

Nature, Narrative and Language in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister
Artium in the Faculty of Arts at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan
University**

January 2010

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The landscape and the language are the same,
And we ourselves are language and are land.
- Conrad Aiken 1977: 67

i. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my supervisors Mary West and Neville Smith; especially to Mary for her understanding towards my project and her much appreciated attempts to guide me through my labyrinthine imaginings. Thanks also to Ronnie Bowker for reading and commenting. Thank you to my wonderful friends and family for all they have done to encourage my writing and for the time they have allowed me to complete this work. Particularly I want to thank my very special friends Rambo and Skye for keeping me constant company while patiently waiting for our daily walk. I want to express my continuing gratitude to my mother for her love and support that enriches my life every day, as well as thank my father for listening calmly. To my life partner, William Pinnock, thank you for recognising my ideas, for the hours (“always the hours”) invested in our discussions and your presence throughout our friendship—life seems more beautiful when you are near.

ii. ABSTRACT

Conrad Aiken's observation that the "landscape and the language are the same, and we ourselves are language and are land," depicts the material terrain we inhabit as necessarily informing the language we speak. An important corollary to Aiken's observation is language itself writes the land. I argue that the binary division between culture and nature, as well as the attempts to universalise languages, abstracts discourse from necessary situated knowledges, alienating the land from the language it embodies. The severing of culture and nature as implied by Aiken's observation is indicative of humanity's progressive isolation from the land through language, as well as from their embodied natures. Remoteness results in what Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Agaat* (2006) terms a "poverty disease" (2006: 251). Michiel Heyns confirms that the character Agaat relates this barrenness of spirit to her "diagnosis of spiritual ills through human dealings with the soil" (2009: 132). I illustrate the novel's revitalisation of language as an act of ecological recuperation that alleviates dis-eased consciousnesses by potentially recognising, valuing and responding to situated knowledges revealed in land narratives.¹ My argument therefore uncovers the challenges that the novel directs at an unreformed and universal Western² rationalist discourse that continues to appropriate nature as resource for a hierarchical culture.

To this end I use critiques of colonialism that reveal culture's assimilation of the Other,³ especially the work of Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway and Nicole Brossard. I use these critiques to analyse self/Other oppositions that Western culture constructs and patrols to maintain a defensive culture of domination. I show how nature and all those feminised and marginalised by Western discourses that hierarchise culture have been consistently overlooked and under-represented by those who purport to 'control' the environment and privilege the symbolic language as the carrier of culture. *Agaat* provides fruitful terrain for the reflection of marginalised voices; voices that confirm the environment and language as necessarily both feminist and social justice issues.

By combining this literary analysis with a wider eco-theoretical enquiry I position my study in an interdisciplinary field of investigation. This is in response to the damaging consequences of the inherited and fragmentary nature of specialisation. In addition, by detailing literary and feminist

¹ My preference for the hyphenated usage of the word 'dis-ease' signals the equation between discomfort or unease and disease or sickness.

² While I am concerned over emphasising words such as Western and Apartheid by capitalising them, I have decided to retain this form so as not to diminish the magnitude of the effect these discourses have had on global and regional communities.

³ When referring to Others I, like Karen J. Warren, capitalise the term. Warren defines Others as all earth Others subjected to "unjustified domination-subordination relationships" (2005: 252).

responses to Western patriarchal discourse and its impact on nature, I show the ways in which literature negotiates the possible re-conceptualisation of our collective cultural imagination. Van Niekerk's novel offers a sustained critique of the oppressive Western conceptual frameworks that have dominated Others through hegemonic constructions. Furthermore, I investigate what this writer might offer as an alternative to systems of social, political and ecological control and the violence it inflicts.

Key Words

Marlene van Niekerk

Agaat

South African *plaasroman*

Situated knowledges

Remoteness

Intentional recognition stance

Powerful infidel heteroglossia

Trickster and Apartheid cyborg

Others/Othering

I. Introduction: Language and Nature, Theory and Practice

i. The *Plaasroman*: From Edenic Pastoral to Nowhere Land

In *Agaat* (2004, trans. 2006) Marlene van Niekerk is largely preoccupied with the farm and farming, and how language and narrative construct notions of nature, land, farming and community. This is evident in the chosen epigraphs of the book, one of which is the *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*. In this dissertation I examine Van Niekerk's work in re-imagining our material terrain. *Agaat* has been seen to take "the *plaasroman* by storm ... and in some ways it deconstructs all those things that are sacred to [it]" (Heyns in De Kock, 2009: 138). De Kock asserts that this rethinking of C.M. van den Heever and the nostalgic *plaasroman* in general, is consciously set up through the intertextual references to other farm novels listed when *Agaat* subversively knocks them off a bookshelf (2006: 14).¹ He says that "Van Niekerk, and now Van Niekerk and Heyns, have ransacked the South African pastoral and reworked it with a complexity that few South African novels in any language have yet achieved" (2007: 18). I am particularly interested in examining the implications of Van Niekerk's reworking of the pastoral and the *plaasroman* to discover what it might mean in eco-theoretical terms.

In order to assess the significance of *Agaat* in South African literature it is important to situate the novel in the history of the *plaasroman* in particular, and more generally writing that treats the subject of humanity's response to the material world. J.M. Coetzee's examination of the *plaasroman* (farm novel) in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) details how bucolic nostalgia for an Afrikaner return to the land might be traced back to W.J. Keith and the "urban-rural dissociation of sensibility" of the 1880s in England (1988: 75).² This dissociation, a result of economic and technological changes spurred on by the rapid urbanisation of the rural population during the Industrial Revolution, signalled the dying way of life of the rural community. In contrast, Coetzee argues that in the United States, pastoralism was different because there was no European peasantry and land was plentiful. Coetzee goes on to detail how literature of the land flourished most prolifically in the German *Bauernroman*,³ peaking in the years 1929-1938 when

¹ Titles listed include works by Edward Abbey, William Faulkner, Etienne Leroux, Dalene Matthee, Nadine Gordimer, Elsa Joubert and Olive Schreiner. Further, reference is made to J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* and Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine*. Certain titles are self-reflexive references to aspects in *Agaat*, such as *Forty-three Years with the De Wets*, which is the timespan of the relationship between *Agaat* and Milla.

² Coetzee refers to Keith's *The Rural Tradition: A Study of the Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (1974: 150).

³ The on-line English-German dictionary translates *Bauernroman* as rustic novel. Refer to www.dict.cc/german-english/Bauernroman.html.

almost two hundred texts in this genre were published. In South Africa he notes the influence of the *Bauernroman* in the work of C.M. van den Heever. The English pastoral influence he detects in Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* (1926) and *The Little Karoo* (1925) with their settings being "too little distinguishable from the village," in relation to Olive Schreiner's anti-idyll farm in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which is "too little distinguishable from nature" (1988: 63). Coetzee writes that Smith's Afrikaans contemporaries more explicitly identified the "crisis on the *platteland*" as a "conflict between peasant and capitalist modes of production" (1988: 78). This provides an important point of departure to examine Van Niekerk's rewriting of the *plaasroman* in *Agaat*.

To counter capitalist culture, Coetzee argues that Afrikaner writing adopted a pastoral longing, especially during the 1930s when "fearing the end of a boere-nasie (nation of farmers)," when people left the land to find employment in cities, "Afrikaans novelists elaborated models of the garden-farm as bastion of trusted feudal values" (1988: 4). Jennifer Wenzel extends Coetzee's analysis through emphasising the dilemma brought about by the 1994 elections, where the "pastoral promise of the return to the land was countered by the political imperative of the return of the land" (2000: 95). The Land Restitution Act of 1994 resulted in changes to territorial imperatives that are reflected in the contemporary *plaasroman*, which no longer serves as a bastion for traditional values, but increasingly as a space for inquiry and revision. Ampie Coetzee identifies the revival of the *plaasroman*, in *'n Hele os vir 'n ou broodmes* (2000), as indicative that this narrative is one of the most important expressions of discourse on land and power.⁴ He writes that land and identity in the *plaasroman* thus expands into a far larger discourse: one of political power, and of texts as part of the construction of hegemony (2000: 14).⁵

Neither J.M. Coetzee nor Jennifer Wenzel explores the gendering of the land and nature and the consequences of dualisms, such as culture/nature and reason/emotion, which separate and privilege the conceptual over the material. This omission is an important lack that needs to be addressed and it is one of the major preoccupations of my dissertation. The privileging of culture over nature and reason over emotion seems a result of Western knowledge production and its

⁴ The title of this work might be translated as 'a whole Ox for an old breadknife.' All Afrikaans translations in this work are my own.

⁵ The Afrikaans reference from *'n Hele os vir 'n ou broodmes* reads: "Die herlewing van die plaasroman in ons tyd bevestig dat hierdie narratief een van die belangrikste uitings binne die diskoers oor grond en mag is. Die Boer het vir lank saam met die grond geleef, en lank gestreef om een met die grond te word; sodat die persepsie bestaan, of bestaan het, dat grond en identiteit een is (...). Grond en identiteit in die plaasroman kring dan uit tot 'n veel groter diskoers: van politieke mag, van tekste as deel van die konstruksie van hegemonie" (2000: 14). *The revitalisation of the plaasroman in our time indicates that this narrative is one of the most important within the discourse of land and power. The farmer has lived on the land for a long time, and long endeavoured to become one with the land; therefore, the perception stands, or has stood, that land and identity are one (...). Land and identity in the plaasroman extends into the more encompassing discourse: of political power, of texts as part of the construction of hegemony.*

reticence to perceive and value processes of material production. Critics such as Margaret Daymond confirm this lack of interrogation in relation to gender in particular, noting that “the issue of power has been focused on race and has so seldom been gendered in South African writing” (1996: xix). Though Daymond is right to identify the necessity of attending to issues of gender, I argue that it is also necessary to consider the work of ecological recuperation as an inter-related oppression. In this respect, Sue Kossew in her analysis of white feminist responses to the South African farm novel, highlights the ways in which it provides the textual space in which to examine the “intersections between gender, race and power-relations [that] are inscribed by national mythologies and are therefore open to reinscription over time” (2004: 121).⁶ She is interested in the phenomenon of women writers exploring issues including “the links between race, class and gender; the sense of being out of place; the idea of ownership of land; and the privations, for some of the women protagonists, of taking on the role as farmer’s wife” (2004: 124).

It may be argued that Van Niekerk’s rewriting of the *plaasroman* is not undertaken as an attempt to bring closure to a generation of South African writers who ab/used the farm novel to retain aristocratic landownership privileges. Rather, as Heyns argues, Van Niekerk’s novel “makes further writing possible to a tradition that has been changed through [her] intervention in it” (In Felman, 2007). This is to suggest that Van Niekerk’s novel has challenged not only preconceived notions of the romanticised, nostalgic *plaasroman* genre, but has also emphasised the importance of working in solidarity towards a grounded and fertile ecological consciousness for long term survival in post-Apartheid South Africa. To this end, I argue that Van Niekerk necessarily adapts what J.M. Coetzee refers to as a “lineal consciousness,” which suggests a preoccupation with an individual’s “submergence” (1988: 83-88) in the family line, into an inclusive and accommodating ecological consciousness. Coetzee’s analysis of the South African *plaasroman* also details how the Europeans, the so-called bastions of civilisation, were threatened by what they perceived as the white colonists’ degeneration into a ‘primitive,’ ‘wild’ and ‘brutish’ state, similar to that of the Hottentots. This resulted in Africa being defined not as a Garden, but rather as an anti-Garden.⁷ In this instance the Afrikaner settlers’ idleness threatened the European justification of their privileged right to the land, as the settlers were not proving they were utilising the land more efficiently than the indigenous nomads. This threat was countered by the emphasis in *plaasromans* on the pastoral romance of the

⁶ Kossew’s *Writing Woman, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction* (2004) concentrates on Anne Landsman’s *The Devil’s Chimney* (1998), but also refers to Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, Pauline Smith’s *The Beadle* and *The Little Karoo*, Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* and Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* to provide context.

⁷ A discursive formulation Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) explores in the characterisation of Kurtz’s descent into madness under the influence of ‘uncivilised’ Africa.

cultivated garden versus the garden in decay (wilderness), which was meant to legitimate Afrikaner Nationalism's 'civilising' claim to the land.⁸

Agaat, amongst other preoccupations, is about a movement away from the pastoral pledge of the Promised Land to what Gerald Gaylard in *After Colonialism* (2005) calls "nowhere land" (2005: 145). Gaylard's concept of "nowhere land" is linked to "dramatic landscapes outside of the temperate, modernised North," which he compares with "domesticated sets of realism and with the pastoral/Edenic." In contrast, "nowhere land" symbolises wilderness and trespass instead of unfulfilled Edenic promises of paradise, and could therefore be seen as not only actual place, but also the "spatial analogue or image of mutating subjectivity" (2005: 145). The Tradouw Mountains, translated as "the way of the women" (2006: 33), is the spatial analogue that *Agaat* must re-narrate in order for Milla to recognise alternative narratives that are too often hidden by overarching grand narratives. At the same time, the importance of negotiating the ways in which these multiple narratives are discursively woven together needs to be examined and recognised.

In this dissertation I argue that Van Niekerk's novel emphasises the significance of finding the good that exists in everything, which resists the active/passive split, as is dictated by the prevalence of binary language in contemporary discourse. It thus becomes apparent that Western privileging of culture above nature underpinned and reified the colonists' claim to the land. Here, it is the dualistic division into particular gender/nature coded forms that are particularly problematic. Val Plumwood, whose work I introduce in more detail later in this introduction, argues that in order to counter our "contrived blindness to ecological relationships" we require a "deep and comprehensive restructuring of culture that rethinks and reworks human locations and relations to nature" (2002: 8). The underlying meaning of *Agaat*'s inscription on Milla's tombstone, "And then God saw that it was Good" (2006: 681), perhaps celebrates the *recognition* of multiple narratives that were previously hidden from view and which might assist survival in the future. The privileging of a global capitalist culture, where the concentration on productivity supports long-standing insensitivities and rationalist distortions, results in the illusion of autonomy. Importantly, a consequence of this illusion is that most people have become remote from the material processes they rely on for survival, which has direct implications for the *plaasroman*'s claim to a close connection with the land.

⁸ This right was institutionalised by the Native Land Act of 1913 that limited African land ownership to indigenous reserves with communal land tenure administered by traditional leaders. Approximately 80% of South African territory was reserved for white people who made up about 20% of the population.

ii. Van Niekerk's Project: Rewriting the Land Covenant

Marlene van Niekerk's *oeuvre* of Afrikaans fiction has offered a sustained investigation of white Afrikaner South African identity in crisis. In her novel, *Triomf* (1994, trans. 1999), the biological and cultural imperatives in the mythology of the Afrikaner 'Chosen People' are satirised as a story of incestuous "monsters" (Van Niekerk, 1999: 463) among poverty-stricken Afrikaner Railway people: the poor Afrikaner people that the Apartheid system was meant to uplift.⁹ *Triomf* offers a clear indictment of the hierarchical claim of inherent originality, or purity of cultures and people, or as Kwame Appiah puts it, "cultural purity is an oxymoron" (2007: 113). Although *Triomf* is set in an urban landscape it has been analysed in terms of the *plaasroman*. Richard Samin argues that Van Niekerk's satire is aimed at undermining the *plaasroman* tradition that idealised the farm as a pastoral haven (2000: 23). In "Renegotiating the land covenant" Laura White asserts that in *Triomf* Van Niekerk suggests the need for a new land covenant that includes men, women, non-human animals and land as part of an interrelated community that respects difference. Through combining the idea of an ecological community with a variant of Coetzee's "lineal consciousness" (1988: 83-88), White argues that Van Niekerk provides a "powerful response to the myth of the Promised Land and might enable a positive revisioning of the land covenant" (2007: 94). This observation holds particular relevance in my investigation of *Agaat* and its examination into the possibilities of re-negotiating an inclusive land covenant that changes its focus from conquering to accommodating narratives, which I argue this novel gestures towards.

