, these projections seem to anticipate the 'virtual realities' and revolutions in conceptions of time-space created by contemporary telecommunications, information and electronic technologies, and the ways in which these potentially erase, dislodge or transcend the conventional nexus of identity, community and location.

Chapter 2: South African Short Stories and Short Story Cycles – A Selective Overview

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2.1 Introduction

The trajectory of South African short stories and short story cycles in English, broadly speaking, emulates developments in these genres traced in the previous chapter – more especially, the ways in which they evolved in territories with a roughly comparable history of colonisation and settlement. However, there are certain anomalies which may best be ascribed to the dual form the colonial project assumed in this country: that is, the antagonistic co-existence, by the nineteenth century, of two major and distinct European coloniser groups, with rivalling and overlapping cultures, languages, patterns of occupation, vested interests, and literary traditions. The most injurious impact of these groups was, without question, their seizure of the land and abolition of the rights of the indigenous inhabitants, together with their elision and marginalisation of the latter's linguistic and cultural heritage and identity, strategies which, by the mid-twentieth century, had hardened into the institutionalised brutality of apartheid. Thus, though Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin maintain that “settler colony cultures have never been able to construct simple concepts of the nation, such as those based on linguistic communality or racial or religious homogeneity” (qtd in Nkosi 2002: 241), the process of forging collective regional identities and a common national identity, both political and cultural, in South Africa was, from the start, a particularly fraught project.

Moreover, the seeming intransigence of the system of segregation and racial supremacy introduced in 1948 inevitably blighted aesthetic no less than political development in the second half of the twentieth century. As Dirk Kloppe reflects, “[f]or decades the boundaries set up by apartheid constituted the limits of our cultural possibilities” (1995: 126). By representing the culmination of processes of separation and exclusion begun much earlier in the “racial caste system of colonial South Africa” (Coetzee 2002: 257), apartheid rigidly enforced and reproduced fractured identities and deeply divided communities. Thus, though one commentator somewhat optimistically claimed that “You can't carve up the country of the imagination into group areas”,¹ a more pessimistic view of South African literary culture would assert that that is exactly what occurred. In the fifties, for example, Es'kia Mphahlele described the effect of the racial polarisation in the country as “paralysing”, and maintained that “cultural work” was “fragmented ... in two ghettos” (qtd in Brink 1983: 81), a view echoed by Stephen

Watson four decades later: “We have lived and continue to live in a world internally isolated by the separate ghettos of separate cultures” (1991: 91).

Despite the irony, then, that apartheid in reality was premised on an elaborate(d) fiction which transformed “race into a moral value” (Abrahams, qtd in Foley 1992: 41) and thereby “turned an irrelevance into a fundamental” (Berthoud 1989: 78), it was also responsible for creating both imaginary and tangible communities premised on this fiction. In other words, though “the boundaries of communities are symbolic” (Thornton & Ramphela 1988: 38), apartheid illustrated “how profoundly structural conditions produce patterns of identity as lived reality” and “the inherent dangers of a rampant ethnicity” (Marks & Trapido 1987: 36). Indeed, almost a decade after the official demise of apartheid, Nkosi was still insisting that in South Africa “the lack of what Pericles Lewis calls ‘the shared assumptions of national culture’ has been responsible not, as some like to think, for a richly heterogeneous but a monotonously rent and schizoid literature” (2002: 241). Similarly, Sarah Nuttall maintained that “‘common sense’ definitions [of different race groups] were ... fixed and bureaucratised by the state. They were also definitions which, once the apartheid straitjacket was broken, appear to have remained internalised” (2004: 735).

Nevertheless, identities and communities under both colonialism and apartheid were neither static nor uniform, but dynamic, contradictory and interwoven in complex and multi-layered ways. In this regard, Kelwyn Sole cautions against a flattening of diversity into homogeneity: “to base an analysis on the criteria (race, religion etc.) by which groups define themselves is to take as given precisely that which requires explanation” (1983: 55). By extension, an absolute distinction between ‘black experience’ and ‘white experience’, ‘commonsensical’ as it may be in the South African context, is at the same time problematic, since it willy-nilly insists on essentialising both collective and individual identities, and reproduces the very distinctions that apartheid, ideologically and materially (as suggested above, with a considerable degree of success), sought to install. The invocation of the oppositional categories ‘black’ and ‘white’, even when ostensibly from a position which seeks to undermine the differential value accorded each by colonial/apartheid practice and discourse, replicates (if unintentionally or unconsciously) binaric modes of thinking which are reductive, and forecloses on more nuanced and complex understandings of a range of experiences and possibilities. Sole also points out, for instance, that:

There are no pure cultures in South Africa, each with its own uncontaminated history and logic. In this country racial cultures have influenced each other greatly, despite the stultifying effect of segregation and apartheid. ... Oppression of a certain kind is indeed experienced by all blacks in South Africa, but it is not experienced by all blacks in identical ways. Privileges along colour lines may indeed be the experience of all whites, but this does not mean that all whites get an equal slice of the cake or live in a monolithic cultural universe. ... Cultural choices and identifications have furthermore diversified among both white and black

(1983: 47-49)

Subsequently he reiterates the point: “not only is there a degree of interaction and influence between white and black cultural practices, but black and white cultures are in themselves also heterogeneous” (1983: 73).

Moreover, although apartheid exploited and legislated categories of identity premised on the supposedly self-evident notion of ‘race’, it was ultimately and inevitably unable to control either this definition of difference (as increasingly absurd and imprecise ‘criteria’ – such as the infamous pencil test – attest) *or* more ambiguous and elusive identifications and entanglements. Nuttall, for example, maintains that “how people actually thought about themselves, and the interstitial manoeuvres they were able to make with this ‘common sense’ bureaucracy of race, remain to be researched in a properly microscopic way” (2004: 735). She argues, further, that it was precisely the evidence of such “interstitial manoeuvres” that was repressed by the apartheid regime in order to reproduce its *raison d’être*:

the point I am pursuing here has less to do with the porousness or otherwise of racial boundaries per se than with the idea that the more racial boundaries are erected and legislated for, the more the observer has to look for the petty transgressions without which everyday life for both the ‘master’ and the ‘slave’ would be impossible. Racial segregation, that is, can only work if, somewhere else, the entanglements, denied precisely to safeguard the official fiction, are also taking place.

(2004: 737)

Though Nuttall is referring here explicitly to infringements of the laws, codes and practices governing interracial encounters and ostensibly separating groups under apartheid, she implicitly provides pointers to the ways in which the notion of entanglement has a wider purchase. In the introductory chapter of her recent volume of essays, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (2009), she explains that entanglement is:

a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with: it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness, but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication.

(1)

She then elaborates a *modus operandi* which would enable this notion to inform critical and theoretical practice, that is, to serve as

a means by which to draw into our analyses those sites in which what was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways. It is an idea which signals largely unexplored terrains of mutuality, wrought from a common, though often coercive and confrontational experience. ... It helps us ... to find *a method of reading* which is about a set of relations, some of them conscious but many of them unconscious, which occur between people who most of the time try to define themselves as different.

(11-12, emphasis added)

In literary terms, this “method of reading” is particularly applicable to the short story cycle, a genre which epitomises both separateness *and* interconnectedness, monadism *and* collectivity. In the South African context, specifically, it also gestures towards the *possibility*, at least, of an intersubjectivity which is not reducible to ethnocentrism.

In the broad overview which follows, I provide an outline of developments in the short story and short story cycle in English in South Africa, drawing on the work of previous commentators and attempting to link their observations to trends identified in the previous chapter. In the first section, I examine early prototypes of these forms from the late nineteenth century and, in the second, discuss the first fully-fledged examples of the short story cycle, as conventionally understood in its regionalist guise, in works by Pauline Smith and Herman Charles Bosman. The third section comprises a selective discussion of apartheid works, and interrogates the racial bifurcation in terms of which such works are generally apprehended as representing ‘black’ solidarity and ‘white’ alienation, respectively.

2.2 “Frontiers, Settlements and Schisms”: Nineteenth-Century Pioneers

The sense of place ... is ... part of a shared, felt milieu, a familiar and meaningful backdrop, the cause of resonance.

– Stephen Gray (1986b: 9)

As in many other parts of the world, the English short story in South Africa first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and, as in other settler societies, it was initially concerned to capture what was ambivalently construed as both the strangeness and bounty of an exotic territory – a “treacherous paradise” (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 11) – for a largely metropolitan readership or “the domestic audience of Empire” (Pratt 1992: 63). In broad terms, then, these stories fall into the category of what Stephen Gray describes as the “imperial adventure romance” (1979: 66) and Van Wyk Smith the “frontier romance” (1990: 25). The latter comments that, in general,

romance strategies ... remained the dominant mode of South African fiction in the nineteenth century. South Africa became for some ... the “hunter’s arcadia”, for others the “white man’s paradise” ... for others still simply the setting of good frontier yarns of pioneering, adventure, prospecting and war

(1990: 12)

Short fiction, in particular, was well-suited to an anecdotal representation of the ephemeral nature of frontier experience, as Gray points out:

Each short story, with its conciseness, its tightness, its sense of balance, could best contain a discrete part of a kind of life which was basically episodic ... in short, the unsettled, unshaped life of the frontier which never quite jelled into the security and shape that the novel need.

(qtd in Adendorff 1985: 141)

Craig MacKenzie, in his comprehensive study, *The Oral-Style South African Short Story in English* (1999), notes that, during the earliest phase, a number of writers – such as A.W. Drayson, J. Forsyth Ingram, Frederick Boyle, H.A. Bryden, W.C. Scully and J. Percy Fitzpatrick – produced collections of ‘campfire’ or ‘bivouac’ tales, unified in a loose sense by a number of strategies which they held in common.² These include a transient setting, a frame narrator who reports the adventurous accounts of a motley conglomeration of yarn-spinners (often stock characters), and the latter’s attempts to outrival each other’s skill at embellishment and inflation. Moreover, the illusion of veracity and immediacy is naively conveyed and un-

ironically endorsed by the frame narrator's supposedly direct transmission of the internal narrators' styles of "oral delivery" (1999: 21).

The earliest South African short story writers, according to MacKenzie, typically produced generically indeterminate narratives, "poised uncertainly between what are now considered to be distinct modes of writing: travelogue, oral testimony, history, anthropology – as well as fictional modes of writing" (1999: 22-23). Their collections were thus "frequently a miscellany of folk-history, frontier lore, autobiographical anecdotes, sketches, tales and legends, manifesting in their heterogeneity the unsettled tenor of the times" (1999: 17). Nevertheless, the narratorial stances adopted claimed an 'authoritative' or documentary status for their representations:

one of the constants in the early colonial story is the claim that the 'plain truth' is being told. The fact that a large part of the appeal of these early stories for their metropolitan readership is precisely this 'realism' or 'authenticity' may account for the curious amalgam of fact and fancy that one encounters in early collections of South African short stories. Many of the stories ... are palpably improbable or, at the very least, highly exaggerated.

(1999: 33)

The general tendency of nineteenth-century South African narratives to hover uncertainly between invention and reportage, fiction and fact, is also noted by Van Wyk Smith:

the distinction between fiction and 'genuine' chronicle is often hard to draw. ... Interspersed with ... early works of fiction, and often providing source material for them, was a steady record of reminiscences, journals, travelogues, and campaign narratives by settlers, missionaries, hunters, traders, explorers, soldiers and their wives – usually espousing the colonial and racial codes of their time, but providing an ample glimpse of life on the frontier, and of *developing stereotypes of people and places*.

(1990: 13; emphasis added)

MacKenzie points out, however, that Scully's and Fitzpatrick's short stories are less culpable in respect of a conflation of fiction and reality, and display "more self-conscious 'artistry'" (1999: 46) than those of their contemporaries. Of Scully's three collections, he nevertheless maintains, none "has anything like the structure of a story cycle, and in none of them is the internal narrator used with any consistency or towards any discernible greater design. ... all three volumes are miscellanies rather than consciously designed thematic entities" (1999: 48).

In the context of the present discussion, the earliest collections of South African short stories therefore appear to conform to certain trends evident in other colonial contexts in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The unifying strategies they employ are somewhat perfunctory and are hardly constitutive in the sense associated with the short story cycle: simple contextual frames or settings act merely as a pretext for the assemblage of what are otherwise unrelated or unintegrated tales of various types. As was the case in the American context, too, many of these anecdotal frontier yarns depend for their impact upon exaggeration, extraordinary coincidence and patently outlandish exploits, though they lay claim to a certain fidelity in their attempt to convey a sense of “the exotic outposts of the colonies” (MacKenzie 1999: 58). Needless to say, such narratives also unselfconsciously reveal the imperialist ethos of the time. Jean Marquard comments, in this regard, that for the most part:

Creative writing in South Africa at the turn of the century reflects the attitudes of empire to the ‘new’ world. The writers themselves, as well as the characters they depict – with the noticeable exceptions of Olive Schreiner and William Charles Scully – are *not yet indigenous South Africans*. They are explorers, prospectors, missionaries, servants of the Company and of the British government which claims their ultimate allegiance.

(1978: 20; emphasis added)

In terms of Van Wyk Smith’s useful differentiation between the discourse of the ‘*colon*’ and that of the ‘settler’ (which recalls Benjamin’s analogous distinction between the oral tales of travellers or seamen and “resident tillers of the soil” [1992: 84]), the earliest collections of short stories seem largely to emanate from the former.³ At this stage, links between region and a stable provincial community were yet to be represented in fictional terms in a cyclical format – or, perhaps more pointedly, forged in reality. Given roughly contemporaneous efforts to establish ‘indigenous identities’ in other parts of the world, it might be expected that similar efforts would be reflected in subsequent South African short stories and story cycles – in other words, that there would be a shift from the exotic to a more realistic and distinctively regionalist writing, and that later works would reflect a greater sense of ‘belonging’ and of identities grounded in particular local places and communities.

Indeed, a number of collections which appeared around the turn of the century *are* more closely integrated by virtue of topographical unity and a focus on a localised community and its regional character. Typically, they employ a first-person frame narrator/‘reporter’ to relay the tales of a single internal narrator or ‘teller’. Invariably the latter is a larger-than-life figure, such

as Abe Pike in Ernest Glanville's *Tales from the Veld* (1897), Vrouw Grobelaar in Perceval Gibbon's *The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases* (1905), and Oom Meihaas in Francis Carey Slater's *The Sunburnt South* (1908).⁴ MacKenzie notes that, in Gibbon's and Slater's collections, in particular, the framing strategy not only enables increasing levels of irony and humour as a result of the implicitly divergent perspectives between the engaging ingenuity of the teller of the tales and the scepticism of the chronicler, but also more continuity and cohesion among the individual stories. He then singles out *The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases* as the first example of a distinctly *South African* short story cycle, in large part due to the ways in which the Vrouw Grobelaar epitomises an entire community – the fictional Dopfontein, a “typical Boer farming community of the late nineteenth century” (1999: 81). The Vrouw Grobelaar, who is related in some way to almost everyone in the area and who is a seemingly inexhaustible “repository of local gossip and legend” (1999: 92), functions as a shrewd observer and resident-teller, providing access to regional manners, customs and social networks. MacKenzie concludes that, “in choosing her as his narratological centrepiece, Gibbon has located his collection of stories at the very nexus of Boer oral lore. He is therefore able to draw on the power of an oral tradition distilled by generations of retellings and give voice to this tradition through an ‘authentic’ spokesperson” (1999: 92). Gibbon's collection thus provides a cogent example of what Ingram would categorise as “the central area of the [short story cycle] spectrum”, since it is unified by a “privileged, first-person ... narrator in the oral storytelling tradition” and by a common, “pseudo-realistic locale” (1971: 20, 193, 147).

As a prototypical South African English example of the short story cycle's conventional representation of an identity between region and community, setting and character, *The Vrouw Grobelaar's Leading Cases* is curious, for a number of reasons. The first of these is that the community in question is one to which ostensibly neither the frame narrator (an erudite English schoolmaster) nor the implied or actual author belong. Moreover, the racism and conservatism of this community are implicitly questioned, or at least treated with a degree of sceptical indulgence, by the narrator. In this regard, MacKenzie comments that:

The Vrouw articulates the dominant ideology of her society at the time, while the first-person narrator maintains a critical distance. This narrative structure enables Gibbon to deliver an oblique but powerful indictment of the prejudices of the age. ... [He] provided South African literature with its first fully-fledged Afrikaner fictional narrator and ... invested a great deal of irony and humour in the narrative structure of the tales she tells. (1999: 96-97)

Despite the obvious quibble that the *Vrouw Grobelaar* is a representation, *in English*, of a Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking person who tells what Gibbon knows or assumes are stories germane to her cultural community, the yoking of the notions of critique and comedy in MacKenzie's remarks here is suggestive. Gibbon's collection appears to confirm that what Van Wyk Smith refers to, in a comment cited earlier, as "developing stereotypes of people and places" (1990: 13) in South African literature in English in the nineteenth century were firmly in place by the early twentieth, and evident in what might be construed as ambivalently sympathetic/affectionate or patronising attitudes towards Boer culture. It is, for example, somewhat ironic that Gibbon's frame narrator is betrothed to the *Vrouw Grobelaar*'s niece, Katje, with whom he intends to enjoy conjugal harmony, no doubt in a less parochial setting, in the future. Cross-cultural intermarriage is thus condoned, though the future destination of the couple is unclear. If Gibbon's "powerful indictment of the prejudices of the age" targets the *Vrouw* as a representative of an insular, Calvinist and conservative Boer community, it would seem that her niece and the English schoolmaster are exempted – as, by implication, are the implied author and reader. Gibbon apparently assumes a homogeneous reading community: a 'white' South African English one which largely and unquestioningly shares the ambivalent attitudes towards Boers mentioned above, but which is itself not implicated in the bigotry of the period. The movement of irony in the stories is therefore arrested at this point.

Secondly, as Gray, Pereira and MacKenzie have pointed out, Gibbon's *Vrouw Grobelaar* and her contemporaries, Slater's Oom Meihaas and C.R. Prance's Tante Rebella, are progenitors of Herman Charles Bosman's more famous Oom Schalk Lourens, the quintessential "backveld Boer humourist" (Gray 1979: 193) and, some would claim, South African ironist *par excellence*. However, the Dopfontein Boer community Gibbon describes in his collection invites comparison not only with that of Bosman's Groot Marico, but also that of Pauline Smith's *The Little Karoo*. Interestingly, in this regard, Pereira accords Gibbon's stories more gravitas than does MacKenzie, remarking that "Unlike the largely comic, plot-orientated tales of his contemporaries, Gibbon's are studies in psychology and human relationships which in many ways anticipate the stories of Pauline Smith" (1986: 111). But it is Van Wyk Smith who is especially insightful with regard to the analogies between the various narrative strategies

adopted by the authors above and a deepening trend in English South African writing at this stage:

illiterate and indolent, but no longer perceived as a threat to the imperial hegemony and also dispossessed of power and land, the Boer could now be treated with a tolerant condescension towards both his attractive qualities (innocence, trust, faith, shrewdness, fierce attachment to the land) and his weaknesses (ignorance, conservatism, racism) that could produce anything from broad comedy to compassionate elegy. [Gibbon and others] are among the more substantial and still readable exemplars of a tradition that would come to powerful fruition in the work of Pauline Smith and Herman Charles Bosman.

(1990: 15-16)

Thirdly, given this line of descent, what is perhaps most anomalous and counter-intuitive in early South African English short story collections is the virtual absence of cyclical texts dealing with specifically *English* identities and regional communities in the local context, such as those works that were appearing concurrently in other parts of the world. The almost exclusive focus on rural Boer enclaves or nascent Afrikaans communities – at least in story cycles if not in novels – arguably relates to what has long been held to be ‘white’ English-speaking South Africans’ alienation and sense of unbelonging, issues which will be more fully explored in the discussion that follows.

And finally, Pereira’s and Van Wyk Smith’s comments above suggest that certain trends evident in embryonic or apprentice form in earlier, turn-of-the-century collections were to be realised more fully in Smith and Bosman’s work – a claim that emulates the sense expressed by A. Walton Litz that the American nineteenth-century local colourists were “distressingly provincial” (1980: 256), but laid the groundwork for the more accomplished writers to follow. It is surely significant that, like Anderson in America and Joyce in England, Smith and Bosman, together with Olive Schreiner, have long been accorded canonical status within the South African English literary establishment, whilst their forerunners have largely fallen from view.

2.3 “Simple People” and “Takhaar Boers”: Pauline Smith and Herman Charles Bosman

2.3.1 Regionalism and Organic Communities

Pauline Smith’s *The Little Karoo* (1925/1930) and Herman Charles Bosman’s *Mafeking Road* (1947), both arranged or completed rather than composed cycles,⁵ are widely recognised as the

first fully-fledged South African short story cycles to display the genre's particular affinity for the depiction of localised regions and communities. In 1964 Guy Butler asked the question, in relation to *The Little Karoo*, "Is not the main character the dry, quiet, lonely region itself?" He responded by claiming that Smith "is an important writer in the development of South African literature precisely because she was the first to produce a successful collection of short stories set in a particular region" (1983: 78). Arthur Ravenscroft similarly observes that "one of the virtues of [Smith's] art is the fine selection of rich details of setting, which place her characters very sharply and make them appear to *belong organically* to the South African landscape they inhabit" (1983: 45, emphasis added).⁶ And, in arguing for a recognition both of the regionalism and the cyclical character of *The Little Karoo*, Adendorff remarks that:

The Karoo plain bounded by mountain ranges not only frames the collection by being vividly evoked in the first and last stories, but as the setting for all the stories, provides *patterns* that make the collection a *cycle*. The setting is the source of much of Smith's imagery and frequently either serves as an expression of her characters' emotional and spiritual states, or stands in ironic contrast to them.⁷

(1985: 43)

All of these commentators, then, appear to subscribe to the view that regionalist writing "emphasizes the setting, speech, and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as local color, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting" (Abrams 1999: 194).

In Bosman's case, more than a hundred-and-forty of his stories are set in the Groot Marico region, over fifty of which are overtly linked by virtue of being narrated by Oom Schalk Lourens (MacKenzie 1999: 138). However, *Mafeking Road* is distinguished from other collections published after Bosman's death by various editors, since this volume was collated by the author himself. Moreover, the cyclical nature of this volume is immediately apparent. As MacKenzie claims:

A legitimate basis for *Mafeking Road*'s being considered a short story cycle is provided in a number of its constituent and integrative elements: its use of the same storyteller ... in all but one of its twenty-one stories; its unified regional setting; its use of similar characters or character-types; and the thematic continuities in the stories. One emerges from a reading of the text, in other words, with the sense of having been given *a composite portrait of a coherent community*.⁸

(2000: 81-82, emphasis added)

Moreover, like Gibbon's *The Vrouw Grobelaar*, Bosman's collection occupies the central area of the cycle spectrum identified by Ingram as a result of the coherence engendered by a first-person narrator, a mock oral style of narration, and a common locale and community.

In both Smith's and Bosman's texts, an identity is established between region and community such that they become the collective protagonists or "sustained personae" (Adendorff 1985: 144) of these cycles. *The Little Karoo* and *Mafeking Road* depict similarly insular, conservative and patriarchal Boer communities struggling to survive in the face of difficult environmental and economic conditions. Marquard, for example, points out that "The political and geographical environment[s] are the controlling boundaries within which individuals enact their small life-dramas", and it is the constraints imposed by these environmental factors that "serve to isolate groups" (1978: 16). Thus, in Smith's stories, "families are separated from one another by vast, empty distances", and Bosman's Groot Marico is "an encapsulated self-referring world" (1978: 16-17). However, in *The Little Karoo* a blend of pathos and tragedy, underpinned by a Calvinist and Old Testament *Weltanschauung*, is the dominant tone, whereas in *Mafeking Road* a quizzical exposure of the mixture of bravado and self-delusion masking the characters' fallibilities, prejudices and hypocrisies produces both irony and humour. It is the contrast between these two modes that Van Wyk Smith characterises as "compassionate elegy" and "broad comedy" (1990: 16), respectively.

Significantly, and unlike Gibbon, Smith and Bosman attempt to capture the speech patterns and intonations of their Dutch/Afrikaans speakers and characters in an effort to convey linguistic authenticity, and in both texts the stance of the narrator is apparently inconspicuous.⁹ In *The Little Karoo*, the latter is achieved through the technique of free indirect narration (see Coetzee 1988: 123-126); in *Mafeking Road*, through the illusion of unmediated and direct access apparently offered by Oom Schalk's putatively oral delivery, his privileged position as participant-observer, and the apparent absence of the kind of frame narrator or filter found in Gibbon's collection.¹⁰ In Smith's case, the effect achieved has been read as an entirely un-ironic endorsement of the notion of rural simplicity, encapsulated in Coetzee's phrase "Simple Language, Simple People" (1988: 115). However, in *Mafeking Road*, the question of the ideological distance between Oom Schalk and the implied author generates levels of unstable irony which, Rebecca Davis claims, make

it almost impossible to trace the irony back to either the narrator or the implied author with any certainty. Oom Schalk Lourens is a classic ‘unreliable narrator’, his unreliability stemming from his “limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme”.

(2006: 25)

Van Wyk Smith also comments that, in Oom Schalk, Bosman exploited “the very modernist device of the limited, half-ironic but half-ignorant first-person narrator” (1990: 62). In a certain sense, then, Bosman’s narrator is *eiron*, *alazon*, and *bomolochus* – or dissembler, self-deceiving braggart, and buffoon or jester (see Abrams 1999: 134-135).

Notwithstanding the fact that the regional verisimilitude of *The Little Karoo* and *Mafeking Road* extends to a correspondence with actual towns and geographical features, Smith’s Aangenaam Valley and Bosman’s Groot Marico are in essence fictionalised localities. Coetzee thus argues that what Smith was attempting to preserve of a “rural order” in her narratives set in the Little Karoo was “a social stability that she idealized, even *fabricated*” (1988: 6; emphasis added). And Dorothy Driver comments that Smith “*constructs* in her fiction a spatial and temporal setting – what Tony Voss calls the ‘anonymous 1890s’ – that permits her to avoid confronting racial issues” (1989: 77; emphasis added) that were surfacing increasingly urgently in the early decades of the twentieth century. By the same token, Marquard claims rather effusively that Bosman

understood that fiction has the power to alter the map of a country by creating archetypes from that country’s raw materials. Bosman’s Groot Marico is to South Africa what Mark Twain’s Mississippi, or Steinbeck’s Tortilla Flat or Hemingway’s Lake Michigan [or Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County] are to America – *ideal scenarios consecrated by art*. ... The fictional village becomes a microcosm of the nation: the focus, centre and axis of an individual poetics.

(1978: 23, emphasis added)

On a more sober note, Lionel Abrahams cautions that,

however convincingly Schalk Lourens’s Groot Marico and the rest of his world looks and sounds and smells like the actual platteland, it is in fact substantially a geographic phantom, an aesthetic invention. The regionalism, the realism of these stories is only apparent, a cloak, a sort of ectoplasm to render visible a population of creatures whose native home is the author’s imagination.

(1981: 10)

The apparent realism of both authors therefore should not detract from a recognition of the fictionality of their representations. Indeed, MacKenzie maintains that Bosman's Oom Schalk is a self-conscious narrator and that this is particularly evident in the reflexivity which emerges when he draws attention to the "mechanics of fictionalizing" (1999: 153) or the choices and conventions employed when constructing a compelling story.

2.3.2 Community Sympathies: Allegiances and Alliances

The question, retrospectively, of the political implications of Smith and Bosman's evident affection for their subjects – that is, whether the familiarity they reveal with the Dutch/Afrikaans communities they render in their fiction extends to what might be deemed overly indulgent identification or endorsement – has elicited much debate. Both writers have been accused of a failure adequately to address such communities' intrinsic racial and ethnic exclusivity, and their parochialism and patriarchalism. Coetzee, for example, argues that Smith's use of a variety of English stylistically inflected to resemble Afrikaans/Dutch, together with an idiom derived from the King James or Authorised Version of the Bible, reinforces the foundational myth of the Afrikaner. In this "homegrown Calvinist myth", the Afrikaner is cast in the figure of

the Israelite, tender of flocks, seeker after a promised national homeland, member of an elect race (*volk*) set apart from the tribes of the idolatrous, living by simple and not-to-be questioned commandments, afflicted by an inscrutable Godhead with trials whose purpose is to test his faith and his fitness for election.

(1988: 118)

In similar vein to Van Wyk Smith's earlier comment concerning South African English literary depictions of Boer culture, identity and aspirations at the turn of the century, Coetzee points out that this myth met with "amusement or condescension" but also "considerable sympathy" in Britain, even after the Anglo-Boer Wars, for reasons more related to domestic issues than the South African context itself. Nevertheless, he insists that this initial tolerance was misguided: "As for the historical consequences of the Afrikaner's myth of election and of the indulgence with which it was received abroad ... they have been far-reaching and serious" (1988: 118).¹¹ Chapman, too, argues that what Arnold Bennett, Smith's mentor, described as her "strange, austere, tender, ruthless talent" does not "negate the 'political' difficulty ... that [her] strengths

in understanding the community she so vividly evoked blinded her to the place of that community in the functioning of South African society” (2003: 189). He then suggests that, in time, Smith will be relegated to the position of a writer of “miniature concern” (2003: 189).

Driver, however, situates the regional affiliations and community sympathies evident in Smith’s fiction within the context of her early upbringing in the Oudtshoorn district, and in opposition to the later ascendancy of a virulent form of Afrikaner nationalism:

If Smith’s desire to write about the past world of the Little Karoo is above all a nostalgic desire (the city-dweller’s yearning for the countryside, the deracinee’s yearning for home, the adult’s yearning for childhood), it is also the desire of a woman trapped in the mid-twentieth century who is longing instead for the latter end of the nineteenth, the time when her father was able to show for the Cape Dutch a sympathy that did not have to be corrected by the knowledge of what was happening by the mid-twentieth century. (1989: 90)

Despite the fact that Driver’s comments here are somewhat anachronistic, given that both *The Little Karoo* and Smith’s novel, *The Beadle*, were published in the 1920s, the dominant sense which emerges is that Smith’s writing evokes a form of nostalgia for and sentimentalisation of an agrarian lifestyle similar to that apparent in works produced elsewhere in the early decades of the twentieth century – and for much the same reasons. Nevertheless, Chapman suggestively points out that Smith’s short stories “are less tempted by idyllic resolution than is her novel” (1996: 188). Though he does not elaborate, his claim is borne out by the fact that *The Beadle* gestures towards a felicitous resolution (the birth of a grandson, forgiveness, the restoration of the ‘natural’ patriarchal order), whereas the first and last two stories of *The Little Karoo* (“The Pain”, “Desolation” and “The Father”) all contain or presage tragic deaths, as do several others in the collection. Thus, though love and “gracious simplicity” (Adendorff 1985: 50) redeem Deltje and Juriaan’s suffering in the first story, and the possibility of renewal is suggested in the figures of Klaas and Dientjie in the last (1985: 70), the collection as a whole maintains an unresolved tension between those stories which conclude on a note of optimism, and those on a note of tragedy. The supposed consolations of human community and rural simplicity are offset by existential isolation, obsessive embitterment, self-righteousness, and blind cruelty. Coetzee notes, on the one hand, that the significantly named farm, Harmonie, in *The Beadle*, represents an Edenic, self-contained, pastoral refuge outside of history (1988: 66-68). On the other, the unity of the ‘organic community’ of the Aangenaam Valley in *The Little Karoo* is disturbed by

dispersal or journeys outwards, by the intrusion of an embryonic capitalist economy, and by drought and the “crisis on the *platteland*” (1988: 78) which is drawing small-scale farmers, *bywoners*, and their offspring off the land and into the cities. In certain respects, the characters in *The Little Karoo* are analogous to those in Anderson’s *Winesburg*: they demonstrate similar repressions, are prone to bouts of irrational rage, and are influenced by external developments which are luring the youth, in particular, to urban areas. The *inherently* dualistic characteristics of the short story cycle are thus amply demonstrated in the tension between community cohesion and fragmentation in *The Little Karoo* – a tension which perhaps accurately reflects actual historical and geographical circumstances in the late nineteenth century.

Though Smith’s representation of the inhabitants of the Little Karoo hardly sets them up as a source of amusement, the same cannot, of course, be said for most of the characters in *Mafeking Road*. Margaret Lenta, however, warns against a tendency to over-emphasise the comic aspects of Bosman’s stories, and claims that his seriousness “is evident in his awareness, like Pauline Smith’s, that the isolation in which rural Afrikaners live, part geographical and part the result of their prejudices against outsiders, allows for obsessional behaviour and patriarchal tyranny which he portrays in non-humorous stories” (2003: 118). The question of the function of the irony, and the butt of the satire, in Bosman’s collection has been scrutinised from divergent perspectives. Adendorff, for example, maintains that Bosman’s debunking of racial and cultural myths and stereotypes, communicated via Oom Schalk’s ironically or slyly revealing – if at times ostensibly guileless – reflections, entails an exposure of jaundiced Boer views of Africans and *Rooineks*. Bosman’s depiction of a parochial but relatively stable community thus tackles the issue of how the identity of this community is premised on a deep-seated suspicion and ‘othering’ of strangers/*uitlanders*. This Boer community is nevertheless cast both as victim of British imperialism and as racially bigoted oppressor.

Though the theme of racial prejudice is most prominently announced by the infamous opening lines of the story “Makapan’s Caves”, it is present in many of the stories, especially in expressions of the racial and cultural bitterness engendered as a legacy of frontier conflict and the Anglo-Boer Wars. While perhaps himself oblivious to the full import of his disclosures on occasion, Oom Schalk reveals the racial and cultural superiority of his community to be ludicrous, hypocritical, and self-deluding, although such notions are most frequently conveyed by innuendo or inference rather than direct statement. In Adendorff’s view, ultimately a

common humanity is asserted which challenges the truth-value of essentialist racial and ethno-nationalist notions, despite the tenacious and largely unquestioned hold these have on the popular imagination of the Marico inhabitants. She claims, for instance, that “The racial theme consistently undercuts any suggestion of an unambivalent mythologizing of the Marico community, despite the contrary assertion of some critics who are perhaps deceived by the comedy with which Bosman is able to present this painful South African reality” (1985: 38). And MacKenzie similarly remarks that:

if one takes Bosman’s stories as a purely realistic evocation of rural life, a number of serious misrepresentations of his work could result. Militant black critics, for example, could object to his flat portrayal of the blacks of the region, without perceiving how his work is in fact a severe indictment of racist practices in South Africa. And, from the other side of the political spectrum, reactionary whites could see in his work a lighthearted but realistic rendering of a life-style which vindicates the former South African regime’s dismissive attitude to the black population.

(1999: 152)

One such “militant black critic” is Nkosi who, in his article “In Search of the ‘True’ Afrikaners”, argues that ‘black’ characters in Bosman’s stories are “rarely more than shadows” and “foils for playing off his Boer characters for whom he claimed the real stage” (qtd in Lawson 1986: 144). Indeed, similar claims have been made about Bosman’s representation of women: “[He] is also slapdash in his treatment of women characters: they tend to remain merely fantastical veld maidens or foils to the male historical concerns” (Chapman 2003: 191).

A number of critics have paid attention to the fact that the irony in Bosman’s stories is “mostly addressed [to] a literate, liberal audience” (Chapman 2003:191), and the humour “is the result of the implied gulf between the liberal English author and the backward old Afrikaans farmer, with the intention being that the reader align him- or herself with the former” (Davis 2006: 96). However, this strategy potentially has the effect of reinforcing an unquestioned sense of superiority amongst complacent readers, rather than initiating a form of self-reflexivity which exposes such readers’ *own* culpability and latently conservative sensibilities. As M.H. Abrams comments, “recourse to irony by an author tends to convey an implicit compliment to the intelligence of readers, who are invited to associate themselves with the author and the knowing minority who are not taken in by the ostensible meaning” (1999: 135). Put simply, if ‘white’, liberal English- (or Afrikaans-)speaking readers accept ‘Bosman’/Oom Schalk’s

invitation to laugh at backveld Boers mouthing and acting upon typecast notions of ‘race’, gender, and British cultural identity, they are, firstly, performing an exculpatory manoeuvre which shifts the blame for a history in which they are themselves implicated and, secondly, unquestioningly invoking and reproducing stereotypical notions of other groups themselves.

Driver pertinently asks, for example, “who has not squirmed at that slandering in post office and voorkamer, at [Oom Schalk’s] riding roughshod over some sensitivity or other, at that canny tongue, that sharp ear, those circles he runs round *our* white, English-speaking consciences?” (1986: 3, emphasis added). And Lenta comments that the actual complexity of Bosman’s attitudes to white South Africa, implicit both in his affection for his subjects *and* his recognition of their racist and exploitative tendencies, was largely avoided by early readers, who tended to view Oom Schalk as a “genial clown” (2003: 112). She then remarks: “Shrewd yet benevolent, racist by the nature of his culture, generous to real merit in anyone, a skilled and ironic teller of tales, it is possible to see Oom Schalk as tailored to the prejudices of white South Africans, *Afrikaans- and English-speaking alike*, in the period from the end of the Anglo-Boer War until 1990” (2003: 113, emphasis added). Underscoring the commonality of these prejudices, Lenta points out that

Unless readers are prepared to acknowledge ... this combination of camaraderie and genocidal racism in Oom Schalk and his fellow Boers, and to acknowledge that it forms part of the ethos inherited by South Africans, the stories remain merely comic. ... Nevertheless, the majority of readers under apartheid remained unaware that they were reading their own prejudices into the stories.

(2003: 114-115)

She then concludes that Bosman’s contempt for ‘white’ South African hypocrisy and self-deception deepened as South Africa moved further into the twentieth century, and is particularly evident in the differences between his stories and his novel *Willemsdorp*, which he was revising just before his death in 1951 but which was only published in 1977:

the Marico stories show him aware of and commenting on the racism, parochialism and hypocrisy of the South African white; *Willemsdorp* reveals a non-comic awareness of the corruption inherent in racism, as well as of the culturally impoverished life of a South African provincial town.

(2003: 120)

In 1980, Gray commented on the fact that Bosman and C. Louis Leipoldt “on school syllabuses and among the canonisers of South African literary taste ... receive regular and monotonous homage, the just dues, one presumes, of sacred cows” (1). Given the prominence accorded Bosman within the South African English literary canon, it is interesting that he has been virtually excluded from the Afrikaans equivalent (see De Kock 2001: 190-194), despite his considerable output in that language. More intriguing, however, is the fact that *The Little Karoo* and *Mafeking Road* – probably the two most celebrated and conventionally regionalist English short story cycles in South Africa – represent Boer/Afrikaans, rather than English, communities, as do their late nineteenth-century prototypes. The fact that a tradition of South African place-based story cycles emerged in ways congruent with other parts of the world over roughly the same period, but anomalous in respect of an apparent fixation on another culture, raises the question of why those English settlements and communities that *did* exist, and rural communities especially, were not represented in similar form.

Perhaps this trend in early South African cycles reflects not only a nostalgia for organic, pastoral communities, given the threat of their increasing erosion, but also an affection for and tolerance of the ‘foibles’ of “queer small town people”, to use Anderson’s phrase, or settler inhabitants – Afrikaans and English alike. An additional possibility, however, is that such texts speak to the reality that, pre- and post-Union in 1910, the schism between English and Afrikaans ‘white’ South Africans was not as insurmountable as popular imagination or politically motivated reconstructions would have it be. This was no doubt the case for Smith and Schreiner, for example, both of whom spent their formative years in the Karoo. But it was also true for Bosman who, though born to Afrikaans parents, was educated in English, later had an English-speaking stepfather, and in fact only spent six months in the Marico district as a teacher, residing most of his adult life in Johannesburg. In a certain sense, then, Bosman might be viewed as a literal and literary embodiment of the type of English/Afrikaans intermarriage and cultural exchange intimated in Gibbon’s *Vrouw Grobelaar*. Interestingly, in this regard, Van Wyk Smith points out that Bosman “shared the romantic and reconciliatory optimism of the pre-1948 years” (1990: 63). Though the period between 1910 and 1948 witnessed the rise of an increasingly ascendant Afrikaner ethnic nationalism, it also saw the short-lived advent of a broad South Africanism, inclusive of both English- and Afrikaans-speaking ‘whites’ but exclusive of the ‘black’ majority. It was the polarisation engendered by responses to the Second

World War, the defeat of Smuts' United Party, the victory of the Nationalist Party in 1948, and the advent of institutionalised and state-imposed apartheid that ushered in a more general hardening and entrenchment of attitudes and hostilities.

As MacKenzie comments, the dominant mode of writing adopted in response to these sweeping changes in the social fabric, specifically by short fiction writers in English, was a brand of realism which was urban in its focus and politically engaged:

The style of the post-war short story ... is overwhelmingly social realist in nature, and the setting is invariably an urban one. This broad shift in the style and setting of the South African short story was largely a consequence of the increasing pace of industrialisation and urbanisation in the first half of the twentieth century. Attendant upon these developments was the intensification of race-based legislation in the 1950s, and this gave a new sense of urgency to South African literature. 'Serious' writing, it was felt, would now have to engage with these new, morally offensive realities.¹²
(2000: 83)

Though MacKenzie's comments are directed specifically at the demise of oral-style stories from the fifties onwards, they point to the more general impact on writing of a South Africa that would be riven by and preoccupied with racial, ethnic, and linguistic divisions and allegiances for almost a half-century.

2.4 "Exiles in our own country": Short Stories and Short Story Cycles under Apartheid

People in misdeveloped twisted lands may not be able to dominate what really happens to them; but they can at least control the stories they tell about how they want what happened to them remembered.

– Ariel Dorfman (qtd in Long-Innes 1998: 181)

We have owned our stories while owning so little else.

– Ellen Kuzwayo (qtd in Brink 1993: 53)

Despite – and, paradoxically perhaps, *because of* – the incrementally oppressive and discriminatory policies implemented from 1948 onwards (and constraints imposed on 'black' writers in particular), short stories in English proliferated, if unevenly, during the apartheid era.¹³ The form proved surprisingly tenacious, robust and adversarial. Indeed, Chapman claims that "[T]he development of the genre and the considerable diversity of talent ... reveals the short story to be arguably South Africa's most resilient and innovative form of literary expression" (2007: 9). This resilience was in no small measure due to the urgency with which the need to document the abuses of an iniquitous system was felt by many writers, especially

those most directly affected. But it was also a function of the obvious attractions of brevity in strained circumstances. In exile in the late fifties, for example, Mphahlele described his sense of the combined influence of both of these factors before he left the country:

I wrote short fiction in South Africa because the distance between the ever present stimulus and anger was so short, the anger screamed for an outlet with such a burning urgency, that I had to find a prose medium that would get me to the focal point with only a few elegant movements. The short story was such a medium. Indeed it came to one as a reflex.

(1959: xxi)

Mphahlele's own circumstances at the time illustrate how state clampdowns, such as detentions, imprisonment, bannings and censorship, and the forced or voluntary exile of a significant number of 'black' writers – particularly those, like Mphahlele himself, who had been associated with Sophiatown and *Drum* magazine in the fifties – created an acute hiatus or rupture in 'black' literary culture.¹⁴ Thus, though the fifties and sixties “witnessed various and exciting developments in short fiction and confirmed the short story as the most popular and prolific form of imaginative writing in South Africa” (Chapman 2003: 237), forms of state repression largely silenced a generation of 'black' writers towards the end of the latter decade. Many subsequently left the country, and were then effectively excluded from a South African readership by the Suppression of Communism Act of 1966 (2003: 243).¹⁵ Those who continued to publish in exile produced work which Coetzee described in 1974 as “a kind of émigré literature written by outcasts for foreigners”, a literature “deprived of its social function and indeed of the locus of its existence in a community of writers and readers” (1992: 344). Those who continued to write from within the country in the seventies, such as James Matthews, Richard Rive and Ahmed Essop, were embattled, if not embittered.

From the 1950s onwards, by contrast, certain 'white' writers – notably Nadine Gordimer, Dan Jacobson and Jack Cope – were establishing formidable reputations as short story writers. Chapman comments caustically that these writers

moved the story away from the colonial adventure yarn and the anecdotal regional tale to a sophisticated art of implication that satisfied taste in magazines abroad like *The New Yorker* and in South African magazines catering for 'literary' readers. ... These are stories favoured in the university tutorial room: they lend themselves to analysis according to a vocabulary of subtlety and nuance. They tend to be stories, however, about silence and loneliness and, at a level perhaps not fully grasped even by the

authors, the stories say something about a denial in white English-speaking South Africans of any popular attachments to a community of voices.

(2003: 237)

Such a “community of voices”, he argues however, *had* surfaced earlier among the *Drum* writers, who had cultivated a mode of storytelling “crowded with the demands of identity-making, survival techniques, and community necessity at the cutting edge of urban experience” (2003: 237).

During the 1970s, despite state efforts to quell deviant voices, the defiant efforts of the editors of a number of literary magazines (many of which were short-lived and subjected to state censorship) ensured that new writers (both ‘black’ and ‘white’, English and Afrikaans) were launched in such forums.¹⁶ And, towards the end of that decade and throughout the eighties, a steady flow of short story collections featuring both established and recent authors appeared. Among these, as Adendorff claims, there are a significant number that might be viewed as variations of the cycle form by virtue either of their conventional focus on a particular location and its community, or a certain generic indeterminacy. To those works that Adendorff herself analyses from the seventies (Bessie Head’s *The Collector of Treasures* [1977] and Ahmed Essop’s *The Hajji and Other Stories* [1978]), might be added Barney Simon’s *Joburg, Sis!* (1974), Sheila Roberts’ *Outside Life’s Feast* (1975), Gordimer’s *No Place Like* (1978), and Mtutuzeli Matshoba’s *Call Me Not a Man* (1979). These were followed, in the eighties, by Mbulelo Mzamane’s *The Children of Soweto* (1982), Richard Rive’s “*Buckingham Palace,*” *District Six* (1986), Denis Hirson’s *The House Next Door to Africa* (1986), Peter Wilhelm’s *Some Place in Africa* (1987), Damon Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings* (1988), and Miriam Tlali’s *Footprints in the Quag: Stories and Dialogues from Soweto* (1989), together with Ndebele’s, Wicomb’s and Vladislavić’s debut collections.¹⁷ The sheer number of works here would seem to justify Adendorff’s sense that, for a variety of reasons (economic, ideological, and aesthetic), a significant number of South African writers were increasingly being drawn to the possibilities offered by a form loosely and somewhat ambivalently positioned on the generic spectrum between the short story and the novel ‘proper’, a form comprising an entanglement of discrete but interrelated stories.

A survey of critical evaluations of these texts clearly demonstrates the insistence on a bifurcation between those by ‘black’ and ‘white’ writers. In a certain sense, given the very real

conflicts, tensions and material disparities between the two groupings, broadly defined, this could not be otherwise, since the literature which emanates from a racially polarised society inevitably reflects its deep schisms. Brink notes, for example, that,

however much one would wish, or try, to discuss in one rubric, or as one whole, all writing in English from both sides of the racial divide, to ignore the divisions imposed by apartheid – divisions of style and focus and narrative approach; often of genre and theme and aesthetic system; invariably, sadly, of audience – would be to distort the image. ... the *fact* of different traditions, audiences, and existential experience cannot be wished away.

(1993: 44-45)

Nevertheless, a closer examination of the two categories that Chapman identifies as “stories of the collective [‘black’] and isolated [‘white’] self” reveals that, though in a general sense this distinction seems apposite, many of these texts explore the complexities of the relations between the individual and the community. In other words, they reveal tensions more intractable than a simple dichotomy between ‘black’ community solidarity and ‘white’ individual estrangement expresses.

2.4.1 “Stories of the collective self”

2.4.1.1 Community/ies Mythologised

In his influential essay “The Tyranny of Place and Aesthetics: The South African Case”, Mphahlele traces the development of ‘black’ South African writing in the twentieth century:

In the first thirty years of this century, the mood of African literature ... tended to move between a sense of loss and nostalgia at the one end, and at the other an assertion of a right to live permanently in the towns, if the white man wanted the black man’s labour. The communal life of the tribe was being eroded, fragmented by the migrant-labour system, family life was being torn to shreds, the best land was being appropriated by the white man. The traditional sense of community which constituted the main scaffolding for the African’s mores was being shaken at the foundation. And when later the African-turned-urbanite realized he had nothing to go back to in the reservations, he decided to stake his claim relevant to a new, albeit forced, commitment – to urban life. ... The African’s literature was born in the rhetoric of a human environment rather than the desolate physical environment of the wilderness.

(1987: 50)

Mphahlele stresses, however, that “black South African literature has not advocated separatism”, since “[t]o do so would have been an endorsement of government policy which relegates Africans to urban and rural ghettos”. He then comments that “segregation reinforced cultural self-reliance. A culture of poverty, yes, but a culture all the same” (1987: 50). Drawing on Mphahlele’s arguments, Van Wyk Smith concurs that increasingly, under apartheid, “a fierce affirmative dialectic of township solidarity, humanity and organicism developed, issuing in an aesthetic of urban values and communal praxis” (1990: 98).

These claims seem to be borne out by the short story collections from the seventies and eighties cited earlier, all of which depict composite communities located in specific urban environments (with the exception of Head’s *The Collector*).¹⁸ Several of these texts implicitly or explicitly chronicle forced relocations from so-called ‘black spots’, or older, more organic and variegated communities, to government-regulated townships: Fordsburg to Lenasia (Essop); District Six to the Cape Flats (Rive); Charterston to Soweto (Ndebele). As Adendorff notes, in such instances there is often a sense of nostalgia and affection underlying the “imaginative recreation of a world that has actually ceased to exist ... a place and a community [are] mythologized” (1985: 74). These reconstructed worlds are memorialised and celebrated as intuitively more vibrant, authentic and heterogeneous than the racially segregated, barren ‘locations’ and group areas to which their former inhabitants have been consigned. In an early review of Essop’s *The Hajji*, for example, Marquard comments that “Fordsburg is not altogether buried and its corpse is brought back to life in these vivid tales” (1979: 60). Patricia Handley similarly describes Rive’s “*Buckingham Palace*” as “a warm and humorous tribute” to District Six, and comments that it is “occasionally nostalgic, and ... presents its main characters as legendary figures of [the district]” (2000: 390).

Essop’s collection, in particular, is imbued with a sense of a distinctive community and the mundane or petty realities that preoccupy its members. For Marquard, *The Hajji* conveys

an optimistic impression of the quality of ordinary, day-to-day community life. Under the most oppressive social and political conditions people maintain an absorbed, absurd and touching interest in their own affairs, they battle with their private demons, spy on their neighbours.

(1979: 60)

This community's collective persona, conveyed in many of the stories via the use of a first-person narrator who is "simply part of the communal 'we'" (Adendorff 1985: 85), centres on familiar places of congregation in Fordsburg in downtown Johannesburg: the mosque, café, court, and political venue. Moreover, the strong Islamic identity of this enclave demonstrates "the specific religious and cultural aspirations of a community that draws its customs and spiritual obligations from the subcontinent and a diasporic culture that is rooted elsewhere" (Smith 2000: 157-158). However, the apparent self-sufficiency and stability of this community are disrupted by encounters with members of other ethnic and racial groups, and by the critical dilemmas posed by the larger political context. Thus, within the Muslim community depicted in Essop's collection, there are those who actively oppose apartheid, others who passively acquiesce, and still others – especially educators – who collaborate with the system. Moreover, individual characters' varying responses to political pressures have a damaging effect on the smaller social unit of the family, producing seemingly irreconcilable rifts. Marquard remarks, for example, that a recurring theme in many of the stories is the "disruption of harmonious family relations in South Africa" (1979: 60). Underlying tensions are not only revealed in conflicts within families, however, but also in the hostility that festers between gangs, individuals, and those touting particular political ideologies. Rowland Smith points out, in this respect, that "Essop's work deals with the conflicting loyalties in and threats to this self-contained community [he] shows how all are contaminated by a system that victimizes one group and discriminates against it [all are] tainted and diminished" (2000: 157). And Marquard similarly comments that Essop "faces up to the brutality and violence in South Africa as a whole, reflected in each of its segregated communities. Enforced segregation is a factor that helps to breed resentment and aggression" (1979: 61).

An important shift in Essop's collection is registered with the forced removal of the Indian inhabitants of Fordsburg to Lenasia, on the outskirts of the city. The theme of relocation/dislocation is highlighted, Marquard notes, by the way in which "The neutral, sombre tone of the stories set in Lenasia contrasts strongly with the highly flavoured ambience of Fordsburg" (1979: 61). Adendorff, too, highlights this shift:

Halfway through the cycle political forces begin to intrude on the action of the stories and to threaten the depicted coherence of community life; ... in the second half of the

cycle, the community persona perceptibly weakens, bringing personal struggles increasingly to the fore.

(1985: 76)

This disintegration of the collective identity and life of the community is particularly evident in the fact that the recurring characters who were a feature of the first half of the collection are no longer in evidence in the second: “one has progressed from stories which show individuals primarily as part of community, to stories in which the individual struggles alone” (Adendorff 1985: 98). Essop ultimately seems to suggest that a shared locale and a common religion and ethnic culture do not necessarily guarantee the survival of a sense of community cohesion after that community has been forcibly evicted from its previous neighbourhood: the intrusion of external interests distorts familiar and customary relationships and curtails individual and collective autonomy.

A similar process of forced removal is traced in Rive’s “*Buckingham Palace*,” *District Six*, which consists of three parts: “Morning”, “Afternoon”, and “Night”. These are set, respectively, in the mid-fifties, before District Six was razed, the late sixties, when evictions began, and the late seventies, after most of the area’s approximately sixty thousand residents had been moved to the Cape Flats. In Rive’s text, the eight characters (including the authorial narrator) are all inhabitants of a row of rundown cottages, ironically nicknamed “Buckingham Palace”, in the district. Their personal idiosyncrasies, humour and warmth, Van Wyk Smith argues, illustrate Rive’s

concern with how a whole, much ravaged but closely knit community endured the demolition of District Six. ... The sharp ear for laconic dialogue and keen eye for tragicomedy ... create in *Buckingham Palace* a rich texture of humanity and incident, as well as a gallery of memorable characters.

(1990: 102)

Though, to some extent, the energy of District Six is idealised or mythologised, Rive also portrays the district’s degradation and volatility, together with the ‘colour snobbery’ and discrimination of its so-called Coloured inhabitants towards the African population in Cape Town. Handley comments, in this regard, that if “*Buckingham Palace*” evokes the “richness and peculiar character [of District Six] as a setting”, it also does not shy away from the “reality of deprivation, violence, and frustration in the slum” (2000: 384). Nevertheless, she claims, “the contrast between the district’s vitality and the soullessness and alienation encountered on the

bleak Cape Flats” (2000: 391) confirms the iconic status of District Six, like Sophiatown or Fordsburg, as an area epitomising the experience of relocation under the Group Areas Act. Thus Essop’s and Rive’s stories, which straddle the first decades of apartheid, chart the individual and communal fragmentation wrought by the systemic violence of a particularly pernicious brand of social engineering, premised on laws that “spatially defined racial and cultural difference” (Adendorff 1985: 75). Their collections provide stark evidence of the ways in which apartheid’s socio-spatial segregationist agenda destroyed more flexible, nuanced and organic notions of community underpinned by voluntary identifications.

2.4.1.2 Black Consciousness Solidarity and Women Writers

[I]t was important for the struggle that we be one thing.

– Miriam Tlali (1989: 79)

In those works that are set in a slightly later time period, the township of Soweto arguably accrues an even greater emblematic significance than District Six and Fordsburg. However, though Soweto, as the locus of the initial student uprisings in 1976, is viewed as an especially potent site – and symbol – of resistance, the Black Consciousness ideology which clearly informs these later works embraces a larger “black collectivity” (Sole 1983: 65) and a sense of common experience which transcends this specific locale. It is perhaps this aspect to which Adendorff is referring when she remarks that “Matshoba’s tales of situations in black township life extend the concept of community beyond considerations of place” (1985: 6). The collections by Matshoba, Mzamane, Ndebele and Tlali, in particular, project a resilient and defiant communal persona encompassing individual characters, stories and voices, and seem to reinforce the notion that comradeship and solidarity are essential components of ‘black’ resistance. Nevertheless, the dehumanisation and brutalisation of apartheid, its corrosive impact on the integrity of individual and collective identities, are implicit in the derogatory connotations of titular phrases such as “*Call Me Not a Man*”, “*Fools and Other Stories*”, “*Footprints in the Quag*” and, later, Achmat Dangor’s “*The Z-[ombie] Town Trilogy*” (emphasis added). Moreover, in addition to being subjected to extrinsic pressures which threaten their cohesion and stability, the communities and individuals depicted are not without their own inner contradictions and conflicts. As Helgesson remarks, in a comment on Ndebele’s collection that is relevant to other similar works:

‘Collective’ and ‘individual’ are central terms here: a vast problematic in *Fools and Other Stories* concerns the tension between the monolithic subalternity forced upon the ‘black’ community (which, ironically, forms the basis of united political resistance against ‘white’ oppression) and the internal differences made evident by Ndebele’s restricted focus on the community itself. Racist logic projects ‘blackness’ as a unified, subordinate category, whereas the actual historical experience of those defined as ‘black’ ... has produced subject-positions marked by a number of fissures and disjunctures.

(2004: 56)

As indicated earlier, Sole had presented much the same argument, though in a more general sense, two decades earlier, when he elaborated a cultural materialist critique of the homogenising impulse of Black Consciousness:

‘Blackness’ must ... be understood as a metaphor for all people in this country discriminated against because of their skin colour. ... Racial identity may have a very real material reality in South Africa as a result of apartheid, but it must be remembered that *cultures have a divisive as well as a collaborative dynamic within them*. The problem with the ‘black experience’ approach is that it downplays the diversity of cultural expression in South Africa today to assert the existence of monolithic “black” and “white” cultures.

(1983: 47-48, emphasis added)

Similarly, in 1979, Gordimer commented that:

It is comparatively easy to create a ‘people’s art’ – that is to say an aesthetic expression of fundamentally-shared experience – during a period when the central experience of all, intellectuals, workers and peasants alike, is oppression: the pass laws are a grim cultural unifier. It is quite another matter when the impact of experience breaks up into differing categories of class-experience.

(1988: 117)

In fact, in his discussion of “Black Consciousness and White Africans”, Chapman himself acknowledges that “if being black is to be more hybridised in perception and humanity than the rhetoric of BC was willing to countenance, being a white African involves more than can be summarised in any uniform identity” (2003: 347).

In addition to the types of class distinctions suggested by Gordimer above, there is also the question of gender, among other significant variables. Gerhard Maré observes, for example, that “Ethnic mobilisation is never gender neutral. ... The constitution of ethnic social identities occurs within the general social relations of society. Hierarchical relationships often accompany

‘tradition’ and the ‘traditional’ roles that are ascribed to men and women within the ethnic project” (qtd in Hunter 1993: 61). Thus if, in a sense, women constitute a “submerged community” (to use Frank O’ Connor’s term) within the larger ‘black’ collective invoked by Black Consciousness, this community is itself by no means homogeneous. Given the relative paucity of works by ‘black’ women writers in the seventies and eighties, Tlali’s *Footprints in the Quag* and Head’s *The Collector of Treasures* are especially interesting for the ways in which they engage with women as individuals and as members of an urban and rural community, respectively.

Eva Hunter suggests that, in *Footprints in the Quag*, the women protagonists “present a variety of subjectivities, differing from each other because of factors that include class, personal preference and age” (1993: 72). Moreover, these women’s individual priorities and loyalties alternately converge with or diverge from those of their male counterparts, their female friends, and the incentives of political resistance. In this respect, Hunter maintains that the care, protection and survival of children are paramount:

Tlali cannot be said to be proposing that loyalty to ‘the people’ or to the community of women should take precedence over loyalty to family; instead, these newer ties have, given both the defection of men and the breakdown of the older support structures, become vital to the survival of the smaller family unit (frequently consisting only of mother and children).

(1993: 67)

Footprints graphically demonstrates these contending affiliations and obligations.

One story in particular, significantly entitled “Metamorphosis”, emphatically promotes the notion of ‘black’ solidarity across gender lines, an allegiance articulated in this instance by a woman and dismissed, initially, by her husband. At the beginning of the story, the husband, Velani, disparagingly recalls the sentiments his wife has earlier expressed:

Mavis had once said that it was important for the struggle that we be one thing ... that injury to the one must be injury to the next. “After all,” they say, “we are all black; we all belong to the soil. Besides, we are all oppressed. An attack on the one must be an attack on all.”

(1989: 79)

By the end of the narrative, however, a series of misfortunes have forced Velani (rather abruptly and fortuitously, given his initial scepticism) to endorse this position himself: “From

now on, I'm with the people" (1989: 92). As is evident in these citations, and in the repetition of Steve Biko's pronouncement, "Black man you're on your own" (1989: 85) and the slogan "Injury to one oppressed is injury to all" (1989: 92), the story is littered with Black Consciousness rallying cries.

Nevertheless, the rather thinly-veiled didacticism of "Metamorphosis" is offset by other stories in the volume which serve to illustrate Laretta Ngcobo's assertion, in her "Introduction" to the first edition, that "[t]he sabre of white apartheid rule cuts divisions even among people of one race" (1989: xvi). In *Footprints* perhaps the most obvious evidence of such "divisions" is to be found in the recurring theme of the ill-treatment of women by men. Hunter, however, points out that Tlali not only exposes various forms of domestic violence perpetrated by men, but also acknowledges the ways in which women themselves may be complicit in perpetuating these cycles of abuse. She thus describes Tlali's stories as focusing on

relationships and situations within the urban black community itself. This shift marks a stage of maturation in her rendering of the politics of identity: her characters are now more than helpless victims of apartheid. ... [She] seems to be calling on Soweto's inhabitants to look into themselves to reform those responses that are destructive.

(1993: 60)

Elsewhere, Hunter claims that Tlali "does not lose sight of the part played by the destruction of black social and cultural forms in the deterioration of relations between the sexes" (2000: 448), more especially the impact of the migrant labour system, urbanisation, widespread poverty, and the humiliation and brutalisation of 'black' men (1993: 64). In her view, what Tlali ultimately advocates is not a return to the old or traditional rural ways of life, but the forging of new gender roles and new relations between men and women in urban contexts (2000: 448).

The virtual absence, in 'black' South African short stories in English, at least, of a tradition of vivid representations of peasant/village life in rural contexts is noted by Ndebele in his essay "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction" (1991: 11, 19) – a view which seems to be borne out by most of the works mentioned here, all of which focus on *civitas* rather than *rus*. Somewhat inexplicably, however, Ndebele overlooks Bessie Head's idiosyncratic and singular achievements in this regard. Rob Nixon, for example, points out that Ndebele "urges a return to rural themes, yet declines to consider a crucial connection between the imaginative construction of urban and rural spaces and gender" (1996: 250). He then suggests that, if what he terms Head's "rural" or "regional transnationalism" was initially

a symptom of her viciously administered life, it was one of her singular achievements to transform that regionalism into a groundbreaking literary vision. Almost all her writings are set in a Botswanan village and accumulatively they convey a powerful sense of the ceaseless border crossings of imperialists, missionaries, refugees, migrant workers, prostitutes, school children, teachers, and armies that score Southern Africa as a region. ... Head saw local history not least as a mechanism for survival.

(1996: 244-246)

In using verbal sources, such as gossip, anecdote, folklore and myth, Head was to compile not only the oral history *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981), but also the short story cycle *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977). MacKenzie notes that the subtitle of the latter “is an early signal that the stories that follow bear, or purport to bear, some relation to a village oral tradition”, and that they were “the upshot of Bessie Head’s research into tribal origins and contemporary village life through the verbal witness of members of the community” (1989: 17). In her avoidance of official, written histories of Southern Africa with their emphasis on racialised and ethnic identities, and her utilisation of the “genre of collective [or popular] memory” (1996: 247), Nixon suggests that Head was drawn to

the idea of a society that secures its identity through flexible continuities of custom and territory rather than through the imposition of ethnic criteria. ... The two books convey her keen enjoyment of the freedom – so rare among South African writers – to engage with social issues that bypass binary forms of racial conflict. One detects in Head an anxiety that racial domination, through its power to compel protest, may continue to preoccupy black forms of self-definition, preventing them from setting more independent imaginative co-ordinates.

(1996: 248-249)

In other words, Head’s fiction avoids the shortcoming that, in the aforementioned essay, Ndebele identifies in protest writing – that of replicating fixed positions and “becoming grounded in the very negation it seeks to transcend” (1991: 23).

Having quoted Head’s own comment, “I decided to record the irrelevant” (1996: 246), Nixon not unsurprisingly points out that her strategy invites comparison with Ndebele’s emphasis on the redemptive force of the ordinary, or what Chapman describes as the telling of “unexceptional tales” (2003: 380). Nixon comments, for example, that:

Head’s most affecting prose arises from her quickness to redeem the irrelevant, the common, the ordinary and, in the etymological sense of “earthly”, the mundane. ...

[Her] animation by the ordinary was partly a reaction against the tremendous violence of South Africa which had fallen, like a dead hand, across her imagination. In fleeing apartheid, she rejected both the imaginative priority of such extraordinary violence and the functionalist imperatives of most South African literature, both of which she rejected as dehumanising. Like Njabulo Ndebele ... if for somewhat different reasons, she broke with the literary tradition of the titanic clash, often staged between characters who are little more than ciphers representing self-evident moral extremes.

(1996: 249-250)

Though Ndebele himself ignores Head's contribution, Nixon claims that *The Collector of Treasures* set a precedent for subsequent fiction on rural women by 'black' women writers, that is, by challenging "many of the conventional silences in South African literature" (1996: 251). Nevertheless, Head's circumstances and choices as a writer in exile in a small village in Botswana differed markedly from those of women in the impoverished Bantustans created by apartheid – as will become evident in my analysis of Sindiwe Magona's "Women at Work" story sequence in Chapter Three.

Interestingly, in his discussion of *The Collector of Treasures*, MacKenzie makes the general claim that short stories are more suited to "the expression of communal experience" than is the novel, largely due to their brevity and therefore their ability to capture "the episodic quality of everyday life" and to focus intensely but severally on a range of individual characters (1989: 26). He then remarks, without identifying it as a short story cycle as such, that:

A collection of stories like *The Collector of Treasures* is also a composite portrait of a total world: it builds up the complete picture by dealing piecemeal with fragments of the whole. Each story can overlap with the next, or imply the presence of the next without a loss of intensity. [Head's collection] works like this. Its focus is constantly shifting, moving from the life of one individual to the next and ultimately rendering a complete portrait. ... Individual experience ... is meant to communicate or exemplify the collective experience of the community. The moral impetus for this is Bessie Head's conviction that the individual is important, but that in an ideal sharing community, the personal is not stressed in opposition to collective experience.

(1989: 26-27)

MacKenzie's comments here resonate with Chapman's observation that narratives of community "grant restorative potential to damaged identities" (2003: 380). Indeed, a number of critics have highlighted the particular pertinence of such a therapeutic project to Head's personal circumstances and development as a writer.¹⁹ Beyond these specifics, however, the recuperative gesture invoked here brings to mind the kinds of claims made about the ways in

which postcolonial cycles – and especially those by women writers – assert the value of community over the individual, the local over the global, and popular memory and orature over ‘grand history’ and all-encompassing narratives of nation.

2.4.2 “Stories of the isolated self”

It is not my country, although I have lived in it.

– Laura Trevelyan (*Voss*; White 1981: 29)

Yes, they have a story to tell. Its setting is in the interstice between power and indifferent or supportive agency. In that interstice, the English speaking South African has conducted the business of his life. Now he was indignant and guilty; now he was thriving. This no-man’s land ensured a fundamental lack of character. With a foreign passport in the back pocket of the trousers, now they belong – now they don’t. When will they tell this story?

– Njabulo Ndebele (qtd in Horrell 2009: 59)

Chapman’s disparaging assessment of short fiction by ‘white’ writers in the fifties and sixties extends to that of subsequent decades. Elevated to a trope, ‘white’ alienation, he argues, is taken to extremes in the eighties – not only in what he describes as the “elite practice” of Gordimer and Peter Wilhelm, but also in the emergent trend of *grens* narratives in Afrikaans, which confront the reader with “forms of the isolated consciousness in a-sociable, often nightmarish landscapes of crisis and collapse” (2003: 379). As indicated earlier, his views were widely shared at the time. ‘White’ writing of the last decade of apartheid was held to foreground notions of unrealised or failed community, and to depict “isolated psyche[s]” (Chapman 2003: 379) or characters whose experience is marked by an increasing sense of anxiety, impotence and marginality. This sense of alienation and dis-placement is explicitly conveyed in titles such as Hirson’s *The House Next Door to Africa*, Wilhelm’s *Some Place in Africa*, Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings* and Vladislavić’s *Missing Persons*. However, it is also evident in the titles of collections from the previous decade, such as Simon’s *Joburg, Sis!*, Roberts’s *Outside Life’s Feast*, and Gordimer’s ironically titled *No Place Like*. Adendorff comments, of Simon’s collection, that “The stories ... are highly individual in style, narration and even theme and create ... a sense of anti-community” (1985: 6), and Van Wyk Smith describes them as “a series of comic monologues that reveal deeply dismayed and imprisoned lives” (1990: 96). By the same token, the latter remarks that both Roberts’s *Outside Life’s Feast* and her later collection, *This Time of Year* (1983), capture “the fragmented aimlessness of white

lower class suburbia” (1990: 96). With reference to several of the collections cited above, Van Wyk Smith concludes that:

Among white writers, the contemporary short story has proven to be a highly effective vehicle for the startling disjunctions and impaired apprehensions generated by collapsing social structures. ... These are, indeed, records of internal exile, revealing the legacy of 1948: impoverished sensibilities living out of touch with a vibrant and fecund world around them.

(1990: 96)

Thus short stories (and novels appearing concurrently) were invariably positioned within what has come to be viewed as an established tradition of ‘white’ South African writing in English which dwells on “[t]he sense of exile experienced by whites in Africa” (Marquard 1978: 36) or what Rowland Smith terms the “theme ... of estrangement” (1976: 117).

An intense self-absorption, and a focus on attenuated social and personal relations in South Africa, are both features that have been particularly remarked upon in Hirson’s, Wilhelm’s and Galgut’s work. In an early review of Hirson’s *The House Next Door to Africa*, Brenda Cooper dismissively characterises it as “in the mould of the painful search-for-identity text, which white English-speaking writers have developed into a genre” (1987: 85). She elaborates further: “the thread of Hirson’s book and the inspiration of its fundamental images, is that old festering sore of estrangement, which has for too long dominated and paralysed white South African writing” (1987: 86). In her estimation, then, the work is “tarnished by the sad, tired, dated and, ultimately, draining paradigm of the angst of the homeless, placeless, white English-speaking, disaffected South African” (1987: 90). Emily Buchanan similarly comments that the stories in Wilhelm’s *Some Place in Africa*

convey less a sense of place than a sense of the writer’s obsession with a place. He writes about failed relationships and rescinded creativity in a landscape of desolation and war, yet doesn’t forge any profound or even reasonable connection between them. The festering decay of nature and the empty, ruined cities are alike impervious to the parallel ruin and decay of the people who inhabit them. This is the white man’s alienation from his beloved Africa at its most agonized.²⁰

(1988: 42)

By contrast, Douglas Reid Skinner suggestively argues that the strained relations and evidence of systemic, psychological and intimate violence in Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings*

are less a function of an alienated 'white' South African consciousness than of a generally fragmented modern sensibility. Initially, he identifies the volume's generic ambivalence:

The book is made up of a novella and four short stories which at first reading might seem unconnected. Yet the reappearance of characters and various threads and linkages, both in images and concerns, point to the felt wholeness of the book: it feels more like a novel in five movements, a central episode with four reverberations.

(1989: 66)

But then he goes on to argue that it is precisely this disjunctive *and* interrelated design that captures what is essentially a ubiquitous feature of contemporary experience:

Why this variable and 'disrupted' view? Because modern life is disrupted. ... What Galgut chooses to emphasize are centres of intensity which tell the story, from the inside, of individuals in a family in a society. The structural irresolution simply reflects the disabled and alienated nature of modern societies. ... [Characters] come close to connecting, but ultimately fail and fall back into their solipsistic, alienated selves.