Van Niekerk's short story, "Labour" (2004), was originally published as "Klein vingeroefening rondom die nosie van hibriditeit"¹⁰ in the subsection dealing with hybridity of the 2001 anthology entitled *Briewe deur die lug*.¹¹ This story explores white guilt as a concomitant of the devaluation of black labour upon which white settlers relied before and during Apartheid. "Labour" is a response to the *plaasroman*'s silence in negotiating black labour and the settlers' reliance on labour other than their own; a simple fact which radically undermines their 'legitimate' right to the land. Coetzee has noted that "[b]lindness to the colour black is built into the South African pastoral" (1988: 5). "Labour" portrays the difficulty of moving beyond the normalisation of

⁹ In *Triomf*, Lambert discovers his incestuous heritage as an adult when finding pictures and letters from his grandfather in a locked draw. An excerpt from his grandfather's letter reads: "Try to keep them off each other's bodies, Mol, in God's name send them away to different places if you can. So an end can come to you know what. Only a monster will be born from this sort of thing. I've heard from the others, more and more such cases are happening among us Railways people" (1999: 463). Subsequent to Lambert's discovery of his status as 'monster,' he kills Pop, stabs Mol, breaks all of Treppie's fingers and his own leg.

¹⁰ This may be translated as 'Little finger exercise on the notion of hybridity.'

¹¹ This may be understood as 'Airmail,' or even 'e-mail.'

privilege that whiteness has historically implied. The Afrikaans title of this story emphasises the necessity to address hybrid identities in order to escape the restrictive discursive formations that dictate pure origins. Mary West notes that the narrator of “Labour” is the barely disguised figure of Marlene van Niekerk, who autobiographically explores her inability to remove herself from discourses that define her as she is caught “between sympathy and guilt ... in a gulf of space not yet bridged in post-apartheid South Africa” (2009: 176). West argues that although Marlene, the narrator, has not been able to remove herself from the entitlement connotations of “Madamhood” by the end of the short story; “the conflicting discourses rendered ... through Van Niekerk’s satirical exposure of her own complicity ... unsettle[s] the conventional authority of white suburban domesticity” (2009: 187). In other words, to acknowledge one’s complicity is painful, but it might be accomplished a little less painfully with humour, a trajectory I explore further in this dissertation. As West argues “even [a] compromised ‘half and half’ laugh is perhaps one of the few effective antidotes for the poisons that white mythologies have engendered” (2009: 185).

Agaat, like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (1956), details a world without salvation; a world where impossible promises create a farcical yearning for consolation from something that will never appear. This seems to necessitate an adaption of our discursive formulations in order to ensure that our time is not spent merely waiting for what might never happen. Both these tragi-comic stances encourage a metamorphosis that allows for the recognition of fallibility, which I argue Van Niekerk depicts as “an urgent call of nature” (2006: 304). Van Niekerk, much as Beckett does, uses comedy to alleviate the existential tragedy depicted.

In *Agaat* Van Niekerk changes her setting from the urban location in both *Triomf* and “Labour” to the farm, Grootmoedersdrift, in the Western Cape. While her previous works of fiction have dealt with traditional aspects of the *plaasroman*, such as patriarchal inheritance and privilege, the usage and productivity of land and the textual silence over black labour, it is in *Agaat* that she most actively goes about rewriting this genre, concentrating on those areas that patriarchal culture has feminised and devalued. In Francois Smith’s interview with Van Niekerk in *Die Burger*, entitled “Plaas se ander kant: Patriargie se ommekeer egter nie so eenvoudig,” the author reveals that Grootmoedersdrift is used in deliberate contrast to the well-known Stellenbosch farm, Grootvadersbosch.¹² However, as the title of the interview suggests, the undermining of patriarchy in the traditional *plaasroman* is not a simple process. This ‘Other side’ to patriarchal power is evident in the narcissism and pathology of an oppressed matriarchy depicted in the novel through Milla and her

¹² The title might be translated as: “The other side of the farm: The undermining of patriarchy not so simple however.”

Other self, Agaat (2004: 8).¹³ Heyns notes that the novel “swivels on that Foucaultian idea of caring as an exercise of power” (In Felman, 2007), a concept which I analyse in the text by questioning colonialism’s ‘civilising duty,’ the “murky realm” of mothering (2006: 679), nursing and farming. Furthermore, I examine the novel’s interrogation of how one protects oneself not only from one’s teacher and mother, but also from one’s students and children who mime lessons back.

Agaat emphasises the interdependency of biocentric or life-orientated communities and replaces the search for purity and paradise (underpinning Apartheid and its policy of separate development) with the concept of hybridity in farming and nature. J.M. Coetzee has argued that the “movement of the prototypical *plaasroman* was steadily towards the revelation of the farm as a source of meaning” (1988: 88). However, what is revealed is that Apartheid ideology did not take the implications of farming seriously, deploying it as an objectified linguistic construct rather than an embodied site of meaning creation. Ironically, the land which originally defined the Afrikaners as a *Volk* (people) became abstracted and remote. The novel’s main focaliser, Milla De Wet, through whose narration we experience events, voices concern over a turning away from specific embedded knowledges contained in the “old knowledge” systems to an abstracted capitalistic focus on mass monoculture (2006: 75). The change in focus from the growth of the nourishing terrain in sustainable mixed farming to the hierarchising of productivity that, in the name of efficiency, weeds out diversity, results in an abstracted consciousness. This dis-eased consciousness is *remote* from the processes it relies on for survival, which the novel refers to as a “poverty disease” (2006: 251).¹⁴ These old knowledge systems are depicted in the novel as fostering a greater diversity of species, hereby increasing the earth’s carrying and corrective capacities. This, in turn, allows the land to flourish. Therefore, these inherited knowledges are rendered essential, as “the wheel always turns” (2006: 75) and thus survival depends on one’s corrective potential; that is the interdependent capacity to adapt and evolve, as opposed to the singular ability to hold onto outdated traditions.

¹³ The Afrikaans reads: 'n Eenvoudige ommekeer van die patriargie wat in die tradisionele plaasroman 'n gegewe is, is dit ook nie, al is Grootmoedersdrift 'n regstreekse teenhanger van die bekende Swellendamse plaas Grootvadersbosch. Die matriargie wat hier voorop staan en in Milla en haar dubbelganger, Agaat, gesetel is, staan in die teken van 'n besonder manipulerende soort narsissisme, 'n psigopatologie wat veral sy besondere nuanses kry binne 'n oppasser-kind-verhouding.’’ *An uncomplicated undermining of patriarchy, that is a given in the traditional plaasroman, it is not, despite Grootmoedersdrift being a direct contrast to the well-known Swellendam farm Grootvadersbosch. The matriarchy foregrounded by Milla and her second self, Agaat, depicts an exceptionally manipulated narcissism, a pathology that despite its particular nuances exists in a nurturer-child-relationship.*

¹⁴ Val Plumwood defines various types of remoteness, which she refers to as spatial, consequential, temporal, technological, epistemic or communicative remoteness. These detail the different ways in which the privileged decision makers are divorced from the consequences of their actions, which prevents liberal-capitalist societies from dealing effectively with ecological problems (2002: 72-74).

iii. *Agaat* in Translation

[A] translation is a licensed trespass upon a rich but relatively unknown territory, upon which the translator has to report back to people to whom the territory is not only unknown but foreign. The translator ... may not have explored this particular tract of land, but he is intimately acquainted with the territory, its flora and fauna, its inhabitants and their habits and peculiarities. He must give as accurate an account of this territory as he can, to enable his audience to understand something of this territory in their own terms but *without losing the sense of foreignness*. If all countries looked the same, nobody would travel.

(emphasis in original, Michiel Heyns 2009: 125)

While Marlene van Niekerk is the Afrikaans author of *Agaat*, it is important to note that this dissertation offers an analysis of the English translation by Michiel Heyns, who was awarded the Sol Plaatjie Award for Translation by the English Academy of Southern Africa in 2008.¹⁵ The judges of this award noted in their citation that the translation was the most taxing because of the “extensive linguistic and literary complexities” that Heyns negotiated with “masterful dexterity” (2008).¹⁶ Leon de Kock suggests that in Heyns’s translation students “would find a complete [literary] study on its own” (2007: 18). De Kock emphasises the ways in which Heyns extended the literary allusions and that Van Niekerk supported him in the “reengineering of reference in her own novel,” which she felt congruent with its explorative and innovative style. In this same interview Van Niekerk acknowledges Heyns’s skill in recognising and translating subtexts and notes that he “brought a whole lot of erudition to the text, and took it into his structures and machinery.” Dedi Felman has written that Heyns’s pairing up with Van Niekerk resulted in the creation of a “masterpiece” for the English-speaking world about which “those in the world of translation usually only dream” (2007). In 2007 *Agaat* became the first text in translation to win the Sunday Times Fiction Award. Heyns thanked both the organisers and Van Niekerk for their support in what he metaphorically referred to as bringing Cinderella out of the closet in terms of their recognition of the role of the translator.¹⁷

Leon de Kock, who translated Van Niekerk’s novel *Triomf*, called *Agaat*, a “masterpiece” that in literary measure is equivalent to Joyce, Marquez and Tolstoy (2007: 18).¹⁸ Charlie Hill argues that internationally *Agaat* has been compared to Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (2002), but that this novel is not imbued with the fatalism and minimalist style often associated with Coetzee, and that the book will

¹⁵ The focus of this dissertation is the English translation of the novel and the critical enquiry that extends beyond the language and context in which it was originally written. Therefore, I do not engage, except where relevant, with the critical reception of Van Niekerk’s work in Afrikaans literary studies.

¹⁶ This information was found on www.news.book.co.za/blog/2008/08/29/michiel-heyns-awarded-the-sol-plaatjie-prize/.

¹⁷ Information available on www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGxxhHM2IRA.

¹⁸ Van Niekerk was the recipient of the following awards for *Agaat*: The University of Johannesburg Prize (2005); the CL Engelbrecht Prize for Afrikaans literature (2007) and the prestigious Hertzog Prize from the South African Academy (2007). The text, published as *The Way of the Women* internationally, was shortlisted for the United Kingdom Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2008).

perhaps be regarded as a landmark South African novel for a different reason (2007: 58). While it has been generally acknowledged, as De Kock here affirms, that *Agaat* has “been written twice ... [f]irst in Afrikaans, then in its extended English version,” the English text manages to retain the feel of Afrikaans. De Kock says that this is achieved through unusually accented English words (2007: 18), which Heyns, in an interview with De Kock and Van Niekerk, compares to Gerald Manley Hopkins’s sprung rhythm (2009: 145). In an article entitled “The Call of Afrikaans” in the *New Statesman* Hill writes that “even in translation the text is a definitive affirmation of Afrikaans; a language that remains, inescapably, one of the mediums for the truth[s] of South Africa” (2007: 58).

Heyns affirms this observation when he says that his translation was focused on allowing the reader an understanding of the linguistic and cultural universe of the source text, rather than adapting this universe to the reader’s (2009: 127). This is especially important given that Van Niekerk has created an archive for Afrikaans myth that was perhaps in jeopardy of being lost or forgotten. Mary West writes that “there would be some kind of poetic justice in an Afrikaans writer becoming the twenty-first century’s most widely read white South African woman writer, given the English claim to liberalism and universality” (2009: 188). This is an important achievement in a ‘post-colonial’ world struggling against the cannibalising effect of globalisation on indigenous cultures.

Nicole Brossard suggests that an inclusive stance to marginalised histories requires an “openness” in language that reflects multiple experiences “above and beyond the thousand times narrated, impossible to circumvent, and ever worrisome binary opposition from which we construct our relation to the world” (2005: 198). She then asks if people would choose the “pressure cooker of a single language” or whether they would prefer to “proceed in the tension of nuances, differences, ambivalence” (2005: 198). Her statement, which encourages sensitivity to earth Others, is similar to Donna Haraway’s concept of “heterogeneous well-being” (1997: 95) that celebrates ambiguity and permanently partial connections. For Brossard meaning is contained in the lives we invent, the “aura” of words that resonate and form “sequences of truth” (2005: 213). The ability to read the Other requires reinvented languages and Heyns’s ‘unusually accented English words’ are merely one of the narrative techniques used to challenge the essentialisation of language.

iv. Narrative Perspective

One of the most demanding aspects of *Agaat* is its experimentation with narrative perspective and narrative temporality. Leon de Kock asserts that *Agaat* “is ambitious far beyond any ordinary measure, and it is loaded with a narrative energy that you will not find—at the same pitch, or in the same range—in the work of any of the big names in South African writing” (2007: 18). In my

analyses I argue that Van Niekerk consciously and explicitly encourages an anti-teleological approach to narrativisation. *Agaat* incorporates anti-establishment thought that resembles Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) and their sequel *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). They confirm that rhizomatic thinking, that is capable of imagining around centralised structures, is not teleological, and while it is structured by dialectics it is not organised by moments of synthesis (2001: 1596). They believe that the partnership between psychoanalysis and capitalism results in attempts to *control* desire, not liberate it. In their view literature can potentially transform the dominant discursive terrain by allowing for "becoming" as opposed to "being" (2001: 1595).

Through weeding out the metaphor of the traditional family tree (representative of all knowledge being rooted in the original) and replacing it with the metaphor of the rhizome (capable of growth anywhere along its length), Deleuze and Guattari attempt to re-think knowledge production as a process of mimesis that inscribes the Other, but refuses to be inscribed; a thought dominant in the West since Plato. This refusal to be inscribed is suggested throughout *Agaat*, a novel that explicitly supplements patriarchal lines of inheritance with matriarchal ones, enabling Van Niekerk to map lines of flight from paralysing orders through "deterritorializing" official culture before "reterritorializing" it elsewhere (2001: 1596). However, the process of deterritorializing culture is not achieved easily, as the pathology-driven oppressed matriarchy in the book illustrates. The metaphor of the traditional family tree resembles trees to the extent that we trace only patriarchal lines of inheritance. Once we include matriarchal lines, the family map resembles a rhizome. This introduces Donna Haraway's trickster mode of thinking that is capable of simulating politics and producing offshoots in unanticipated directions, a branch of feminist theory I explore in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

The story is focalised almost exclusively from Milla's perspective. Yet the character *Agaat* dominates the story. Despite the obviously limited focalisation in *Agaat*, the book is ultimately concerned with dynamic power relations and how, over time, monolithic, mountain-like conceptual frameworks are eroded into the polyvalence of trickster subjectivities and linguistic shifting sands. Van Niekerk deliberately denies *Agaat* any focalisation other than through her dialogue with Milla and Jakkie. Yet her powerful presence in the text forces the reader into what Gayatri Spivak calls counterfocalisation.¹⁹ Spivak defines counterfocalisation as the political moment in a text that transforms a "tendency" into a "crisis" (2002: 22), for example, the tendency to cannibalise the resistances and responses of the colonised. This inevitably denies the Other agency and, by

¹⁹ See Spivak's "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching" (2002) for her exploration of counterfocalisation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2000).

extension, the ability to narrate their own reality. Spivak's "crisis" encourages the reader to counterfocalise from the perspective of the marginalised, which then might reveal the reader's complicity in perpetuating oppressive conceptual frameworks. In *Agaat* these marginalised perspectives offer the potential of demonstrating Milla's wounded attachment to victimhood that results in her inability to undermine publicly 'isms' of domination, specifically racism, sexism and naturism.²⁰ Van Niekerk's narrative techniques allow the reader to counterfocalise the Other, in this case *Agaat*, as a legitimate subject of knowledge. This "indeterminate sharing" between reader and writer is what Spivak regards as "sacred" (2002: 18). The reader is then able to imagine being figured in the web of the Other, which is a vital undertaking encouraging empathy, and affirms power as a negotiation inextricably linking all involved.