(1989: 66-67)

Nevertheless, the rifts and tensions within the family depicted in Galgut's text (and the society of which it is a part) are aggravated by circumstances peculiar to South Africa. The "small circle of beings" of the title is what the author himself describes as the "Calvinist institution" of the Afrikaans nuclear family (qtd in Skinner 1989: 65). This institution, as Richard Samin points out, is premised on

the virtues of Christianity, manliness and racial superiority [and on an] ethos handed down from generation to generation by the parents and the Afrikaner community at large, grounded in a strong sense of loyalty and solidarity ... [Yet] clichés, prejudices, half-truths or downright lies [expose the] moral shallowness of this community.

(2000: 20-21)

However, in *Small Circle of Beings*, the close-knit family unit is disintegrating to expose the damaged intimacies that are a product of life in an abnormal society, and "the obvious contradictions, deceits and hypocrisies of [the] community" (Samin 2000: 20). Thus Skinner comments that, through his characters,

[Galgut] creates and explores the disorder and threat beneath the surfaces that house displacement, ignorance and repression. The fractures in their life become irreparable gulfs and the family flies apart. ... In heavily repressed societies, it is [the] 'dark' side [the Unconscious] which becomes the scapegoat [*pharmakos*] – a community destroys

itself or projects the darkness and destroys others. [*Small Circle of Beings*] is about the complexity of relationship and division between inner being and social being, individual and history, self and other. It is written from within, from felt experience, out of an inner history that subtly represents outer history: as the family, so the society. Far from being ‘disengaged’ from its historical time and place, it most emphatically explores the human conditions of that time and place.

(1989: 66-67)

His views here recall Marquard’s similar remarks on the “disruption of harmonious family relations” (1979: 60) in several of the stories in Essop’s *The Hajji*. If the latter charts the fragmentation and dissolution of a particular ethnic, cultural and religious community in an earlier phase of apartheid South Africa, then Galgut’s collection does much the same for another similarly-defined group in a later period. Both, in fact, provide ample evidence for Pereira’s claim, quoted earlier, that under apartheid “what could be seen as the challenging *diversity* of South African society [became] mere fragmentation, whereby communities – and even families – [were] divided and driven apart” (1986: 106).

2.5 Conclusion

From critical responses to cyclical texts produced during the height of apartheid, it might seem that the inescapable conclusion is that, in those works written by ‘black’ writers, community accrues a strategic, political significance as an expression of solidarity, whilst those produced by ‘white’ writers embody disjunction, solipsism, and an agonised sense of atrophied individual and collective identities. The notion that integrated short story collections offer unique representations of the “coherent multiplicity of community” (Wong 1995: 174) is confirmed by works by ‘black’ writers, all of which depict multi-layered, heterogeneous communities attached to specific locales. Another feature of these texts is a link between identity and setting, no matter whether the narratives comprise nostalgic reconstructions of communities and places that no longer exist, represent communities artificially constructed by the ethnic or racial imperatives of apartheid social engineering, or feature rural villages “largely untouched ... by the disjunctions of colonialism and racism” (Van Wyk Smith 1990: 116). However, none of these communities is without internal divisions and tensions, or free of external intrusions and disruptions. If communities, to recall Sole’s comment, are premised on both a “divisive and [a]

collaborative dynamic” (1983: 48), the cyclical format of these works renders this dynamic without compromising either pole of the dialectic.

On the other hand, if ‘black’ writers seem to express a nostalgia for or affirmation – indeed, the political necessity – of community, for ‘white’ writers such group identifications are painfully guilt-inducing, or are interrogated and eroded. This is perhaps most apparent in works which are formally disjunctive in terms of the narratives they contain. Such works frequently express a fundamental dislocation, and expose the damaged psyches and stunted relations that characterise a distorted society.

But this distinction is not as clear-cut as it might seem, and, although a critical commonplace, is ultimately reductive. This is because demarcating these tendencies in racially dichotomous terms elides the ways in which many of the works provide evidence – both formally and thematically – of ‘discontinuity-in-relationship’, divisiveness and collaboration, diversity and entanglement, and represent experiences of dislocation and ‘internal exile’ of various kinds. Self-evidently such experiences were a fundamental and widespread effect of colonialism and, more especially, of apartheid in South Africa. In the most brutally literal way, they were exacerbated for the ‘black’ population. Nevertheless, they also manifested as a general sense of uneasiness and neurosis amongst the ‘white’ population, especially as the illegitimacy and vulnerability of its continuing monopolisation of political and economic power became increasingly more evident. Thus “more and more dictatorial police-state measures” ensured the “extinguishing of civil liberties” for *all* South Africans (SACP 1962: 16). As Michael Ignatieff has more recently claimed, “[w]hat the TRC uncovered was ... a system, a culture, a way of life that was organized around contempt and violence for other human beings. ... Every South African citizen was contaminated by that degradation, that deadness, that offence against the spirit” (2001: 21).

In terms of the short story cycle, those collections which seem primarily to assert community coherence and solidarity (lost, politically imperative, or newfound), premised on a racial, cultural or ethnic identity, do not imply homogeneity – unless they are approached with a ‘holistic’ recuperative procedure in mind which flattens their internal contradictions, tensions, frictions and discontinuities into what is, in the final analysis, a “cultural typification” (Chapman 2003: 380) which elides differences and specificities of the kind *not* delimited by ‘race’. In a sense, this gesture replicates, if unintentionally, the radical polarisation effected by

apartheid. And, conversely, those texts which seem to emphasise isolation and fractured community ironically figure ‘communities’ of sorts – anti-communities and communities comprised of misfits – or signal their absence as desire. (Indeed, as Ingram suggests, the “co-protagonists of certain story cycles may comprise a ‘community’ of “outsiders” or of “solitary searchers for solidarity [1971: 22].) Both possibilities, of course, accord with the ambivalence at the very heart of the short story cycle as a genre. This ambivalence, as was argued in the previous chapter, is in turn refracted in readers’ respective emphases and recuperative gestures (to say nothing, in this context specifically, of their political agendas). Arguably, then, the simultaneously fragmentary and cohesive format of the short story cycle, in its various permutations, proved particularly apposite to representations of the stresses and ruptures produced both within and between individuals, families and communities in the South African context under apartheid – a context in which the assertion of, the search for, or the absence of affiliation were *all* overdetermined and abnormally defined by ‘race’.

Furthermore, the very instability of the concepts ‘community’ and ‘identity’, when teased away from referential realism’s assumption of a correlation, even identity, between signifier and signified, points to the linguistically mediated and constructed reality of fictions of fellowship as much as fictions of isolation – fictions in the sense both of narration and fabrication. In other words, the “representational literalism” (Bethlehem 2006: 6) which generally dominated apartheid writing should not obscure the fact that this writing is ultimately rhetorical and a function of literary convention and practice – no matter how compelling or politically strategic and urgent the stories might be. As Van Wyk Smith comments, “South African writing was perceived in the mid-80s as a largely fictional project locked into what Ndebele calls the representation of spectacle but which could also be called the tyranny of realism, the mimesis of traumatic social conditions” (1993: 82). In this regard, Louise Bethlehem maintains that:

The disavowal of ‘rhetoric’ in the name of ‘urgency’ ... shields English South African literary culture against the inadmissible: the recognition that the referential authority of the sign is contractual rather than immanent, constructed rather than ontologically founded The referent ... is the “text’s fiction of the absence of text, the text’s fiction of its own outside”. ... the rhetoric of urgency in South African literary discourse functions to ward off the spectre that the vaunted mimesis of instrumentalist signification (whether liberal, Marxist or otherwise) might prove to be merely specular – the site of opaque reflexivity rather than of transparent reflection.

(2006: 14)

This is not, however, to detract from the ways in which fictions of identity and community have a particular purchase on lived or felt realities, on experiences of belonging and communality, or separateness and alienation. Thus, the recognition that “People use [places] by constructing who they are, producing a narrative of identity” (Nuttall 2004: 18) as much as they construct “narratives of displacement” (Hall 1990: 223) is in itself a reflexive manoeuvre.

Notes

¹ To the best of my knowledge, this claim was made by Philip Segal, a lecturer at the University of Cape Town, but I have been unable to trace a definite source: I recorded it whilst a student at the university in the seventies.

² Many of their titles also announce their position within an obviously imperialist, masculinist 'sub-genre', as is evident in Drayson's *Tales at the Outspan, or Adventures in the Wild Regions of Southern Africa* (1862), Boyle's *The Savage Life: A Second Series of Camp Notes* (1876), and *On the Borderland* (1884), Ingram's *The Story of a Gold Concession, and Other African Tales and Legends* (1893), Scully's *Kafir Stories* (1895), Bryden's *Tales of South Africa* (1896) and *From Veldt Camp Fires* (1900), and Fitzpatrick's *The Outspan: Tales from South Africa* (1897).

³ It is worth quoting Van Wyk Smith's comments at some length, as they have a self-evident explanatory force in distinguishing between modes of writing in the colonial period in South Africa, but also well beyond:

The *colon* ... is the semi-permanent colonial sojourner who never gives up his metropolitan identity, yearnings, and pretensions; the settler, with varying degrees of success, at least attempts to negotiate a new home in what may be conceived of as either paradise or wilderness, but to which there is no alternative elsewhere.

The *colon* impulse produces the romance, in which the colonial terrain is always an exotic alternative to a "real" existence elsewhere, in the metropole, and never to be taken seriously or in its own right

The settler impulse encourages a literature of realism, in which the wilds have to be confronted as the only world there is, enforcing negotiations on which depend both physical and spiritual survival

(1990: 9)

⁴ Ernest Pereira, however, maintains that Glanville's stories owe more to the trickster literary tradition – and specifically to American practitioners – than they do to the attempt to capture, and realistically depict, a sense of the specifics of the South African context. He comments, for example, that:

Glanville's Abe Pike is in the tradition of Baron Munchausen and other tellers of tall tales, but his immediate predecessors must be sought in the American Mid-West ... neither the style nor the humour could be described as indigenous.

(1986: 110)

Slater's Oom Meihaas is similarly characterised by John Doyle as a "South African Baron Munchausen ... nothing is peculiar to South Africa. This kind of character and this type of story is found in every community in the world" (qtd in MacKenzie 1999: 102 n.2).

⁵ When *The Little Karoo* was first published in 1925 it contained eight stories which Smith had written between 1915 and 1923, five of which had already appeared in magazines. "Desolation" and "The Father" were written in 1927 and 1929 and added, as the penultimate

and final stories, to the 1930 edition (see Driver 1983: 7-10; Adendorff 1985: 66). Bosman himself selected and arranged the twenty-one stories which comprise *Mafeking Road*, having been invited to do so by the CNA, his publishers. According to MacKenzie,

when he collected together the stories, he omitted several that come early in the temporal sequence in which they were originally written, and decided, moreover, to include one 'non-Oom Schalk' story ("Brown Mamba"). These details suggest that he conceived of *Mafeking Road* as a collection of the 'best' of the stories he had published by 1946, rather than as a predetermined sequence written to an earlier 'master plan'.

(2000: 82)

⁶ Ravenscroft records that it was on Arnold Bennett's advice that Smith added contextual detail to the stories. Bennett wrote to Smith, complaining: "You take for granted throughout a complete knowledge on the part of the reader of the conditions of life in the place and time of which you are writing. ... Who is to guess that it is in South Africa, even? Geographically, sociologically, climatically, ethnologically, ought to be explained & set forth" (qtd in Ravenscroft 1983: 44-45).

⁷ With some justification, Smith might be labelled a regionalist writer, given that all of her works focus on a particular region and community. Moreover, Johan Geertsema argues that both *The Little Karoo* and *The Beadle* (1926), share correspondences which extend beyond mere details of setting, and that both "exemplify characteristics of the short story cycle. ... one finds some narrative elements, such as the figures of the miller and Esther Shokolowsky/Sokolowsky, the farm Harmonie and Mijnheer van der Merwe, in both ... which would link the two texts in terms of Smith's larger *oeuvre*" (1999: 177).

⁸ Though Bosman continued to produce Oom Schalk stories throughout his writing career, during the last eighteenth months of his life he published the eighty "conversation pieces" which constitute the "Voorkamer sequence" at weekly intervals in *The Forum* (MacKenzie 2000: 75). MacKenzie presents a strong case for recognising that, like *Mafeking Road*, this sequence should be considered a short story cycle, and then argues persuasively that the Voorkamer stories provide an "implicit commentary on the decline of rural life" (2000: 83).

⁹ MacKenzie indicates that Gibbon "does not attempt to reflect the cadences of the Dutch language as Pauline Smith and Bosman would do later. Whereas both later writers attempt to create the illusion – mainly via syntactical constructions – that Dutch-Afrikaans is being spoken by their characters, Gibbon, having informed the reader about the language medium, is content to revert chiefly to standard English, with the occasional idiomatic expression or Dutch word thrown in for effect" (1999: 82-83). Earlier, MacKenzie remarks that "Like storytellers in a primary oral culture, [the Vrouw Grobelaar] is accomplished in the art of verbal exchange – be it mere banter or a fully-fledged tale. She relies on a conversational turn of phrase and a store of memorable phraseology derived mainly from the Old Testament, itself a rich source of oral lore" (1999: 81). In the latter respect, Gibbon anticipates Smith's later adoption of a similar strategy.

¹⁰ In fact, in most of the stories in *Mafeking Road* the shadowy presence of a frame narrator is implied by variations of the opening lines "Oom Schalk said ...". There is thus an implied

audience (whether singular or plural) within the stories, since Oom Schalk ostensibly addresses his ruminations verbally to a listener or listeners.

¹¹ The notion that the Afrikaner originary myth was created by and largely indebted to English-language secondary sources in the nineteenth century, rather than to firsthand accounts or the nascent self-construction of an Afrikaner identity, at least at this stage of South African history, has been extensively (and controversially) argued by André du Toit and Herman Giliomee. Du Toit comments, for example, that David Livingstone was “the first writer who directly attributed specific notions of divine mission to Afrikaners as a historical explanation of their racial views and prejudices. ... In so doing, he almost singlehandedly reshaped everyone’s perceptions of early Afrikaner history” (1983: 939). Subsequently, he maintains that “Livingstone’s *Missionary Travels* [1858] ... became the single most influential source of stereotypes for early Afrikaner history and thought” (1983: 947). He points out, however, that:

By 1900, the story becomes quite complex. At this point, the historical myth that had been generated in the secondary literature about Afrikaner history caught up with its *ex post facto* appropriation by Afrikaners themselves and its regeneration within neo-Calvinist and nationalist notions. ... As has been the case in other nationalist movements as well, Afrikaner nationalism is less the product of its unique cultural roots than the result of the ideological labors of a modernizing elite seeking to ensure social cohesion in transitional times.

(1983: 951-952)

¹² Certain “morally offensive realities”, such as land dispossession, slavery, exploitative labour practices and segregation, had, of course, already long been entrenched in Dutch and British-ruled colonial South Africa. As Timothy Keegan claims: “the humanitarian vision of a society in which indigenous people were free of oppression was always a pipedream in a colony in which a substantial white population had already established itself as a dominant class, with control over resources of land and dispossessed labour” (1996: 282).

¹³ Paul Scanlon remarks that, “Over the years, as Afrikaans became more closely linked with the language of the oppressor, English came to be seen as the language of protest, adopted by almost all the African writers. ... This adoption of English alone was in sharp contrast to Plaatje and the early African literati, who sought cultural and literary fulfilment through an understanding of both English and vernacular languages” (2000: xvii). Similarly, Chapman comments that: “Against the ethnically-based imperatives of the Afrikaner state, Sophiatown writers chose English as the medium of their challenge in minglings of literary reference, Americanisms and tsotsi-taal, a polyglot gangster slang” (2003: 239).

¹⁴ Helgesson comments that ‘black’ culture in general in South Africa experienced successive waves of disruption from the colonial period onwards:

Firstly, indigenous African culture is negated by the dual, if somewhat divergent, forces of imperialist violence and the civilizing mission. Secondly, when individuals from the subaltern majority begin to occupy the same symbolic spaces as colonial

culture – in particular various forms of written English – they are ignored or ousted from these spaces by the racist state. Thirdly, the individual writers and readers of a specific period are cut off from the writing of preceding periods; and the already frail tradition of writing breaks down into discontinuities.

(2004: 55)

An alternative view is proposed by Michael Gardiner, who maintains, specifically of poetry published in South African literary magazines between 1956 and 1978, that “There are those who give credence to the notion of the ‘silent sixties’. This is a fundamentally inaccurate description” (n.d. 28).

¹⁵ Marquard begins her introduction to *A Century of South African Stories* (1978) by indicating that, as a result of the system of censorship, she has been obliged to “exclude the work of several distinguished writers”, among them Mphahlele himself, Alex la Guma and Lewis Nkosi (11). Other writers who went into voluntary or forced exile include Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Todd Matshikiza, Dennis Brutus, Nat Nakasa, Arthur Nortje, Masizi Kunene and Bessie Head.

¹⁶ Although the focus among the new generation of ‘black’ writers initially seemed to be particularly on poetry, short stories were published in *Contrast/New Contrast*, *The Classic/New Classic*, *The Bloody Horse*, *Bolt*, *Donga-Inspan*, *Heresy*, *IZWI*, *Purple Renoster*, *Upstream*, *Speak* and *Staffrider*.

¹⁷ Though certain of these works are clearly integrated collections of short stories, others have generally been approached as novels. Yet critics register some uncertainty with regard to the latter designation. Chapman, for example, describes Mzamane’s work as a “trilogy of *interlinked stories* (novel is not really the apt term)” (2003: 396, emphasis added). Patricia Handley views Rive’s “*Buckingham Palace*” as a novel in three parts, but comments that it “has been viewed as a series of distinct short pieces” presenting a composite portrait of the community of District Six (2000: 390). And Brenda Cooper describes Hirson’s *The House Next Door to Africa* as a short novel but also “an extended poem” (1987: 85). Galgut’s *Small Circle of Beings* consists of five apparently discrete narratives – a novella and four short stories – which, on an initial reading, seem disconnected but, on closer inspection, reveal both resonances and disjunctions.

¹⁸ This is partly a reflection of the petit-bourgeois socio-economic position of most of the writers involved. Sole comments, for example, that “[m]ost self-conscious black artists in this country belong to this better educated and more privileged class: they are by profession teachers, journalists, clerks, academics, managers, shopkeepers, commercial artists and the like” (1983: 49).

¹⁹ In MacKenzie’s view (shared by Nixon), *The Collector of Treasures* may to some extent be read as an expression of Head’s own sense of affiliation to Serowe (1989: 278), whereas her three earlier novels trace experiences of deracination, alienation and psychological breakdown (1989: 24). Nixon suggests, for example, that Head’s choice of a linked series of stories relating to this particular rural community was part of a remedial project, and that her

“determination to win social acceptance was boosted by her experimentation with a change of genre” (1996: 245). Van Wyk Smith, too, comments on the ways in which the “growth towards new social harmonies” (1990: 116) in some of the stories in *The Collector* – most notably “The Deep River” – diverges significantly from “the personal and social disintegration” evident in *A Question of Power*. The latter, he claims, “explores an insanity that results from and hence also typifies the wider social madness of South African racial prejudice” (1990: 116).

²⁰ Chapman’s, Cooper’s and Buchanan’s comments here suggest that they themselves are immune to or transcend the paradigm they invoke. By implication, and somewhat ironically, they undermine its basic premise – that is, that a sense of alienation is a characteristic, even essential, ‘white’ English response to South Africa/Africa.

Chapter 3: “The Hell of Unhomely Lives”: Joël Matlou’s *Life at Home* and Sindiwe Magona’s “Women at Work”

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3.1 Introduction

[The] emphasis in Black Consciousness on racial rather than class divisions has obfuscated class differentiation in black society. ... the 'black experience' becomes a catch-all phrase by which more privileged sectors of black society can obscure the difference in economic placement and social life between themselves and (for example) factory workers, domestic servants, migrants and others.

– Kelwyn Sole (1983: 50)

Two late-apartheid story sequences which seem to epitomise the communal versus disjunctive poles of the short story cycle spectrum, but which disturb the particularly racialised inflection this opposition has accrued in the South African context, are the linked series of monologues, “Women at Work” in Sindiwe Magona’s *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*, and Joël Matlou’s collection *Life at Home and Other Stories*, both published in 1991. Magona’s composite text is modelled on the notion of individual characters and ‘voices’ together forming a collective articulating a strong sense of ‘black’ solidarity, whereas *Life at Home* presents an excessively self-conscious, alienated individual protagonist who, as quoted earlier, “appears not to know that there is a community of any kind beyond himself” (Morphet 1992: 140). Nevertheless, a significant area of commonality in both works is their focus on working-class experience and the lived realities of some of the most severely exploited in South African society – domestic workers, farm labourers, and miners. Thus Magona’s sequence concerns the similar experiences of a group of ‘black’ live-in ‘maids’ working for ‘white’ employers in an urban suburb, while Medupe, the protagonist and narrator-focaliser in *Life at Home*, is born a “farm-boy” (11), subsequently becomes an odd-job man in the township of Mabopane and, later still, an absconding mineworker. In focusing on the anxieties and difficulties of daily survival, both sequences highlight the profound dislocation and insecurity occasioned by the drift of poverty-stricken migrant labourers from rural to urban or peri-urban areas.¹ In both, too, suffering, slavery and hell are refrains underlining a sense of entrapment and affliction (in Medupe’s case, bordering on mental derangement), despite the characters’ protestations of resilience and minor triumphs over adversity. However, though both “Women at Work” and *Life at Home* predominantly use first-person narration to convey a sense of ‘authentic’ first-hand experience, in the former this is an overtly literary strategy whereas, in the latter, the conflation of protagonist, narrator-focaliser and storyteller/author results in a disconcerting slippage which renders the ontological and literary status of the narration indeterminate. Part of my analysis explores the significance of this disparity, and the impact it has on readers’ responses to these texts.

3.2 “Homeless and Unhinged”: *Life at Home*

Art is powerful precisely because it is not just propaganda or the same as a political pamphlet: it allows elements of sympathy, of play, of estrangement, or irrealism; as well as bringing in social, personal and psychical dimensions.

– Kelwyn Sole (1983: 74)

‘[S]torytelling’ fiction ... broadens the agenda of knowledge by limiting the scope of the ‘knowledge’ produced by intellectuals at a distance from the culture of the wider, non-intellectual population.

– Michael Vaughan (1990: 204)

By turns evaluated as ordinary or extraordinary, naïve or postmodern/magical realist, autobiographically anecdotal or sophisticatedly self-reflexive, an unconventional short story cycle or an unmotivated series of fragments, a subversion of the genre of the *plaasroman* or a series of hybrid narratives which draws on Setswana oral and cultural traditions, *Life at Home* refuses neat categorisation. The critical confusion the collection has elicited speaks volumes about, to borrow Driver’s term, its “uncontainability” (1992: 116) and resistance to recuperation within literary-critical paradigms. In the discussion which follows, I first address the ways in which the text may be – or has been – viewed through such paradigms, and then interrogate the utility of academic appropriations of the text. Ultimately, I suggest that the latter are an imposition on what, quite literally, is a testimony to the unrepresentability of trauma and to an attempt to endure trauma’s belated effects.

3.2.1 *Life at Home* as Anti-*Bildungsroman* or (Fictionalised) Autobiography

One possibility offered by the short story cycle is that the narratives cohere around the growth to consciousness and maturity of a single protagonist, whilst avoiding the continuity and sequentiality associated with the conventional *Bildungsroman* or novel of formation. Certain features of *Life at Home* suggest that it, too, be read as a series forming a ‘coming-of-age’ narrative. For example, in addition to the first-person point of view adopted, for the most part, by the narrator-protagonist – identified interchangeably as Medupe (11, 21, 30, 89, 96) or Joël (Medupe) Matlou (51, 60, 73) ² – the first four stories are linked sequentially by a linear chronology which traces the protagonist’s development from childhood to his early twenties. This trajectory begins with Medupe’s youth as a farm labourer’s child on a ‘white’-owned farm near the Magaliesberg, in the opening story “Farm-boy”, followed by the account, in “Life at Home”, of the Matlou family’s escape from the farm to their new home in the “location” (33) of

Boekenhoutfontein, later renamed Mabopane, North West of Pretoria. “My Lifestyle” then outlines the nine years Medupe spends in Mabopane becoming an enterprising “lifestyle maker” (41) – that is, by taking on menial work outside school hours to earn money. And “Man Against Himself” describes his brief but harrowing and depersonalising experience as a mineworker on a platinum mine near Rustenburg, his desperate flight from the mine, and his return to Mabopane and reunion with his girlfriend, his self-respect and humanity apparently restored. The symmetrical ‘home’ – ‘exile’ – ‘return’ pattern here evokes – only to ironically revoke – the ‘master-of-two-worlds’ topos: the notion that the traveller journeys forth, encounters alien places and people, and returns triumphantly to recount his experiences, having integrated them into his consciousness and expanded his horizons and worldview. However, “Man Against Himself” is followed by two additional stories which problematise this notion and disrupt any sense of achievement and maturation in the sequence as a whole. The first of these, “Carelessman Was a Madman”, though also set in the North West, appears to be about an entirely different character, “Believed to be Mr David Letshwene, about 36” (77), who eats grass, chews his pillow, crawls like an animal and, following a priest’s failed attempt to baptise him, sets fire to his hut and perishes in the Moretele River (86). The second and final story in the collection, “My Ugly Face”, again focuses on Medupe as protagonist, but revisits and radically recasts the account of his formative years presented in the earlier narratives. Homeless and destitute at the end of this story, Medupe has apparently regressed from his mid-teens to infancy, and is being carried on his mother’s back as they both return to a transit camp near the Zimbabwean border. The *Bildung* traced to this point in the collection as a whole is therefore reversed or disrupted.

It is the discontinuities between the earlier set of four stories and the final two that ultimately ensure that *Life at Home* in its entirety does not project the stable, integrated consciousness or teleological sense of accomplishment and self-assurance – the “recognition of one’s identity and role in the world” (Abrams 1999: 193) – that is characteristic of the conventional *Bildungsroman*. In other words, if the traditional *Bildungsroman* traces the confluence of the parallel narratives of “individuation” and of “socialisation” (Helgesson 2004: 82), or of autonomous selfhood and integration into community/society, no such convergence is apparent in Matlou’s text. Indeed, the narratives contained in *Life at Home* “disrupt the unitary subjectivity upon which such a novel would have been premised” (Geertsema 1999: 163).

The fact that the central protagonist of almost all of the stories in *Life at Home* appears to be a fictionalised version of the actual author – an identity reinforced, as indicated above, by the self-referential use of the author’s own name – invites a reading of the volume as predominantly autobiographical in nature. Indeed, the publisher’s commentary on the back cover claims that “most of [the stories] feature a new reincarnation of Matlou himself”. Brink similarly points to the ways in which the collection foregrounds the notion that “personal history is story” (1993: 53), whilst Cornwell comments that it comprises “a series of sketches that read like segments of a hallucinatory autobiography” (2009: 28). However, it is precisely the “hallucinatory”, startling and improbable episodes the collection contains that initially trouble the autobiographical assumption of a clear identity between author and narrator- protagonist, and that seem to place *Life at Home* more in the realm of fictionalised or quasi- autobiography than autobiography proper. These episodes include the description, in the first story, of the occasion on which Medupe, at the age of nine, has a needle hammered into his head by a Moloi (witch) on the night he sleeps over at the farmer’s house, though strangely at the time he “*heard* nothing” (18, emphasis added). Or the description, in the final story, of the night a teenage Medupe, having left the camp near the border and set off for the capital with three companions, is seduced in the bush by a female animal “like an ape” (91). The animal initially kisses him, but then gets “serious with [his] body” (91), while his friends look on impassively. Once again, his response to this succubine episode and to his own arousal is astonishingly deadpan: “It was a surprise to find that the animals in South East want to sleep with human beings” (91). He does later register some unease, however: “I never slept on the road during the night because I knew that female animals would rape me continuously. I didn’t want to father an animal child” (96).

This implausible incident in the final story is followed by a succession of increasingly more bizarre encounters and descriptions. When Medupe and his three companions later enter a town, split into pairs, and Medupe and his partner head for a café, they are surrounded by more than two-hundred curious onlookers, who are fascinated by his ugly face. The narrator comments:

We spoke a funny language, which they couldn’t trace. Each of our feet had three toes, and each of our hands had four fingers. People thought we were animals. We were very different to people. Our hair had grown onto our foreheads and necks. I think we had become animals because I had slept with one. Perhaps my mother was an animal?

(92)

Apart from this metamorphosis into a half-human/half-animal state, which is directly a function of the previous night's transgressive encounter (in which both boys now seem implicated), there has been no mention in the earlier stories that Medupe is in any sense physically unusual (nor, for that matter, that he is the offspring of cross-species procreation). When he and his friend subsequently find a dump and spend the night in an old scrap car, they remain asleep (like the young Medupe in "Farm-boy") even though they "*heard* things biting [their] toes" (94, emphasis added). On waking, however, Medupe discovers that the rats have not only bitten off his friend's toenails, but have also gnawed out his stomach, and two hours later his friend is dead (95). Though he realises that he is alone now and without support – "my right hand was dead" (95) – his main concern is self-preservation and evading the police, whom he knows will hold him responsible for his friend's death. Despite this abject encounter with death and the shock he has experienced, he is unable to weep for his friend, however. The sequence thus reads like a dreamscape experienced with detached matter-of-factness and, though 'normality' has been suspended, nothing that occurs, however strange, seems remarkable to Medupe.

Deciding to retrace his journey and return to the camp where he had previously been living with his mother before she "left [him] alone, with people [he] did not know" (95), Medupe meets a solitary woman on the road, who asks him his name. When he replies, she declares: "My lost son. I am your mother" (96), and puts him on her back like a baby, though Medupe has earlier stated that he is fifteen years' old (89). Then, carried "like a small hitch- hiker" (96), he falls asleep as she continues on her way back to the camp in the South East at the story's conclusion. It is unclear here whether Medupe actually views this woman as his biological mother, or as a generic, nurturing maternal figure who offers him relief and protection from the nightmarish psychic journey which he has been experiencing. Moreover, the final scene reprises or doubles back to the story's opening passage: "Speech is silver, silence is golden. When I came to light and recognized what was happening, I found that my mother was a destitute black woman, adorned in hanging rags, and I was a baby on her back. I took my mother's simple back as a hitch-hiker" (87). This circularity – from infant to fifteen- year-old to infant again – conveys the story's overall temporal dislocation, calls into question the reality of Medupe's journey away from the camp, and suggests a repetition compulsion in which events – real or imaginary – are insistently revisited or re-enacted, since the ending of the story returns to the beginning *ad infinitum*.³ Significantly, too, the circular movement or return to infancy in "My Ugly Face" is paralleled in the volume as a

whole, since both the first and final narratives depict Medupe as a young child attached (emotionally or literally) to his mother. Nevertheless, the account of homelessness and migrancy in the final story directly contradicts that presented in the first three stories in which, as a youngster, Medupe lives with his parents and five siblings on a farm before the family moves to their own home in Mabopane and he starts school. Of the two versions, the latter seems more credible as a straightforward ‘narrative of self’.

Apart from the apparently fanciful or delusional episodes, implausibilities and discrepancies above, further confusion for the reader attempting to piece together the details of Medupe/Joël Matlou’s life story is created by conflicting place names and contradictory details in what are admittedly the more realistic and plausible earlier stories in *Life at Home*. For instance, the farm on which Medupe grows up is called Sterkfontein (12) in the first story, but renamed De Wild (23, 29) in the second. In the former, the local church is run by a man known as Moruti (priest/minister) and his wife, MmaMoruti (20). However, in “Life at Home” the narrator, recalling the Matlou family’s life on the farm, indicates that it was Medupe’s own father who gathered farmworkers and their families together for a Sunday service and was called a Moruti, and Medupe’s mother was known as MmaMoruti (26). Similarly, Medupe’s father is initially described as “an old man” (27) but immediately thereafter as “just 45 years old” (28), and the Matlous are said to occupy a one-roomed house on the farm (12), but later their dwelling is described as having had two rooms (24). All of these disparities cast doubt on the reliability and consistency of the ‘facts’ presented, and problematise the coherence and credibility of the narratives as an unfolding autobiographical account.

There are also perplexing tense vacillations in the stories, such as Medupe’s account, in “Life at Home”, of his family’s arrival at their new home in Boekenhoutfontein: “They came near now to see the birth of their new place. Here they are now. Entering the new place was a lesson for them” (38). And, in “My Lifestyle”, he describes the odd jobs he performed in Mabopane in the past tense, but shifts to the present to convey the panic occasioned by a police raid: “My last promotion was after three months when I was promoted to coal and wood seller. ... Today the residents of Winterveldt are facing a raid. Rumours have spread of a possible police raid to arrest and fine people who have no permits to be in the area. Families are pulling down their shanties and packing their belongings ...” (49). Whereas, on the one hand, these shifts in tense seem out of place and disrupt the internal sequentiality of the narratives, on the other, they signal a sense of

anticipation or urgency: a heightened dramatisation intended for effect. However, as MacKenzie points out, in general “Matlou’s use of the English language is disconcerting. Ubiquitous stylistic inelegancies are juxtaposed with a linguistic playfulness and hard-won wisdom which causes the reader to ponder whether his naïve use of language is deliberate” (1993: 113). The issue MacKenzie raises here about deliberate stylistic choice or ‘naivety’ – or ludic intentionality versus inexperience and a lack of linguistic sophistication and skill – raises the question of the precise implications of one or the other interpretation for a reading of Matlou’s work, an issue to which I return in my discussion of critical responses to *Life at Home*.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of what MacKenzie terms “linguistic playfulness”, and of an improvisationally reflexive and therefore non-realistic dimension to the narratives, occurs in direct references to the title story as source of ‘authority’. In the story “Life at Home”, for example, the narrator asserts that “*Life at Home* says Matlou’s family were ‘swop-shops’” (27), and that “*Life at Home* says Matlou [senior] did not have a reference book, even his wife did not have one” (29). These comments may be read as implicitly revealing the textuality of the narratives, rather than their grounding in mimesis since, as Johan Geertsema notes, “Each of these instances of self-reflexivity draws attention to the constructedness of *Life at Home*” (1999: 185). Further evidence of what could be construed as metafictionality can be found in the fact that the narrator refers to himself, or is referred to by others, as Joël Matlou, since here the ‘author’ is positioned as a character in a story whose existence is ontologically congruent with that of other more obviously fictitious characters – or as entering the narrative as a textual construct. Moreover, a paratextual commentary accompanies the text in the form of twenty-three line drawings or sketches which elucidate or illustrate incidents described in the stories. Though, on one level, these sketches are apparently intended to verify the authenticity of the details conveyed in the text proper, on another, they serve an ancillary or accessory function which detracts from, or competes with, the singular authority of the narratives themselves. They thus highlight the contesting representational claims of visual and verbal modes of signification.

Significantly, in this regard, Sope Maithufi observes that in Matlou’s original drafts of his stories, as opposed to their appearance as finished pieces in *Life at Home*, “the normal boundaries between text and image are up-ended as drawings intrude into the space of the text, accentuate the entanglement out of which Matlou is responding to apartheid, and, furthermore, comment on how he produces his literature” (2010: 30).⁴ In his introduction to *Life at Home*, Mike Kirkwood

similarly highlights the entanglement of the textual and the visual in the draft versions of the stories:

in soft-covered exercise books of the old quarto-sized standard issue, Joël Matlou of Mabopane ... was writing these stories. Whenever he laid down his pen, he would record the time in the margin. The pen, an ordinary retractable blue Bic, is etched in my mind by its unique ordinariness, its terrifying mildness, its acutely serendipitous way of snaring truth and beauty in casual longhand loops. Matlou is not unaware of what his pen can do. In one of the many drawings to be found in his manuscripts, the pen, erect and unassisted, hovers over the last word it has written and questions the emptiness of the unwritten page. (1991: 7)

Maithufi points out that “What obviously and immediately captures Kirkwood’s attention is the materiality of the book and the writing itself” (2010: 29), and explains that, for Matlou, “drawing seems to emerge ... as an extended form of writing”. Having noted that “Writing is ... a modernist form of self-empowerment the material processes of which often become invisible”, he argues that “Matlou makes these phenomena visible and, in doing so, provides a way of reflecting on his own preoccupation as an artist” (2010: 28).⁵ If Matlou’s handwritten and illustrated manuscripts draw attention to the tangibility of the media he employs, this further – though implicitly – compromises notions of representational realism in the published stories themselves, since the latter, presented in a conventional typographical format, do not convey this aspect of his original self-presentation.

The cumulative effect of both the defamiliarising and the reflexive strategies that *are* identifiable in *Life at Home* as a published volume is that the linear and mimetic conventions of ‘narratives of self’ – whether fictional or autobiographical – are subverted. In other words, such strategies cannot be recuperated within the conventionally realist formats of the novel of development or of the autobiography: they not only destabilise the trajectory of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, with its notion of the developing but ultimately stable ego which has integrated into and accommodated itself to society, but also disrupt the plausibility and consistency that at least nominally underpin the autobiographical mode. The impression *Life at Home* leaves on the reader, then, is that it is, in literary terms, a fictionalised autobiography. Nevertheless, the purchase such terms have is problematised by what appears to be the writer’s “struggle[...] to formulate [a] cohesive life narrative[...] out of [an] identit[y] and thinking that have become fragmented and chaotic” (Vickroy 2002: 24). Moreover, the ways in which the text self-

consciously foregrounds its own compositional processes makes its status as ‘fact’ problematic – though its status as fiction is equally open to contestation since, to use Rob Gaylard’s expression, “The boundary between fact and fiction seems at best tenuous” (2009: 51 n.7). Jessica Murray’s discussion of the representation of trauma both in reality and fiction is suggestive here. Having first made the claim that “[t]he intertwined nature of fiction and testimony precludes the unproblematic placement of texts into these categories and the nature of trauma means that texts that testify to traumatic events further challenge such classifications” (2008: 1), she then goes on to point out that certain “features of a traumatic experience ... complicate the articulation of such experiences, for example, the fracturing of time, the flooding of the victim’s cognitive structures, and the impossibility of keeping the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction intact” (2008: 3). Arguably, *Life at Home* demonstrates precisely this dissolution of ontological boundaries – or of realms that are conventionally considered to be incommensurate. Despite this intermingling of the plausibly realistic and the fantastical, however, the way in which Matlou projects himself both textually and visually in his stories also speaks to an urgent desire to communicate his singular experience. This desire is no doubt related to his sense that a magazine such as *Staffrider* opened up a space for marginalised and previously unheard voices, voices addressed primarily to readers in those very communities from which the work derived.⁶

3.2.2 Intimations of Cohesion

In total, as indicated earlier, three of the narratives in *Life at Home* initially appeared as independent stories in *Staffrider* in the late seventies and eighties, though in reverse order to the sequence in which they appear in the collated volume. “Man Against Himself”, the fourth story, was published in 1979; “My Lifestyle”, the third, in 1980; and “Life at Home”, the second, in 1987. To some extent, this publication history may account for certain of the discrepancies among the stories, since they may not originally have been written as interludes in a connected or continuous whole, nor with a larger, coherent design in mind.⁷ However, as Geertsema points out, “Even though the stories which make up *Life at Home* ... may not have been conceived as a cycle, they are nonetheless connected to one another as a result of repetitive strategies which shape individual stories and link them together” (1999: 183). Amongst the “repetitive strategies” or integrative links that Geertsema identifies (1999: 183-185) are the following: the refrain that the

Matlou family's life on the farm is one of "slaves" appears frequently in the first two stories (14-15, 23, 24, 25, 27, 30, 32, 33, 34); the figure of a Moruti recurs in three of the stories (20, 27, 82); the saying "Speech is silver, silence is golden" is repeated twice – in "Life at Home" and "My Ugly Face" (34, 87); the detail that Mr Matlou, Medupe's father, does not smoke or drink is emphasised in the first two stories (14, 25), and is a trait shared by the madman in "Carelessman" (80) and by Medupe himself (75); and animals such as impalas and crocodiles feature in several of the stories. Though Geertsema acknowledges that these might seem "apparently trivial details", he nevertheless maintains that they "stand out in a text that seems random ... [and] serve to connect the stories into a short story cycle. They help make *Life at Home* more than merely a loose collection of stories, yet less than a fully-fledged novel" (1999: 185).

In terms of Ingram's schema, *Life at Home* occupies the middle range of the short story cycle spectrum: it is unified, for the most part, by its focus on a single protagonist, by first-person oral-style narration, and by a distinctive regional setting. As noted earlier, however, there is very little evidence of a community attached to and defined by this region and, as the stories progress, the protagonist seems increasingly uprooted from a stable social milieu. In this regard, Geertsema claims that *Life at Home* "subverts the traditional centripetal, integrative short story cycle (tending as the latter does towards regional cohesiveness and a sense of community)" (1999: 182).

Moreover, if most of the narratives are topographically linked by virtue of being set in the region North West of Pretoria (Magaliesberg, Mabopane, Rustenburg), the detailed descriptions of this setting in the earlier stories are replaced by a less defined sense of place in the later ones.

Likewise, the narrator's earlier careful tracking of time, which includes specifying his age, the year, the day of the week and the hour that certain events transpire, is later supplanted by temporal indeterminacy and asequentiality. MacKenzie remarks, for example, that towards the end of the volume the "spatial and temporal location of events becomes confused: the reader is left utterly disoriented" (1993: 113), and Geertsema similarly comments that "Matlou's stories tend centrifugally to disrupt space and to make diffuse what had seemed a specific, regionally coloured locale The sense of cohesiveness – what Morphet calls a 'coherent identifiable external world' ... – is, as soon as it has been created, disrupted" (1999: 183). Thus, though references to the Moretele River and Hammanskraal in "Carelessman", the penultimate story, situate the narrative in Bophuthatswana, also in the North West, it is unclear whether the area referred to as "the South-East" (89, 90, 91, 95, 96) in the final story is located in Zimbabwe itself – as references to

“reporters and photographers from the *Zimbabwe News*” (92) seem to suggest – or just south of the border between that country and South Africa. It could be argued, too, that details of time and place in both of the latter stories are largely irrelevant, since their protagonists are located on the literal and figurative border between sanity and insanity – outside of a sense of history and rooted, regional community, and inside the turbulence of their psychic upheavals.

However, despite the fact that the continuity established between the first four stories, which focus chronologically on Medupe’s reminiscences of his early childhood, youth and young adulthood, is radically disrupted by the temporal and spatial dislocation of the final two stories, there are some teasing similarities which suggest that the latter *are* loosely connected to the former. For example, “Carelessman” and “My Ugly Face” immediately follow Medupe’s account of the mine episode in “Man Against Himself”, in which he admits: “What I did not know was that I was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. My last night at Hlatini was very long and terrible. It harboured demons, but it also symbolized escape from dangerous falling rocks to the gentle air of Pretoria City. ... I risked my life and reason for [ninety-six rand]” (69). This admission hints that, given their delirious and hallucinatory qualities, the penultimate and concluding stories are thinly veiled accounts of that breakdown.⁸ Indeed, the title “Man Against Himself” itself alludes to a psychic fracture or “damaging split in self-identity” (Hartman 2003: 265). As Geertsema points out: “The man described in the story, instead of emerging out of his ‘initiation’ intact, is deeply split, as suggested by the title of the story. ... the story is concerned with the disruption of the self by an alterity within, an alterity bordering on the experience of madness” (1999: 210). Medupe’s experience on the mine is profoundly traumatic, and if, as Simon Critchley argues, “under the deafening shock or the violence of trauma, the subject becomes an internally divided or split self”, resulting in “a scarred interiority inaccessible to consciousness and reflection” (qtd in Murray 2008: 13), what is presented in the final two stories is “a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche” (Hartman 1995: 537). Though “Carelessman” is ostensibly not about Medupe at all, but about a certain Mr David Letshwene who is not “careless and lazy” but “a ‘madman’” (78), there are details which suggestively link the two protagonists. In addition to the fact, mentioned above, that the madman, like Medupe, does not smoke or drink, he wears a Scotch tie (78); in “Man Against Himself” Medupe describes purchasing just such a tie with the money he has earned on the platinum mine (72). Moreover, the madman is described in terms

which uncannily resemble certain of Medupe's own pronouncements in the other stories. As a resourceful youth in "My Lifestyle", for example, he comments that, at the age of twelve, he was determined to avoid crime and become successful through his own initiative and hard work: "I was really on my marks and ready to shoot my lifestyle" (41). Later, as a gardener for a 'white' family in Pretoria, he reflects on his new experiences: "For myself I was learning for the future" (50). In "Carelessman", the narrator comments that "When [the madman] was among people he was normal and he spoke clearly like any normal person. ... People thought he was mad, but *he was really facing up to his future*. ... He was a gentleman without problems. But his future rested on only one thing: he was mad" (79-80, emphasis added). Subsequently the narrator reiterates that, when the madman is coaxed into church by an old Moruti, he "never gave people any problems. He spoke sense like any other person. ... He was a gentleman among gentleman" (83). Medupe, too, having purchased new clothes with his paltry mine wages in "Man Against Himself", asserts: "I was really a gentleman" (72) and, having returned to Mabopane, he repeats this claim: "I looked like a real gentleman" (75). In "Carelessman", once the madman has returned from the church to his hut, his behaviour becomes increasingly deranged, and his speech fluctuates between incoherence and coherence. Having earlier remarked that the madman's "speech was unintelligible, but at some points he spoke sense. ... The man was not aggressive. He gave people no trouble. He spoke clean English" (78), at this point the narrator comments that he "started talking with his hands ..." (85). This emphasis on unintelligibility and an inability to communicate emerges, too, in "My Ugly Face" when Medupe describes his friend and himself surrounded by curious onlookers at the café: "We spoke a funny language, which they couldn't trace. ... People tried to explain with their hands where we'd come from" (92). Clusters of phrases and descriptions such as these speak to the effort to maintain a semblance of "clean English", 'normalcy' and 'gentlemanly behaviour' in the face of incomprehensibility, mental instability and erratic behaviour, and they trace the increasing ascendancy of paranoid or delusional phantasies in the later stories.

By the same token, though the final story refashions the circumstances of Medupe's early upbringing and appears to diverge entirely from the penultimate story, it contains details which echo those encountered in the earlier stories. For instance, a man carrying a camera appears in "Man Against Himself" (56), and curious spectators with cameras feature both in "Carelessman" and "My Ugly Face". In the former, when, at the height of his delirium, the Carelessman chews up

the pages of his Bible, takes off his shirt and jacket and starts dancing slowly outside his hut before setting it alight, the narrator comments: “People were watching him, some were using their cameras. But the carelesman didn’t care” (85). And, in the latter, Medupe describes how, when he and his friend arrive at the café, “more than two hundred people were surrounding us, blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians. They wanted to see my face. Some had their cameras” (91-92). Though apparently unrelated, both of the latter scenes convey a similar sense of exposure: the abnormality of the characters’ behaviour and physical appearance draws the attention of bystanders. The protagonists become objects of detached curiosity – even amusement, derision or aversion – rather than the recipients of empathetic care, and are reduced to a spectacle for passive consumption. As the narrator comments in “Carelesman”: “Many villagers hung around [the madman’s] place like a dark blanket to see what he would do next” (79), and later he remarks: “People were laughing at the madman, and no one helped him. No one called the police, or the fire-fighters, or even the strongest men from the village. No one helped the lonely man, although they could see that he was mad” (86). Only one old woman expresses compassion: “Ag shame, arme skepsel”, but she is too weak and crippled to help.

Later, when the madman drowns himself, the narrator observes that “[p]eople were screaming and some were laughing when the man swam and moved with the river. The man just disappeared with the water and was never seen again. The grass-eater was buried by Moretele River” (86). This description is prefigured by similar responses to Medupe’s dishevelled state following his escape from the mine: “People looked at me. Some of them were laughing instead of crying blood” (72). And Medupe’s appearance, in “My Ugly Face”, is met with a similar response: “In town people looked at me and laughed because I was ugly and dirty” (91). Though Medupe and his friend are offered a lift by one of the reporters or photographers from the *Zimbabwe News*, they refuse because they are hoping to meet up with their other two friends, and spend the rest of the day wandering around the town, followed by a large crowd of spectators who do not offer them food or shelter. In all three stories, then, the protagonists’ suffering “is excessive and frightening for the other characters, who isolate the protagonists, forcing them to carry what should be a collective burden” (Vickroy 2002: 40).

Perhaps the most significant link between “My Ugly Face” and an earlier story, however, concerns Medupe’s reunion with his mother at the end of the final story, since the sketch which illustrates this episode not only depicts him as a tiny baby, but also shows him swaddled in a

fringed blanket or an animal-skin wrap on her back, a detail which is not mentioned in the narrative itself. In the opening story, “Farm-boy”, Medupe introduces the symbolic significance of the *thari*: “When I was a little boy my mother would hold me on her back in a goatskin, which is known as ‘thari’ in Setswana. The thari was black. Even today at our home in Mabopane my black thari is still in the cupboard to remind me of when I was a child” (16). Though described here in affectionate terms as representing security, the maternal bond, and continuity with the past, the *thari* at the end of “My Ugly Face” is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, it signifies a refuge or homecoming and the wish-fulfilment of a return to a nurturing mother-figure. Maithufi, for example, suggests that

Matlou’s return to his mother’s back at the end of this story and the collection ... is symbolically a return to the world of innocence and pre-puberty ... [and] a symbolic means of redressing the violence committed against his family and his people. ... [If] the extended family structure is grounded in the belief that all mothers are mothers to everybody. ... it is this sense of motherhood that pulls him back from the brink of amnesia and its attendant dangers of falling into different worlds.

(2010: 49-50)

On the other hand, Medupe’s rendezvous with his mother and return to infancy is also a form of regression in the face of suffering, and Maithufi directly links the latter to Medupe’s mine experience and the amnesia caused by the “trauma of exploitation and the mine ‘injection’ that ‘makes you forget about your parents, relatives and friends ... makes you think only about work underground’” (2010: 46). He explains that, in Setswana/North Sotho culture, there is a concept which expresses the lack of conscious memory and discomposure brought about by the alienation of minework:

In order to deal with the angst that ... vexes the male migrant, the Setswana and North Sotho narrative template of ‘*sauwe*’ or ‘*sabubi*’ is often told to euphemise the predicament of amnesia. ... [it] designates acute forgetfulness/loss of one’s home and it is sometimes spoken of as a temporary sojourn with the ancestors. This sojourn tends to be experienced by those who act in many ways contrary to the social norms Portrayed as a journey through darkness, the experience manifests itself as the protagonist having no access to a semblance of himself and his people, nor way into the language of his own society. He thus roams in a bewildering wilderness.

(2010: 47-48)

To capture this sense of alterity or self-loss – of literally being ‘other’ to oneself – and of liminality, “My Ugly Face” is “located at the juncture of various worlds so that the protagonist is always in danger of being sucked across a boundary into another realm” (2010: 47). It is set on the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe and “traverses different time zones”; Medupe, at fifteen, is at “a liminal age” between youth and adulthood; he “finds himself at the boundary of the animal/human world” in terms of his encounter with the ape- like creature and his subsequent physical mutation; and he has “to negotiate the frontier between the world of the living and the dead” (2010: 47) in relation to his friend’s death and, perhaps, the inexplicable disappearance of his mother. The acute disorientation that Medupe experiences is mirrored by “a world in which he has completely lost his bearings: he and his friends ‘did not know where [they] were from’, they spoke ‘a funny language which [people] couldn’t trace’; they had three toes, four fingers and had come to resemble animals” (2010: 48).

The dissociative episodes of “My Ugly Face” may thus be read as symptomatic of the psychological crisis and identity shock induced by Medupe’s experience on the mine and intimated in his reference to “a complete mental breakdown” (69): following this trauma, the umbilical link, suggested by the *thari*, to a previously more stable identity within the framework of the family is ruptured. Moreover, though at the end of the story Medupe and his mother are ostensibly heading back to the ‘home’ they left behind, this ‘home’ is in reality a transit camp – a ‘non-place’ – near the border: they will, essentially, remain dis-placed, homeless and outside of community. As Medupe expressively puts it in an earlier description of the camp: “I couldn’t understand *what the name of the place was* and *why we weren’t living with people*. Even my mother did not want to tell me the truth. That lonely place made me feel alive and burning all the time” (88-89, emphasis added).

That the “terror of apartheid” (Maithufi 2010: 1) and the struggle to survive, let alone find a ‘home’ (a “place with a name”) and a ‘community’ (“people”), are overriding themes in *Life at Home* is emphasised through a number of recurring motif clusters in the stories – most prominently escape, slavery and suffering. The motif of escape or of convicts or resisters on the run from the authorities is associated with a sense of fear and danger which is heightened by encounters with animals and birds in the bush away from human settlements. The first instance of this motif occurs in “Life at Home”, when the Matlou family escape from the farm to travel to their new house at Boekenhoutfontein: “The day of the escaped convicts opened and the truck

arrived. They broke into the jail and the daring escape was made. Now bandits are on the run. Detectives are watching on TV2. But Matlou's family is never seen again" (35).⁹ On their journey, the family witnesses two large crocodiles attack impalas at a watering-hole and drag them beneath the water's surface. At this sight the family fears "that it would be their turn next to be attacked" (37), a fear which turns to panic when the driver of the truck they are in cannot re-ignite the engine, followed by relief when he eventually does and the incident can be recalled and embellished as they proceed unscathed. Similarly, in "Man Against Himself", when Medupe attempts to catch a train at Wolhuterskop station to start work on the mine, he comments: "I was tired and felt like a convict on the run" (56), and when he subsequently flees the mine, he remarks: "I went out of the main gates at Hlatini to escape to Northam station. ... I felt like a political asylum-seeker, running to Tanzania. ... I ran like hell" (70). For Medupe, then, the mine is a prison or repressive regime – as an old school friend he encounters there, Joseph Masilo, confirms: "This place is a jail. ... No girls around here and you must have respect for yourself until your sentence is finished" (61). Heading for Rustenburg, following his escape from the mine, Medupe encounters a "half- eaten impala" in a ditch, a menacing reminder of the attack witnessed in the earlier story, and the acute anxiety he feels is aggravated by an intense awareness of the natural sounds around him: "Birds were singing, animals roaring" (70).

A similar anxiety is reflected in "My Ugly Face" when Medupe describes how he and his three friends encounter "different animals, like apes, hares, jackals and big birds singing" on the road after they leave the tented camp, and explains that "at night we heard things moving and chasing each other. We became frightened and we even tried to run away. ... the South East is full of animals at night" (90). The potential threat posed by these animals is, of course, realised in Medupe's subsequent rape by an animal resembling an ape. In addition, rats are responsible for killing his friend, who is described at this point as a doomed fugitive or escapee: "[he] fell slowly onto the floor, *like a wanted man* who had been shot by police, or a cowboy in a film" (94-95, emphasis added). The natural world thus seems to collude with the human one and, though escape from human bondage brings some relief, this is ephemeral or illusory: there are further terrors to confront in the bush away from human society which only serve to accentuate Medupe's unhinged state of mind.

The previously mentioned refrain of a life of slavery is coupled with references to suffering, hardship and disillusionment, references which intensify and become especially

prominent in “Man Against Himself”. In “Life at Home”, for example, Medupe reflects on life on the farm, and comments that “in fact, [the farmer’s] people were slaves and suffering” (24), that his father was “a living slave” (33), and that the farm itself was “a camp of slaves” (34). Under these circumstances, “For Matlou and his family it was a hard work to unsucces” (25). However, even after the family has relocated to hopefully improved circumstances in Boekenhoutfontein, Medupe feels that “Life at home was really like at hell” (40). In “My Lifestyle”, his determination to find honest work is expressed in his assertion: “My life was dear to me” (48), and his optimism at this stage is captured in the conclusion he draws from a succession of increasingly better-paid jobs and his sense of upward mobility: “Where there is suffering, there is progress, of course” (49). Nevertheless, at the end of the story, his pigeons and chickens have been stolen, his fowl-run burned down, and he is “left with only ashes for [his] hard-earned money” (52).

This heralds a turn for the worse in Medupe’s fortunes: in “Man Against Himself”, at the age of twenty-three, it appears that he is unemployed, homeless and displaced, as is suggested in his comment “I was alone, struggling to get money, and far away from home where no one lives or grows” (53).¹⁰ Though he is advised by a Mr Dlongolo to become a miner, he does not anticipate the effect this kind of work will have on his psychic well-being: his comment “I could never have imagined what was going to happen *after* my struggles” (58, emphasis added) prefigures his subsequent mental breakdown. As Medupe’s sense of disquiet deepens following his induction into mine procedures, he believes that he and his co-workers “were going to buy [their] lives with blasted rocks” (59) and, having received an injection in preparation for going underground, he describes feeling that he was “fighting for [his] dear beautiful life” (60). Joseph, his friend, explains that he and all the other mineworkers are there because they are desperate: “Suffering brought me All the people here have troubles” (61). But for Medupe himself the first experience of shift-duty is utterly devastating and demoralising – “Life was so bad; for me life was a little piece of stone” (67) – and he views his pay after twenty-five days of work as insignificant in relation to the mortal peril he has experienced: “The money was ninety-six rand. It was for my own work. I risked my life and reason for it” (69). Later, though, he regains some self-respect by purchasing new clothes with his wages – “I decided to buy my pride with my suffering” (72) – and he subsequently reflects: “Suffering taught me many things. Suffering takes a man from known places to unknown places. Without suffering you are not a man. You will never suffer for the second time because you have learned to suffer. ... If suffering means

happiness I am happy” (72- 73).¹¹ The stoicism he expresses here about his sense that initiation into manhood is synonymous with suffering, and that the latter constitutes the limits of his expectations of happiness is, however, undermined by the derangement and disassociation of the next two stories, which implicitly suggest that it is possible to “suffer for the second time”, and again confirm that ‘escape’ only provides temporary respite before the greater suffering to follow.

In addition to the recurring motifs which traverse the stories and intimate cohesive links between them, the oral-style narration of *Life at Home* contributes to a sense that the quality of ‘voice’ is consistent throughout. In this regard, a number of critics have pointed out that a distinctive feature of all of the stories in *Life at Home* is their air of oral and anecdotal directness, punctuated by digressions in the form of homespun homilies – such as the ‘lecture’ Medupe delivers, in “My Lifestyle”, on the youth’s lack of respect for their parents and the perils of teenage pregnancy (45). Medupe’s ruminations are also littered with aphorisms which are intended to abstract a general ‘truth’ from his experiences. Kirkwood first drew attention to the oral storytelling quality in Matlou’s narratives in his introduction to the volume:

The storytelling skills which Matlou began to learn at the communal fireside ... are evident enough in his work. ... He brings the reader into the storytelling audience by asking questions and making startling, confidential admissions.

(1991: 9-10)

In particular, the narrator’s use of axiomatic expressions – such as “Where there is suffering, there is progress, of course” (49), “The life of a man is heavy in his bones and his future is a deep unknown grave” (53), “If the Lord gives you a burden, he will also provide help to carry it” (58), “Today is a new life” (75), and “every day is a time for a wise man” (76) – contributes to the sense that, though the narratives are deeply and personally introspective, they are also intended to convey a didactic or exemplary message, and are addressed to a communal ‘audience’.

MacKenzie comments, for example, that Matlou’s use of such maxims points to “an important dimension in [his] stories: their continuity with a rich oral tradition of storytelling ... in which the main narrative is frequently interrupted to allow for digression, while an oral mode of delivery sometimes obtrudes” (1993: 113), whilst Ndebele claims that this aspect of Matlou’s writing style demonstrates the “attempt to apply tradition and custom to manage ... day to day family problems” (1991: 53). Nevertheless, there is an ironic tension between the community experience intimated by the oral-style form of address and the narrator’s actual alienation from a community.

In certain respects, then, Matlou's writing evinces many of the characteristics Michael Vaughan identifies in Mtutuzeli Matshoba's stories in *Call Me Not a Man*. With reference to Benjamin's argument in "The Storyteller", Vaughan points out that "There is a contradiction between producing for a [reading] *public*, and assuming a relation of participatory immediacy with a *community* (that is, adopting the role of storyteller)" (1981: 45), but goes on to argue that Matshoba's stories appear to undermine the distinction between literariness and orality, and between writer and storyteller. Chapman also notes that "Matshoba's narrator ... is not really distinguishable from Matshoba himself" (Chapman 2003: 373) – a conflation of author and narrator-protagonist which Vaughan neatly encapsulates in the epithet "protagonist- Matshoba" (1981: 45). Vaughan enumerates those aspects of the latter's stories that provide a semblance of oral delivery or address:

Each story has an *exemplary* quality: it treats the situation that is its subject-matter as a model situation, from which a lesson can be derived.

The illusion-creating fictional narrative is shallow, and not allowed to develop the semblance of autonomy. It is constantly punctuated by a non-fictional narrative voice, a voice of social and historical analysis, of practical advice, of counsel. ... Matshoba adopts the narrative role of the friend, the sharer of experience. In formal terms, the space between fiction and actuality is abbreviated.

(1981: 45)

All of the above seem equally applicable to Matlou. Indeed, it could be argued that, like Matshoba and many of the other contributors to *Staffrider* who were producing a blend of fiction, fact, and oral (hi)stories, Matlou wrote in the mode of what L. Innes and C. Rooney term "inscribed vocalization" or "spoken writing" (qtd in Daymond 2002: 333) and produced stories which are "an interpenetration of individually written short fictional and oral storytelling modes, inhabiting a generic space somewhere between the two" (Sole 2001: 104).

Moreover, in Matlou's stories there are frequent expressions and passages in the vernacular, not all of which are translated and, as Maithufi convincingly demonstrates, Matlou employs "*back-texts*" of Northern Sotho and Setswana idiomatic expressions and cultural lore as a source for his English transliterations. Maithufi points out that

One feature of Matlou's style is the presence of apparently direct translation from Setswana. In part motivated by a poor command of the English language, this technique is

also indicative of his attempt to mobilise a sense of time and space that apartheid denies black people, and that standard English cannot in the same way prioritise.

(2010: 42)

In similar vein to Ndebele, then, he argues that Matlou's use of oral tradition enables him "to open up a gap, on the one hand, between the crushing realism of everyday life for the marginalised under apartheid and, on the other, the various ways of trying to make sense of, and intellectually conquer, even if briefly, the meaninglessness and oblivion demanded by mass oppression" (2010: 51). Nevertheless, it is significant that, in the last two stories in *Life at Home*, the aphoristic and didactic turn of the earlier stories disappears almost entirely, apart from the statement "Speech is silver, silence is golden" (87). In other words, in these stories "meaninglessness and oblivion" seem to dominate and, even if the cultural template of *sauwe* or *sabubi* is cross-referenced, the experience these terms denote is one of amnesia and self-loss.

If the verbal echoes and repeated phrases which permeate Matlou's collection, and the consistency of the narratorial 'voice' (despite differences in narrative point of view), suggest tentative links between the stories, the obvious dissimilarities and radical rupture between the first four and the final two stories gesture towards an experience or series of experiences unrepresentable in conventional terms of cause-and-effect – or, in Geoffrey Hartman's expression, "cause and affect, an affect that has enduring, if chronic, psychic resonance" (2003: 261). Hartman maintains that trauma is a "psychic wounding ... a determining but deeply occluded experience" (2003: 257), and Roger Luckhurst similarly argues that it is "something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by the usual mental processes" (2006: 499). Read from this perspective, the break between the fourth and the last two stories in *Life at Home* implies the absence or lacuna of the trauma itself, which has 'fallen through' the net of conscious experience, and suspended notions of a coherent self; in Luckhurst's terms, trauma "falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or ghost" (2006: 499). Moreover, if trauma produces "a distorted and disjunctive sense of time" (Vickroy 2002: 33), the ways in which causality, temporal sequentiality and narrative cohesion break down towards the end of *Life at Home* may be read as symptomatic of this disruption. In other words, Matlou is not describing, indeed cannot describe, the trauma which resulted from his mine experience referentially, but only obliquely through distortion, fragmentation, disassociation, ellipsis and the phantasmagoric. Though MacKenzie comments that

Life at Home is “a puzzling, rich and somewhat paradoxical *miscellany* of autobiographical reminiscences and narrative *fragments*” (1993: 113, emphasis added), the volume does evince a tension between cohesion and disjunction which suggests that it displays certain of the qualities of the short story cycle form. However, it is a particularly recalcitrant and perplexing one which is arguably motivated less by generic considerations than by something both more elusive *and* more obvious – that is, “the tragic *psychic* consequences of recent history in countries such as [South Africa] ... in all their monstrous intractability” (Long-Innes 1998: 182). It is the collection’s resistance to conventional literary appropriation and the contradictory history of the reception of Matlou’s stories that I wish next to explore.

3.2.3 Matlou’s Reception: The Spectacular Ordinariness of Suffering, Trauma and Endurance

[T]he social and the psychological merge in traumatic experience.

– Laurie Vickroy (2002: 20)

In 1984, nine years after “Man Against Himself” had originally appeared in *Staffrider*, Ndebele claimed in his essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary”, first published in the same magazine, that Matlou’s story exemplified “a sense of the ordinary that is the very antithesis of spectacle”. Two other stories which had also appeared in *Staffrider* – Michael Siluma’s “The Conversion” and Bheki Maseko’s “Mamlambo” – Ndebele welcomed in similar terms, claiming that “These three stories remind us that the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest because they constitute the *very content* of the struggle, for the struggle involves people not abstractions” (1991: 55). Nevertheless, he added the significant qualification that, in Matlou’s case, this “sense of the ordinary ... may be frustrating and even exasperating” (1991: 50-51). Describing “Man Against Himself” as “a kind of initiation story”, Ndebele commented that “The problem we have to deal with in this story is how a man who has undergone such brazen and humiliating exploitation should emerge from the entire experience feeling triumphant” (1991: 51). Though he credited Matlou’s narrator-protagonist with the ability to engage in “deeply philosophical contemplation” and to arrive at “certain fundamental lessons” (1991: 51), he also pointed out that these ruminations were of an apparently apolitical nature:

The school of criticism which favours explicit political themes will be exasperated by the seeming lack of direct political consciousness on the part of Matlou’s character. But we

must contend with the fact that even under the most oppressive of conditions, people are always trying to maintain a semblance of normal social order. ... the significance of the story is that the writer has given us an honest rendering of the subjective experience of his character.¹²

(1991: 53)

For Ndebele, then, the strength of Matlou's story lay primarily in its candour, its focus on interiority and lived reality, and the resilience of its protagonist. In other words, it epitomised his notion that "The very resources of living should constitute the material essence of the search for personal and social meaning" (1991: 159). Whilst later commending Ndebele's "trenchant analysis of why black South African writing could not for ever remain locked in protest realism", Van Wyk Smith remarked disparagingly that Ndebele was unable to suggest an alternative other than "a variety of heroic or triumphalist realism illustrated by three stories which are frankly naïve" (1993: 83). It is somewhat ironic, then, that when *Life at Home* appeared over a decade after the original publication of "Man Against Himself", the collection as a whole was viewed as diverging radically from the 'ordinary', and as an innovative and reflexive blend of reality and the fantastic or mythical.¹³ Brink, for example, pointed out that, in the stories, "'ordinary' experiences like living on a farm, or working on the mines, or courting a girl, [have been translated] into an extraordinary vision of hell" (1993: 26). With more specific reference to Ndebele's pronouncements, Driver maintained that *Life at Home* "opens up a mythic space ... quite unfamiliar and *uncontainable* by South African literature as it is currently known. ... Matlou has written the 'ordinary' in a way which extends, rather than conforms to, the critic's decree" (1992: 116-117). As indicated in my Introduction, Morphet similarly claimed that the stories transcend Ndebele's "own boundaries" (1992: 139) and are "the first ... from a black writer which, *wittingly or unwittingly*, employ a profoundly reflexive authorial strategy" (1992: 140, emphasis added). He then declared the author himself a "post modern 'fabulist'" (1992: 140).

The nature of these critical differences of opinion depends, to some extent, on the supposedly self-evident but ultimately problematic binary installed between the ordinary and the spectacular (including the question of the interchangeability of the two terms when the 'normal'/'ordinary'/personal is 'abnormal'/'spectacular'/political, and vice versa).¹⁴ Writing in 1998, Sole, for example, remarked that "the hegemony current in the South African literary academy can most obviously be seen in the manner in which Sachs' and Ndebele's interventions in debates over the last decade are constantly reiterated – rather than discussed – as sources of

legitimation and authority” (258). He added that “the concept of the ‘ordinary/everyday’ ... is surely useful only if it is problematized” (262). Chapman, too, has more recently argued that the terms ‘ordinary’ and ‘spectacular’ should be utilised as “categories for debate rather than as self-evident definitions” (2003: 375). Moreover, Ndebele’s generalisation that ‘black’ writing was uniformly fixated on the spectacular in its adoption of the mode of “protest realism” is contestable. Taking issue with Ndebele’s use of “‘protest’ as a generic term to refer to black writing” (2009: 47) and his assertion that “The history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle” (1991: 37), Rob Gaylard, for example, maintains that:

[The latter] sweeping statement is symptomatic of a tendency to overlook individuality and difference and to homogenise a body of quite varied and disparate writing. ... It is, surely, simplistic to view all (or almost all) black writing as a species of protest writing, or as caught up in the conventions of the “spectacular”, or as promoting an “unhistorical image” of a “passive people”

(2009: 45)

Gaylard provides persuasive evidence that even “Ndebele’s [own] use of these key terms (protest, spectacular) is in fact inconsistent and sometimes confusing” (2009: 48). Thus, the central problem that he identifies is the unquestioned assumption that ‘black’ writing under apartheid and over many decades invariably expresses a sameness in ‘black’ experience, is flattened out to a habitual focus on the surface realities of oppression, and subscribes unconditionally to “the standard metanarrative of a people’s struggle for liberation” (2009: 41). By contrast, he endorses Martin Trump’s view that ‘black’ South African writing is “as much about assertion and affirmation as it is a record of hardship” or “a largely descriptive documentation of suffering” (qtd in Gaylard 2009: 51).

However, assessments of Matlou’s writing, in particular, crucially hinge on the issue of whether “Man Against Himself”, as an independent story, or *Life at Home*, as an entire collection, is under consideration. For example, on the basis of “Man Against Himself” alone, Ndebele viewed Matlou’s writing as idiosyncratic and apolitical in comparison with that of the “writer[s] of indictment” (1991: 24) and the spectacular that he was critiquing. Chapman, by contrast, maintains that *Life at Home* in its entirety *does* in fact present

a version of spectacle in its quality of naïve (magical?) realism as we follow the teller through mixtures of precise observation and quirky recollections from his rural beginnings to the mines and, his humanity intact, back to a freer awareness of what it is to be alive, well and undefeated in adverse circumstances: “everyday is a time for a wise man”. The celebration centres on small victories rather than on the certainty of new political dispensations.¹⁵

(2003: 375-376)

Nevertheless, Chapman’s focus on the narrator’s resilience echoes Ndebele’s sentiments, and his reference to “small victories” rehearses Kirkwood’s observation that the above aphorism, which appears at the end of “Man Against Himself”, is “the central proposition in Matlou’s view of the world, which is adapted to the celebration of small, unlooked-for victories rather than the Victory which is certain” (1991: 8). This view would also seem to be endorsed by the narrator’s preceding claim: “I know now that I can live one day at a time” (76). Indeed, many of the other maxims which appear in the earlier stories in *Life at Home* convey a sense of Medupe’s optimism – an optimism tenuously maintained, but maintained nonetheless, against a backdrop of overwhelming adversity. And, as Kirkwood remarks, Medupe’s insistence, in “Farm-boy”, on the life-giving connotations of his Setswana name (derived from the expression “*pula ya medupe*”, meaning “rain falling continuously day and night”) is evidence of “the principle of hope” (1991: 8) and regeneration. The narrator explains, for example, “I was named Medupe because I was born during a slow-falling rain. I was well known all over the farms because of my simple name. I was the roots of the family” (11-12), and he asserts proudly: “My name of Medupe never died” (21).

Later, in “Man Against Himself”, in what is perhaps the most lyrical passage in the collection, Medupe comments on the fact that his girlfriend is also named after rain, and that this confers a sense of serendipity and symmetry on their relationship:

When I saw the beautiful girls on the train I thought of my own beautiful sweetheart, my bird of Africa, sea water, razor: green-coloured eyes like a snake, high wooden shoes like a cripple; with soft and beautiful skin, smelling of powder under her armpits like a small child, with black boots for winter like a soldier, and a beautiful figure like she does not eat, sleep, speak or become hungry. And she looks like an artificial girl or electric girl. But she was born of parents, as I was. She is Miss Johanna Mapula Modise of Mabopane who was born on a rainy day. As I am Mr Joël Medupe Matlou of Mabopane and I was also born during a rainy day. Mapula and Medupe is our gift from God. So, we accepted these names by living together.

(73)

However, the sense that Medupe's return to Mabopane and reunion with Mapula provides a felicitous conclusion to his ordeal on the mine is premature, since "Man Against Himself" is not followed by an account of Medupe in happier circumstances after his return – as the narrative trajectory to this point would seem to suggest would be the case.¹⁶ On the contrary, the hard-won wisdom and philosophy of endurance and self-reliance that he expresses in his reflections at the end of this story are abruptly offset by the disorientation and increasingly dislocated and dreamlike sequences of the final two stories, in which "the fantastic and the commonplace combine to offer a devastating portrayal of deprivation and oppression" (MacKenzie 1993: 113). As Geertsema points out,

Whether one considers "Man Against Himself" in isolation (as Ndebele was forced to) or in the context of the collection, the apparently "triumphant" note on which the story ends has a false note to it. The ending of the story is not really an escape from the hallucination resulting from suffering. The suffering Medupe experiences on the mine is merely a prelude to insanity and hallucination, and if the ending of the story is triumphant at all, then this is an interlude between the suffering and hallucination of this story and that of the final two. In view of this deep-seated rootlessness, Ndebele's celebration of "Man Against Himself" as an exemplification of the ordinary becomes questionable.

(1999: 210)

Thus, toward the end, *Life at Home* evinces a disorientation bordering on psychosis both in its central protagonist and in some of the shadowy half-human, half-animal characters he encounters or describes – hardly a 'community', as Morphet claims. Arguably, then, the volume illustrates the kinds of damaged identities and "psychic disintegration" to which Chesca Long-Innes refers in her psychoanalytical analysis of the representations of another deeply traumatised society in the work of the Mozambican author Mia Couto (1998: 165).

Though Couto, like Matlou, has been termed a magical realist writer, Long-Innes maintains that "we can best make sense of Couto's use of the fantastic if we think of it not so much as a product of any 'magical realist' poetics, but as 'naturalised', or motivated as a function of the collective neurosis of a society traumatized by its continuing history of poverty and extreme violence" (1998: 159). Borrowing Franco Moretti's emphasis on the original Spanish understanding of the term "[*lo*] *real maravilloso* – Not magical *realism* ... but marvelous *reality*. Not a poetics – a state of affairs" (1998: 171), and Julia Kristeva's analysis of how endemic violence leads to a "crisis of signification" (1998: 179), Long-Innes explains:

Couto's response [to Mozambique] is to depict political horror as absorbed by private suffering into the subject's psychic microcosm. In no sense, however, does this amount to an *evasion* of the political, or an escape into the intellectual or aesthetic conceits of 'magic realism'. At stake here is no mere question of technique, nor any reflection of an inescapable divide between the private and the political. The political events of contemporary history in Mozambique, overwhelming and outrageous as they have been, are assimilated to the extent of being measured by the suffering they have caused.

(1998: 179)

Nevertheless, she is at pains to point out that, for Couto's characters, "Madness and melancholia are involuntary last resorts ... in the battle against total fragmentation and disintegration the condition is not a function of weakness or defeatism. It is a way of coping with existence" (1998: 180-181). In similar vein, Ndebele claims that, though Matlou "confronts us with the painful dialectic of suffering", he also gestures towards "the sense of redemption that can result from it" (1991: 54).

Despite the resonance Long-Innes' analysis holds for Matlou's work, however, Couto and Matlou are distinguished by the fact that the latter was not an experienced writer, able to effect a translation of psycho-social realities into fictional worlds of his own making and to actively engage in literary (re-)craftings of these realities. Maithufi, for example, points out that, when he died in 1991, Matlou "had received formal education only up to the level of Standard Seven" and that, although he has been labelled a magical realist by critics, he himself "could not have known of the formal stylistic features of [this mode]" (2010: 30). Like MacKenzie, who refers to Matlou's "ubiquitous stylistic inelegancies" (1993: 113), Maithufi draws attention to Matlou's "characteristically error-sprinkled style" (2002: 13). He deduces further, from Kirkwood's comments in the introduction to *Life at Home*, that "it is clear that Matlou has produced a manuscript that enacts a set of writing and literacy practices which stands outside of, but also comments on, the 'normal' hegemonically sanctioned conventions of literary production" (2002: 14). As noted above, Maithufi also maintains that Matlou's direct translation from Setswana may be ascribed, in part at least, to the author's "poor command of the English language" (2002: 19). Ndebele similarly notes that what he terms Matlou's failure to "explore the ultimate implications of his materials is no doubt connected to his inexperience both as a writer and in the inadequacy of his education" (1991: 53). Though he argues that some of Matlou's "literary deficiencies can be attributed to the intellectually stunting effects of apartheid and Bantu education", he nevertheless

credits him with having “made superhuman efforts to explore life beyond the narrow focus of an oppressive education” (1991: 56).

The inescapable conclusion, then, is that the psycho-social reality to which Matlou’s stories refer is indelibly his own: that he is writing about himself in an intuitive and literal transcription of his lived reality and psychic experience – or, to revise Ndebele’s formulation, he is presenting “an honest rendering” of his *own* “subjective experience”, *not* that of “his character” (1991: 53).¹⁷ Thus Matlou’s apparent use of what in literary terms is called magical realism – or, perhaps, postmodernism or fabulation – is not a function of aesthetic choice and literary convention, but a reflection of his state of mind: “not a poetics – a state of affairs”.

Read from this perspective, the links and the disjunctions or inconsistencies among the stories do not stem from a conscious artistic choice to employ those tensions between coherence and fragmentation associated with the short story cycle as genre, but are a function of the lucid and coherent memories *and* the projections, disorientations and lacunae in the consciousness of the experiencing and narrating self. In this sense, *Life at Home* bears witness to a systemic trauma that became normative in the South African apartheid context, resulting in psychic breakdown – as is especially evident in the delirium and surreality of the last two stories in the collection. This psychic damage also emerges in the hiatus between the fourth and the fifth story, a rupture which gestures towards the inexpressible nature of trauma. Far from asserting a sense of self-possession or equilibrium and of communality, then, the last two narratives convey the absence of a sense of ‘belonging’ or ‘being at home’: the fact that, at the end of “My Ugly Face”, the narrator has become an infant once more and, together with his mother, is a destitute migrant, indicates his unsettlement, dispossession and dis-placement. In this regard, Geertsema points out that “Homelessness ... appears as the condition of the narrator/protagonist of *Life at Home*”, and that the title of the collection is deeply ironic:

Medupe *leaves* his home, the farm, and never returns ... (Of course, the farm is shown in the first two stories not to have properly been a home at all.) Life at home is life on the road. The journey has no end and home is an alien place. The collection thus depicts the pathos of a wandering and consequently suffering protagonist. This suffering leads to the breakdown of narrative on the most literal level: the border between reality and fiction is disrupted as a result of the hallucinatory consequences of suffering.

(1999: 210)

The haunting power of Matlou's collection ultimately lies in the ways in which it serves as a brutal testimony to personal trauma and the symptomatic crisis in signification or representation that it occasions. Laurie Vickroy claims, for example, that "Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study. They internalise the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures. They reveal many obstacles to communicating such experience: silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression, among others" (2002: 3). And Anne Whitehead's comments, too, have a bearing on the ways in which, despite the narrator's efforts to assert clear temporal and spatial markers, the stories in *Life at Home* increasingly gain an unruly and oneiric sense of being 'out of time' and dis-located: "[Writers] have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection" (2004: 3). Though a crisis in representation or signification is characteristic not only of trauma but of postmodernism generally, and magic realism and a mixture of realism and the fantastical may be used in trauma fiction to gesture towards the unrepresentable aporia of trauma, what Matlou presents in his stories is a literal rather than a literary version of what Jeanne Delbaere terms "psychic realism" (1995: 251) and "grotesque realism" (1995: 256).¹⁸

In conclusion, I shall tentatively answer the question posed earlier about the difference between a reading of Matlou's work which views it as naive and one in which it is held to be profoundly self-reflexive. Though a "fracture in the real" (Delbaere 1995: 251) and a sense of crisis are endemic to postmodernist fiction, magical realism and trauma, literary categories are not directly transposable to an unmediated record of the raw experience of trauma, even if that record points to the undecidable admixture of the fictional and the factual in both trauma narratives and testimony. As Jessica Murray claims, "the notion of undecidability ... is at the very border at which the commonality of testimony and literary fiction emerges" (208: 7). If anything, then, Matlou's stories evoke "the complex *psychic disturbance* which inevitably follows on lives grounded in extreme poverty", and are "more concerned with 'giving voice' to *this* than restoring any (implicitly strong and healthy) 'voice of the people'" (Long-Innes 1998: 158) ... or, for that matter, experimenting with genre, mode and literary strategies.

Retrospectively, Ndebele may have been right, though not for the reasons he adduced, in claiming that Matlou's writing captures something of the ordinariness and interiority of 'black'

experience under Apartheid, in all the (ab)normality of the extraordinary psychic damage and suffering caused by this system. The fact that, once collated into a single volume, the narratives in *Life at Home* were extravagantly fêted as experimental (literary) postmodernism or fabulation by academic critics, raises profoundly disturbing questions regarding the ways in which the discourses and narratives of the underclasses – or the “proletarian realm” (Bozzoli 1998: 168) – have been disseminated and appropriated by the South African literary critical establishment.¹⁹ My own discussion, of course, is open to a similar indictment for misrepresentation and appropriation. As Anne Whitehead cautions, “A fragile balance is engendered between the necessity to witness sympathetically that which testimonial writing cannot fully represent and a simultaneous respect for the otherness of the experience, which resists rendering it too familiar or indulging in too easy an understanding or identification (2004: 7-8).

3.3 “Women at Work” ... Condemned to Life in Another’s Kitchen

no woman should be condemned to life in another’s kitchen. ... Surely, even in the minds of people who have long forgotten what it is to be without blinkers, white women must see they do not pay their servants a living wage or an adequate wage: to say nothing of a fair wage. That can only come from a just medem or master.

– Joyce (Magona 1991: 41)

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s amnesty hearings heard, in fact, no submissions from English-speaking white women as perpetrators. Indeed, as Jacqueline Rose reports, “Under apartheid, the message would seem to be, there is very little women were guilty of”. ... Everyone engaged in an “apartheid of the mind”, in psychological splitting What is extraordinary is that many white women were able to effect this “splitting” despite the intimacy of shared living and work spaces in their homes.

– Georgina Horrell (2009: 61-66)

If *Life at Home* is distinguished by its protagonist’s profound alienation from a sense of self and community as a result of the trauma induced by the dehumanisation and alienation of mine labour, Magona’s story sequence “Women at Work” turns to the ways in which friendship circles and neighbourhood support groups are formed by ‘black’ ‘live-in’ domestic workers in ‘white’ suburbs to counter their feelings of isolation and to forge a sense of solidarity. The stories in Magona’s sequence act as something of a corrective to what has dismissively been referred to as the obsession, in ‘white’ South African writing, with ‘looking out the back door at the servants’ quarters’. Implicitly, however, they also address what Nixon identifies as “[‘black’] South African

literature's fixation with male, urban space ... [and its] amnesia towards rural space and ... toward the experience of women" (1996: 250).

As a linked series of narratives, "Women at Work" comprises Part One of the volume *Living, Loving, and Lying Awake at Night*: Part Two, subtitled "... and other stories", contains eight independent narratives. "Women at Work" is presented as a sequence of first-person monologues which putatively capture, in mock-oral fashion, the seven individual 'voices' of a group of isiXhosa-speaking women: Atini, Stella, Sheila, Sophie, Virginia, Joyce and Lillian. With the exception of Joyce, the youngest member of the group, who was studying for matric before her classes were suspended due to student riots (40), the women are semi-literate and poorly educated. They work long hours, are paid very little as domestic workers, and the majority live in separate 'maid's quarters' on their employers' premises. Atini, the "newest maid" (16), is initially the object of some suspicion and curiosity, given that she ousted her employer Mrs Reed's previous 'maid', Imelda. Over time, however, she has gained more acceptance, and the other domestic workers have taken to visiting her in her room to gossip about their 'medems' and one another, complain about their working conditions, and offer moral support and advice.²⁰

It is these individual gossip sessions that form the content of the women's respective monologues. Though "Women at Work" is set alternatively in East London or Cape Town – as indicated by place and street names such as Duncan Village (27, 33), Nahoon (36) and Mdantsane (31, 54), or Crossroads (47), Lovers' Walk (28), Groote Schuur Hospital (30), Langa (20), Constantia, Camps Bay and Llandudno (25) – these settings are interchangeable, since the protagonists all appear to know one other and are familiar with one other's affairs. As the series proceeds, for example, gossip initially transmitted from one woman's perspective is relayed from another's. Displaced from their own homes and communities by rural destitution and economic hardship or political unrest, and forced by a lack of alternative prospects to take up domestic employment, the seven women form an informal or surrogate 'community' of sorts, a community unified primarily not by place or region, but by shared circumstances and experiences. Nevertheless, this alternative community, as a cohesive, collective protagonist or agent, is vulnerable to job insecurity and the unpredictability of employers, and this vulnerability manifests in the women's conflicting loyalties and priorities, and the self-serving motivations behind some of their gossip. As Margaret Daymond comments:

[it is] difficult ... for these workers, dependent as they are on their employers' whims, to establish the conditions of trust from which their common interests could be developed. ... However much their long-term interests might require solidarity, their immediate survival depends on pleasing their employers, on grasping whatever opportunities they can and, if necessary, on betraying each other. In this light, their situation is very different from that of a rooted community

(2002: 338-339)

Moreover, although 'black' women's experience of exploitation and victimisation is the dominant motif in Magona's stories, what at first appears to be a heavy emphasis on the typicality and homogeneity of the group depicted is weighed up against the singular identities, temperaments and idiosyncratic voices of its members.

Structurally, the sequence contains an opening frame narrative, followed by eight ostensibly uninterrupted first-person monologues, each named after the woman who is 'speaking'.²¹ The first and last of these monologues – "Atini" and "Atini's Reflections" – are delivered by Atini and addressed to an unidentified 'listener', to whom she familiarly refers as "my friend" (12), "sweetheart" (13) and "Friend" (14) in the former or, more indulgently, as "my child" (53) in the latter. Nevertheless, Daymond points out that, in both of Atini's monologues, the "audience is an implied rather than an active presence the audience function is congruent with that of the narratee of western narratives" (2002: 337). Both of the Atini pieces are, in fact, tantamount to interior monologues, particularly "Atini's Reflections" which, as its title suggests, has the introspective quality of inward reminiscences and musings. The other six monologues – "Stella", "Sheila", "Sophie", "Virginia", "Joyce" and "Lillian" – are addressed to Atini herself.

"Leaving", the introductory frame narrative, is a third-person account of how, in desperation early one morning, a young woman who is not yet thirty (5) leaves her five children still asleep in her hut in a rural village and sets out in search of work to support her family. In this narrative, the protagonist is unnamed – as Pamela Ryan claims, to emphasise the "frequency of the theme" (1992: 68) – as are the village the woman leaves and her destination, though two of her children, together with their paternal grandmother, are named. However, at the very beginning of the first monologue, set in East London twenty months later, the young woman introduces herself as Atini, and proceeds to relate the circumstances which led to her abandoning her children, travelling to the city, and becoming employed by a 'white' 'medem', Mrs Reed. In her final monologue – which acts as a closing frame narrative – Atini reviews her experiences in the city

after two years and eight months have passed. In the interim, her two youngest children, Sizwe and Thandiwe, have joined her in East London, where they are being cared for by a woman in Mdantsane; the three eldest, Nomakhwezi, Andile, and Nomsa, have remained in the village (revealed to be Gungungulu, outside Mthatha in the Transkei) under the watchful eye of their grandmother, Manala. Atini and her husband, a migrant mineworker, have only briefly returned once, but on separate occasions.

Notwithstanding the personally specific details Atini provides in her closing monologue, she herself underscores the “frequency of the theme” of economic necessity and poverty forcing rural women to leave their families and homes to find work in the city, and the commonality of the predicament of ‘live-in’ domestic workers in general: “And here in the city, are all these women *wearing the same blanket* or do my eyes fail to see *the different pattern*? Are they all enveloped in sorrow? Or is the plaintive, melancholy note I hear only an echo of what sounds in my own heart?” (55, emphasis added). Subsequently, she affirms that it is the first of each of these two sets of options that applies both to herself and to the other women who have become her confidantes: “No longer will I ask: what is hell? I know it because I am there. I know it because all these women tell me they are there. Yes, *the words are different* – some are angry words and others are sad and sorry words. I have even heard a few words of praise. But, deep down, *all the words tell the same story*. We are slaves in the white women’s kitchens” (59, emphasis added). In thus drawing attention to the collective representivity of the group of which she has become a member – a generic identity which is implicit in the shared concerns and the litany of grievances that the women reiterate throughout the sequence of monologues – Atini points to the ubiquity of what Jacklyn Cock characterises as the “ultra-exploitation” (1980: 6) of domestic workers in South Africa and their lived experience of triple oppression in terms of ‘race’, class and gender.²²

3.3.1 “The same blanket ... the same story”

Black hands may nurse our babies,
Black hands may cook our food,
Black hands may make our beds, and do our washing,
And that’s GOOD.
Black hands may do the dishes,
Black hands may keep us clean ...
But would you shake a black hand? NO!
You don’t know where it’s been.

– Stephanie Warren (1981: 18)

As in *Life at Home*, and as Atini emphasises above, the experience of entrapment, disempowerment and exploitation, together with a deep sense of injustice, is pointedly captured in Magona's text in multiple variations of the refrain "We are slaves" (21, 36, 38, 40, 44, 46, 47, 48, 52, 57, 58, 59). And the women's awareness that they are not treated as fully human by their employers is emphasised in comments such as Sophie's "These women we work for treat us like dogs, worse than their dogs, in fact" (33), or Joyce's "I don't count except as a donkey that must work" (45, see also 21). Particular grievances revolve around inadequate wages ("peanuts" [24, 43] and "chicken feed" [25]), unreasonable working hours, and the generally excessive demands made by employers. Thus, though her own employer is more liberal and well-meaning than most 'medems', Sophie points out that other 'maids' are less fairly treated: "Their medems pay them little. They don't give them enough rest; one hour every day, half a day a week, and only two weeks of holiday for the year" (33). And Stella, having complained that she is required to work "six to six, six days a week" (20), goes on to expose her employer's double standards:

If there's one thing that makes her out and out mad at me – it's when I'm sick. ... She, can be sick But I must never get sick. "You think I run a clinic here, my girl?" That's what she says first day I'm sick. Day number two: "Maybe you should go home and send one of your daughters to help". ... You know this woman has children the same ages as mine. I must send my children here to help her and her children while I'm sick. My children must miss school to come and make sure their goat food is made, the beds are made, their shoes are polished, their clothes are washed.

(21)

The notion that employers operate in terms of generalisations and stereotypes – such as that maids are prone to sickness and are likely to infect the families for whom they work, or that they are unclean – is not only reflected in Stella's comments above, but also in Sheila's observation that

they have the cheek to *nogal* say we are dirty. Where would they be without us forever cleaning after them so they can be clean? No, my dear, nothing can make the white people clean like the maid does. But, of course, they can't say we are the ones responsible for them being clean. They never give us our due; but never mind, we know what's what. And that's what is important.

(24)

In similar vein, Virginia recounts the story of how, after five years working in her employer's home, her 'medem' one day unexpectedly gave her Sunlight soap and Mum cream, telling her to

“take this for yourself, and use it” (35). Incensed at the insinuation that she needed to attend to her personal hygiene, her initial response was to silently accuse her employer of duplicity: “She must see my eyes are asking her ‘Why?’ Me, I say nothing with my own mouth. I just look at the things in her hands” (35). Virginia’s mutely defiant response then forced her employer into defensive mode and into a thinly veiled justification of the racist sentiments underpinning her supposedly well-intentioned gesture: “I’m sure you sweat a lot with the kind of work you are doing. I’m not saying you don’t wash or anything like that” (36).

‘Medems’ and *mlungu* women in general are accused of callousness and a lack of empathy. Sophie, for example, is aware that her employer is an exception to the rule and shows some humanity and decency: “I tell you, that woman is a person, a human being although she is white. She feels for another person” (31), and later she remarks: “I feel sorry not more white people are like medem. But there are so few good white people that the bad ones swallow them and we don’t see the good ones. And then we forget they are there” (34). Virginia, by contrast, who is not as fortunate as Sophie, asserts: “If it wasn’t for my pass, I’d leave this mad, mad woman. She is no good. No good at all. She has a bad heart: a heart that cannot feel for other people” (36). And both Atini and Sheila highlight the mistrustfulness of ‘medems’ and the ways in which they are quick to leap to conclusions about their domestic workers’ honesty and accuse them of petty theft. The former points out that “They don’t like that, *mlungu* women, that the maid should keep someone in her room. They say that makes their own girl steal to feed the person in her room” (13), and the latter comments to Atini: “All these women we work for, they all think we are thieves, finish and *klaar*. Nothing but thieves. All of them think like that, but yours goes right into your room behind your back and she *kraps* around there while you’re away visiting your people in Duncan Village” (27). Indeed, all the women seem to agree that Mrs Reed is particularly mean-minded, though she is simply the worst example of what they register as a general trend among their employers.

It is self-evident to the women that the stereotyped notions invoked by ‘medems’ indicate that the latter view them as a homogeneous group. Sheila claims that the uniform manner in which domestic workers are treated is a function of the ways in which ‘white’ women confer with each other, and arrive, for example, at common understandings about ‘appropriate’ wages:

We should have maids' groups. The women we work for *must* have their groups too. Otherwise, if they don't have groups all over the place, how do they know how much they pay us? They talk about these things, the white women. They tell each other what to do about maids. Only we're too dumb to see they do this and control us. ... They treat us the same because they know what that same is.

(25-26)

In her final monologue, Atini, too, expresses her realisation that 'maids' are viewed collectively, not as individuals. Having acknowledged that "It can't be that much fun to have to take a total stranger into your home. Not all maids are good people. I've seen not a few I wouldn't want myself in my home", she points out that "One bad experience with a maid, and all the bad things a medem has heard about maids are confirmed". She then goes on to comment on the injustice of such typecasting, and the ironic reflex response it engenders in its victims:

That's the worse thing for a maid – to be under such constant suspicion when she herself has done nothing to deserve such. It is this that reminds her that, to her medem, she is not a person in her own right but one of a group; and not a good group at that.

Why can't the medem deal with each maid as a separate person? Why can't she treat her right until the maid shows herself undeserving of such treatment? Wouldn't it be better to show a new maid trust? Might she not then respond by proving worthy of that trust? Why would a woman not steal when she knows she is expected to anyway?

(58-59)

Atini's probing of master-servant dynamics here exposes the mechanisms by which, as Darcy Du Toit puts it, "domestic employment remains an institution with roots deeply embedded in colonial society Seeking to abolish its oppressive characteristics means addressing not only patterns of behavior that have become established over centuries but also the (self)perceptions that have been generated and have become equally deeply-rooted" (2010: 2).

A constant theme which emerges from the women's discourse is the disjunction between their generally scathing assessments of their employers and the latter's indulgent and self-righteous view of themselves – more especially their sense of what they deem to be their 'generosity' towards their employees and their expectation of gratitude in return. As Virginia remarks, "White women are quick to see the favour they do for you but they never see any favour you do for them". She then explains: "Mine is always reminding me how she got my pass right. ... Fixing my pass was buying me; that's what she thinks. ... ONE DAY! One day I will remind her it was not her who had to spread her legs for that white dog, the Bantu inspector who made my

pass right. I think she forgets that” (38). The ways in which employers offload their cast-off clothes on their domestic workers is particularly contentious, since the latter view this so-called charity as an exercise in self-congratulatory delusion on the part of ‘medems’ and resent the practice intensely. Stella’s employer, for example, has the effrontery to expect her to sell such hand-me-downs in the township – not only on Stella’s afternoons off but also for her employer’s own profit:

On my half day off I must be working for her. Selling her second-hand clothes. She even pins the price on each one.

Now don’t think these almost new clothes have been drycleaned. You think she’d spend her money like that? There, I must carry clothes smelling her smell, carry them home and sell them to my friends.

Then she’ll take one of these clothes, look at it like it was a child going away, and say – “Take this one for yourself.” That is how she pays me for carrying a heavy suitcase, making my friends laugh at me selling her silly clothes.

(20)

As a result, Stella has taken to paying off the clothes with her own money, and then sending them to relatives in her village. Mrs Reed is more than usually parsimonious in regard to second-hand clothes or gifts of any kind, as Sheila warns Atini:

Her stingy is not the everyday kind of stingy. Her stingy is a sickness. ... she even sells her old clothes to her maid. Be careful if she gives you anything. Make sure she is giving it to you not selling it. One of the maids before you ended up in jail.

(26)

But it is Joyce, by far the most outspoken and politically radical of the group – no doubt as a result of her politicisation and exposure to student resistance and leftist ideology at school – who presents the most damning and contemptuous critique of the hypocrisy underpinning employers’ supposedly benevolent gestures:

You tell me of the kind white women who buy books for the children of their maids. But, aren’t these maids working women? Why do they need to have someone else pay for their children’s books? And, why do the white women feel compelled to buy books for children who are not theirs? ... Could it be that they themselves are not fully convinced of the adequacy of the wage they offer their employees? If that is the case, even half the case, then buying books is hardly the answer.

The white woman can do all sorts of things for her maid. She can take the maid to her doctor; she can give her groceries to take home to her children on her day off; she can give her her cast-off clothes; she can pay for the education of the maid’s children; she can

take the maid with her when she goes to Pampoenstad on vacation; and thousands of other good things like that: but, she is doing for the maid what the maid would do for herself if she had the money.

The dribs and drabs the white woman sees as charity are nothing but a salve to her conscience, an insult to the maid's dignity, and an assault to her self-esteem. The maid remains in a never-ending position of indebtedness. She works. Pay her and pay her justly. Then and only then does she become – even in the eyes of the medem – the adult she is.

(41-42)

As is evident above, Joyce is also outraged by the infantilisation of domestic workers. Having earlier pointed out that “it should be a crime to pay a full-grown woman less than the pocket-money you give to your twelve-year-old” (40), she subsequently expands on the ways in which the notion that maids are childlike is passed from generation to generation among ‘white’ families:

in the eyes of the white women they work for they are children, worse than children: children grow up but domestic workers remain children to their death. When the white children the black woman raised become adults, they see the maid as a child, just as their parents have done all the time this woman has been working for them, smoothing their days and making them forget the coarser side of keeping house.

(44)

Speaking of the ways in which ‘white’ children deliberately misbehave and are generally unruly when under the care of domestic workers, Virginia similarly identifies the cross- generational transfer of contempt: “it is the blackness in us that makes the white children not to respect us. They can’t help it; they learn it from their parents. Where have you seen the children of the crab crawling straight? Children learn from their parents” (38). Moreover, it is the incipiently patronising attitudes of ‘white’ women towards their ‘black’ counterparts that, for Joyce, precludes the possibility that women in South Africa could unite across ‘racial’ lines to oppose patriarchy in general: “Feminism in this country has been retarded, in part, by this paternalistic attitude of white women towards black women. How can I be a sister to my father, the white woman?” (42).

Nevertheless, ‘white’ housewives, too, are infantilised – by their dependence on their husbands and on their domestic workers, who view such women as feeble children who are unable to care for themselves and their families. Lillian, for example, scornfully refers to “this child, this thing I work for” (48) and, in “Atini’s Reflections”, Atini comments: “I left my baby and came to this town to work. What do I find? Here I am working for another baby, a grown-up baby called

Mrs Reed. The woman is really, really useless” (57). She subsequently comes to the ironic conclusion that “[Medems’] need of us in their homes beats their dislike and suspicion of us. They are slaves to the leisure and luxury that having servants gives them. Yes, they are slaves just as we are slaves. We need each other we need each other to survive” (59). Thus Atini has intuited that the master-servant relationship is premised on mutual, if unacknowledged, dependency.²³ She has also recognised that, despite their semblance of power, ‘white’ women are in fact disempowered by their confinement to the domestic realm, their subordination to their husbands as breadwinners and the real loci of authority, their debilitating lack of autonomy, and their reliance on domestic help. By comparison, the resourcefulness and resilience of their ‘black’ compatriots are viewed with some pride, as emerges from Lillian’s assertion that “We really are strong – to live like we do” (47). However, this assertion follows her comment that ‘white’ people would not survive in the degrading and cramped living quarters to which she herself is restricted:

Look at the room I sleep in. ... A chicken would suffocate in this thing, that is how small it is. But I am a servant; I am not supposed to have eyes to see when someone pushes me into a coffin and calls it a maid’s room. Why didn’t they put me in the garage? More room there – even with two cars in it.

One day, I wish whites would be forced to live like this. They would die like flies. And they would die screaming with the horrors – they’d be mad – mad – mad. Die of madness, they would.

(47)

The notion that such spatial confinement engenders insanity is similarly expressed by Joyce: “When I see myself cooped up in this box they call the maid’s room I ask myself how the maids who worked here didn’t lose their minds” (44). And Atini, having claimed that domestic workers “carry hope the way sailors do lifejackets”, also underlines their precarious hold on sanity under the conditions which afflict them: “Without [hope] I sometimes think we would all be in Fort Beaufort, you know? Where they lock up people whose minds have left them” (56).

Though the women in Magona’s series are primarily concerned with their immediate domestic realities and personal tribulations, they do address the oppressive political and socio-economic conditions of apartheid South Africa. Much of Joyce’s monologue, for example, presents a strident critique of the exploitation of domestic workers and of workers in general in South Africa:

This exploitation of the masses will stop. Workers are going to be paid a decent wage. ... It's fine to have cheap labour. But fodder costs the same whether the horse chewing it is black or white. ... Domestic workers should work civilized hours like all other workers. They should be able to live with their families.

(40)

The unjust laws which govern the lives and choices of 'live-in' domestic workers and which separate them from their families, are similarly raised as an issue by Sheila. The latter is older than Atini, and she thus remembers a time when the young children of domestic workers were allowed to live with them on their employers' premises: "It's a shame they made a law so now you can't bring your baby to stay with you where you work. Used to be like that when I had little ones" (27). Sophie, too, is solicitous about Atini's children, asking: "How are your children? Did you manage to bring the younger ones you say you are worried about? Shame" (32). However, as Atini reveals in her final monologue, the only way she has been able to arrange that at least her two youngest live nearer to her is to pay a woman in Mdantsane to care for them. Thus, if apartheid laws were progressively designed to fulfil the demands of industry and prevent migrant labourers from relocating their families by restricting access to urban areas, such legislation has also intervened to meet the demands of 'white' households for 'live-in' domestic workers detached from their immediate maternal responsibilities. In this regard, once again it is Joyce who points out that 'white' women, who might feel an affinity with their 'black' compeers by virtue of the shared experience of motherhood, in reality show a complete disregard for their domestic workers' family commitments: "the white woman knows the black woman working for her has children. Knowing this, why is she not bothered by this mother in her house, who is never there when they return from school with some hurt, real or imagined, or when they have had a tough day just being children?" (44). Thus, as Margaret Lenta points out:

the mutual "knowing" which occurs between employer and servant is of a particular kind which involves as much – perhaps more – wilful ignorance as knowledge. The intimate knowledge which the employee has of the employer's life is something which she is required to conceal, while the employer, though she admits her employee into her home, must deny her the status of family member and usually refuses or neglects to find out about her life and obligations elsewhere.

(1989: 238)

Given that 'white' men are at work during the day and it is their wives who are in charge of the domestic realm, the maids generally gossip about their 'medems' rather than their medems's

husbands. However, the issue of masters' unwanted sexual advances and the unequal power differential subtending such attentions surface specifically in relation to Mrs Reed's husband. Virginia, for example, invokes the legal prohibition against sex across the colour line in reference to the rumour that Mrs Reed's husband's relations with the succession of domestic workers who have worked in his household are less than disinterested: "They say he tries tricks on the maids. ... people should be careful what they say. They shouldn't say things if they have no proof; they'll go to jail, lying about white people. And there is a law about what they say that man is doing" (39). Lillian, however, later confirms the rumour when she warns Atini about the potential risk involved in babysitting the Reeds' children when Mrs Reed has gone out at night unaccompanied by her husband:

Be careful of stay-in; especially if it's only the woman who is going out. Ask yourself why they need you to stay in if the father of the children is there. Ask yourself that or you will find yourself minding children who have beards. ...

You, get yourself a young man, I am warning you. If the husband of this strange woman you work for doesn't soon hear a man's cough here some nights ... you will become his business; of that I can assure you. Don't say I didn't tell you, one day. It's long ago that I first saw the sun, I tell you.

(49-50)

Considerably older than Atini, Lillian's age and experience mean that she has a shrewd sense of the ways in which domestic workers are vulnerable to sexual abuse, despite the Immorality Act which forbids interracial relations. Moreover, her own daughter was once a victim of unwelcome advances from her master:

My daughter once had a master like the one you've got. She was afraid even of being in one room with him. And men like him, white men like that, they always find an excuse to talk to the girl. There they have a wife who should be telling the girl what's what, but, no. They must be the ones who tell her. Sometimes, they will even go to the girl's room, any time – day or night. Then you know they are no good.

(49-50)

Though her daughter had managed to evade her master's designs, Virginia here points to the larger reality that sexual exploitation in the 'white' household adds a clandestine dimension to domestic workers' existence: they are defenceless against this abuse of power and in reality largely unprotected by the law, since reporting an incident of this nature lays them open to arrest

themselves, the police being more likely to believe the ‘white’ employer than the ‘black’ employee.

Of a less physical nature than sexual harassment, a further indignity to which the domestic workers are subjected which is nonetheless a violation of their individual integrity, is the anglicised names their employers impose on them – proof, at best, of wilful misrecognition, and, at worst, of indifference and a lack of respect, as the maids are aware. Atini, for example, explains that “Xhosa, our mother tongue, [is] a language the likes of Mrs Reed had never bothered learning” (15). Though she introduces herself, at the beginning of her first monologue, using her isiXhosa name, she points out that her employer has assumed the prerogative to rename her at the latter’s convenience:

I am Atini, though Mrs Reed calls me Tiny. I have been working for Mrs Reed for eighteen months now. ... Oh, the Tiny comes from my name, Atini. I feel funny being called Tiny; I am a large woman. *Sidudla*, that is a name people give to a fat person who cannot even pretend she isn’t fat. But Mrs Reed said: “Oh, I can’t say your names, they’re difficult. All those clicks and things. I’ll call you Tiny.” And so I became Tiny; fat as I am. (12-14)

The obvious irony here is not only that Atini is, by her own admission, a “large woman”, but also that Mrs Reed has abbreviated and anglicised her name despite the fact that it does not contain “clicks and things”, and she has chosen to mispronounce it. Atini has not herself adopted her new name, but all the other women in her support group are identified and refer to each other by their English names – a detail which seems to confirm the notion, articulated by Du Toit, that self-images become deeply ingrained in the context of employer-domestic worker relations. Joyce, however, does briefly mention her isiXhosa name, Ntombi, at the opening of her monologue (40), and Nombini, the woman from Atini’s home village who housed her for two months before arranging for her to fill in for Imelda while the latter took three weeks’ leave, is only referred to as such.

Related to the issue of naming and self-perception is the use of the more impartial term “domestic workers”, rather than demeaning alternatives such as “girl”, “domestic servant” or “maid”, which a number of the women indicate they no longer find acceptable in the mouths of employers – though they themselves generally use the last of these and, indeed, often lapse inadvertently into using the other two. Sheila, for instance, asks Atini:

Have you heard about how maids should not let the white women call them girls or servants anymore? And we should join a group to fight for our rights? Do you think that can happen? White women can learn not to call us girl? After all these years they're used to calling us anything they like – never mind if the girl likes it or not; never mind if it's her name or not? Do you really think they'll learn that? Me, myself, I don't think so. I really don't think so.

(25)

Later she refers to Atini, herself and other domestic workers as “We poor domestic servants”, but then catches herself, commenting ruefully, “Listen to me; here I'm the first to forget I'm not a servant anymore. I am a worker; I must remember that. I'm just as bad as these white women, hey? Can't teach an old dog new tricks, as they say: heh?” (28). Even Joyce, the most overtly political member of the group, uses the term “maids” throughout her monologue and “domestic servant” once (43) – though the latter in reference to the generations of women in her family who have worked in ‘white’ homes, a destiny she is intent on escaping herself in due course.

Though required to display an attitude of deference and compliance ‘on the job’, the domestic workers’ withering scorn for their ‘medems’ finds expression in the derisory nicknames they devise for them behind their backs, and their resentment emerges in the defiant and subversive strategies they adopt – strategies they revel in relaying to Atini. Mrs Reed, who is a prime topic of conversation, is repeatedly caricatured in phrases such as “stork legs”, “legs of a bird” (30), “walk-on-arms” (36), “skinny legs”, “no-legs woman” (49), “woman-with-no-legs” (51), “kindling legs” (54) and “sticks” (57), and she is villified in more explicitly derogatory expressions such as “she-dog”, “bitch” (32) and “snake in the grass” (27). Virginia's employer has been nicknamed “Tracer” (35) by her previous domestic workers because she unfailingly detects accidental breakages and docks wages for these mishaps, and Stella refers to her employer as the “Goat Food Woman” due to her fanaticism about vegetarian and health food. The latter also highlights her employer's mean-mindedness and hypocrisy in descriptions such as “a sour *suurlemoen* of a woman”, “change-face-so-and- so”, and “with her always-mouth-open-face: she could win a Mrs Sunshine Sweetest Smile Competition” (18). Stella then gleefully relates the story of how, on the very first day she started work, she was horrified to discover not only her employer's dirty bath water, which the latter had not bothered to drain, but also her soiled underpants floating in the water. Refusing to wash the underwear, she had lifted the pants out and proceeded to clean the bath only. Subsequently she encountered a note in which her employer

instructed her to wash her underpants every morning, to which she responded by writing her own note in turn, explaining: “I was taught that a panty is the most intimate thing ... my mother told me no one else should even see my panty. I really don’t see how I can be asked to wash someone else’s panty” (19). This rebuff had ended the matter. Similarly, Virginia’s response to having been given soap and cream by her employer and to the insinuation that she was unclean, was to leave the items untouched and in full view on the kitchen window-sill. She triumphantly tells Atini: “They can stay there until they grow roots. She will see them get flowers, right there in her kitchen” (36). Sheila, too, having mimicked her employer’s voice reciting a litany of complaints and instructions, then conjures up a scenario, albeit imaginary, in which she achieves some retribution:

One *shushu* day, when I’m nice and well-done fed up, I’m going to tell her to her face:
“Do it and let me see how you want it done. Show me.”

And watch her burn her hands or cut a finger off – if it’s my lucky day. She doesn’t know the front side of the iron. That will shut her big mouth and give my hot ears a rest.

(25)

However, though these expressions of defiance and acts of retaliation provide the women with a satisfactory sense of small victories won, and confiding them to Atini engenders a conspiratorial air of audacity and complicity (and enables the reader to access the levels of bitterness and frustration that the women feel in reality), they have to maintain a veneer of submissiveness so as not to jeopardise their jobs and their children’s well-being. As Atini confides in her final monologue: “[My children] are the only reason I’m still here, the one reason I will go on doing this job that is killing me. At least it is giving life to them. For my children I will go on being killed everyday, slowly but surely, by kitchen jobs. How can I leave them?” She subsequently concludes: “Therefore all of us maids *say the same thing*: we work for nothing but it is better than not working We work and send our children to school and hope we will not die before we’ve seen them grown” (59, emphasis added). The phrase “say[ing] the same thing” captures the monovocality of the grievances the women express and the sense that, though they all feel trapped in their current positions, there are no alternative options available to them, especially if they have to provide for their families. Their collective solidarity and the resilient identity it seeks to assert in the face of both the major and petty injustices and abuses to which they are subjected, are undermined by economic and socio-political conditions affording little hope of change.

Overall, then, the commonality of the various refrains which traverse the women's separate monologues indicates that they 'speak with one voice', which expresses a shared sense of exploitation and disempowerment. Indeed, the fact that, with the exception of Atini, the monologues are identified by the women's adoptive, anglicised names, that they use these names in referring to one another, and that they call themselves "maids" – or even "girls" on occasion – cements the notion that they are speaking 'in role' as members of a group: that their collective identity overrides individual specificities and differences. Moreover, the ways in which they address each other using terms denoting easy familiarity, such as "my friend" (12, 31, 40), "my sister" (15, 30) or "my dear" (24, 26, 29), suggests that they feel a bond with each other which is premised on this shared group identity – an identity formed in opposition to a mutual and odious adversary: 'medems', who themselves operate as a monolithic group which conforms to deep-rooted and identifiable patterns of behaviour.

3.3.2 "The different pattern ... the different words"

While we have ... undertaken few readings of the intimacies, across race and class, that have long characterized a deeply segregated society – that is, the often unexpected points of intersection and practical knowledge of the other wrought from a common, though often mutually coercive and confrontational experience – we might equally remark ... that intimacy does not necessarily exclude violation. ... it may often be another name for tyranny.

– Sarah Nuttall (2004: 9)

Servitude is about caste or status. Persons in conditions of servitude occupy a social station that does not allow them to alter the conditions of their existence: their station makes it appear that they work 'voluntarily' for those above them. Servitude appears voluntary because this form of dominion ... is underwritten by 'law, custom or agreement' Such 'law, custom or agreement' refers to social understandings and not to any consent by the bonds [wo]man to abject conditions.

– Stu Woolman and Michael Bishop (qtd in Du Toit 2010: 17)

The underlying similarity of the women's circumstances and of the topics they discuss in "Women at Work" gives the impression that the series is monologic in relation to its dominant themes, and that the women's group identity overrides their individuality. However, this is not entirely the case, since their respective ages, degrees of experience and self-confidence, and their attitudes, idiolects and self-characterisations all contribute to a sense of their distinctively singular personalities. Thus, despite the fact that they are animated by much the same issues, their voices are idiosyncratic and differently inflected, and their situations and material realities are not entirely interchangeable in respect of variables such as the treatment they receive from their

employers, their family responsibilities, and their future prospects. As a result, it is perhaps more accurate to describe the story sequence as embodying a form of repetition-with-variation, rather than homogeneity.

Four of the women, in particular, stand out: Joyce, the youngest; Sophie, who in many ways serves as a counterpoint to Joyce; Lillian, the eldest; and Atini herself. Joyce, the first of these, though not yet twenty is the most assertive of the group of women, as I have already intimated. She employs a register drawn from radical political discourse, and is adamant that she has definite rights. For example, she relates the story of how she refused to read a Xhosa story to her employers' daughter on the grounds that she would not receive extra remuneration and would prefer to be at school herself, rather than assisting the education of others more privileged than herself. She thus articulates her refusal to be exploited beyond the basic terms of her employment. While she does not communicate her position to her employers directly (in fact, she is pleased that their daughter is learning an African language), she devises a brazenly fallacious excuse: "I just told them I was not good at reading and I did not like stories. They haven't asked me again" (45). Joyce is also the most optimistic and idealistic of the group, and the most determined to escape her current position: "Believe me, I mean it when I say I will not stay long in this kind of work. I would rather kill myself than be a nanny for the rest of my life. ... Four generations of domestic servants – that's enough. NO MORE. I refuse to be a slave" (43-44). She is not only intent on becoming the sixth African woman doctor in the country (40), but also confident that the days of 'black' domestic servitude are numbered: "I look at the people I work for ... and I feel sorry for them, you know. The days of masters and medems with lots of slaves are going. Friend, before long, these people will learn to cook for themselves, clean for themselves, and scrub their own floors and do their laundry for themselves" (40). Joyce's views are uncompromising – even militant on occasion – and she expresses a youthful confidence which singles her out from the other domestic workers. Moreover, because she does not have a family to support and has almost completed her secondary education, she is freer and more able to envisage an alternative to domestic employment than the other women, who perforce have had to resign themselves to a working-class existence.

By contrast, Sophie is conflicted about her situation and, as mentioned earlier, manifests a certain ambivalence towards her 'medem', since ultimately she feels trapped by the latter's kindness. Her employer is liberal in outlook: she works at the Advice Office in Duncan Village,

has run foul of the authorities, hosts multi-racial dinner parties, and has bought a house for Sophie in Mdantsane. As a result, Sophie feels beholden to her: “How do you leave a *mlungu* woman who has bought a house for you? I feel the house is cement; because of it I can never leave this woman. ... I am stuck – for the rest of my life. But, I shouldn’t complain. ... how many of us can say: I have a house and it is mine?” (34). If Sophie’s feelings towards her ‘medem’ are a mixture of gratitude for the relatively generous treatment she receives and resentment at her own indebtedness, Joyce’s response to Sophie’s employer’s supposed altruism is, predictably, more cynical and dismissive. Having commented that she is “sick and tired of people telling [her] about this one woman who bought a house for her maid”, Joyce asks a series of rhetorical questions: “Who bought the house the maid cleans every day? The house the kind white woman lives in with her family? Do you hear her boss or her husband’s boss going around crowing about how he bought a house for his employee? Why not?” (43). Once again, then, she draws attention to the fact that charity, as an ameliorative measure, is no substitute for economic empowerment.

Sophie is also aggrieved at the fact that she is called upon to relinquish her evenings off to cook for and serve ‘black’ guests at the dinner parties her employer arranges – guests who are more highly educated than she is and in a different social stratum:

I complain very much although I say nothing to her. I complain because I don’t know why she has to make me serve people who are black just like me. It is a punishment, I feel.

I am a maid and they are teachers, and nurses, and social workers, and so forth. So what! I leave the location and its people and I come to work in a white woman’s kitchen. And there she takes her kombi; takes it and goes into the location to bring it right back here to her kitchen. Is she going to serve this whole location she brings here? No! The maid is there. Now I am a maid to serve black people.

(33-34)

The vexation Sophie expresses here reveals her sense that she is a menial and forced, unwillingly, to collude in her employer’s display of liberal tolerance. But her sentiments, ironically, reveal that she endorses the view that master-servant relationships should be defined in racial terms – a view Joyce emphatically rejects: “the colour of the maid should not automatically be black. ... [Domestic work] should not be the preserve of black women only. Neither should the position of master and medem: blacks too should experience those positions. ... We must stop living according to prescription” (41).

All in all, Sophie's employer's treatment of her emerges as a duplicitous blend of ingratiation and exploitation. Though she encourages Sophie to hold meetings of domestic workers at her house, ostensibly so that they may discuss their grievances and mobilise to demand better working conditions, her apparently progressive intentions seem somewhat dubious and self-affirming, since she presses Sophie afterwards to reveal the other women's gossip about their 'medems'. When Atini is invited by Sheila to attend one of these meetings, she does not do so for fear of reprisals from Mrs Reed, and Sophie confirms that this threat is real enough when she visits Atini the following day:

Why didn't you come to the meeting last night? My *mlungu* woman has been asking me about that the whole morning. You know how she is – for her, whether she's at the Advice Office or back here in the house, it is all the same. She must be putting her nose in everybody's business. ... she ends up asking me things I don't want to talk about; and she gets me into trouble with the medems of these women. You would think a *mlungu* woman wouldn't worry herself about maid gossip; not the one I work for, *hay'mntakwethu* [no, my dear sister].

(30)

Thus Sophie resents and feels manipulated by her employer's meddling, and her own position is compromised by the latter's liberal pretensions – though she realises that her situation is an improvement on that of her co-workers.

Lillian, by far the eldest member of the group, has a daughter and a granddaughter working in better-paid service positions in embassies in Cape Town. Like Sophie, she feels a sense of dependency, though this is premised on future expectations rather than past generosity. She is only continuing to work because the husband of her previous 'medem' – her current employer's mother – put pension money aside for her in the bank. He has subsequently died, however, and his wife has left the country: "Oh, what did God do to me? Why did He have to take my master? That man! He was a good, kind man, a saint. I'm sure it was his idea to put money in the bank for me. Medem ... she was nice too. But, stingy!" (48). Lillian is therefore unsure whether her old 'medem' will release the money, and she is forced to wait until her current employer decides she is unable to work any longer and contacts her mother to expedite the pension payout. In the meantime, Lillian is tired of having to perform menial tasks, despite her advanced years, and views the demands made upon her as an affront to her dignity. For example, she is especially offended at being asked by her 'medem' to use a cloth rather than a brush when cleaning the toilet:

Do you know what this child wants me to do? Take my hand – MY HAND – and put it down there where their shit goes down. My hand must touch their shit. Not my shit; she wasn't talking about my toilet, mind you.

Old as I am; I must take the shit of grown-ups in my hand. These people – when they pay you they think you are not a human being.

What would she do if her own boss asked her to do something dirty like that, Mmh? I wonder.

(47)

As is evident here, Lillian is the least likely in the group to use euphemistic or oblique language. It is Lillian, too, as indicated earlier, whose age and sharp eyes have given her a canny sense of those areas of their lives that other domestic workers might wish to keep private: as she herself emphasises to Atini, "I'm old enough to be your mother, my child", and she later repeats: "It's long ago that I first saw the sun, I tell you" (50).

Given that "Leaving" is focalised from Atini's perspective and that two of the monologues are dedicated to her, the reader has greater exposure to her thoughts and speaking voice than those of the other women, and a more rounded sense of her character and background therefore emerges. Her implied responses to the other women's confidences indicate that initially she is diffident and circumspect: it is her more experienced informants who monopolise the conversation, while she largely occupies the position of listener, a presence in the background whose actions and reactions are registered only via the speaker's comments. For example, Sheila responds to Atini's obvious expression of amusement at her disclosure that some of Mrs Reed's previous domestic workers have left in disgust before a month was up and without being paid: "You laugh? I'm serious as the back of pyjamas. ... The woman really eats up maids" (23). And Stella, on entering Atini's room, asks her to make her a cup of coffee, thanks her when it materialises (18), and then again expresses thanks when she leaves (22). Overall, the impression is given that Atini hardly interrupts the other women's monologues at all – indeed they frequently ask rhetorical questions which then spur them on to further divulgences and stories, or answer questions they have asked her themselves without waiting for a response. Nevertheless, though it seems that Atini is largely silent during the other women's monologues, indications of her verbal responses *are* present. For example, she provides answers to enquiries concerning her age, her children, the length of time she has been with Mrs Reed, and Nombini's well-being. Moreover, it is implied that she does interject and disrupt her confidante's flow of speech on occasion. During the tale of Virginia's having discovered her employer's soiled underpants in the bath, for example,

she twice interpolates a remark, though her actual words are not recorded. In the first instance, following Virginia's description of the panty floating in the bath, it appears that Atini has expressed shock and asked Virginia how she reacted. Virginia then exclaims: "What! Me? I taught her a lesson, that very first day" (19). On the second occasion, following Virginia's description of her employer's peremptory note, Atini again repeats her question, and Virginia responds similarly: "What do you mean what did I do? I did not go to school for nothing. I found a pen in her bookshelf and found a piece of paper and wrote her a note too" (19). Atini's prompts thus encourage her confidantes and contribute to propelling their stories forward – as Daymond comments, her "actions, reactions and implied comments serve to shape what is said" (2002: 336). It is also clear that she is learning from her informants, though it is not until "Atini's Reflections" that she reveals what she has made of their divulgences. However, the identity constructed between Atini and the reader as 'recipient' or addressee implies that the latter's response will in some sense parallel hers.

In "Atini's Reflections", it is evident that Atini has become more outspoken and assured, though her ability to imagine the feelings of others – even those of 'medems' – means that her opinions are measured and nuanced. Though she evinces a stoicism which hides her dreams and hopes, her resignation is counterbalanced by brief bursts of optimism for the future. She also displays a whimsicality which sets her apart from the other women in the group. For example, she compares domestic workers to wild flowers: "That's another thing about white women: they hate to see anything free. The flowers of the veld – made for fresh air, sunshine, and freedom – they pluck and imprison inside their houses. Like us, the flowers have no choice" (57). And, in "Leaving", she again uses a metaphor drawn from nature to articulate the source of her mother-in-law's resentment of her: "Manala ... had never forgiven her for being the woman in whom her son found the honey of the deep of night, woman's sweetness" (7-8). In the latter story, too, the opening passage implicitly associates Atini with a lyrical sense of the bewitchment of the dead of night, though it also introduces her desperate insomnia and despair:

It was right at the time of night when dreams glue eyelids tight and spirits, good and evil, ride the air; when lovers stir, the fire spent once more rekindled; and the souls of the chosen sigh as they leave the flesh, homeward bound. A woman lay wide-eyed on her grass mat on the floor of a tiny, round, mud hut.

(3)

If it is Atini's role to find a balance between starvation and servitude, despair and hope, it is also her role to negotiate the other women's confidences and advice. While the ways in which they interact with her are broadly supportive, they are also, as Daymond observes, manipulative and duplicitous at times:

The intensity with which the women negotiate who is inside their circle, who is tolerated and who is excluded is a direct reflection on their employment opportunities. These women cannot altogether control the hiring and firing of domestic workers in the neighbourhood (their 'medems' do that), but they can choose whether or not they will be 'helpers' to a newcomer. ... While the element of duplicity in the monologues might undermine the value of what each speaker says, the monologues do nevertheless form part of a self-correcting circle and their very variety is what offers Atini some prospect of finding a stable understanding of what she hears.

(2002: 336)

Atini therefore has to learn from the women's stories and the contradictions and variations in their discourse as they individually and collectively initiate her into the trials and tribulations of domestic work. From this process, and her own experience, she has to forge new understandings. In a sense, then, she must progress from the role of *ingénue* to that of adept informant or 'helper' herself, and her progress is charted in the temporal and experiential distance between "Leaving" and "Atini's Reflections".

3.3.3 The Sequential Unfolding of Imelda's – and Atini's – Story

Despite the circularity of the ways in which the maids return to certain issues, which then take on the force of recurrent motifs in "Women at Work", the monologues span just under three years of Atini's life, and her presence is both the common denominator and the backdrop to the other women's gossip as they guide her through what, to her, is initially a new experience. This, together with the fact that their monologues are framed by the opening story and Atini's retrospective and introspective musings in "Atini's Reflections", means that the series roughly traces a chronological sequence.²⁴ Thus, even though only four of the stories explicitly provide temporal markers, they trace Atini's development from a resourceful but disconsolate rural woman to a seasoned domestic worker.

It is clear that 'medems' exercise an "arbitrary and tyrannical power" over their maids" (Lenta 1989: 241), and are therefore unanimously projected as the common enemy by the latter.

However, the women's responses to Atini's predecessor, Imelda, cast her, too, in this role. Daymond, for example, refers to the "oral *topoi* cluster", identified by Harold Scheub, of a triad entailing "[a] central character, a helper and a villain", and then points out that "This triad in Magona's stories is composed of Atini, one or other of her fellow workers, and Imelda, the woman whom Atini had inadvertently ousted from her job" (2002: 336). She subsequently comments that:

As a mediator of all the monologues, Atini is crucial to our judgement of Imelda's actions as well. Imelda does not have a monologue to herself and so all the speakers share responsibility for her presence, but it is Atini's reception of their words that is crucial. Imelda's propensity for malicious gossip (and, it seems, for lying and stealing) casts her in the role of villain, but, just as it is difficult to be certain about the helpers who present themselves to Atini, so it becomes increasingly difficult to treat Imelda wholly as a villain. (2002: 340)

It is Virginia, in particular, who accuses Imelda of bringing bad luck, of borrowing money without returning it, and of spreading vindictive stories about Atini (36-37). Invoking a collective unanimity, she tells Atini: "All the girls are happy Imelda's gone; I can tell you that, my sister. ... That woman! She was a crook, a first class crook" (37). Though Virginia warns Atini about gossip ("Watch your mouth" [39]), she is unaware of the irony that she herself not only displays a prurient interest in Atini's affairs, but also, in siding with Atini, gossips about Imelda in turn. Atini's own role in this gossip is self-exonerating, and she displays more than a touch of *schadenfreude* in her first monologue when she confides:

of all the stories I like, the ones that show me in much better light than Imelda are the best. And boy, are there stories about her! That is what happens when you go around painting other people's names black. It all comes back to you. Yes, indeed, we do reap what we sow. Of course, I hear a lot of the things she went around telling other people about me, most not true, as can be imagined. But then, it looks like she was one to spin tales about others: maids, medems, their husbands, boyfriends, and secret lovers. Imelda knew everybody's business Couldn't keep a thing to herself, that one. Things just spilled out of her chest.

(16-17)

However, this sense that Imelda is in the wrong is over-hasty and self-serving, and Atini, at this stage, has been too easily persuaded. The way in which she subsequently discovers the shocking truth behind Imelda's failure to return within her allotted leave period – a revelation which

emerges piecemeal as the sequence progresses – casts her predecessor more in the role of victim than villain. Moreover, as one woman's version of the events which led to Imelda's protracted absence is pitted against another, both Atini and the reader become aware of the perversity of which Mrs Reed is capable.

In her opening monologue, Atini explains to her addressee that, soon after her arrival in East London, she had been employed for three weeks as a temporary substitute for Imelda, an arrangement organised by Nombini, the home-girl with whom she was staying. She had believed that Imelda had requested this leave to return home due to a sickness in her family (13). However, Imelda did not return until eleven weeks had passed and, by this time, Atini had proven herself the better worker so that Mrs Reed did not want Imelda back. Atini attempts to justify her usurpation of Imelda's job in terms of her own pressing need to find employment – "What purpose would be served by the two of us treading Desperation Street?" (15) – and then defends her actions by recounting the guarded exchange she had with Imelda, in isiXhosa, after the latter returned and arrived at Mrs Reed's front door. She reports that, standing behind her employer in the passageway, she had said to Imelda "But you stayed away longer than you said you would. And if I'd left you'd have lost it anyway". She "also reminded her that she had said she might not want the job, in fact, upon her return and I would be more than welcome to it" (15) – the first hint that Imelda had not been happy working in the Reeds' household.

Despite her rationalising here, however, Atini expresses some misgivings: "Did I do wrong? If so, would it have been less wrong to let my starving children go on starving and perhaps die?" (12). In the beginning, she explains, she inured herself to the reproach of the other 'maids', telling herself to "Remember [her] children and work for them; [she] didn't come here to look for friends" (16). However, as the other women became more accepting of her and started including her in their circle, they began to cast Imelda, rather than Atini, in an unfavourable light. It is only when Sophie reveals, in her monologue, that her 'medem' fears that Mrs Reed will "mess [Atini] up the same way she messed up Imelda" (30) that it is suggested that there was a more sinister explanation for Imelda's disappearance. Sophie then explains that, subsequent to losing her job, Imelda had been jilted by her fiancé, a doctor at Groote Schuur, because she was supposedly unable to conceive. However, he had learnt from a 'white' doctor they consulted about her infertility that Imelda *had* been pregnant previously, though she had not told him this herself (30-31). Mrs Reed had organised an abortion for Imelda, but the latter was not aware that she had

simultaneously been sterilised – a fact that only dawned on her during the consultation. As Sophie bluntly comments: “That doctor her medem had taken her to when she had stopped, that doctor cleaned up Imelda. Cleaned her up not only for what was inside her then – but for all those that would have lain inside her in time to come” (31). It is because of Mrs Reed’s grossly insensitive presumption that Sophie confides that her own employer believes Mrs Reed is “the worst medem”, though she hastens to add: “Mind you, the woman I work for sees little good in medems – in white people generally” (31).

A further twist to the tale emerges when, in the fifth monologue, Virginia informs Atini that Imelda had frequently complained about Mr and Mrs Reed: “She would tell us she hated working for those people because they were dirty inside, in their hearts and they think she is not only a slave but a she-dog” (36). The particular significance of the latter epithet is then later explained by Lillian in the seventh monologue, when she advises Atini to “find a man if you don’t want trouble from some of the masters around here; yours included, right in the front of the line too. That is how Imelda got into trouble. ... I don’t trust skinny legs, your medem. I think she knows what her husband is up to with the black girls” (49). Though Sheila has earlier cautioned Atini against such rumours – “Let me give you a tip. Friend, don’t listen to anything the other maids tell you about the woman you work for. Or her husband. ... when they tell you things – listen with one ear only” (29) – Lillian’s age and astuteness lend credibility to her version of Imelda’s story. As she herself remarks to Atini: “Well, my child, I wasn’t born yesterday. Imelda must have said yes to somebody. ... Your people – that woman knows, *suuka!* I’m not a child. They send her to their doctor. End of story, my child. The woman is so flat you can think someone ironed her stomach for her. ... But she nearly died” (49-50). Lillian is also the first to express some real sympathy for Imelda: “Poor Imelda. I didn’t like her very much. But I must say I felt very much pained for her. Yes, my heart ached for her” (49). She tells Atini that, prior to being violated by Mr Reed (a man to whom she was not in a position to say “no”), Imelda had refused the advances of a number of ‘black’ men, including Sophie’s husband, and that, subsequent to her abortion, she had become wildly promiscuous: “she was saying yes to all the men” (50).

Lillian’s revelations, in particular, throw new light on Imelda’s behaviour, and call for a more sensitive understanding of the series of setbacks to which the latter has been subjected. Moreover, readers’ identification with Atini as addressee or auditor implicates us in this process of unfolding disclosure, since it prompts a recognition of both Atini’s and our own propensity to

too readily accept gossip at face value, and a sense that Imelda has been judged too hastily on the basis of Atini's own attempts to project herself in a favourable light and garner sympathy in her opening monologue (and what we know of her predicament from "Leaving"). However, we do not know what Atini herself has made of this alternative version of Imelda's story until "Atini's reflections", in which she says nothing about Imelda directly, but makes a passing remark about "maids helping themselves to their masters (naturally, with the encouragement of these masters)" – to which she adds the rider: "Of course, that doesn't say all maids do such things" (58).

If, in stages during the course of her friends' confidences, Atini is exposed both to the particular perils and vulnerabilities that beset 'black' domestic workers in 'white' homes, and to the pitfalls of a self-interested acceptance of gossip, the reader simultaneously becomes privy to an unfolding revelation of sexual exploitation, and to the manipulateness of 'partial' versions of the truth. S/he is also able to trace Atini's progress from an inexperienced and naïve, though desperate and determined, rural woman – as she herself derogatively observes, "I was more than a *mampara*. I didn't even know what a *mampara* was then, and that should show you what a *mampara* I was" (13-14) – to a more informed and canny urban dweller, whose 'informants' have rendered intelligible that which was previously opaque to her. The distance she has travelled is measured by comments she makes in her opening and closing monologues. In the former, for instance, she remarks: "I suppose I'll learn and be like [these women of the town] one day after I've been here long enough to forget the ways of the village" (13), and she later confesses: "I would be lying if I said [the other women's] stories are uninteresting. ... A whole new world is opening right in front of my eyes" (16-17). In the latter, she comments: "Me, my child, believe me, I have lived. I have lived and life has been no mattress made of chicken feathers. Far from it. But now, the hardship I carry on my shoulders is a different hardship" (53). Significantly, if Lillian's seniority entitles her to address Atini as "my child" (46, 49, 50, 52), Atini herself has now assumed this prerogative due to the insight she has gained since arriving in East London.

However, the hardship Atini now experiences, though different to the abject poverty of her life in the Transkei, is not only the daily tedium of domestic work ("I ran away from a hell of starvation, torn clothes, sick children. ... Now, I find that I am in hell. And I am a slave" [60]), but also, and more especially, the anguish occasioned by isolation from her children – an anguish which has not diminished over time, but intensified. In "Leaving", for example, the pain of separation is figured in both literal and metaphoric terms. On a literal level, soon after Atini sets

out from her rural home she is forced to expel the milk in her breasts, milk which should have fed her six-month-old baby, Thandiwe:

Kneeling she took out first the one then the other breast. Plumped hard and veined, they were hot to her crying hand. Squirt-squirt; jets of white streamed to foam the ground. Squirt-squirt-squirt: the greedy soil quenched its thirst with her baby's life while near her knees the woman's eyes wet a spot.

(10)

Similarly, the word "Ttssp!" (7-10) – a synesthetic translation of feeling into sound – is repeated thirteen times in this narrative to capture Atini's heartache, which is also metaphorically figured as the bleeding caused by a thorn: "A thorn long embedded in her heart twisted itself. Ttssp! A drop of blood squeezed out of her heart Ttssp!" (7). In addition, variations of the refrain "if I couldn't do that, I would not be a mother", both in this story and in "Atini's Reflections" (6, 8, 10, 53) embody the unbearable dilemma with which she was – and is still – faced: that she cannot be both provider and nurturer simultaneously. In other words, ensuring her children's survival entails relinquishing their love and watching them grow: "The only way she could be a mother to her children, she saw, would be to leave them" (6). Atini is faced, like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, with what Lawrence Langer terms "a choice between impossibilities" (qtd in Vickroy 2002: 34).

3.3.4 "Big stumbling blocks": Orality versus Writing

Why is an organic relationship with oral culture an impractical aim for the fiction-writer to pursue? Large issues are involved in this question, issues of culture and of class. These issues concern the cultural relationship between literacy and orality, with the added complication that literacy involves, at some stage, transition to education in a non-vernacular language; and also the contribution of the distinction between literacy and orality to the class differentiation of the African population.

– Michael Vaughan (1990: 192)

As a series, "Women at Work" involves not only repetition-with-variation or a reiterative structure in terms of its recurrent motifs and themes, but also a tension between its polyphonic/multi-vocal qualities as an aggregate narrative – a short story cycle written in a mock oral style and employing a collective mode of narration – and its univocal qualities. This is apparent in the sameness of the speakers' concerns and the text's focus on the unfolding development of the central protagonist and recipient of the other women's divulgences, Atini. Though, as Ryan claims, Atini is a

representative figure and her experiences typify those of a larger group, her ‘voice’ and story are afforded the most space in the sequence (roughly a third), and the chronological tracing of her personal odyssey individualises her story. Thus “Atini’s Reflections” both asserts her newfound collective identity, premised on a commonality of experience with her fellow workers, and is imbued with her very personal sense of her attenuated identity in her earlier role as wife and mother – a “different hardship” to replace the desperation which earlier drove her to the city. In the opening frame story, “Leaving”, she is described as still feeling some love for her husband, though she is caustic about his neglect to provide for his family and the annual pregnancies he inflicts upon her when he returns home from the mine: “Ttssp! Her children hungered, daily. Ttssp! Her husband, was a dog that unsheathes itself onto a tuft of grass. He forgot the grass he’d peed on. Forgot what came of that” (8). However, she has become even further estranged from him since her arrival in East London: “Unfortunately, when I went back I missed him by a few days. Perhaps it was just as well. What would he have said to me? And I to him?” (55). She is also estranged from her three eldest children, who have remained in the Transkei – as she remarks, “Nomakhwezi is the woman of that home. She cooks for her brother, Andile, and her sister, Nomso. She also teaches them work” (54). And, in reality, though her two youngest children have joined her in East London, she lives apart from them: they are under another woman’s paid care, though Atini is able to visit them on her off-days (54). She is painfully aware, then, of the emotional cost of separation from her children: “These children I work for, I do not see. Soon I will be a stranger to them” (60).

Atini’s “solitary suffering” (Barrett 1985: v) – and that of the other domestic workers – can thus only partially be compensated for by their membership of a surrogate community constituted by their shared experience of loss and exploitation. If the youngest domestic worker, Joyce, speaks for all the women when she declares: “We live in hope of living one day. But the one day never comes and we die poor, hoping still” (43), the eldest, Lillian, confirms the accuracy of Joyce’s words: “We live to work, that’s all. Nothing else. It is no life. No life at all” (52). And Atini herself reflects: “when a woman is alone – alone at night and can’t sleep thinking of all these problems – then, she cries. She cries because she can see she may never escape from this hell” (60). All of these observations draw attention to the unrelieved anxiety and despair that are reflected in the title of Magona’s volume as a whole, since “living” and “loving”, for most of these women, are synonymous with heartache and anguish. The harsh reality is that the migrant

wage-labour system and the impoverishment of the ‘homelands’ are causing the disintegration of their marriages, families and traditional rural communities. However, if the support network to which Atini belongs is founded on a common experience of deprivation, estrangement and loneliness, it is also premised on resilience and stoicism. This is evident in the sentiments Atini expresses immediately preceding her assertion quoted above: “But I am not alone. All the other women, like me, are suffering. That is why we laugh at our troubles. ... We have so many and they are the same” (60). These sentiments echo a claim she makes earlier, after she has pointed out that it is better to have a poorly paid job than no work at all: “Meanwhile, we laugh a lot about our work in the kitchens of white women. We laugh because if we did not laugh what would we do? Cry? Which maid would help which other one wipe away the tears?” (59). This oscillation between laughter and weeping, solidarity and solitude suggests that they co-exist in equal measure – indeed, might ultimately be indistinguishable from each other.

The vulnerability and limited bargaining power of the group to which Atini belongs (and of domestic workers in general) in relation to larger determining circumstances – competition for scarce, poorly remunerated and insecure employment, limited agency and opportunities to effect change, and a dependence on the fortunes and self-serving whims of their employers – are evident in the résumé Atini provides, in her final monologue, of the current circumstances of some of the women who have become her friends in the city. She explains that

two or three were left here when their medems, including the Advice Office woman who was always telling us about our rights, went overseas with their families. Those took even their cats and dogs with them but not one of them talked about taking their maid. Which proves it doesn’t matter how long a maid stays with these people and how many times a day they tell her: “Oh Sheila, we love you and we don’t know what we’d do without you,” – when they decide what to do about themselves, it is their cars, their dogs, their cats, their houses, their friends and their anything-else-but-the-maid they think about.

(56-57)

Of Joyce, Atini comments: “The young woman, so sure she is not here for long when I first met her, is still here”, but she then explains that Joyce has not relinquished her aspiration to pursue a medical career and is applying to become a nurse at a training hospital as “a stop-gap measure” on the path to becoming a doctor. Atini is less sceptical than the other maids about Joyce’s ambitions: “I, myself, wish her luck, I pray she succeeds. But I know a lot of the other maids laugh at her behind her back. They do not believe she will escape from this place. They say she can forget

about education” (55). Lillian’s prospects, too, have not improved as yet: “The old woman’s hopes of a pension are still on hold” (55). Atini divulges that Lillian’s medem died in a motor accident, and that Lillian feels her late employer’s widowed husband should be afforded a decent period in which to mourn before she can broach the topic of her pension and ask him to contact his mother-in-law. Given the family’s bereavement, Lillian is in any event unsure whether she will be retained for much longer (56). Thus the circumstances of the women in Atini’s support group have not remained static: the women’s unity in suffering, the cohesiveness of their surrogate ‘community’, and even the meagre stability afforded them by virtue of their identities as domestic workers, have been tested by unforeseen events and external factors over which they have no control.

Following the above disclosures, “Atini’s Reflections” and Magona’s series conclude on an ambivalent note, with Atini poised between resigning herself to a sense of her own confinement and lack of alternative options, and celebrating the news she has just received of Joyce’s chance to escape servitude through improved educational prospects – an overseas scholarship and the opportunity to study to become a doctor. Although, ironically, Atini initially attributes Joyce’s lucky break to the divine intervention of “the Man Upstairs” (60), she does subsequently acknowledge Joyce’s own resolve and perseverance: “Oh, I am so happy for her. Shows you ... you have to be determined. There *are* ways. If you know what you want and you don’t give up ...” (60, ellipses in original). The fact, however, that the sequence ends on this elliptical or inconclusive note suggests that, for most, if not all, of Magona’s other protagonists the possibility of an improvement in, let alone a reversal of, their straitened circumstances is pointedly deferred to the next generation. Significantly, in this regard, when Atini earlier thinks of Joyce, her hopes for her eldest daughter are rekindled:

[Joyce] is only four years older than Nomakhwezi and perhaps that is why I want to believe in her dreams. I have dreams too for my children although I don’t tell them to the others. Dreams are like secret lovers; elusive and prone to bolt if you divulge them. I lock mine up in the deepest chamber of my heart and only take them out on lonesome nights. And then, like a magic mirror, they dazzle me with bounteous hope for the morrow.