The experimental nature of the narrative perspective reinforces this. Apart from Jakkie's narration framing the text, the narrative is focalised through Milla's fragmented perspective and encompasses first-, second- and third-person narration. Every chapter begins with Milla's first-person present narration, which details the forty days before her death from "bulbar paralysis" (2006: 155) at the age of seventy. Sixteen of the twenty chapters are followed by Milla's second-person narration, where she remembers her past in the present. Milla's diary excerpts form the third narrative in each chapter, while the fourth narrative is comprised of italicised poetic stream of consciousness sections.

The forty days before Milla's death mirror Christ's journey into the wilderness and represent a flight from so-called civilisation where, through *Agaat*'s weaving of meaning, the familiar is rendered unfamiliar in order to offer alternative perspectives. The order of the other narrative modes varies slightly within specific chapters, which I explore in greater detail in Chapter Three. The second-person narration works as a distancing technique, which provides the reader with insight into how and why Milla's perspective alters over the years; it refers to what Van Niekerk has called a "court of conscience" (In De Kock, 2009: 143).

The diaries contain narrative peculiarities, such as a marked lack of punctuation and the tendency to abbreviate. This phenomenon suggests Milla is not capable of telling the whole story and that she has left gaps and silences. This in turn points to an incoherent account of her history, which is fraught with personal uncertainties. The diaries become the journal of *Agaat*'s occluded history, which Milla selfishly tries to cordon off as a "separate chapter" to prevent Others from being exposed to mistakes Milla might make (2006: 653). It might be argued that the diary writing sometimes works as a palliative, similar to the increasing dosages of tranquillisers Milla takes, which

²⁰ The term naturism was coined by Karen J Warren and refers to "the domination or oppression of non-human nature" (1990: 125).

deter her from standing up for her daughter by retaining the public/private dualism. Milla's diaries record the time from Agaat's abduction until Jakkie's desertion from the South African Defence Force, when she stopped writing as she feared what someone might read into them. In contrast to the diaries, the stream of consciousness sections express the focaliser's thoughts omnisciently, which emphasises the discontinuity existent between her dreams and desires, and her actions and spoken words. These sections offer a clear example of Milla's inauthentic life suffering under the burdens of oppressive conceptual frameworks.

Similar to Spivak's position on counter-focalisation, which encourages an understanding of Others, this contradictory collection of narrative modes that forms the novel's system of languages, collects raw materials that encourage multiple readings and an appreciation and understanding of difference. The relentlessness of Milla as the sole focaliser, as well as the various narrative modes used, illustrates Milla's painful negotiation of contradictory dreams and desires in a world that is dictated to by an abstract sterile purity indoctrinated as Apartheid policy. Van Niekerk confirms that it was essential that Agaat be denied focalisation, precisely because she is the source of consciousness in those who see and try to interpret her; she is the "ghost of the other characters' desires and anxieties" and despite being domesticated she remains Other.²¹ That the novel is ultimately an investigation into the self's own desires and anxieties is suggested by Milla, who summarises Agaat's central narrative positioning as:

a pivot ... a kingpin, you'd felt for a while now how the parts gyrated around her,
faster and faster, even though she was the least. (2006: 378)

Here Agaat's potential to impel the masters to re-think their entitlement is evident, which reinforces the interpretation that domination and resistance are inextricably linked, and that power is attained through a process of negotiation.

²¹ This is revealed in the interview with Francois Smith in *Die Burger* on 7 September 2004. The Afrikaans reads: "Dit was vir Van Niekerk essensieel dat Agaat nie 'n spreekbeurt kry nie. 'Sy bly die Ander, die geheim, en ek kon haar nie laat fokaliseer nie. Sy is die bron van die selfverstaan van ander wat h  r sien en probeer interpreteer. Sy bly 'n projeksie, 'n spook van al die karakters se verlange en vrees. Selfs so domesticated soos sy is, bly sy die Ander.'" *It was essential for Van Niekerk that Agaat does not speak. "She remains Other, the secret, and I could not allow her to focalise. She is the source of the self understanding of others who see her and try to interpret her. She remains a projection, a ghost of all the other characters' desires and anxieties. Even as domesticated as she is, she remains Other."*

v. Ecosensitivity in South Africa and the World

In the ecological parallel to the *Titanic* story, we have reached the stage in the narrative where we have received the iceberg warning, and have made the remarkable decision to double the engine speed to Full Speed Ahead and go below to get a good night's rest. A change of course might be bad for business, we might have to slow down, lose time. Nothing, not even the ultimate risk of the death of nature, can be allowed to hold back the triumphant progress of the ship of rational fools.

(Val Plumwood 2002: 1)

In the last four or five decades it has become increasingly urgent that all scholarship turns its attention to the escalating ecological crises; and to realise that science alone, and the rationalist discourse informing it, may not offer the only answers. What is also needed is a sustained engagement on the part of human and social sciences with the task of re-conceptualising our cultural imagination. The task might suggest alternative signifying practices to living with a logic of domination that marginalises too many earth Others on this planet. Val Plumwood, in her seminal work, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002), uses the metaphor of the *Titanic* to think through our current ecological situation. However, Plumwood emphasises that this liberal-democratic myth is reversed in the real ecological world, as the millionaires won't go down with the ship—and it will certainly not be the women and children first to the lifeboats as the ship begins to sink. It is therefore important to know the composition of the passenger list, who the decision-makers are, and under what dominant illusions the decision to move 'full speed ahead' is taken. Plumwood is explicit in recognising that the illusion of Reason's absolute power and remoteness from nature may take some time to deconstruct, but its demise is necessary and unavoidable in order to change the *Titanic*'s course. This is because the ultimate illusion is that the privileged will be protected from the consequences of destroying nature (2002: 236). Indeed, there are no lifeboats on this putative headlong journey towards the iceberg.

Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* is a *Titanic* literary novel in both size and scope, encouraging critical work on diverse issues. My argument focuses on the ways in which *Agaat* challenges essentialising structures in language that allow culture to appropriate nature as a resource. The novel illustrates these damaging frameworks, all too often depicted as civilising missions, as colonising nature both inside and outside the body. In Milla's case this is illustrated by the increasing poverty of her spirit, as embodied in her paralysis. *Agaat* is the catalyst in the novel to reinvest language with material meaning and who challenges Milla's acceptance of oppressive structures. That Milla allows *Agaat* to be turned into a servant emphasises the novel's interrogation of passengers who are too often one's instructors of "*amenability*" (italics in original, 2006: 35), encouraging one to continue camouflaging the privileged navigators. The novel illustrates, in a particularly South African context,

that an inherited Western patriarchal discourse indoctrinates complicity in paralysing frameworks. Although there are many other readings of the novel that are just as important, it is apparent that a major part of the text is preoccupied with the farming or cultivation of land, and by extension the material and spiritual erosion of those who farm it under the dominance and tyranny of Western reason and patriarchal discourse.

This study thus investigates Van Niekerk's representation of the *plaasroman* genre and the interaction of human and non-human beings in the landscape. The social interplay of voices allows for the articulation of alternative perspectives that challenge oppressive discourses. I employ Val Plumwood's argument that a striving for the reduction of remoteness from political and ethical systems is necessary for an "intentional recognition stance" (2002: 177). This stance is a "counter-hegemonic" practice of "openness and recognition [that is] able to make us aware of [the] agentic and dialogical potentialities of earth others" (2002: 177). By regarding the "world as active subject" (Haraway, 1991: 199) one challenges reductive anthropocentric and production-orientated cultures that privilege and hyper-separate culture from nature and reason from emotion. As I argue, this privileging seems a result of Western knowledge production and its reticence to perceive and value processes of material production. The ecological crisis, a consequence of this reticence, encourages my belief that meaning should not exist independently of the senses. While language has the potential to make us discursively and linguistically remote from the material world, an intentional recognition stance, or an ethical awareness of the consequences of this remoteness, might remind us of the need to continually challenge our alienation in language.

To recognise oneself as discursively and linguistically mediated from the world does not simultaneously imply that we are only discursive or linguistic. Indeed, language entertains the capacity to remind us that we are nature, and therefore part of the material or objective world. The ability to speak does not create the nature/culture division, as otherwise the cultured pole would consist of a lot more diversity. Rather, culture seems to be defined by the 'knower's' ability to understand and agree with what is being said, which again foregrounds the importance of an intentional recognition stance that is respectful to Othered perspective.²² While our articulation of the desire to overcome hierarchised polarisations might highlight these divisions, it is at the same time an admittance of the urgency of such aporetic endeavours to render language and narrative more accommodating. These endeavours might alleviate stress on the biocentric community through encouraging dialogical communication that supports the idea that the "the world is an intrinsically dynamic interconnected web of relations" (Eckersley in Buell, 2005: 137). Haraway's "powerful

²² Importantly it should be remembered that women, slaves, children and all non-human animals have historically been placed on the nature rather than the culture side of the dualism.

infidel heteroglossia” (1991: 181) incorporates a Bakhtinian dialogics of language and emphasises the interplay of social voices and the diversity of relationships in existence, which offers a potentially effective challenge to this remoteness. This encourages an interaction with, and the recognition of, numerous speaking voices including, most importantly, that of land and nature within signifying practices. In South Africa, while our decision-making policy is determined by the narrow parameters of economic realities and oppressive conceptual frameworks, we continue to ignore environmental issues, such as those outlined in Section 24 of the South African Constitution.²³ This legitimates an irrational set of responses that allows the “triumphant progress of the ship of rational fools” (2002: 1).

The re-imagining of our linguistic terrain might start by ensuring that the stories we tell are ecologically wise. Such a re-imagining would suggest a revision of patriarchal language and concepts in order to challenge a conquering mindset that promotes discrimination, rivalry and the violence inherent in logics of domination. While I argue for accommodating rather than conquering narratives I acknowledge that because language is based on a process of selection accommodating narratives are also premised on exclusion. However, it is an ethical imperative that we become self-reflexively aware of our narratives’ exclusions and are therefore able to interrupt rather than suspend disbelief in conquering narratives that encourage isms of domination. In particular I use Nicole Brossard’s radical feminist theory, detailed in *Fluid Arguments* (2005), to show that *Agaat* offers fertile ground for the re-imagining and revision of language. Such re-visioning might enable those Othered to ritualise their presence in language. In Brossard’s terms, this requires one to “*unthink the symbolic*” and so-called rational responses to the ecological crises (emphasis in original, 2005: 251). I read *Agaat* as demonstrating the ways in which an intentional recognition stance, open to the wishes, hopes, dreams and fears of all earth beings, might alter patriarchal trajectories. Brossard asserts that the ability to say “‘I want’—desire—makes the body work” and encourages exploratory dreams that might extend ethical playing fields (2005: 72).

In *Agaat*, the abducted daughter of the same name is brought up in isolation, as if her life were a “separate chapter” (2006: 653).²⁴ The boundaries of Agaat’s world are delimited by the gates of the farm, Grootmoedersdrift. Milla, her capturer, becomes concerned over Agaat’s potential to deal with the outside world from which she has been deliberately excluded. Kwame Appiah suggests

²³ Section 24 of the South African Constitution details how we shall not interfere in ecological systems so as to prevent pollution and ecological degradation. However, the development of a consciousness that regards it as a basic human right to appropriate nature’s resources erodes our material reality: our own natural bodies. This allows for constructions, such as Coega, the Industrial Development Zone in Port Elizabeth, which research has shown might irreparably damage our current ecological systems.

²⁴ Milla’s pathological indoctrination by patriarchy, which renders her incapable of rewriting her presence in language, represents women as abducted daughters.

that in order for us to live together as a “global tribe,” essentially a human community that sees no “conflict between local partialities and a universal morality,” we require a revitalisation of ethics that he refers to as “cosmopolitanism” (2007: xi, xvi). This term was coined in the fourth century BC by the Cynics who were wary of custom and tradition. “Citizen of the cosmos” (2007: xii) therefore expands the community to include all communities, which works against nationalism and other isms of domination. Plumwood warns that while it is vital to stress the importance of reducing remoteness and emphasising links to place, complete autarchy or small-scale self-sufficiency “may actually increase other kinds of remoteness ... including ecological relationships” (2002: 76). Milla’s isolation of Agaat reflects the damaging consequences of separate development or ‘Apartheid,’ which is shown by Milla’s apprehension over Agaat’s ability to cope with the “motherless dust,” the ecological damage surrounding the farm (2006: 538-541). Therefore, at the end of Milla’s life she acknowledges “inexpressible regret” (2006: 540) over raising Agaat in “isolation” (2006: 591) and by extension perhaps calls on all South African readers of the book to recognise the inexpressible regret of Apartheid. Communities that are self-enclosed epistemologically and economically (both in terms of knowledge production and material wealth) do not provide inhabitants with transparent knowledge of ecological relationships and dependencies.

Appiah suggests that moral disagreements are most fundamental when concepts are introduced that Others don’t have, suggesting that at these times “the struggle is not to agree but just to understand” (2007: 47). This discursively leads to habits of coexistence, countering the reification of nationalisms and separatisms, because “conversation doesn’t have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another” (2007: 85). Appiah’s call for the revitalisation of ethics is at least partially imbued in *Agaat* as an attempt to re-imagine the Truth and Reconciliation process.²⁵ For me, *Agaat* presents an argument for liberation rather than salvation; a movement towards affinity rather than unity; towards recognition rather than reconciliation; towards possibilities rather than restrictions. Truths cannot always be reconciled, but rather truths can be accommodated in order to ensure survival. This altered trajectory appreciates and respects difference, which allows for conversation and agency rather than dualistic discourses that emphasise prediction and manipulation.

²⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was implemented in 1996 and worked towards reconciling oral histories with official History in the new South Africa’s transformation process. Milla’s death in 1996 is recorded as occurring subsequent to her recognising, but too late for reconciling, Agaat’s silenced history. The novel, therefore, suggests that the recognition of alternative perspectives begins dismantling master narratives and accordingly histories are emphasised as changing, living processes that require recognition as a necessary precursor to the possibility of reconciliation.

vi. Ecological Feminism as Criticism

In fact, I think that redefining literary criticism has nothing to do with criticism. It has to do with changes in reality, changes in our way of perceiving reality. It has to do with our desire to make space for what we value the most as individuals, as individuals wanting society to shape itself in such a way that we can breathe in it.