(55)

However, in revealing her deepest private maternal desires to her addressee, in the hope no doubt of striking a sympathetic chord, she is, by virtue of her own logic, jeopardising the chance that

these dreams will be realised – an irony which gestures towards the irresolution of her narrative at the conclusion of her final monologue and of “Women at Work”.

The defiant, if vulnerable, *sensus communis* evoked in Magona’s sequence asserts its inherent value as a mechanism of survival *despite* its existence as an effect of colonial and apartheid policies, legislated racial segregation, and economic inequalities and exploitation. Characterised by an unresolved tension between resilience and resignation, group solidarity and individual anguish, “Women at Work” – like Head’s *The Collector of Treasures* – diverges from “the literary tradition of the titanic clash, often staged between characters who are little more than ciphers representing self-evident moral extremes” (Nixon 1996: 249-250), even though the series demonstrates both the ubiquity and the human cost of triple oppression in South Africa. In dealing with the ordinary or everyday experiences and struggles of ‘black’ domestic workers, the stories do not avoid ‘black’/‘white’ conflict, however, but relocate this to the ‘unspectacular’ realm of the domestic – more specifically, the ‘white’ household – where larger confrontations play out in microcosm, and small victories and acts of resistance compete against seemingly insurmountable systemic odds. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the women in Magona’s series are unremittingly and virulently critical of their ‘white’ female employers/“*mlungu* women” (13), including those with well-meaning ‘liberal’ pretensions, they are forced into submission by the necessity of ensuring the survival of their children. Yet they remain aware of the subversive potential, at least, of mobilising ‘black’ domestic workers to demand better wages and working conditions, and are also cognisant, with varying degrees of analytical sophistication, of the ‘race’ and class differences that militate against a broader non-racial female solidarity, a ‘sisterhood’ defined in opposition to patriarchy.

Moreover, certain of the women recognise the pervasiveness of male domination in the ambivalent ‘rewards’ of male-generated affluence for ‘white’ women who are housewives, housebound, and infantilised or disempowered in their own homes, and Lillian, in particular, presents a forceful indictment of the sexual behaviour and irresponsibility of ‘black’ men. Having divulged to Atini that one of the men whose attentions Imelda refused was Sophie’s husband, a clerk at the Bantu Administration Office, she responds to Atini’s obvious expression of shock: “Don’t give me those eyes. Men will always be dogs; they will have more than one woman, my child. It has been like that since the time of our forefathers” (49). Lillian subsequently comments that her own daughter “had been with a husband of sorts; you know the kind that has never heard

of *lobola*? The African who wants to think he is coloured and just takes a wife? My daughter's husband was that kind. A dog" (50). And Atini herself uses this epithet to describe her husband after he has gone to the village of her own relatives to berate them for her dereliction of wifely duties:

There, my people laughed at him as if his pants had dropped to his ankles, in full view of the whole village. "You left here, years ago, with our daughter," they said. "Today, after she has given you so many children, when you have a misunderstanding, you come to us? Had she been a bad wife, we believe we would have seen your face here within weeks of your taking her. You, it is, who must be the bad husband."

That is what my people told my husband. They say he left like a dog who returns from a hunt with a fox bite.

(55)

According to this view, if it is women's role to provide children, it is their husbands' to provide for their families and, as both Lillian and Atini note, in this regard men are unreliable. Lillian, for example, comments that "This husband of [my daughter] did not know that children eat" (51) and, in "Leaving", Atini realises that "Her husband was not one to remember his wife once he was in the gold mines of Johannesburg. ... Although she loved him still she had slowly come to accept that, unlike husbands of most women in the village, her husband would never be a provider; not to her, not to his children; he didn't even give his mother support" (5-6). Overall, then, the women in "Women at Work" are acutely conscious of the injustices to which they are exposed on a daily basis, and outspoken and articulate in their condemnation of the gendered, racialised, and socio-economic constraints which force them into domestic servitude.

Geertsema argues that *Life at Home* is positioned within, and radically subverts, the genre of the *plaasroman* in South Africa by presenting an unsentimental and non-nostalgic rewriting of this genre from the perspective of one of those conventionally occluded from narratives of this type – specifically, in this instance, a 'black' farm labourer's son. He maintains, for example, that Matlou's voice "subverts the farm novel and lets its silences speak by subverting its formal coherence and the cohesiveness of its landscapes. [It] may be understood as constituting a voice of alterity in the farm novel" (1999: 187). In a similar way, "Women at Work" focuses on the 'submerged' – but substantial – population of domestic workers in South Africa, thereby drawing attention to marginalised voices and experiences.²⁵ It thus falls within a 'tradition' of fictional and documentary works which describe the experiences of 'black' working-class women.²⁶ As Isabel

Hofmeyr has commented in regard to the last of these categories, however, there is a certain interventionism implicit in efforts to record the life-stories of domestic workers in South Africa, since such projects have largely been undertaken by ‘white’ female academics via interviews translated from the workers’ vernacular language into English. She points out, for example, that:

the format of the biographical interview prevents informants from expressing their experience through alternative fictive conventions derived from popular, oral story telling traditions that are, for example, *not necessarily chronological*.

(1991: 131, emphasis added)

Through the adoption of what Elleke Boehmer terms “Multi-vocality as a method and a form ... the technique of sharing responsibility for narration with a chorus of voices” (1992: 245), and by drawing on Xhosa oral traditions to dramatise the “interplay of narration and reception” and evoke the “reciprocities of oral performance” (Daymond 2002: 335, 337), “Women at Work” appears to represent ‘black’ working-class women’s stories in a more ‘authentic’ and less mediated way. Arguably, too, Magona’s own roots in Gungululu in rural Transkei and experiences as a domestic worker in Cape Town, recounted in her autobiographical works *To My Children’s Children* (1990) and its sequel *Forced to Grow* (1992), attest to the veracity of the themes in “Women at Work” and the opinions expressed by the women she seeks to represent. Daymond comments, for example, on Magona’s description in her first autobiography of her experience of commuting on buses with other domestic workers: “They had retained, in informal guise, the rhetorical skills of their forebears and used these to record, lament and mock their employers’ attitudes, and instruct other women in ways of resisting their power”. She concludes that “what Magona represents in ‘Women at Work’ has its origins in two forms of speech, the first being formal tales and the second the actual, everyday words of working women who had not been silenced and were refusing to take alterity as their self-image” (2002: 343).

Thus, by adopting the first-person mock-oral format to ostensibly present the speakers’ own ‘voices’ and ‘first-hand accounts’ in “Women at Work” – a strategy facilitated by the short story cycle format – Magona circumvents the conventional filtering of documentary reportage. This strategy serves to convey the illusion of immediacy and actuality, and the directness and anecdotal air of gossip. It also, as suggested earlier, constructs an identity between Atini, the explicit addressee/audience, and the implied reader, creating the impression, for the latter, of having been taken – like Atini – into each woman’s confidence and of having unmediated access

to her own version of her circumstances. Added to this, the notion that the implied reader will respond to the women's stories and divulgements in much the same way that Atini does further reinforces the identity between them.

Yet all of these claims are problematised by the fact that Magona's composite narrative, despite its "semblance of mimesis" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 109), is in the final analysis not only a fictional construct but also a linguistic sleight-of-hand. "Women at Work" is a sequence of what MacKenzie terms seemingly "'artless' oral-style stories" (1999: 45), and the 'gossip' and 'confidences' it relays are not conveyed in speech and in isiXhosa, but written in English. Vaughan succinctly expresses the problem here:

through the practice of writing, the writer enters into a more specific and exclusive relationship; that is, with a readership. ... We can never derive the nature of the non-reading population's 'response', its 'relationship' to the writer's practice, from the terms in which this population is conceptualized in the practice. ... In brief, the writer cannot, in a really organic sense, write for the non-reading population, but only about it.

(1990: 196-197)

Besides, as Mphahlele matter-of-factly pointed out in a discussion of the ignorance 'black' and 'white' South Africans have of each other outside of the workplace, the intimate knowledge that 'black' domestic workers have of their 'white' employers' lifestyles, habits and modes of behaviour is not generally disseminated to a broader reading public, since "maids do not possess the writing ability we are thinking about here" (1987: 48). This disjunction between orality and literacy (and between Magona, the writer, and many of her supposed subjects) is ironically foregrounded by Atini herself when she comments, in her final monologue, "I know not to read. I cannot write. ... Those are very big stumbling blocks in anybody's way [to achieving success]" (53). Later she again reflects: "I wish I could tell [my husband] a thing or two ... but since we are 'red' and cannot write, how can I?" (55). Through inadvertently highlighting Benjamin's notion of the disjunction between oral storytelling and print culture, Atini reveals the reflexive premise that lies at the core of Magona's text: that it is fiction, not fact, and that the larger reality to which it ostensibly refers is one characterised by illiteracy or semi-literacy.

3.4 Conclusion

In both Matlou's and Magona's short story sequences, the "inscribed vocalization" (Innes and Rooney, qtd in Daymond 2002: 333) or seeming orality of the stories accords with certain qualities associated specifically with postcolonial stories and cycles, qualities noted in my first chapter. It is worth repeating Pratt's argument here, since both Matlou and Magona draw on the oral and linguistic resources of their cultural communities:

The tradition of orality in the short story has a special significance in cultures where literacy is not the norm, or where the standard literary language is that of the oppressor. ... In contexts such as these, the short story provides ... a genre where oral and non-standard speech, popular and regional culture, and marginal experience, have some tradition of being at home, and the form best-suited to reproducing the length of most oral speech events.

(Pratt 1981: 190)

However, two very different notions of the individual's relation to community (and to a sense of belonging and place) are staged in *Life at Home* and "Women at Work", though in each there is the common thread of the dehumanising suffering inflicted on individuals by apartheid, and their precarious hold on stability and sanity as a result.

In *Life at Home*, it is evident that the protagonist, Medupe, is 'unhomed' and bereft of community, that his identity has been damaged and uprooted as a result of a series of experiences that threaten to overwhelm him and that render unstable the border between reality and hallucination, actuality and fiction. Matlou has produced an honest, if harrowing, rendering of trauma and his stories bear witness not only to the deadening impact of suffering and poverty under apartheid, but also to the author-narrator-protagonist's efforts to survive this onslaught on his individual integrity. The use of the singular 'voice', an oral-style form of address, and a mixture of the real and the fantastical in the stories is ultimately premised not on literary choice but on "a cultural experience that comes from the way people ... cope with their existence" (Dorfman, qtd in Long-Innes 1998: 182 n.610), or a "social matrix [in which] improvisation is not merely a formal literary device but a function of living in the world" (Kumkum Sangari, qtd in Maithufi 2010: 5). In other words, Matlou is using "non-literary, colloquial forms of narrative self-expression" that are vernacular and demotic (Qiong 2011: 158). Moreover, though *Life at Home* is a monologic work, it does not – indeed, cannot – reflect a dominant ideology or

hegemonic regime, given the social marginalisation of the one who ‘enunciates’. In a sense, then, in these stories the subaltern *does* ‘speak’ and, to recall Gayle Sato’s argument, it is incumbent upon the reader to ‘listen’, rather than, literally – or literarily – to appropriate that ‘voice’. Thus, while Matlou’s text *may* be approached as a disjunctive short story cycle, the author himself is unaware of the literary implications of that genre: his stories are an attempt to transcribe the terrors of his lived reality and the survival mechanisms he has developed in response to a political system in which the ‘normal’ *is* abnormal, and extraordinary suffering is ‘ordinary’.

By contrast, Magona has quite consciously adopted the short story cycle format to produce a composite text, the multivocality in “Women at Work” suggesting a chorus of voices that reiterate certain themes to produce a sense of the communality of the women’s experiences. Nevertheless, the solidarity that is expressed by the group of domestic workers is offset by their individual anguish as a result of their alienation from their families and original communities. To illustrate this, the story sequence contains two strands – one consisting of the intersubjective relationships implied by the women’s gossip sessions which, although they are presented as individual monologues in the text, entail both speaking *and* listening, and the other tracing the unfolding narrative of Atini’s individual or personal odyssey and increasing estrangement from family and a sense of ‘home’. The two strands thus reveal a tension between resilience and suffering, and between the sustaining influence of a surrogate ‘community’ or support group and the pain that, individually, the women experience when they are alone – an isolation which is both physical and emotional. However, though the vulnerability of the domestic workers is accentuated by their seclusion in ‘white’ homes, and though they run the risk of jeopardising their jobs if they express dissatisfaction with their working and living conditions, they nevertheless do engage in small acts of defiance and subversion in the households in which they feel enslaved, and unburden their grievances to each other.

Thus, despite the fact that domestic workers are largely semi-literate and therefore unable to record their experiences in writing, the intimate knowledge they have of their employers *is* passed on by word of mouth – as “Women at Work” seeks to demonstrate or simulate through the very format it has, for the most part, adopted. As an example of a series of stories which, in Pratt’s terms, take “the form of represented speech” and, more specifically, of “first person narration in an oral setting”, “Women at Work” bears out her contention that oral-style short story cycles are “supported [not only] by literary precedents ... [but also] by living ... oral narrative traditions”

(1981: 189). However, Kennedy's previously quoted comment is once again pertinent here – that is, that the “composite text ... curiously resembles the gathering of a group to express its collective identity. ... Yet, as a written artefact, a product of print culture, [it] always assumes an ironic relation to the scene of communal story-telling that it obscurely simulates” (1995: 194).

A further irony pertains in this case, however, since ultimately there *is* no organic, self-regulating and autonomous community in “Women at Work”, as is evident in Atini's pointed comment that her friends are forced to visit her either singly or in pairs, rather than as a group, for fear of offending her employer:

they've taken to coming over to my room in the evenings. Funny thing though, it's never more than two at any one time. If one of them finds two already here, she'll either not stay or one of the two who were here before her will leave. I wonder why they do that? Really, these women of the town are not the same as the women in the village.

(13)

As Daymond points out, by comparison to the oral culture of the village, in which women's stories were “usually performed in or near the homestead to an audience composed of family members and intimate friends” (2002: 334), in the city “[e]ach of Magona's women speaks about her life in a compelled isolation. She speaks before a mostly silent but active audience of one, Atini, and she does so while closeted in Atini's [room] to which she is a surreptitious or after-hours visitor” (2002: 333). The fugitive network of friends and acquaintances which “Women at Work” represents thus does not negate the reality of the essentially isolated lives of these women and the systemic constraints militating against their construction of a viable community. As Daymond points out, “the sequence shows [that] Magona's women's talk neither gives them sufficient power to shape their present circumstances, nor will it recreate the basis of shared knowledge and trust on which their oral culture depended. Because each woman is compelled to speak alone, she remains effectively powerless, despite the ‘knowing otherwise’ that speech can achieve” (2002: 333). And finally, while Magona herself may be perceived, in certain respects, as a ‘native informant’, given her familiarity with the lived experiences of domestic workers, in the act of writing she speaks *about* (and not *for* or *with*) such workers, and *to* those who employ them. In other words, the implied reader for whom she writes is not a member of the constituency about which she writes, and there is an irresolvable disjunction between the intratextual audience and the extratextual readership. In the final analysis, as Vaughan claims, “any direct analogy between

the oral storyteller and the ‘storytelling’ writer is misleading” (1990: 199). Thus, once again in this text the central paradox of the adoption of an oral format and a collective mode of narration in short story cycles emerges – the paradox that these strategies approximate but cannot reproduce speaking voices invoking a community of listeners since, by definition, literary texts are addressed, by a solitary writer and in writing, to a solitary reader.

Notes

¹ This theme, of course, is not new, given the prominence of what has rather problematically come to be known as the ‘Jim comes to Joburg’ trope in much South African fiction. Tony Voss points out, for example, that reference to this trope “as anything more than a late regional variant of [the theme of tradition versus modernity in modern African literature] is reductive and impoverishing: it prolongs the currency of an opprobrious epithet, it privileges Johannesburg, the Chamber of Mines, and male experience, and it ignores the ... extraordinarily prefigurative example of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*” (1994: 16). Voss’s allusion to the Chamber of Mines refers to a recruiting film the latter produced, entitled *Jim Comes to Joburg* (20). A feature film, *African Jim* (also known as *Jim Comes to Joburg*), the first to star an all-‘black’ cast and to specifically address ‘black’ audiences in South Africa, was made in 1949. It starred Dolly Rathebe, and was directed by Donald Swanson, produced by Eric Rutherford, and distributed by Villon Films.

² The first-person point of view is not uniform throughout *Life at Home*, but employed in four of the six stories (“Farm-boy”, “My Lifestyle”, “Man Against Himself” and “My Ugly Face”). However, the remaining two stories (“Life at Home” and “Carelessman Was a Madman”), though predominantly narrated in the third person, open with observations in the first-person plural and singular, respectively: “Where *we* were, *we* could really feel what the life of a slave was like” (23, emphasis added), and “He used to chew his pillow until 3.30 a.m. The grass-eater ... is still mad, *I* tell you, he used to chew his pillow until 3.30 a.m.” (77, emphasis added).

³ The sketch which illustrates both the opening and closing of “My Ugly Face” depicts Medupe on his mother’s back wailing “Mama”, to which his mother responds “Aag Aiii Joël shut up!” (88). If silence is “golden”, that is of greater value than speech (silver), and Medupe falls asleep on his mother’s back and therefore subsides into silence, the narrative events which interpose between the opening and the conclusion of the story – since these are relayed in language – are afforded the quality of a dream or nightmare. In other words, the story interrogates its own conditions of being as a realistic account of ‘real’ events.

⁴ Though Maithufi indicates that the manuscripts contained many illustrations, only a selection of the latter accompanied the three stories of Matlou’s that were published in *Staffrider*. Some of these illustrations are reproduced in *Life at Home*, together with others presumably derived from the drafts of the other stories in the collection. In “The Struggles”, a story which Matlou also submitted to *Staffrider* but which was not published, he specifically requests that the photograph he attached to the manuscript be included in the magazine. Maithufi comments here that “Matlou’s appeal to have his photograph published next to (or in) his story raises interesting questions about the relationship between text, image and how the author wishes to be seen”. He concludes that, “for Matlou, both media – story and photograph – play a role in his self-presentation. The activity of projecting the self, then, involves both text and image” (2010: 27). The original drafts of Matlou’s stories were initially in the possession of Andries Oliphant, who was an editor at COSAW when *Life at Home* was published and was involved in the process of collating the volume. They were subsequently returned to Matlou’s family, after Matlou himself died of unknown causes in 1991, and they are currently held by his younger brother (Maithufi 2013).

⁵ Matlou's intense self-awareness and reflection on his "preoccupation as an artist" are explicitly staged in a comment he wrote in the margins of one of the drawings that he produced that was not attached to a story: "Joël Matlou – up and coming artist and story teller" (see Maithufi 2010: 32).

⁶ When *Staffrider* was launched in 1978, one of its aims, spelt out in the first editorial, was

to respond, as publishers, to the great surge of creative activity which has been one of the more hopeful signs of recent times A feature of much of the new writing is its 'direct line' to the community in which the writer lives. This is a two-way line. The writer is attempting to voice the community's experience ... and his immediate audience is the community.

(1978: 1)

Littered with emendations, grammatical errors, sketches and comments in the margins, dated and accompanied by multiple copies of his signature/name and address – as if to affirm his *bona fides* – Matlou's original manuscripts show ample evidence of his huge determination to reach a wider audience, but obvious struggle to write.

⁷ Indeed, the fact that the unpublished story, "The Struggles", written in 1980, rehearses events related in "Man Against Himself", with some variations, suggests that Matlou had no such design in mind – and, more specifically perhaps, a temporally sequential one. On the contrary, it might be argued that he felt a compulsion to return to and recast the experience depicted in the earlier story.

⁸ Whilst it could be argued that "Carelessman" is intended to be read as an entirely independent story, disconnected from the others in *Life at Home* that deal directly with Medupe (a claim supported by the collection's subtitle "and Other Stories"), the third-person narration of the story is interrupted, in the opening paragraph, by the phrase "I tell you" (77), which acts as a frame linking this story to the first-person narration of the previous stories in which Medupe is the narrator. And "My Ugly Face", the final story, returns to Medupe as narrator-protagonist, though its temporal dislocation, irrationalism and revisionist qualities as an alternative version of Medupe's youth ensure that it cannot be viewed as a continuation of his earlier, linearly unfolding story – unless viewed from an alternative and unconventional perspective.

⁹ Geertsema argues that the odd use of the preposition in the phrase "broke *into* the jail" might be interpreted as "an instance of ... 'foreignising translation', and thus an othering mechanism, or it could signify that Matlou and his family are not really escaping" (1999: 212).

¹⁰ Again, Geertsema comments on the ambiguity of this claim: "It is not really clear from this passage whether 'where' refers to 'far away' or to 'home'. A reading of 'home' as a dismal place 'where no one lives or grows' is particularly persuasive in view of the last story in the collection, where the narrator's family is described as living in complete destitution ... and with little scope for the kind of enriching life which results in 'growth'. This is also suggested with respect to life on the farm, where there is 'little progress' (14) and life in the township: 'life at home was really like at hell' (40)" (1999: 209-210).

¹¹ In “The Struggles” Medupe refers to himself as “Born to Suffer” on four occasions.

¹² Though there is no direct reference to apartheid *per se* in “Man Against Himself”, Matlou is quite explicit that the stories in *Life at Home* are set against the backdrop of apartheid. In the opening paragraph of the first story, “Farm-boy”, for example, Medupe comments: “It all started like a dream, when I was a farm-boy near the Magaliesberg mountain. The South African flag was still in the air, waving its colour-signs” [11]). And, in “My Lifestyle” (49), he describes the consternation occasioned by a police raid in Winterveldt. However, there is a virtual absence of reference to politically significant events in the years he specifically delineates. In “Farm-boy” Medupe indicates that he is nine in 1962 (17), and in “Man Against Himself” he comments that he is twenty-three (56). However, though the first four stories span the years 1954 to 1976 no mention is made, for example, of major events such as the Sharpeville massacre and the Soweto uprising, nor, for that matter, bannings, school and township unrest, boycotts, and the controversial creation of the homeland of Bophuthatswana (in which Mabopane was located). Some of Matlou’s independent drawings, however, do reference explicitly political themes, such as “School Unrest Moved to Mabopane” and “Chief Patrick Mphephu of Venda” (see Maithufi 2010: 55).

¹³ The fact that Ndebele read “Man Against Himself” (and, perhaps, “My Lifestyle”, which appeared in *Staffrider* in 1980) independently or in isolation, relates back to the issue of the ways in which the publishing history of individual stories ‘conditions’ readers’ responses, since Ndebele could not, at the time of writing “Rediscovery of the Ordinary”, have encountered the other four stories that go to make up *Life at Home*: his opinions on Matlou’s writing were necessarily constrained to a single story – or, at best, two.

¹⁴ Mbulelo Mzamane, for example, maintains that “politics pervades all aspects of a blackman’s existence” (qtd in Gaylard 2009: 49). Sole similarly points out that “individual life for black people under apartheid could never be interior or private, given the manner in which racist laws enabled the authorities to intrude on the private lives of individuals at any time”. He then concludes that “Ndebele’s paean to the ‘everyday’ ... is simply insufficient in a situation where the ‘ordinary’ and its normal activities have been subjugated to a consistently denigrating power” (2001: 107-108).

¹⁵ The way Chapman uses the term ‘spectacular’ here, however, differs from Ndebele’s demarcation of a “highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation” in which “[t]he visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation” (1991: 37) are rendered in “the spectacular contest between the powerless and the powerful” (1991: 43).

¹⁶ Interestingly, the original version of “Man Against Himself” published in *Staffrider* is described as “An *excerpt* from a story by Joel Matlou” (1979: 24, emphasis added), suggesting that only a part of the entire narrative was published. This version also included a poem which is not reproduced in *Life at Home*.

¹⁷ The equation of author and narrator-protagonist is indisputable, given the effort Matlou made to identify himself as both via photographs, self-portraits, and multiple versions of his name or signature on the drafts of his stories. Maithufi comments that “the protagonist-storyteller and the

author in Matlou's collection is one and the same person. ... The evidence is so obvious in the notes he has provided COSAW publishers when he was asking for his stories to be published" (2000).

¹⁸ Marc Maufort paraphrases Delbaere's explanation of these terms as varieties of magical realism, and usefully outlines the commonalities between these forms, postmodernism and, by implication, trauma:

Magic realism ... is often used by postcolonial or minority writers to express a reaction against the center, against hegemonic society. Magic realism reinforces the postmodern concept of the "ex-centric". It serves to designate a "fracture in the real," a sense of crisis. In ... "psychic realism," a variant on magic realism, the 'magic' constitutes "almost a reification of the hero's inner conflict" ... [it] records the character's fissured vision of the real. ... "grotesque realism" ... tends to further distort and amplify reality ... [and may] be used "for any sort of hyperbolic distortion that creates a sense of strangeness through the confusion or interpenetration of different realms like animate/inanimate or human/animal

(2002: 24-25)

¹⁹ More recently, similarly uncomfortable questions have been raised by the TRC process, since the hearings themselves not only entailed selection, narrativisation and translation, but were also subsequently appropriated and re-presented in fictionalised memoirs, theatre, poems, novels and films.

²⁰ The use of the term "maid" – or worse, "girl" – to refer to adult domestic workers is obviously derogatory, and the deferential terms "medem/madam" and "master" are equally controversial. They are the terms Magona has her characters use, however – and not always un-ironically.

²¹ Daymond maintains that "each of the individual life-story monologues in [Magona's] sequence is 'spoken' in the mode of the dramatic monologue of western literature" (2002: 331). However, though these pieces meet the formal requirements of the dramatic monologue – they are patently not to be ascribed to the author, are addressed to an auditor whose presence is intimated by verbal clues, and a sense of the speaker's distinctive personality emerges from his/her words (Abrams 1999: 70) – it is debatable whether Magona had this western form in mind, since it could rather be argued that she was attempting to capture the cadences and idiosyncrasies of ordinary speech in the most direct way. Michael Vaughan comments, for example, that "The most dramatic means available within the realist tradition [to introduce other, subordinate voices into the narrative when there is a 'prevailing narrative voice'] ... is the direct speech of characters. One effect is to give the impression that no constraint is put upon the expression of characters ... [They] are enabled to speak in their own voices, no matter how different from that of the narrator" (1990: 198). However, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan makes the point that "Even when a narrative text presents passages of pure dialogue [or, in this case, monologues in free direct discourse] ... there is in addition to the writers or speakers of this discourse a 'higher' narratorial authority responsible for 'quoting' the dialogue or 'transcribing' the written records" (2003: 89). Thus, though there does not *appear* to be a "prevailing narrative voice" framing the eight monologues themselves in "Women at Work", the opening frame story is written in conventional third-person mode – the

suggestion being that *this* is the “‘higher’ narratorial authority” to which Rimmon-Kenan refers above.

²² Cock points out, for example, that “Domestic workers are among the most exploited groups in a society marked by extreme inequality. They are situated at the convergence of three lines along which social inequality is generated – class, race and sex. These inequalities are related to the capitalist system of production in South Africa, which is not unique, but is perhaps uniquely vicious in its degree of exploitation and repression” (1980: 5). Of Cock’s groundbreaking study, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*, Darcy Du Toit comments: “[in d]escribing the different worlds inhabited by white women and their black female servants, her book developed a paradigm of the domestic employment relationship which to a large extent remains valid today: a relationship which is liberating for the [white] employer but exploitative of the [black] employee, even though both are women experiencing the general oppression of women, but in vastly different ways” (2010: 1).

²³ Implicitly, Atini is invoking the Hegelian notion that the master-servant relationship is a dialectical relationship of mutual, if unacknowledged, dependency. In Hegel’s analysis, this relationship of interdependency is allied to the parent/child relationship, and entails a struggle for reciprocal acknowledgement or respect which can never be resolved (see Hegel 1977: 104-119). David Carr paraphrases: “The one thing parents cannot give children (or children parents, for that matter) is recognition as independent and self-sufficient persons. If we seek that ... we must look elsewhere (1986: 141). Carr points out, further, that the conflict at the core of the analogous master/slave parent/child relationship does not actually involve triumph or defeat: “Recognition, not victory, turns out to have been the real point of the struggle. If I win I get only existence, not the acknowledged right to exist; if I lose ... I get neither” (1986: 142). In other words, the resolution of the opposition is based not on its inversion but, paradoxically, on a possibility which is by definition not obtainable within the set parameters.

²⁴ The monologues are not arranged in a strictly chronological order, however. For example, if the first monologue, “Atini”, is set eighteen months after Atini first became employed two months after she left her children in Gungugulu, the third monologue – Sheila’s – occurs only a few months after Atini took up the job (Sheila expresses surprise that Atini has lasted more than a month with Mrs Reed) (12, 54, 21). Sophie’s monologue, which immediately follows Sheila’s, is also set at this time: she is visiting Atini the day after the meeting to which Sheila invited Atini at Sophie’s employer’s house, to enquire why she had not attended. Both Sheila and Sophie ask after Atini’s youngest children (27, 32), and are aware that she has been trying to bring them to East London. In fact, Sheila gives the distinct impression that the children have already arrived. She first asks Atini: “Did you say you have a little one? *Ag tog*; what is it? Oo, *foeitog, die arme skepsel*, mus’ miss you a lot, hey? Cries when you go away on your off-days, neh?” (27). Later she tells Atini that she should give Mrs Reed the following excuse early the next morning so that she may attend the meeting: “tell her you have to take food money to your baby as soon as you’ve done the [supper] dishes” (29). In “Atini’s reflections”, however, Atini indicates that she only fetched her two youngest children on her brief return to Gungugulu after twelve months in East London (54), though she makes no mention of this in her first monologue, set eight months later.

²⁵ Du Toit refers to an International Labour Office report which estimated that the number of domestic workers internationally is over 100 million (2010: 3), and comments that “Over the past decade the number of domestic workers in South Africa has fluctuated at around one million, over 90% of whom are black women” (2010: 9).

²⁶ For example, Elsa Joubert’s *Die Swerffare van Poppie Nongena* (1978), Jacklyn Cock’s *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (1980), Cherryl Walker’s *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (1982), L. Lawson and H. Perold’s *Working Women: A Portrait of South Africa’s Black Women Workers* (1985), Fatima Meer’s *Factory and Family: The Divided Lives of South Africa’s Women Workers* (1985), Jane Barrett et al’s *Vukani Makhosikazi: South African Women Speak* (1985), and Sue Gordon’s *A Talent for Tomorrow: Life Stories of South African Servants* (1985).

Chapter 4: Deconstructions of Identity and Community: Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*

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4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* and Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*, discussions that are largely reworkings of responses I wrote soon after these collections were published in the late eighties. In both cases, I argued that the texts could – or perhaps should – be read as short fiction cycles. I have now added new material, however, and some retrospective comments on the ways in which both Wicomb's and Vladislavić's debut collections foreshadowed many of the concerns which were to become prominent in their subsequent work. Vladislavić has since published two novels (*The Folly* [1993] and *The Restless Supermarket* [2001]), another collection of interlinked short stories (*Propaganda by Monuments* [1996]), and several generically ambiguous texts (*The Exploded View* [2004], *Portrait with Keys* [2006], *Double Negative* [2011] and *The Loss Library* [2012]) which attest to his continuing interest in indeterminacy and his experimentation with narrative form. Wicomb followed *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* with two novels (*David's Story* [2002] and *Playing in the Light* [2006]), but has returned to the short story cycle in her most recent publication, *The One that Got Away* (2008), which is the subject of my final chapter.

When *You Can't Get Lost* and *Missing Persons* first appeared, they both garnered significant attention – the former for its reflexive focus on the narrativisation of self and the ways in which the discursive mediation of reality challenges notions of a stable identity attached to community and place, and the latter for its fragmentary quality, its quirkily mordant and satiric representation of South African realities, and its mixture of the patently absurd or risible and the deadly serious. As with Matlou's *Life at Home*, the stories in Wicomb's collection may be approached as a loose *Bildungsroman*. However, in *You Can't Get Lost*, the protagonist recognises but refuses to be constrained by the markers of identity – 'race', gender and class – conventionally foregrounded in South African versions of the novel of development. Moreover, any attempt to trace the *Bildung* of the central character and first- person narrator is problematised by the variety and temporal discontinuities among the stories themselves, and by self-contradictory plotlines which make contestatory claims in regard to the veracity of the presentational surface and reflexively draw attention to the fictionality of the stories. As a volume of interlinked stories, rather than a novel, then, *You Can't Get Lost* uses metafictional strategies and intertextual allusions in order to subvert the ostensible realism of the

Bildungsroman format in typically postmodernist fashion, and to suggest that the teleological notion of identity-formation installed by this format is inadequate to a representation of conflicting and overlapping narratives of self – of identifications rather than unitary, essential identities.

Though *Missing Persons* is similarly reflexive and concerned with the role representation plays in social and political reality, its refusal of the consolation of notions of secure identities rooted in community and place is premised on a recognition of the mayhem and sense of crisis produced by apartheid, and the reality that identities were manipulated by a kind of pervasive social dementia which had a corrosive impact on individuals in this society. The collection also displays a self-ironising scepticism towards language and literature, and the ways in which both were implicated in the ‘compost pit’ of a deeply divided country, and it interrogates and satirises the apartheid system’s ludicrous attempt to preserve – or literally ‘set in stone’ – its public memory and history via the monuments, statues and structures it erected. However, though a sense of a society on the brink of a systemic collapse is mirrored in the fragmentation both of the volume as a whole and of the stories it contains, suggestive links are forged between individual stories. A web of allusions and intratextual cross- references emerges that intimates that *Missing Persons*, while it might not be integrated into a coherent whole, is more than a mere collection of discrete stories – or, alternatively, that, despite the disjunctiveness of the society it reflects, glimmerings of connections and entanglements exist which gesture towards an interconnectedness not officially sanctioned by a regime obsessed with separation.

4. 2 Zoë Wicomb on Getting Lost in Cape Town

It’s fairly autobiographical, but no one need know.

– the ‘author’-narrator. (Vladislavić 1996: 168)

[L]ack of belonging was the root of hurt.

– Arthur Nortje (1973: 62)

In the latter half of the book the heroine is in Britain, but I refuse to comment on it because my experience there was about being silent.

– Zoë Wicomb (Hunter & MacKenzie 1993: 87)

Like Matlou’s *Life at Home*, Wicomb’s first collection of short fictions, *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) has certain of the characteristics of a *Bildungsroman*: it coheres around a

single narrator-protagonist, Frieda Shenton; for the most part, employs the first-person point of view;¹ and it establishes a linear trajectory which traces Frieda's early youth in Namaqualand, her school and student years in Cape Town, the experiences which precipitate her decision to leave South Africa, and concludes with her residence, as an adult, in England. In outline, these details correspond, in many respects, to Wicomb's own life story. Thus, again similarly to Matlou, the main character in many respects appears to be a fictionalised version of the actual author, given the quasi-autobiographical links with Wicomb's own background and circumstances. However, 'continuities of self' are disrupted by narrative short-circuits and anomalous details which draw attention to the fictionality of the stories, and prevent any neat conflation of author and protagonist. Moreover, Frieda's profound suspicion of notions of belonging and selfhood erected on the basis of an affiliation with region and community is foregrounded by her reflexive awareness of the discursive and performative underpinnings of all constructions of identity (whether personal, collective, regional or national), and her deconstruction of the ways in which the self is narrativised and mediated through language.

Writing in 1997, Dorothy Driver maintained that, in *You Can't Get Lost*, Wicomb had engaged in

a new mode in South African writing, steadfastly insisting on creating more complex subject positions than those of the past, with new subjectivities continually emerging at the critical point between stereotype and representation, and between one discursive subject position and another.

(146-147)

The collection not only presented a nuanced rendering of the politically vexed issue of identity in South Africa, by refusing to be constrained by "an epistemology in which reality is conceived purely in terms of a total polarity of opposites" (Ndebele 1991: 58), but also adopted a sophisticated reflexivity within a generically hybrid format. As indicated in my introductory chapter, Michael Neill noted that, in her "remarkable recent collection", Wicomb had approached a "position in which the definitions of the white power structure, with its pathology of boundaries, are simply discarded", and added that the volume appeared to be "a fairly conventional collection of interlinked stories, forming ... a loose *Bildungsroman*" (1990: 172). And André Brink similarly observed that the "successive chapters" of *You Can't Get Lost* could be read "either as a series of short stories or as a (very short) novel" (1993: 55), but that one of

its “most striking feature[s]” was “the way in which personal history is story” (1993: 53). The overtly metafictional aspects of *You Can’t Get Lost* include stagings of debates between putative author and surrogate-reader, and intertextual references to other literary works by writers such as Arthur Nortje and Thomas Hardy, works with which the narrative both implicitly and explicitly sets up a dialogue. Moreover, the volume’s continuity and coherence as a narrative of self are disrupted by mutually contradictory plotlines, and the connotations of familiarity, stability and security implicit in its title are rendered thoroughly ironic through a heightened awareness of dislocation and alienation, and of “identity as movement” (Butler 1995: 10) rather than rootedness or fixity.

4.2.1 “Belonging without question”

You Can’t Get Lost is, in Ingram’s terms, a “composed” cycle (1970: 9), that is, a collection which is originally conceived of as an entity by its author, and in which, as he puts it, each story is written with “the demands of some master plan, or some unifying directional impulse” in mind (1970: 9).² In *You Can’t Get Lost*, the fact that the stories focus on the development from youth to adulthood of a single protagonist, who is also the first-person narrator, suggests a coherence which approximates that more usually associated with the novel than the short story collection – and, more specifically, the *Bildungsroman*.³ Moreover, given that in the sixth story, “Home Sweet Home”, it emerges that Frieda has been writing stories herself, and that, by the final story, “A Trip to the Gifberge”, some of these have already been published and a collection is forthcoming, *You Can’t Get Lost* follows the itinerary of the *Kunstlerroman* as a sub-genre of the novel of development. Additional coherence is provided by the recurrence of a number of characters in certain of the stories: Frieda’s father and mother, the seemingly endless network of uncles and aunts who provide an extended familial milieu, and her close university friend, Moira, who acts as something of a foil to Frieda. And three major settings – Namaqualand, Cape Town, and an unspecified locale in England – conform in spatial terms to the home-exile temporal sequence, though Frieda’s experience overseas is alluded to only obliquely. Taken together, the linking devices in the collection provide a structural cohesion which would conventionally create the impression of a continuous narrative and of an identity formed in relation to a strong sense of

community and place, an impression which at least initially seems to be reinforced by the title of Wicomb's text.

However, the dominant mood or tone of *You Can't Get Lost*, paradoxically, is one of disconnection and dislocation, of Frieda's *not* being 'at home' or 'belonging' – not only as an expatriate in England, as might be expected, but also in South Africa. Her sense of alienation in South Africa is especially evident in the titular story, which sketches the increasing estrangement between Frieda as a young woman classified 'Coloured', but who is Griqua by extraction, and her 'white' lover, Michael, as a result of the abortion of the child they have conceived together. These circumstances confirm the prescience of an earlier story, "When the Train Comes", in which a school-friend of Frieda's predicts that she "might meet white boys" (33) when she leaves her home in Namaqualand for St Mary's, an English private school in Cape Town. Frieda's own Cinderella fantasy at the time is similarly presageful: "fortified by conjugations of *Amo*, I saw the eyes of Anglican boys, remote princes leaning from their carriages, penetrate the pumpkin-yellow of my flesh" (33). Moreover, the solemn pact she makes with her erstwhile friends – "We swore we'd never have babies" (33) – is ironically ratified by the abortion itself. However, the disillusionment attendant upon the termination both of the pregnancy and her relationship with Michael emerges most powerfully in Frieda's fear of losing her way *en route* to the backstreet abortionist. She finds no consolation in Michael's seemingly reassuring but ultimately callous response to her disorientation:

A look at my anxious face compelled him to say, "You can't get lost in Cape Town. There", and he pointed over his shoulder, "is Table Mountain and there is Devil's Peak and there Lion's Head, so how in heaven's name could you get lost?" The words shot out unexpectedly, like [a] fine arc of brown spittle. ... There are, I suppose, things that even a loved one cannot overlook.

Am I a loved one?

(73-74)

Frieda's dawning realisation that she is no longer Michael's "loved one" means that Cape Town personally symbolises the negation of the happy ending of the fairy-tale plot she had earlier fabricated for herself – her disenchantment highlighted by the cold reality that interracial sexual intercourse and marriage are prohibited by law in apartheid South Africa. Her sense of contamination is evident in the terms she uses to describe the actual abortion: she feels that she has been "[d]eflowered by yellow hands wielding a catheter" (80), and that the woman who

performs the operation is a “grotesque bridegroom with yellow teeth” (80). The following morning, after the foetus has been expelled and Frieda has discarded it in a street dustbin, she imagines that God, who is too “fastidious” (81) to contend with her actions, has deserted her – the inference being that Michael, too, has absconded, since the meaning of his name (“who is like the Lord”) associates him with the divinity.⁴ As she reflects earlier, then, she has been “[d]uped by a dream” (75).

Significantly, the title story describes the emotional and physical severances, together with the political realities, which ultimately motivate Frieda’s decision to leave for England, that is, to cut the umbilical cord of country and kin. This process has, however, begun far earlier. “When the Train Comes”, the story alluded to above, recounts various partings from her family and separations from friends, and her experiences in Cape Town simply represent the culmination of an accrued sense of isolation and detachment. As a result, she cannot share Michael’s smugness with regard to what, for him, are the immutable and distinctive landmarks of the city: Table Mountain, Devil’s Peak and Lion’s Head. Her inner response to her sense of dislocation is to long nostalgically for her earlier home in Namaqualand. Alighting from a bus on the way to the abortionist, for example, she sits on the steps of an imposing building in the city centre and thinks to herself:

I ought to know where I am; it is clearly a public building of some importance. For the first time I long for the veld of my childhood. There the red sand rolls for miles, and if you stand on the koppie behind the house the landmarks blaze their permanence. ... *In the veld you can always find your way back home.*

(73, emphasis added)

Though Frieda’s concluding thought here apparently constitutes an affirmation of the security and familiarity of her ‘real’ home in Namaqualand, this sentiment is, in reality, something of a romanticisation: much later, when she returns to bid her family farewell before leaving for England, it appears that she has lost her way there too. In the story ironically entitled “Home Sweet Home”, which describes the family re-union in Namaqualand organised in honour of her imminent departure, she is discomfited by her inability to recognise even the landmarks of her youth:

Did I not hope that my senses would quiver with receptivity, that all these sights and sounds would scratch about in the memory like hens in the straw until they found the perfect place to rest. Where in the feather-warm familiarity I could be the child once more, young and genderless as I roamed these banks alone, belonging without question to this country, this world.

(93)

Frieda's loss of the innocence of youth is rendered here in her recognition both of her gendered identity and the burdens it entails, and of the reality that, by virtue of her colouredness, she is *not* a citizen of "this country" – understood as a political entity or nation- state, rather than a natural world apprehended via the senses. When she encounters her Oom Dawid, whilst she is wandering aimlessly in the veld, he comments on her neglect of her family and lack of a sense of obligation: "Ja ... about time you came home to see us. But I hear you're going over the waters to another world. Now don't you stay away too long". Though Frieda explains that she is leaving for England on New Year's Day, she cannot bring herself to confess that she intends leaving for good. Oom Dawid's response is obdurate: "Still, the old man persists, you're home now with your own people: it can't be very nice roaming across the cold water where you don't belong" (94). He then draws an analogy between Frieda and his obstinate, unruly mules that highlights her fecklessness: "Like you they've always got somewhere to go. More trouble than they're worth" (95). However, this analogy also points to ways in which her impatience and determination to escape her sense of constriction and unbelonging are interpreted, by her family, as ingratitude and betrayal.

Embarking on the ship which will carry her to England, Frieda becomes conscious of the looming presence of Table Mountain above the harbour and city: "Behind the stirring ship Table Mountain, whose back I have woken up to for so many years in the Southern suburbs, stood square" (85). Her sense of the implacability of the mountain and its – and, by implication, the city's – rejection of her is countermanded when, on board with other family members to see her off, Uncle Gerrie accuses *her* of desertion and malcontentment:

So we've sent you to college, your very own college that this government's given you, just so you can go away and leave us to stew in ignorance. I know ... that here in the veld amongst the Griquas is no place for an educated person, but we all thought you liked Cape Town. The most beautiful city in the world you know, and the richest. There's a future for you here.

(85-86)

Frieda, by contrast, views the beauty of Cape Town dispassionately as a tourist trap which obscures the sordid underbelly of the ironically named ‘Mother City’:

I do not give a fig for the postcard beauty of the bay and the majesty of the mountain, the pretty white houses clinging to its slopes and the pines swaying to the Old Cape Doctor. A city of gleaming lavatories with the smell of disinfectant wafting from its pines. And the District Six I do not know and the bulldozers, impatient vultures, that hover about its stench. But I say nothing. At the base of this hollow edifice of guilt rattles the kernel of shame.

(86)

The contrasts drawn here between the words “beauty”, “majesty” and “gleaming”, on the one hand, and “disinfectant”, “vultures” and “stench”, on the other, highlight the ways in which the city’s sanitised appearance is premised on the reality of forced removals. Nevertheless, Frieda herself is detached from the latter reality – the District Six she does “not know”. She is self-consciously aware that she does not or cannot identify either with pristine ‘white’ Cape Town or with District Six as an emblem of coloured Cape Town.⁵

It is in “Home Sweet Home”, too, that Frieda arrives at an understanding of the increasing gulf which separates her from her immediate relatives and “makes it so hard to speak to those who claim [her] as their own” (94). That is, she realises that their sense of belonging and attachment is founded on an unquestioning tendency to take language at face value, whereas she has a deep-rooted suspicion of the role language plays in constructing notions of inclusion and exclusion. For example, her family trots out clichéd, sentimental expressions – such as “Blood is thicker than water” (68), “There’s no place like home” (99), and “home is where the heart is” (99) – all of which vacuously gloss over the harsh realities of apartheid, dispossession and racial segregation which actually govern their lives. In other words, terms such as “home”, “family” and “belonging” cannot be innocently invoked when they are overdetermined by a political system which decrees who may live where and with or amongst whom. The members of Frieda’s extended family are simply not aware of, and therefore not disconcerted by, any perceived disjunction between sign and referent, word and reality – they are, from Frieda’s perspective, both politically and linguistically unreflective. Moreover, they comfortably and unquestioningly inhabit the stories they create about their lives: “they cut *their stories* from the gigantic watermelon that *cannot be finished* by the family *in one sitting*. Their stories, whole as the

watermelon that grows out of this arid earth, have come to replace the world” (87, emphasis added). Implicitly, then, in terms of the literary analogy Frieda draws here, with its intertextual allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s theories on the short story, her family’s lives are not disjunctive and discordant, but composed of segments which comprise a harmonious whole, complete in and of itself. Thus, their self-contained, fictionalised or narrativised world is more like a novel than a short story.

Frieda, contrarily, is denied this satisfactory sense of continuity and completeness, since her education has led her to an awareness of the textuality of reality and the fictionality of self as a unified sensibility, a coherent and autonomous subject. She thus wishes she could expose the self-delusional quality of her family’s homilies: “I would like to bring down my fist on that wholeness and watch the crack choose its wayward path across the melon, slowly exposing the icy pink of the slit” (88). Her *own* stories, then, her ‘telling of herself in words’, are short fragmentary sketches which she knows her family will not appreciate or understand, nor will they make her motives for wishing to permanently leave South Africa intelligible to them: “I would like to reveal myself now so that they will not await my return. But they will not like my stories, none of them” (88). Nevertheless, it is significant that Frieda’s decision never to return to South Africa (“I will not come back. I will never live in this country again” [90]) and to escape to England – a country for which, paradoxically, she feels a greater affinity – is largely predicated on the latter’s representation in narrative. She ‘knows’ England only as a literary construct, that is, through its literature – as is indicated in her description of “the bright, green meadows of Hardy’s England, *a landscape anyone could love*” (90, emphasis added). However, her conviction here is itself both naïve and misguided, as she is later to discover. Indeed, when she encounters Henry Hendricks, an old schoolmate, on a visit to South Africa over a decade after her departure, and he prompts her to talk about her experience abroad (““England,” he says musingly, by way of encouragement, ‘sounds green and peaceful’”), Frieda retorts: “The telly will give you a better idea than I can. Mine will always be the view of a Martian” (123). Once again, then, she has been “duped by a dream”.

4.2.2 “Betrayed once more on this page”

Frieda’s exposure to regionalism (Hardy’s Wessex) and her recognition that this is a fiction, a linguistic or narrative construct, in turn alerts the reader to Wicomb’s own stories’ self-consciousness with regard to their fictional status, and foregrounds the most obvious instance of the disruption of their surface realism and narrative momentum as a conventional, if fragmentary, female *Bildungsroman* or *Kunstlerroman*. The latter disruption hinges on the temptation to identify the narrator-protagonist with Wicomb herself, and the concomitant assumption that the stories comprise a mimetic reflection rather than a narrativisation based on, but at several removes from, the author’s actual experiences. Though the parallels are immediately apparent and, indeed, seem to invite a conflation of author and narrator, towards the end of the collection certain anomalies surface which cannot easily be reconciled with the conventionally realist paradigm which underpins narratives of self. In the final story, “A Trip to the Gifberge”, for example, it transpires that, despite both direct and indirect references in the earlier stories to Mrs Shenton’s death from respiratory illness whilst Frieda is a young girl (22, 24, 101, 109, 163, 175), she is ‘in reality’ very much alive, and Frieda has returned from England to visit her after the death of her father. Though this incongruity would not be as noticeable or disconcerting in a collection of discrete and unintegrated stories, in this case the reader has been led to believe that the stories in *You Can’t Get Lost* roughly follow Frieda’s development from youth to adulthood, and that the death of her mother was a significant event in her childhood. The reader is therefore somewhat disoriented at this point, since the impression has been created that Frieda’s father was largely responsible for guiding her when she reached puberty. This is especially apparent, for instance, in his overprotectiveness, the ways he plies her with food, and his rather antiquated and superfluous advice to her on the provisions and precautions attendant on the onset of menstruation (22). Moreover, in the stories “Behind the Bougainvillea” and “A Fair Exchange” it seems that Frieda has returned briefly from England to South Africa specifically to visit her widowed father.

The ontological *mise en abyme* occasioned by the existence of two conflicting versions of the respective life-spans of Frieda’s parents and two contradictory plotlines is further complicated when, in the final story, Mrs Shenton comments caustically on what she sees as her daughter’s feeble attempts at story-writing, instances of which she has read in magazines sent

from Johannesburg by Cheryl, a female relative. Her response thus ironically confirms Frieda's earlier sense that her family would not like her stories. In expressing her disgust, Mrs Shenton not only reveals her sense of hurt and disappointment at her daughter's long absence overseas, but also her scorn for her daughter-as-author's matricidal literary tendencies: "You've killed me over and over so it was quite unnecessary to invent my death" (172). The irony, however, is that Mrs Shenton's comments constitute a refutation of the latter tendencies and a vindication of the autonomy of fiction since, though she may have been 'killed off' in Frieda's stories, she is 'in fact' not dead.

Two possibilities pertain here, both of which trouble the distinction between the author (Wicomb) and 'author' or author-figure (Frieda), between the latter and the first-person narrator in or of the stories (including the final one), and between the intratextual reader (Mrs Shenton) and the actual reader of Wicomb's narratives. The first is that the primary diegetic level is constituted by the nine stories read to this point, in which Frieda's mother *has* died and the narrative encountered so far comprises a relatively straightforward coming-of-age story, with Frieda as protagonist-narrator, but not author. From this perspective, Mrs Shenton cannot 'realistically' or logically comment, from within the last of Wicomb's stories, on her excision from all but the opening story. In other words, this reading raises the question of the ontological status of the final story, since it cannot be a continuation of Frieda's 'real' life story, and must therefore represent a further diegetic level. In effect, Wicomb has presented a conventional *Bildungsroman*, but then undermined the realism with which the form is conventionally invested by advertising its artifice. The second possibility is that, though the reader has read the first nine stories as the "first level of mimesis" (Wicomb 2005: 149), in retrospect they emerge as Frieda's stories, contained within a frame narrative constituted by the tenth story in Wicomb's volume. Frieda's stories therefore recast her life in fictional form, afford her a certain amount of poetic license, and enable her to be less than scrupulous with the truth. "A Trip to the Gifberge" returns from this fictionally distorted world to 'reality': a reality in which Mrs Shenton knows, because she has read Frieda's stories, that she has been excised from those which deal with her daughter's formative years. The second of these options is the more plausible, however, given that the first does not generate a "fictional occasion of the [final] story's narrating" (Neumann 1990: 65) or an explanatory narrative situation and narrator. Either way, the reflexivity which emerges at this point troubles the stories' representational surface and their generic

categorisation – that is, their apparent status as a ‘realistic’ *Bildungsroman* or, alternatively, (semi-)autobiographical record, and raises the question of which or whose discourse (if any) is to be believed. The ‘authority’ and ‘authenticity’ of the narrator – and, by extension, that of the intratextual author, Frieda, and the actual author, Wicomb – are interrogated by this deliberate dissolution of the ontological boundary between protagonist-narrator, ‘author’ and author, a strategy which problematises notions of origins and originality. Moreover, the metafictional re-evaluation staged here also foregrounds the discursive character of the stories as a whole and their intertextual foundation, an intertextuality particularly evident in the stories “A Clearing in the Bush” and “Ash on My Sleeve”.

In the former, Frieda, as a student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), is struggling to write an overdue essay on *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* for her English lecturer, Retief. The topic requires her to focus on the theme of fate in Hardy’s novel and, presumably, the notion that transgression merits punishment. However, her inclination is to read the figure of Tess as a victim of social determinism and prejudice, and to launch a feminist attack on the double standards of the time – specifically the expectation that women remain virginal until marriage. Coincidentally, on the previous day, the day the essay was due, Hendrik Verwoerd, the South African Prime Minister, was assassinated in the Houses of Parliament by Demetrios Tsafendas (historically, 6 September 1966). The consternation this momentous event had caused, specifically amongst the ‘white’ lecturers on campus, had enabled Frieda to avoid having to ask for an extension from Retief – an instance of the workings of fate, the irony of which does not escape her:

At the very moment yesterday as I strained for an excuse, trembling at the thought of a visit to Retief’s office somewhere along a carpeted corridor, a pet abdominal tapeworm hissed persuasively into the ear of its Greek host, whose trembling hand grew still for a second to aim a fatal shot at the Prime Minister.

(39)

Frieda’s reference to the widely reported and bizarrely engrossing detail that Tsafendas claimed a talking tapeworm or “dragon-worm” (Van Woerden 2000: 150) in his stomach had instructed him to murder the head of state reflects the public’s prurient interest in his motives and state of mind.⁶ Her description of the “fatal shot”, however, also reflects the confused reports and rumours which circulated at the time, since Verwoerd was in fact stabbed to death. As Frieda

mulled over the public significance of this event and her essay on Hardy's novel, the question of whether it is possible to justify the political act of assassination or to defend Tess's murder of Alec D'Urberville becomes confused in her mind. The novel produces a sense of ambivalence in her: "I have always been able to distinguish good from bad but the story confuses me and the lecture notes offer no help" (42). However, when she does begin writing, she opens with a caveat: "Before we can assess the role of fate in the novel we must consider the question of whether Tess is guilty or not, whether she has erred in losing her virginity, deceiving her husband and killing her lover" (42). Though she finds it difficult to continue, she subsequently advances an interpretation which diverges from that of her lecturer: "I have followed the opening thrust with two more paragraphs that wantonly move towards exonerating Tess. Retief's notes are no good to me. He will not be pleased" (49).

Frieda's intention – to read against the grain – is significant in terms of the ways in which she responds to the assassination, too. For example, though the male students on campus are organising a boycott of the commemorative ceremony to be held later in the day, Frieda wonders if it is possible empathetically to imagine the feelings of grief of Verwoerd's family, or to humanise the man held responsible for many of the most draconian apartheid policies.⁷ In the student canteen, she asks Moira: "Do you feel any sense of horror or shock or even distaste at the assassination?" and, when Moira ignores the question, she persists: "Well, do you? ... Can you imagine being a member of his family or anyone close to him?" (54). Moira then responds in the negative, and asks: "Do you think there's something wrong with us? Morally deficient?" To which Frieda replies by pointing to the self-contradiction within a selective application of the sympathetic imagination:

Dunno. My father would call it inhuman, unchristian. It seems to me as if common humanity is harped on precisely so that we don't have to consider the crucial question of whether we can imagine being a particular human being. Or deal with the implications of the answer. All I can tell about the human condition is that we can always surprise ourselves with thoughts and feelings we never thought we had.

(54)

By implication, here, the literary process of imagining being a character (Tess) is equated with the reality of imagining being an actual person (Verwoerd, a member of his family, or Tsafendas, for that matter). Moreover, if the answer to the "crucial question" Frieda outlines is "no", then

the notion of a “common humanity” is negated as a term with any purchase in reality. Though Moira laughs at Frieda’s philosophical scruples, she also unwittingly points to the parallel between Frieda’s ambivalent thoughts on the significance of Verwoerd’s death and the deaths of both Alec and Tess in Hardy’s novel: “You’re always ready with a mouthful of words. I’m surprised that you have any trouble with knocking off an essay” (54).

The parallel established between the writing of the essay and Frieda’s musings above is also evident in the fact that the essay must be finished by the time the commemorative ceremony for Verwoerd concludes. However, Frieda is unable to develop the argument she initiated, and eventually capitulates, producing the type of conventional analysis of the novel that Retief expects, rather than a revisionist or more nuanced interpretation – or one perhaps more in line with Hardy’s subtitle for *Tess*, “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented”. Frieda admits defeat: “My attempt to understand the morality of the novel has to be abandoned. Retief will get what he wants, a reworking of his notes, and I will earn a mark qualifying for the examination” (55). Writing this alternative, conformist essay outside under the bluegums on campus, whilst the memorial service proceeds, Frieda feels a sense of guilt at having deserted Tess: “I retrieve my restless fingers raking through the grass to attend to Tess, luscious-lipped Tess, branded guilty and betrayed once more on this page” (56). In effect, then, this literary betrayal means that she has disposed of Tess in much the same way that Tess herself dispatches Alec D’Urberville and then is sentenced to death for the murder. And Frieda has relinquished her attempt to confront the ethical implications of conferring humanity on Verwoerd, despite his political transgressions – or on Tess and Tsafendas, despite their murderous behaviour.

The theme of complicity and betrayal is further evident in the later story “Behind the Bougainvillea”, in which Frieda, like Tess before her after Angel Clare’s departure for South America, submits to the sexual advances of Henry Hendricks, the old school acquaintance with whom she had exchanged love letters during adolescence:

All that summer we composed delicious letters of love. Secret, for Father said I was too young to think of boys; besides, Henry Hendrikse, I had heard him say many times, was almost pure kaffir. We, the Shentons, had an ancestor, an Englishman whose memory must be kept sacred, must not be defiled by associating with those beneath us. We were respectable Coloureds.⁸

(116)

Encountering Henry coincidentally during her visit over a decade later, Frieda seems to feel a curious sense of detachment in response to his feverish and brief coupling with her listless body:

He would like to fuck me without my noticing. I will not allow him that luxury; my cowardice does not stretch to that. ... he deftly unzips his trousers and flicks out the terrifying thing of which I catch a glimpse only. I relax at his haste and correctly predict that it will not take long. My body registers a fleeting disappointment so that I have every reason to be pleased with the transaction.

(123)

When, immediately thereafter, Henry enquires whether Frieda has seen her old friend Olga Simson, she is puzzled for a moment, but then remembers that it was Olga who, as a teenager, had giggled upon meeting Henry and asked “That’s not the Henry who writes those letters?” (124). Frieda’s response to Olga was an excruciating betrayal of the intimacy she and Henry had been tentatively exploring at that stage: “‘No,’ I whispered, ‘don’t be silly. Would I be writing to a native?’” She had then turned around and “looked ... for the last time into the wounded eyes that had seen it all” (124). After this humiliation, the letters, understandably, had stopped – as Frieda has earlier recalled, on first recognising Henry after all these years. She remembers that she and Henry “never spoke. (Except that last time, but I do not want to think about that)” (116). Though she hastens now to reassure him that she has lost touch with Olga, she is acutely aware that she has been reminded of her compromising and hurtful behaviour. She is also forced to recognise that, though she believed herself to be in control of the sexual “transaction”, Henry has taken a form of compensation, if not revenge: “I have always miscalculated the currency of sex” (124). Moreover, only later does she realise that she may have compromised herself again on this occasion, though in a different sense, since her father reveals that Henry may be an *askari* or apartheid spy: “People say that he works for the government, that he gets paid a lot of money for being a spy. People talk such blinking nonsense; what would the government need spies for?” (124). Despite her father’s naivety here, Frieda is only too aware that, like Tess, she has ‘slept with the enemy’.

The title of the other story with strong intertextual overtones, “Ash on my Sleeve”, is derived from the final line of Arthur Nortje’s poem “Waiting”, two short extracts from which comprise the first epigraph to *You Can’t Get Lost*:

Origins trouble the voyager much, those roots
that have sipped the waters of another continent ...

it is solitude that mutilates,
the night bulb that reveals ash on my sleeve.

These lines prefigure the major thematic concerns of the story: exile, estrangement, and the attenuation (“ash”) which results from both temporal and spatial distance. Not only do Nortje’s biographical details reveal a certain correspondence with those of Frieda Shenton (and Wicomb herself) – classified ‘Coloured’, educated as an undergraduate at the apartheid- designed ‘bush college’ of UWC, English graduate, self-imposed exile in England, writer – but certain words and phrases from Nortje’s poem are also reproduced almost directly in the story, thus highlighting both the textual and, indeed, intertextual nature of subjectivity. For example, the poem’s title “Waiting” is echoed in Moira’s words of explanation when she meets Frieda again after her long absence abroad. Desmond, Moira’s husband, has let Frieda into their lounge, since Moira appears to have been detained by the various people she is harbouring in her backyard. She is somewhat flustered and is apologising mid-sentence when Frieda first hears her approaching down the passage: “... to deal with these people and I just had to be rude and say my friend’s here, all the way from England, she’s waiting” (146).

The notion of waiting resurfaces when Moira tells Desmond that it is Susie’s afternoon off, and then again apologetically explains to Frieda that they have a domestic servant: “Moira’s silence asserts itself as her own so that we wait and wait until she explains” (149). And it recurs as a verbal motif in the final lines of the story, in which Frieda describes herself lying awake in one of Moira’s children’s bedrooms, with the bedside lamp (another “night bulb”) still shining:

I lie in my nightdress on the chaste little bed and try to read. The words dance and my eyes sting under heavy lids. But I wait. I stretch my eyes wide open and follow a mad moth circling the rabbit-lamp by the side of the bed. I start to the mesmerising scent of crushed gardenia when the book slips and slips from under my fingers. In this diminutive world it does not fall with a thud. But I am awake once more. I wait.

(162)

The recollection of the smell of “crushed gardenia” which Frieda has here alludes to the days when young male students who were interested in Moira would invite Frieda for a dance, knowing that her “friendship had to be secured in order to be considered by Moira” (151).

Following this perfunctory gesture, Frieda would “wait for the casual enquiry after Moira”, after which they would sit out the next dance discussing her friend, “the gardenia on my bosom meshed in maddening fragrance our common interest” (151). Later, she would report the admirer’s conversation to Moira: “Then in the early hours, sitting cross-legged on her bed, we sifted his words and Moira unpinned for me the gardenia, crushed by his fervour, when his cool hand on my shoulder drew me closer, closer in that first held dance” (151). Frieda, it seems, is waiting now for the old bond to be re-established, perhaps even for Moira to come to her room to share confidences with her, as in the past. However, the evening has made it painfully aware to her that this sense of intimacy has been lost – the intervening years have disrupted any continuity with the past. The unfulfilled desire Nortje expresses in his poem for a sense of (re-)connection and affinity (“The amplitude of sentiment has brought me no nearer / to anything affectionate” [91]) thus finds a direct parallel in Frieda’s similarly unfulfilled longing.

The lines which precede those quoted above, from the fourth stanza of Nortje’s poem, once again resonate with Frieda’s experience:

You with your face of pain, your touch of gaiety,
with eyes that could distil me any instant
have passed into some diary, some dead journal
now that the computer, the mechanical notion
obliterates sincerities.

(90)

While Nortje’s lines here are addressed “to a lost land or a lost lover” (Berthoud 1984: 5), or both, their bittersweet quality is directly echoed in “Ash on my Sleeve”. For example, Frieda describes Moira and her own spontaneously shared jollity at one point in the evening as “simultaneous laughter that cleaves through the years to where we sat on our twin beds recounting the events of our nights out” (149). And later she describes Moira in the kitchen preparing the evening meal: “I turn to Moira bent over a cheese grater, and with the sepia light of evening streaming in, her face lifts its sadness to me, the nutbrown skin, as if under a magnifying glass, singed translucent and taut across the high cheekbones” (154). Though she then attempts to appeal to her old friend and to reach beneath the superficialities of their inconsequential chatter, her aching sense of disconnection is apparent in her realisation that she no longer has access to Moira’s private life: “So I tug at things, peep, rummage through her kitchen pick at this

and that as if they were buttons to trigger off the mechanism of software that will gush out a neatly printed account of her life” (154). Though no mechanical programming language can enable Frieda to plumb the depths of Moira’s innermost feelings and experiences, in effect she *has* been narrativised, however, since she has been put into a story by Frieda. In a fulfilment of Nortje’s words, she has “passed into some diary, some dead journal” (90) – just as Nortje’s lover, though distant, is imaginatively rendered in his poem.

It later becomes apparent that the two friends’ estrangement is occasioned not only by the time that Frieda has spent in England, but also by a shift in the political landscape in South Africa, a shift in which Frieda has not participated but in which Moira is actively involved, via the UDF (158).⁹ At one stage during the evening on which Frieda is visiting, Moira accuses her friend of having betrayed her original identity and roots. She begins by criticising the fickleness of coloured people who repudiate or disaffirm their affiliations and obligations in their attempt to be viewed as distinct from and superior to the ‘black’ majority: “We’ve never wished to be ourselves and that’s why we stray ... across the continent, across the oceans and even here, right into the Tricameral parliament, playing right into their hands” (156). Although Moira’s reference to the Tricameral parliament is directed at those whom she regards as sell-outs to the ‘white’ nationalist regime and its efforts to forestall a broad-based oppositional coalition, her comment about those who “stray” overseas is obviously aimed at Frieda herself. Following this challenge, Moira then pointedly remarks, looking directly at Frieda: “Actually, it suits me very well to live here” (156), a remark which insinuates that Frieda’s departure from South Africa was misguided and premature, if not treacherous. Moreover, if Moira’s political allegiances and pragmatism, together with her commitment to the local, constitute something of a rift between the two friends, it is also apparent that their lifestyles and careers have diverged significantly. Thus Moira, despite her university training, has become a housewife and mother, whereas Frieda has honed her literary-theoretical and narrative skills overseas – the culmination of the process begun by her English private-school education in Cape Town, her undergraduate training at UWC, and her postgraduate studies in England (101). Indeed, Frieda’s exposure to feminism (158) and postcolonial theory (171), together with her theoretical understanding of the ways in which language operates as “the site in which difference is produced” (Wicomb 1990: 43) or as “a field of contestation” (Attwell 1992: 8), means that she is profoundly aware of how language structures identity and is complicit with power. Or of the ways in which, to use Wicomb’s own

words in a different context, “representation does not simply express, but rather plays a formative role in social and political life” (1998: 94-95).

4.2.3 Caliban’s curse: using English “like a catapult”

[T]o be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English.

– Homi Bhabha (qtd in Nixon 1987: 560)

The importance of the theme of language and discourse in the collection is announced by the title of the opening story, “Bowl like Hole”, which does not so much suggest “[some]one’s loss is another’s gain” (Van Niekerk 1990: 95), as the emphasis placed on ‘correct’ or ‘received’ pronunciation by those who wish to learn English as a means of social upliftment.¹⁰ In this story it emerges that Frieda’s mother impressed on her, as a child, that English would offer her a means of escape from the narrow provincialism of her Afrikaans-speaking Griqua community.¹¹ In the process, however, she alienated Frieda from this community, her peers and her extended family, and from their value system. However, as Frieda recounts, her mother later has cause to regret having encouraged her daughter to learn the language. In “A Trip to the Gifberge”, Mrs Shenton relays her own mother’s sentiments on the matter:

My mother said it was a mistake when I brought you up to speak English. Said people spoke English just to be disrespectful to their elders, to You and Your them about. And that is precisely what you do. Now you use the language against me that I’ve stubbed my tongue on trying to teach you it. No respect! Use your English like a catapult!

(171)

The reference here to the deferential second-person pronoun or possessive “*u*” and its informal equivalents, “*jy*” and “*jou*”, in Afrikaans, indicates that Mrs Shenton believes that the English her ingrate daughter uses to address her is impertinent, and that the language has ultimately become a source of division rather than pride. However, on this occasion Frieda decides not to challenge her mother and risk further antagonising her: “I will not be drawn into further battle. For years we have shunted between understanding and failure and I the Caliban will always be at fault” (171). Though here she realises that her mother believes she has literally ‘raised a monster’, her reference to Caliban recalls the famous lines from *The Tempest* which the latter addresses to Prospero: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse.

The red plague rid you / For learning me your language” (1.2.363- 365). In other words, the implication is that Frieda is “fluent in acrimony” (Nixon 1987: 567) – she uses her education to express her disaffection and to critique the role language has played in patriarchy and the colonial project.

A further reference to English as a weapon occurs in “A Clearing in the Bush”, when Tamieta, who works in the canteen at UWC, notices that Frieda, whom she knows from Namaqualand, is sitting there drinking a cup of coffee. She wishes Frieda would snub her impudent co-worker, Charlie:

Full of himself and no respect for his elders. ... [Frieda] too is from the country. Tamieta knows of her father who drives a motor car in the very next village, for who in Little Namaqualand does not know of Shenton? The girl speaks English but that need not prevent her from saying something educated and putting this Charlie in his place.

(46)

Though Frieda does not speak to Charlie on this occasion, Tamieta imagines using English herself to vanquish him:

She, Tamieta, will turn on him and ... strike him with a real English saying which will make that know-all frown. She has not worked for English people without learning a thing or two. She has learned to value their weapon of silence, and she has memorised Madam’s icy words to the man with the briefcase, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Oh to see Charlie’s puzzled look before he pretends to know exactly what it means.

(46-47)

However, while Tamieta prides herself on her ability to use English to assert a sense of superiority and to express contempt for the likes of Charlie, who teases her mercilessly, it is she, ironically, who discovers herself to be a fool later in the story. Unaware that the students have planned a boycott of the memorial ceremony commemorating Verwoerd, she attends in her finery, only to discover that, apart from a handful of dutiful young men from the Dutch Reformed seminary, she is the only coloured person in attendance. She is exposed by the sea of empty seats and, in her mortification, she imagines the farm of her youth, where “the dry-throated wind croaks a heart-broken tale of treachery ... the hot shame creeps up from her chest to the crown of her head” (59). In this respect, Tamieta is much like Frieda’s family members:

complacent and unreflective, she is unaware of the extent to which she has internalised her own oppression.

Significantly, in the title story, “You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town”, the injurious potential of language is literalised, since it becomes apparent that it is Frieda’s educated English accent that enables her to procure an illegal abortion: in the dingy room into which she is led on this occasion, she is assumed to be ‘white’ as a result of her intonation. Having introduced herself to the abortionist under a false name, Sally Smit, she is confronted by the question: “You’re not Coloured, are you?” Frieda then thinks to herself: “It is an absurd question. I look at my brown arms ... and watch the gooseflesh sprout. Her eyes are fixed on me. Is she blind? ... Then I realise: the educated accent, the accent has blinded her”. Having replied in the negative, she “waits for all the cockerels in Cape Town to crow simultaneously” (78-79), but her treachery is not revealed. Instead, the abortionist takes her at her word, and launches into a distasteful diatribe which exposes her racism:

“Good,” the woman smiles, showing yellow teeth. “One must check these days. These Coloured girls, you know, are very forward, terrible types. What do they think of me, as if I would do every Tom, Dick and Harry. Not me you know; this is a respectable concern, and I try to help decent women, educated, you know. No, you can trust me. No Coloured girl’s ever been on this sofa.”

(79)

Ironically, of course, Frieda is about to enjoy this dubious privilege herself. However, earlier she has acknowledged her murderous intent: “Desire is a Tsafendas tapeworm in my belly that cannot be satisfied”. She then inwardly asks: “Will I stop at one death?” (77). This second allusion to Verwoerd’s assassin and the tapeworm that inspired his murder of the grand architect of apartheid, together with the ensuing question, explicitly links Frieda’s destruction of her unborn child to an event of grave historic, national and political significance. Moreover, the sense of culpability she articulates in the above question not only recalls the guilt she felt upon betraying Tess, but also implicitly alludes to or anticipates the other ‘deaths’ of which she is guilty – the excision of her mother from nine of her stories or, alternatively, her father from the concluding one, if she is indeed the author of the latter. In terms of these parricidal tendencies, in other words, she has failed to accord her parents ‘due respect’ both in the language she employs

(in her mother's words, she "Yous and Yours them about") and in the fictions she writes. In addition, she has abandoned them.

After some time in England, however, Frieda is no longer immune to the claims of filiation. In "Behind the Bougainvillea", on a bleak and wet winter's day in that country, she is depicted as weeping freely ("But heroines must cry" [112]) as she remembers the infrequent rain in Namaqualand when she was a child. She decides to return to South Africa to see her father: "I would go home. I could no longer avoid a visit" (113). Recalling how, following the rain at home, the sky would miraculously clear and it would seem that God had blessed the landscape, she describes the children's response: "We lifted our faces to God's spread hands. And he muttered through his beard, Honour thy mother and thy father so that thy days may be lengthened ..." (113). Though Frieda here recollects the Fifth Commandment with its respectful pronouns and filial injunction, she trails off and omits its concluding phrase: "in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20.12). Instead she thinks: "I do not, dear God, wish to lengthen my days" (113). Both her omission and rejoinder here are significant as an index of her desire to distance herself from South Africa, a country which she professes to hate (174) and which, because she is a member of the dispossessed majority, patently has *not* been "given" to her. Nevertheless, her recollection of the Commandment confirms her decision, as a dutiful daughter, to return to South Africa to visit her widowed father. Moreover, though in the final story it appears that her mother has outlived her father, and that Frieda has returned to South Africa shortly after the latter's funeral (166), once again this visit is an expression of filial obligation. Meeting her Aunt Cissie on her arrival at the airport in Cape Town, she questions her about the funeral and hears that it was "a business" (168): her mother had openly announced that she did not wish to see her daughter (she is not at the airport to meet her), and had snubbed her husband's side of the family (169). When Aunt Cissie advises: "Man, you mustn't take notice of what she says. I always say that half the time people don't know what they talking about and blood is thicker than water so you jus do your duty hey" (168), Frieda confirms: "Of course Auntie. Doing my duty is precisely why I'm here" (169). She then thinks to herself: "it is not often that I can afford the luxury of telling my family the truth" (169). The sardonic nature of this "truth" is that Frieda is reflexively aware that "duty" or filial and familial obligations, no less than regional affiliations, are discursive and narrative constructs which mediate notions of identity and community. In other words, she understands the relational ways in which identity is

produced, and recognises that, as Stuart Hall claims, “[i]t is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are” (qtd in Wicomb 1998: 93).

This sense of the contestatory claims of representational practices emerges most strongly in the conversations Frieda has with her mother in the concluding story in the collection. These conversations not only resemble self-interrogations but also embody the text’s prefiguring of its own reception, since Mrs Shenton is inserted as an intratextual reader- figure who reproaches her daughter – and, perhaps, Wicomb herself – for *misrepresentation*.¹² For example, Mrs Shenton comments disparagingly on Frieda’s stories and their forthcoming publication in a single volume:

“Stories,” she shouts, “you call them stories? ... Dreary little things in which nothing happens, except ... except” and it is the unspeakable which makes her shut her eyes for a moment. Then more calmly, “Cheryl sent me the magazine from Joburg, two, three of them. A disgrace. I’m only grateful that it’s not a Cape Town book.

(171)

Her final comment here is obviously ironic in the context of a collection entitled *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, though in fact seven of the stories are set in Namaqualand and only three in that city. When Frieda objects that the stories are fictional and therefore not required to adhere to reality – “But they’re only stories. Made up. Everyone knows it’s not real, not the truth” (172) – her mother’s retort is accusatory. She charges her daughter with distortion, ignorance of her own people, her ancestors and the South African natural landscape, and insinuates that Frieda’s severance of her ties with the country means that she has forfeited both the ability to authentically represent it and the right to do so:

But you’ve used the real. If I can recognise places and people, so can others, and if you want to play around like that why don’t you have the courage to tell the whole truth? Ask me for stories with neat endings and you won’t have to invent my death. What do you know about things, about people, this place where you were born? About your ancestors who roamed these hills? You left. Remember?

(172)

Frieda’s mother’s preference for narratives which do not rely on fabrication and which are satisfactorily resolved recalls Frieda’s earlier thoughts on the self-sufficiency of her family’s

stories, and also – by inference – anticipates the question of how “A Trip to the Gifberge” itself ends.

Evidence of what Frieda’s mother suggests is her daughter’s lack of indigenous knowledge emerges subsequently in this story. When Mrs Shenton suggests the trip to the Gifberge, she muses: “They say there are proteas on the mountain”. Though Frieda contradicts her, claiming that “it’s too dry. You only find proteas in the Cape Peninsula”, Mrs Shenton responds scornfully: “Nonsense ... you don’t know everything about this place” (173-174). Frieda immediately disavows any interest in South Africa (“Ag, I don’t care about this country; I hate it” [174]), but is later forced to acknowledge that her mother was correct: “‘And here,’ I concede, ‘are the proteas’” (177). A verbal tussle then ensues on the symbolic appropriation of the protea as emblem of the Afrikaner nation, and the imputation that the flower has been tarnished by the political and ideological meaning with which it has been invested. Frieda begins by asking, “I wonder why the Boers chose the protea as national flower” (177) and, when her mother asks her to remove a specimen for her garden, her response is cutting: “If you must And then you can hoist the South African flag and sing ‘Die Stem’” (181). Her mother scoffs at the notion that the connotations that the flower has accrued define its essence:

Don’t be silly; it’s not the same thing at all. You who’re so clever ought to know that proteas belong in the veld. Only fools and cowards would hand them over to the Boers. Those who put their stamp on things may see in it their own histories and hopes. But a bush is a bush; it doesn’t become what people think they inject into it. We know who lived in these mountains when the Europeans were still shivering in their own country. What they think of the veld and its flowers is of no interest to me.

(181)

Ironically, however, another bush has been the subject of an exchange between Mrs Shenton and Frieda earlier in the story, and on this occasion the former adopts a contrary position. When Frieda asks whether the shrub is “ghanna”, her mother tells her that it is “Hotnos- kooigoed” (*kooigoed* in Afrikaans meaning “bedding stuff/material”), and Frieda corrects her, using the more politically acceptable term: “You mean Khoi-Khoi-kooigoed”.¹³ Though her mother uses the opportunity to jibe at Frieda, she nevertheless approves of this alternative coinage: “‘Really, is that the educated name for them? It sounds right doesn’t it?’ And she repeats Khoi-Khoi-kooigoed, relishing the alliteration”. Frieda points out that the term is that originally employed

by the Khoi people to refer to themselves, rather than one imposed upon them as a derogatory substitute: “No, it’s just what they called themselves” (180).

Though both of these skirmishes over language focus on the ideological content accrued by certain words and the question of who owns the language and the right to name the peoples, fauna and flora of a region, they also gesture to the reality that the link between sign and referent is ultimately arbitrary, and that language is self-referential. In other words, “a bush is a bush” – it is what it is, regardless of what it is called. However, when later Mrs Shenton is disappointed at being unable to see the view of her house far below the mountain, since a fence and an “extravagantly barred” gate, secured by thirteen padlocks, prevent Frieda and herself from doing so (179), the conflictual reality of claims to the land and the prerogative to name its features is made manifest. In other words, Frieda and her mother are denied access despite the latter’s assertion of a prior and autochthonous entitlement, and it is evident that political history intervenes in what is asserted as an organic connection to the land.

Nevertheless, it is as a result of the testy conversations that Frieda has had with her mother on this trip that she reassesses the finality of her decision to leave South Africa. Later in the evening, as she surveys the night-sky, it is almost as if she reads a message in the stars, a message pointing her in a particular direction:

I watch the stars in an ink-blue sky. The Milky Way is a smudged white on the dark canvas; the Three Kings flicker, but the Southern Cross drills her four points into the night. I find the long axis and extend it two and a half times, then drop a perpendicular, down on to the tip of the Gifberge, down on to the lights of the Soeterus Winery. *Due South*.

(181, emphasis added)

When she returns inside and suggests to her mother that she would not be surprised if she decided to return to South Africa permanently and live in Cape Town again, her mother’s response is muted. Although she simply asks “Is it?”, her eyes betray her relief, however. Frieda then cautions: “Oh, you won’t approve of me here either. Wasted education, playing with dynamite and all that”, the inference being that, like Moira, she will become actively involved in local opposition to apartheid. She is also wryly alluding to her mother’s earlier dismissive comment about some of her younger cousins, and why they would not have been at the airport to meet Frieda when she arrived: “Have better things to do than hang about airports. Your Aunt Cissie wouldn’t have said anything about them They’ll be at the political meetings, all UDF

people. Don't care a damn about the expensive education their parents have given them" (170). Mrs Shenton, however, refuses to rise to the bait now: "Ag man, I'm too old to worry about you. But with something to do here at home perhaps you won't need to make up those terrible stories, hey?" (182). Given that both the final story and the collection end at this point, Frieda's mother's comment is, in a sense, ironically realised: the "Cape Town book" and *You Can't Get Lost* are completed and the question of what Frieda will do if or when she returns to South Africa remains open-ended. In reality, too, as a narrative construct Frieda is herself 'killed off' or disposed of at this juncture. The actual author, Zoë Wicomb, however, will continue to produce stories which "use the real" in reflexive ways and refuse the consolations of "neat endings": narratives which expose the "fictional nature of identity construction", explore "the postcolonial relationship with a politics of location" (Wicomb 1998: 95), and represent South African reality as a range of conflicting rather than monolithic stories, both personal and public.

4.3 "Freeze-frame?": Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons*¹⁴

[A] national community is still under construction. We are in a second interregnum, a parenthetical era, in which a provisional country asserts itself, but drags its history behind it in brackets, like a skin it has not properly sloughed. As physical space is renamed and reclaimed, an old nomenclature vanishes from the statutes, the maps, the road signs, and is left behind in the history books.

– Ivan Vladislavić (2005b: 88)

Missing Persons was first published in 1989: it is something of a truism that South Africa has changed both inordinately and, in many respects, far too little since then.¹⁵ Thinking back on the publication of *Missing Persons* in the late eighties, Tony Morphet remarks that "[a]t the time it was impossible to imagine a future. It is now almost as hard to imagine a past. The scale of difference remains barely credible. Nothing has not been touched". He then observes that, "[a]s the 'big story' triumphed and carried all before it, it was hard and brave work to stick with the marginal" (2006: 89), an allusion to Vladislavić's own comments on his work, made in an interview with Shaun de Waal in the mid-nineties:

the world is already so overloaded with big stories and important information that the small and peripheral has come to me to seem a positive value. That's what I mean about accustoming oneself to marginality, engaging with something that makes no claim to completeness. To complexity maybe, but not completeness.

(1996: 3)

Recognised, as Vladislavić is now, as one of South Africa's most innovative and uncompromising contemporary writers, it is possible to claim, in retrospect, that many of the dominant concerns that surfaced in his first collection characterise his entire *oeuvre* to date. These include a profoundly self-reflexive practice which scrutinises the role of art in relation to the imperative "to imagine a fractured society into wholeness" (Helgesson 2006: 29); a quirky and extraordinarily observant fascination with the human and built environment of Johannesburg and its evolution from an apartheid, capitalist edifice to a sprawling postmillennial, postmodern African city; a focus on the multiple, contradictory and intersecting nature of South African identities, and the ways in which evanescent intimations of community are set against individual and social neuroses; and a satirical and self-ironising take on the caprices of language as a signifying system. Vladislavić's "longstanding interest in architecture and urban space" (Graham 2006: 50) is reflected in recurring motifs of monuments, buildings, walls, landmarks and transit routes, and his immersion in urban experience and culture in South Africa expresses itself in his meticulous inventories of familiar and 'found' objects: consumer items, *drek*, 'what-what'. The distinctively idiosyncratic and defamiliarising strategies first encountered in *Missing Persons* have persisted in his subsequent work.

In the context of the late eighties, however, Vladislavić's debut collection seemed bizarre, its fantastical or magical-realist qualities both far-fetched and startlingly astute as an inspired projection of a society literally and figuratively in a state of crisis. But who *then* could have imagined the more optimistic *real maravilloso* of Nelson Mandela's inauguration at the Union Buildings some five years later, under squadrons of SADF helicopters (fearful emblem of the suppression of township revolts in the eighties) sporting huge, new multi-coloured 'Rainbow Nation' flags? Or Mandela's wearing of the Springbok captain's Number 6 jersey before the start of the Rugby World Cup Final in 1995, to tumultuous applause (to say nothing of the country-wide celebrations following the subsequent victory)? Or his dwarfing of the diminutive figure of the ninety-four-year old Betsie Verwoerd on a visit to her in Orania in the same year? Previously, no doubt, it would have been maintained that this was the 'stuff of fiction', of fabulation. To quote Philip Roth out of context, "actuality [was] continually outdoing [writers'] talents" (1977: 34) in the mid-nineties in South Africa. Today, I would venture, however, the satirical and by turns outrageously and bleakly amusing aspects of *Missing Persons*, and the stories' stark exposure of the deadly absurdities and insanities of the apartheid era, *do* enable

readers to ‘re-imagine’, soberly, the incongruities, complicities and complacencies of the past – for some, perhaps, with the disconcerting and uncanny sense that accompanies *déjà vu*. Such a ‘re-imagining’, of course, inevitably entails a reappraisal of the present. For these reasons, I believe, the collection remains as disturbing and astonishing as it was in 1989.

4.3.1 “Mysteries of Meat and the Imagination”: The South African Compost Pit

Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random; it leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily.

– B.S. Johnson (1973: 14)

Compose; composite, composition, compost: [L. *compositus*, *compostus* – *com-*, together, *pōnēre*, to place].

– *Chambers English Dictionary* (“Compose”)

In early reviews, *Missing Persons* was heralded by a number of critics as representing a refreshingly new orientation in South African short fiction. Sally-Ann Murray, for example, described the volume as overturning “the conventions of realism that have tended to govern local approaches to the short story” (1991: 190), and Alf Wannenbun commented that “Vladislavić’s world ... has many familiar features, but in mindscapes strange to me in such a country the signposts are frequently ambiguous, the intention elusive” (1990: 82). Verna Brown used phrases such as a “dislocated society”, “fractured consciousness”, “a crazy web of displacement”, “dissolving illusions” and a “society-in-extremis” to describe the disquieting aspects of individual stories (1990: 127-129). And, later, Graham Pechey was to write that “the magic-realist experiments of Ivan Vladislavić in *Missing Persons* so elasticize probability, the factual record, and the very dimension of time and space as to counter [the] anaesthetizing normalization of South African reality” (1998: 72). In an important sense, then, Vladislavić’s collection of stories was viewed as diverging significantly from previous trends, trends which reflected a sense that social realism was the most appropriate way in which writers could engage with the socio-political realities of South Africa. For some critics, however, *Missing Persons* already exemplified the form of writing which, it was anticipated, would emerge in the aftermath of apartheid – that is, “writing which registers response to a decentred and less symbolically oversimplified society” (Cornwell 1991: 17). However, though Chris Thurman has recently commented that “it is tempting to suggest that *Missing Persons* is a proto-post-apartheid text”

(2011: 54), he indicates that many of the collection's concerns are inflected by the experiences of a writer who grew up under apartheid.

Composed of eleven narratives, many of which are themselves subdivided, by number or subtitle, into smaller parts or fragments, *Missing Persons* falls into the category of the "completed cycle" (Ingram 1970: 18) – that is, a collection consisting of stories which may originally have been written as independent units, but which are subsequently assembled into a single volume that contains recognisable unifying links.¹⁶ Though the initial impression which the volume establishes is that of an unmotivated assemblage of discrete and independent stories, closer inspection reveals interconnections and reverberations, and a teasing duality which challenges the reader's generic expectations by hinting at a holistic design and inviting recuperation as a cycle. This configuration, however, remains elusive, since the stories are characterised by recalcitrance and a patent desire to advertise their incongruities and disjunctions – a disjunctiveness which is intratextually foregrounded by the quotation from a poem by Lionel Abrahams which serves as the epigraph to the eighth story, entitled "A Science of Fragments":

Fragments neither close
nor open meaning:
they may mean anything except
wholeness, except certainty.

(83)

The quotation not only prefigures the incoherence of the story it introduces (a collage, in ten parts, of disjointed reminiscences), but also serves to encapsulate the frustrated intimation of unity and the discontinuous impression created by the collection as a whole. Yet, despite its entropic impression, *Missing Persons* offers provocative intimations of cohesion and is unified to some degree by recurring images – particularly those of characters in transit or displaced (the "missing persons" of the title), by the motifs of fragments, hands, statues and monuments, and by an underlying web of complicity and paranoia. Acting in conjunction, these common threads draw the narratives into two, ultimately interrelated story clusters, whilst frustrating received notions of narrative cause and effect.

The first and most obvious cluster comprises the opening story, "The Prime Minister is Dead", together with "Tsafendas's Diary" and "The Box". Wannenburg refers to "Tsafendas's Diary" as a "sequel" (1990: 83) to the opening story, thus drawing attention to the elements

which are common to both: the child-narrator, his deranged Granny, the images of the latter's obsessive needlework and the compost pit, and the figures of the deceased Prime Minister and Tsafendas. In "The Prime Minister is Dead", the assassination of the head of state becomes confused in the child's mind with the compost heap on which he and his father have been working at the time the historic announcement is made on the radio, and this conflation is subsequently reinforced by Granny's morbid description of the Prime Minister, on the afternoon of the latter's funeral, as "rotting in the soil. A piece of meat" (4). By implication, the boy's father's wry response to Granny's additional comment that the Prime Minister leaves a wife and six children – "He leaves more than that" (4) – equates the "grim legacy" (Brown 1990: 127) of apartheid bequeathed to South Africa by Verwoerd with a rotting compost heap.

Though Verwoerd's name is not mentioned directly, the fact that the story has a factual basis and a verisimilar setting is revealed by certain significant details. For example, the circumstances of the Prime Minister's death, together with the information that the new suburb in which the boy lives is subsequently renamed in the former's honour and is close to a major city, situate the story temporally in 1966 and spatially in Verwoerdburg, just south of Pretoria.¹⁷ Despite this semblance of actuality, however, other aspects of the story clash somewhat unnervingly with recorded history. The first part, subtitled "The Day *They* Killed the Prime Minister" (1, emphasis added), refers to killers in the plural – a suggestion of conspiracy which is contradicted by the fact that Verwoerd's assassin committed the crime single-handedly. (Although the boy's father does reinforce this suggestion when he later remarks to his wife that "they" might also kill the Prime Minister's successor [5]).¹⁸ Furthermore, the second section of the story, entitled "The Day *We* Buried the Prime Minister" (3, emphasis added), implicates the child and his father personally in the historic sequence of events, though the use of the plural pronoun is subsequently motivated when the narrative takes an entirely fanciful course. In an ironic and absurdly literal realisation of the narrator's mother's sentiments ("When one of the great events of history comes along you have to grab it with both hands" [5]), the family's garden wheelbarrow is dragooned into service as emergency transport for the Prime Minister's coffin, and the boy is required to grasp and steady it en route to Heroes Acre in the cemetery. There, like garden refuse, the coffin is "unceremoniously dumped" from its substitute bier into the open grave – an irreverent fictional representation of Verwoerd having received his "come-uppance" (Brown 1990: 127) or 'just deserts'. His death, ironically however, is later associated

with regeneration and growth (an incongruous latter-day Fisher King?). Although he dies in winter, he is buried in spring,¹⁹ and the compost heap with which he is linked in the boy's mind is prodigiously fruitful: it becomes a patch "on which practically anything would grow" (2). The death of the Prime Minister is thus literally associated with arable soil, but metaphorically provides fertile ground for the child's impressionable imagination.

The mixture of the factual or verifiable and the fictional or fantastical in this story, and the collapse of the distinction between the personal and the public in the narrator's consciousness, are taken to extremes in "Tsafendas's Diary". Here, once again, recognisable landmarks and historic events and actors constitute an identifiable physical and historical milieu, yet this semblance of realism is subverted by the surreality of Granny's enterprises and her psychotic fervour. As in the opening story, she appears only superficially to conform to the cosy stereotype of a doting old woman, crocheting and knitting for her grandchild. Indeed, at one point she is gleefully described as hurtling down the Ben Schoeman freeway in her motorised rocking-chair, with the boy on her lap under a meat-blanket (93). In itself somewhat odd, Granny's obsession with the retrieval of Tsafendas's (fictitious) diary ("the key to all mysteries" [92]) assumes a sinister guise when one of the articles she knits – a "long black ribbon" (94) – begins to bear an uncanny resemblance to the tapeworm that Tsafendas claimed prompted his murder of Verwoerd. This ribbon/tapeworm is not only described as having a "fanged head" (94) and a body "fat and bloated, heaped coil upon coil" (94), but is also equated with Tsafendas himself: "He's been there [Pretoria Central Prison] all these years. Sitting on his secrets, hatching them out, feeding them from his filthy mouth, caring for them until they are dark and ugly enough to be sent out into the world" (93).²⁰ Granny, as the ostensible creator of the ribbon/tapeworm, is thus implicitly the 'Muse' behind the assassination plot. However, she is equally, and more generally, depicted as a 'spinner of history' (and, like Verwoerd, an 'architect' of apartheid): the segregated patchwork produced by her crochet-hook "knots the giddy momentum of the planet into *little coloured squares*" (91, emphasis added).²¹ She herself is subsequently absorbed into her handiwork: "The ribbon unravels. A pile of crinkled wool grows next to the chair, larger and larger, looms over Granny, ingests her" (97). Significantly, then, Granny, her needlework, Tsafendas's tapeworm, Tsafendas himself and the Prime Minister become indistinguishable in the boy's imagination, suggesting a web of adult complicity of which he is only dimly aware.

Since the child in this story unquestioningly accepts and assimilates Granny's eccentric views and behaviour into his own amalgam of guilt, dream and delirium, he ultimately cannot discriminate between his own fantasies or projections and actual circumstances. In a dream, for example, he imagines a fluorescent trajectory, the arc tracing the flight of a bullet, to connect Tsafendas to the Prime Minister to Granny to himself: "I am its end" (96).²² Later, again in a dream, he interprets the silver-sequinned "D" Granny has added to the thinking-cap she has knitted him to represent "Death" (97), rather than the perhaps more obvious referent, 'Dunce'.²³ His sense of culpability here, however, also suggests that the "D" might stand for Tsafendas's first name, Demetrios. Having, at least subconsciously, accepted his collusion with death, the child adopts both Granny's persona and that of the tapeworm/Tsafendas: "I am coming with my fluorescent thread and my iron hook to knot the world into my blanket" (98).

The multiple suggestions of complicity and of a claustrophobically paranoid society in this story are reinforced by the child's earlier experience of suffocation by the thinking-cap, which chokes him while he is asleep: "my mouth is full of warm fur, my nose is full of its stench. Meat stew" (94). Subsequently, when he shovels meat and other scraps from the kitchen into the compost pit, he is watched over by Granny who, like Verwoerd, topples into the hole and joins the fermenting mixture which represents South African reality. The boy's own contribution to these "mysteries of meat and the imagination" (92) takes a metafictional turn, however, when the ink on the papers he digs into the compost pit begins to run and the print becomes illegible, the implication being that Vladislavić is making a reflexively sardonic comment on his own literary endeavours.²⁴ Thus, though both "The Prime Minister is Dead" and "Tsafendas's Diary" are linked through a certain duplication of characters and historical circumstances, and the perspective of an *ingénu* or child assimilates these agents and events into the absurd and surreal and establishes that innocence and guilt are commingled, the suggestion ultimately is that this adult world is inhabited by the writer and reader, in reality. In other words, that the activities in which both the latter engage are part of the compost pit: "rotten but fertile" (Thurman 2011: 58).

"The Box" – the other story in the collection which forms a cluster with the two discussed above – does not contain such overt correlations as a common setting and temporal period, or a single focaliser-protagonist and recurring set of characters. Nevertheless, as was the case with the undignified burial of the head of state in the opening story, here too the stature and authority of an actual public figure (in this case, the belligerent, finger-wagging Prime Minister

of the eighties, P.W. Botha) are treated with scant respect.²⁵ Initially he is described in his office, addressing the nation on television and highlighting his government's resolve to withstand those enemies of the state who wish to topple the regime by violent means. The irony that he asserts that his "government is committed to the maintenance of law and order" is not lost on Quentin, who is watching the broadcast with his wife, Mary. Quentin blurts out: "He's out of his mind That is the horrible truth. He's mad as a hatter" (45) – a claim which recalls the child narrator's similar characterisation of his Granny as "off her rocker" (91) in "Tsafendas's Diary". When, however, the camera zooms out, and the Prime Minister moves to the front of his desk to announce that, "To those who approach us as equals in the community of nations, we extend the hand of friendship" (46), Quentin *does* take him at his word:

A chubby hand reached out to Quentin. He put out his own hand and it tingled as it approached the screen and then slipped into warm custard. The screen went blank and Quentin groped, closed his fingers around the Prime Minister and jerked him out of the box.

In Quentin's fist the Prime Minister looked even tinier than he had on the screen. ... "Put me back! Put me back this instant!" he shouted, beating his tiny fists on Quentin's knuckles.

Quentin turned to Mary, who was getting shakily to her feet, and said, "Look what I just did."

(46)

Quite literally reduced to the six inches of his perspectival image on the television screen, the Prime Minister's Lilliputian size might be read as an allusion to the excessive pomposity of the statesmen of that tiny kingdom in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* – and to the similar presumptuousness of apartheid apparatchiks.

Subsequently, in what is perhaps a further reference to this work (Part I, Chapter 3), the Prime Minister bargains with his abductor for greater liberty (if not equality and fraternity), and a four-point agreement is drawn up. As a result of this pact the Prime Minister is "relocated", in a parody of forced removals and apartheid interventionism, from a birdcage to his new "homeland" (55) in the spare room. Despite the ignominy to which he has been subjected, however, the Prime Minister is accorded a certain dignity by the story's third- person narrator, primarily through descriptions of the intimacy he shares with his wife after she too has been 'kidnapped' from The Box. The First Couple thus come to stand in ironic contrast to Quentin and Mary, whose relationship is a humourless, barren and emotionally sterile affair, as the Prime Minister himself

recognises: “Don’t think I haven’t noticed the dearth of human fellowship round here” (54). A warped reciprocity is nevertheless established between the prisoner and his captor, since the former affords the latter a source of at least *some* human emotion – humour – although at his own expense, as the Prime Minister points out: “I need you. You need me. The reasons you need me are rather different. I amuse you. I keep you company” (54). For Mary, by comparison, the Prime Minister comes to occupy the position of a surrogate child.

Once again, in this story, the malaise which characterises the state, epitomised in the figure of the Prime Minister, finds an analogue in the psychoses which underpin relationships in the private realm. Though the images of the Prime Minister slumping and smoking dejectedly on a heap of sunflower seeds in his cage (48), being fed miniscule rations and provided with “little things from toyshops” (50) by Mary, or exercising gamely on a hamster’s treadwheel (49) are hilarious, they are also somehow poignant, and the narrative’s lampooning of the respect frequently accorded a head of state is therefore not one-sided. Indeed, it is the sadistic and perverse side of Quentin’s character which becomes increasingly evident as he continues to remove figures from the TV set, some of which are disembodied pieces or fragments of the human anatomy. As a pile of tiny, reeking corpses and dismembered body parts grows in the spare room – a ‘compost heap’ of human flesh – the story modulates into black humour, and its macabreness serves as a sickening image of a projected South African future, a ‘world’ gone (and already) insane. Thus, though Quentin arrogates to himself the power to create a country-in-miniature, pulling professors out of the television screen to ensure that it is not a “stupid republic” (58), the story itself presents an apposite microcosm of the “stupid republic” it parodies in reality – a country in which terms such as “homelands” and “republic” have dubious significance. It is surely deeply ironic, therefore, that at the beginning of the story Quentin is described as drinking from a bottle of Southern Comfort (45). By the end, Mary has left him in disgust at his increasingly manic and arbitrary social engineering.

4.3.2 Voortrekkers versus *Personae non Grata*

The second cluster of narratives containing suggestive links consists of “Flashback Hotel *TYYY”, “A Science of Fragments”, and “The Terminal Bar”. However, the interconnections among these three stories set up an elusive network of verbal repercussions and motifs which

ultimately encompasses every story in the collection, via a ricochet effect rather similar to that apprehended by the child-narrator's oneiric tracing of the fluorescent arc of the bullet in "Tsafendas's Diary".

The Flashback Hotel, scene of a gruesome bomb attack in the story which takes its title from the name of the establishment, recurs in "A Science of Fragments". In the latter, one of the male protagonist's recollections is of having sat in the Cavalier Bar in the hotel and of writing the following words on the back of a serviette: "You crossed the border. You came to rest in a homeland of deaf earth and dumb stone. Now and always, you are travelling on a foreign passport" (86). This sense of an uneasiness related to being 'out of place' is also reminiscent of the unnamed sightseer/tourist's effort to keep his face "like the picture in his passport" (22) as he hurries through the streets of the capital (Pretoria?) in the earlier story "Sightseeing". His implicitly guilty gesture here in turn recalls his earlier pang of self-reproach at the knowledge that his refusal to give food or money to young beggars, including a pregnant girl, obscures the reality that he is carrying "a kilogram of powdered milk like a Conscience" (20) in his suitcase. Though he attempts to justify his lack of charity by evasively explaining to the children that he "travel[s] light" (19), he concludes that, as a sightseer, he is guilty of careless waste and is alienated from his surroundings: "In remote places he comes to litter like his own and knows that he is not a voortrekker" (20).

However, the above references to passports and to a pervasive sense of anonymity and undefined guilt are especially evident in "Flashback Hotel". For example, the narrator of this story is not even recognised by his own father, the receptionist at the hotel at which he is staying, when he collects a letter from the reception desk. In the letter he discovers a pamphlet describing a younger version of himself as a person who has been reported missing, and a SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) (11). Subsequently he reads his own obituary in the "Hatches, Matches and Dispatches" columns of a newspaper delivered to his room, and discovers details about his life of which he is seemingly unaware. He also sees an identikit photograph of himself on the front page of the newspaper, indicating that he is held to be the prime suspect responsible for the act of terrorism which has earlier occurred in the hotel's dining-room. In an attempt to hide his identity, he shaves off his moustache (13), and then returns to the scene of the crime, pretending to be a reporter. When a fat man in a school uniform hands him a satchel, a policeman intervenes to find out what is going on, and he runs away, the fat man exclaiming: "If he's

innocent, why's he running away?" (13). The narrator later attends a fancy-dress party in the alley behind the hotel's kitchen, dressed in the chauffeur's uniform which he has discovered in the satchel, a satchel which also contains its legitimate owner's passport – that of a man "who was almost familiar" (14). Having made up his face, and memorised this man's name and address, the narrator adopts a fictitious or phoney identity by masquerading as him. The story ends with the words from which the title of the collection as a whole is derived: "I went as a missing person" (15).

Significantly, this title, together with the cover design which accompanies it, reinforces the links between "Flashback Hotel", "A Science of Fragments" and other stories in the collection. "Versions of Himself", a subsection of "A Science of Fragments", describes a photograph of a cardboard box which is "full of chaos and decay" (85) – like the compost pit and the scenario described in the story entitled "The Box". Amongst other items, the box in the photograph contains a "looming matchbox", "silkworm cocoons ... [and] droppings", and "five plastic people on a bench" (85), each of whom is characterised by a lack of definition or a distinct identity, and might be seen to correspond to the "missing persons" of the title. These figures are listed in vague terms as: "(from l. to r.): The watcher ... The lovers ... The listener ... The other man" (85), and all five are photographically reproduced on the cover of the collection, together with what might be a mulberry leaf and a superimposed, diagrammatic outline of a wheelbarrow. The latter is an obvious allusion to the opening story, whereas, more obliquely, the leaf and the silkworm cocoons evoke the image, discussed earlier, of history being spun in "Tsafendas's Diary" (an image which recurs in the seventh story, "We Came to the Monument"). Moreover, the poses of the "five plastic people" described in "Versions of Himself" are replicated not only on the cover of *Missing Persons*, but also in certain of the stories themselves. The lovers, "man and woman, their heads resting together, their hands meshed, inanimate. Her eyes ... closed. Or perhaps simply lowered to look at his hand" (85), for example, appear in the story "Movements", in which the male protagonist upsets ashtrays on the floor (64) and his lover subsequently bends intently over the hand he has hurt in the process, to remove a shard of glass (63). The "other man, the dark one, cut off by the edge of the photograph, in shadow, his head down, his hands hidden. Below the brim of his hat a face without features" (85) appears in another section of "A Science of Fragments", significantly entitled "Debris", and utters a speculative and solipsistic monologue (89-90). Further, the title of

the photograph of the box which contains these figures, “The Waiting Room”, with its connotations of being in limbo or in transit in a transient location or ‘non-place’, holds obvious correspondences with the title (and subject matter) of the final story, “The Terminal Bar”. Confirmation of the latter story’s inclusion in the web of allusions and motifs which links the others mentioned above is provided when the narrator in “A Science of Fragments” travels to Jan Smuts International Airport, the location of the “Terminal Bar”, and telephones the Flashback Hotel in what proves to be a frustrated attempt to contact his female counterpart. She, meanwhile, is described as being “in the gardens ... in a childhood place, in the beautiful gardens of the Flashback Hotel, her veins slow with sleep ... her bones heavy with words” (87).

The evident, though intractable, connections between the stories above assume a subtle significance in terms of their reiteration of the themes of anonymity, transience and displacement, and of fragmented recollections or flashbacks. The thematic thread of alienation is, in particular, conveyed through the motif of hands, which are used to convey frustrated attempts at human intimacy, communication and connection. In “Movements”, for example, the woman’s hands are described as moving in “gestures [the male character] cannot understand, and so he allows them to assume the shape of hands that are reaching for door- handles and keys” (66) – that is, he interprets her to be leaving him. The ambiguity of his response to what he assumes her hands are unconsciously communicating is, in turn, conveyed through his own hands, one of which “wants to comfort her, draw her back to him”, whilst the other “wants to push her out into the night” (66). A measure of the couple’s inability to understand each other emerges in the detail that she also construes each of his hands to bear the opposite message to that which he apparently intends:

She listens to the hands, just the hands.

The one on her shoulder, curled like a crook, she hears, is pushing her out through the crack of the door. The one on her back, that flat palm, is pulling her in.

(66)

Moreover, the story ends with the revelation that the male protagonist has not moved at all, in fact, but is framed immobile in the doorway of his bedroom. In other words, he has not conveyed his desire either to hold onto or to let go of his lover (and, by implication, their relationship). Her reaction, both to his indecision and her own, has meanwhile been to desert him:

She turns herself to him, his hands turn her in to him. She opens him like a door, it is easy, and she walks through. He sees her getting smaller and smaller down the passages to the small place where he is waiting, where he will be able to speak to her without fear. I am coming, she says, and soon my voice will be small enough for you to hear it above the clamouring of your busy heart.
 He looks at his grey hands.
 He hears her car start in the street below.
 He finds himself in the doorway of his room.
 He sees that she has gone out, closing the door behind her. It is light behind the frosted panes, it is morning outside, where she is.

(66-67)

The ‘framed’ postures of inaction or suspension (both physical and emotional) encountered in this story, ironically titled “Movements”, are earlier expressed in the photographic or cinematic metaphor: “Freeze him Freeze her” (65), a metaphor which suggests both immobility and frigidity. The metaphor finds multiple echoes in the other stories in *Missing Persons*, but especially in the futuristic fable “We Came to the Monument”. Here the male protagonist, a statue, refers to the expressive “talkative hands” (70) of the flesh-and-blood woman he loves, whereas she describes the historical actors depicted in the friezes of the Voortrekker Monument as “frozen, half in and half out of the stone” (71). Subsequently the statue notes that his hands have been “frozen into two permanent gestures, one open, one shut” (72) – an ambivalent stance which replicates those encountered in “Movements”, though here it is conveyed in terms of the fixed poses of statues, petrified in stone, rather than the paralytic indecisiveness of living human beings.

The “destiny of stone” (81) apparently shared not only by statues but also by people, finds direct expression in what is possibly the most significant motif in the collection: that of monuments (epitomised in the sentiment expressed by the narrator in “A Science of Fragments” and quoted earlier: “You came to rest in a homeland of deaf earth and dumb stone” [86]). The opening story, “The Prime Minister is Dead”, for example, is infused with images which depict, in both literal and metaphorical terms, a segment of South African society’s desire for apotheosis, matched by what is portrayed as the resultant ossification of its members. For example, the child-narrator remarks, of the renaming of the suburb in which he lives, “They wanted us to live in a monument” (3). This unconsciously ironic and naïvely-wise comment on the state’s attempt to permanently fix the public record, via the mythologisation of selected national heroes and statesmen, also reflects on the torpor of Verwoerdburg’s inhabitants. In the

same vein, the boy observes that he “see[s] now that the death of a Prime Minister has many consequences” (2). Subsequently, however, he humanises and points to the decay or ‘mortality’ and impermanence of the monumental figures he and his father encounter in the historic part of the city: “Old statues, the flesh blistered and corroded, stared down at us” (6-7). By contrast, his father’s response to this particular historic occasion is implacable: “His jaw was set and craggy as a statue’s. His eyes looked stonily ahead” (7). Like his father, too, the cenotaphs in the cemetery in which the Prime Minister is to be buried are impassive to this momentous event: “On either side the stone faces of the men in the history books looked down from their columns, unblinking, unmoved” (9).

The suggestions, in “The Prime Minister is Dead”, that monuments may be habitable (‘lived in’), and that statues, paradoxically, have human features in more than a sculptural sense (‘a life of their own’) but are indifferent to history-in-the-making, are expanded upon in “We Came to the Monument”. Set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the latter describes how the statue, together with the last remnants of the Afrikaner nation, literally takes up residence in the partly destroyed Voortrekker Monument on the hill overlooking Verwoerdburg. The desperate circumstances of this party of “latter day Voortrekker” survivors (Brown 1990: 128), and the decline of the monument which previously served as a monolithic affirmation of the originary mythology of their nation, constitute an ironic depiction of the fate of the “compost heap”. The statue, motivated by a desire to escape the debris signifying the defeat of the civilisation to which he once aspired to belong (and, at least as a historical personage, was instrumental in establishing), has vacated his post in the capital (Pretoria) and, like the human group, views the monument as a potential refuge, a “place to stay” (76). Once there, he expresses his dismissal of history, both contemporary and longstanding, by entering the frieze which depicts the signing of the treaty between Dingane and Piet Retief after the Battle of Blood River on 16 December 1838, and then turning his back – not only on the principal actors and assembled onlookers depicted in the representation of this historic scene, but also, by extension, on any current viewer of the frieze.

The statue’s earlier desire to be human is subliminally manifested in a dream he has, in which he imagines his demolishers discovering, amongst his ruins, “a sticky heart pacing out the confines of [his] broken ribcage” (73). This description anticipates one of the musings of the “other man” in the photograph entitled “The Waiting Room”: “if I should hear in the ribcage of

the hardest word its soft heart beat” (90). The implicit conflation of stones, masonry, words and hearts in these two references recurs in “Journal of a Wall”, the most self-reflexively ironic story in the collection – a story that refers directly to the widespread and institutionalised violence of the eighties, interrogates the role of words and writing in a state of emergency, and itself enacts a crisis in representation. In the story, the unnamed protagonist-narrator, who is recording in minute detail the progress of his neighbour’s construction of a perimeter wall around his property, recoils from the scenes of conflict broadcast by the newsreader, Michael de Morgan (24), on television every evening: “I ... was finding the news depressing – full of death and destruction”. Subsequently, he poses the rhetorical question: “Who would build amid these ruins?” (28) and, later still, when he imagines his neighbour’s wife bringing out a bottle of champagne to celebrate the completion of the wall, he repeats and expands upon the query:

But is there cause for celebration. No. Is there reason for building when things are falling down? No. Is there reason for drinking beer when people are starving? Probably not. Do two people and a bottle of champagne make sense when citizens are pitched against soldiers, when stones are thrown at tanks? Does private joy make sense in the face of public suffering?

(42-43)

The unconscious innuendo underpinning the dilemma the narrator-writer articulates in these interrogations hinges on his equation of bricks with words, and the process of producing a verbal record or chronicle of the building of a wall to its actual construction. For example, as the wall nears completion, he observes:

There he begins the last course of bricks. How bored I am with the tired repetition of gesture. How bored I am with the familiar shapes of words. How bored I am with this journal. It’s just a wall. That must be clear by now. Even a child could see it. And the words that go into it like bricks are as bland and heavy and worn as the metaphor itself.

(43)

Thus the questions the narrator raises in regard to the appropriateness of building – or celebrating and experiencing a sense of contentment – in a country in crisis not only apply to the building of the wall and his writing of the journal, but also, by extension and self-reflexively, to Vladislavić’s own writing practice. Moreover, the narrator’s earlier desire, via his writing, to establish an emotional bond and a sense of common purpose with his neighbour – his need for ‘community’ – is thwarted when, towards the end of the story, he discovers in a paroxysm of

fury that bricks (and, by implication, words) embody disjunction and separation: they do *not*, that is, have “soft heart beats”. The wall constitutes an impenetrable barrier and excludes the narrator from communion with his neighbours, and his journal has brought him no closer to establishing a sense of connection with them: in fact, they are not even aware of its existence. Finally, that bricks, walls and words are part of the compost mixture of South African reality becomes apparent when the solitary brick which the narrator has stolen from his neighbour’s pile, and hides inside his own house, spends the night “steaming, fermenting inside ... bubbling and hissing” (33).

Following the narrator’s unsuccessful attempt to assert some claim to ‘co-authorship’ of the bricklaying process by visiting his neighbours, on the pretext of borrowing a cup of sugar, and striking up a conversation on the wall’s progress (40-41), he falls back on the journal as his real locus of power. Thus, once the wall is finished, he claims triumphantly that, though the builder “lays the last brick”, he himself has “the last word” (43). He then signals his ostensible control of both processes with the tautological flourish: “THE END” (43). But his elation and sense of victory are short-lived since, unable to sleep whilst his neighbours have a “wall-warming” party to which he has not been invited (43), he is forced to continue the journal. Subsequently, he records the end of what was, at best, a tenuous sense of ‘fraternity’ and affinity: he is taken aback to discover that his neighbours have abruptly and unaccountably sold their house and left the neighbourhood. He does not then, in a certain sense, “have the last word”, and can no more lay claim to the old – or the new – neighbours, the wall itself, or the stolen brick which he surreptitiously replaced in the pile but nevertheless regards as his own (44). Nor can he claim authorial control over the writing process. Multiple ironies surface here, since the journal-keeper is himself a fictional construct, a character in a text over which he has no jurisdiction. Nevertheless, as an author-surrogate, his predicament suggestively raises the possibility of the actual author’s loss of control over ‘the sense of an ending’. Thus, though initially the narrator’s obsession with the wall and his journal in this story seems merely eccentric, the narrative’s repeated references to militarism and the violent suppression of township revolts in the eighties (24, 28, 32) act as a sober reminder of the less than trivial consequences of a careless use of words and walls – or the verbal and physical enforcement of segregationist policies to which, in the eighties in South Africa, no end seemed in sight.

4.3.3 Coda: The End of the Kreepy Krauly/Apartheid

Though the stories in *Missing Persons* are not arranged chronologically, the time frame of the collection extends from the mid-sixties (the assassination of Verwoerd in 1966), through the seventies (television was introduced in 1976), to the eighties (the premiership of P.W. Botha from 1978 to 1984; successive States of Emergency; Michael de Morgan as newsreader). It is as a result of this sketchy temporal continuity that Stephen Kennedy argues that there is, in fact, a central protagonist and consistent focaliser throughout the collection: in other words, that “the child narrator of ‘The Prime Minister is Dead’ and ‘Tsafendas’s Diary’ is Quentin of ‘The Box’ and the night watchman at the Terminal Bar”. Moreover, according to Kennedy, this focaliser “is portrayed as schizophrenic within the construct of a fundamentally psychologically flawed society” (2005: 2-3). He suggests, then, that the “eclectic collection of dishevelled and derelict patrons engaged in meaningless, ritualistic behaviour, the random displays of pointless aggression, and the hopelessness of escape” that characterise the establishment (*‘the Establishment’?*) described in the concluding story, “The Terminal Bar”, are “akin to the back ward in a psychiatric hospital for the incurably insane” (2005: 5).

In the descriptions of this manic scenario, the dying convulsions of the Kreepy Krauly – over-zealously shot by an army captain who enters the bar with his men – are graphically foregrounded:

The bullet hit the Kreepy Krauly in the head. A gout of slime laced with cogs and sprockets splattered against the wall. A terrible spasm started in the Kreepy Krauly’s neck, ran along its body and burst into the cash register, so that the drawer sprang open and the bell rang. ... the Kreepy Krauly was in its death throes. The sucker slurped desperately at the surface of the wall, but could not find purchase. The neck bent, the head slid slowly down to the floor, the head rolled over, exposing the sucker, which gasped and rattled and spat slime. The Kreepy Krauly moaned once, a low cry full of anguish and yearning, and was still.

(112)

In her early review, Verna Brown argues that “South African society-in-extremis finds its absurd objective correlative in the death throes” (1990: 129) of this ‘creature’. More recently, Felicity Wood has maintained that the Kreepy Krauly’s association with white privilege and suburban swimming pools, together with its local patenting (in 1974), does not only mean that its ‘death’ signifies “the demise of white South Africa”, as Brown suggests, but also that it “satirises

commodity fetishisation” (2001: 26-27). Both these interpretations of its significance in the story and in the collection, however, ignore what Kennedy ingeniously maintains is the most obvious explanation, one “that is waiting, coiled up and ready to writhe into the consciousness of the reader”. Thus, “the Kreepy Krauly is Granny’s ‘long black ribbon [with its] fanged head’ ... now grown gluttonously huge, having fed on the filth of a corrupt society. It is Tsafendas’s tapeworm” (2005: 6-7). Indeed, the correspondence is made explicit in an earlier description of the Kreepy Krauly as “[a] magnificent specimen, thirty foot long if it’s an inch, with a livid head ... a gigantic pale sucker trailing filaments of slime [and a] long ribbed body” (108). For Kennedy, then, the Kreepy Krauly is “a symbol of a society gone wrong, a trophy mounted on a wall in a place of lunacy”. And, as he points out, “In an insane society, who is to say who is sane?” (2005: 7) – or, as van Woerden puts it in his “*anamnesis*” (2000: 159) of Tsafendas: “Which of the two, then, was truly more crazy: Verwoerd or Tsafendas?” (2000: 146). In retrospect, too, Quentin’s description, in “The Box”, of a subsequent Prime Minister as “out of his mind ... mad as a hatter” (45), is supremely ironic, given his own deranged behaviour, and Granny, in “Tsafendas’s Diary”, is “off her rocker” (91) too.

The concluding words of “The Terminal Bar”, the ambiguously titled final story in which the Kreepy Krauly features so prominently, comprise the bartender’s recitation of the time-honoured notification to diehard or drunken patrons that a drinking establishment is about to close for the night: “Time, gentleman!” (119). Unremarkable in itself, this announcement appears to reinforce the barman’s routinely impassive response to the debauched and violent events he recollects and recounts in the story via the deadpan refrain: “Another night Another night” (105, 106, 113, 115, 118, 119). Given the rabidly violent microcosm of South African society that the Terminal Bar represents, however, the barman’s final warning is ominously prescient in more than a mundane sense. In a metafictional *tour de force*, Vladislavić in effect conflates the closure of the bar, the conclusion of this story and the collection as a whole, and the long overdue demise of the old order in South Africa. Nevertheless, given that the phrase “Time, gentleman!” (105) also comprises the opening words of “The Terminal Bar”, a certain circularity and irresolution are suggested by its repetition at the end. Moreover, having delivered his warning at the beginning of the story, the barman immediately thereafter thinks to himself: “It’s always closing time in the Terminal Bar, but no one leaves” (1989: 105). The sense of monotony or repetitiveness and stasis conveyed here, underlined by the refrain mentioned earlier, thus

intimates that ‘closure’ might not be as finite a notion as it seems. As Vladislavić himself reflects, “For people living through the mid-1980s in SA, it didn’t look like apartheid was going to end – the feeling was of something interminable” (qtd in Thurman 2011: 56).

With hindsight, of course, the imminence (and perhaps immanence) of the ambiguously rendered ‘sense of an ending’ in “The Terminal Bar” was, at least in certain respects, to transmute into the certainty of reality less than five years after the appearance of *Missing Persons*. In his assessment of the continuing relevance of Vladislavić’s first collection of stories to South Africa post-1994, Pechey cautions, however, that “there is no reason to suppose [the anaesthetizing normalization of South African reality] will have ended absolutely with the formal end of apartheid” (1998: 72). If *Missing Persons* epitomises William Kentridge’s Gramscian notion of political art – “an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay” (qtd in Sittenfeld 2001: 15) – then this is no less true of Vladislavić’s subsequent work. In what he himself characterises as the “second interregnum” or “parenthetical era” (2005b: 88) which has succeeded the formal end of apartheid, he has continued to produce similarly unorthodox and generically ambivalent fictions: fictions that defamiliarise and interrogate the ‘normal’, and that celebrate rather than eschew quirkiness, contingency and flux. In so doing, he appears to endorse Robert Thornton’s view that “South Africa is not simply in ‘transition’ to a final state, or to some other ‘end of history’. To be successful, it must remain in a sort of permanent transition. Just as it once seemed to exist perpetually just ahead of apocalypse” (1996: 158). If the approach Vladislavić adopted to the apocalyptic tenor of the eighties in *Missing Persons* was unconventional and distinctively idiosyncratic – a mixture of “topographical realism” and “zany surrealism” (Heyns, qtd in Thurman 2011: 51) – his response to the exigencies of the second interregnum has been similarly uncompromising and inventive.

4.4 Conclusion

As different renditions of the short fiction cycle form that emerged at the end of the tempestuous decade of the eighties, Matlou’s, Magona’s, Wicomb’s and Vladislavić’s collections are significant in sociological terms. Whereas *Life at Home* and “Women at Work” chart the grave consequences of apartheid for those that bore the brunt of that system by virtue of their

marginalisation and exploitation, Wicomb's and Vladislavić's volumes examine somewhat different forms of disenchantment with notions of identity, community and belonging overdetermined by 'race'. Though it is tempting to view these discrepancies along racial lines, it is also evident that each of these volumes features estrangement in one form or another, and problematises the cycle's conventional association with regionalism and community. Moreover, a spectrum of writing styles emerges: from the raw transcription of a lived reality of (extraordinary) suffering and tenuous survival (Matlou) and a conscious use of a multivocal and mock-oral format to convey a sense of collective voices, offset by an individualised narrative which highlights the anguish of separation and isolation (Magona), to the deployment of intertextual, fragmentary and reflexive strategies to interrogate the role of narrative in the construction of identity and notions of belonging (Wicomb and Vladislavić).

While the stories in *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* initially appear to approximate a *Bildungsroman*, the collection subverts its ostensible realism by advertising its existence as discourse or story/fiction, and by foregrounding the narrative construction of identity and the contestatory claims of all versions of South African reality. As Wicomb herself remarks, in a statement which serves as a useful reflection on her own stories:

The search for a literary/cultural theory to suit the South African situation must surely take as a point of departure a conflictual model of society where a variety of discourses will always render problematic the demands of one in relation to others and where discursive formations admit of cracks and fissures that will not permit monolithic ideological constructs.

(1990: 36)

By including within itself a reflexive commentary on the conventions and politics of both representation and interpretation, *You Can't Get Lost* also provides a cogent challenge to what Wicomb has described as the misguided reception of 'black' women's writing (and here she includes her own) as autobiographical and "artless record[s]" which are "primarily of social and anthropological value" (1990: 42).²⁶ Moreover, intertextual allusions to both Hardy and Nortje in the volume implicitly reflect on events and experiences on the primary level of mimesis, and set up a dialogue on literary regionalism, culpability, the ethics of sympathy, and the exilic condition.

When *Missing Persons* first appeared, it constituted the most radical and disturbing subversion of the notion of a collective sense of identity attached to place – a *sensus communis* – yet encountered in the short fiction cycle genre in South Africa. By confronting the legacy of apartheid as an irreality bordering on the hallucinatory, the surreal and the grotesque, and by presenting an urban landscape in which identifiable locales dissolve into unstable mental terrains, the collection refused the consolations of secure identities grounded in the familiarity of place. And, by fusing the extreme and the ordinary, mundanity and absurdity, reality and nightmare, *Missing Persons* projected a society on the verge of (or perhaps already characterised by) madness. Nevertheless, it also both paradoxically and intuitively captured the consciousness of dislocation and frustrated striving for that elusive sense of belonging, a national identity, which so characterised this particular society in the throes of what Vladislavić himself would term the ‘first’ interregnum. The interlocking allusions to monuments, statues, walls, bricks and stone – the mythological and literal foundations of apartheid – encountered throughout the collection point to a nation’s preoccupation with the records of its achievements and unity, and its desire to perpetuate itself and ‘make its mark’, both in the history books and on the landscape. However, the dislocated and alienated experiences of the characters in the stories – the “missing persons” of the title, each of whom is in some sense at a loss – negate any sense of a shared community, history and destiny, and expose the fractured reality constructed by the nationalist architects of apartheid. These “missing persons”, then, are the “bits and pieces of a puzzled world” (87), the “artefact[s] ... unearthed from the tomb of a dead civilization” (75) which comprise “nothing worth possessing” (69). Vladislavić’s bleak yet comical depiction of the discontinuities of South African reality in the eighties finds a cogent parallel in the ultimately frustrated intimations of cohesion which the collection evinces – or, to borrow from Lionel Abrahams, the “wholeness” and “certainty” which the “fragments” of which it is composed refuse to yield. Unlike earlier writers who used the short story cycle form in this country to convey a sense of social and regional cohesiveness, in *Missing Persons* Vladislavić presented no such comforting fictions.

Christy Collins maintains that the paradigm which preoccupied both writers and readers under apartheid was encapsulated in the polemical question “which side are you on?” Both Vladislavić and Wicomb, from their earliest writing, however, imaginatively moved beyond this question, the former, in particular, opting rather to embrace what Collins describes as the “non-

essentialist” question of “where is here?” (qtd in Kossew 2004: 137). Though the answer provided in *Missing Persons* is complex, if not complete, Vladislavić himself would assert, with simple directness, what for him is the self-evident truth – that “We will never be ourselves anywhere else” (2005a: 135). However, this raises the question of ‘being oneself’ somewhere else – or whether one *is* or *can* be ‘oneself’ elsewhere – a question with which Wicomb’s more recent volume, *The One that Got Away*, is preoccupied, given that it features South African characters visiting or living in Scotland (as does Wicomb herself), and vice versa. In my final chapter, then, I provide a close reading of this volume, by examining the ways in which it differs from Wicomb’s first collection of stories and much more prominently and skilfully plays with the complexities introduced into the reading process by the tension between cohesion and disjunction in the short fiction cycle. Indeed, it appears that, in *The One that Got Away*, Wicomb has quite deliberately used this generic format to produce a dizzying array of intratextual echoes and ontological dissolutions, and to test the limits of representation by self-reflexively meditating on the relation between coherence and fragmentation, representation and reality, and freedom and determinism. In another sense, too, the collection’s twin settings – Cape Town and Glasgow – not only reflect the author’s own intimate experience of both cities, but also interrogate contemporary notions of the cosmopolitan to suggest the prominence of urban over regional or national affiliations.

Notes

¹ Two of the stories (“A Clearing in the Bush” and “A Fair Exchange”) alternate between the first- and third-person points of view, the latter introduced for those passages describing the experiences of the characters Tamietia and Meid/Magriet, respectively, and focalised through their perspectives.

² In a telephonic conversation I had with her, Wicomb confirmed that she had not published any of the stories in *You Can’t Get Lost* prior to their appearance in the collection, and that they were originally intended to form an ensemble.

³ As discussed earlier, this coherence goes some way towards accounting for the critical confusion with which many cycles are met. In an early review of *You Can’t Get Lost*, for example, Barend Toerien describes the stories it contains as “episodes of a novel, a kind of Bildungsroman and a carefully structured one at that” (1988: 43). Hunter, in her interview with Wicomb, refers to the collection as “a series of pieces rendered novel-like” (1993: 80) and as Wicomb’s “first novel” (1993: 93). However, the stories *are* able to be read independently, and their fragmentary nature and the temporal gaps between them mean that *You Can’t Get Lost* does not follow the trajectory of a life as closely as would be the case in a conventional *Bildungsroman*.

⁴ Michael is earlier linked to both God and Frieda’s father in being irascible, chauvinistic and autocratic. For example, when he attempts to persuade Frieda that her pregnancy is “God’s holy plan” and that, as a Christian, she should view the termination as sinful, she reflects: “God is not a good listener. Like Father, he expects obedience and withdraws peevishly if his demands are not met. Explanations of my point of view infuriate him so that he quivers with silent rage. For once I do not plead and capitulate, I find it quite easy to ignore these men” (75). When Michael then accuses her of not listening to him, she detects the “revulsion in his voice” (75).

⁵ Wicomb has written somewhat caustically about the adoption of District Six (“an inner-city community marked by poverty and crime”) as a (retroactive) symbol of a homogenised and mythologised coloured identity and as an “ethnic homeland”, claiming that this “illustrates not only the fictional nature of identity construction but also the postcolonial relationship with a politics of location” (1998: 94-95). She argues that:

Since the earliest fiction by writers like Alex La Guma and Richard Rive, [District Six] has become a ready-made southern counterpart to the loaded signifier of Soweto. Site-specific as media signifiers of oppression had become, [it] had the advantage of being urban, demolished and therefore patently about loss, as well as being associated with forced removals to which far fewer coloured than black communities were in fact subjected.

(1998: 95)

As she goes on to point out, the musical *District Six*, produced in 1986 by David Kramer and Taliep Petersen, contributed significantly to a sense of a coloured community constructed

through representation – its projected image of cohesion belying the reality of differentiations within the group and complicit with the notion of ethnic exceptionalism:

The self-fashioning of a totalizing colouredness located in a mythologized District Six of the 1950s and sixties found its expression in the eighties in the popular eponymous musical. Here ethnicity was constructed within a politics of nostalgia that sentimentalized the loss. ... the show's reliance on pastiche, a mode described by Jameson as "the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motives", signalled its refusal to engage with collocations of colouredness, or with interacting identities in a larger framework of South African citizenship. ... The popular attempt at inventing an authentic colouredness illustrates how representation does not simply express, but rather plays a formative role in social and political life.

(1998: 95)

⁶ Henk van Woerden summarises the general public perception that Tsafendas "was a madman; nothing else. Nothing more. In a few days [his] tapeworm had become famous nation-wide. ... Whatever political elements there may have been in Tsafendas's statements to the police were not made known to the public. The worm spoke more strongly to the imagination of the public" (2000: 8). As Andrew Unsworth puts it: "Declaring Tsafendas mad neatly denied him any political motive or responsibility" (2003: 1).

⁷ Including the ironically named Extension of University Education Act of 1959, which prohibited 'non-white' students from attending 'white' universities, and established new 'bush colleges', such as UWC, for those designated 'Coloured', Indian or 'black'. The fact that this story is entitled "A Clearing in the Bush" and that Tess's first encounter with Alec D'Urberville occurs in "The Clearing" in Hardy's novel, constructs a further parallel between Frieda's reading both of Hardy's novel and Verwoerd's assassination.

⁸ Frieda's father's sense of superiority, by virtue of lineage, ironically recalls that of the Durbeyfields – and Tess's father, in particular – in Hardy's novel. In the South African context, however, as Mr Shenton's sentiments reveal, social pretensions are determined not only by class, but also by 'race'.

⁹ The acronym of the United Democratic Front, an umbrella, non-racial organisation first launched in Rocklands, Cape Town, in 1983. It was, in part, created to oppose the government's plans to set up a Tricameral parliament in which 'white', Indian and 'Coloured' South Africans would be represented in separate houses, but from which the majority 'black' population would be excluded.

¹⁰ This story's emphasis on the social prestige attached to impeccable English, and the ways it is believed to encode 'class' and 'respectability', is prefigured in the third of the collection's epigraphs, an extract from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, which opens with the claim that "In writing the history of unfashionable families one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society".

¹¹ Of her own background, Wicomb comments: “my parents were able to teach themselves English – because, again, they’d identified English as a way out of the oppression. I remember that when I was about six we got a radio and my mother literally used to sit and listen to the news, and articulate after the newsreader. And so we were taught to speak English” (Hunter & MacKenzie 1993: 89).

¹² Wicomb explains: “In a sense in my final story, where I turn my young woman into a writer, I anticipate [my family’s] reaction of distaste. ... The book seems to be an embarrassment to my family” (Hunter & MacKenzie 1993: 83). It is ironic that, having specifically warned against the erroneous equation of actual author and narrator/protagonist, she herself falls into this trap at various points throughout her interview with Hunter. More recently, however, Wicomb has defended the notion that “the foregrounding of the authorial [especially in postcolonial texts] is indeed a departure from the usual traffic with subjectivity, but that, instead of staging representation, such resurrection of the author is also concerned with asserting an ethics of authorial responsibility in an ostentatious coupling of author and narrator” (2005: 150).

¹³ Also known as a licorice plant or everlasting, the botanical name for *kooigoed* is *Helichrysum petiolare*, from the Greek *helios* for “sun” and *chrysus* for “gold”. *Petiolare* refers to the plant’s elongated leaf stalks. It is indigenous to South Africa, grows in the drier inland areas, and has medicinal properties (“*Helichrysum petiolare*” par. 1-6).

¹⁴ The original version of this article was first presented as a paper at the SAVAL Conference in Vanderbijlpark in 1991, and published in *Current Writing* 4 in 1992 as “Ivan Vladislavić’s Revision of the South African Story Cycle”. It was revised and expanded for inclusion in *Marginal Spaces: Reading Ivan Vladislavić*, edited by Gerald Gaylard and published by Wits University Press in 2011.

¹⁵ Nuttall, for example, comments that “a surprising number of cultural analyses of this *now*, this contemporary, many of them neo-Marxist analyses, start from the assumption that not much has changed in South Africa since the end of apartheid. This is a different point from one that stresses, quite rightly, that many of the inequalities of the past remain in place, particularly for the poor in South Africa. This, in turn, does not exclude the fact that much has changed and that we need theories and ways of reading culture which take into account the extent of the transformations that have taken place” (2004: 731).

¹⁶ Some of the stories were published individually in literary magazines such as *Sesame*, *Staffrider*, *Stet*, *TriQuarterly* and *The Bloody Horse*, and in the *English Academy Review*, earlier in the eighties.

¹⁷ Lyttelton was renamed Verwoerdburg in 1967, and subsequently again renamed, as Centurion, in 1995 (after the major cricket ground located there). Vladislavić, born in 1957, himself lived outside Pretoria in the 1960s with his parents and grandparents, and would have been roughly the same age as the child-focaliser in “The Prime Minister is Dead” when Verwoerd died. The story therefore seems to contain quasi-autobiographical references. However, given the increasingly bizarre turn of events as the story progresses, the equation of narrator and author cannot be sustained.

¹⁸ In reality, various conspiracy theories did circulate, especially in the media, immediately after the assassination, but none was verified by the Commission of Enquiry into Verwoerd's death.

¹⁹ Historically inaccurate, since Verwoerd was assassinated on 6 September 1966 – that is, in early spring.

²⁰ Tsafendas spent twenty-eight years in Pretoria Central, before being transferred to the Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital near Krugersdorp in 1994. He died there in 1999, at the age of eighty-one.

²¹ The notion, in this story, that history is in some sense 'crocheted' or 'spun' is also encountered in the later story, "We Came to the Monument", in which one of the two protagonist-narrators, a statue, thinks to himself that "the planets turned on the brittle stem of [his love's] wrist" (76). He subsequently imagines that the earth's motion has been arrested – as if a child's hand has blocked the globe and begun to revolve it in the opposite direction, so that the "long thread of history" (80) unwinds into space.

²² Another misrepresentation, since Verwoerd was stabbed with a dagger by Tsafendas, not shot – or "chopped ... up with a panga!", as the boy's Granny claims in the opening story (2). As Thurman points out, the latter claim, which Granny makes on the day she hears of the assassination on the radio, reveals that she has jumped to the conclusion that the perpetrator must be 'black' and has therefore used a traditional weapon. Thurman comments that "The change in weapon may ... hint at the debate about who Tsafendas was deemed to be acting on behalf of – a panga would be more strongly associated in the apartheid mindset with the 'swart gevaar'" (2011: 65, n.7).

²³ The colloquial understanding of the phrase "to put one's thinking-cap on" – that is, to devote some time to thinking about a specific problem or to deliberate carefully – is derived from the fact that seventeenth-century jurists and scholars wore tight-fitting square caps, and from the juridical practice in which a judge, after soberly donning a black cap, would pronounce the death sentence on a guilty offender.

²⁴ Thurman points out that, "[as] the story progresses, the activities of tending the stew and of writing become coterminous. When he realises that he will not be able to retrieve Tsafendas's diary (because either it has disappeared, or it never existed), the boy starts to write it himself. Once it is completed, he presents it to his grandmother as he might a fresh cut of meat, 'wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string'" (2011: 61).

²⁵ Though, temporally, "The Box" is set several decades after the events recounted in "The Prime Minister is Dead" (the first story) and "Tsafendas's Diary" (the ninth), it is positioned between the two as the fifth story in the collection.

²⁶ In response to a question from Eva Hunter on the autobiographical flavour of *You Can't Get Lost*, Wicomb comments: "black women are supposed to write autobiography – whether they write in the third person or not, they're always received as if it's autobiographical, almost as if

we're incapable of artifice, incapable of fictionalising. That irritates me intensely" (Hunter & MacKenzie 1993: 93). In light of this comment and her expressed preference for writers who offer their readers "the experience of discontinuity, violation of our expectations, or irony" (1991: 14), Wicomb's assertion that she herself is "not innovative ... [and is] unable to experiment with form" (1993: 92) is something of a red herring – as is evident in her debut collection.

Chapter 5: “You Left. Remember?”: ‘Roots’ Versus ‘Routes’ in Wicomb’s *The One That Got Away*

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5.1 Introduction¹

[H]ome, best place from which to keep an eye on the world.

– Margaret (“There’s the Bird that Never Flew”; Wicomb 2008: 74)

I wanted to write about a thing that I find difficult to admit even to myself, which is the fact that I left home.

– Salman Rushdie (qtd in Wicomb 2006: 153 n.4)

I have a ghost existence here [in Scotland]: my whole intellectual and emotional life is in South Africa.

– Zoë Wicomb (Robinson n.d. par. 15)

Sometimes you have to go halfway around the world to come full circle.

– *Lost in Translation*

If Wicomb’s first collection displayed a particular concern with the tenuousness of origins and stable identities, and the increasingly hybrid and diasporic nature of Frieda Shenton’s experience, then this concern is even more apparent in *The One that Got Away*, Wicomb’s second collection of short fiction, published just over two decades later. In many respects, the latter takes over where *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* left off, particularly in imparting a sense of the ambiguities of expatriate experience – an area which Frieda references only obliquely in relation to her sojourn in England in the earlier collection. Though *The One that Got Away* does not continue the narrative of Frieda, the stories it contains focus on South Africans visiting or living ‘overseas’ (more specifically in Scotland, rather than England), and on Scots visiting or resident in South Africa. Five of the twelve stories are set in Glasgow and all but two contain Scottish nationals, contemporary descendants of 1820 Scottish settlers in South Africa, or South African women with Scottish husbands.² Moreover, at least five of the characters who are Scottish or Scottish by birth but have relocated to South Africa, are internal focalisers in the narratives, rather than minor characters rendered purely via third-person descriptions and snatches of dialogue. The stories therefore constitute a significant shift in Wicomb’s *oeuvre* to date since, by her own admission, she has been loath to write about Britain in general as a setting, and reticent about her ability to intimately imagine Scottish characters: “I can’t write about Britain, and writing about South Africa is arguably a way of coping with absence and longing and a need to belong” (Meyer & Olver 2002:182).³ Kai Easton and Andrew van der Vlies, for example, refer to Wicomb’s previous reluctance to write about Scotland as “an ethical disavowal, a refusal to presume she might write about a place that is not, strictly, her home” (2011: 251) – a refusal similarly articulated by a character in *The One that Got Away*.

In *You Can't Get Lost*, Frieda chooses voluntary exile in England above remaining in South Africa, whereas the South African characters in Wicomb's more recent collection experience the increased mobility brought about by the end of apartheid and South Africa's re-entry into the global community. In exploring the interface between people from different nationalities and cultures, and the tensions and antagonisms which simmer and surface between outsiders, visitors or tourists, and those who lay prior claim to a particular place or territory – those who express what Achille Mbembe terms “the cult of locality – or, in other words, [an attachment to] home, the small space ... where direct, proximate relationships are reinforced by membership in a common genealogy” (2002: 266) *The One that Got Away* interrogates notions of ‘home’, proximity, relationality and a “common genealogy”. In this regard, it is significant that the word “shibboleth” – a word whose pronunciation is a means of distinguishing between those who belong to a particular group or community and those who do not – is both explicitly and implicitly invoked in the collection. Moreover, as foregrounded by the title, the stories in *The One that Got Away* deal with the conflicted responses both of those who ‘get away’, whether temporally or permanently, and of those who ‘stay’. In a sense, then, they circle around the accusations levelled at Frieda by her mother, Oom Dawid, and Moira in *You Can't Get Lost*, all of whom suggest that Frieda's departure for England is a form of betrayal, or renunciation of an identity only to be secured by an attachment to place or ‘home’. Apparently, Frieda does not share this sense of a rooted identity, of belonging, herself.

In the eighth story in *The One that Got Away*, the character Bev, like Frieda, “manage[s] to get lost in Cape Town in spite of Table Mountain” (124), an intertextual echo which points to the ways in which this collection continues the deconstruction of notions of belonging or ‘feeling at home’ initiated by Wicomb's earlier collection. The two volumes are overtly dissimilar in many ways, however. For example, in “Ash on my Sleeve”, Moira's allusion to the inauguration of the Tricameral Parliament in South Africa in 1983 (also the year in which the UDF, Moira's political ‘home’, was launched), reveals the temporal distance between the two texts. If *You Can't Get Lost* broadly traces the years from the late fifties to the early eighties, the stories in *The One that Got Away* are largely set in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. The latter therefore address a more recent, post-apartheid and post-millennial scenario, whilst also continually harking back to the impact on South Africa of early nineteenth-century Scottish travellers, settlers and missionaries and their cultural and

demographic legacy. Furthermore, there are two immediately apparent formal differences between the two texts, the first of which is the absence of a single or dominant first-person narrator-protagonist, and the second, the lack of narrative sequentiality – strategies which, in *You Can't Get Lost*, suggest the kind of coherence and continuity associated with the *Bildungsroman* (specifically, in this case, the *Kunstlerroman*) – than a collection of discrete stories. *The One that Got Away*, by contrast, contains a large cast of different characters who co-exist within roughly the same contemporary time period and whose various perspectives are conveyed through a limited third-person point of view, with the internal focalisation or 'voice' and idiom often oscillating between two or more characters within a single narrative. And, in terms of setting, the narratives span two continents, hemispheres and countries, two geographical, historical, national and cultural contexts, and two cities: Cape Town and Glasgow.