(Nicole Brossard 2005: 23)

Through an ecofeminist textual analysis of *Agaat* I examine the effects of oppressive conceptual frameworks and show how the novel might offer alternatives. In order to do so I have incorporated the body of work that has come to be known as ecological feminism. This term was first introduced by Francoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Feminisme ou la mort* (1974) to describe women's potential to bring about an ecological revolution (Warren, 1994: 1). Karen J. Warren defines ecofeminism as:

an ecological and feminist position that takes gender as a starting point for providing analyses of and solutions to the unjustified domination of human and nonhuman Others. These 'Others' are those who are excluded, marginalized, exploited, devalued, or naturalized—who become 'Others'—in systems of unjustified domination-subordination relationships (...). 'Others' includes both 'human Others,' such as women, people of color, children, and the poor, and 'earth Others,' such as animals, forests, the land. (2005b: 252)

I argue that Van Niekerk, through the characterisation of *Agaat*, reinvests the more-than-human world with active agency, which entertains the potential for this ecological revolution. This challenge means that, as Sandra Harding argues, “the social location of the knower” be taken into consideration in “understanding and assessing epistemological claims” (In Warren, 2005a: 146). I incorporate the work of Donna Haraway, who advances Harding's theories, to address the problematics of Western notions of objectivity and conceptions of nature, discursively gendered as female, as a passive object of study. This involves Haraway's alternative, pluralistic, context-dependent view of knowledge, what she calls “situated knowledges” (1991: 198). Situated knowledges

require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of “objective” knowledge (...). A corollary of the insistence that ethics and politics covertly or overtly provide the bases for objectivity ... is granting the status of agent/actor to the “objects” of the world (...). Accounts of a ‘real’ world do not, then, depend on a logic of ‘discovery,’ but on a power-charged social relation of ‘conversation.’ (1991: 198)

Haraway's call for a “conversation” rather than “a logic of discovery” requires a re-thinking of the “conquering gaze” (1991: 188), which is so much a part of how knowledge production has emerged in Western discourse. This requires a doctrine of “embodied objectivity,” in other words, situated knowledges rather than remote reasoning. To this end in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) she creates her figure of the cyborg defined as a “hybrid creature,

composed of organism and machine” (1991: 1). This is a metaphor for the “disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” adapted to the social order of Western capitalism (1991: 163). Haraway theorises a turn towards a cyborg feminism that negotiates “historical and political positionings and permanent partialities without abandoning the search for potent connections” (1991: 1). Van Niekerk is clearly interested in Haraway’s cyborg figure as a potentially disruptive dissident force. This is evident because Agaat is referred to as an “Apartheid cyborg” (2006: 677) in the book, a hybrid creature capable of negotiating Apartheid’s programming to reinvest intentionality in nature.

Related to Haraway’s cyborg metaphor is the work of Val Plumwood. She uses the metaphor of a web in order to enable a liberatory politics. She invokes bell hooks’s Womanist conception of feminism as “retaining a separate identity but as necessarily overlapping with and participating in a wider struggle” (1994: 79).²⁶ Plumwood suggests ways to imagine connectedness, while still maintaining our distinctness. This opens up the possibility of a re-imagined liberatory politics. Plumwood argues that “[r]eason has been made a vehicle for domination and death; it can and must become a vehicle for liberation and life” (2002: 5).²⁷ Ecofeminists, generally, recognise important conceptual ties between the domination of women and nature, in which the feminisation of nature has allowed both nature and women to be turned into resources.²⁸ That is, women and nature are pruned and cultivated by the master narratives of patriarchal culture, just as a wilderness is constructed into a garden. Moreover, this garden is then placed on display as indelible proof of ‘civilisation,’ highlighting how those that are cut back (and tamed) become the mirror for culture.

Ecofeminists have added naturism, or the oppression of non-human nature, as a category of Others marginalised by “the logic of domination” (Warren, 2005b: 256) and argue that a revision of nature is required to escape its devaluation by binary logic. In fact, Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen suggest that ecofeminists recognise that it is “no longer possible to discuss environmental change without addressing social change.” Moreover, it may not be “possible to discuss women’s oppression without addressing environmental degradation” (2005: 157). To address social injustice one needs to work towards a participatory liberation in communicative politics allowing substantive social

²⁶ Plumwood refers to bell hooks’s statement in *Talking Back* (1989). She further notes that the net or web analogy is an alternative to pillar analogy and was suggested by Foucault in “Disciplinary Power and Subjection” (1980).

²⁷ Elizabeth Gross notes the irrationality of rationalist forms of reason. She sees the crisis of reason as “a consequence of the historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal; that is, it is a consequence of the inability of western knowledges to conceive their own processes of (material) production, processes that simultaneously rely on and disavow the role of the body” (1993: 187-216).

²⁸ The nature/culture debate has made us aware of the inherent problems in this dualism, in that often what is regarded as nature is actually cultivated by humans, but naturalised and then reified. While this work interrogates this dualism’s divisions, my references to nature refer to the natural environment that does not have an anthropocentric centre.

equality and agency. This might encourage the linguistic and material space for the marginalised to write themselves into the world through an ethics of care that is interconnected and responsive rather than detached. Ecocriticism, according to Lawrence Buell, is an “umbrella term” referring to the “environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice” (2005: 138). Donald Worster argues that the global crisis today is not because of how ecosystems function, but because of how our ethical systems function. By working towards an understanding of these systems we begin the process of reformation (In Glotfelty, 1996: xxi). Nicole Brossard offers a radical feminist re-thinking of an ethics of care by creatively detailing the linguistic potential for undermining oppressive conceptual frameworks. She argues that in order to counter language’s erasure of the female self, we are obliged to perform “rituals of presence” (2005: 102) that begin the work of representation. This I relate to the rituals Agaat performs from the moment she is moved out of the house and branded a servant. While Brossard uses her metaphor of the ritualisation of presence in language to account for language’s erasure of women, I find it particularly apt for demonstrating Agaat’s linguistic narrative potential for re-imagining relations with nature. These theorists provide the theoretical frame of reference employed in this dissertation. Their work offers various ways of challenging oppressive conceptual frameworks.

vii. Final Introductory Observations

Reality is what matters and as a writer I have to deal with it as fiction because I know that twenty-first century reality will be about the worst and the best of our fictions.

(Nicole Brossard: Epigraph to *Fluid Arguments*: 2005)

Agaat’s understanding that she is part of the biocentric community, even while ostracised by human ‘isms’ of domination, emphasises that contradictory truths can co-exist, and partial affiliations are possible and in fact, as we shall see, necessary to revitalise dualistic language structures. This enables Agaat to survive with an “energetic” step (2006: 677) in contrast to her adoptive Afrikaner white mother’s progressively dis-eased inactivity. I read Milla’s death from bulbar paralysis, significantly a disease of the nervous system, exactly forty-three years after she adopted Agaat, on the Day of the Covenant turned the Day of Reconciliation, as Van Niekerk’s condemnation of Milla’s inability, and by extension white South Africa’s inability, to accommodate conflicting ideologies.²⁹ In behaviour

²⁹ The Day of The Covenant, also known as the Day of The Vow and Dingaans Day, celebrated the Voortrekkers’ defeat of the Zulu under Dingane in the Battle of Blood River on the 16th December 1838. The Afrikaners apparently vowed that if God allowed them to defeat Dingane they and their descendants would forever commemorate the day as a Sabbath and build a church to honour the fact that they were the ‘Chosen People.’ After the 1994 elections the holiday was renamed the Day of Reconciliation to commemorate the end of Apartheid.

mimicking that of her ancestors, Milla undertakes to civilise Agaat, a duty that she details as a covenant with God (2006: 601).

This ‘civilising’ covenant, similar to those records of historians that postcolonial theory has documented as a one-sided perspective of the ‘victor,’ is portrayed in her sixty-three diaries (2006: 58). It is these diaries which form the basis for Agaat’s recasting of knowledge when she narrates them in reverse. She rewrites Milla’s record to interrogate concepts that result in Milla’s abduction and marginalisation of her. The narrative of the end of Milla’s life is textually woven into the suppressed narrative that is the beginning: the abduction of the land and the abduction of Agaat. That Milla is able finally to define her life as good, as opposed to a “ditch” (2006: 510,590) that she continually falls into, depends on an act of ecological recuperation that involves her acknowledging the good in those Others that were abducted and buried by her discourse.³⁰

Milla’s diaries reflect her attempts to record causes and effects that are the legacy of inherited Christian, rationalist, patriarchal, nationalist and capitalist history, institutionalised as the Law during the Apartheid period.³¹ Agaat re-narrates Milla’s inheritance by challenging her narcissism through making unfamiliar the intended meaning of the diaries. This enables Milla to “shore” up the “fragments” of her life against her ruins (2006: 163). These inter-textual reference to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1998: l. 431), suggest that fragmented style is not necessarily symbolic of culture’s disintegration, but rather, the necessary maintenance of it. Hugh Kenner argues “in a civilization reduced to ‘a heap of broken images’ all that is requisite is sufficient curiosity; the [person] who asks what one or another of these fragments means ... may be the agent of regeneration” (1965: 147). Perhaps this is why both Milla and Agaat are portrayed as midwives in the text. This marks their refusal to give up against stacked odds, their continual inquisitiveness, and assists in the birth of hybrid possibilities.

I read Agaat as what Coetzee refers to as a *natuurmens* (1988: 88).³² Agaat is documented not only as a legendary embroiderer of stories, but also a *natuurmens* whose close and particular knowledge of the land means she understands its meaning and her interdependence with her shared environment. Van Niekerk’s novel seems to suggest that she is addressing what Coetzee has termed the “problematics of consciousness ... inherent in the *plaasroman*” (1988: 88) through foregrounding

³⁰ The Afrikaans for a hole is “‘n gat,” which might be another play on Agaat’s name and indicative of her central positioning in Milla’s negotiation with her eroded conscience.

³¹ I am sceptical of the need for Constitutions and the legalisation of value systems, as Constitutions often take too long to change and accordingly imply the creation of a base structure that does not keep up with the need to adapt. Sarah Hall, in *The Carhullan Army* (2007), also registers scepticism towards Constitutions when she has the community of women depicted in her novel decide not to instate one (2007: 98).

³² This might be translated as ‘Natural Person’ or a ‘person of nature.’

the importance of situated embedded knowledge systems.³³ This is emphasised in order to create a language that does not make one remote from, and thereby encourages contradictions towards, the material world. The novel's articulation of Agaat's embedded knowledge, enabling the land and natural elements to be portrayed as affirming her actions, establishes Agaat as a *natuurmens* whose consciousness extends beyond the limitations of the dominant language. In other words Agaat's character reveals the potential of meaning creation outside the symbolic language that might inoculate one against the dangerous complacency attendant on conquering narratives. *Agaat* interrogates the "Light of the Word that the Dutch supposedly brought here on the Dromedaris" (2006: 401) and acknowledges the exclusionary damage this colonising rhetoric has had on the people of South Africa. Therefore, the novel may be read as an interrogation of intimate power relations that emerge out of inherited conceptual frameworks, which as a result of their continued currency have implications for all beings in the world.

In Chapter One I analyse inherited biblical narratives that have resulted in oppressive conceptual frameworks, such as the nature/culture dualism and the policies of Apartheid. Chapter Two examines the ways in which these frameworks have been reinforced by capitalist and scientific discourses, as well as the ways in which the characters, specifically Milla and Jak, negotiate these legacies and cultural practices. In Chapter Three I explore the novel's foregrounding of a repressed feminised materiality, which results in Milla's altering perspectives and her consequent need for the re-narrativisation of these inheritances in order to accommodate Others rather than assimilating them. Chapter Four examines the ways in which the novel, through the trickster character of Agaat, shows these legacies as subject to re-narrativisation. Essentially, I read the contemporary South African farm novel, *Agaat*, as performing the work of ecological recuperation, in its call for less violent and more accommodating narratives than the ones inherited.

³³ J.M. Coetzee defines the problem of consciousness inherent in the *plaasroman* as being due to the fact that "once natural man (*sic*) is able to articulate his essence in language, he is thereby removed from the realm of nature" (1988: 88). Coetzee accordingly details language as an abstraction from the material realm. This enables writing to become what Levi-Strauss called it "a technology for mass exploitation" (2001: 1417), something which Michel Foucault investigates in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).

1. Chapter One: Legacy of Master Narratives

In the traditions of ‘Western’ science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination.

(Donna Haraway 1991: 150)

1.1 Introduction: Duty, Law and Reason

In Chapter One I argue that *Agaat* explores the ways in which the Afrikaners’ material knowledge framework was undermined during Apartheid by an appeal to the spiritual growth of their people recast as salvation. This perpetuated the abstracted belief in the Afrikaner biblical myth of “tribal salvation” discursively linked to the biblical narrative of the wandering Israelites in search of a Promised Land (Coetzee, 1988: 2). That this discourse resulted in the Afrikaner switching to abstracted notions of racial purity, rather than foregrounding their material connection with the land, encouraged farmers to discredit what they relied on for survival: the world of “flesh and blood, root and web” (Plumwood, 2002: 14). The resultant imposition of abstracted rules of equivalence and replacement, as represented by Jak’s focus on capitalist production-orientated farming practices explored in Chapter Two, in turn created delusions of illusory autonomy from both the land and the indigenous population discursively constructed as Other. This simplified schematic illustrates the dystopian consequences of hubristic technologies that generate a discursive momentum implying the world can be remade by the human animal, just as easily as we believe God created the world in seven days.³⁴

In *Agaat* Milla’s progressive questioning of Western discursive structures reveals her interrogation of dualistic thought, specifically in the stream of consciousness sections. Milla asks

how does a sickness begin?... soil is more long-suffering than ... sheep soil sickens slowly in hidden depths from tilling ... did i think then i was god that i had to lie and take it ... who decided stones had no rights for stones can waste away from being denied from being abused and who decided who is the ploughed and who ploughs and why did i not ... go away and what would have happened if i had resisted her my mother my instructress of amenability ... i smother in words that nobody can hear ... i have done as was done unto me the sickness belongs to us two. (2006: 35)

This excerpt not only exposes culture’s colonisation of nature, but also Milla’s complicity in perpetuating oppressive conceptual frameworks. Milla’s questioning of who has the right to define

³⁴ In the novel the number seven is hugely symbolic and works together with other tropes in the book, such as those idiomatic universal truths: what goes up must come down, the wheel always turns, and you reap what you sow (2006: 75,155,341).

and control remains unresolved. The erosion of the soil is related to the spiritual erosion of the characters, whose bodies are written by the dis-ease of identity politics. Greta Gaard points out that while social ecologists identify the root cause of all oppression as hierarchy, ecofeminists argue that hierarchy is a result of a self/Other opposition (1993: 3). Ecofeminists thus argue that anthropocentrism develops from a consciousness dominated by the performance of androcentric culture and the “pathology” of “power-based morality” (1993: 6).

The immense discursive effort undertaken to construct and maintain a self-centred white patriarchal Christian Nationalism, in opposition to indigenous cultures, women and nature, reveals the defensive motivations of colonising practices in South Africa. These motivations are often hidden by universalising claims of benevolence that underpin master narratives. This reminds one that representation is too often constructed by those who have the power to interpret and thus narrate ‘reality.’³⁵ As suggested earlier, Milla’s ambivalent position with regard to her abduction of Agaat strategically foregrounds this assertion. Colonial authority is legitimated through a process that has to be negotiated with those it seeks to control, which reflects the interpretation that domination and resistance are inextricably linked.

Jak is an example of the extent of the discursive efforts undertaken to protect privilege under Apartheid. His religious position is described as purely aesthetic (2006: 638), which suggests his awareness of the biblical and textual construction of Apartheid ideology, and by extension the tenuous construction of his privilege. In Chapter Two I argue that Jak represents the newer Cartesian fantasy of mastery in his search for salvation on earth through science, as opposed to heaven through God. That both these constructions have removed the material processes essential to ecological survival is important to note. Jak believes that man has already replaced God and feels compelled to assert and defend Apartheid’s inherited mastery. That Jak is a non-practising attorney underpins the inefficacy of Apartheid law, in the sense that those placed in a position of mastery could not live up to these expectations. Jak’s characterisation demonstrates these distorting effects in that he is pulled between the abstracted conscious awareness of his ‘supposed’ mastery and his real life inability to actualise his so-called elevated position as a white, male Afrikaner.³⁶ Jak’s defensive motivations are

³⁵ Edward Said contends for instance that without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot understand the “enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (2001: 1992).

³⁶ South Africa’s current political situation could be construed as analogous to the dilemma Van Niekerk’s characters enact, in the sense that, as the Communist Party has indicated, the ANC, specifically under Thabo Mbeki’s neo-liberal agenda, has become so remote from the people and their requirements that poverty alleviation no longer seems possible. Monako Dibetle reports that Tokyo Sexwale’s overnight stay at Diepsloot and President Jacob Zuma’s visit to Balfour are being regarded by many as a patronising joke. Tshediso Kesi, a resident of Diepsloot, said: “Look, the minister only wanted to calm us down after the protest. He is not the first top politician

read in his refusal to consider that he may be responsible for his and Milla's childless state, or to publicly value Milla's far greater farming potential. To compensate for his sense of powerlessness Jak repeatedly and violently asserts his inherited patriarchal mastery over Milla, whom he compares with nature and whose knowledge he continually ridicules and devalues.

Arguably Milla's presumption that she has God-like capability is a consequence of the historically presumed privileging of whiteness, the centrism perpetuated by the reification of colonising biblical narratives. The novel's depiction of Milla's colonised status under patriarchal white Christian Nationalism reinforces her belief that she is capable of acting only under the instruction of a master, even while paradoxically believing that she is the "one who directs everything" (2006: 30).³⁷ Therefore, Milla enters into a private covenant with God through the abduction of Agaat. She convinces herself that she legitimately acts under God's instruction in her 'civilising' mission. This private covenant results in Milla trying to raise Agaat in "quarantine" (2006: 653). However, the ability to create a nourishing terrain, a "responsibility," which the book implies has been relegated to the domain of women (2006: 37), requires an ethical re-imagining of the interdependency of biocentric communities, which cannot be undertaken in private. Milla's denial of agency and the internalisation of her subservient position in a male-favouring society results in her self-abnegation and victimhood.

Milla's inability to articulate her personal beliefs in the public sphere causes her progressive nervous disorder that culminates in paralysis and death. Milla's daughter-servant-master has to trick Milla into understanding that her dis-ease is one of the symptoms of her civilising duty. *Agaat* confirms that concepts such as dignity, honour, truth, law, gods, mastery and so on, are the inventions of humanity's egocentrism and the defence of these can only be portrayed farcically. Thus, Jak's defensive actions culminate in his death, which is represented as a "spectacle" where he is staked through the heart by the branch of a tree after a car accident (2006: 156). Similar to Plumwood's liberal-democratic myth of the Titanic "ship of rational fools" charging into the iceberg (2002: 1), Jak's vehicle was travelling too fast for him to read the warning signs and survive the silted river-bed crossing (2006: 621). That Jak's spectacular death is significantly portrayed as vampire-like suggests the ways in which Apartheid, which the book demonstrates was extensively

to visit Diepsloot and he is not the last. He thinks sleeping in a shack makes a difference ... we have been sleeping in them for years" (*Mail and Guardian*: August 7-13 2009: 12).

³⁷ Monique Wittig argues that 'woman' and 'man' are political categories and not natural ones; that in fact there is "no nature in society" and that women's "deformed" bodies have become naturalised; thereby making oppression inescapable (2001: 2014-8). Judith Butler, in discussing the performativity of gender, has argued that "the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject" (emphasis in original, 1993: 225-6). Nicole Brossard thus writes that the colonised woman is condemned to escaping alienation through imagination and re-presentation; that is, for the colonised woman the "margin for manoeuvrability is in the dominant language" (2005: 209).

influenced by capitalist practices, fed off those it Othered. Importantly, those who believed in their inherited mastery and absolute principles are still required to live in the corporeal world. Indeed, the denial of this material world is a refusal by the ‘masters’ to acknowledge their embodiment, which by extension implies living like the walking dead. Plumwood notes that the detrimental effects of colonisation and human-centredness derive not only from “the ill effects on the colonised, on animals and nature themselves, but more indirectly from its distorting effect on the colonisers, on human identity and human society” (2002: 141). Jak’s tragic need to dominate demonstrates this.

The focus of Chapter One then entails an analysis of the boundaries protecting a particular political vision of reality, the structure of which promoted separation between the ‘familiar’ (white patriarchal Afrikaner Christian Nationalism)³⁸ and the ‘strange’ (non-white indigenous cultures). It is important to note the ambivalence involved in the construction of Afrikaner Nationalism, as while it sets up binary divisions between the familiar ‘us’ and the strange ‘they,’ it simultaneously involved a transition from the familiar to the strange. This can be seen in the movement away from a traditionally feminised nature to a mechanised, masculinised science and technology that denies value in the old material farming knowledges promoting diversity. Instead, this transition promoted racial purity and the policing of these boundaries in order to legitimate oppression in the name of efficient production. My argument reveals that these boundaries are the products of the very theoretical processes used to maintain them, processes which encourage remoteness and alienation from personal, cultural and linguistic embeddedness.

The ‘reasoning’ behind the maintenance of discursive boundaries is revealed through my literary analysis of the boundary wars fought for the control of production, reproduction and imagination on the farm Grootmoedersdrift. I foreground not only the resultant alienation, but also the underlying arrogance and insecurity implicated in these conquering discourses. A primary tool for maintaining imperial relations is discourse, which significantly Tiffin and Lawson have compared to “guns, guile and disease” (1994: 3). I thus invoke theories, especially those of Val Plumwood, that reveal culture’s assimilation of nature in order to support my analysis that nature, and those associated with it, are instrumentalised and objectified as tools by religious, capitalist and scientific discourses.³⁹ While my analysis concentrates on a South African literary novel to emphasise the importance of situated knowledges, I position the narrative within specific ecofeminist frameworks to

³⁸ This is not to suggest that Afrikaner Christian Nationalism is exclusively responsible for a traumatic South African history.

³⁹ Plumwood uses the term “appropriative colonisation” to describe the assimilation of the Other and argues that “human-centredness is inflected by its social context.” She parallels notions of hegemonic centrism, and their concepts of androcentrism, eurocentrism, and ethnocentrism, with her model of anthropocentrism. She suggests this juxtaposition useful if we think, as Henry Beston does, of earth Others as “other nations ‘caught with ourselves in the net of life and time’” (2002: 100-1).

suggest the potential of moving towards what Appiah refers to as “cosmopolitanism” (2007: xi) or Plumwood as “planetary organisation” (2002: 79). These movements challenge centrism and dualistic thought through appreciating difference and encouraging ecological understanding. The difficult connections between representation and reality are negotiated in order to attain a greater understanding of the ideologies and discursive attitudes of the colonial institutions the colonised have inherited. In *Agaat* “extreme pressure” (2006: 350) dismantles Jak’s and Milla’s bodies when they are unable to live up to colonialism’s manipulated expectations of mastery based on constructed notions of racial superiority. It is through this explicit embodied connection that we become aware of the extent of the psychological damage the privileged and ‘unmarked’ category of whiteness has to overcome. Chapter One, then, explores the oppressive consequences of the legacies of religious discourse in South Africa, and to this end it is important that I begin by defining the systematic and imperceptible nature of oppression. Chapter Two examines the ways in which this legacy has been augmented by capitalist and scientific discourses over time.

1.2 Cause and Effect in a Noose: Oppression’s Lasso

[S]elf-love, I tell you, self-love, the malignant, the contagious kind, that unfortunately is what this tale is all about.

(2006: 360)

In *Agaat* the dynamic relation between colonised and coloniser emphasises the ways in which this relationship is continually spliced by numerous social hierarchies. This might be illustrated in the ambiguous positioning of Milla as a white individual privileged by the ideologies of Apartheid, and yet marginalised as a woman under the perpetuation of patriarchal religious discourse. In an attempt to make sense of her ambiguous positioning, Milla’s diary writing increasingly becomes her “way of waiting to see what would happen next,” which she hopes will enable her to connect “cause and effect in the stream of events” (2006: 410). Milla’s search for cause and effect in her diaries suggests her apprehension over her treatment of Agaat. However, her inability to negotiate publicly her ambivalence prevents her from taking adaptive action. This reveals not only Milla’s struggle to escape monolithic dualistic structures, but also the damaging trajectories these structures result in, which the novel depicts as tying the “long rope of cause and effect together in a noose” (2006: 644).

Agaat clearly examines the alienating and diverse effects of colonisation on both the oppressor and the oppressed. Agaat’s “force-feeding” of Milla during the last forty days of Milla’s life represents a reversal of Milla’s colonisation of Agaat (2006: 41). Milla remembers the “countless little dying animals” Agaat fed and then liberated by slowly turning them “wild again” (2006: 42). Therefore, Milla retaliates to being “force-fed” (2006: 681) by saying “I’m more than a rabbit in a

cage” (2006: 43), which illustrates a wish to imagine around oppressive conceptual frameworks that tame and repress desire. To understand the relationship between Milla and Agaat I examine in more detail the systematic and invisible nature of oppression by referring to Marilyn Frye’s metaphor of a birdcage. Frye argues that when one looks at a single wire at a time it is impossible to imagine how the bird’s movement is restricted. However, if one steps back and takes a macroscopic view, one sees a “network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to [the bird’s] flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon” (2005: 86). Frye emphasises that oppression is both systematic and imperceptible. It is not “accidental, occasional or avoidable” and collectively works to “immobilize, confine and restrict” freedom (2005: 72). Iris Marion Young argues that while oppressed people face a common set of limitations, it is impossible to have a definitive grasp of oppression. This is because different factors, or combinations of factors, constitute the oppression of heterogeneous groups (2005: 92).⁴⁰ For this reason it is important to detail and compare the differences in Milla’s and Jak’s upbringings, all of which to some degree intrinsically influence their political and cultural positionality. This, in turn, affects their responses to nature. An investigation into the ideologies behind these belief systems is a necessary starting point in identifying the discursive tools of oppression, specifically religious, scientific and capitalist narratives, articulated in the novel.

A common denominator in all dualistic structure is reason. It is important to note that Milla’s surname is Redelinghuys, which when translated suggests “house of reason” (2006: 238). This strategically works not only to foreground reasoning faculties in women, where it has been historically denied, but also to fracture ‘reason’ as an absolute concept because it is apparent that Milla does not act reasonably throughout her life. Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), details how hegemonic centrist conceptual frameworks develop from a foundation of dualistic structure, dating back to what she can identify as the most ancient: the gendered reason/nature dualism (1993: 44). She argues that whether dealing with androcentrism, eurocentrism, ethnocentrism or anthropocentrism, centric structures represent a web of power which prevents equality through systematic oppression. This is like the ‘rabbit cage’ Milla cannot escape while subscribing to self/Other oppositions that oppressive frameworks promote. Put simply, the privileged One (male, European, Western, human) denies the Other representation as an agent with reasoning faculties in order to justify domination.

⁴⁰ Young identifies five faces of oppression, “exploitation, marginality, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence,” which she feels assists in identifying similarities and differences between categories of oppression (2005: 92).

In *Agaat* the growth of institutionalised power can be seen to develop from a web of dualisms that rely on gender- and nature-coded presuppositions. These dictate comparisons that are either made or implicit in the discursive construction of the ‘inferior’ status of woman, animal and slave (farm labourer). This is legitimated through an essentialised Platonic comparison with the material realm. These Others are consequently subjugated as reproductive receptacles in terms of Plato’s formulation of the abstracted masculine realm of eternal forms, which has ‘exclusive’ access to superior reasoning capacities. This, as I shall argue, is evidenced in Jak’s reductive derision of Milla’s knowledge. Instead, he attacks her for her inability to fall “pregnant” (2006: 87). Jak’s behaviour illustrates that while dualisms may change over time, residues remain behind in the conceptual frameworks of dominating contemporary dualistic structures. Because the web of dualistic structures is formed by and through the accumulation of power, any account of these structures is arguably the advancement of institutionalised power.

My examination of binary structure in *Agaat* highlights the slippages that always exist within these polarised categories. The novel reveals the false dichotomy contained in the contradiction between the theoretical construction of ‘absolute’ divisions between master/slave relationships and the material reality of their negotiated discourse. Van Niekerk shows that dualistic structure results from a denied dependency on the Other and is a cultural expression of a hierarchical relationship that constructs centric cultural concepts and identities. *Agaat* demonstrates the construction of oppressive frameworks, revealing the ‘Othering’ process through language. Van Niekerk’s use of *Agaat* as the novel’s unconscious suggests how vital it is that one argues, as Donna Haraway puts it, for “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (emphasis in original, 1991: 150).

The re-narrativisation of the novel is undertaken to prevent Milla’s discourse becoming a “noose” on which she hangs herself (2006: 644). She cannot challenge the dualistic division of language that allows biblical narratives to polarise people into the categories of ‘Chosen’ and ‘Reprobate.’ Neither can she accept the heterogeneously constructed and interdependent nature of the world, even as she imparts alternatives in the lessons she teaches *Agaat* as a young child. She tells *Agaat*:

The things of the world are tied to one another at all points with words I say & we know one thing through the name of another thing & we join the names together. It’s a chain & if you move one link then they all move the possibilities are endless. (2006: 625)

Here Milla acknowledges the discursive potential to re-negotiate our material terrain. While Milla teaches *Agaat* that “all the world” is in her name, the noose of dualistic thought prevents her from

accommodating Aagaat wholly. Instead, Milla continually tries to “wash white” Aagaat in order to “make a human being of her” by ‘civilising’ and converting her into Milla’s language (2006: 576). Unless Milla is able to see through her narcissistic narratives of completeness and purity, her demise will echo Jak’s farcical death. The novel suggests that oppressive consequences might be assuaged by the recognition in one’s discourse of the mantra-like “wishes, fears, hopes and dreams” of the biocentric community (2006: 308,435,532,679).

Van Niekerk challenges dualistic thought in order to avoid what Plumwood describes as the “Illusion of Disembeddedness” or “remoteness” (2002: 100,71-80), which then encourages one to take responsibility for the impact of environmental degradation on the planet. Undeniably, in this contemporary moment, the ultimate illusion is in believing that anyone will be able to remain remote from the consequences of destroying nature, the very soil upon which all material life depends for survival. Moreover, there is no transcendental being that will intervene on humanity’s behalf on the Titanic journey towards the ecological iceberg. The division of knowledge into “particular gender- and nature-coded forms” hide the potential of hybrid subjectivities, which further inhibits the development of certain mixed forms crucial for an “ecologically-integrated humanities knowledge field” (2002: 51). Jak’s and Milla’s characterisation exhibits these influences that result in them both promoting and complying with the doctrines of patriarchal Afrikaner Christian Nationalism. The historical roots of oppressive types of consciousnesses lead to the One managing to radically exclude the Other and then reify this exclusion through stereotyping or essentialising identity politics. Reliance on this Other is then rendered invisible through backgrounding their value, which is then appropriated and instrumentalised. The Other becomes a tool that is recognised only in terms of the One’s prerogatives. Accordingly, the Other becomes a resource mined for the One’s immediate benefit. The backlash of this supposed ‘benefit’ has resulted in what is today commonly regarded as an ecological crisis. *Aagaat* demonstrates the ways in which dualistic structures are inherently violent. These structures enable religious discourse to lead people like lambs to the slaughter, which is a persistent trope I analyse in the book.

1.3 The Law and the Prophets: The Day of the Covenant

We are told in the biblical story of Genesis, Adam's sin is precisely a failure of will. Adam's failure to obey God's command is attributed to Eve, and Eve's lapse of obedience is in turn ascribed to the snake.