Though no single character appears in all of the narratives in *The One that Got Away*, a network of social relations of various kinds between Scots and South Africans materialises: transnational marriages; friendships and contacts forged at school, university or in the workplace; chance encounters on transatlantic visits; employer and domestic worker/gardener relationships; and the interactions of neighbours – both old residents and new arrivals. As the stories make clear, too, the histories of Scotland and South Africa are intertwined by virtue of the imprint of colonialism and British imperialism, the spread of missionary Presbyterianism to the south, and the arrival of Scottish travellers, philanthropists and settlers in the early nineteenth century. Particularly prominent, in the latter regard, is the Pringle party of 1820 – a family from whom at least four of the coloured characters in the stories claim direct descent, thereby revealing a complex history of intercultural contact. However, the traffic was by no means only from North to South, and the stories provide clear evidence that encounters and experiences in the contact zone of the colonies produced effects which registered, both imperceptibly and seismically, in the metropole. As Stuart Hall points out, "[the process of] colonization ... marked the colonizing societies as powerfully as ... the colonized (of course, in different ways). ... colonization was never simply external to the societies of the imperial metropolis. It was always inscribed deeply within them – as it became indelibly inscribed in the cultures of the colonized" (1996b: 246). Moreover, more recent migratory movements within a globalised economy have ensured that increasing numbers of those 'born and bred' in one hemisphere, relocate, permanently or temporally, to the other hemisphere, their paths intersecting and

converging. D.W. de Villiers, for example, remarks that “[i]n shuttling between ... two countries Wicomb’s text explores the ineffably meshed character of identity, traversed by countless lines of influence. The stories are set in the ‘global village’ of the present, yet also register the global entanglements of the past” (2008: par 3). If the “entanglements of the past” gave rise to various forms of cultural hybridisation and of conflict, the new global mobility reflected in the stories holds a similar potential, since such mobility does not necessarily imply a recognition of mutuality, or erase cultural diversity, and local cultures continue to assert the specificities of “temporal, spatial, geographical and linguistic contexts” (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 119). Thus, though certain characters in the stories do establish common ground, despite their different origins and backgrounds, others experience antagonism, cultural dissonance and a sense of estrangement in their encounters with others.

The first eight stories, in particular, are intricately interwoven in multiple ways, most obviously through the recurrence of certain characters (both fictional and historical) and the motifs of entrapment and escape or transcendence, freedom and determinism, the performative nature of identity, notions of (existential) authorship and agency, social affectations or “airs and graces”, propriety and impropriety, and shame or disgrace. Given the stories’ negotiation of two cultural contexts, a reference to the film *Lost in Translation* in the seventh story, “Friends and Goffels”, highlights the significance of the themes of inter-cultural communication and miscommunication – of translation, mistranslation and untranslatability. These themes are related to hermeneutic processes in general: to interpretation and misinterpretation, and to readings, misreadings and rereadings – of people, social contexts, and cultural texts. Frequently in the stories conflicting or diametrically opposed interpretations are presented which, since they cannot be conclusively resolved one way or the other, produce exegetical uncertainty. In addition, a number of the stories employ a variety of Chinese box and *trompe l’oeil* effects to dissolve diegetic levels and produce a perspectival illusionism which undermines their apparent verisimilitude. Both of these strategies, in turn, contribute to a reflexive commentary on the distinction between (or, alternatively, conflation of) representation and reality. When, in “A Trip to the Gifberge”, Frieda’s mother labels her stories “A disgrace”, Frieda responds exasperatedly: “But they’re only stories. Made up. *Everyone knows it’s not real, not the truth*” (172, emphasis added). Her mother, unconvinced, retorts: “But *you’ve used the real*. If I can recognise places and people, so can others, and if you want to play around like that why don’t you have the

courage to tell the whole truth?” (172). Arguably, *The One that Got Away* continues this conversation, along the lines of Madame LaGrange’s claim in the film, *The Thirteenth Chair*: “I show you my tricks. Would I have done that if I wanted to fool you? I would not. Well, then, why can’t you give me credit for being honest?” (qtd in Manon 2006: 60). However, the metafictionality of *The One that Got Away* is more pronounced and playful than in Wicomb’s earlier collection: it highlights the ways in which discourse and narrativisation are always already the necessary but inadequate grounds upon which our apprehensions of reality are premised.

From the multiple links and echoes in the first eight narratives in *The One that Got Away* and the complex interconnections among the characters, both contemporary and historical, it is evident that Wicomb is employing the generically ambivalent format of the short fiction cycle in a more deliberate fashion than was the case in *You Can’t Get Lost*. As Julika Griem notes, for example, “[n]o longer playing with the skeleton of a female *bildungsroman*, Wicomb in her second collection of short stories creates an even stronger impression of generic instability than the first” (2011: 392). However, the last four stories in the collection are appended somewhat arbitrarily at the end of this overtly linked group of stories and, as Wicomb herself indicates in the “Acknowledgements” at the back of the volume, these stories were initially published independently and in “slightly different versions” elsewhere. Three appeared in the early nineties – almost two decades before the others which comprise the completed volume. Moreover, despite the fact that there is no definite break between the first eight and the last four stories in the collection (as is the case, for example, between “Part One” and “Part Two” in Magona’s *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*), and that the last four narratives are similarly set in Cape Town and in Glasgow, none of the latter contains characters related to those who appear in the first eight stories, though there are certain thematic and stylistic resonances. I shall therefore focus on the first eight stories, given that even within this interlinked group there are so many connections that they cannot be dealt with exhaustively.

Most commentators on *The One that Got Away* have focused on the theme of cosmopolitanism in the volume. Griem, however, analyses the collection from the perspective of the political implications of Wicomb’s choice of the short story sequence, arguing that her “instable and subtly interrelated stories in the collection do not just play on or expand the variability of a generic type. They also demonstrate that, in postcolonial writing, the formal and

political laws of genre cannot *not* be broken” (2011: 392). By contrast, I explore the complex entanglements revealed within the stories themselves and how these relate to what I ultimately argue is Wicomb’s sense not of two nations, but of two interconnected cities. Though it is obviously possible, though not mandatory, to read the stories sequentially, the complexities and intricacies of Wicomb’s project, which weaves backwards and forwards between the present and the past, Cape Town and Glasgow, and reality and fiction, render a linear explication of the multiple echoes and links which traverse the stories well-nigh impossible. Indeed, *The One that Got Away* is a particularly fine example of just how a short fiction cycle challenges conventional reading practices by demanding, simultaneously, both a localised or story-specific *and* a global or holistic apprehension.

5.2 The Pringle Connection: Putting on “airs and graces”

Sae that’s the lot o’ our inheritance, then? Aweel ... I maun say the place looks no sae mickle amiss, and may suit our purpose no that ill, provided thae haughs turn out to be gude deep land for the pleugh, and we can but contrive to find a decent road out o’ this queer hieland glen into the lowlands – like any other Christian country.

– a member of the Pringle party, arriving at Baviaans River Valley on 25 June 1820 (Oettle n.d.: 4)

I tune no more the string for Scottish tale;
For to my aching heart, in accents wild,
Appeals the bitter cry of Africa’s race reviled.

– Thomas Pringle (“The Emigrants” 7-9; qtd in Kloppe 2000: 373)

[A]s a colonial poet, Pringle’s allegiance lies both with the mother country and with the colony, and ... his position is necessarily ambiguous. This ambiguity pervades his South African writings, creating a breach between his identification with the oppressed people of the land and his partial responsibility as a colonist for the very condition of oppression he decries.

– Dirk Kloppe (2000: 371)

Though no single character appears in all of the first eight narratives in *The One that Got Away*, three stories in particular (“Disgrace”, “The One that Got Away” and “There’s the Bird that Never Flew”) are overtly linked by virtue of their focus on a triad of characters: Grace, a seventy-four-year old charwoman in Cape Town, her recently married younger daughter, Jane, and the latter’s artist husband, Drew, who are honeymooning in Glasgow. However, this group of characters also includes additional family members, and other seemingly disparate characters are drawn in by association. For example, Grant Fotheringay, the protagonist of the opening story, “Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood”, recalls his sexual attraction to an anti-apartheid protester and ardent Scottish nationalist during his student days in Edinburgh (30), before he moved to Cape

Town in 1984 to take up a post as an English academic at the University of Cape Town. Though he describes this young woman as a “fiery redhead” (14), rather inexplicably or perhaps disingenuously he cannot now recall her name. However, in “Disgrace”, the second story, which focuses largely on Grace as focaliser-protagonist, it emerges that the object of Grant’s student infatuation is none other than Fiona McAllister, Grace’s employer Shirley Haskins’s old school-friend and current visitor, now on her second trip to South Africa from Scotland. Like Grant, Grace notes that Fiona is “a pretty woman ... with *real red hair*”, unaware of the unintentional irony underpinning her subsequent comment that “in the sunlight it looks just like the Clairol girl’s” (26). Later in “Disgrace”, a shift in focalisation to Fiona reveals that, despite his self-professed but rather suspect amnesia in the opening story, Grant earlier had in fact remembered her name and had even kept her address, since in 1994 he had sent a celebratory postcard to her in Scotland to commemorate voting in the first democratic elections in South Africa.

In “Disgrace”, Fiona also thinks back to her first visit to Cape Town and the welcoming dinner arranged for her by Grant, at which she was introduced to some of his fellow academics and expatriates, all of whom seemed to her to have become duplicitously (in her terms) more English than Scottish. At the dinner table she commented drily that “the Scots necessarily lose their way in the old colonies” (31), to which Grant responded by explaining to the other bemused guests that, “whereas people were plain poets in the rest of the world, in Scotland they were Scottish poets” (31). He then told Fiona about Thomas Pringle, the Scot who spent the years between 1820 and 1826 in the Eastern and Western Cape, and whom Grant described as “the father of South African poetry” (31).⁴ Ironically, however, Pringle is also claimed by Scottish literary scholars as essentially a Scottish poet (see, for example, Calder 1982: 1-14), thus proving Grant’s earlier claim. Fiona, herself a published poet, then expressed an interest in conducting some research on Pringle in the Eastern Cape (as Grace earlier reveals, Fiona did travel to that part of the country, following a trip to the Karoo with Shirley [28]). When Fiona also commented that Pringle seemed unusual in having “found rather than lost his way in the colony” (31), implying that he not only had avoided anglicisation by retaining his Scottish affiliation with other peoples similarly oppressed by the British, but also had discovered his political vocation in South Africa, Grant rebuffed this assertion by smugly pointing out that Pringle returned to England, rather than Scotland, after his sojourn in South Africa. In scoring a cheap point, however, he withheld the information that Pringle was an abolitionist and politically liberal for

his time, and that his expressed desire to return to South Africa was only prevented by his premature death from tuberculosis. Nor did he refer to the fact that many in the original 1820 Pringle party did settle permanently in South Africa, especially in the Eastern Cape – including the leader of the group, Robert Pringle, Thomas Pringle’s father.

The endurance of the Pringle line in South Africa is confirmed in the fourth story, “Mrs Pringle’s bed”, in which the eponymous character, Polly Pringle, retrospectively feels a sense of shame at having conservatively chosen Robert Pringle, a coloured descendant of the original settler family, rather than Herbert Kleintjies, as her husband. This was because the alliterative “Polly Pringle” carried a more pleasing ring and the surname Pringle held more prestige and ‘respectability’ in the old, apartheid South Africa:

She knew of course that the world, or at least South Africa, had changed over the years, but how was she to know that things would take such an upside-down turn, that what passed for perspicacity then would sound pompous now? To Mrs Pringle’s reformed, New South African ears, Polly Kleintjies had a clear ring of rootedness, of comfort, of straightforwardness

(56)

In the post-apartheid era, it seems to Mrs Pringle, a prominent ‘white’ settler genealogy is no longer desirable as an index of social rank. However, her husband’s infidelity has given her additional grounds to regret not having accepted her heart’s choice, Herbert, whom she remembers as “a fine tall chap with wavy hair”, whose “kind, soft-spoken manner” had made her “heart [lurch]” (56).

By comparison to Polly’s self-recrimination, an unreconstructed sense of pride in being ‘of settler stock’ is expressed by her husband’s cousin, Trudie, who claims that she was “not born a Pringle for nothing. They were of course an old respectable family from way back” (55). Mrs Pringle, having unconsciously decided to stop deferring to Trudie and to drop the obsequious “honorific of Cousin”, later dismisses her as “plump with pomposity, a Pringle through and through” (56), and finds a pretext to cut short her current visit. This first act of rebellion presages Mrs Pringle’s decision, on 14 May 1990, to abandon her normal responsibilities and take permanently to bed in what used to be her daughter Daisie’s room, leaving her domestic worker, Annie, in charge of the daily routines. Mrs Pringle’s bedridden state, which lasts over two years, together with her decision that Annie should move into her husband’s study when she discovers that the latter’s husband is abusing her, in turn precipitates

Robert Pringle's departure from the marital home, upon which Mrs Pringle revives. Having set up an alternative domestic arrangement with Annie – one more convivial and to their mutual satisfaction – Mrs Pringle escapes both the oppressive yoke of heteronormative domesticity and of a supposedly superior lineage, in a series of gestures which speak to her inarticulate desire to embrace alternative ways of being in the transitional period of the early nineties in South Africa. Thus, though Tom, Daisy's husband, claims that his mother-in-law is "Befok", and "hopes that the baby [Daisy is expecting] will not inherit any of her genes" (59), Mrs Pringle is sublimely oblivious to the insinuation that she is misguided or, worse, deranged. If initially her motives are opaque to her, she nevertheless does recognise that Daisy's room, with its neatly made-up bed and cupboard notably "clear of feminine clutter" is "a place where one can start afresh". And it is in this neat and orderly room that Mrs Pringle sets about escaping her previous domestic existence, her identity as a coloured woman with a superior marital pedigree, and the racial obsessions of the old South Africa:

After a long life of hesitation and prevarication, Mrs Pringle has acted decisively, at last free of doubt. The sleep [into which she subsides] also seems to bring *freedom from history*. A smile of self-satisfaction plays briefly on her lips; to think that she herself has made this bed, prepared this clarity, as one would a room *for a guest*.

(54, emphasis added)

She has thus cleared a space of hospitality for herself as both host *and* guest, and is being hospitable to herself as the stranger she has become to herself.

Significantly, after her eviction of the last occupant of the room, Cousin Trudie, Mrs Pringle had remade the bed herself, rather than relying on Annie to do so, and ensured that this was very neatly executed so as to produce "tight hospital folds" (31). Given that the Latin *hospes* is the root of the words "hospital" and "hospitable/hospitality", Mrs Pringle appears to be welcoming herself not only as guest but also as patient. The room becomes a personal sanctuary of which she is the proprietor – for example, when Mr Pringle stands awkwardly holding a pink thread she has asked him to remove from her sheet, she points out that "[t]here's no bin in my room" and then thinks to herself: "So it is done; she has said it herself: *her room*" (57, emphasis added). And the room is also a sanatorium in which she can recover from past circumstances (both private and public) and divest herself of roles to which she no longer subscribes. It is telling, therefore, that two years later, when Mr Pringle returns after spending Christmas away from home (presumably with his mistress) to find Annie ensconced in his study, his vitriolic

response invokes the very history of entitlement and racial discrimination that has oppressed Mrs Pringle, but which she now rejects:

He explodes with rage, which frankly disappoints Mrs P. She expected better of him. She listens to him stomping about, banging doors and shouting at Annie – fuck this and fuck that and who the fuck does Annie think she is, moving into his room? She should get her fat Hotnot arse back to Bonteheuwel; does she think he wants to live like Hotnos with all types in his house?

(63)

Mrs P (as Annie now calls her to her face) refuses to conform either to the obedient mimicry associated with her first name, Polly, or to emulate the social affectations and racist snobbery which both her husband and Cousin Trudie manifest as a result of the Pringle surname.

In the fifth story, “There’s the Bird that Never Flew”, Aunt Trudie resurfaces as one of the new in-laws or “aunties” to whom Jane is obliged to pay a courtesy visit, together with Drew, before they leave for Glasgow on honeymoon. (By inference, though Drew’s full name is Andrew Brown [38], he is Aunt Trudie’s nephew, his mother is Robert Pringle and Trudie’s cousin, and Daisy is Drew’s second cousin). During the visit to the aunts, Jane recounts, “They sipped tea from cups that were introduced as if they were posh cousins with double-barrelled surnames. Royal Doulton Bone China, they were announced” (68). As has become apparent in “Mrs Pringle’s Bed”, Trudie perceives *herself* to be a “posh cousin”, despite lapses into vulgarity which make Mrs Pringle wince (54-55). Moreover, the status conferred by a fine tea set is earlier underlined in “Disgrace”, when one of the reasons Grace silently resists Fiona’s suggestion that she would like to visit “a coloured township” and have tea with Grace at her home in Manenberg, is that “her china set [is] all chipped now, no longer at its best” (26). However, though Drew’s aunts – unlike Grace – are able to flaunt their ownership of a superior tea service, their attempts to mimic high society and to maintain a veneer of ‘colonial gentility’ are marred by their indiscreet boasting about the china and, by implication, its British origins and royal endorsement which is, of course, ironic in the context of a history of imperial subjugation at the Cape. The veneer is further disrupted by their use of the colloquial expression “Yous”, which Jane also later detects in the Scottish dialect of Margaret, the cleaning woman she and Drew encounter one morning in the cheap boarding-house in which they are staying in Glasgow. Margaret advises them that, despite the rain, “it’s a grand day Yous don’t want it too hot for doing the tourist things” (68), and Jane finds her use of the expression familiar and comforting –

“just like Drew’s Cape Town relatives, the aunties” (68). At the time of their visit to the aunties, however, she became increasingly exasperated by Aunt Trudie’s inquisitiveness.

After giving Jane and Drew some well-intentioned, if rather jaundiced, advice on precautions to take on their voyage, the aunts insisted that they would throw a homecoming party on their return – “for the photographs” (68), if not to welcome back the couple themselves. Jane found this curiosity prying, observing to herself that “The new family-in-law certainly wanted to see everything” (68). This observation subsequently became more pointed, as Aunt Trudie insisted on inspecting the nape of Jane’s neck for “frizz”, which she described as a “give-away” sign – that is, of racial heritage. Though Drew “laughed uproariously” and commented that, “yes, she was absolutely right, it gave away everything about the one who investigates”, Jane registered that Aunt Trudie “didn’t seem to understand” (69) his jibe at her effrontery. Her indignation goaded her into challenging Aunt Trudie by pointing out that modern hair-straightening chemicals were mild, and enquiring sweetly whether she did not realise that “the old nape test had become quite unreliable” (69). Nervously checking her own hair for tell-tale signs, Aunt Trudie at this point inwardly retorted to herself that at least “no one in *her* family cleaned for white people” (69, emphasis added) – a slight aimed, of course, at Jane’s mother. A brief switch to Grace herself as focaliser earlier in this story, however, has revealed that she rejects the snobbery of Drew’s “people”, whom she disparagingly refers to as “hoity-toity, not her kind at all. More like khoity-toity”. She had explained to Jane that, “no matter how toity, there’s no getting away from the Hotnot, or khoi, as you youngsters say these days, so with your B.A. you can just ignore their airs and graces” (66). Grace’s advice to Jane here is obviously ironic, given her own preoccupation with discriminating among racial features and genealogies. In other words, she evinces an unconscious suspension of disbelief in the fiction that there is an ordinary disgrace attached to coloured identity – a shame or taint which the adoption of “airs and graces” cannot transcend but which, ironically, is non-existent in the final analysis, since it is premised on the narrative of so-called ‘miscegenation’. Or, as Wicomb puts it herself,

Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of ‘race’, concupiscence, and degeneracy, continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid’s strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is to say a denial

of shame. We do not speak about miscegenation; it is after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse.

(1998: 92)

Despite Grace's caution on the adoption of "airs and graces", in the story "Disgrace", Grace herself falls prey to her own vanity, but then acknowledges the truth of her mother's admonishment: "from airs and graces comes disgrace" (36). The motif of disgrace or shame, often linked to an exposure of misinterpretation, misrepresentation and, on occasion, wilful ignorance, recurs throughout *The One that Got Away*. Indeed, the fact that one of the stories is entitled "Disgrace", however, not only draws attention to the prominence of this motif, but also calls to mind Coetzee's controversial novel of the same title, published in 1999. In Wicomb's story, Grace removes a beautiful aquamarine silk scarf, which she has earlier admired, from Fiona's packed suitcase on the day of the latter's departure from Cape Town. Attempting later to justify her actions, she cannot but feel mortified by her own behaviour:

She is still awake at midnight, amazed by the woman who has taken a silk scarf that does not belong to her *Not stolen. She is not a thief; she has never in her life stolen anything.* She should take it back. But to whom? She could throw it away, into the fire, drown it, but with the McAllister woman now gone, what would be the point?

Grace wraps the scarf around her neck. She would like to see herself in the mirror. It is hers; she is entitled to it; did she not hand-wash the woman's silk shirts, change her bed, polish her floor? Grace starts. *Shame* rises hot like hives in her neck so that she whips the scarf off. Of course, she must take it back and confess her sin.

(35, emphasis added)

In a story with this title, Grace's denial that she is guilty of a misdemeanour recalls David Lurie's similarly evasive self-defence in Coetzee's novel: "Not rape, not quite that" (Coetzee 1999: 25).⁵ Unlike Lurie, however, Grace's sense of being personally compromised deepens when, on returning to work the next day, she is handed an envelope by Shirley containing what in Grace's terms is a substantial tip from Fiona. This courtesy she had not anticipated since Fiona, on her previous trip to South Africa, had left directly from the Eastern Cape without presenting Grace with a token of her gratitude: "It's of course not the money, it's the thought that counts, being appreciated and so on" (28).

On this second visit, Grace interprets Fiona's refusal of her offer to iron her clothes before she packs for home as a snub and as evidence of the proverbial miserliness of the Scots: "Grace knows exactly what that's all about. Meanness – the woman doesn't want Grace to do the

ironing so she needn't leave a tip. And with all those rich English pounds too, it's unbelievable, no wonder she calls herself Scottish" (34). Now, however, Grace has to confront her own misguided presumption (to say nothing of her mercenary motives) in ascribing pettiness to Fiona, together with her vanity in desiring the scarf itself and in prejudging the visitor. Throughout the visit, in fact, Fiona has sought to draw Grace out in conversation, and even teased her gently on occasion – as is evident in the fact that the envelope containing the gratuity is addressed to "MISS GRACE' in bold black capitals", which Grace reads as "Miss McAllister's wee mockery of the way things are done here" (36). Earlier she has disparaged the informality and false familiarity of the use of first names overseas:

Grace thinks of Fiona as that woman. She is from overseas where they have funny ways, like using first names when they don't even know a person, although of course in Grace's case she is only the char and so that is her name, which is a pity, for with such a holy name it would be lovely to add a decent title: Miss Grace. As a young girl she used to mouth to herself in the cracked mirror, Miss Grace, and toss her hair, and her mother said, airs and graces, just see it doesn't all end in disgrace. Imagine, wanting to be called by your first name. Fiona, the woman said the first time, holding out her hand. No, I don't want to be called Miss McAllister; it takes too long anyway. ... The woman is too forward, and this nonsense of calling her by her name, she can forget it.

(26)

Grace emerges, then, as a self-appointed custodian of propriety. Later realising that she has misinterpreted Fiona's friendly overtures and intentions, and that she *herself* has been both devious and uncharitable, she "feels her head shaking, back and forth, feels the shame rising from her scalp as if each hair is being uprooted, one by one, leaving her bald as a baby. It is, dear God, just as her mother said: from airs and graces comes disgrace" (36).

Grace's rehearsal of her mother's homily exposes the affectations and self-delusions of which she is culpable – and the irony that ascribing these qualities to others, whilst absolving herself, is a form of arrogance. Despite her "holy name", her *lack* of graciousness means that she misinterprets situations by stubbornly insisting that she is right. For example, she earlier complains to her older daughter, Tracey-Anne, about the way in which Fiona responded when Grace inadvertently included her in the generic category "You English people from overseas". Grace recounts that Fiona had angrily insisted she was Scottish, "actually baring her teeth". Oblivious to the insult she has directed at Fiona, Grace obdurately remarks to Tracey-Anne: "Now what kind of *putting on* is that ... when *everybody knows* it's the same place, same

people” (27, emphasis added). It is ironic, then, that Fiona has a keener sense than Grace of the arrogance of intruding upon unfamiliar territory or making assumptions about people from elsewhere. When, for instance, Shirley suggests that Fiona could write poetry about the South African landscape, the latter protests that “it would be presumptuous, she wouldn’t dream of writing about a place she doesn’t know intimately, hasn’t lived in” (29) – an echo of Wicomb’s own sentiments.

“Disgrace” highlights the dilemmas posed by cultural misunderstandings, miscommunication and misrepresentation, and the shame engendered by wilful self-delusion when it is exposed and the one disgraced confronts a self which is other to that she has projected. It also introduces the theme of the disjunction between the intimate knowledge of locals and the partial knowledge of visitors, a theme which emerges more prominently in Jane’s experience in Glasgow. Moreover, the Pringle links between “Disgrace”, “Mrs Pringle’s Bed” and “There’s the Bird that Never Flew” reveal Wicomb’s exposure of the social status derived from claims to a Scottish settler stock or a South African brand of ‘aristocracy’ in an extended coloured family – and this family’s efforts to conceal the shame inherited as a result of ‘miscegenation’. Nevertheless, despite her best efforts to appear superior, Grace is entrapped in this narrative, whereas Polly Pringle manages to escape or transcend it by literally going to bed - and thereby ‘writing herself out of the plot’, so to speak. The suggestion, too, is that the younger generation, represented by Jane and Drew, treat the Scottish connection with playful disrespect, and are therefore less concerned with racialised categories of identity-construction. However, in Scotland itself, Jane becomes painfully self-conscious about her otherness and conspicuousness. It is only when the word “Doulton” accrues a more nuanced meaning for her whilst she is in Glasgow that she becomes self-reflexively aware of how colouredness has been discursively and artistically represented, and more attuned to the notion of identity as performance rather than essence or fixity. As a result, she confronts the possibility of a re-invention or re-presentation of herself – of reconstructing the narrative of shame which she has imbibed and which gives rise to her self-consciousness.

5.3 The Doulton Fountain and Kaatje

Scotland, you have invoked her name
Just once too often
In your Presbyterian living rooms

She's had enough. She's come.
Whit, tae this dump? Yes!

– Kathleen Jamie (“The Queen of Sheba” 1-3; 10-11)

Apart from the ramifications of the Pringle connection discussed above, two further references to the drift of Scottish settlers to South Africa in the nineteenth century appear in the story, “There’s the Bird that Never Flew”. These are provided, respectively, by the cleaning-woman, Margaret, in Jane and Drew’s boarding-house in Glasgow, and by Mr Ellis, the nineteenth-century modeller of the South African tableau on the Doulton Fountain, the central focus of the story. (Historically, a Herbert Ellis was indeed the sculptor of this tableau [“Doulton Fountain” par. 1].) As Jane discovers, having “done her homework” (70), this terracotta fountain was initially erected in Kelvingrove Park in Glasgow for the International Exhibition in 1888, and was intended to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Jubilee the year before and Britain’s “imperial achievement” (70). The fountain comprises five tiers: a larger-than-life statue of the empress-queen on the pinnacle; a group of four kneeling maidens emptying pitchers of cascading water on the tier immediately below; four sentries representing the British armed forces – a Scottish, Welsh and English soldier, and a sailor from the Royal Navy on the ledge beneath the water carriers; a basin decorated with spouting gargoyles; and four tableaux representing the colonies of Australasia, Canada, India and South Africa around the base. After the exhibition the fountain was moved to Glasgow Green and, by the 1970s, had been vandalised and become derelict. In the early years of this century, however, it was refurbished, and then moved to its current location in front of the People’s Palace on the Green in 2005 (see Adams 2005: par.1-5).

On the morning on which she and Drew first meet Margaret, Jane spends some time inspecting the fountain, and decides to return the following day. Setting off the next morning, she again encounters Margaret who, hearing that she is from South Africa, mentions that “[h]er Highland people went out to South Africa a good two hundred years ago when the country was brand new” (73). Most, however, perished in a fire on board ship, “before they were even in sight of the promised land” (74). On hearing the news of the calamity, Margaret’s great-great-

grandfather, waiting on the dock for the next ship, had had second thoughts and had sensibly gone home “to unpack and stay put” (74). According to Margaret, “the handful who survived are stinking rich, swimming pools and such”, though she adds the cautionary rider that “there’s nought for nothing, a price for everything” (74). This homily underscores the reality that the wealth acquired by ‘white’ settlers in South Africa – from land ownership, agriculture and, in particular, the mining boom in the late nineteenth century – was premised on the exploitation of ‘black’ labour and, ultimately, the iniquitous system of apartheid. Margaret’s recognition of these realities stems from her own working-class consciousness, as Jane is later to discover.

When Jane asks Margaret what she thinks of the fountain she is about to visit for a second time, Margaret confesses that she “hasn’t seen it; it’s only been moved there recently” (74). However, her youthful recollections are of it in a state of disrepair: “She was only a girl then, but she recalls the monument being a dump, all in a mess, the fountain dead, statues without noses, the Queen’s head lopped off as the winos threw their bottles of Buckfast at the figures, and the dogs shat in the dry moat” (74). Margaret then dismisses the inauthenticity and myopia of tourist experience, and scoffs at the ways in which grand imperial monuments present deceptive facades that belie the reality of exploitation and oppression both at home and abroad. As a working-class Glaswegian, however, she is more concerned with the local:

She, Margaret, doesn’t give a toss for all them tourist walkabouts. She nods at Jane with friendly contempt. See yous, she says cryptically, yous get to see everything, but yous dinnae know a thing about the real Glasgow. That’s why she stays put like that great grandda, stops at home, best place from which to keep an eye on the world.

(74)

By “the real Glasgow” Margaret means the city’s “working folk” (75) and the ways in which they are marginalised and overlooked. She proceeds to relate a second “family history about fires” (75), describing how her grandmother died in the blaze which partially destroyed another ornate edifice on Glasgow Green, the Templeton carpet factory, which she describes as “copied from some fancy place in Italy” (75). In reality this fire occurred in 1900, and the building was designed by a prominent Scottish architect, William Leiper, and modelled on the medieval Palazzo Ducale or Doges Palace in Venice. As a Scottish heritage site points out:

[d]uring the nineteenth century there was quite a taste for building industrial and trading premises with exotically styled exteriors which proclaimed the company’s pride and

ambition while concealing the industrial processes within. ... Venice was particularly admired The late Gothic [Doges] Palace in St Mark's Square ... inspired a number of imitations, including several in Britain. Templeton's is probably the most spectacular.]
(“Templeton's Carpet Factory” par. 4)

Because this structure has also, as Margaret comments, become “Another tourist attraction now”, she again expresses contempt for its grandiose mimicry and its masking of its original function: “did Jane think that was a place she, Margaret, wanted to ooh and ah about?” (75). Thus, what seem to be throwaway comments in the story highlight the theme of deceptive appearances – or an outer facade that obscures the reality behind: a version of the *trompe l'oeil* motif, or that of the deceptiveness of the covers of books.

As an adolescent, Grant Fotheringay's response to the derelict Doulton fountain and its imperial tableaux was less indifferent and dismissive than Margaret's – as he indicates in the opening story, “Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood”. On observing his gardener's son running backwards in his suburban garden in Cape Town, leaving an “after-image of streamers taut in the west wind”, Grant is reminded of himself as a child, “charging with a kite on Glasgow Green” (10). This, in turn, brings back memories of the squalid, claustrophobic atmosphere of his home in the working-class area of the Gorbals in Glasgow, “that close of fag-ends, hawked-up phlegm, and the smell of neeps and sprouts cooked to death” (10). Grant thinks wryly to himself that “Then he knew nothing of mangoes, avocado pears, could not have known of the Queen of Sheba leading her soft camels widdershins round the kirk-yaird a full two decades later” (10).

The latter reference is to lines from Kathleen Jamie's acclaimed poem “The Queen of Sheba”, published in her anthology of the same title in 1994, in which the exotic, voluptuous Queen arrives in conservative, small-minded Scotland to ruffle the parochialism of “Presbyterian living rooms” (3). The poem suggests that the Queen's outlandishness and shameless exuberance will shock the locals from their dreary passivity, and that no Scottish Solomon will be found to match her wisdom or extravagance. Most of all, however, the Queen will appeal to a young generation of women hungry for an alternative to their cramped lives.⁶ (In “The One that Got Away”, Drew again invokes the name of the fabled queen in suggesting that Jane will have a similar effect on Glaswegians. In the process he teases her by imitating her inability to pronounce the “sh” and “ch” sounds “Imagine, you'll give them sutz a skrik. Shimmying in your Cape Flats bling like the Queen of Seba” [39]). In quoting directly from what Edwin Morgan describes as Jamie's “splendidly boisterous” poem (“Kathleen Jamie” par. 7), Grant intimates

that, in the time he has spent in the Cape, the exotic *has* arrived in the drab Scotland he remembers from his youth, both literally and figuratively speaking. In other words, a wave of migrants moving “widdershins” or “in reverse” from the Southern to the Northern Hemisphere has ushered in a new, cosmopolitan Glasgow, and more offbeat and provocative writing has replaced sentimental “kail-yard tales” (10) extolling the virtues of simple village life.

The absence of such multicultural and imaginative resources in the past meant that it was “from the grand old derelict fountain on the Green, its cracked, blunt-nosed sculptures, that [Grant’s] dreams were fed. There a child from the Gorbals could escape to far-off lands via the terracotta tableaux of the colonies” (11). Moreover, his youthful projections of the alien or foreign – together with his masturbatory fantasies – were fuelled especially by the frieze depicting South Africa on the fountain:

He favoured the bearded man in the South African tableau with a gun by his side, and at his feet a sweet, odd-looking girl who would speak in a lovely sing-song voice, quite unlike the slags who smoked and cursed in the close. But best of all was the ostrich with a long snake neck and full, soft feathers like the girl’s bosom, an image that guided his hand at night under the blanket and brought wet dreams of coupling with a continent.⁷

(11)

Evidently, Grant viewed both the ostrich and the woman as exotic and erotic representatives of a continent he desired to explore or penetrate – in both the analogous colonial and sexual senses.

His move to South Africa, then, was in part due to this early fascination (though, after finishing university, he had also been unable to find an academic post in Scotland [14]). However, arriving in Cape Town in 1984, he was unaware of the academic boycott, and shamelessly used his brief flirtation with radicalism, as a result of his short-lived liaison with Fiona, to impress his colleagues, although in reality he was settling into complacency:

Here in the brightness of the Cape sun or the cool shade of suburban gardens, the lines were clearly drawn. How could he be anything but heir to a liberalism that in the blinding southern light bled so wantonly into radicalism? ... How much nicer it was anyway to find himself thawing in Cape hospitality, finding his political feet without the dubious guidance of sex. As he later said to [his ex-wife] Stella, *it was his very own northern heart that he found in Cape Town*, a healthy heart that turned out to be hungry for political change.

(15-16, emphasis added)

This inversion of Fiona's words ("the Scots necessarily lose their way in the old colonies" [31]) is ironic, however, given that Grant has adopted the privileged lifestyle of 'white' middle-class English South Africans. He also deludes himself into thinking that he has made a contribution to the struggle, a contribution which endorses his right to stay in South Africa: "And was he not also entitled? Did he not in his own humble way, as did all the activists on the Jameson steps, contribute to the birth of the new South Africa?" (16). Ironically, too, Grant's wife, having left him, has settled in Scotland and retraced his steps: "Pah, so much for Stella's commitment. Where was she now that Rome was burning, or at least still smouldering? Well, in Edinburgh, of all places, which in some ways conveniently confirmed for him the permanence of his stay in the South" (16). If Stella has escaped, both from Grant and Cape Town, to Scotland, Grant himself will not return, though he is less than honest about his motives and his own "commitment". He has conveniently discarded his past in order to assert a sense of belonging in a context more conducive to his basic conservatism, and has assumed or invested in a new identity, ironically suspending disbelief in this performance of an adoptive self. Herein lie his dishonesty and self-delusion.

A link between "Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood" and "There's the Bird that Never Flew" emerges when, in the latter, an analeptic shift from the present to the nineteenth century, together with a switch in focalisation from Jane to the creator of the South African tableau, a fictionalised Mr Ellis, reveals that the latter has an erotic response to the ostrich similar to Grant's. Although he has bought his wife an ostrich-feather boa – which he wraps around her neck and she uses "shamelessly to wrap him around her little finger" (72) – he has nevertheless "failed to persuade his missus to emigrate" (73) to South Africa. As consolation, however, she has provided him with books on the colony, one of which is by Thomas Pringle (undoubtedly *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*). Having read Pringle's account of the intelligence and nesting habits of the ostrich, Mr Ellis is described as having fallen "head over heels with the creature" (73). As a result, he has exerted pressure on the owners of the Doulton factory to be given the commission for the South African tableau, "plead[ing] the importance of the ostrich", which he believes is "no less significant than the glittering new diamonds" (72-73) – a further reference to the pre-eminence of the mining industry and its vulgar connotations of acquisitive greed.

Once given the commission he so desires, Mr Ellis sets about sculpting a full-scale replica of an ostrich, a man and a woman to represent the colony. The passage which describes

his modelling of the bird and the young woman evokes the myth of Leda and the swan, and quotes directly from Yeats's famous poem of that title:

At last he would create a life-size ostrich, magnificent with its curved neck, its head held proudly aloft, and all the more alluring for being half-hidden behind the human figures. But the girl brushing against the sinuous neck and the fulsome plumage would feel its *feathered glory*. ... a bird fitting for the beauty of the girl.

(73, emphasis added)

Like Grant Fotheringay, then, Mr Ellis focuses on the girl's sensuality and the bird's magnificent feathers and sexually suggestive neck. Moreover, in ambivalently gesturing towards the possibility of either seduction or rape (echoes of *Disgrace* again), and in suggesting that the bird, rather than the man, is equal to the girl's loveliness and therefore her 'rightful mate', the tableau evokes many erotic depictions of the Leda myth in art, which function subliminally by figuring Leda and Zeus-as-swan as a socially-sanctioned means of circumventing the taboo against representations of human copulation. Thus, though Mr Ellis is disappointed that he has not been able to move to South Africa himself, he pursues his erotic fantasy of that part of the world by proxy in the tableau. In addition, his sculpture of the ostrich, true to Pringle's account, "shows a visage infused with intelligence" (73), rather than the dull-witted creature of popular myth.⁸

A measure of the tenacity with which Mr Ellis adheres to his vision of South Africa is that he "can't or perhaps won't read" (Andrew) Geddes Bain's "Kaatje Kekkelbek" (*Kaatje Kekkelbek; or, Life among the Hottentots* [1838]), since he thinks that Kaatje's dialect is "vulgar" and the work itself an affront to England. Mr Ellis prosaically believes that "Bain, a fine road engineer indeed ... should have stuck to roads" (73).⁹ In this he displays a sensitivity which is offended by Bain's crassness, a sensitivity itself indebted to Pringle's curiosity about the indigenous peoples of South Africa and concern not to misrepresent them, their languages or their ways of life. As Dirk Klopper observes, for example, "[v]iewed within the context of the writings of other colonial writers, Pringle's works display a remarkable generosity and tolerance toward the racial and cultural groups in the Cape Colony" (2000: 374).

Ironically, however, it is Bain's eponymous character that immediately comes to mind when Jane first discovers the intriguing female figure in the South African tableau, though she registers the ways in which Ellis's projection deviates from stereotypical representations and conceptions of Khoi women:

She would have expected a burlesque of Kaatje Kekkelbek, whose author was after all a man from Thurso, or even a Saartjie Baartman who had titillated Europe with her spectacular behind. But no, the woman is exceptional only in her ordinariness. She sits in her niche, unembarrassed, demure as any woman of her time, and immune to the cold and the rain, presumably acclimatised by now.

(71-72)

Jane is disconcerted by this discovery. Earlier she has been worrying about her ability to decipher artworks without Drew's guidance: on this occasion, he has left her to her own devices. Given her sense of ineptness, she is determined to form her own opinion of the fountain by following the advice Drew has given her:

Drew insists that there is nothing to it, nothing arcane about looking at art. It's just about giving it time, attention, *looking carefully*, because if you can describe a work accurately, you're more than halfway towards understanding what's going on. Easier said than done, but there's no harm in practising on the monument, even if it turns out not to be art. ... She has promised herself to make an effort to look at things without Drew's help; she hopes that effort is not inimical to the idea of looking. *But can her views be trusted?* And might he not say that if it's such an effort to look, then why bother?

(69-70, emphasis added)

It is because she has *not* been "looking carefully" enough that Jane initially overlooks the woman in the tableau. Moreover, the doubt she expresses here about her ability to form an accurate opinion is symptomatic of her general uncertainty and lack of self-confidence. For example, she is puzzled by the brochure's description of the artists who produced the Doulton Fountain as "modellers" rather than "sculptors": "Do they mean different things? ... Can a monument be a work of art?" (65).

Though Jane herself does not arrive at an answer, her questions above echo Mr Ellis's own self-deprecating sense of his artistic limitations in the brief passage in "There's the Bird that Never Flew" in which he is the focaliser: he believes that, having had to "forego adventure, the call of the wild", he will have to "stick to modelling, for the truth is that he will never produce art". Mrs Ellis, however, leaps to his defence, proclaiming that "It's all rubbish ... emperor's clothes and all that; none of those fashionable artists have your skill" (73). Although what she intends to suggest is that modish artists are all show ("airs and graces") and no substance – that they lack the skill to produce realistic representations and are therefore fraudulent – she is also unconsciously invoking the *trompe l'oeil* motif. In other words, the image or projection (the emperor is clothed in finery) and the reality (he is naked) are disjunctive, but viewers (the

emperor's subjects) suspend disbelief – they are ultimately *not* deceived, but maintain the illusion nevertheless – until someone bluntly points out the obvious. In reality, actual examples of *trompe l'oeil* operate in a similar fashion. The décor is so lifelike that initially it 'deceives the eye': however, the optical illusion of three-dimensionality is in reality painted onto a two-dimensional surface, such as a wall or canvas. Nevertheless, the fact that viewers know this does not detract from their appreciation of the effects achieved. And representational literalism or narrative realism functions analogously, since readers or interpreters are aware that a realistic text is fiction not reality, but are willing to indulge the illusion. According to Catherine Belsey, this willing suspension of disbelief highlights a crucial aspect of "a true trompe-l'oeil", namely that the effect "depends on what is missing, the absence of a secret concealed behind the paint" (1995: 257).¹⁰ In other words, the paint on the surface or the script on the page is both image and reality: the representational medium *is* the reality. Thus, Mrs Ellis, in loyally championing her husband's ability to produce life-like representations, as opposed to more abstract, avant-garde compositions, is unwittingly drawing attention to the fact that realism itself is deceptive, and produced through techniques and conventions which reflect a particular ideological stance towards the world.

Indeed, Jane's initial response to the fountain is an exposé of its ideological content and a critique of its imperial presumption. Having first observed the "extravagant" and copious display of "fountaining, spouting, or gushing [water]" (67), she focuses on the statue of Queen Victoria, and decides that it is the latter (rather like Aunt Trudie) "who deserves a good dousing, if only to shatter that plump smugness" (70). When she examines the tableaux, she is struck by the ways in which they emphasise the bounty of the colonies in terms of their fauna and flora, rather than reveal the mercenary motives underpinning the scramble for land and resources – both natural and human – in those regions. The South African frieze, for instance, "does not speak of gold in the colony, of the rich Witwatersrand seams that lure settlers and investors, or of the war that looms" (70-71). Her first impression, too, is that the tableaux are interchangeable: "The niches are much the same, and without the scrolls with the names of the colonies, they are indistinguishable" (71). Again noting caustically that "*Sth Africa*" is represented "unmistakably [by] the Cape rather than the riches of the Rand – the exotic flora and fauna that lured the Brits in pursuit of pure knowledge and scientific progress" (71), Jane foregrounds the ways in which the discourses of the natural sciences and ethnography – the taxonomical classification of animals,

plants and peoples in the colonies – aided the British self-delusion that they were disinterested observers. She thus presents a standard postcolonial analysis of the nexus of knowledge and power in the imperial project.

However, inspecting the ostrich more closely, she is disconcerted to discover that her interpretation has been too glib:

And then, following the line of the neck, Jane alights upon the woman *she has passed over at least twice*. How could she not have noticed before, for there in the niche, sitting cool as a cucumber in the Glasgow chill, is a young woman, no more than a girl, but unmistakably coloured. Jesus, she says aloud; *she has not been looking properly after all*, has missed the girl in all that elaborate Victorian detail and modelled in the same white stone as the other figures.

South Africa, then, comes to offer a different kind of knowledge. Astonishing ... quite unbelievable that more than a hundred years ago, miscegenation was celebrated in a public work here in the “centre”.

(71, emphasis added)

The irony, then, is that Jane has been deceived by colour – or the ‘lack’ thereof (“the same white stone”) – into a misreading of the woman’s coloured identity, an identity conveyed not by skin pigmentation in this instance, but by physical features. In addition, she has arrived at an interpretation, premised on her own preconceived expectations and assumptions, which is contradicted by the reality before her.

Returning to the fountain the following day and circling around the tableaux, Jane once again notes “the uniformity of the figures, the commonalities”, thinking to herself that the human forms all seem to be modelled on “the same white people” (75). In other words, the colonial or cultural other is presented in the image of Europeans, and therefore reduced to the same, or ‘tamed’ into familiarity. Moreover, pastoral or agricultural images of fertility and abundance belie the primary, economic need for resources and labour behind imperial expansionism, and the ways in which reproduction sustains and enhances capitalist-colonial productivity and mining- industrial profit: “In all the niches are couples, future mummies and daddies with agricultural produce that presage babies. The men are moustachioed. The women are bearers of bounty. Clustered around their figures are the ears of grain tied into sheaves and cascades of grapes. Bucolic, like harvest-festival displays, and not a gold bullion in sight” (75-76).

Earlier, Margaret had proudly produced a photograph of her son and grandchild, and Jane had inwardly hoped they would “survive the fires of Glasgow”, deciding that “she would not like

to have a baby. To reproduce a fearful, tottering creature like herself, brimful with embarrassment, cannot be a good thing” (75). The fountain’s imperial display of the benefits of fertility thus contrasts directly with Jane’s recognition that she would not wish to bequeath her acute sense of self-consciousness to a child. Her uneasiness here is exacerbated by the fact that she feels visibly out of place in Glasgow as a result of her colouredness or, to borrow Wicomb’s words in a different context, as a “foreigner ... [she is] marked by her visual salience and the natives’ focus on her difference” (2006: 152). In other words, she is self-conscious because of her sense of shame, and is therefore entrapped in the narrative of ‘miscegenation’ that produces it. In the earlier story “The One that Got Away”, for example, it is apparent that Jane’s difference makes her the target of what she perceives to be derision from a group of teenage girls in hoodies, who crowd around her and “jeer in demotic” (42), forcing her hurriedly to leave the coffee shop in which she has taken refuge from the rain. Later that day, Drew finds it hard to believe that Jane did not understand anything that the hooded girls were saying to her, and when she insists: “No, ... really, not a word. They just stopped in their tracks at the sight of me and started laughing and shouting”, he teases her again by asking her to “Say shibboleth” and, given her inability to pronounce the digraphic “sh” [ʃ] sound, she responds by saying “sibboleth” (48). However, Drew’s choice of the word “shibboleth”, in the context of the cultural incomprehension and miscommunication which characterise Jane’s confrontation with the girls, obviously speaks to the ways in which she feels excluded, and out of place or alien. It is significant, therefore, that Jane feels more comfortable or ‘at home’ with Margaret’s use of the familiar “yous” or in the landlady of the boarding-house, Mrs Buchanan’s kitchen, but is fearful of venturing out alone and intimidated by the unintelligible dialect of the teenage girls, which reminds her of and accentuates her difference. By comparison, however, the young coloured woman depicted in the South African tableau is unashamed of her identity, has become “acclimatised by now” (72), and is unembarrassed to be in full public view.

When Jane focuses on the South African tableau for a second time, she decides that she *will* name the young woman Kaatje after Bain’s character after all – though as a re-invention of her prototype and a recasting or ‘re-reading’ of stereotypical colonial notions of Khoisan women:

Kaatje, that is what she’ll call the woman, never mind that with her quiet confidence she couldn’t be more different from Baine’s crass Kaatje Kekkelbek.

She is conspicuously native. Not only are her facial features – cheekbones, nose, full lips – distinctively Khoi, but the fullness of hair framing her face speaks

unashamedly of miscegenation. *It is the plumage of the ostrich that is repeated, refashioned in that crown of tight curls.*

(76, emphasis added)

In Jane's interpretation, then, Ellis has translated the "feathered glory" of the ostrich into his vision of the woman's 'crowning glory', unconcerned that this transposition, together with his depiction of the young woman, conveys the scandalous trace (for the nineteenth century, at least) of racial hybridity. Though, on the previous day, Jane has wondered whether "the figure was modelled from a real woman" (71), it is clear, from the passage in the story which presents a fictionalised account or embedded story of Ellis's creation of the ostrich and the woman, that he has no intimate, first-hand knowledge of his subjects, nor has he sculpted from real-life models. He has, however, used Pringle as a source, whose liberal-humanist and philanthropic account of the indigenous peoples of South Africa deviates from representations in colonial discourse which emphasise the stereotypical connotations attached to the physical features of Khoisan women: steatopygia, idleness, vulgarity and concupiscence. Similarly, as previously noted, Pringle's observations on the habits and behaviour of the ostrich "[correct] the popular view of the creature's stupidity" (73). Once again, then, Pringle emerges as a figure more sympathetically attuned to the inhabitants and the fauna and flora of South Africa than many of his contemporaries: "on the one hand, he is at pains to name and to describe the natural environment of animals and plants; on the other hand, he notes with great care the customs and beliefs of the indigenous inhabitants" (Klopper 2000: 379).

Like Grant Fotheringay before her, Jane recognises the erotic or sexual undertones in Ellis's depiction in the tableau: she notes that Kaatje and the "bearded white man, a boer with a bandolier across his shoulder" (76), are surrounded by "symbols of fecundity", and that the seated Kaatje is presided over by the head of the ostrich on its "phallic neck" (76-77). However, she is more concerned with the woman's relation to the man than to the bird. As Kaatje is barefoot, she wonders whether "she's a servant ... the farmer has been sculpted with his maid", but then comes to the conclusion that compositionally the demeanour, bearing and proxemics of the man and the woman express "metonymies of matter-of-fact intimacy. They are unmistakably a couple" (77).¹¹ Thus, though unabashedly a sexual creature, Kaatje is not subservient or dependent: she has an autonomy and lack of self-consciousness that free her from debilitating stereotypes.

In her re-reading of the official imperial archive, of which the Doulton stature is part, Jane comes to recognise that, against the grain, Ellis has represented a Khoisan woman who has escaped both objectification by the male European gaze and the shame of ‘miscegenation’ and serfdom:

Kaatje’s posture and facial expression tell that she is not a servant; she occupies her space with ease, not regally like Victoria, for she feels no need to claim space, no need to assume an imperious pose. ... Her slanted Khoisan eyes gaze out brightly at the world, with neither arrogance nor humility, rather, with calm curiosity as if she knows of her transportation to the metropolis and does not mind at all. Her difference is not a burden, and hence the astounding paradox of a sculpted figure *who will not be an image; she cannot be subjected to anyone’s gaze*. No wonder Jane had missed seeing her. Whilst her descendants at the Cape have either been cringing with shame or living up to the Kekkelbek portrait, Kaatje has been sitting there bathed in grace for more than a century, unembarrassed. As for Aunt Trudie: Kaatje would not mind the old bird at all, would lean her head into that bony lap, luxuriate in the probing fingers, and click her tongue soothingly at the foolish woman.

(77, emphasis added)

Earlier Jane has interpreted Kaatje’s lack of self-consciousness or a sense of shame as indicating that, though she finds herself in Europe, she does not feel that her otherness singles her out – unlike Jane herself, who is acutely aware of feeling out of place. Thus Kaatje is “bathed in grace”, whereas Jane herself is involuntarily “cringing with shame”. In presenting “the astonishing paradox of a sculpted figure who will not be an *image*; [who] cannot be subjected to anyone’s gaze” (77), Kaatje cannot be reduced to a specular object and she escapes the reifying gaze which ‘reads’ her in terms of a predetermined set of hermeneutic codes. She refuses to subscribe to the codes of inclusivity and exclusivity which the process of othering entails.

Paradoxically, then, a representation (Ellis’s) of a representation (Pringle’s) has assumed a reality and integrity of its own. Moreover, since Jane has been deceived or duped into initially misreading that which is right before her eyes – she has “missed *seeing* [Kaatje]” (77, emphasis added) – she is forced to acknowledge that she herself has been caught unawares in a hermeneutic and epistemological loop which ‘reads’ the alterity of ‘racial’ hybridity in conventional and unexamined terms as signifying disgrace or shame. In other words, she has been trapped by the circulation and reproduction of stereotypical representations into *misreading* or *misrecognising* the reality of Ellis’s Kaatje for the negative image of Khoisan women in much colonial discourse: she is herself entrapped in this narrative.¹² It is at this point, too, that she

realises that she has unconsciously allowed herself to be influenced by a sense of inherited shame of which she herself is not the origin or cause – hence her earlier anger at Aunt Trudie’s presumption in inspecting her hair and her refashioning of that scene here in Kaatje’s indulgence of the old woman’s silliness in subscribing to a predetermined, self-deprecating image or social projection that Kaatje herself has eluded. Paradoxically, too, it is Ellis’s portrayal, a *representation*, rather than her sense of her own embodied *reality* that catalyses a reconsideration on Jane’s part, and challenges her to become Kaatje – or “Seba” – herself: that is, to escape or transcend social stigmatisation, refuse to conform to conventional expectations, and become indifferent to the weight of public opinion.

In this regard, Drew is far less inhibited and more *laissez-faire* than Jane. For instance, he refuses to take Aunt Trudie seriously, and he generally laughs at Jane’s earnestness in feeling that it *should* be possible to arrive at a definitive interpretation or response (whether to experience in reality or artistic representation). On the previous day, he had carelessly removed a roll from her plate in a cafeteria and walked out with it, unconcerned that this might be viewed as somewhat unconventional or odd. At the time, Jane had “marvel[led] at his lack of self-consciousness, at his not caring what the waitress might think, although that, of course, [was] about being a man. But it [gave] her courage ... to stay longer, out of the rain for a while” (72).

If Jane feels that Drew’s lack of reserve or self-doubt is “of course... about being a man” (72) – a gendered rather than ‘raced’ distinction which highlights the unconscious power wielded by masculinity – Kaatje, a coloured woman like herself, poses a further challenge. This becomes evident when Jane realises that Kaatje may not only be unashamed of being a product of ‘miscegenation’, but may also have chosen not to wear a wedding band. (In this respect, Kaatje is like the character Ben in the sixth story, “Neighbours”, who, when addressed as “Missus” by her irate neighbour, Jeff Shankie, displays her ringless finger and asks to be addressed by her first name – in other words, refuses to be identified in terms of a masculine economy of availability. Ben’s first name, of course, in itself already troubles heteronormative binaries and expectations.)

When Jane discovers she has mislaid her own wedding ring the morning after her second visit to the Doulton Fountain, she asks Margaret to be on the look-out for the ring whilst cleaning. Margaret, winking at Jane, advises her not to worry, since “St Mungo, the patron saint

of Glasgow, will keep an eye” (78).¹³ She then asks whether Jane is familiar with “the Glasgow legend” and recites the following ditty:

There’s the tree that never grew
There’s the bird that never flew
There’s the fish that never swam
There’s the bell that never rang.

(78)

Directing Jane’s attention to the city’s coat-of-arms on a brochure in the foyer of the boarding-house, Margaret explains that it features all four of the objects mentioned above, and points out that “the fish carries a ring in its mouth; it’s fished it out of the fountain” (78). The symbolism of Glasgow’s heraldic design refers to the four miracles which St Mungo is alleged to have performed: reviving his mentor, St Serf’s dead pet robin; relighting an extinguished fire in St Serf’s monastery, using only a frozen hazel branch and prayer; bringing a bell he had received from the Pope back to Glasgow; and aiding Queen Languoreth of Strathclyde when her husband, King Riderich, suspected her of infidelity after she presented the ring he had given her to a knight as a gift. The King, demanding to see the ring, intended to accuse his wife (under penalty of death) of having taken the knight as her lover, though he himself had removed it from the knight and thrown it into the River Clyde. When the Queen appealed to St Mungo for help, he sent a messenger to catch a fish from the river, opened the fish to discover the ring inside, and returned it to the Queen, who was thus able to prove her innocence (“Glasgow’s Coat of Arms” par. 6; “Fish on the City Crest” par.2). It is as a result of this legend that St Mungo is also the patron saint of infidelity.

Margaret’s wink at Jane is thus ambiguous – both jocular, given the implausibility of the legend, and loaded, as she suspects Drew himself of “monkey business” (41). She has twice seen him leave with Jane to go out sightseeing, only to discover that he has returned to their room alone, locked the door, and put up a “Do Not Disturb” sign. Ironically, however, this furtive routine has nothing to do with sexual indiscretion, since Drew is working on a “project” (37) which he has not disclosed to Jane. Nevertheless, Jane herself has begun to suspect that he is “up to something” (44), since their landlady has earlier asked her why it is that Margaret cannot gain access to their room to clean it.

After Jane tells Drew about the loss of her wedding band (discreetly deciding not to mention the un-serviced room), she repeats Margaret’s ditty, and he is reminded of an Afrikaans

song with similar words which he recalls his grandmother singing. He proceeds to sing it loudly and enthusiastically himself:

Daar's 'n hoender wat 'n eier nie kan lê nie
Daar's 'n hoender wat 'n eier nie kan lê nie
Daar's 'n hoender wat 'n eier nie kan lê nie
En dis die haan wat op die kerk se toring staan ...
Daar's 'n perd wat hmm hmm nie kan hmm nie
En dis die perd wat op die whisky-bottel staan.

(79)

The words which he has forgotten in the fifth line are “op kommando” and “gaan”, the solution to the second riddle being a reference to the label on White Horse whisky bottles.¹⁴ Commenting that the Afrikaans version must be based on the Glasgwegian original, Drew then doodles the outline of a church tower on his sketchpad, adds a weather vane on which he “will perch a cockerel with a ring on its toe” (79), and laughingly points out that “the Glasgow story seems to regret *the difference between the real and the image*, whereas our colonial version is upbeat, *ready to celebrate representation*, or one could say that the real ...” (79, emphasis added). In other words, he seems to be suggesting that, in the latter, the real is already an image or representation – there is no distinction between the two and that, just as an image assumes a reality of its own, identity itself is a representation, a performance. Or, alternatively, that ‘reality’ itself is always already mediated by representational and discursive codes which enable the making of meaning but *disable* access to raw reality, a reality which exceeds such signifying codes. Exasperated by his frivolity and unhelpful excursus into the realms of aesthetic speculation, Jane interrupts him by blurting out that “no fricking fish is likely to dart from the fountain with her ring in its mouth” (79) and miraculously return the precious object. When Drew attempts to placate her – “Look, it’s only a ring, and it may well turn up, but if it doesn’t, who cares. You don’t even like wearing it. Bet your Kaatje doesn’t wear a ring” (79) – Jane thinks back to the woman in the tableau:

It is true. Kaatje doesn’t wear a ring. Or, Jane revises, frowning in concentration, the woman’s left hand clutching the spade – damn, for all her looking, *she can’t be sure. But Kaatje wouldn’t care*, would not deliberately keep her finger hidden. *Kaatje doesn’t give a toss*, as the character, whose name Jane doesn’t know, would say.

(79, emphasis added)

Thus Kaatje is not concerned about public opinion, or whether or not her relationship with the “boer” is legally or socially sanctioned.

By contrast, Jane herself has been wrestling with her new status as wife and her desire not to appear to conform to this conventional role by henpecking Drew and interrogating him about his movements:

If they were not married, she would certainly have expected them to do things together. Now, because it means nothing, because it is no more than a convenience, she must put up with Drew rushing about the place, leaving her to her own devices. It is as Jane thought; being a wife is rubbish, precisely because you have to be careful not to behave like a wife, or rather, not to be thought to behave like a wife. Which also sounds like rubbish ... Oh, it makes her head spin.

(40)

Despite her misgivings (she was not at all convinced that marriage was necessary in the first place), Jane has not removed her ring since the wedding ceremony. Nevertheless, whilst at the fountain she becomes conscious of how unaccustomed she is to wearing it and, perhaps, to its symbolic function as a marker of masculine proprietary rights:

she fingers her ring of plain white gold nervously. After all these days, the eighth to be precise ... it still feels strange. ... If it were not for Drew, she wouldn't bother to wear the ring, which draws attention to her knobbly fingers; indeed, she is banking on him losing interest in it. He had after all happily given up the idea of wearing one himself when she said she didn't care. Why then does he think she should wear a ring?

(76)

However, from Drew's remarks after the loss of the ring, it is quite clear that he is aware that it makes her uncomfortable, has not exerted pressure on her to wear it, and that, like Kaatje, he “doesn't give a toss”. Rather it is Jane's own timidity and lack of self-confidence that have made her unable to act decisively and remove the ring – she is guilty of *mauvais fois* in not assuming existential authority over the plot of her own life, and in submitting to social expectations, notwithstanding her reservations.

When Jane decides that ultimately Kaatje “doesn't give a toss, *as the character, whose name Jane doesn't know*, would say” (77, emphasis added), she is recalling the phrase Margaret used to dismiss Glasgow's tourist sights (74). However, the authorial intervention here points to the fact that it is the third-person narrator who has earlier revealed the cleaning woman's name: “The woman is called Margaret, but Jane doesn't know her name, is too embarrassed to ask so

late in the day” (74). Both of these authorial asides draw attention to the fictionality of the story, and to the reality that Margaret is a character in a narrative – as, of course, are Jane and Drew. In other words, the reader has been initially deceived into taking the representation as reality, but then is reminded that the illusion of reality conveyed by the realism of the representation is false. However, this recognition does not mar an appreciation of the ‘reality effect’. As Belsey points out:

the trompe-l’oeil pleases by presenting the appearance of a three-dimensional object which we go on to recognize as exactly that: no more than an appearance, painted in two dimensions. In order to enjoy the trompe-l’oeil, we have to be convinced by it in the first instance and then to shift our gaze so that, seeing the object resolve itself into lines on a canvas, we are no longer convinced; we have to be deceived – and then to acknowledge our deception.

(1995: 258)

“There’s the Bird that Never Flew” thus ultimately illustrates Stuart Hall’s claim that, as with fictional characters, in reality “[i]dentities are ... constituted within, not outside, representation. ... They arise from a narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity” (1996a: 4). The real itself is mediated by language, no less than the representation, and identities are narrative performances. Jane has been forced by Kaatje to recognise the possibility of alternative scripts – that she can refashion the story in which she has inadvertently allowed herself to be trapped. In Dorothy Driver’s terms, she has reached a “[small] revolutionary [moment] of fictive self-actualisation” (2010: 528).

In tracing a *Bildung* of transcendence through reading or re-reading – that is, through becoming aware of ways in which one might be entrapped in a narrative that is not of one’s own making, and hence the problem of agency or ‘authorship’ of one’s own identity and choices – “There’s the Bird that Never Flew” addresses the notion that identity is fixed through unconscious repetition and iteration of a narrative without origin. However, in also highlighting the performative as opposed to essentialist or static nature of identity, the story gestures towards the ways in which identities may be re-invented. Thus, like Mrs Pringle and Kaatje, Jane is confronted with the possibility of transcending the disgraceful entrapment of coloureds in the narrative of ‘miscegenation’ – of being “bathed in grace” rather than “cringing with shame”. By contrast, Grace, her mother, is – ironically, and despite her name – still entrapped, as are Aunt

Trudie and Robert Pringle who, though descendants of the Pringle line, have “lost their way”. However, in “The One that Got Away”, the ironically-named title story of Wicomb’s collection, a self-reflexive questioning of agency and of the idea that one *can* “get away” or escape narrative determinism is staged – as I argue in the following section.

5.4 Moving Widdershins and the Chinese Box Effect

All marks made in a book in ink [is] vandalism.

– Gavin Wilton (Wicomb 2008: 38)

All Chinese boxes hey, where will it all end?

– Drew (Wicomb 2008: 50)

If Grant Fotheringay’s youthful dreams of escaping from the grim Gorbals of Glasgow to the exotic Southern Hemisphere were fed by the South African tableau on the Doulton Fountain – itself a projection of Mr Ellis’s similar yearnings – these desires are ironically echoed, in inverse form, by Drew in “The One that Got Away”. Twice in the latter story he is described as using the titular phrase to refer to himself as an escapee (38, 45) – an indication of the impression the phrase has made on him in the fictional present of the story. The first of these occasions occurs when he is reminiscing about his experiences as a schoolboy in Mr Gavin Wilton’s monotonous history classes. He recalls his fantasy of being able to run up to “the rim of the disc that was the real world” (37) and leap into the new world that lay before him – the Northern Hemisphere: “that alien landscape: mountain ranges with high snow-capped peaks, trees burning in autumnal colours that he had only seen in pictures, colours so distant and so subtle that they had never been named”. He “would have been the one that got away” (37-38). It was in Wilton’s classes that Drew – as Carli Coetzee notes, the past tense of the word “draw” (2010: 567)¹⁵ – first experimented with the notion of artfully vandalising his history textbook, Fowler & Smit, by using multi-coloured pens and a pencil to turn the pages into “dazzling works, every one of them different”.

Importantly, for Drew, the “project” of transforming the book “was all the more exciting for being a secret act performed so publicly” (38). Thinking back to his covert act of ‘image-breaking’, he mimicks the pretentious tones of Willem Stirling, “the dreaded Cape Town art critic”, and proceeds to pontificate: “Fowler & Smit is of course garish, but it could be seen as Andrew Brown’s first work of art, and as far as juvenilia goes, a significant pointer to Brown’s

mature iconoclasm” (38). Though this first act of irreverent defacement puts Drew on the path to becoming a conceptual artist, it also provides him with the germ of the idea which prompts him to persuade Jane to honeymoon in Glasgow, “the home of Presbyterianism ... just the place to go for an authentic wittebrood” (39). He has ulterior motives, however, since he intends to combine the ostensible reason for their visit to Glasgow with another clandestine “project” (37, 39, 40, 49) involving a book. Moreover, since he does not intend to divulge the project to Jane until its completion, it too, in a sense, will be a “secret act performed ... publicly”.

Earlier, when Drew had been conducting research in the Cape Town City Library for an art installation on the history of gold mining in South Africa, he had fortuitously come upon a novel by Helen McCloy entitled *The One that Got Away* – a “mystery set in the Scottish Highlands” (45) which was obviously misplaced in the holdings on mining.¹⁶ Having “without thinking” (45) pilfered the book, Drew later discovers that it had originally been taken out of the Dennistoun library in Glasgow on 16 June 1976 (the historic date on which the Soweto uprising began in South Africa, but also the day celebrated annually, since 1954, as Bloomsday).¹⁷ Though Drew is not interested in the novel itself (“Not his kind of thing”), the materiality of the book, together with its ‘life story’, intrigues him: “it was the object and its history that interested him. What would he do with it? He didn’t know, but there was also the title that resonated, and the fiction *that made him think of himself as a character whose role would become clear in time*” (45, emphasis added). Beyond the bare facts revealed by his discovery of the book far from its original home and the date on which it was last borrowed, Drew cannot access the “history” of its odyssey – the identity of its last borrower, how it arrived in Cape Town, why it remained there, or how it came to be lodged in the Cape Town library but erroneously shelved, for instance. Nor can he substantially modify the narrative it contains, apart from defacing the printed pages. As a material object, however, he *can* tamper with the book’s appearance and its future, and this is indeed the role that “become[s] clear to him in time”.

Multiple ironies surface in the passage cited above, however. The first of these is that Drew arrives at a self-reflexive recognition of his own textuality, his ontological status as a character in a story. This intuitive grasp foreshadows the ending of “The One that Got Away”, in which the reader discovers that, ‘in reality’, Drew has been made a character in another author’s plot, since this ‘author’ is interpolated as a first-person narrator and draws attention to the fact that the narrative the reader has read to this point is actually ‘her’ story.¹⁸ The coda which

constitutes the ending of “The One that Got Away” thus acts as an unexpected frame – just as “A Trip to the Gifberge” functions in *You Can’t Get Lost*. Moreover, Drew is also, of course, a character in Zoë Wicomb’s “The One that Got Away” and *The One that Got Away*, though not Helen McCloy’s novel of the same title. The dizzying conflation of fiction and reality here – of the fictionalised and the ‘real’ Drew, of implied and actual authors, of the fictional worlds of Wicomb’s titular story and the real novel the latter references, and the world in reality and the books it contains (both McCloy’s and Wicomb’s texts, identically titled) – shatters the illusion of realism and dissolves the ontological distinction between diegetic levels, a dissolution that Drew will intuit as the Chinese box effect at the end of the story. It is supremely ironic, therefore, that he recognises that McCloy’s novel’s title “resonate[s]” (as does the title of Wicomb’s short story and the volume in which it appears), since this is accurate not only in respect of his own experiences (read in realist mode), but also his ‘circumstances’ (read in metafictional mode).

It is at this point of reflexive recognition that Drew again rehearses the titular phrase, slightly modified as “the one who got away” (45), to describe his lucky escape from “the pin-stripe world of his brothers, the businessmen, the hollow men, the invisible men” (45), to the world of art. Once again, the ironies proliferate: Drew has not only become an artist; as a literary construct he *is* art – in other words, he does not have the agency or freedom which he ascribes to himself here. He therefore *cannot* escape or “get away” from the text in which he is trapped. Moreover, by drawing on titles by T.S. Eliot and Ralph Ellison to convey his scornful sense of the aridity and anonymity of the world of commerce, as opposed to the world of the imagination, of art and fiction, he is borrowing and *unimaginatively* rehearsing or plagiarising famous phrases to launch a critique of the former from within a work of fiction/art, a work in which his words are precisely *not* his own. They belong, in the first instance, to the English language, but beyond that to Eliot and Ellison, to the intratextual implied ‘author’, and to Wicomb. Moreover, the implication, ultimately, is that it is not only Drew who is ‘written’ but also Wicomb herself, in the sense that she, too, is interpolated in language, in culture and in narrative.

Though Drew subsequently neglects the book he has appropriated to attend to what he terms, somewhat crassly given the artistic sensibility he professes above, “the *business* of marriage and honeymoon” (45, emphasis added), he himself admits that “perhaps it was the other way round, since by then he knew with absolute clarity why he had taken the book” (45). In other words, he acknowledges that the book project he proposes to undertake, under the pretext

of honeymooning in Glasgow, possibly supersedes his emotional investment in the trip: “It could be said that the project has brought about the marriage and honeymoon, for how else would he have justified a trip to Glasgow?” (39). It is the final sentence on the Dennistoun library’s lending sheet (“*A book must be returned to the library from which it was borrowed*” [45]) that has convinced him to travel to Scotland (with both Jane and the book – or vice versa) and obey this directive. Having arrived in Glasgow, he muses:

[s]uch an injunction has to be taken seriously. It is the imperative, the indefinite article, and the mode of address that targets any reader, that at the same time orders him, Drew, to carry out the task. The text speaks to him: responsibility for returning the book does not remain with the one who borrowed it. Like any traveller, then, the book will return, showing the scars of its journey, the markings of travel and adventure; it should return, *flaunting its history and its difference*. But how? That he didn’t know until the very day of their arrival, so that now he has the task of transforming the object in a cheap boarding-house room.