(Marti Kheel 1993: 253)

It might be argued that the novel attempts to reinsert pagan animism through the characterisation of Agaat. This is especially evident in the symbolism of Agaat's rituals with nature, her embroidery, and the mouldings that she creates around her fireplace, which Milla refers to as "Romish & creepy" (2006: 268). The reintroduction of pagan animism will be explored further in Chapter Four of this study. Lynn White Jr. argues that Christianity, by destroying pagan animism, was able to justify man's exploitation of nature, which was reduced to the level of the symbolic (1996: 10-11). He argues that Christianity, by radically excluding animism (thereby divorcing culture from nature), freed man from the constraints of Greco-Roman mythology, which insisted on a cyclical notion of time. In contrast, Judeo-Christian teleology established a non-repetitive and linear notion of time, which allowed for the construction of a spectacular, but fundamentally dangerous, creation story. Marti Kheel argues that the Jewish-Christian tradition has contributed to an "instrumental and hierarchical conception of nature" and that both the priestly and Yahwist version of the Genesis story of Creation reinforce the notion that women and nature exist only for the purpose of serving "Man" (1993: 246-247). While there have been valiant attempts to reinvest "stewardship" in a more benign manner, there is no escaping the fact that the story constructs a hierarchy, placing the male human at the summit. Donna Haraway argues that "teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse" (1991: 152). Indeed, these stories must be blamed for our current state of affairs.

Van Niekerk's novel is explicit in revealing Milla's religious education of Agaat as child abuse, which directly results in the twelve-year old Agaat being ostracised by her adopted family and alienated from her home. The Dutch settlers at the Cape brought with them a fundamentalist form of Calvinism, which was embedded in the scriptures and the belief that God predestines all things. This theory of predestination allowed for the binary division into those Chosen by God, and those Othered by Him. Martin Schönteich and Henri Boshoff, in *'Volk', Faith and Fatherland: The Security Threat Posed by the White Right* (2003), describe how neo-Calvinist influences "reinterpreted Calvinism as a philosophy of natural theology according to which God revealed Himself both in nature and in history" (2003: 45). Scripture, the sacred writings of the New and Old Testaments, was therefore manipulated as a coercive conceptual tool to reinforce a perceived superiority and the radical exclusion of those not chosen: nature, women and the indigenous population. J.M. Coetzee argues

that the only mythology in South Africa comparable to the myth of the return to Eden and innocence was that of the “story of the wanderings of the Israelites in search of a Promised Land, a story of tribal salvation appropriated as their own by the wandering Afrikaner tribes” (1988: 2). Schönteich and Boshoff also describe early Afrikaner Nationalism encompassing a “distinct religious element—the Israelite myth,” which included references to the Afrikaners as the ‘Chosen People’ and to South Africa as the Promised Land (2003: 45).

Afrikaner religion is thus discursively structured on a predetermined dualised division that makes Milla and Jak complicit in the perpetuation of oppressive conceptual frameworks through internalising hierarchical claims of entitlement. Apartheid’s political policies institutionalised this entitlement, which was justified by the Broederbond through the incorporation of polarised religious discourse.⁴¹ This encouraged comparisons between Apartheid and Nazism. In “The Nazi influence in the formation of Apartheid South Africa,” Elizabeth Jemison notes that after 1948 and the coming to power of the Purified National Party, while Nazism was not openly espoused as it was during World War II, the political and intellectual maturity of this party was developed in the shadow of Nazi Germany (2004: 99). In Agaat’s re-enactment of Milla’s belief systems, she satirically goosesteps up and down at the foot of Milla’s bed and Milla thinks: “the Third Reich [has] come to Grootmoedersdrift” (2006: 407). This marks the beginning of Milla’s recognition of how militant her education of Agaat has been, and by extension, the ideological constructions of Apartheid.

The Broederbond is the society that Thuys, Milla’s best friend Beatrice’s husband, nominates Jak for in 1959 (2006: 638). Jak is, however, not interested in the religious theoretical constructions of the Broederbond, which suggests he is only concerned about maintaining the appearance of privilege rather than questioning the constructions this privilege is based upon (2006: 638).⁴² The Broederbond is also the society with which Beatrice threatens Milla’s excommunication. Beatrice says that the community regards Milla’s relationship with Agaat as “abnormal & a sin before God,” as it is “subtly undermining community values & defeating the ends of the political policy” (2006: 638-639). This illustrates how religious discourses police the boundaries between self and Other, as well as demonstrating the particular notions of racial superiority that underpinned racially exclusive discourses. Milla’s personal relationship with Agaat threatens the radical exclusion necessary for the

⁴¹ The Broederbond was an exclusively male protestant secret society dedicated to the advancement of Afrikaner interests and later played a major role in the development of Apartheid in South Africa. Every prime minister and state president in South Africa from 1948 to the end of Apartheid in 1994 was a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond. In 1944 the organisation’s chairperson said: “The Afrikaner Broederbond was born out of the deep conviction that the Afrikaner volk has been planted in this country by the Hand of God, destined to survive as a separate volk with its own calling” (Schönteich and Boshoff, 2003: 46).

⁴² This interest in the maintenance of the appearance of privilege is textually echoed through the plastic surgery Jak surreptitiously undergoes to hide the effects of ageing (2006: 459).

continued survival and perpetuation of Apartheid doctrine. While Milla votes for the National Party, she is unsure about the Broederbond's secrecy and claims not to be ashamed of publicly objecting to "skulduggery" (2006: 639). Yet her painful negotiations of Agaat's political and social quarantine remain 'silently' contained in her diaries.⁴³

In order to unpack the implications of Milla's silent betrayal it is necessary to consider the enormity of the social and political contract governing her cultural affiliation. The Day of the Covenant commemorated the battle of Blood River fought on the 16th December 1838, which was celebrated as a Sabbath by the Voortrekkers as the so-called 'Chosen People' believed that God had preordained their victory over Dingane. This particular moment of Afrikaner mythology is importantly challenged when it is revealed in the novel that Milla dies on the 16th December 1996.⁴⁴ The pyrrhic victory over Dingane consolidated the Afrikaners' belief in the validity of their claims of racial superiority, and the concomitant legitimation of their 'right' to the land. The deployment of biblical narratives to this end is evidenced in the novel when the Dominee refers to the biblical testimony detailing how the fathers of the children of Israel, to whom the Promised Land of Canaan had been given, sent their sons to search the land to wean out spies. The corruptibility of religious discourse is revealed when the Dominee encourages the community in a sermon to enlist their sons in the Angolan war. The sermon is further used to warn the community of those "false prophets who speak excellent Afrikaans & cite the Bible & don't hesitate to undermine their own nation in their mother-tongue & in their church" (2006: 427).⁴⁵

These panoptic instances revealed in the Dominee's sermons all suggest the intimate connection between Apartheid and religion, and serve to indicate, as Marilyn Frye has suggested, how discourse collectively works to "immobilize, confine and restrict" freedom (2005: 72). The damage perpetrated by such discursive restrictions is illustrated by Jak's death, Milla's paralysis, Agaat's occlusion and Jakkie's emigration. Restrictions on freedom are revealed as defensive

⁴³ Jakkie questions Agaat as to why there is a copper post-slit inserted in the inside bedroom door where Milla kept Agaat when she was brought from the farm Goedbegin. Agaat says "perhaps there was somebody in quarantine (...). [T]hat's when you don't know what disease someone's suffering from then you isolate them otherwise they infect the healthy people then they communicate only in writing because talking is too dangerous because the germs live in the breath" (2006: 363).

⁴⁴ The Day of the Covenant turned Day of Reconciliation after the 1994 elections. Further, 1996 is the year the Truth and Reconciliation process, discussed earlier in this dissertation, was implemented.

⁴⁵ Beyers Naudé, whose father was one of the founders of the Broederbond in 1918, is one of the false prophets that the dominee refers to. Naudé began to lose his faith in the South African Dutch Reformed Church after attending interracial church services in the 1950s. Subsequent to the Sharpeville Massacre on the 21st March 1960 his faith was completely shattered, causing him to leave the Broederbond in 1963. Instead he argued for racial reconciliation and a multi-racial society which anticipates the change from the Day of the Covenant to the Day of Reconciliation. Adam Bernstein reveals that Naudé, despite being imprisoned, ostracised and persecuted by his own community, said on his deathbed; "I saw myself never as anything else but an Afrikaner, and I'm very grateful for the small contribution which I could have made" (2004: 6). Naudé's public anti-Apartheid beliefs shattered the unanimity of Afrikaner thought that Apartheid tried to reify and exposed its doctrines and policies as already clearly under threat.

processes used to reinforce the boundaries of dualistic discourse and thereby ensure its perpetuation, which is evidenced in Milla's adoption of covenant ideology in her education of Agaat.

1.4 Covenant Manipulated: Milla's Construction of Agaat

It's not just that 'god' is dead; so is the 'goddess.'

(Donna Haraway 1991: 162)

Milla's God-like attempts to include Agaat in the fold of 'Chosen People' remain traumatically unrealised while she continues to allow dualistic structure to govern meaning creation in her discourse. That she is trapped in binary oppositions is shown by Milla's goddess-complex, where she assumes the mantle of "His obedient servant and woman of His people," as she believes she cannot act without a master (2006: 681). Milla is brought up by an Afrikaner family who instill in her a deep belief in Afrikaner Christian Nationalism, which simultaneously implies a sense of martyrdom due to the patriarchal bias of this religion that insists "the mother is secondary." Milla tells Agaat that "the Catholics believe that the Mother of God is also a mediator," but she confirms this "superstition," because "JC is the only way to the Father" (2006: 170). The novel thus foregrounds Milla's, and by extension Afrikaner women's, sacrifice of agency, which seems to imply that Jesus was not the only one crucified for humanity's sins. Indeed, religious narratives might be interpreted as camouflaging the ways in which self-sacrifice or the concept of restraint augments discourses of power that ensure the perpetuation of inequality.

The consequences of hierarchical practices are evidenced in Milla's defensive actions. When Milla does not fall pregnant and honour her marriage contract she rallies against her loveless and childless marriage by abducting the four year-old coloured Agaat from a domestic labourer living on her mother's farm. Milla manipulates the reasons for her actions and converts this abduction into a duty undertaken to fulfil her 'civilising' responsibility and save Agaat from "perishing as an outcast amongst her own people" (2006: 681). Milla then attempts to include Agaat in the fold of 'Chosen People' and thereby save her from the status of reprobate, categories into which Milla's National Calvinist religion racially divided the population. Milla's oscillation in this regard emphasises her ambivalent state, in that her spiritual beliefs fundamentally contradict her material belief in the old knowledges that accentuate that there is good in everything, importantly, one of the meanings of Agaat's name (2006: 487). It is relevant that the novel indicates that these inherited knowledges are being threatened by "the onslaughts of so-called civilisation" (2006: 75).

The dedication to Milla's diaries is written seven years after Agaat's abduction (while life seemed promising because of Jakkie's imminent birth) and mimics the discursive style of covenant

narratives. Importantly, Agaat juxtaposes Milla's dedication to her sixty-three diaries, detailing Milla's 'civilising' responsibility to Agaat, next to the list of symptoms of Milla's bulbar paralysis. This placement provides Milla with "a constant reminder ... of what [she is] suffering from" and remains on the reading stand by her sickbed throughout the forty days before her death, which allegorically mirrors Christ's journey into the wilderness (2006: 10-11). Jakkie is surprised that his "sentimental, hypochondriac mother with her head full of romantic German melodies" would have written the dedication, as it sounded more like Jak's "toastmaster bravado," but "without a trace of irony" (2006: 681). The lack of irony in this instance further confirms Milla's so-called benevolent desire for duty and is indicative of her immersion in religious discourses perpetuating the self/Other split. Jakkie suggests that even though Jak may have understood the dynamics of power better than Milla, who was "so force-fed with the insanity" of South Africa (2006: 681), even he "couldn't help himself" being drawn into notions of privilege and racial superiority (2006: 683). Agaat learns the violence of dualistic thought from watching Jak and Milla interacting, and during the last forty days of Milla's life foregrounds metaphor and irony as part of her armoury to counter Milla's literal indoctrination. Agaat's weaving of meaning, in which the familiar is rendered unfamiliar to suggest alternative perspectives, uncovers the good and beauty in the untamed, wild and uncultivated landscape and consciousness (examined in detail in Chapters Three and Four). This challenge to a hierarchised culture fundamentally suggests that Milla's colonising mission was a selfish abduction undertaken to alleviate a personal lack induced by her alienation from nature.

Milla's diaries document her attempts to legitimate God's 'benevolent' work through her in order to justify her treatment of Agaat to the entire world, where she can hold Agaat up as an example of a "solid person" and finally say, "See, I told you! You didn't want to believe me, did you?" (2006: 576). Similarly, Michiel Heyns refers to Milla's serious and pious covenant with God as a need to keep a detailed record of every day of Agaat's development (In Felman, 2007). The influence of biblical narratives, such as Genesis's 'benevolent' Creation stories that legitimate man's rightful dominion over the rest of the world, is evident in Milla's attempts to justify her behaviour as a civilising mission. Milla manipulates her religion and claims God-like power when she determines she is able to decide on who is Chosen and who Othered. Milla's capacity for 'authorship' significantly reveals the potential for Othering through language and centralised discursive frameworks. However, it must be remembered that these diaries also describe Milla's painful negotiation with centric dualistic structure, which illustrates the ways in which these frameworks prevent Agaat from being Chosen within the culture of Apartheid and its ideology of racial purity and separate development.

Milla's education of Agaat represents her attempts to uphold tradition and duty, which is what she refers to as good behaviour reminiscent of a "Dutch house" (2006: 125,160,395,524). Gramsci's concept of hegemony is useful when attempting to understand Milla's complicity in promoting oppressive conceptual frameworks, as it illustrates how individuals can be persuaded to believe in and perpetuate oppressive ideologies. Hegemonic consent operates on the hierarchical premise that one culture is superior to another, and that this privilege is then managed through the dualistic comparison with this discursively created Other. Consent is then importantly both voluntary and contrived. Moreover, hegemony works not only by direct manipulation and indoctrination, but by playing with what Raymond Williams calls the "lived system of meanings and values" in order to produce subjects who 'willingly' submit to being ruled (1977: 110). Discourses that discursively construct a culture or a population who internalise the concept of restraint as a reification of tradition and duty, Milla's 'Dutch House,' are attempts to control unruly passions and universalise behaviour.

In the novel *Agaat* defamiliarises Milla's oppressive discourses of restraint in order to foreground Milla's repressed desires. One of Van Niekerk's prime objectives through the course of the novel is to illustrate how "someone who is subjected to a form of power, can take aspects of that power and mime them back, and make themselves stronger in the process" (In De Kock, 2007: 18). Milla's and Agaat's relationship, however, proves this a difficult undertaking. Van Niekerk's statement introduces Haraway's trickster subjectivity that is about "consciousness—or its simulation" (1991: 153). Importantly, however, Gaylard's possible problems with a trickster consciousness, discussed in Chapter Four, are relevant when considering the potential for the shifting negotiation of discursive power. These potential difficulties are briefly, the dangers of solipsism, greed, and the violence tricksters would have to endure if the boundary makers refuse to give up defending their borders (2005: 282-284). An understanding of the master narratives that have defined individuals as an end-product of historical processes is foregrounded in order to compile an "inventory" (Said, 2001: 2010) of the history of this construction, as the "wheel always turns" (2006: 75).

It might be suggested that Milla's diaries constitute this inventory as well as her attempted creation of a good "Dutch house" through Agaat. The diaries, therefore, serve as an explication of the methodology employed in Milla's undertaking, which is initiated as a covenant with God under the auspices of a civilising responsibility. Moreover, the diaries reflect how Agaat maps lines of flight away from immobilising structures by literally "correcting [Milla's] composition" (2006: 15) in order to provide Milla with the perspective and space to re-territorialise her understanding of master narratives. That is, Agaat mimes her education back at Milla through re-narrativising it, and creating a language that might potentially challenge binary constructions through recognising nature and the

Other. The upholding of the traditions of a good Dutch house is interrogated and defamiliarised through allowing Othered voices to be represented that reflect Milla and the West's civilising mission as an abduction of agency.