(45-46, emphasis added)

Significantly, the highlighted phrase is almost identical to that used earlier by Drew when he reflects on having persuaded the initially resistant Jane to marry him and having suggested “frugal Presbyterian” (39) Glasgow as a honeymoon destination. At first she had matter-of-factly objected that there was no need to change their current arrangements – if a holiday was what he had in mind, they should simply call it that – but then engaged in some lighthearted punning on the Afrikaans term for honeymoon, “wittebrood”, to suggest that their visit would, of necessity, have to be economical, like the proverbial Scots themselves. When Drew had then jokingly referred to Grace’s sense of shame that her daughter had chosen an indolent artist as partner, Jane had relented:

So in the din of mockery and laughter she said yes, alright then, let’s do it, at least marriage would please her mother.

That is how their differences are resolved, the banding together against a world that seems to them sentimental, thoughtless, conventional, and one in which they *flaunt their difference*.

(39-40, emphasis added)

The highlighted phrase thus suggests an identity between the book and the couple, and Kaatje, whose “difference is not a burden” (77), could be added to this equation. However, as indicated earlier, Drew’s assumption here is not entirely accurate, since Jane is not in fact as self-assured

as he: she has yet to confront the challenge that Kaatje's unashamed bearing and outlook on the world pose to her own identity and sense of self as a coloured woman.

The "history" that Drew decides to make McCloy's book exhibit via a cosmetic or artistic make-over includes allusions to its adoptive country and current possessor, and the "difference" it flaunts from its original format entails a change of genre, title, author and colour. Having erased McCloy's title, changed the book's cover from green to red, altered the flyleaf and inserted a second title page, Drew mischievously appropriates the name of his old history teacher, Gavin Wilton, as the putative author of the book, which he now entitles *Gold Mining on the Rand: 1886-1899* (49). His iconoclasm here ostensibly transforms the book from fiction/story to fact/history, and the new title and author allude to the location in the Cape Town library in which the book was discovered, the art project on which Drew was then engaged, and the latter's high school years. Drew has thus provided clues both to the book-as-object's history and to some of his own. Moreover, he has not only reversed the trajectory of the book but has also, in a sense, subversively restored to the metropolitan centre the history of mining, acquisition and exploitation in the colonies that imperial self-projections, such as the Doulton Fountain, suppress.

During this process, however, Drew does experience some qualms, at one point wondering, "what would Helen McCloy have thought of the alteration [to her title]?" The narrator indicates that he "thinks of the author as dead, as indeed he thinks of all authors, who, if not actually dead, are ancient and chair-bound with long white beards" (69). Despite the accuracy of Drew's ruminations here (McCloy in reality having died in 1994), Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author", with its critique of the author-god or author as God-like creator figure, immediately comes to mind.¹⁹ This, of course, is hardly surprising in a text itself indebted to a previous author and novel and littered with self-reflexivity – a narrative which literalises the ways in which stories come from other stories and which problematises notions of authorial control and originality.

It is because Drew has assumed authority and exerted a certain amount of artistic license over McCloy's book that he has vague feelings of guilt, which cause him to re-examine the novel he is disfiguring for clues to its author's presence and identity:

It is unease about the author that makes him flick through the pages, not for the first time, although he has no desire to read the book. His eyes are drawn to a word in italics. This is

the hour we call forenicht, he reads, when you can see anything – ghosts of the dead and the living, too, if you're a true Highlander. For a second he shudders at the thought of seeing the ghostly author with her wispy beard, but then takes comfort in the fact that he is not a Highlander.

(42)

The line which catches Drew's attention appears at the beginning of Chapter Two in McCloy's novel, and the use of the word "forenicht" is obviously intended to convey a sense of the Scottish setting of the story and the dialect and superstitions of Highlanders (Grost n.d.:11). However, the fact that the word is *not* reproduced in italics in "The One that Got Away" is significant, since the reader is required to identify the word at issue, and is therefore attuned to its uncanny reappearance at the end of Wicomb's story, again unaccentuated.

Once the book has received a facelift, Drew dutifully returns it to the Dennistoun library, placing it on a shelf between works by Wickham and Witworth – in other words, exactly where Wicomb's *The One that Got Away* would itself be positioned (46).²⁰ In effect, then, a Scottish mystery story, a work which purports to be on nineteenth-century mining in South Africa, and Wicomb's own collection are conflated here – the latter containing a story about a Scottish mystery story transformed into a historical tract on mining which contains, between its covers, a Scottish mystery story. However, Drew's reconstructed version of McCloy's original book – a recycled object – is again out of place on a shelf of fictional as opposed to historical works, whereas it is correctly placed as fiction in terms of the actual narrative it contains, but wrongly catalogued, since its actual author's surname begins with "M" not "W". This confusion points to a certain arbitrariness or slippage in the ways that books are categorised and their ability to 'escape' or 'elude' neat categorisation. In other words, though a system supposedly exists to make accessible or fix the meanings and content of books, considerable latitude is possible.

Drew's sense of satisfaction, mingled with loss, at his mission having been accomplished is expressed when he utters the word "Done" aloud, thinking to himself as he leaves the library that the project has been "Nothing major ... just a modest little project to go with a wittebrood" (49). However, the story is not "done": this premature sense of closure is subverted by the coda in which the 'author' of the narrative we have just read – perhaps 'Wicomb' – appears as a first-person narrator who is discussing the typescript of her story with Drew in Cape Town after he and Jane have returned from Glasgow.²¹ It becomes apparent that she has recast the anecdote that Drew has told about his book project there or private little joke into a short story of her own. In

other words, she has taken *his* story, his ‘real’ but inconsequential project and transformed or converted it into fiction. The coda, acting as a frame, therefore dispels the illusion that the story with which the reader has been engaging to this point constitutes the primary narrative level, and reveals that what we have taken to be ‘real’ is in fact a representation: a narrative *trompe l’oeil*.

The opening description of this appended section, “We sit in the twilight, the hour of forenicht, on the stoep looking out at Table Mountain on fire” (49) contains the Scottish word for “evening” which Drew is described as encountering earlier in McCloy’s novel – the time at which “you can see anything” (42), including the spirits of the quick and the dead. Despite the apparent realism of these opening lines, attention is implicitly drawn here to the ephemerality or ‘ghostliness’ of what we have taken to this point to be the ‘real’, now about to be revealed as a fiction which indeed contains characters who are both ‘alive’ (Drew, Jane, Grace, Aunt Trudie, Gavin Wilton, the ‘author’, and others, such as Willem Stirling, who may not – or may – be fictional creations of the ‘author’) and dead (McCloy). Furthermore, the question arises as to how the intradiegetic author comes to use the word “forenicht”, since ostensibly it is Drew, in the story we have read to this point, who has glanced at the contents of McCloy’s novel, his eye alighting on this word because it was highlighted by the use of italics. The ‘author’, however, has not had access to the book itself, only to Drew’s anecdote about it. Once again, then (as with Drew’s allusion to Eliot and Ellison), the suggestion is that multiple citations are involved: the word ‘belongs’ to the Scottish dialect, to McCloy, to Drew who encounters it in the latter’s novel, to the intratextual author-figure who uses it in a different and alien context, and, ultimately, to Wicomb herself, who has deliberately planted it twice in “The One that Got Away” in order to draw attention to the ways in which words – like books, narratives, images and identities – circulate, are recycled, and are differently inflected in different contexts.

The author-figure is surprised, even hurt, that Drew does not wish to keep the story, and seems rather unimpressed by it, since he believes his project and the book’s prodigal return to the Dennistoun library to be flimsy grounds for narrative embellishment. When asked what he thinks of the story, for example, he responds offhandedly: “It’s okay ... even if it’s hardly a subject for a story. Really, it was just idle chat, just another event amongst things that happened on the honeymoon”. The first-person narrator/‘author’ then paraphrases his subsequent comments: “He didn’t think someone would weave an elaborate story around it, hadn’t imagined himself and Jane *as characters in someone’s story*” (49, emphasis added).

Though these comments might ultimately be read as a rueful reflection on Wicomb's own part, they are somewhat disingenuous, coming from Drew, since he has himself earlier commandeered or wielded authority over someone else's story/book. In other words, he demonstrated a sense of artistic entitlement and impunity which, ironically, he does not extend to the 'author' and her story, seemingly oblivious to his double standards. Moreover, Drew's assertion of autonomy and agency (he believes that he and Jane *do* have an existence outside the story the 'author' has spun around their trip to Glasgow) is further ironised by the reality that they are characters or fictional constructs both on the secondary *and* the primary diegetic levels – that is, not only in the author-figure's story, but also in Wicomb's "The One that Got Away". (The possibility, of course, exists that they may be fictionalised versions of actual people, if Wicomb has "used the real" as a narrative resource, but this would simply add another mimetic level to the mix and would not dispute the point.)

Indeed, when earlier the third-person narrator of the author-figure's story briefly switches from Drew to Jane as focaliser, in order to convey a sense of the latter's misgivings about her new marital status and the fact that Drew often leaves her alone in Glasgow (whilst supposedly visiting art galleries), the 'author' intervenes directly, using the first-person pronoun to signal a shift back to Drew. On a first reading this does not seem odd or obtrusive, but it does reveal the author-figure's 'presence' or what Rimmon-Kenan terms "perceptibility" (2002: 90) behind what to this point has seemed to be limited third-person narration:

Jane is as comfortable [drinking coffee in a café] as can be. ... after the coffee she will browse in the shops, so that I have no compunction leaving her in Princess Square. ... Should she get bored, I could wheel in a juggler or a clown since the terraced space on the ground floor is large enough to accommodate a number of municipal activities laid on for the season of tourists and children's outings.

And so back to Drew whose story this is

(41)

The notion that Jane has the power to decide what to do next is contradicted by the authorial narrator's manipulateness (Jane has been made comfortable for the time being; further distractions could be introduced, if necessary, to keep her entertained). Moreover, as we discover at the end of "The One that Got Away", the story is palpably *not* Drew's own – or, at least, the anecdote which generated the author-figure's story derives from him, but what she has made of it is patently not under his control. And, in a further and analogously ironic twist, just as Drew's

retrospective anecdote and the author-figure's refashioning of it in her story are directly or indirectly inspired, firstly, by McCloy's book and, secondly, by his book project, Wicomb's "The One that Got Away" is inspired by or indebted to the artwork of her partner, Roger Palmer – as she reveals in her acknowledgements at the end of *The One that Got Away*. This acknowledgement again raises the issue of (the anxiety of) influence – even determinism – and the question of agency, since a reflexive awareness of influences problematises if not prohibits notions of originality and freedom.

The author-figure's response to Drew's dismissiveness towards the story she has produced – that "it is difficult not to be offended, difficult not to be defensive" – means that she attempts to counter his criticism of her use of Jane and himself as a narrative resource with a similarly inept explanation to that which Frieda gives her mother in the final story in *You Can't Get Lost*: "Well, [the story is] obviously not about you, or the two of you; it's just that I used your project – as one does, I add lamely. I just thought you'd find it amusing to see what I came up with" (49). Her comments here highlight the tension between the notion that art is essentially autonomous, autotelic and self-referential, as opposed to primarily mimetic, representational and grounded in reality – a debate which has, in effect, been staged by Wicomb's story, taken as a whole. Couched within a story, this debate is a non-sequitur, however, since the only conclusion there *can* be is that 'reality' – like fiction – is a representation mediated by language as a sense-making mechanism. Thus, Drew *does* "put [his] finger on it" when he remarks:

Yeh, it's okay ... Ag, I don't know; can't put my finger on it; I've always been rubbish with words. Perhaps it's the casting into words that seems to make a song and dance about something that was not meant to be weighty. Now tamed further in the telling, as *your* Jane would say. All Chinese boxes hey, where will it all end?

(49-50)

That is, Drew has identified the illusory quality both of representations of reality and reality itself, and the ways in which this illusionism plays with notions of infinite regression – or stories within stories within stories ... ad infinitum.

Moreover, he here also repeats a phrase the author-figure earlier has Jane use to convey her sense of the simultaneous futility and necessity (or possibility and impossibility) of relaying mundane but 'real' stories, such as rehearsing the events of one's day, to an intimate partner:

Jane recounts the events of her day A funny old thing hey, she says, this business of ‘sharing’ your life with someone. ... What is it good for? She asks, this telling of the things you did, the things that happened. Why do we do it? So *the telling can tame the happening*, the strangeness of experience, and ease it into the order of your shared life? Like writing an essay after reading the book Perhaps if you were to keep it to yourself, undiluted, you’d deal quite differently with the dangers that breed in the day.
(47-48, emphasis added)

Jane is suggesting that something of the unpredictable and unnerving quality of lived experience is reduced or domesticated in the telling or retelling, and that there is an intangible excess to experience which lies outside of or escapes representational capture. Similarly, Drew’s accusation that the ‘author’ has created a “song and dance” out of his original anecdote – has embellished it beyond recognition – implies that something has been “lost in translation” or exceeds the possibility of linguistic or narrative transcription. Thus, he is accusing the ‘author’ of having constructed an unreliable narrator in her story, a narrator who does not, indeed *cannot*, faithfully relay his experience in Glasgow. Though *he* has this sense, the reader of course has no way of knowing what has been omitted or inserted: how the narrative has been somehow distorted in the process of being ordered into the conventional format of a short story. Ironically, too, although Drew references the Chinese box effect to signal his awareness that his story has been ‘contained’ (in both senses) within the author-figure’s story, he is unaware that the latter is itself enclosed in Wicomb’s story, which in turn is included in Wicomb’s collection. That is, what he feels is the reality – as opposed to the narrativisation – of his experience, is itself already a fiction, the implication being that we are *all* fictional creatures or narrative constructions.

In foregrounding a distinction between “*your Jane*” (the intradiegetic author’s fictionalised version) and, presumably, “*my Jane*” or, alternatively, “Jane’s Jane” (the person ‘in reality’), Drew’s comments above also point to the relative claims of competing narrativisations and interpretations. However, as “The One that Got Away” has suggested, such a distinction – that is, between experience as ‘authoritative’ and stories of experience as ‘non-authoritative’ – does not exist, since experience in itself cannot be communicated except via language and narrative, no matter how inadequate the latter are to the purpose – *or* how indispensable and suggestively ‘pregnant’ with meaning they are. Moreover, all of these deliberations raise the intriguing question of who is ‘writing Jane’ in the later story, “There’s the Bird that Never Flew” – the intratextual story-writing ‘author’ or Wicomb herself? Put differently, whose “Jane” *is* this? And the final irony – one of many in “The One that Got Away” – is that Drew’s parting question

(“where will it all end?”) is in a sense answered, since immediately thereafter Wicomb’s story *does* end, with the line “There is a terrifying, cracking sound of fire, and a flare from the mountain lights up our faces” (50). On the one hand, this is not an ending, or not in the conventional sense of ‘tying up loose ends’, since Drew, Jane and their friend, the ‘author’, will (ostensibly ‘in reality’) continue with their ‘lives’, marriages, projects and so on, till they die, and the fire will continue burning until *it* dies or is extinguished. On the other hand, an end *has* been put to the narrative process in Wicomb’s story, an end which reflects the reality that, like all lives, all stories with final lines perforce *do* end – even the most seemingly vertiginously Chinese box ones.

5.5 (Not) Judging a Book by its Cover/Being an Expert in Reading

If the alterations Drew effects to McCloy’s *The One that Got Away* make literal the idiomatic expression “you should not judge a book by its cover”, this notion is explicitly asserted in the later story, “Friends and Goffels”. In the latter, Julie, an old school friend of Dot’s, returns to Cape Town with her Scottish husband, Alistair Baines, after spending some time in Scotland furthering her medical studies and having recently accepted a position as a doctor at Groote Schuur Hospital. On meeting the couple on their arrival at the airport, Dot shrieks at Julie: “I can’t believe you’ve come home, you gorgeous goffel” (107).²² She is astonished at the way her friend’s appearance has changed:

But Julie was no goffel; Julie looked exactly like Naomi Campbell with long sleek hair that bounced like a horse’s tail, and a complexion that glowed like deep honey. ... Dot could not help being taken aback by the professional make-over. Julie seemed laminated with an overall glossy poly-something substance. Now *don’t you judge a book by its cover*, Julie laughed. It’s a change of style; we could all do with a change of style from time to time.

(107, emphasis added)

Described above in terms which correlate with those used to depict Drew’s transformation of McCloy’s novel, Julie’s “make-over” underlines the notion of identity as non-essential and performative – a matter of “style”, and confirms the analogy discussed earlier between book and person. As Julie herself emphasises, and as the reader knows from Drew’s project in “The One that Got Away”, covers – or appearances – may be deceptive.

Having later decided that Alistair is a bigot and a chauvinist, Dot has reason to return to Julie's citation of the proverbial expression "don't judge a book by its cover":

Tonight as Dot weeps onto the kitchen table ... she goes through the logic of the idiom. The point surely of a cover is to give you an indication of what the book is about or what you would like potential readers to think the book is about. Thus one should always judge a book by its cover. But that is disloyal; besides the problem is not Jules, it's the pig husband.

(107)

Though the expression exists to correct a basic but misguided habit of perception, it is clear that Dot is a literalist or textualist who believes that the exterior appearance of a book, as much as that of a person should be an index to inner content or identity – that the link between sign and referent should not be arbitrary or contingent, and that the one should correspond with and be precisely translatable into the other. On the one hand, covers function in much the same way as titles, that is, they "shape both the reception and interpretation" of books, "acting as "hermeneutic pointers [that] promise, prefigure and orient". On the other hand, however, as ciphers or semiotic codes, covers also "both defy and demand translation, exposing a pre-existing level of arbitrariness" (Dwyer 2005: 306). In other words, they both offer the promise of plenitude *and* withhold its gratification. Moreover, as Drew has shown in "The One that Got Away", covers are not only substitutable, but may also act as deliberate decoys or be modified in ways that have contradictory interpretative and classificatory consequences.²³

A further connection between the latter story and "Friends and Goffels" emerges when Gavin Wilton's name is briefly mentioned as Dot and Julie's high school history teacher when they first became friends, the implication being that they and Drew were pupils at the same school and perhaps even contemporaries. It is also possible that the history teacher Gavin Wilton is the same Gavin the reader encounters in "Trompe L'oeil", the eighth and final story in the cluster, though in the latter Gavin's surname is not disclosed. However, both characters are historians – a teacher and an academic, respectively. Gavin, in the later story, occupies a Chair in History (123) at what he refers to, with unconscious intellectual snobbery and a hint of racism, as "the University here in Cape Town" (119): Dot and Julie, after leaving school, become students at the University of the Western Cape – "their own goffel university" (106). Given that Drew, Dot and Julie are adults in the narrative present of the stories, it is not inconceivable that in the intervening period Wilton has progressed from high school to university teaching and established

an academic career as a South African historian. Moreover, both the teacher Gavin Wilton in “The One that Got Away” and the academic Gavin in “Trompe L’oeil” are depicted as unimaginative and pedestrian. The latter’s hostility to fiction and those who produce it is blatant – if he *is* Gavin Wilton, it is wonderfully ironic that, on the completion of his project in Glasgow, Drew “chuckles at the thought of old Wilton finding his name attached to a novel” (48-49). Significantly, too, in “Trompe L’oeil”, Gavin has recently produced a prize-winning “monograph on nineteenth-century settlement in the Eastern Cape” (120), a detail which links him to other characters with a similar interest, and he has joked about the absurdity of recognising creative writing as research to a sceptical colleague – perhaps Grant Fotheringay? – in the English Department (119-120).

The teasing network of possible connections above remains, for the most part, purely speculative, however, since no explicit confirmation is provided, whereas Fiona McAllister almost certainly makes a reappearance in “Friends and Goffels”, as the adult Dot’s neighbour. (Earlier, in “Disgrace”, the suggestion has been that Fiona may buy a house in Cape Town and settle in South Africa permanently [33].) At the end of a particularly disastrous evening with Dot and Alistair (who, despite their best efforts, seem to have taken an instant disliking to each other), Julie joins Alistair in bed, and puts the animosity of the evening out of her mind: “She has always had the ability to spirit herself away to a desert island, to turn the dissonance around her into the swoop of bright parakeets” (113). Waking up in the early hours and unable to prevent herself from fretting, she sits at the kitchen table and decides: “It just wasn’t working. Alistair and Dot rub each other the wrong way so they had better be kept apart. Which is a pity, but Dot has always been such a strong, wayward character” (113). In mulling over a particularly charged exchange between Dot and Alistair earlier in the evening, Julie remembers the former relaying the story of how, earlier that day, a woman had knocked on her door, asking to speak to “the owner of the house” (114). Realising that Alistair had not spotted the slight, Dot explained: “Don’t you see, a goffel opened the door in the middle-class neighbourhood, and the blonde dame didn’t ask whether the goffel was the owner of the house, she just assumed that I wasn’t. Must have thought I was the char. She spoke very much like you – Scottish, I suppose” (114-115). Her caustic reference to “the blonde dame” obviously implied that the woman was stereotypically dim-witted, but she also used the opportunity to jibe at the Scots and to implicate Alistair in the woman’s idiocy and racism. Alistair, however, had responded noncommittally:

“Yes, I see ... yes there’ve always been many Scots in these parts”, upon which “Dot looked at him scathingly; it seemed that he had failed a test” (115). In a sense, then, Alistair failed a shibboleth-type interrogation – in other words, he did not correctly pronounce the condemnation of the woman’s prejudice that Dot was soliciting, thereby signalling his identification with the latter as victim. However, it is not clear whether he was being deliberately obtuse or was simply oblivious to the issues at stake.

During this conversation Dot seemed to have forgotten that Julie was visiting her when the woman called round earlier in the day, and the latter’s recollection of the woman’s exchange with Dot, which she overheard from the kitchen, is entirely different to the version Dot communicated to Alistair. She remembers the woman introducing herself as Fiona (115), explaining that the occupants of the street were setting up a neighbourhood watch, and asking Dot if she would erect a sign in her window advertising the scheme. From Julie’s perspective, the caller had certainly assumed that Dot was the home-owner, and the conversation which ensued was entirely “amiable” (115). Believing that Dot has been guilty of a deliberate misrepresentation, Julie inwardly protests that “the story [Dot] told Alistair – it wasn’t right” (115).²⁴ At the end of her attempt to make sense of Dot’s irrational and provocative behaviour, Julie is exhausted and desperately clutches at straws: “[her] head feels heavy, she really needs her sleep, and this is not the time to rake things over. It will all have blown over in the morning. And perhaps the woman, the neighbour in the story – perhaps that was another one”. Having thus rather unconvincingly exonerated her friend, Julie consoles herself with the complacent thought that “[s]he and Dot have been together since way back; there is no question of them not being friends forever” (115), and she returns to bed and Alistair.

Dot is far more upset than Julie realises about the evening’s events, however, which she interprets as jeopardising their longstanding friendship. She has also decided that Alistair is brutishly insensitive and domineering: “The author of her misery is European, from Scotland, which does not, of course, make him a pig, but he is a pig all the same” (101). (Despite her qualificatory remark here, her animosity is patent, since she has pigeonholed Alistair and foreclosed on alternative interpretations of his identity and character.) In fact, the story opens with Dot sitting at *her* kitchen table at midnight, weeping over the treasured oilcloth Julie brought back for her as a gift – “a print of lush Rousseauian jungle, the kind of thing you won’t find in Cape Town” (102) – and hoping in vain that Julie will rush over to “talk things through”

(101). Believing that Julie's marriage to Alistair is a betrayal, she rages against the entrapment and dependency of wives: "Either [Julie] would have to announce with car keys in her hand that she'll have to go and see her dear friend, that is Dot, even if it is midnight, and so incur Alistair's anger, or persuade herself that all is well" (102). In the event, however, as the reader subsequently discovers, the latter strategy *is* the one that Julie adopts. Indeed, it becomes clear that she does not even entertain the idea of leaving Alistair in order to visit Dot to try to resolve matters, and certainly does not share the latter's sense that her loyalties should be divided, since she immediately retires to bed with Alistair on returning home from the evening out.

When Dot thinks back over the many years of her friendship with Julie, she recalls their mutual shame at having been crudely pronounced "a pair of goffels" by a classmate, Angus Geddes, the day after they arrived in high school – because they were "very dark, had short frizzy hair and flat noses with prominent cheekbones" (103). Believing Alistair to be similarly callous and obdurate, Dot associates him with Angus, and has even on occasion confused their names:

Dot should have known that all was not well with Alistair Baines. Within minutes of meeting him she understood why the long-forgotten word goffel had crept into her speech: Alistair, with his heavy thighs, looked exactly like Angus Geddes morphed into whiteness and adulthood. How could Julie be attracted to someone like that? She had been especially careful not to allow the man's looks to cloud her judgement; that was why she ignored the early signs of piggery.

(108)

Strangely, however, when Dot inadvertently calls Alistair Angus, Julie does not detect the allusion to their erstwhile *bête noire*: instead she innocently asks whether 'Angus' might be a romantic interest of Dot's, and "dismiss[es] the slip as a meaningless confusion of names" (108).

This indication that Angus's name has faded from Julie's memory, though Dot is still fixated on him, provides an index to the ways in which the two women have grown apart, since Julie no longer obsesses over the past and obviously does not view Alistair as a racist or 'Angus-type'. At school, needless to say, Angus's labelling the two girls "a pair of goffels" (102) had conferred pariah status on them both, and they had initially attempted to prevent further humiliation by avoiding each other. Dot nevertheless had wondered about their supposed likeness: "They had been declared a pair, but how could that be when they were so different? ... Did goffelhood really have the power to override all that difference?" (104). She remembers that

she was the one who made the first overture, asking Julie about the creamcakes sold by the vendor outside the school premises, buying one herself, and then sharing it with Julie. She also remembers how she spontaneously rechristened the cake a “parrot”, thus arrogating to herself the power of naming (though not, in this instance, of shaming) which Angus had earlier exercised: “She had no idea how the word had slipped into her head but she said [it] emphatically, in what sounded curiously like Angus’s voice, That’s what we call it” (105). The two girls then flaunted the word in front of their peers, conspiratorially refused to explain its new referent, and from that point on became inseparable.

However, later in the story when Julie, too, is reminiscing over their friendship, it becomes apparent that her memory of the creamcake incident again differs from Dot’s: when she tried to lean toward her fellow goffel – they were a pair for God’s sake – Dot kept stubbornly apart, stared resolutely ahead, until she, Julie, broke the silence to ask about the cake. The parakeet, she tried to christen it, as they fell about laughing, but Dot said no, that was too long a name, that it was a parrot.

(113)

These contrasting versions of the same story confirm that Dot did indeed have the last word, if not the first but, taken together with Julie’s amnesia in respect of the name of their tormentor at school, they also point to the fallibility of memory, since even the events which precipitated the girls’ friendship are open to contestation. Moreover, the tensions that have surfaced during the course of this particular evening have forced Julie to recognise that distance and time, together with her exposure to other cultural realities, have meant that she has become estranged from Dot:

Perhaps it is foolish to imagine that a friendship can be sustained over years of separation: one can’t, after all, expect things to stay the same. There are things Julie supposes that she no longer understands; she has been away too long Julie does not like to dwell on matters that puzzle her, not here at home where she belongs. Would people not say that she has lost her roots?

Roots – she wonders if that is not at the root of it all.

(114)

From her perspective, then, it is not Alistair, as a third party, who is primarily responsible for this rift, though here, once again, she is at odds with Dot. Moreover, a performative understanding of identity presupposes deracination, and therefore a different notion of community – one that is not grounded in origins or essence, or asserts a homogeneity of experience.

A second altercation between Dot and Alistair had occurred later in the evening, after the threesome had watched Sofia Coppola's film *Lost in Translation* (2003) at the Labia, and disagreed in the car afterwards about whether or not Scarlett Johansson, the female lead, was beautiful. This discussion Dot interpreted as avoiding the main issue: "Who cares what the girl looks like, surely what we are trying not to talk about is the *disgraceful* aspect of this film?" (112, emphasis added). Though Alistair seemed bemused by the question, Julie refused to respond or to side with her friend and instead took up humming evasively, further infuriating Dot, who challenged Alistair's seeming obtuseness by blurting out:

Well, how would you Europeans like to be otered in this way? How would you like to have your difference from other people made fun of? At the crudest level, take size – so you think the filmmakers weren't banking on the uproarious laughter when whatshisname towers over the little Japanese in the lift? Pathetic. How crass can you get! What's the point of Europeans being hyper-civilised when civility can't stretch to those who are different? No thought that the little Japanese might find such height grotesque, hey? (112)

Dot's comments here echo those of many of the film's detractors, who accused it of anti-Japanese sentiment and orientalism, if not outright racism.²⁵ For example, Steve Burgess claimed that it was an "ethnocentric compendium of unpleasant stereotypes ... indicative of the way visitors and foreign workers often view Japan" (2003: 38). Similarly, Kiku Day described it as a "caricature of modern Japan", and denounced Coppola for "negative stereotyping":

Reading the praise, I couldn't help wondering not only whether I had watched a different movie, but whether the plaudits had come from a parallel universe of values. *Lost in Translation* is being promoted as a romantic comedy, but there is only one type of humour in the film that I could see: anti-Japanese racism, which is its very spine. ... There is no scene where the Japanese are afforded a shred of dignity. The viewer is sledgehammered into laughing at these small, yellow people and their funny ways, desperately aping the western lifestyle without knowledge of its real meaning. ... The Japanese are one-dimensional and dehumanised in the movie, serving as an exotic background for Bob and Charlotte's story.

(2004 par.1-3)

Significantly, Day's analysis of the elevator scene is almost identical to Dot's: "how funny is it to put the 6ft-plus Murray in an elevator with a number of overly small Japanese?" (2004: par. 3). On the one hand, the fact that Dot also interprets the film in this way again provides evidence of her heightened awareness of racial stereotyping and touchiness in regard to both real or

imagined racial slurs. On the other, however, it might be argued that Dot has not changed since childhood: she still smarts at the original racial insult (“goffel”), despite her reverse appropriation of the term. In other words, this term has come to define her identity and responses, since her continued anger and resistance invest it with meaning – a meaning which carries the burden of shame. From this perspective, then, she is still determined by the narrative of ‘race’: indeed, allows it to determine her ‘readings’ of others – of Alistair and Fiona, for instance, and of *Lost in Translation*.

Alistair, instead of engaging with Dot’s critique, exacerbated what was already a tense situation by accusing her of overreacting and indiscriminately yoking her into a generalised category of overly-critical malcontents:

Oh lighten up the trouble with *you people* is that you’re hypersensitive, terrified of being slighted. This society is well on its way to becoming more confident, and then you’ll take a more liberal, urbane view. Relax, one doesn’t have to keep an eye on political correctness all the time. Why not talk about the aesthetic qualities, the cinematography, the brilliant ending ...

(112, emphasis added)

Dot, in turn, read Alistair’s response as patronising and insultingly dismissive, and she subsided into a resentful silence, which she assumed he read as acquiescence but was quite the opposite. Moreover, the stand-off had meant that the evening was cut short by Julie, who only broke the frosty silence in the car to give Alistair directions to Dot’s house so that they could drop her off. Recalling this conversation and thinking that Julie might at that very moment be lying in bed “in anguished silence” or “enduring ... the pig’s conjugal rights” (113), Dot shudders and goes to bed herself. Believing that Julie’s response to Alistair must be identical to her own, she is not ultimately prepared to recognise or concede that “goffelhood” might indeed *not* have “the power to override all that difference” (104) between Julie and herself.

When Dot’s cell phone beeps at three in the morning, alerting her to an incoming text message. she is woken from a nightmare of “stamped[ing] trouserless men with fat brown thighs” (115). In this nightmare, Alistair and Angus have once again been conflated, since Angus used to roll up the hems of his school shorts so that they were invisible under his blazer, and Alistair, too, has “heavy thighs” (108). When Dot discovers the SMS is from Julie, her immediate response is incredulity: “is that all?” On reading the communication, she repeats the question: “A text message – is that all?” (116). Significantly, Bob Harris (Bill Murray), the lead

male character in *Lost in Translation*, asks the same question after a female interpreter mistranslates the lengthy instructions of the Japanese director of the whisky advertisement in which he is starring. She simply utters the brief line: “He wants you to turn, look in camera. O.K.?” In essence, then, the interaction between the director, the translator and Bob points to the inadequacy and incompleteness of transference from one culture and language to another – or what Tessa Dwyer terms the inevitability of “inter-cultural (mis)communication” (2005: 295) and “linguistic non- reciprocity” (2005: 299). In other words, that which is, quite literally, “lost in translation”. However, miscommunication characterises personal interactions, too: self-evidently Dot views a brief text message from Julie as inadequate to resolve what she perceives as a crisis in their relationship.

Though Julie’s message is intended to be placatory – “*Let’s all try to be more tolerant. Not used to this drinking and driving*” – Dot finds it insulting, perhaps more so coming from her friend, rather than Alistair, and she is incensed. Once again, then, there is a disjunction between Dot’s expectations of Julie and the latter’s actual response to the turn of events. Leaping out of bed in disgust, Dot thinks to herself: “So that is what it amounts to, being married to a pig, consorting with an Angus, and turning yourself into Naomi Campbell – the glorious goffel days are *gone for good*” (116, emphasis added). Hastily dressing again, she returns to her kitchen and her table “covered with lush jungle print”, though now she is angry and “dry-eyed” (116). Though she is prepared to concede Julie’s point about drinking and driving, she is scathing about the notion of “pallid ... wishy-washy tolerance”. Simply entertaining the idea makes her pound the table in fury, “[t]he noise startl[ing] the ghost of a bird, a bright parakeet, who darts from Rousseau’s jungle, then settles for a second as a clearly drawn shadow on the wall, then vanishes” (116).

Given that on two occasions earlier it is Julie who is associated with parakeets (in the creamcake incident and in her “ability to spirit herself away to a desert island, to turn the dissonance around her into the swoop of bright parakeets” [113]), this fanciful or magical realist moment – unexpected in a conventionally realist narrative – suggests that the parakeet is a representation of Julie who, alarmed by Dot’s vehemence, escapes from or flies out of the oilcloth. If the latter is an emblem of their friendship or “the glorious goffel days”, then by implication both the friendship and Julie have “gone for good” (116): like Polly Pringle, Kaatje and, perhaps, Jane, Julie has escaped an entrapping narrative which restricts her identity to that

of “goffelhood”. Moreover, though earlier Julie’s altered appearance has been described in terms which suggest the gleaming surface of an oilcloth (“laminated with an overall glossy poly-something substance” [107]), she has “changed her style” in more than a superficial sense: she refuses to be what others make of her – whether a “goffel” *or* a Naomi Campbell. In this respect, like Kaatje, she “will not be an image ... cannot be subjected to anyone’s gaze” (77). She, too, refuses to be fixed or determined by stereotypical readings and expectations imposed upon her by others, and she has an autonomy which enables her to transcend competing claims on her identity: she will *not* be ‘judged by her cover’. Thus, in “Friends and Goffels” the analogy established in earlier stories between books and persons is extended – as is the theme of freedom and determinism and identity as performance.

The description of the escapee parakeet/Julie as “a drawn shadow on the wall”, after its flight from the cloth, highlights its phantasmal or optically illusory qualities as a light-induced reflection. Nevertheless, the parakeet is simultaneously both magical and real, as are the words used to describe it: it both is – and is not – because it has been represented, just as Julie, herself a shadow or figment of the imagination, a fictional illusion, exists because she has been rendered in words. Significantly, the word “shadow” also appears in the description of Dot at her kitchen table in the opening section of the story: “Light spills from the bedroom so that her shadow on the wall has the hunched, undefined shape of a person parcelled in grief” (101) – a description which conveys a sense of the finality of the breach in the two women’s friendship. Neither of Dot’s two opposed responses – weeping or dry eyes, grief initially then anger later – can prevent this closure, as is confirmed by the fact that at this point the story itself ends. It is here, too, that the title “Friends and Goffels” gains weight, since the suggestion is that a friendship which is premised upon embracing and insisting upon a name and an identity which foreclose on alternative options and are essentialist in nature, does not admit for the possibility of “style” or performance. In other words, such a friendship – and a sense of community – implies a static or unchanging conception of identity which cannot permit deviance or variation.

The appearance of the magical-realist parakeet also suggests that, though the “lush Rousseauian jungle” (102) on the oilcloth is a representation and a copy or replica, it nevertheless has an imaginative life of its own – that is, that the magical and the real coalesce. Thus, though Rousseau’s jungle scenes are highly stylised rather than realistic, their expressionistic qualities animate the creatures and dense foliage they contain beyond the purely

naturalistic. Significantly, however, Rousseau's paintings were not based on first-hand experience or actual exposure to tropical forests. George Heard Hamilton, for example, comments that

there is no evidence that he ever left France. Nor do the details of his jungles prove that he experienced tropical flora and fauna more closely than in the zoological and botanical gardens in Paris. Through his imaginative transformation of the commonplace into the unreal the most ordinary house plants were magnified into towering jungle trees. Similarly, the creatures inhabiting these forests ... were reproduced from photographs, or from dolls and toys. Apollinaire wrote that Rousseau, while painting such scenes, felt their imaginative reality so intensely that he had to throw open the windows to escape from his self-created spells.

(1972: 226)

In this respect, then, Rousseau is not unlike Mr Ellis in "There's the Bird that Never Flew", who has not seen an ostrich – or a Khoi woman, for that matter, though he animates both figures in the tableau on the Doulton Fountain as a result of his encounter with Thomas Pringle's representations of both. The irony, then, is that Ellis's recycled image of Kaatje conveys a liberating truth – the truth of performance, of the lie of essence, and his depiction of the ostrich corrects jaundiced views of the stupidity of the bird. Similarly, Rousseau's non-naturalistic images, reproduced on the oilcloth, enable imaginative flights of fancy, as figured in the magical- realist escape of the parakeet/Julie – a repetition-with-variation of the theme of people, objects and creatures being released or escaping from the conventional meanings with which they are imbued.

Nevertheless, both Rousseau's and Ellis's works produce conflicting interpretations or irreconcilable 'readings' in their viewers (like Coppola's *Lost in Translation*). On the one hand, Ellis's tableau contributes to the Doulton Fountain's ostentatious display of imperial might and repression of the actual history of avarice, exploitation and subjugation at the heart of empire. On the other, it is read by Jane as an anachronistic celebration of the resilience, humanity and right to dignity and self-determination of colonised peoples – their refusal to be shamed by the European gaze. In similar vein, Rousseau's work has been viewed as naïve or primitive, a "revelation of intuitive experience untainted by conventional expression and experience" (Hamilton 1972: 223) – or, alternatively, fêted as avant-garde Expressionism, a deliberately highly stylised "distortion of any or every element in a painting ... whether representational elements are retained or not" (Hamilton 1972: 157). A similar bifurcation is evident in responses

to Thomas Pringle: a Scotsman at heart or the first truly South African English poet; a derivative and indifferent versifier or a pioneer voice; “a humanitarian Christian imperialist” (Calder 1982: 3) or a champion of the South African underdog who “sanctioned the concerns of belonging and alienation, miscegenation, oppression, protest, and resistance as crucial matter for South African poetry” (Chapman 2003: 97).

This co-existence of mutually contradictory interpretations also emerges in respect of the postcard Grant Fotheringay sent Fiona in 1994, a photograph of a painting on the wall of a traditional Venda house. On the reverse side of the postcard was an explanatory legend: “Wall decoration – The Three Hunters – traditional skills incorporating contemporary ideas” (30). The mural depicted three foreshortened and beheaded male figures holding something – “a fan-tailed bird perhaps” (30) – in their hands, and a bas relief of a gun aimed at a snake, all painted in “folk-naïve” (30) or “faux-naïf” style” (31). Fiona had read a politically subversive message into the scene – that is, that it was intended to convey the necessity of armed resistance to apartheid. However, when she suggested as much to Grant on the evening he arranged the dinner party for her at a restaurant in Cape Town, he failed to see the postcard’s supposedly subversive content, “so that Fiona was embarrassed about her interpretation: zealous and gushing, he no doubt thought, and he was, after all *the expert in reading*” (31, emphasis added). However, Fiona’s belief in Grant’s acumen is somewhat misplaced and deeply ironic, given that, in the opening story, “Boy with a Jute-Sack Hood”, he *mis*-reads his relationship with Samuel, his gardener’s son, and fails to see the offence he causes. Like “Disgrace”, this story deals with relations between employers and domestic employees. However, it presents an inversion of the situation presented in “Disgrace”, since in this case it is Grant, the employer, whose ‘disgraceful behaviour’ is exposed. Initially Grant’s and Samuel’s opposed perspectives on each other, revealed through oscillating focalisation, are ironically captured in the ways in which each accuses the other of disgraceful or improper behaviour. For example, Samuel is dismayed at the shabby garden furniture Grant has on his stoep: “He knows the man to be rich and grand. Why then does he keep such ramshackle, such *shameful* things?” (13, emphasis added). By the same token, when Grant notices that the child is curiously peering into the interior of the house, unaware that Grant has caught him in the act, his immediate response is: “Heavens above, what insolence”, and he “leaps to his feet and goes to the window where the child now stares in horror before putting his palms over his eyes with *shame*” (13, emphasis added). Once Grant has invited

Samuel in, however, not only allowing him to enter his *sanctum sanctorum*, his study, but also preparing lunch for him every Saturday when he visits, he begins to take what a friend describes as an “inappropriate” (19) interest in him, to the extent that he withdraws from other social engagements on the days Samuel comes to visit. Grant’s response is both incensed and obtuse: “Inappropriate, he shouted, what a ludicrous thing to say. What’s inappropriate about having lunch with a kid, and who cares about propriety anyway?” (19). Believing that he and Samuel have established a comfortable, companionable routine (“Saturdays at home had become sacrosanct” [19]), Grant is taken aback to find that this is threatened when he suggests the boy should wash up after the meals they share together – in other words, adopt the position of menial: “Once, after lunch, Grant asks if he would like to wash the dishes. Samuel furrows his brows theatrically. Would that not be inappropriate? He asks, clearly pleased with his use of the word, and Grant thinks it best to say yes, that perhaps it would” (19). The relationship is abruptly ended when Samuel’s father, George, witnesses the sumptuous way in which Samuel is being entertained indoors whilst he works outside in the rain: he comes to the back door to consult Grant about the position of a new tree, and his son ignores him, his back turned to the door at which his father is waiting for Grant to grab a raincoat. George obviously resents the ‘white’ academic’s adoption of and patronising hospitality towards his son, and from then on Samuel no longer comes to the house. Though Grant enquires about Samuel’s absence, George is evasive, and he explains that he has himself given his son a thesaurus for Christmas, thus pre-empting Grant’s desire to do so and re-asserting his claims as father and provider (21).

Moreover, Grant and Fiona have diametrically opposed views of their brief relationship as students and of the political situation in South Africa at the time. She supported the anti-apartheid movement and the boycott of South Africa, refusing to visit the country with its “evil regime” (28), whereas Grant had no such qualms about emigrating and, in fact, shamelessly used his brief flirtation with political activism (and Fiona) to impress his liberal but apathetic colleagues and the younger, more radical set at UCT. When he recalls going on a protest march with Fiona in Edinburgh, which did not bring about “the calculated outcome” (sex), he thinks that “it seemed possible that the redhead was rather mild-mannered, but he couldn’t be sure” (14). Fiona, on the other hand, thinks of Grant in Edinburgh as “a politically naive young man she once fancied against her better judgement. ... but she had given up on him, had to admit to herself that the man had ice in his veins and cared nothing for her, and so years later she was

surprised by the postcard. ... She had kept the card purely for the picture” (30). Still, when contemplating her first visit to Cape Town, Fiona admitted that she “would also not mind seeing the Fotheringay man again” (31). Nevertheless, when she does meet up with Grant again, she comes to the conclusion that, “in spite of having shed the awkwardness of his youth, or perhaps because of it, [he] was a disappointment” (31), largely because his life in South Africa has made him more, rather than less, conservative and complacent.

The oscillating and contradictory perspectives revealed by shifts in focalisation, both within and across individual stories, thus reveal that characters and relationships – like words, books and artworks – are analogous in being open to conflicting and sometimes mutually contradictory readings. The various interpretations, re-interpretations, and misinterpretations which emerge – both of people-as-texts and of cultural texts and contexts – suggest that no-one can claim to be an “expert in reading” or able to “judge a book by its cover”. Hermeneutical processes are inflected by the competing claims of gender, class, culture, nationality and ethnicity, among others. Moreover, the thread of failed relationships and friendships, and of unfulfilling or difficult marriages in many of the stories indicates that ‘reading’ people is no less fraught with difficulty and contradiction than interpreting artistic and literary works. By implication, interpretations of other people fix their fluidity and foreclose upon their shifting identities. For example, just as Angus labels – and thereby constructs – Dot and Julie as “goffels”, Dot reads Alistair as a “pig”. These derogatory constructions are then treated as ‘fact’, in the process denying their targets their indeterminacy, and also determining their identities. In Dot’s case, this process has precluded her from ‘getting away’ or becoming other than she is: she is unable to escape the determinate interpretation with which a racist society has invested her – unlike Julie/the parakeet and Polly Pringle, both of whom, in a sense, ‘fly’. Dot, by contrast, might be viewed as “the bird that never flew”.

5.6 “Some bloody life”

If Mrs Pringle ‘gets away’ by retiring to her bed and literally going nowhere, her gesture of refusal is repeated in Jeff Shankie’s rejection of domestic banality – “Some bloody life” (99) – and dismissal of his wife, Marie, and Ben, their new neighbour in Bilsland Street, Glasgow, at the end of the sixth story, “Neighbours”. Similarly, in the eighth story, “Trompe L’oeil”, Bev

literally shatters the illusion of her “perfect marriage” (130) to Gavin by destroying the prized sliding glass doors which he has had installed in their suburban lounge in Cape Town. Bev’s uncharacteristic and singularly poignant act of defiance is, however, paradoxically premised on the prior exposure of the façade of her marriage in a short story written by a young Scotsman (Ben’s elder son, Roddy), whom the couple had met whilst staying at the Ligurian Study Centre in Italy two years earlier. In all three cases, the arrival of a visitor (Cousin Trudie) or an encounter with an outsider or foreigner (Ben, Roddy) precipitates these characters’ acts of recoil from the meaninglessness and claustrophobia of their domestic existences. However, despite the slight possibility that Gavin, in “Trompe L’oeil”, is the Gavin Wilton mentioned in two of the earlier stories, neither “Trompe L’oeil” nor “Neighbours” features any of the recurring characters that appear in the other six stories in the cluster. Nevertheless, both of these narratives are linked to each other and contain multiple verbal and thematic echoes which resonate with those encountered in earlier stories.

“Neighbours” features a retired Scottish couple, “Jeff’n’Marie” Shankie (81) – the abbreviated conjunction of their names suggesting their inseparability and interdependence. Though they lead dull and insipid lives, they manifest a self-congratulatory complacency about the respectability of their neighbourhood, their continued good health (82), and their mundane routines: “G’nT’s on alternate nights” (81); the obligatory “private activity, followed by a nap” every Saturday afternoon, during which Marie watches *Coronation Street* on television whilst “receiv[ing] Jeff’s measured pumping” (87); and fortnightly visits on Sundays to Jeff’s ninety-three year old Aunt Sally in an old-age home (88). The Shankies’ smug existence and routines are abruptly disrupted, however, by the arrival of a new neighbour next door: Ben, a coloured South African woman who is a nurse, together with her adult son, Reuben. Ben’s ‘difference’ – her unruly body and her refusal to be ‘contained’ or to conform to what the Shankies believe is ‘decent’ behaviour – exceeds their categories and exposes their deeply jaundiced views and their proprietorially officious attitude to the square in which their semi-detached house in Bilsland Street is located. Their apoplectic response to Ben’s indifference towards the state of her garden and to her easy commandeering – or, ironically, ‘reverse colonisation’ – of the ‘public’ green they consider out of bounds, means that they become increasingly irrational in their attempts to legislate and maintain jurisdiction over the borders of respectability, thereby exposing the exclusionary principles that underpin their conservative bourgeois suburban existence and the

limits to their tolerance of those who are ‘other’ to themselves. In a sense, then, Ben emerges as a Kaatje or Queen of Sheba figure who “doesn’t give a toss” for the much-vaunted ‘standards’ and conformist parochial values that the Shankies espouse. Nonetheless (and against her better judgement), she is drawn into their lives – first, by physical proximity, and, secondly, by her *own* sense of what constitutes hospitality, common decency, and responsibility for others.

It is Marie who first ineffectually tries, one Saturday morning, to persuade Ben that the weeds in her front garden require attention, only to be rendered speechless when Ben asserts that she actually likes the moss and dandelion flowers (83). Agitatedly returning home, Marie launches into a tirade:

Imagine, she pants, not the end of the world! What kind of low-down thing is that to believe, never mind say. It’s disgraceful, wherever you might live, but in a street like this ... The woman’s views are themselves like weeds that will multiply wantonly and invade the artful order of herbaceous borders; they cannot be tolerated in Bilsland Street ... It may have been a run-down area once, but it’s been respectable for a while now, and with the fine houses renovated, the prices are soaring, and not every tom, dick and harry ... (84)

Marie’s illogicality and paranoid exaggeration here make it apparent that she perceives Ben as a noxious and invasive presence, whose arrival will open the floodgates to a mass invasion of rank and file undesirables and threaten the Shankies’ staid, middle-class Scottish existence (Marie is hardly a representative of the cosmopolitan Glasgow Grant Fotheringay envisions in “Boy in a Jute-Sack hood”). However, as Jeff points out, not without a touch of irony, “the woman with the bloke’s name must know [the prices of property in the neighbourhood]; she has after all just paid a fortune for her house”, though he does add that “you have to wonder how *such people* could afford it” (84, emphasis added). Nevertheless, believing that “standards have to be maintained, that it is every home-owner’s responsibility to do his bit, a matter of common decency” (84), Jeff, “a man of action” (84), himself goes next door to confront Ben about the state of her lawn. But he is caught off-guard by Ben’s insouciance and affronted when she twice interrupts him to insist that he call her by her first name and to ask after Marie’s health, since she has registered the latter’s earlier discomposure. He becomes aware that he is being toyed with: “[his] colour rises. He’s no fool; he has a nose for cheekiness, and that he will not tolerate” (86). Noting his choleric expression, however, Ben decides not to risk further antagonising the Shankies. She thinks to herself that “These people are excitable” and wonders whether

this exhausting business is what's called neighbourliness; she had always wondered why such a category should exist, how it could be different from just being a decent human being who would readily lend a hand or a cup of sugar. Now she understands the underlying concerns of ownership, the need for uniformity that neighbourliness must police.

(86)

Jeff has thus been acting as spokesman for the collective and legislating the terms upon which this community is defined. Indeed, as we later learn, he is both founder and Chair of the local residents' association and, in this capacity, he self-importantly believes he simply translates and puts into practice what in reality are the wishes of the majority: "Typical of folk, waiting for someone like him to come along and set in print, in stone, their heart's desire" (91).

The Shankies' indignation at Ben's quiet resistance to their interventions sees an escalation in the invective they employ to characterise her, which evolves from the derogatory to the openly hostile and racist. For example, hearing that Jeff's visit has been similarly unproductive, Marie thinks to herself that "there'll always be the riff-raff types who let the side down", and asserts Jeff's and her own prior claim to belonging and a sense of territoriality, since they were "born and bred here in the city" (87). Though she notes that Ben is "quite dark, quite different", she nevertheless feels that she is redeemed by her diction: "The woman's saving grace is that she does speak nicely, *not your common type*" (87, emphasis added). Still, she is alarmed by Jeff's report that he had overheard Reuben's swearing at his mother, since she believes that "The problem with bad language is that bad deeds are sure to follow" (88). Implicitly, then, Marie's sense of entitlement and moral rectitude reiterates the "pride cometh before a fall" theme – as indeed becomes the case when her life with Jeff is thrown into complete disarray. It is Ben, however, who ironically steps in to show *real* kindness and charity – or demonstrates, by "good deeds", that neither "bad language" nor "speaking nicely" are necessarily an index to common human decency.

The situation reaches a climax when, returning from a visit to Aunt Sally one Sunday, the Shankies discover Ben, her visiting cousin, and other friends "carousing in the communal gardens" (91) in the centre of the square in Bilsland Street. Jeff, as the self-appointed custodian of the uses to which the garden may be put, is incensed that the rule that there should be "no picnicking or gathering in the private gardens" (91) has been broken. Once again, he extrapolates a general representivity from his own indignant response, believing that he deputises for the

collective concerns of the neighbourhood: “it was not as if he did not have the support of the rest of the householders. *No one* wants the place invaded by riff-raff from the housing estate at the very edge of the neighbourhood. So how on earth did *this lot* get hold of a key?” (91, emphasis added). It is obviously ironic that the garden is generally locked and so inaccessible not only to potential trespassers, outsiders and the *hoi-polloi*, but also the residents themselves, and that gardens, conventionally intended as outdoor spaces for recreation and enjoyment, are the bone of contention in both these confrontations between Ben and the Shankies. Jeff and Marie, it seems, presume to preside not only over the space which is Ben’s privately-owned garden, but also a garden intended as a public space.

Though Ben invites Jeff and Marie to join her “house-warming party” – to which Marie snidely retorts: “But this isn’t your house” (91) – they rudely rebuff this offer of hospitality, flabbergasted at the audacity of the offer. Their indignation only increases when it is casually reiterated by one of the other guests: “Come on people, ... it’s a lovely day at last, the miserable weather’s over, so let’s drink and be merry” (92). When Ben introduces this guest as her visiting cousin from Cape Town, the Shankies immediately register the woman’s strangeness, foreign accent and Khoi features: her “vast behind”, mottled brown face and “unnatural green eyes” (92). Though Jeff offers to help the party pack up, Ben riles him further by quietly defying his authority:

That’s jolly good of you, but I’m afraid we won’t be leaving. You see, I haven’t read your regulations, and I wouldn’t sign-up to such a decision. My understanding is that each of us owns part of this green so, if you like, my guests could stake out my boundary. ... not a bad size, we’ll make sure not to step across the line. Beats me why you don’t want anyone using the public green, and on a lovely day like this? It’d be great for kids to play in. Not mine, of course. And I know yours have *fled the nest*.

(92-93, emphasis added)

In deliberately repeating the expression Marie used earlier when she explained to Ben that her own children were no longer at home (thereby hinting that Reuben is exploiting his mother), Ben here wickedly insinuates that the Shankies’ children have escaped in disgust from the stifling conformity of the Shankie household. Indeed, Marie suspects that is her intention, since she “can’t be sure, but she thinks she hears an emphasis on the word ‘fled’, which makes her wince” (93). Jeff, however, is immune both to Ben’s innuendo here, and to her rational suggestion that

she could delimit her share of the garden and thus not trespass on anyone else's space. Instead he explodes into profanity:

Does the bloody woman not get the difference between public and private? It's obvious, he says. It's a private, an exclusive garden; it has to be kept neat. Once residents take liberties, the riff-raff up the road will see it as a free common space to cavort in, and before you know every layabout and drug addict will be sprawling on this grass, littering the place. That's why you have to understand that it's a private green. As for staking out your boundary, it just isn't possible; it's against the spirit of communal gardens.

(93)

Obviously, the sense of "communal" is lost in Jeff's translation and, in rudely overstating his case, he becomes a target of ridicule and antagonises Ben's guests into open defiance. Ben's cousin turns up the music to drown him out and begins dancing towards him, provocatively "twitching each buttock in turn ... Like a grasshopper she sashays towards him, so that Jeff staggers back, appalled" (93), at which point he storms off, dragging Marie behind. Later in the evening, his bile rises again when he mimics Ben's appropriation of the slightly precious expression "jolly good", and he then descends into vulgar racism: "Jolly good, he says mockingly as he takes a sandwich from the proffered plate. Imagine that, saying jolly good. Bl-bl-bloody Sambos – I'll give them bloody good" (93).

It is this over-excitement which precipitates Jeff's heart attack later that night. Hearing the commotion, Ben knocks on the Shankies' door and immediately takes charge: she not only gets Jeff to hospital, but also puts Marie to bed when they return, treating her as "quite the invalid" (94), since she has been reduced to a state of helplessness. Similar kindness is also shown by the "brown-black cousin" (94), who brings food around to Marie, and whose solicitousness embarrasses Marie, given the erstwhile display of churlishness of which both she and Jeff have been guilty. Moreover, she feels a sense of chagrin that, despite the cousin's friendly overtures, she "simply can't remember the woman's name". All that she can remember is that it is "Something outlandish that begins with a K" (95). Ben's cousin also tells Marie that Ben had worked underground for the ANC in South Africa, had subsequently gone into exile in Scotland, and had stayed on as a nurse in Glasgow, even after the unbanning of the liberation movement, the transition to democracy in South Africa, and the death of her Scottish husband, in order to look after her *laat lammetjie*, Reuben (95).²⁶ She also mentions that Ben has an older son, Roddy, "a published writer" (95). Marie, however, is unable to make sense of "all this talk",

which is outside of her comfort zone and “might as well be in a Hottentot language”. She has swallowed the official Thatcherite line that the ANC was a terrorist organisation, and “can’t help thinking of the IRA and all that dreadful, bloodthirsty lot” (95). Remarking out loud that “you wouldn’t have thought Ben to be the killing type”, she is taken aback when Ben’s cousin “claps a presumptuous hand on her shoulder” and laughingly tells her “Now don’t you be so foolish ... Ben wouldn’t hurt a fly. As long as its politics are on the left” (95). The notion that Ben’s radical political stance means that she opposes conservatism wherever she finds it is obviously ironic in the context of the extent to which she has helped the Shankies, quite literally in their hour of need. By contrast, they have not extended the same courtesy to her as a neighbour: the limits of their acceptance of others has been exposed by their narrow-mindedness and their fundamental conservatism (in both senses). Moreover, it later becomes apparent that Ben is haunted by memories of her involvement in armed resistance to the apartheid regime – an involvement which not only meant that she was continually on the run, but also had damaging repercussions on her family, her eldest son especially. Her cousin’s lighthearted joke here therefore belies the seriousness of this phase in Ben’s life. Nevertheless, Marie is oblivious to these realities. However, she is reluctantly forced to admit that Ben has “been very neighbourly, a real brick, even if the woman does say ‘jolly good’” (96).

Jeff’s heart attack is followed by an infection, which causes him to become confused and to suffer from amnesia. With her characteristic lack of empathy, Marie thinks to herself that he is “off his trolley”, and she is unsettled by his repetitious but insistent questions:

Where is he? What’s he doing here? What exactly are the nurses playing at? – over and over again – and once, alarmingly; Who is he? Although that must have been a slip of the tongue. *It’s not the kind of thing one would talk about to others.*

(96, emphasis added)

Marie’s sense of the importance of ‘keeping up appearances’ and of the kinds of disclosures that it is permissible to air in public means that she cannot even bring herself to trouble her children with their father’s uncharacteristically disoriented state. Confiding in Ben, however, she subsides into self-pity: “It’s too much, seeing Jeff as an eejit, he who has always been in charge, who has looked after her” (96). It is as a result of Marie’s *own* feeble-mindedness and ineffectuality that Ben agrees to accompany her on a visit to the hospital. When they arrive together, however, it is

evident that Jeff has forgotten who Ben is, since he displays a quaint kind of chivalrous curiosity towards her:

Jeff greets Ben with exaggerated, stagy politeness. He adjusts his pyjama shirt at the throat – a phantom straightening of the tie – and enquires from his wife who the lovely lady is. Marie is embarrassed. Don't be daft, she says, you know Ben, our new neighbour, and he bows gallantly, thanking her for visiting, which infuriates his wife. Oh, she says, so we're *putting on airs and graces*, are we?

This appears to throw him into confusion, so that he asks petulantly, Where am I? What is this place?

(96-97, emphasis added)

Obviously Jeff does not realise that his behaviour seems both affected and outrageously duplicitous, given the animosity he has earlier displayed towards Ben. For Marie, however, his current capriciousness is the disgrace: it is his “putting on airs and graces” now that is objectionable, rather than the sanctimonious persona he previously adopted.

Despite his muddled state, when Marie explains to Jeff that he is in the hospital close to their home, he has a moment of clarity and comments to Ben: “Thank heavens ... that this isn't home”, but then again becomes confused about where home is located, and how he will find his way back there. Though Ben reassures him that he will not be expected to travel home alone, he is less interested in this information per se than in Ben as a dependable source (unlike Marie, it seems) and an object of desire: “he turns to her and smiles admiringly. His eyes linger on her breasts. Madam, he says, how kind you are, and Marie rolls her eyes and shakes her head” (97). His uncharacteristically frank sexual gaze is replicated when a nurse comes into his ward bringing tea: “he nudges Marie, flicks his eyes at the nurse and cups his hands on his chest, miming the weight of her large breasts. Whoah, he says, have you seen that? So that Marie reddens and admonishes, If you don't behave yourself, you'll never be sent home” (97). Jeff then drops a series of revealing clangers. He first asks, “Do I want to go home?” (97) and, despite Marie's reassurances, begins to interrogate her: “And in this place, our home, what do we do there?” (98). Flustered by this interrogation, Marie is completely at a loss to know how to respond, but Jeff becomes more insistent: “in his old authoritative voice ... Jeff ... now sitting bolt upright, says, Just tell me woman, speak up, what do we do there, in this house? ... What do I do there?” (98).

Since Marie has been rendered speechless, it is Ben who attempts to respond to these questions, carefully listing what she knows of her neighbours' routines – gardening, sitting

outdoors on the patio, drinking G'n'Ts – but Jeff is not satisfied with this response: “[he] turns to her. His gaze is steady. No, he says emphatically, my question is; what do I do there?” (98). Ben wonders how she has managed to become embroiled in this situation and what the limits of her responsibilities are, given that she has so little in common with the Shankies: “How has she got mixed up with these people? How could she be expected to know anything about them? Christ, what does she care? ... They’re not her sort of people; they’re only neighbours, for God’s sake” (99). Nevertheless, despite her dislike of all that the Shankies represent, and their disgraceful behaviour towards her, she has become involved and has cared, even if she is unable to explain what has motivated her. Moreover, the injunction to show unconditional hospitality or, more literally in this case, to “love thy neighbour as thyself”, is precisely to care for those who are *not* one’s own “sort of people”. Ethical engagement thus requires the acknowledgement that the claims to empathy of the familiar or same are no less insistent and non-negotiable than those of the different or other.

Perhaps it is precisely because the burden of unconditional hospitality seems so counter-intuitive that, at this point, Ben has an involuntary flashback to her days as a freedom fighter when, presumably, ‘taking sides’ seemed imperative and allegiances were clear-cut. Although a freedom fighter who opposed conservatism and racism, however, she is now open to plural realities – in other words, she has become hospitable in ways which she herself is surprised at. Nevertheless, she grieves over the fact that her commitment to the struggle for social justice in South Africa had traumatic consequences for her own children, since her sacrifice of her role as mother for a just political cause compromised their security and stability:

But just as she decides that *she has no choice but to deal with the man*, [her] head floods with confusing images – of police with dogs, of crouching in the bush with AK-47s and the acrid smell of fear, of Reuben as a baby crying day and night, and Roddy packing his bags, having had enough, whose words pound in her ears: Your world is not mine. I can’t live with your past.

(99, emphasis added)

Ben’s repressed memories haunt her here, and her self-recriminations dredge up a past she can neither alter nor excise. Moreover, there is a stark disjunction between her previous and current realities – that is, of children unable to cope with the trauma of a society rent with conflict and violence, and of adults whose lives, to this point, have been safely cocooned in the relative comfort of a bourgeois existence, but who are similarly ill-equipped to deal with trauma on a

smaller, though no less affective, scale. It is these contrastive realities (in both of which she has had or has a role) that bring Ben to the realisation that “Yes, there are many worlds” – that they co-exist rather than are mutually exclusive. This realisation propels her back into her current reality, one in which she is a nurse rather than a revolutionary, and is required to respond to Jeff:

to return to this [world] Ben has to scale a high wall, but she slips back repeatedly, until, after a superhuman effort she reaches the top, back to Bilsland Road where she dredges from her memory a scene from the bedroom window. It is the nurse who says slowly, soothingly, playing for time: Well you have that nice stone birdbath – you like watching the birds, protecting them from that ginger tomcat who comes prowling

(99)

As in other instances in the stories in *The One that Got Away* in which attempts are made to indulge or pacify an irate or confrontational interlocutor, Ben’s intervention here is read as patronising and fundamentally dishonest, since Jeff, even in his muddled state, is demanding nothing less than the truth from her. And, in this instance, he is aware that she is prevaricating, though previously he has suspected her of a defiantly subversive dismissal of his authority, values and lifestyle:

It is his eyes that make her stop. For all their weak, washed-out colour they seem to be on fire, popping out of a face flushed in disbelief. His left eyebrow jumps up and down, and the voice that comes out of a mouth curled with disappointment, or distaste, does not belong to Jeff at all.

Gin. Tonic. Birds. Cats, he recites. There are equal, theatrical pauses between the next words: Some Bloody Life.

In an agile, youthful movement he slips under the covers, *straight as a die*, and staring ahead with the quilt pulled up to his chin, says sneeringly, Thank you, ladies. Thank you for your time. Thank you and good afternoon.

(99, emphasis added)

The way in which Jeff’s voice has changed – from its previous peremptory tone when he lambasted his wife, to its unrecognisability now that he rejects all that he previously had set store by – is a measure of the unpredictability of the astonishing transformation he has undergone. Moreover, the phrase “straight as a die”, which literally signifies an absolutely direct trajectory but figuratively also connotes directness in the sense of uncompromising honesty and clarity, suggests that somehow Jeff has uncovered or extracted a truth that the two women are unable (in Marie’s case) or unwilling (in Ben’s) to reveal to him. His having been ‘brought to his senses’ has not, however, been occasioned by a conscious recognition of the tenuousness of life as a

result of his sudden heart attack. Rather, his ‘change of heart’ has been precipitated by his having been literally un-homed or estranged from the familiar, which itself now seems strange in its monotony and aridity. His gesture of withdrawal is also implicitly manifested in the ways in which the story has shifted in terms of its presentation of point of view. Though the story is initially characterised by the oscillating perspectives of Marie, Jeff and Ben, at a certain point Jeff disappears from the equation – he is not only literally in hospital and removed from Bilsland Street, but figuratively has extricated himself from active participation in or generation of the interior monologues that have characterised the narrative to this point.

In dismissing both Marie and Ben and his previous lifestyle, Jeff’s gesture echoes the finality of Polly Pringle’s withdrawal in “Mrs Pringle’s Bed”. On the day on which Mrs Pringle enters Daisy’s old room, for example, she “does not remember why she is there” (50) – like Jeff in the hospital ward. From Annie’s perspective outside in the backyard, where she is observing her employer’s dim outline and movements through the lace curtain at the window, Mrs Pringle appears to inspect the bed, undress slowly, get into the bed, and then disappear. As Annie thinks to herself, “the figure is gone. A clumsy striptease, and when the performance is over, it feels as if Mrs Pringle has *gone for good*” (52, emphasis added). Significantly here, Annie uses the same phrase Dot does to convey a sense of something (a friendship, a lifestyle) which is indisputably over. Annie’s recognition that Mrs Pringle has taken leave of her old life is further underlined when she observes to herself that her employer “might as well have been peering over a stack of suitcases, waving her hand from the window of a moving train” (52). The similarity between Mrs Pringle’s and Jeff Shankie’s respective abscondences is made clearer by the fact that Mrs Pringle has herself meticulously made up the bed like one in a hospital (51), and that, when she slips under the covers, she “lays her arms neatly by her side” (54) – in other words, lies rigid or “straight as a die”, before her body relaxes into a rejuvenating sleep which releases her from months of insomnia. She has thus cleared a space for a reincarnation of herself to emerge, a self unfettered by the burdens of her past. Given the previously-mentioned etymological roots of the words “hospital” and “hospitable/hospitality” in the Latin term *hospes*, both Mrs Pringle and Jeff Shankie have, consciously or unconsciously, become strangers to themselves and to others. They are now in a position to acknowledge these other selves as unanticipated and unknown guests who were excluded in their previous lives and by their previous modes of being. Who or what

these selves (or host-guests) might be, however, will only be “revealed in time” (45), to quote Drew in “The One that Got Away”.

Thus “Neighbours” rehearses or forms a repetition-with-variation on the theme of breaking out from a stolid, entrapping existence, and Jeff is reminiscent of other characters in the collection who achieve this or seem poised to do so: Polly Pringle, Julie, Jane, for example. Conversely, Marie is unable to escape. Moreover, given that Ben acts as the catalyst for Jeff’s transformation, she is like Kaatje or the Queen of Sheba in earlier stories. Significantly, though, she too changes as a result of the encounter with her neighbours – that is, as a result of the spontaneous hospitality she shows towards those with whom she has nothing in common. Indeed, Ben’s response to the Shankies surprises her: it contrasts with her previous commitment to a cause in which ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ were clearly defined and on opposing sides. Thus, despite her reservations about the Shankies, in accepting that which is different to herself, she is altered in the process.

5.7 “Say[ing] something significant about the real world”

Trompe-l’oeil is only apparently realistic. It is in fact linked to the self-evidence of the world, with such meticulous likeness that it becomes magical.

– Jean Baudrillard (qtd in Manon 2006: 60)

It is not possible for people from the different worlds of this country to talk to each other.

– Brenda (Wicomb; *Playing in the Light*, qtd in Gurnah: 2011: 275)

Surely I’ve written better things.

– Ludwig van Beethoven, on the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata
 (“Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata” par. 7)

In “*Trompe L’oeil*”, the eighth and final story in the cluster, a link is clearly established with “Neighbours”, since the Scottish writer whom Gavin, the “celebrated historian” (122), and Bev, his wife, encounter whilst staying at the Ligurian Study Centre in Italy in 2000 is Roddy, the elder of Ben’s two sons – referred to only in passing by Ben’s visiting cousin in the earlier story. In “*Trompe L’oeil*”, references to Roddy’s unnamed “South African mother” as a “revolutionary” who had known Steve Biko and had spent some months in jail in South Africa (118, 122, 131), are also congruent with information already supplied by Ben’s cousin in “Neighbours”. Given that, in the later story, Gavin remembers that “Roddy What’s-his-name[’s]” initials are RP, that he is Scottish, and has a “funny sing-song Glasgoow accent” (118), it is

tempting to speculate that he, too, is a Pringle.²⁷ Moreover, since Marie Shankie cannot recall the “outlandish” name of Ben’s feisty cousin, though she remembers that it begins with a “K” (95), there is a slim chance that it might be Kaatje. But these are only teasing possibilities.

By contrast, while Roddy uses the alphabetical letters X, Y and Z – rather than the initials R, G and B – as shorthand for himself, Gavin and Bev in the story he writes about his meeting with the couple at the Study Centre, this strategy does not mask their true identities: the characters in his narrative are recognisably based on their counterparts in reality. As a result, both Wicomb’s reader and the intratextual reader-figures in “Trompe L’oeil” (Bev and Gavin, who by chance encounter Roddy’s story two years after their sojourn in Italy) are able to substitute actual names for the letters X, Y and Z with some degree of certainty. Indeed, Roddy’s narrative, which explores the boundary between representation and reality in the mode of a *trompe l’oeil* itself, palpably has a veracity which problematises the distinction between fiction and fact. The title of Wicomb’s story thus not only refers to the realistic embellishments found in the Ligurian region, which literally produce a “Momentary deception of the eye” (128), but also to this embedded story within a story, which is simultaneously both credible *and* unverifiable in certain respects. However, it is those aspects of Roddy’s story which display a fidelity to reality that galvanise the usually subdued and restrained Bev into a gesture of defiance which confirms that Roddy’s story, “straight as a die” (the phrase is repeated at the end of “Trompe L’oeil”), has revealed the truth or met its mark in exposing the lie at the heart of Gavin and Bev’s marriage. In other words, though Catherine Belsey maintains that the “effect [of a true *trompe l’oeil*] depends on what is missing, the absence of a secret concealed behind the paint” (1995: 257) (or words, in this case], here there *is* a ‘secret’ which Roddy unearths and Bev recognises – and which explains Gavin’s furious response to what is only ostensibly, or superficially, a fiction.