After Jakkie joins the Defence Force Milla stops writing the diaries because she fears what someone may "read into them" (2006: 601), and that her views may be regarded as heretical in a culture that bases its superiority on racial purity. She then locks the diaries away, but fearfully keeps on thinking that they should be destroyed. Owing to her paralysis she instructs Agaat to burn the diaries, possibly to avoid facing the "facades" that spoke of "the whole lie" she had lived (2006: 601). Agaat's re-reading of these diaries suggests the liberatory potential Milla might have attained had she questioned the racist discourses that informed her subjectivity, and not suppressed her anxieties over Agaat's isolation. Similarly, if Beatrice had not ignored her anxiety over Milla's physical abuse she may have achieved some liberation from her own oppressive marriage, instead, neither speaks against their indoctrination and thus they do not offer any resistance against patriarchal power.

During Beatrice's visit near the end of Milla's life Milla acknowledges that God "was not on the side of the unmaskers. He was the great Mask himself" (2006: 270). Milla lies "biered for the fatherland" and is no longer able to counter Beatrice's defence of the holy sanctity of marriage, which upholds the *appearance* of benevolent patriarchal privilege from kitchen gossip. However, Milla is at least delivered to the mercy of her diary that "runs deeper than little kitchen secrets" (2006: 270). Milla's education of Agaat cannot be considered completely as an exercise of power, as the diaries also document interaction between them where their mutual pleasure is obvious.⁴⁶

Agaat's perceptive and symbolic rewriting of Milla's diaries represents the rewriting of colonial historiography that details 'benevolent' civilising responsibilities. The novel's documentation of Milla's changing belief systems, in conjunction with Agaat's rewriting of Milla's diaries, implies that perspective is nuanced, that it can and does change. This is indicative of the intimate connection between the coloniser and colonised, and suggests the potential of transgressing dualistic borders. Inventories must remain open to re-inscription in order to ensure, as Edward Said argues, that the humanities responsibly address politics and culture and that these investigations formulate the nature of the connection between knowledge and politics in the "specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances" (2001: 2002). Therefore, it is important that Milla's diaries, as well as Agaat's rewriting of these, remain open to further interpretation for responsible reflections on the influences in the characters' lives.

⁴⁶ In the interview with Dedi Felman (2007) Michiel Heyns agrees with this statement.

1.5 Carving Culture from Nature

How you get to an uncivilised place in a civilised way. And stay there. A grim tussle with mother nature. I was not in accord.

(2006: 5)

The covenant narrative ‘entitled’ the Afrikaner to the Promised Land of South Africa, which J. M. Coetzee asserts developed into a “lineal consciousness” (1988: 83-88) that legitimated the passing of land to the Afrikaner descendants as the ‘Chosen People.’ The entitlement to the land was attained not only through capitalist means, which the *plaasromans* of the 1920s to 1940s specifically denigrated because of the painful transition from farmer to townsmen in the mass urban migrations during this period. Entitlement was also achieved through the sweat and blood of their ancestors who carved these farms out of the wild, untamed land, in much the same manner that civilisation discursively polarises culture and nature. This hierarchised opposition results in culture’s appropriation of nature’s intentional qualities, offering them back as reductive anthropocentric reflections that deny Other perspectives on the history of oppression. Jakkie confirms civilisation as being in “a grim tussle with mother nature” (2006: 5) and thus challenges so-called civilised practices of hyper-separating culture and nature.

I explore the ways in which the novel examines the influence of liberal Western capitalism on conservative Afrikaans cultures and interrogates the opposition between work (industriousness) and leisure (idleness) that has affected our ethical and ecological playing field. The “pronouncements,” “prescriptions” and “prohibitions” (2006: 554) of an increasingly abstracted culture exert “extreme pressure” (2006: 350) on Milla and Jak, which is then written on their bodies, as shown by Milla’s nervous disorder and Jak’s “emaciated” appearance (2006: 350). Similarly, the eroded environment is written by a culture that is remote from nature, and thus cannot perceive or adequately respond to the processes it relies on for survival. To understand the ways in which socio-cultural practices in the novel influence Milla’s and Jak’s disparate responses to their environment, it is important to unpack the ways in which they negotiate their varied cultural performances.

Jak de Wet is the only son of “the GP in Caledon” and he is orphaned at a young age and sent to Bishops, an exclusive private Anglican boys boarding school in Cape Town (2006: 24). While Jak is Afrikaans, he is schooled in liberal English views, with no parents to instill Afrikaner Christian Nationalism in him, and he has no farming background. Milla is very aware of Jak’s urbanised heritage, and notes that “he was no farm boy. His hands were soft ... schooled at Bishops to be a gentleman. He would have to learn everything from scratch. From you and your family he would have to get it” (2006: 24). Not only does this foreground Milla’s responsibility as an educator, but furthermore sets up divisions between and within English and Afrikaans cultures; between and within

the essentialised categories of ‘gentleman’ and *boer*. Jak and Milla marry on the 13th December 1947 (2006: 44), just before the National Party’s accession to power in June 1948. Symbolically their marriage might be representative of the Apartheid government’s attempt to unify white South Africans through the consolidation of a liberal, capitalist-orientated English culture (focusing on production) and a conservative patriarchal Christian Afrikaans culture (emphasising work ethics that promote ‘good stewardship’). It is important to note that both categories legitimated the racial oppression of individuals of colour as a source of labour.

The Afrikaner work ethic is determined by the rule of good stewardship, implying an ability to respond to the environment’s requirements, which further justifies the inheritance of land. Milla’s ancestors “planted the wild fig avenue ... and traced the foundations of the homestead with lynx-hide ropes” (2006: 28), suggesting that Coetzee’s “lineal consciousness” (1988: 83-88) clearly informed the Afrikaner’s link to the land. Significantly, Milla cannot give up her birthright carved “in the sweat” of her “ancestors” brows, as this would imply a loss of her own privileged access to land as part of the ‘Chosen People’ (2006: 28). While a discursive link to the land is admirable, one based on predetermined privilege results in damaging conquering narratives. This illustrates that this entitlement, despite the work ethic emphasis, shares a similar hierarchical structure to the Bible’s creation stories, which as we have seen hands the human male animal dominion over the rest of the world’s beings. If Milla had been able to replace this lineal consciousness with a more inclusive ecological consciousness, that adopts Plumwood’s intentional recognition stance, she might have enabled the rhizomatic, anti-establishment discourse posited by Deleuze and Guattari. This signals the possibility of accommodating Agaat by discursively imagining around the oppressive conceptual frameworks of the symbolic order.

As suggested in my introduction, the European masters’ justification of the white colonialists’ entitlement to the land depended on their proving they utilised the land more efficiently than the indigenous nomads. Milla’s responses to nature suggest a production-orientated discourse disrespects the land. That the Afrikaner settlers did not initially take to capitalism’s need for increased production, despite the ‘civilised’ and romanticised luxuries it purported to afford, resulted in the European masters defining them as ‘idle.’⁴⁷ Coetzee writes that the Hottentots have been

⁴⁷ Coetzee quotes Barrow’s survey, which states that unless the slothful ‘nature’ of the Boer is changed, or, failing that, “the Boers are replaced with more industrious and enterprising settlers,” the Colony will not become productive (1988: 29). He refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754) to support his argument that the division between leisure and idleness enabled the Hottentot’s exclusion from the golden age. Rousseau details how humans are lifted out of primitive savagery by participating in the tool-making revolution, which meant their free time was “devoted ‘industriously’ to the elaboration of ‘conveniences,’” which “develop into the yoke of civilization” (In Coetzee, 1988: 24-25). Interestingly, Milla’s sexual manipulations result in Jak telling her that his penis is not her “toolbox” (2006: 347).

described, and denounced, as idle since 1652, but nowhere was it asked whether the Hottentot's lifestyle "may not be a version of life before the Fall," a life in which humans are not yet "condemned" to eat their "bread in the sweat of [their] brow" (1988: 18). That the Hottentots spent their "'free' time sleeping" meant they were excluded from Western notions of the golden age because they were unwilling to be exploited as obedient labour in so-called 'civilising' missions. Coetzee, however, notes that the true scandal of the nineteenth century was not the idleness of the Hottentots, but the idleness of the Boers (1988: 28).⁴⁸ Significantly, this contrasts with the concept of 'Chosen People' and good stewardship.

The criticism of Boer idleness is interestingly opposite to Jak's criticism of Milla's inherited work ethic, which he describes as essentially being "slave" labour (2006: 86). Jak's statement in this instance is indicative of his more liberal orientation, which further reinforces his alienation from the land. Ironically, many of the difficulties that Milla faces on the farm are a direct consequence of the depletion of the nourishing terrain induced by Jak's capitalist farming practices, focusing on profit and production. Jak's production-orientated discourse maintains his privilege, and by extension his oppression, by seeking profit and status while remaining remote from the material processes required for survival.

Agaat reminds us that in a time of global ecological crises regeneration will require increased demands on our work ethics. This demonstrates the necessity of eliminating remoteness from our ecological foundation, and facing the consequences of unethical frameworks that demand oppression. *Agaat* impels us to investigate the European Masters' capitalist emphasis on production outputs that resulted in the Hottentots' and Boers' way of life being undermined. That the Masters were unaware of the consequences of their insatiable appetites structured by oppressive conceptual frameworks, encouraged an aggressive will to steal from nature in order to survive. Therefore, Coetzee argues, work ethics that "rejected the curse of discipline and labour in favour of a prelapsarian African way of life in which the fruits of the earth are enjoyed as they drop into the hand ... [and where] work is avoided as a scourge, and idleness and leisure become the same thing," could not be allowed to threaten the Coloniser's greedy privileges (1988: 32).

Jak makes a "mockery" of Afrikaner Christian Nationalism's emphasis on good stewardship and inherited privilege during his wedding speech, which exposes his anxiety at allowing himself to be "snared" and consequently emasculated by Milla in order to gain access to entitled land (2006: 49,26). Milla's mother's phallic unearthing of the map of the farm from its "long sheath," implying

⁴⁸ Despite British moral outrage at the perception of the Boer life of ease being earned at the expense of black slave labour, which differentiated them from the Hottentot's lifestyle, Coetzee notes that frequently servants preferred to work for Boer masters rather than British, because while the British paid more they demanded too much work (1988: 31).

patriarchal lineage, is challenged by the fact that the farm is Milla's matrilineal birthright, which entitles her to be the fifth generation owner when she marries (2006: 28). The price for this privilege is Milla's virginity and the honouring of the social contract, which is organised around domesticity, subordination to male authority, child bearing and nurturing. The cost to Jak is his emasculation because not only does he lack any farming knowledge or experience, especially in comparison to Milla, but he is aware of his merely being a pawn in Milla's manipulations to own the farm through their marriage. Jak, therefore, constantly derides Milla's work ethic and rule of good stewardship, which he refers to as "slave" labour (2006: 86). In contrast, Milla argues that "money [is]n't everything, work rather, toil and sweat" (2006: 23).

The novel's examination of the concept of what it means to be 'good' is analysed through Agaat's naming by the dominee, which he refers to as "a self-fulfilling prophecy" not unlike a "holy brand" or an "immanent destiny" (2006: 487). Agaat's name is Dutch for Agatha, which originates from the Greek word meaning 'good' (2006: 487). Milla looks up 'Agate' in her father's old reference books and says, "all the world is in your name," which counters the dominee's belief that goodness can be attained only through God (2006: 625). Marti Kheel's analysis of Aldo Leopold's land ethic is useful for understanding Western ideas of 'goodness.' Kheel argues that Leopold's land ethic (extending "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" [2005: 103]) is inextricably tied to the idea that proper hunting conduct involves 'good' sportsmanship, which means that to be ethical one must cooperate and play by the rules (1993: 253). This develops from Leopold's Western belief that instinct prompts competition (2005: 103). Similarly, the Afrikaners' right to the land was validated through the discourse of "lineal consciousness" (1988: 83-88) and 'good' stewardship. In much the same way as wildlife is preserved, not because of the animal's "inherent right to life, but because of the hunter's inherent right to kill" (Kheel, 1993: 253), the Afrikaners' right to the land is preserved not because of nature's inherent right to life, but because of the Afrikaners' 'inherent' right to dominion over it. It may be argued that the narratives of biblical entitlement enabled the capitalist manipulation of the discourse on 'good' stewardship.

While Milla is disgusted by Jak's un-sportsmanlike decimation of the small game on the farm through using hunting rifles with sights, her religious beliefs still dictate human beings' right to have dominion over nature. Perhaps this is why she gives Agaat a 'sporting' chance at being included in the fold of the 'Chosen' through her attempts at 'civilising' her (2006: 223). Milla's religion teaches her that "you are conceived and born in sin" (2006: 224) and have to work towards becoming good, which often involves a limitation of freedom. Intimately related with this formulation is thus Milla's attempt at being 'good' through her education of Agaat. When Agaat does not observe her duties and

behave like a good “Dutch house,” she is punished for disobedience (2006: 125,160,395,524). Agaat’s discursive ability to resist Milla is detailed in her response as a young child to one of Milla’s punishments:

Good, she says crying, one good two goods, goods is loose goods ... & goods are a lot of things that don’t have a name & goods are your goods that you have in your suitcase, stolen goods. (2006: 626)

This excerpt emphasises language’s slipperiness, as well as the commodification of good/s that can be appropriated and manipulated as power dictates. Discourse divorced from emotion controls ethical conduct through restraining wayward or immoral passions, which is encouraged not only in Western religion, but in Western philosophy as well, both of which police the discursive terrain that they ultimately create.

Theorists, such as Marti Kheel, Lynn White Jr., Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway argue that since the Enlightenment ethical theory has tended to be based less on the Word of God and more on the God of Reason, both monolithic discursive strategies. I argue that Haraway’s “powerful infidel heteroglossia,” which resists ‘perfect’ communication, challenges these strategies (1991: 181). These oppressive monolithic structures are influenced by Kant’s ideas that stipulate duty should eclipse personal desires and anxieties and instead be determined by an exercise of will. We are thus able to see how ethics might be appropriated and instrumentalised as a tool of restraint, which ensures ‘good’ social conduct that discursively limits freedom. Jakkie says “you’re [all] more scared of freedom than you are of the communists” (2006: 608). This suggests that transcendental metaphors have made people so remote from their embodied natures that they fear the processes they rely on for survival. Remoteness allows the characters to be easily manipulated by oppressive conceptual frameworks that hyper-separate desires and anxieties from a sense of duty. The cultural implications of gendered ethics will be discussed further in Chapter Two, while the influence of biblical discourses of salvation will be examined in more detail in Chapter Three in “Urgent Call of Nature: Scourge of the Seven-Year-Itch.”