Once again, “Trompe L’oeil” employs the Chinese box effect in presenting a story (that is, Wicomb’s or the primary diegetic level) in which there is a story (the secondary diegetic level) written by a writer (Roddy) about a writer (X) who is thinking of inventing or fabricating a story around the interactions of X, Y and Z – a narrative which may or may not be the story Roddy does in fact write. The latter story, indicated typographically through the use of italics, is not included in its entirety in “Trompe L’oeil”, but only partially revealed in the snatches which Gavin reads after Bev has discovered it in the magazine section of the *Mail & Guardian* two years after their trip to Italy. She has placed it on his easy chair and he begins reading it after

dinner, as they sit in their suburban lounge in Cape Town listening to the Moonlight Sonata in what appears to be companionable silence on a beautiful summer's evening. Though Roddy's story proceeds conventionally enough, with descriptions of the interactions of the visitors at the Study Centre and the growing antagonism between X and Y, set realistically against the backdrop of the Ligurian region and the Mediterranean, Gavin becomes increasingly aware that there is more to it than meets the eye. The climax of the story occurs in a crucial description of repeated verbal confrontations in Y and Z's bathroom adjoining X's at the Centre, confrontations which the latter overhears through the thin partitioning wall and which reveal the full extent of Y's self-importance and bullying of his wife.

At the Centre, Gavin required his wife to sit with him during meals while he talked about the progress he was making on his monograph on nineteenth-century Eastern Cape settlers – a work which “just as expected” later went on to be awarded a “well-deserved prize” (120). When Bev on one occasion asked diffidently whether they were not expected to circulate rather than keep to themselves, Gavin had pooh-poohed the very idea: “Who cares, he said loudly, about couples having to separate at table. He didn't, he added in the silence that followed. He had chosen her, Bev, to share his life with, so stuff the rules” (128), supremely unaware of the sexist implications of the latter remark. Moreover, though Gavin obviously intended to snub the gathering at large, his slight was especially aimed at Roddy, whose easy sociability and attentiveness to Bev he resented. Thus, when Roddy later commented: “How extraordinary that you two should do everything together, that after all these years you still seem to like each other. A good advertisement for marriage if ever I saw one. You must know everything there is to know of each other” (128), his observation was double-edged, since Gavin's routine self-absorption means that it is debatable whether he can really know anything about Bev. Given that Roddy himself was still unmarried, Bev had at this point reflected wryly that there was “No one to cramp his style” (128), whereas she felt acutely self-conscious of being a hanger-on amongst the legitimate visitors at the Study Centre: “[She] did not find it easy to be a spouse. She ought to have been used to the condition, but there she was something like an uninvited guest, a free-loader, a charity case, or so she thought the serving staff viewed her” (126). Gavin, however, dismissed her reservations, claiming that “she was imagining things, that her sensitivity was a symptom of colonial cringe” (126).

Bev's use of the phrase "no one to cramp his style", however, also recalls the occasion Gavin had first suggested that she accompany him on the trip to Italy, pointing out that she would be bored and lonely "kicking [her] heels [at home] for two months on [her] own" (123). She had acknowledged to herself that her daily routine of housework was completed so efficiently that she had empty hours on her hands, no idea of how to spend them fruitfully, and frequently subsided into depression, apathy and inertia: "There was no escaping the time in which she floundered, in which her spirit grew thin, spread through the house, spread effortlessly over all the dust-free surfaces of cupboards and chairs and beds, seemed to evaporate, leaving her light-headed" (124). Against this background of domestic ennui and monotony, the proposed visit to Italy had seemed to offer a brief escape or diversion: "She would view the fellowship in Italy as an experiment with unpunctuated time, unmarked by chores of any kind, which would *settle things for good*" (124, emphasis added) – the latter phrase another prescient iteration of the motif of conclusive outcomes or endings. Nevertheless, she had needed reassurance that her company overseas would be welcome: "Did he really want her to come to Italy? Would she not in be in his way, cramp his style?" (125). He, in turn, had objected to this suggestion, not because he was mindful of her insecurities, but on the grounds that, as his partner, she had always been both attentive, circumspect and an attractive asset:

He deplored the vulgar expression. Of course he wanted her to come. She had never been in his way and he knew he could rely on her to be sensitive to his needs. Of course – he had no misgivings at all. Few women your age look as good as you do, he said, having thought about the expression and decided there was an entailment that warranted a reply.
(125)

It is evident, then, that his pursuits and well-being are paramount: she has to suppress her own needs in order to cater to his, and her role is to enhance his stature and reflect well on him. Thus, though Bev had intended to read novels in Italy, and to familiarise herself with the Ligurian region by consulting guides and going on day trips, in the event she had accomplished very little, since "It turned out that the spouse's unstructured time at the Study Centre was only such within the fixed parameters of set mealtimes and Gavin's working routine" (127). Moreover, even before leaving for Italy, Bev had already had misgivings about whether she would have "the courage to take ... risks" in venturing out on excursions of her own there, given that she "managed to get lost in Cape Town in spite of Table Mountain" (124). The fact that she finds her

‘home city’ disorienting and alien, however, is less a function of a sense of estrangement from both the place and its inhabitants (as is Frieda’s experience in *You Can’t Get Lost*) than a reflection of the nervousness and ineffectuality that are induced in her by virtue of Gavin’s dominance of their relationship.

When, in response to Bev’s suggestion that she would be an encumbrance at the Study Centre, Gavin tried to define “his style”, he concluded that he was “a solid, old-fashioned sort of man, a family man, who dressed soberly in a navy-blue blazer” (125) – a sartorial taste that Roddy (himself a denim man) parodies outrageously at the opening of the story he weaves around Y:

One knows what to expect from a man who wears a blazer, for the blazer is designed to announce the wearer’s unassailable authority. The brass buttons and double-breastedness confer both authority and probity upon the wearer, and what is more, they keep a man on his toes. The double-breasted blazer does not brook investigation. Just as it does not permit slouching ... rather, it bellows a no-nonsense clarity of purpose guaranteed by the combination of sober navy-blue with sportive brass buttons that declares its difference from the staid traditions of the suit. Thus does the blazer blaze the wearer’s ready-made integrity. In its signifying function it is not unlike denim, which once spoke so unashamedly of permissiveness and subversion, of a brazen disregard of order, that it had to be rescued by the fashion industry. There is, of course, no danger of the blazer being appropriated in that way.

(117)

There is an obvious irony here, since the difference “announce[d]”, “bellow[ed]”, “declare[d]”, “blaze[d]” – or flaunted – by the blazer is hardly less conformist than that of the suit (with its connotations of businessman-like dependability) – or of denim jeans, for that matter.

Nevertheless, Gavin, in middle age, has opted for a sober respectability and decorum which bespeak his fulfilment of the career and domestic potential with which he seemed endowed at an earlier age.

At the beginning of their relationship, for example, Bev recalls that she was considered lucky to have been courted by “a star, a catch” (122), and was envied by other women for having been singled out by such a “bright, handsome” man to be his wife. She believes these women would have predicted the successful career trajectory Gavin would follow, and the advantages she herself would enjoy as a result:

She lists the things that others must have foreseen [and envied in advance]: for bearing the name that appears on the cover of the well-reviewed books, for foreign travel that comes with a prestigious Chair in History, for the issue of marriage, their lovely boys, both away at university – all these things must have been there as embryos, little bloody specks, contained in the albumen of brightness. She tosses the word about and summons its synonyms: vivid, luminous, brilliant, blazing. Blazing, as in blazer.²⁸

(122-123)

Like Roddy, then, Bev is cognisant of the semiotics of the blazer: its gravitas and connotations of success. However, her ruminations seem just a little tinged with doubt or scepticism: though she is enumerating the ways in which she could – or would – be considered extremely lucky in the eyes of her peers, she seems less than convinced herself. The nagging question which implicitly presents itself is: “What *more* could she want?” – a question Bev hardly dares articulate to herself. Moreover, the synonyms for “brightness” that she conjures up here result in her arriving at the stolid and somewhat bathetic “blazer”: as Gavin himself acknowledges, he is rather conservative in his dress sense or “style”. Nevertheless, he prides himself on the fact that, despite his years, his hair is still “rather fine” (125), as he puts it. While this might seem a minor and excusable vanity, in reality it is a measure of a far greater sense of self-esteem, since Gavin’s self-image, and the image he projects in public, is in fact premised on parading his indisputable authority. It is as a result of his innate sense that his opinions are unassailable that Gavin deigns to deliver judgement on all and sundry, even when in reality he is out of his depth.

Skim-reading beyond the opening section of Roddy’s story, for example, he finds its reliance on actuality, rather than suspenseful fictionalisation, unimaginative and distasteful, though he is at this stage dimly aware that the story is presenting a caricature of him which is hardly flattering. His response is both defensive and dismissive:

He deplores this kind of thing, fiction that claims to say something significant about the real world. These people should stick to stories, events and characters, rather than rummage through stale stereotypes and imagine that something new has been forged. He has no objection to a good old-fashioned yarn, that is, when one can find the time for reading fiction, but this pompous stuff ... Why on earth does Bev think that he would be diverted by it? She ought to know that he sees through this kind of thing – platitudes passed off as profundities.

(118)

Encountering what he considers to be tolerable descriptions of the Ligurian setting and, “predictably, the Ligurian *trompe l’oeil*” (121) in the story, Gavin launches an attack on Roddy’s

recourse to realism: “Are writers not supposed to use their imaginations, invent, for God’s sake? What is the point of simply transferring from the everyday, from what happens to be within view, or hearing, to the page?” (121). The “point”, however, as Gavin is subsequently to discover, is to divulge what is hidden beneath the everyday and the readily visible and audible: that is, *not* to confuse appearance with reality, blazer with decency and integrity, or book with cover, but to read between the lines. The *mise-en-scène* which Roddy has so carefully constructed is misleading in its seeming innocuousness: that which is “within hearing”, though not “within view” is to play a crucial role in his story’s unmasking of the deceptiveness of appearances – and the ways in which readily apparent surface realities and behaviours in public provide an index to far more serious underlying tendencies.

Thus, in Roddy’s story, Y’s propensity to bluntly contradict the opinions of others and to rudely interrupt to assert his authority is highlighted. On one occasion, for example, the topic of colonial genocide was under discussion at the Study Centre. Gavin finds Roddy’s rendition of this discussion “marginally more interesting” than the narrative to this point, largely because he uncritically reads it as confirming his superior knowledge and ability to disabuse Roddy of his ignorance: “He chuckles at the dialogue, not least because, for all the sardonic tone, young RP has clearly learnt some lessons in history from their dinner-table conversations”. However, just prior to this, Gavin has noted that “Roddy’s character [Y], much given to shaking his head vigorously”, firmly rebuffs X: “*No, no, no, such speculations are painful to those of us who know something about history. Let me take you through the arguments*” (121). The accuracy with which Roddy captures Gavin’s emphatic rebuttals here is borne out by those sections of “Trompe L’oeil”, or what Wicomb terms the “first level of mimesis” (2005: 149), which reveal a similar pattern. During pre-dinner drinks one evening at the Centre, for instance, Bev had joined Roddy’s group and he had cracked a joke about circulating at such functions, mincingly demonstrating what the Scottish term for such social obligations, *stonneroonie*, entails. Hearing the ensuing laughter, Gavin had come across and immediately dampened the jollity by deliberately picking a fight with Roddy about the inconsequentiality of the latter’s profession. He had mentioned that earlier that day he had read an article on the millions of fictional works produced annually and asked the group whether they did not think this “terrible”, the implication being that “fill[ing] the world” with novels was both profligate and scandalous, since such works were of little value in his estimation (127). Though Roddy had rationally pointed out that

publishers would not publish books that did not sell, Gavin had doggedly persisted: “Well, I call it shameful, wasteful, ... the sheer amount of pulp produced, tossed into a benighted world – I am of course not speaking of great literature – and then others have to read it all” (127). Though Roddy had responded mildly both to the insinuation that fiction was trivial and that he himself was a second-rate writer, he had done so in such a way as to cast aspersions on Gavin’s own sphere of interest – history:

In the larger scheme of things where men join armies and go out to shoot people they don’t know, the harmless, solitary pleasures of reading and writing could hardly be called shameful. In fact, they should be encouraged. And not many of us are able to read or write great literature. We have to make do ...

(127)

Immediately Gavin had intervened to dispute Roddy’s point: “no, no, no, Gavin interrupted, but Roddy, the conscientious fellow, turned away with drink in hand to circulate according to the rules of the stonneroonie” (127). Ironically, however, though Roddy had taken evasive action at this juncture by simply cold-shouldering Gavin, the story he has written constitutes some form of retaliation. Thus, though Gavin both dismisses the views of others and Roddy’s story, in which his overbearing and opinionated interventions are faithfully rendered (and mockingly foregrounded), he experiences an increasing sense of unease at the compromising way in which he has been represented: “But all through the Beethoven sonata, something has been niggling, and now Gavin finds himself picking up the paper once again” (121).

Against his better judgement, Gavin reads on, until he comes across a passage which is painfully revealing:

For all Y’s authority, the child, the palimpsest of a boy who is afraid of pigeons, persists: it rises like a blush below the elegant silver hair, so that the fleeting look translates into a message of panic, a plea to his wife. Who will act, will leap to his side to steer him away from menace, from the portly pigeons that strut self-importantly, or the cool comprehending look of the gauche young man who will not take his word, who tries to interrupt.

(125)

Evidently X has detected the insecurity beneath Y’s veneer of authority, and challenges him in ways which gall the older man. Z, on the other hand, hastens to reassure and protect Y from an unmasking of his dual inferiority/superiority complex and to provide him with the undivided

attention and allegiance which bolster his self-image. In reality, however, the fact that, at the Study Centre, Bev found Roddy interesting, sympathetic and perceptive, rather than provocative and confrontational, obviously irked Gavin and threatened his vanity. In his story, Roddy has thus precisely identified his self-regard and need for constant affirmation and admiration. In other words, he has recognised that Bev's role is that of sycophant or devotee, and that her spirit has been killed by Gavin's needs and dominance. Moreover, if Roddy is independent and self-sufficient, Gavin is essentially, though unconsciously, dependent on his wife: his "style" depends on Bev as attractive partner, but also the housewife whose silent and efficient contribution to the running of the home makes his comfortable lifestyle possible.

Gavin's conceit, then, made him unaware that Roddy's characterisation of this arrangement – his marriage to Bev – as "extraordinary" was hardly complimentary, but carried within it an ironic undertone. He therefore misinterpreted the tenor of Roddy's comment, since the latter was insinuating that it was surely impossible for a woman such as Bev to condone her husband's belligerent posturing and dominance. Instead, taking "the young man's expression of surprise for admiration or envy", Gavin had proudly announced that he and Bev had been together "Thirty years at the end of this month ... so it isn't surprising we are so close, that we do everything together" (128). Launching into an inventory of their day's sightseeing in Genoa, as if to drive home the point, Gavin had been timidly interrupted by Bev, who offered the observation that, as a couple, they had been lucky, at which, Gavin, true to character, protested: "No, no, no, not lucky. It takes some thought, some backbone to keep a marriage working in these pressured times" (129). Once again, he takes the credit himself, unconscious of the irony that what he terms "backbone" consists in overruling Bev, seeing her as an extension of his ego, and stifling any glimmerings of creativity or independence in her.

In Roddy's story, however, Gavin's brusque contradiction of Bev's reference to their good fortune is symptomatically recast as an exposé of Y's belligerence and insensitivity, both in interrupting his wife and then in presuming to instruct X on the differences between British or Scottish and South African attitudes to marriage, the former no doubt lacking in stamina and endurance:

Y shakes his head. No, no, no, he says.

He has two ways of starting. If not the multiple "No's, his opening would be: Of course, of course, which involves an equally vigorous shaking of the head, and really

there is no way of knowing how the man chooses between the two since both are followed by an invitation to infer that his knowledge and understanding are boundless, that the other person's naivety is a given.

X frowns thoughtfully while the lecture on cultural difference is being delivered. The new Père Ubu, he thinks, blazered, and buffed by the academy.

'Bunkum' – delivered in his mother's no-nonsense guerrilla style as she looks her interlocutor straight in the eye – that's what he ought to say. Instead, he smiles. Perhaps it's all about personal vanity: Y shakes his head to draw attention to his handsome, full head of once-blond hair now elegantly silvered with age. Common vanity, a vigorous nod at Mother Nature who has always been kind to him, whom he has come to rely on.

(129)

X's allusion to the central protagonist in Alfred Jarry's play suggests that Y is an intellectual bully, bombastic, self-centred and ruthless. Nevertheless, in the fictional rendering of this conversation, X decides not to challenge Y and resist his posturing – as Ben would do with blunt directness. Moreover, though earlier Bev had been embarrassed to feel flattered by Roddy's compliments and attention, believing that at her age she should be past such vanity (122), Gavin, by contrast, has no such scruples – as indicated in Roddy's story by the repeated references to Y's pride in his still fine head of hair.

As Roddy's exposure of him and what motivates him becomes increasingly more apparent to Gavin, he finds himself in the grip of an uncontrollable compulsion to read further to see where the story leads: against his will, it exerts a power over him since, recognising (an unflattering depiction of) himself in it, he cannot entirely dismiss it as mere fabrication or speculation:

Gavin would like to stop reading this odious story, but something over which he has no control drives him on. It is the same morbid fascination with which he examines in the mirror his mosquito bites ... the same absorption in something he knows to be temporary. There is no need to be upset by these facile words, by the ravings of a limited mind. But something niggles, a sense of something unspeakable woven into these sentences that Gavin can't bring himself to draw out into the light. And a monstrous sense of shame creeps up lividly from the open neck of his shirt to his very brow where it settles in the luxuriant hair. He steals a look at Bev. Does Bev know of the thing hidden in this story?

(129-130)

The conflation of story and mirror here implies that Gavin is seeing his own reflection in the former – like Grace, he is being confronted by his own vanity and egotism. Moreover, the story does not consist of "ravings", but a calculated revelation of the public façade and the private reality of his marriage to Bev (while Roddy may be fictionalising certain aspects of the latter, the

primary diegetic level in “Trompe L’oeil” reveals that he has read Gavin’s character astutely). “The thing”, then, or the source of “niggle” is the disjunction between Roddy’s shrewd grasp of Gavin’s psychological make-up and the latter’s self-delusion: Gavin’s sense of shame derives from this excruciating unmasking. Though he hopes (in vain) that Bev has not read the story, and is determined, ironically, to protect *her* from its probings of their private life and, more specifically, his role as the dominant partner and suppression of her voice, he is unaware that its effects are soon to become anything but as “temporary” as a mosquito bite.

Accusing Roddy of duplicity in only thinly veiling the real identities of his characters, Gavin wonders whether “RP has interrogated his own use of initials – X, Y, Z indeed, instead of naming his characters. Pathetic. No doubt such cowardice passes for postmodern ingenuity” (130). However, only Roddy, Gavin and Bev themselves are able to recognise the actual people behind the characters in Roddy’s story. In other words, only they can know that Roddy has “used the real” (Wicomb 1987: 172) in much the same way that Frieda is accused of doing by her mother in *You Can’t Get Lost*. Other readers (apart, perhaps, from their fellow residents at the Ligurian Study Centre) will no doubt assume the story to be entirely fictional and therefore not personally damning of its target. Indeed, the fact that Roddy has not revealed the true identities of X, Y and Z suggests not so much “postmodern ingenuity”, as that he wishes his narrative to be judged on the grounds of its literary merit, rather than its truth value or verisimilitude – at least by those readers ignorant of its purchase in reality. Nevertheless, the fiction/reality distinction is troubled by this strategy.

Reaching the climax of Roddy’s story, Gavin encounters the passage in which the narrator describes X hearing voices through the thin partition that separates his and Y and Z’s adjoining bathrooms at the Study Centre:

There, occasionally, above the sound of rushing water he witnesses the lie that is Y’s perfect marriage. He lies rigid in his bath and tries not to splash, the better to hear that voice of reason bark at Z, laugh cruelly at her quiet, timid explanations. She would be cringing at the menace that rises above the angry rush of water. X hears the wife’s whimpers of fear or her clipped anger, and finds himself inventing a dialogue around which to weave a story. More than once the stifling of dry sobs like hiccups. The bathroom is also a place in which to retreat, he supposes, but then the entry of another, the unmistakable No, no, no and the slamming of doors. So much for that smiling marriage.

(130)

This revelation of Y's domineering behaviour and sense of entitlement in intruding into the private space of the bathroom to lambast and humiliate his wife into cowering submission confirms that the marriage is a sham and far from "perfect", despite what Gavin professes. Still, the question arises as to whether the scenario Roddy describes here is entirely fictional or based on 'reality': did he 'in fact' overhear Gavin's verbal and emotional abuse of Bev or has he "invented" it or conjured it up as an indirect riposte to Gavin's supercilious treatment of him? If Roddy's writer, X, finds himself "*inventing a dialogue around which to weave a story*", that is, a story yet to be written in the future, is that story at a further diegetic remove from Roddy's story itself – or are Roddy's story and the narrative X visualises creating one and the same? If the former, X's projected story is hinted at from within Roddy's story which is itself contained within Wicomb's "Trompe L'oeil", and a further layer is added to the Chinese box effect. If the latter, how much of Roddy's story is 'fact' and how much 'fiction' and, more importantly, is Y's overt bullying of Z, as revealed in this passage in Roddy's story, plausible or consistent with other aspects of the characterisation of Gavin and Bev on the primary diegetic level of Wicomb's story: in other words, how realistic *is* it? And what are Roddy's motives, if the scene *is* invented – or Bev's in passing the story on to her husband, if the latter's abuse of her is a pattern she recognises to be all too familiar?

Gavin's fury at what he perceives to be Roddy's manipulation of reality/the truth in his story seems to indicate that he holds Roddy responsible for gross and libellous mendacity, and that there is something in the narrative which threatens his composure and escapes his control:

Gavin sits bolt upright in his chair as the monstrous thing claws its way out of the print and hisses. How low can a writer stoop? He is not surprised to find that the chap eavesdropped on their conversations in the bathroom, but how dare he misrepresent their marriage in this way? How dare he be so cruel to Bev, poor gullible Bev who *wouldn't harm a fly*, who had shown the chap every kindness, and who had listened attentively to his pretentious prattle.

(130-131, emphasis added)

However, apart from the irony that Gavin has earlier accused the story of *not* being sufficiently imaginative or fictional ("Are writers not supposed to use their imaginations, invent, for God's sake?" [121]), the primary diegetic level has revealed that he is guilty of a number of misrepresentations or fabrications of his own here. His so-called 'conversations' are always one-sided and dominated by himself, and Bev had actually enjoyed Roddy's company and did not

find him either opinionated or his talk banal – indeed, truth be told, she would have liked to have spoken to him more, had her husband permitted. Moreover, Gavin leaps to the conclusion that it will be “poor, gullible”, harmless Bev who will be hurt by the story’s exposure of marital disharmony and abuse, though it is an exposure of the perpetrator or tyrant, not the victim. In a sense, then, Roddy perhaps “dares” in order to enable Bev to escape these stifling circumstances in reality, should she ever happen upon his story – whether the bathroom scene is accurate or not. In other words, he dares to be cruel to be kind. Thus, Roddy has extrapolated from “what happens to be within view, or hearing” (121) in public, and what he has (perhaps) heard but not seen in private, to produce a searing analysis of Gavin and Bev’s marriage that reaches beneath the veneer or façade. And, finally, if it is Roddy who has exposed the lie of their marriage, it is Bev who acts on this exposure (because to her it rings true and carries conviction) – she shatters the illusion in an act which shows that she is not ultimately as tolerant or innocuous as Gavin believes her to be: like Ben, she is not above “harm[ing] a fly”.

In regard to the last of the claims above, there is ample evidence on the primary diegetic level of “Trompe L’oeil” of Bev’s fear of Gavin, evidence which confirms that Roddy’s analysis is not a misrepresentation of the reality of her husband’s treatment of her, though it may be a partial embroidering. For example, when Bev first looks up from her crossword to see Gavin shaking his head over the story, she regrets having placed it on his armchair – “she is not in the mood for a diatribe on art and knowledge” (122) – since she knows his antipathy towards fiction, writers, and Roddy, in particular. Examining her motives, she thinks that perhaps she hoped to prove that her interest in Roddy had not been misplaced, since he clearly is highly regarded in the literary world. Subsequently, however, when she looks up again, she notes Gavin’s “frown, the livid colour, and feels *a shiver of terror*” (122, emphasis added) – the deep-rootedness and intensity of her response here a significant index to the dread that his visible anger and disapproval induce in her. And still later, she remembers initially hiding the story from Gavin when he came into the kitchen earlier where she was reading it whilst preparing their evening meal. Then she had intended to throw it out, but for some obscure reason she had actually kept it and quite pointedly left it on his chair, so that now she experiences increasing trepidation: “watching Gavin grow red with rage, she can’t tell why she hadn’t binned it after all” (131). Anticipating Gavin’s furious reaction, Bev could thus have disposed of its cause and shielded Gavin from the story’s exposure of him – in other words, conformed to the protective role the

narrative reveals she routinely adopts. However, it seems that she wanted – whether consciously or unconsciously – to provoke him into confronting the truth she has long been forced to suppress in herself.

At this point “the monstrous thing” that Gavin has uncovered in Roddy’s story “slithers under Bev’s chair where it hides” (131), which suggests that it finds a refuge or is brooding there. Though Gavin thinks to himself that “The young man simply has no sense of morality, of decency” and that he would physically assault Roddy were he to lay his hands on him, the story has hit home: “There is a bitter taste in his mouth. *Fiction, my foot*, he snorts with disgust” (131, emphasis added). On the one hand, and superficially, this dismissal seems to suggest that Roddy’s story is not worthy of serious attention – it is puerile, contrived and without any literary merit whatsoever (not that Gavin would be in a position to judge). On the other, however, the observation is ambiguous, since it inadvertently acknowledges that the work is *not* fiction – that is, that it has a direct relation to reality, a reality that Gavin cannot or refuses to bring himself to recognise.

Ironically, Bev is concomitantly remembering that she had initially imagined that the story would be about “something real” (31), such as Roddy’s mother and her involvement in the struggle against apartheid. At the Study Centre she had found it difficult to broach this topic with Roddy, given her sense of complicity and guilt as a privileged ‘white’ South African: “How often she wished that she could ask about the woman, the revolutionary mother, but it would be too difficult. All she could hope for is that he had not read [her silence] as indifference, that he had understood how she was trapped by all that complicated history” (122). It is thus further ironic that Bev is as much trapped by this political history as by her marriage. She also recalls that Roddy had once enquired about the Eastern Cape, mentioned that Ben had been imprisoned there for a while, and indicated that he intended to conduct some research in that region in the near future and to visit family members whilst in South Africa: “he owed it to his mother, he muttered” (131). Significantly, then, he has experienced a turn-about in his earlier rejection of his mother’s political activism, a repudiation revealed in Ben’s searing flashback in “Neighbours” when she is haunted by Roddy’s words: “Your world is not mine. I can’t live with your past” (99). It seems that he is now able to face both – in much the same way that, in *You Can’t Get Lost*, Frieda feels a sense of obligation to visit her family after she has been distanced from them for many years, and despite her earlier sense that she was estranged from them and

did not share their outlook on life. Thinking back now to her reticence at the Centre and her desire to deflect a possible interrogation from Roddy on her own stance towards apartheid, Bev is again embarrassed at having concocted a feeble distraction which simply deepened her sense of guilt about avoiding sensitive issues: “Why then was she unable to ask about the mother? Instead, she waved at the Czech historian hovering under the great palm tree, who rightly read it as an invitation to join them. Her voice was thick with shame as she said, Poor Pavel, how lonely he seems to be” (132).

Contrary to Bev’s painful sense of implication in a shameful ‘white’ history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, Gavin is unrepentant: indeed, he professes that it is he and Bev who are now being victimised, and that what he perceives to be the venom in Roddy’s story is politically motivated. Initially, his interpretation of Bev’s having passed on Roddy’s story to him is that she must want him to explain the latter’s motives in so misrepresenting their marriage: “Even a cursory look at the story must have given Bev an idea of the thing He understands her hurt, her need for him to explain the ugliness away. That is surely why she has left the paper on his chair” (132). The reader, however, is aware that Bev has read it and is not hurt by it: her silence in the lounge where they are sitting is not a pained one. In fact, earlier she had been on the point of falling asleep listening to the music (126; 130), and hardly seemed distressed – at least by the story. It is Gavin, rather, who has been affronted by it, and his instinctive response is to rationalise Roddy’s motives as a function of the latter’s antipathy towards their kind, rather than to engage with the story’s actual contents: in an “unnaturally calm” voice, he addresses Bev, declaring: “You know why he hates us? Prejudice. We are white South Africans of a certain age, the ready-made pariah” (132). Though, once again, Gavin has asserted the authority of his views, Bev protests against this reflex ascription of anti-‘white’ sentiment to Roddy: “But he doesn’t hate us ... oh no, not at all. We spoke quite a bit in the end, quite frankly of the bad old days, you know” (132). Ultimately, she reveals then, they *were* both able to talk about “all that complicated history” in a way which suggests a sensitivity to the polarisation and potential for friction inscribed in vastly different experiences and backgrounds, and that they were able to respond to each other with understanding and empathy. Nevertheless, Bev’s use of the feeble euphemism “the bad old days” foregrounds the disjunction between her awareness of ‘white’ privilege and the vivid, traumatic memories of that period that Ben cannot quite suppress in “Neighbours” (99).

True to form, however, Gavin refuses to take his wife's opinion seriously: he condescendingly thinks that she is being naïve and lenient (he has earlier in the evening thought that Bev "often got the wrong end of the stick" [119]), and he is not prepared to concede that she might be a better judge of the content of her conversations with Roddy than he:

Which goes to show how innocent Bev is, how simple and good-hearted, so that a rush of affection mingles with the bile in his throat. He would like to place both hands around the chap's scrawny neck and slowly squeeze the life out of him. Not that he cares about the pathetic characterisations, the heinous misrepresentations. No doubt the story has been short-listed as an act of positive discrimination – they have strict quotas in Britain these days and of course South Africa, ever the colonial mimic, is following suit in that direction. The meanness of it all, the folly, beggars belief. Gavin's bile subsides. Why should he care about such badly written nonsense, a story so patently devoid of imagination? He will skip to the last paragraph, check on the direction of the man's malice.

(132)

Having thus sneered at the political correctness and fickleness of literary awards and prizes, revealed his political conservatism, and located a convenient scapegoat to explain away the recognition Roddy's story has been given – that is, as an instance of reverse discrimination, colonial cringe and the slavish reproduction of metropolitan trends – Gavin begins to regain his sense of equilibrium. Moreover, his decision to fast-track to the ending of Roddy's story recalls Drew's question, in "The One that Got Away": "where will it all end?" (50). However, given that the ending of Roddy's story is not in fact reproduced in "Trompe L'oeil", the reader has no idea of how it concludes. Nevertheless, the word "direction" here is significant in relation to the concluding paragraph of "Trompe L'oeil" itself, as with the actual ending of "The One that Got Away". And it prefigures the deliberate manner in which Bev forcibly and decisively expresses her refusal to continue to defer to Gavin or to be a pawn in his world.

If Gavin is self-deluded in his response to Roddy's story and self-protective in his attempts to brush it aside, he is also deceived into complacency by Bev's apparent serenity and quiescence as she listens to the Moonlight Sonata: "He is transfixed by her. The lovely red hair tumbles in luxuriant waves in the lamplight that pools her head. ... Her face is composed, which gives her the beauty she does not quite manage in daylight" (132-133). His arrogance indicates that he has returned to his normal self and is reassured that Bev seems oblivious to the turmoil of emotions that the story has unleashed in him. He is therefore totally unprepared for the unexpectedness of her next movement:

As the music rises to a crescendo, he watches, spellbound, her left hand rise slowly as if in a trance, watches it move mechanically to the coffee table by her side where it falls precisely upon the glass paper-weight, cupping it in the dome of her palm. ... He watches her lift her hand, in balletic slow motion, the weight of the glass palpable in her dreamlike movement. Her arm is raised, stretched well above her head when she leans back and, like the skilled netball player of her schooldays, aims for the centre of the French window, drawn across into a double pane. It shatters into a million pieces as the glass eye crashes into reinforced glass, the mosaic spreading and crackling eerily, and beyond it a full *trompe l'oeil* moon disperses into a million fragments before it skids away across the sky. Her arm is still raised and the glass jewels are still dropping like hailstones out of a clear sky when he rises, crosses the jewel-studded threshold to find some air for his choked lungs from which an eerie sound escapes.²⁹

(133)

In effect, then, what Bev has shattered is not only the window but also the illusion of stability and harmony which is Gavin's reality. Moreover, the materiality or solidity of the moon is no less illusory than that of the glass window or their marriage, since all three appear to disintegrate in this moment, their only remnants "a million fragments", "glass jewels" or shards of what once was "luminous, brilliant, blazing" (123).

The French window Bev destroys has been mentioned previously in the story: installed by Gavin, it is a source of pride and self-congratulation in terms of its improvement of the house and, more specifically, the way in which it enables the garden to appear to fuse with the lounge. As he earlier in the evening thinks smugly to himself:

The rain in winter may be relentless, but in summer there is nothing to beat this house. Last year he had the entire wall replaced with sliding glass doors so that the frangipani and nicotiana waft into the room, and the brook around which the garden is structured babbles cheerfully. Now, as they listen to Beethoven in the twilight, inside and outside slide into each other. He lights a citronella candle, just in case. There is nothing like watching from the comfort of upholstered chairs a pale moon mature in the sky. Just the two of them.

(120)

However, Gavin's self-satisfaction here is premature, since Roddy has become a ghostly third presence in the room (or "irritating in a ... needling sort of way" [119], like a mosquito), and both he and his story have intruded upon the enchantment of the witching hour. Moreover, the music in the background and Bev's abrupt action in destroying the window are synchronous in more than a merely temporal sense, since the crescendo which constitutes the third and final movement of the Moonlight Sonata, entitled "*Presto agitato*", is – as its name suggests – furious

and tempestuous, and ends with rising, rippling chords that are themselves tantamount to sheets of glass shards dropping. Bev's emotions are thus not only revealed in the way in which she acts at this moment, but are also reflected in Beethoven's third movement, described by Charles Rosen as "the most unbridled in its representation of emotion. Even today ... its ferocity is astonishing" ("Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata" n.d.: par. 6). The reader, no doubt lulled or deceived by the universally known title of Beethoven's work, a title which reflects the tranquillity and measured cadences of its opening movement, has complacently assumed that the scene in Gavin and Bev's lounge is one of composure.³⁰ However, the phrase "rises to a crescendo" at the beginning of the passage describing Bev's shattering of the window should have alerted the reader, since it captures Bev's inner turbulence rather than her calm exterior: appearances are once again deceptive.

Like Jane's confrontation with the tableau on the Doulton Fountain in "There's the Bird that Never Flew", Bev's reassessment of herself and her marriage has been precipitated or provoked by a representation or work of art – in this case, both Roddy's story and Beethoven's sonata. The former has forced her to recognise Gavin's mendacity, underlying brutality, and misrepresentations – of others, of himself, and of the reality of their life together, whilst the latter, moving from serenity to turbulence, reflects both her mood and the trajectory of the story as a whole. From this point on, it seems, there is no turning back: things *have* been settled "for good" (124), since Gavin will no longer be able to rely on Bev's acquiescence and docility, or impose his will on hers. And, finally, the fact that he has immediately grasped the implications and finality of her act of resistance or non-compliance is indicated by his acute state of shock and inability to breathe: for once he is speechless and unable to fall back on his usual reflex reactions – intimidation and anger.

In the final short paragraph which concludes "Trompe L'oeil", the narrator describes the night scene which confronts Gavin as he stumbles into the garden: "Outside the sky is spangled with stars. There is also the pointed red light of an aeroplane finding its way expertly across the chaos of light and stars, *straight as a die* as it dips towards its destination" (133, emphasis added). On the one hand, this appears to be a purely realistic evocation of the Cape Town night sky and a plane about to land at Cape Town International airport – its "destination", given that it is "dip[ping]" or descending. In this sense, the phrase "finding its way ... straight as a die" conveys a precise sense of direction, in contrast to Bev's tendency to get lost in the city. Now,

however, she arguably *has* ‘found her way’ by getting away: she has made a move as decisive as that of Mrs Pringle in “Mrs Pringle’s bed”, Jeff Shankie in “Neighbours” and the parakeet/Julie in “Friends and Goffels”. On the other hand, the story’s conclusion recalls an earlier description of how, at the Ligurian Study Centre, Bev spent her free hours down at the beach jotting down “half-finished sentences” in a notebook, after Roddy had encouraged her to attempt to write. She would find herself floundering, becoming frustrated at her messy attempts, and

lying on the dirty beach where the seaweed had started rotting, staring aloft at the growing white line drawn by departing aircrafts, the bright point of a pen driven inexorably across the blue slate sky. Purposeful. Leaving behind a clear message. That was what it ought to be like, she thought.

(127)

The analogy drawn here between the purposiveness of aircraft and of writing or a pen – and, implicitly, between flying/escaping/transcendence and the imagination, and between reality and image/representation – suggests a metafictional reading of the ending of “Trompe L’oeil”, since Roddy has “left behind a clear message” in the story he has written. That is, he has exposed the falsity of Gavin and Bev’s marriage. Bev, in turn, has acted upon this exposé: her aim (both literally and figuratively) in shattering the window which enables inside and outside to fuse (or the illusion of domestic conviviality and harmony to be maintained) is true in both senses – or “straight as a die”. She shatters the illusion which is Gavin’s private reality, just as Roddy has exposed it “in the public domain” (118) in his fiction premised on that reality. Roddy’s story (a representation) has therefore impacted on ‘reality’ in such a way as to suggest that Bev herself has now left behind or created “a clear message”: she *is* now able to ‘write’, to exercise agency and to assume existential ‘authorship’ of her own life. Moreover, both Roddy’s and Bev’s “message[s]” have “reached [their] destination” – Bev and Gavin, respectively, as is evident in the fact that at this point “Trompe L’oeil” ends. End of marriage: end of Gavin’s world: end of story.

5.8 Conclusion

... an appealing interplay ... between past and present, memory and experience, Europe and Africa, fiction and fact, and so on, full of potential.

– the ‘author’-narrator (Vladislavić 1996: 169)

[A] person can’t take nothing for granted no more, what with the world all scrambled up and shrunk down.

– Aunt Trudie (Wicomb 2008: 69)

In the domain of everyday living the effects of inter-personal (and cross-cultural) encounters are uncanny and incalculable.

– D.W de Villiers (2008” par.5)

The One that Got Away demonstrates particularly well the difficulty of reading short fiction cycles both locally (that is, by focusing closely on individual stories) and globally (that is, by simultaneously identifying linkages among and across the stories). However, this hermeneutic process not only operates on a structural or formal level, but also relates to the ways in which the stories in the collection emulate the tension and interplay between the local or provincial and the global in reality – or between site-specific cultures and transnational or intercultural migrations of people, objects, and information. Indeed, it is the latter feature of *The One that Got Away* that has generally received most critical attention, especially in relation to its staging of both colonial (North-South, centre-margin) and postcolonial entanglements. Nevertheless, while Wicomb’s text asserts the reality of hybrid, mobile and cosmopolitan identities, particularly in the contemporary era, it also highlights the fact that migration patterns are “selective” (Muller 2009: 26). In other words, a materialist reading of the collection indicates that migration is, in large part, a reflection of socio-economic and educational advantage – of capitalism and the legacy of colonialism – or, alternatively, of political necessity. Pamela Scully, for example, in her discussion of *The One that Got Away*, takes issue with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism as a celebration of cultural “heterogeneity and difference”, and as an enabling space for “engaged conversation”, and pointedly asks: “How do women, working class people, people who do not speak the language of cosmopolitan conversation get to be at the table in the first place?” (2011: 302). In this regard, it is significant that, in *The One that Got Away*, it is largely working-class characters – such as domestic workers, gardeners, and cleaners (and women especially) – who “stay put” (74), as Margaret expresses it in “There’s the Bird that Never Flew”. By contrast, those who “get away” or ‘escape’ to other contexts do so by virtue of their ability to study, travel or find employment and establish themselves elsewhere. Though

such movements frequently, if not inevitably, entail a sense of cultural as well as physical displacement, alienation and disorientation, in *The One that Got Away*, Wicomb indicates that these experiences are ubiquitous, and no less a feature of the colonial than the postcolonial era. Thus, “home” may indeed be the “best place from which to keep an eye on the world” (74), but being ‘unhomed’ may equally well result in one’s ‘finding oneself’.

Given that the first eight stories in *The One that Got Away* reveal both overt and elusive interconnections, repetitions-with-variations, and recurring characters, motifs and phrases – all of which point to a very deliberate staging of a formal or generic tension between fragmentation and cohesion, centripetal and centrifugal forces, and between discrete units and an intricately interwoven design, the question arises as to what kind of community, if any, the text projects. As Julika Griem observes, citing Gerald Kennedy, “the problem of composition also has to be addressed as a problem of social organization, as in most short story sequences the structure of the sequence projects an idea of communal relations” (2011: 393). Nevertheless, in regard to “Kennedy’s analogy between the formal and social cohesion of a short story sequence”, she claims that “the imagined community of *The One that Got Away* is tenuous” (2011: 394), since the collection “prevents us from imagining the partially overlapping worlds of the individual stories as a continuously expanding communal sphere” (2011: 395). She then cites Dorothy Driver’s view that

[t]he links between the stories, the use of different perspectives from different speech communities, and the dramatisation of the historical and ideological entanglements of its two represented nations – South Africa and Scotland – mean that this book generally interrogates and exceeds the notion of nation more than the earlier ones do.

(2011: 395)

Arguably, however, in *The One that Got Away*, Wicomb has set out not to represent national or even regional communities, however imaginary or fractured, but two particular cities connected by historical and contemporary circumstances and by the lived experience of the author – herself ambiguously both a local and a stranger in Cape Town and Glasgow.

Koichi Iwabuchi claims that “the city and urban spaces can be considered as sites of ‘actually existing’ cultural multiplicity and negotiation that cannot easily be grasped by a methodological nationalism”. This is because “Issues of migration, transnationalization, and multiculturalism” transcend notions of the imagined coherence of nationhood (2008: 551, 552). Similarly, Stuart Hall comments that “the transverse linkages between and across nation-state

frontiers and ... *global/local* inter-relationships ... cannot be read off against a nation-state template” (1996: 250). The notion that the city is a space of “cultural multiplicity and negotiation”, “an experiential and existential space” which paradoxically embodies both “movement and settlement” (Mumford, qtd in Robins 1993: 316) is suggestive here, since it captures the ways in which short story cycles operate in general – and postcolonial versions of the form, in particular. However, it is also especially pertinent to the ways in which Wicomb has projected the entanglements between and within two cities in *The One that Got Away*. Virginia Richter, for example, describes Glasgow as “function[ing] as a topographical *doppelganger* of Cape Town” (2011: 379). Moreover, Wicomb’s intimate knowledge of both cities – revealed in the stories’ attention to detail, and the depth of historical and cultural knowledge which emerges³¹ – conveys a sense of an embodied experience of both difference or estrangement and immersion and ‘belonging’ which traverses two different contexts.

Nevertheless, whilst it might be tempting to view Wicomb’s vision in this collection as an endorsement of “cosmopolitan Cape Town” or “cosmopolitan Glasgow”, the stories themselves belie such easy or wistful ascription: once again, image and reality are at odds. As the narratives demonstrate, “multiplicity and negotiation” give rise to social and cultural conflict, and generate a variety of responses, ranging from blanket incomprehension or well-intentioned but misguided overtures and gestures, to open hostility, confrontation, and racism. Indeed, the prominence of the shibboleth motif in *The One that Got Away* indicates that the potential for openness, accommodation, hospitality and inclusion is weighed up against the reality of intolerance, hostility, and exclusion. As Stefan Esposito remarks, then, the “question of the tenability and limits of community [is] the question of the *shibboleth*” (2009: 211), and “[c]ommunity ... emerges as a rhetorical one in the space of literal multiplicity” (2009: 224). The necessity of cultural interpretation and the inevitability of misinterpretation mean that something will *always* be “lost in translation”, despite the central paradox that “[t]ranslation is both necessary and impossible” (Kamuf, qtd in Wicomb 2006: 147).

More suggestively, however, an alternative and more elusive notion of community *does* emerge in *The One that Got Away* – one *not* defined in regional, national or even urban terms, for that matter. If the collection centrally examines how identities are both configured by ‘roots’ and reconfigured by ‘routes’, then by definition its conception of community must be fluid and unstable, dependent on movement not stasis, changeability not origins. Moreover, as Hall puts it:

the processes of forced and ‘free’ migration ... have become a global phenomenon of the so-called ‘post-colonial’ world. Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as “the changing same”: not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our “routes”.

(1996a: 4)

Hall’s latter sentiments, in particular, recall Julie’s reflections on the rift between herself and Dot in “Friends and Goffels”: “one can’t, after all, expect things to stay the same. There are things ... that she no longer understands; she has been away too long ... [She] does not like to dwell on matters that puzzle her, not here at home where she belongs. Would people not say that she has lost her roots?” She then arrives at a poignant recognition: “Roots – she wonders if that is not at the root of it all” (114). A performative understanding of identity is one shaped by ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots’, by *representations* rather than “endless reiteration”. It also presupposes deracination, and therefore a different notion of community – one which is ateleological and not grounded in origins, roots or essence or premised on inclusion and exclusion and shibboleth-type invocations. In other words, a community which is more accepting of difference.

Given the collection’s focus on how representations and narrativisations produce or construct identity, an alternative, more figurative or reflexive, reading of *The One that Got Away* is suggested above. As the volume makes clear, identities – like representations and narratives – are subject to rereadings, reinterpretations, misinterpretations and re-creation. Thus, the identity established between people and books in the collection implies that the hermeneutics of reading life are analogous to those applied to the reading of fiction and art. Moreover, people – like characters – may be trapped within narratives not of their own making and by discursive regimes which define their identities in essentialist terms. However, in certain of the stories characters are confronted by the option to adopt an alternative script – a confrontation which occurs unpredictably and involuntarily, and which is often precipitated by a stranger, visitor, artwork, or object. Thus ‘getting away’ is equated with ‘writing one’s own story’, and ‘escape’ is possible through a reinvention or recreation of self: to write oneself (literally and figuratively) means to

assume agency and existential authorship or, to recall Driver's terms, to reach a "[small] revolutionary [moment] of fictive self-actualisation" (2010: 528). Ultimately, then, the collection gestures metaphorically towards the notion of a provisional community premised on a transcendence of fixed notions of self – on embracing performativity, alternative scripts and constant rewritings.

¹ An introductory draft of this chapter was presented as a paper at the conference “The Cape and the Cosmopolitan: Reading Zoë Wicomb” at the University of Stellenbosch in April 2010.

² As in *You Can't Get Lost*, the narratives in *The One that Got Away* are obviously inflected by Wicomb's own circumstances, since she has been resident in Glasgow since 1989, and her partner, Roger Palmer, is Scottish and himself a well-known artist and academic.

³ In her article “Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author”, Wicomb comments: “I could say that the impingement of my otherness in Scotland necessitates my homely South African fictions, but it is rather with Ezekiel Mphahlele, for whom there was no executive value in exile, that I identify [and his view that] the compulsion to write about South Africa [is a function of] a tyranny of place [J.M. Coetzee's] formulation of the problem as a bodily act of uttering an unspeakable sentence [‘Once upon a time I used to live in South Africa but now I live in England’] is a suggestive one” (2005: 145). Subsequently, she maintains that, “If the foreigner is marked by her visual salience and the natives’ focus on her difference, the imagined envelope of space will not fit her snugly; she will necessarily have difficulty setting her fictions in that space or in pressing her characters into ill-fitting envelopes that would render them posturally disfigured. It is proprioceptivity that will prevent her from presuming to be a writer in the foreign culture” (2005:152). However, Wicomb considers herself fortunate, as a writer, “in having a personal ready-made topic that is happily legitimated by the postcolonial keyword of transculturation” (2005: 144). In writing about both South Africa and Scotland, in a sense belonging – and not belonging – to both, in *The One that Got Away* she arguably does respond to the questions which are levelled at her transcultural condition, questions such as “why, when you have lived so long in Scotland, do you write about South Africa? When will you set your fictions in Scotland? Can you go on writing about a place in which you do not live?” (2005: 144). These questions obviously require her to choose one or the other identity, rather than to straddle them both. She takes issue with Homi Bhabha's notion of “in-betweenness”, however, commenting that “By invoking a metaphoric field of spatial ambiguity the concept indeed dissolves self-other binaries, but the term also denies the postcolonial writer's corporeality in much the same way as does the foreign culture that hosts her invisibility, and thus legitimizes incivility” (2005: 153).

⁴ Dirk Kloppe comments that “For many years Thomas Pringle was referred to as the ‘father’ of South African poetry in English. It suited the liberal-humanist scholars of the greater part of the twentieth century to place at the head [of this poetry] a man whose Enlightenment ideals, Evangelical values, and Augustan-Romantic style accorded with their own conceptions of the nature and function of poetry. More recent scholarship, however, has come to the conclusion that although Pringle is indeed a seminal figure ... the origin and development of South African poetry in English is more complex and diverse than allowed for by the teleological notion of Pringle as its progenitor” (2000: 370).

⁵ Significantly, Grace's words are later echoed by Drew when, having surreptitiously removed a book from the Cape Town library, he protests to himself: “It couldn't be called theft; perhaps it was to test whether the library alarm system would allow it ... whether the book was a hoax of some kind” (45).

⁶ Kaye Kossick comments on Jamie's poetry in ways which suggestively draw an analogy between the latter and Wicomb's own writing. For example, in discussing the theme of exile and rootedness in Jamie's work, she remarks that "The desire to 'fly the coop' is one of Jamie's primary drives and she embraces her anomalous cultural and gendered positionality with the ex-centric pleasure of the traveler who is everywhere 'not at home'" (2001: 196). She also points out that "Sean O'Brien believes that Jamie is becoming a poet of 'the Condition of Scotland' because of her acute awareness of 'the internalization of shame, the abolition of history, and, in a sense, of the self'. Jamie undoubtedly shares Scotland's vexed post-colonialist inheritance of political negation, territorial insecurity and linguistic violation" (2001: 197). Of the "Queen of Sheba", more specifically, Kossick writes: "Jamie conjures a champion, a queen, half-myth, half-legend, wholly exotic, a lustrous witch of the Levant, whose 'bonny, wicked smile' invites disempowered women to bring down walls, smash through the looking-glass and construct for themselves a new heaven and a new earth on the smoking rubble of Calvin's kirkyaird. ... Sheba substantiates the theme of otherness and excess but defies the anomalous liminality of her positioning by refusing either to be contained or excluded by the dominant order" (2001: 210-211). In conclusion, she notes that "The point as Jamie makes it [in the poem] is not to re-iterate or re-inscribe a reversed hierarchy, but to unpick the locked binarisms that encode and enshrine our hatred of Otherness. Following Bakhtin's assertion that laughter 'demolishes fear and piety' ... Jamie sets the example and invites us to revisit, interrogate, and revision what we most fear in others and in ourselves. We only have to look straight on to see that, like the Medusa of Cixous, Sheba the 'm/Other' is not deadly, is not abject, is not evil. She's brave, she's beautiful, and she's laughing" (2001: 212).

⁷ The detail that the girl has a "lovely sing-song voice" recalls Pringle's reference to the "highly musical" speech of a Xhosa woman he encountered on the first day he embarked in Algoa Bay (see Calder 1982: 4).

⁸ Pringle's account reads as follows: "The ostrich of South Africa is a wary animal, and displays little of that excessive stupidity ascribed to it by naturalists. On the borders of the colony, at least, where it is eagerly pursued for the sake of its valuable plumage, this bird displays no want of sagacity in providing for its own safety, or the security of its offspring" (1835: 178).

⁹ In the later story "Friends and Goffels", the boy who taunts Dot and Julie when they are schoolgirls is named Angus Geddes (102). Subsequently Julie's husband, Alistair, teases Dot when she slips up and calls him Angus: "On you go ... we're all called Angus, we're all the same, some of my best friends etcetera" (108). In "There's the Bird that Never Flew", the name of the author Andrew Geddes Bain is correctly spelt on the first occasion (73), but Jane subsequently refers to "Baine's crass Kaatje Kekkelbek" (76): Alistair's surname, in "Friends and Goffels", is Baines (108). The interchangeability of the names here perhaps suggests that Wicomb is deliberately creating the impression that all of these characters are objectionable.

¹⁰ Belsey refers to the famous legend of the two painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The former painted fruit so realistically that birds were tempted to eat it, whereas the latter painted a curtain that was so true to life that when Zeuxis asked Parrhasius to draw the curtain to reveal the picture behind, the latter attempted – unsuccessfully, of course – to do so. Belsey's discussion of

Parrhasius's painting as a true *trompe l'oeil* is premised on Jacques Lacan's seminar, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*" (1995: 257).

¹¹ Mariangela Palladino and John Miller suggest, however, that Kaatje's "'matter-of-fact intimacy' with the man standing next to her ... may be more complex than Wicomb's story seems to allow, given the [International] Exhibition's situation between successive Boer wars. If the white farmer is read as a Boer, his evident relationship with the woman asks uncomfortable questions (from a British imperialist point of view) of the 'white' presence in South Africa, and about Boer identity as such. Besides their apparent age difference, the Boer and the 'native' girl exemplify two distinct social statuses and ethnicities in contrast to the harmonious equalities of the fountain's other imperialist groupings. Representing a man and a woman from equivalent socio-economic contexts and age groups, the statues portraying Canada, Australia, and India are uncomplicated by racial differences" (2011: 415).

¹² Given that the Doulton Fountain exists in reality, the question arises as to which interpretation of or response to the ostrich and Khoi woman in the South African tableau is 'accurate': the historical Ellis's conception (to which we have no access), the fictional Mr Ellis's vision – based on his understanding of the Pringle text, Margaret's dismissal of grand imperial monuments which disregard the contributions of the working classes, Grant Fotheringay's erotic fantasies, and Jane's notion of "miscegenation ... celebrated" (71). The range of interpretations ultimately suggests that it is the *actual* reader (who may or may not have seen the Doulton Fountain or photographs of it) who will decide which s/he favours. Nevertheless, the fact that Jane's interpretation is the final one encountered in *The One that Got Away* and is positioned towards the end of the story "There's the bird that never flew" (after which no further mention of the fountain is made at all), arguably privileges her reading above the others.

¹³ Mungo ('dear one') is the name given to St Kentigern by St Serf, who brought him up after his mother, Teneu/Thenaw/St Thaney, was cast out by her father for having been seduced by Owain mab Urien and having become pregnant as a result ("St. Kentigern Mungo" par. 6).

¹⁴ A third verse to the song reads: "Daar's 'n perd waarme jy mense nie kan skiet [repeated three times] / Dis die kanon van die Gunston van Oom Piet / Dis die kanon, dis die kanon, dis die kanon van die Gunston van Oom Piet".

¹⁵ Also, of course, an abbreviation of "Andrew" – a popular Scottish name for boys.

¹⁶ McCloy, an American writer of detective fiction, lived from 1904 to 1994. *The One that Got Away* was published by Gollancz in 1945, and *is* set in Scotland.

¹⁷ Joyce's protagonist in *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, steps out in Dublin on 16 June 1904. The fact that a day of momentous political significance for South Africa and a famous literary or imaginative 'event' in Ireland should coincide – a fusion of the historical and the textual, the South and the North – seems to intrigue Wicomb, since this is registered elsewhere in her fiction. For example, Jane Poyner points out that, in *David's Story*, "The amanuensis celebrates the 'Day of the Revolution of the Word' [2000: 35], having noticed that Joyce's Bloomsday coincides with the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto uprisings (the student protests against Afrikaans in schools). She is pleased by a coincidence linking the politicization of language during the protests with Joyce's untameable prose" (2011: 326). And Driver notes that, in the same novel, a

further connection is established between coloured cuisine in the Cape and that favoured by Joyce's best-known character: "the animal's 'inner organs' [kidneys] enjoyed by the coloureds of the Cape also make up Leopold Bloom's breakfast on 16 June 1904" (2011:101).

¹⁸ Though the gender and identity of this writer-figure are not revealed, it is tempting to read him/her as an incarnation of the actual or implied author, Wicomb or 'Wicomb'. I have therefore elected to use the female pronoun in referring to this figure, rather than use "s/he". Furthermore, in "Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author", Wicomb insists on the "postcolonial writer's corporeality" and visibility (2005: 153), and suggests that the "foregrounding of the authorial is indeed a departure from the usual traffic with subjectivity but that, instead of staging representation, such resurrection of the author is also concerned with asserting an ethics of authorial responsibility in an ostentatious coupling of author and narrator" (2005: 150). Read against these claims and the fact that Wicomb is, of course, the author of "The One that Got Away" in its entirety, it is possible to read the 'voice', if not the content, of the final section of the story as in some sense approximating her own.

¹⁹ In "Setting, Intertextuality and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author", Wicomb paraphrases Barthes: "To recap Roland Barthes; intertextuality, a condition of all writing, strikes a death blow to the author and so liberates the reader from author-centred, theological meanings" (2005: 146).

²⁰ As Carli Coetzee points out, "This is the place on the shelf where Wicomb ought to be. And, of course, were a reader to go to the shelf in this very same library, there would now also be a book called *The One that Got Away*" (2010: 568). In fact, the online Dennistoun Library catalogue indicates that there are no fewer than five authors who have produced books with the title *The One that Got Away* that are currently held in the library's holdings. One of these authors is indeed Wicomb. Moreover, the name "Wickham" is not only a homophone of Wicomb, but it also might refer to the actual novelist, Madeleine Wickham, who uses the pseudonym Sophie Kinsella.

²¹ Rimmon-Kenan draws a distinction between the implied author and the narrator: "the implied author is only a construct ... its defining property (as opposed to the narrator) is that it 'has no voice, no direct means of communicating' if it is to be consistently distinguished from the real author and the narrator, the notion of the implied author must be de-personified, and is best considered as a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice (i.e. a subject). It follows, therefore, that the implied author cannot literally be a participant in the narrative communication situation" (2002: 89). I have therefore chosen to term the intradiegetic author in "The One that Got Away" the 'author', author-figure or first-person narrator, in order to differentiate between this persona (who *does* speak and have a voice within the text) and the implied author of the story as a whole. The question of this 'author-figure's' relation to the real author, Wicomb herself, is more vexed, however, and cannot be established via the text itself. Moreover, in the coda to "The One that Got Away", the first-person narrator literally speaks to or addresses Drew, though he cannot be the narratee of this section of the story. In other words, "the diegetic level [of the coda] is narrated [in the first person] by an extradiegetic narrator [the 'author'], the hypodiegetic level [the story before the coda] by a diegetic (intradiegetic) [largely third-person] one" (2002: 93), though the narratee in both cases is the actual reader and, in the latter, also Drew.

²² “Goffel” is an extremely offensive term for a coloured person whose physical characteristics supposedly reveal socially stigmatised and recidivist racial genes, stereotypically identified in relation to skin colour, hair type, and shape of nose and lips.

²³ The prominence of the motif of (not) judging a book by its cover, and Dot’s reflections on the topic in “Friends and Goffels”, inevitably draws attention to the cover of Wicomb’s own text, which in the Umuzi edition, features a solitary ostrich – literally the “bird that never flew” – on what appears to be a stretch of sand surrounded by dune scrubland. Though an ostrich does, of course, feature in two of the stories in the collection, the narratives are not centrally about that bird in any literal sense, since it functions as a symbol of the exotic and erotic. Arguably, however, the solitariness of the ostrich on the Umuzi cover suggests that it is a fugitive or escapee, despite its flightlessness, and in this sense it relates to the motif of ‘getting away’. The cover thus both does and does not give “potential readers” a clue to “what the book is about”. However, the New Press edition, published in 2008, features two small birds in flight, whereas the Five Leaves edition of 2011 reproduces a close-up photograph of the figures in the South African tableau on the Doulton Fountain, together with a brief commendation by J.M. Coetzee. (Amusingly, one edition, advertised on the Amazon.com site, has a mock cover, the bottom two-thirds in green, and the top third in beige, with a scroll across the top. The legend “Note: This is not the actual book cover” appears in fine print at the bottom.) In a sense, these differences in cover design prove the point that covers are interchangeable and somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, the three “actual book cover[s]” do contain some reference to the themes and motifs in Wicomb’s collection, though they are hardly exhaustive or even adequate “hermeneutic pointers”.

²⁴ If the woman-caller was indeed Fiona McAllister, Dot’s version is deliberately distorted in more than one respect, since the reader knows, from “Boy in a Jute-Sack Hood” and “Disgrace”, that Fiona is a redhead (a detail of which Julie herself could not be aware, since she had not personally seen the caller). Moreover, given Fiona’s radical politics, it is unlikely that she would be guilty of the type of unconscious prejudice Dot ascribes to her here.

²⁵ According to Todd McGowan, the film “provoked the ‘Lost-in-Racism’ campaign that encouraged Academy Award voters *not* to vote for [it] in any category” (2007: 58). In the event, it went on to win four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director. It won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay, too.

²⁶ Ben’s cousin describes Reuben as “that boy who came along just as [Ben] thought she was finished with children” (95). Grace describes her younger daughter as “her late-lamb, her Jane” (27).

²⁷ The initials may also, however, be a sly reference on Wicomb’s part to her partner, Roger Palmer.

²⁸ The word “blaze” derives from the Old English for “torch”. The sports jackets labelled blazers were originally so named for their bright colours: the prototypical blazer was designed in 1825 for the members of the Lady Margaret Boating Club at St John’s College, Cambridge, and was a vivid scarlet, the club’s colour. Subsequently other boating clubs followed suit in adopting similarly flamboyantly-coloured jackets. By the 1880s, however, the colours had become more

subdued, and navy blue dominated. As an item of men's clothing, blazers are especially associated with elite universities and public schools, the navy, and sports clubs – both in Britain and elsewhere (“Nautical by Nature” par. 3).

²⁹ In the Five Leaves edition of *The One that Got Away*, this passage and those that follow it are conspicuously indented and separated from the rest of the story by a space, which suggests that the final scene of the story may or may not have occurred ‘in reality’. Though these passages *are* indented in the Umuzi edition, the space from the left-hand margin is not as noticeable. I have therefore chosen to interpret the final scene ‘literally’, given the details it contains which have previously been mentioned in the ‘story proper’ – Beethoven’s sonata and the French window, in particular. However, if these passages are read as introducing another diegetic level into the story, the question of who has written the scene is similar to that raised earlier about who ‘authors’ Jane in “There’s the Bird that Never Flew”.

³⁰ The name by which Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp-minor is generally known is not that given to it by its composer, that is, *Sonata quasi una fantasia*, but was conferred upon it by German music critic and poet Heinrich Friedrich Ludwig Rellstab five years after Beethoven’s death. Rellstab compared the opening movement’s effect to that of moonlight shining upon Lake Lucerne in Switzerland (“Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight’ Sonata” n.d.: par. 4).

³¹ Sue Kossew, for example, notes that “Wicomb has suggested that the [short story] form ‘offers itself ... to the harshness of cultural fracture’ it is this concept of fracture, fissures and crossing borders that is central to the later collection of linked stories. For while each story occupies its own space, there is a movement across and between them that replicates the journeys, between South Africa and Scotland in particular, that have characterised Wicomb’s own life and subjectivity in the years between the two publications” (2010: 578).

Conclusion

[T]he page of history is wide open for all sorts of stories to be written.

– Ndebele (1991: 52)

For the South African writer there has been the ready-made general question of whether there is anything to write about after the demise of apartheid but that foolish enquiry has necessarily petered out with the passage of time.

– Wicomb (2006: 144)

I have argued at some length that the short fiction cycle is an intrinsically hybrid genre, displaying a tension between individual or discrete stories and a holistic or “whole-text” (Griem 2011: 394) design. Though the cycle evinces a spectrum of formal possibilities, it is this inherent dualism which is its most defining feature – a dualism which means that the genre is particularly well-equipped structurally to embody the tension between the individual and the collective, or between the separate identities of diverse characters and the larger community they comprise. In its contemporary form, however, the cycle has displayed a distinct shift from a conventionally realistic portrayal of localised regions or enclaves and their inhabitants to an increasingly self-reflexive awareness of the fictional nature of identity construction and of notions of community and place.

In the South African context, an early emphasis on regionalism and community in short story cycles written in English modulated into an acute sense of the ways in which apartheid attacked both individual integrity and communal cohesion, and a reliance on social realism to reflect and engage with the socio-political contortions of this pernicious system. Though the shift to a reflexive mode surfaced here later than elsewhere, significantly it occurred when writing was experiencing a sense of crisis in the late eighties – a period which witnessed a growing awareness not only of the representational difficulties posed by a country experiencing a literal and figurative state of emergency, but also of the politics of representation. In particular, collections such as Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* and Vladislavić’s *Missing Persons* constituted a new direction in South African short fiction writing, by displaying a sophisticated reflexivity, adopting an innovative approach to the potentialities offered by the short fiction cycle form, and evincing a sceptical or irreverent stance on the representation of South African identities and communities. They also crucially introduced a sense that it might be possible to re-invent our selves and ourselves in less binarist ways than in the past. Thus, whilst they predated the optimism which accompanied the ushering in of a constitutional democracy in 1994 – and the growing realisation that such reinventions and imaginings were about to become

a reality – they nevertheless heralded an upsurge in cross-generic fictions that continued this trend towards hybridity, indeterminacy, discontinuity and provisionality, utilising the cycle genre as a *focus imaginarius* through which to refract a changing country. Writing specifically about coloured identity in the post-apartheid period, Wicomb succinctly articulated the sense that a recognition of non-essentialist conceptions of identity – of intersecting and contending identifications and entanglements, rather than bifurcations and incommensurable rivalries – was required in the ‘new’ South Africa:

Instead of ... fabricating a totalizing [identity], ‘multiple belongings’ could be seen as an alternative way of viewing a culture where participation in a number of ... micro-communities whose interests conflict and overlap could become a rehearsal of cultural life in the larger South African community where we learn to perform the same kind of negotiations in terms of identity within a lived culture characterized by difference.
(1998: 105)

Arguably, the very nature of collections of interlinked stories encapsulates this notion of the social space, but the form is especially apposite to a representation of the conflicts and possibilities which characterise a society previously deeply segregated by racially defined notions of community and identity – a country transforming itself into a unified but culturally diverse democracy.

As I have attempted to highlight, reading short fiction cycles and simultaneously doing justice both to individual stories *and* the collection as a whole exerts a contradictory pressure on the reader, since of necessity an unresolvable if productive tension pertains between the claims of local versus global, or synchronic versus diachronic interpretations, and the “composite meanings” (Kennedy 1988: 14) produced differ from those associated with either a novel or an independent short story. A similar process also pertains to individual identities and collective ones, since self-evidently a focus on one obscures the other. Thus, while certain cycles may convey a strong sense of a community persona, and of temporal and topographical unity, others may centre on individuals fundamentally isolated from a sense of community and one another. The spectrum within the form ranges from cycles which appear so obviously integrated that they approximate, but are not quite, novels, to those which seem so fragmentary that the links among the stories remain elusive. Thus, for example, the coherence installed via a single narrator-protagonist and a chronological timeframe may gesture towards an implicit *Bildungsroman*, as is the case in Matlou’s *Life at Home* and Wicomb’s *You Can’t Get Lost*. Nevertheless, the

teleological nature of the novel of development is undermined in both of these texts by the discontinuities among the stories, by temporal disjunctions and contradictory plotlines and scenarios which cannot be recuperated within the conventional notion of a unitary self. Significantly, too, in both texts, the focus on a single protagonist's isolation from or scepticism towards a sense of community grounded in a regional identity conveys a sense of dislocation and 'unbelonging' – of being 'unhomed'.

By comparison, Magona's story series, "Women at Work", employs a multivocal and mock-oral mode of narration to capture a sense of collective voices and of the surrogate community comprised of a support group of domestic workers estranged in a 'white' suburb. Yet, as I have demonstrated, this notion of communal solidarity is undermined, since the women's monologues are framed within the essentially singular narrative of Atini – a narrative which highlights her anguish and unrelieved suffering at her separation from her original home and family. Moreover, the linguistic and literary sleight of hand involved in Magona's project subverts the illusion of oral immediacy and authenticity, since ultimately the text can only approximate but not reproduce the reality of the spoken voice addressed to a listener or a community of listeners.

At the other pole of the cycle spectrum, the fragmentary and seemingly discrete narratives in Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* initially suggest that the volume is unintegrated, and the fragmentary quality of the stories conveys a sense of the similar disjunctiveness of South African society. But recurring characters, motifs and intratextual echoes gesture towards elusive connections – connections which refuse to stabilise meaning, however. Moreover, the satiric and self-ironising stance adopted and the blatant absurdity and black humour in the collection provide an apt projection or vision of a society-in-extremis – one on the brink of imploding under the weight of its own manic policies.

Published two decades after *You Can't Get Lost*, Wicomb's second volume of interlinked stories, *The One that Got Away*, provides a sense of the greater mobility and fluidity established post-1994, and suggests that identities themselves are now more mobile and less defined solely in narrow terms by the local. In a sense, the collection thus bears out Jane Poyner's claim that, "With the end of apartheid, cultural commentators anticipated new directions in South African fiction that would place its narratives on a world stage, taking account of global concerns" (2011: 313). *The One that Got Away* reveals a dense network of "composite meanings" and

entanglements, and illustrates particularly well the difficulty of disentangling the one from the many – or vice versa. My contention has been that this text’s metafictional focus on the performative and narrative nature of identity construction implies that ‘stories of self’ can be re-written, re-interpreted and re-created. In other words, if identities are fluid and performative, rather than fixed, static or essentialised – or are no longer grounded in ‘roots’, but conceived as a function of ‘routes’ – an alternative conception of community is possible.

If, as Kennedy argues, the cycle form is intimately and imaginatively bound up with notions of community – with composite fictions and fictions of community – it is clear that the unresolved and productive paradox inherent in the genre’s dynamic tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces discursively captures what David Carroll terms “the conflictual diversity of the social space itself”, and a heterogeneity of “petit récits” that refuse to be unified and synthesised (1987: 72). Carroll points out, for example, that “[t]he social space may not be one, but it is not made up only of random, unconnected entities either”, and that “[t]he social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread” (1987: 80, 86). From Carroll’s perspective, hegemonic paradigms of the self and identity have been deconstructed and dissolved under the conditions of postmodernity and postcoloniality, and the “Bakhtinian dialogised subject ... is hardly a stable, unique, unified origin from which or in terms of which to construct a unified concept of society” (1987: 86). He comments, however, that, in Lyotard’s terms, this is no cause for regret: “Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction” (qtd in Carroll 1987: 86). As Carroll explains, “What has been lost then is the desire for an original subject and a justification for society coming from ... some ... form of metadiscourse; what has not been lost is the desire for community, for sociability” (1987: 86-87). In my assessment of the cycle’s fictive representation of “community in diversity” (1987: 103), I have sought to demonstrate that it enacts or rehearses the processes at work here, whilst staging its own fictional limitations. Thus, while the short story sequence may provide a critique of the lack of community in contemporary culture, it *simultaneously* intimates that community may be reconstituted or ‘re-imagined’. In Kennedy’s words,

The arranged collection lends itself to this cultural work perhaps because the short story form – with its inevitable circumscription of relations – isolates characters from a larger

social order, whereas the sequence, with its inevitable breaks between stories, mirrors the gaps or barriers that partition social reality along lines of class, gender, religion, education, or ethnicity. Rejecting the novelistic illusion of a continuous experiential world, the sequence constructs instead a segmented fiction of separate lives and seemingly discrete problems. *Yet such collections also reveal the commonalities – the shared predicaments, desires, and anxieties – that allow us to glimpse the possibilities of community inherent in the text.*

(1995: 213; emphasis added)

In microcosmic form, then, the cycle can manifest the tension between narratives of inclusion and exclusion, unity and disunity, interdependence and independence, community and isolation, dialogism and monologism, at work in culture generally. Moreover, this tension is inherently paradoxical – an “open, unresolvable conflict of representations” (Carroll 1987: 81) – and cannot, by definition, be foreclosed upon.

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