The novel also investigates academic institutions and their involvement in oppressive conceptual frameworks that encourage a restraint of desire in order to appropriate people for their own purpose. Jak and Milla both obtain degrees from Stellenbosch University, Jak in law and Milla in languages. Jakkie’s response to Milla’s attempts to convince him to return to South Africa and study Afrikaans cultural history at Stellenbosch contains much of what Edward Said refers to as “oppositional criticism.” Milla, describing Jakkie’s letter, says:

And then in his next letter he delivered himself of a whole lot of stuff about how he wasn’t a Patriomantic Oxwagonologist, but an anthropologist, and that meant that it

was the rubbish bins of the worthy professional Brethren of Stellenbosch, not their ideas, that he had to scrutinise under a magnifying glass. (2006: 243)

What is clear from Jakkie's assertion above is that an examination of what remains silenced under the ideological discursive formulations of racial superiority might unlock the potential to escape them. Similarly, Said's work is critical of intellectual scholarship that helped create the body of theory and practice on the Orient, the construction of which increased with the West's material investment in the East. Said therefore argues for "oppositional criticism" not reducible to a political position, but rather life-enhancing through the production of noncoercive knowledge in the interests of human freedom.⁴⁹

Jakkie's suggestion that the "Bureau of Mechanical Engineering at Stellenbosch was a kind of front for Armscor" foregrounds the erasure of histories that place Apartheid in an unsavoury light (2006: 455). Milla's reaction to the exposure of the National Party's involvement in the Angolan war, and her growing sense of "suspicion" and "apprehension" during the seventies and eighties, is to take stronger tranquilisers (2006: 456). As a consequence, Milla adopts the helpless and embittered position of a victim and internalises her anger at firstly, Jakkie for not disclosing his involvement in the Angolan war (1966 – 1989); secondly, at the Defence Force for using Jakkie for their own purposes; and thirdly, the government "that maintained a dour silence" (2006: 455). Jak, on the other hand, does not see any harm in the cultural headquarters doubling up as an "arms factory," arguing that this is how "all honourable nations consolidate themselves" (2006: 455). This highlights the interweaving of colonial education with militarism, and conflates language and colonial education with weaponry in the task of sub-ordinating the Other. Jak's explicit acknowledgement of this position illustrates his ironic liberal instrumentalism, and the fact that his privilege is maintained by both the gun and the word.

Jak justifies his inculcation of Apartheid militarism in Jakkie by saying he "defends our borders" (2006: 458). Jak's responses foreground his awareness of the need to patrol the borders of his constructed privilege, which result in his willingness to sacrifice his child. This aggression is not only condoned, but actively encouraged under patriarchal Apartheid, implying the sacrifice is for the greater good of the Afrikaner who defends "white man's future" (2006: 458). Jak demands that Milla display "more fighting spirit" to boost the "morale of the men on the border" (2006: 458). Ironically, Jak's willingness to sacrifice his son for the greater 'good' mirrors the biblical symbology of God allowing his son to be killed for the redemption of man. Milla's defensive motivations are also

⁴⁹ Edward Said signals this position in the introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). Similarities might be drawn between Said's 'oppositional criticism' and Kwame Appiah's 'cosmopolitanism,' Val Plumwood's 'planetary organisation' and Donna Haraway's 'powerful infidel heteroglossia.'

revealed in her Eve-like desire for a paradise garden in order to reinvest hope in a system she is beginning to doubt. Milla coerces Jak into allowing her to cultivate this Paradise through fulfilling sexual favours, which makes evident the extent to which Milla uses her sex to manipulate negotiations with Jak.

However, Milla's sexual manipulations do not entice Jak to improve his "meagre" knowledge (2006: 67). Despite Jak's "so-called diploma" from Elsenburg Agricultural College, which Milla's mother insists Jak obtain before he puts a foot on her land, he is completely dependent on Milla, whom he bitterly notes "always knows better" (2006: 24,67,353). Jak's disinterest renders him incapable of responding to the environment's basic needs and instead his inadequacies result in "fear" and "hysteria" when his inability to perform the master role he internalises is revealed (2006: 353). However, Jak does not have to prove good stewardship, as his 'right' to the land is established through his marriage to Milla, which requires Milla's subservience and silence in the face of the vestigial stories proffered by an increasingly abstracted patriarchal society.

While the novel interrogates Afrikaner ancestral entitlement, it also reinvests an Afrikaner work ethic with positive connotations through emphasising its respect for the "rhythms of nature," which I explore in Chapter Two (2006: 113). This is destroyed in the capitalist rush to make a profit, and effects a change in relationship between farmer and the land: the farmer rather than being part of nature becomes an exploiter of nature. That Milla's own nature is colonised by culture is evident in her eroded subjectivity that is literally and figuratively paralysed by her inability to accommodate religious indoctrination, as well as her desires and anxieties. The novel suggests that whether it be religious or scientific abstractions, both Milla and Jak, for their different reasons, believe they are tragic God figures.

1.6 Conclusion: Paradise Lost

You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone,
They paved Paradise and put up a parking lot.
- Joni Mitchell, "Big Yellow Taxi"

The novel is explicit in recognising Milla's inability to accommodate her ambivalence and when it is clear that the farm will not fulfil her Edenic idealisations, she tries to cultivate, in the form of a garden, the pastoral promise of a paradise. It is in this garden, which seemed like a "fairy tale" if "you didn't know better," that they celebrate Jakkie's twenty-fifth birthday during his final visit before he deserts the South African Defence Force and leaves the country (2006: 611). I argue that this pastoral pledge of a so-called Promised Land does not provide a sense of belonging to its children. In fact, the overtly religious construction imbricated in the legitimisation of the discourse of

‘Chosen People’ is revealed as a tool of Othering that consolidates hierarchy within nature/culture and self/Other oppositions. The juxtaposition of Milla’s desire for an Edenic Paradise with Jak’s need to defend Apartheid significantly implies that ‘paradise’ has already been lost. Similarly, Milla’s self-protective action, resulting in the implementation of Apartheid in their home, suggests the loss of connectivity, and of the potential correctives implied, as I argue, in situated knowledges. The potential introduced by Milla’s mixed farming and her love for the coloured Agaat is traumatically unrealised.

Two key textual instances in the novel support the theme of paradise being lost. Firstly, Agaat persists in using Milton as disinfectant on Milla’s paralytic body, despite the fact that she knows “Milton sets [Milla’s] teeth on edge” (2006: 184). John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) became renowned for its heretical views as it renounced the mind/body dualism of Plato and Descartes, as well as Hobbes’ mechanistic determinism. Similarly, Val Plumwood’s intentional recognition stance counters what she refers to as the “on/off Cartesian concept of consciousness” that Descartes selected to “effect the whole-sale exclusion of non-humans” or the further alternative developed in the “Great Chain of Being” (2002: 176). Milla’s disavowal of Milton suggests her ambivalent positioning in perpetuating the nature/culture dualism.

Cartesian reductive stances are challenged by William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), which ends with a series of revolutionary prophecies enticing people to break the bonds of religious and political oppression. He writes about John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell ... because he was a true Poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it.⁵⁰

Similarly, the most poignant sections of Milla’s diaries are those that detail her joy in educating Agaat, suggesting then that their relationship cannot be entirely about power manipulation. This education largely entails the study of nature as meaningful, often contradicting Milla’s indoctrinated religious beliefs, which result in Milla questioning whether her education of Agaat is “blasphem[ous]” (2006: 527). However, it is only during the last forty days of Milla’s life that she is able to acknowledge that “completeness” is the “wrong medicine,” and that “perfection, purity [and] order” are all “the devil’s own little helpers” (2006: 219).

When Milla tries to articulate the meaning of her paradise garden, she does not find the words (2006: 459). Years later Agaat opens Milla’s diary at the section entitled “Agaat and the garden of Grootmoedersdrift 1980” and Agaat notes that this section is almost empty, merely saying

⁵⁰ Information obtained from Wikipedia and <http://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/darknessvisible/critics.html>: accessed 21 May 2009.

“paradise” at the top and containing a list of plants (2006: 57). From the beginning Agaat challenges Milla’s abstracted transcendental beliefs. As a young child, echoing Blake above, she contradicts Milla’s depiction of Heaven as having “precious stone walls of jasper & streets of gold” by saying that “Heaven is a stone” that “trap[s]” and ossifies the soul (2006: 626). Milla calls Agaat’s ability to see fossils through the monolithic structure of stone “second sight,” which I relate to Plumwood’s intentional recognition stance that I explore in greater detail in Chapter Three (2006: 625).

The novel’s interrogation of religious doctrine, with its egocentric and abstracted sense of entitlement, warns that the inevitable outcome is a trap that paralyses resistance. Milla embodies this metaphor through her own paralysis and at the end of her life admits to preferring “life on Grootmoedersdrift” to the “heavenly void” (2006: 555). Milla’s inability to articulate what paradise might be, is a symptom of the Christian indoctrination she struggles to emerge from. It results in the disintegration of her physical body and her belief in God. Milla’s decomposing body is mirrored by the eroding farm landscape, which is then a reflection of the damaging consequences of covenant narratives and a pioneering logic. In the next chapter I examine the ways in which this religious legacy is fortified by capitalist and scientific discourses.

2. Chapter Two: Negotiating Inherited Narratives

2.1 Introduction: Granite taken for Granted⁵¹

Nay what, Jak said, this is not a picnic, we're going to match our strength against nature. You just see to it that we build up our stamina beforehand, and have the food ready when we return.
(2006: 377)

Milla's and Jak De Wet's farming techniques stand in opposition to each other and represent the binary divide between sterile purity (mechanised monoculture/factory farming) and hybridity (mixed farming). This chapter examines the ways in which a dis-eased consciousness caused by a "lack" in the base structure, the literal and figurative soil that we all rely on for survival, creates the "wrong hunger" (2006: 251). The lack, that centralises harmful desires, seems to be the result of painstakingly constructed acontextualised ideology that requires a turning away from material knowledges, such as those contained in the *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* included in the epigraphs to the novel (2006: 74).⁵² This book forms part of the cultural heritage that is handed down from Milla's father, to Milla and then to Agaat and Jakkie. The inclusion of a seminal text (forming part of the cultural goods that influenced the old knowledge systems of farmers) against the contemporary capitalist emphasis on production, emphasises the ways in which culture and knowledge systems have been manipulated by capitalist priorities over time.⁵³ It is clear that the allegorical representations of Milla and Jak signify to some extent this manipulation.

A comparison of mixed farming and Apartheid's laws on racial purity reveals the ways in which secular knowledge might have assisted in undermining Apartheid ideology, and instead encourage affinity amongst South Africans. This is suggested because the logics of situated knowledge (material reality) and evolution contradict racialist laws of purity in the sense that purity denies the adaptation necessary to survive in a continually changing world. In the main, the white colonists did not succeed in objectively analysing farming practices contained in their inherited knowledge systems, and fell prey to capitalist manipulations of the farm's meaning by turning

⁵¹ The phrase "granite taken for granted" is taken from Irene J. Klaver's essay "Stone Worlds: Phenomenology on (the) Rocks" and refers to the long history of the Earth as a world not taken seriously into account (2005: 351).

⁵² Translated as *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*. This text was written by civil servants and other experts and originally published in 1929. It details innovative material farming practices and was reprinted within the same year due to public demand. Although it may be seriously flawed and dated, it might, to some extent, offer an ethics of caring that is still relevant and worth salvaging in this contemporary moment.

⁵³ In response to specific criticism I emphasise that the *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* would have been published by people soon to legalise a racialised white capitalist landowner class and my intention was, and is, to argue that changing farming practices reflected when comparing this text to current trends reveal the ways in which capitalism seems to have depleted an ethics of caring for the earth and beings in general, and not commend the *Hulpboek* as anti-capitalist.

towards mass monoculture: ultimately choosing profit over the soil/base structure. The intense effort that this construction required is analogous to the effort Agaat has to invest in keeping Milla's paralytic body alive. This becomes a trope for the immobilising restraint that Apartheid instilled in the people it was created to serve.

Such restraint results in both Jak's and Milla's agency, albeit to different degrees, being defined by the need to defend their privilege, which then alienates them from vital embedded knowledge sources. I argue that Milla's and Jak's entitlement advocates privilege and alienation, which results in increasingly remote and abstracted farming practices. This is particularly traumatic for Milla, who senses the wrong in her response, or lack of response, to both Agaat and the farm. Milla's internalisation of the nature/culture dualism results in her allowing Jak to perpetrate violent reproduction prerogatives on her body. At the same time, Milla ambiguously acknowledges it as "treason" when Jak perpetrates the same on the bodies of the Simmental cows (2006: 252). Milla's body, which the book persistently portrays as weakening, is mapped as the site where Milla's pathologies are ultimately inscribed. This reminds us that the social, cultural and political narratives we tell define and delimit not only the nature outside our bodies, but also the nature inside them. Van Niekerk collapses the nature/culture dualism through reading both the landscape of the farm and the landscape of the characters' bodies as text.

I examine the ways in which global capitalism has changed the orientation of farming to an egocentric mass monoculture that is "about profits and costs and optimal utilisation of soil" (2006: 109). The instrumentalisation of production-oriented technology as a power tool, in replacing manual labour, further increases the Masters' privilege (and alienation). I argue that the capitalist prerogative for continually increasing production outputs required science to replace religion as the new overarching discourse. The resulting increase in remoteness from the processes we rely on for survival then paralyses the potential for corrective action and encourages 'rationalised' discourse that is divorced from emotion. Further, it creates the presumption that technological rationality is independent of and able to re-create the world and evolving species by itself. Jak is portrayed as searching for salvation on earth rather than in heaven; he is a man of science whose capitalist bias leads him to abstractions that are not adequately mitigated by Milla's subjugated role as nurturer and educator.

The novel clearly depicts the ecological crisis as resulting from a 'cultured' mind that cannot acknowledge and adapt to its material body, or the embodied and ecological support base our bodies draw from. I argue that Carol Gilligan's research in "Moral Orientation and Moral Development" (1987) on enculturated gendered focus phenomena and an ethics of care are relevant to understanding the differences in the types of political, religious and social motivations Milla and Jak entertain. To

this end I examine Van Niekerk's depiction of Milla's and Jak's ethical standpoints to reproductive and productive practices with reference to some of Gilligan's findings. These differences are, to a large extent, controlled by the legislation of unethical policies, which include the concept of marriage that maintains patriarchal privilege through the subjugated *volksmoeder*.

2.2 Privatisation: The Marriage Contract

I shall néver talk out of the house, Milla. Marriage is hóly and it's private. Everything depends on that.⁵⁴

(2006: 120)

In *Agaat* the farm, Grootmoedersdrift, is Milla's matrilineal inheritance, which is evidenced in Milla's fantasy that her mother will *see* how the consummation of her and Jak's relationship proves that "ownership and history and heritage all were finding their course, as it was predestined, with the brute energy of a good start" (2006: 31). Despite the transition from feudal to capitalist systems, Milla has to marry Jak before she can access ancestral land. I argue that Milla's and Jak's marriage is a tragic romanticised capitalist contract undertaken at great cost to them both, costs which are silenced through the privacy that the "hóly sanctity of marriage" dictates (2006: 120). Through naming a comparison is drawn between the formation of the garden settlement at the Cape of Good Hope (Goedehoop) and that of Afrikaner farms, such as Goedbegin (Good Start). This emphasises the ways in which an Afrikaner "lineal consciousness" (1988: 83-88) works as a colonising enterprise constructed on the belief that privileged rights to resources are predestined and consolidated through a marriage relationship, another tyranny perpetuated in the name of a 'civilising' mission.⁵⁵

In the main, the marriage contract silences Milla's objections to Jak's farming practices, which highlights her complicity with patriarchal discourse. While Milla's matrilineal heritage legally entitles her as the fifth generation owner of the farm Grootmoedersdrift, this privilege is dependent on her honouring the social contract. Elaine Unterhalter emphasises how women's reproduction in South Africa was controlled not only through the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act No. 55 of 1949, and the Immorality Act of 1950 (both repealed in 1985), but also how the concept of 'woman' "was organised around domesticity, subordination to male authority, child bearing and child care"

⁵⁴ The unusually accented English words gesture towards retaining the vernacular prominent in translation.

⁵⁵ Coetzee argues that "in more than one sense, the attainment of lineal consciousness in the *plaasroman* becomes like the consummation of true love in the novel of marriage: the achievement not only of the blending of the questing subject with the beloved, but also of the end of the discontent of individual consciousness" (1988: 101).

(1995: 228).⁵⁶ J.M. Coetzee writes that marriage in precapitalist times was a “universal life-goal” and that it was arranged, usually within the district, under patriarchal authority (1981: 71). It is relevant then that the only time Milla speaks up in public on behalf of the land, which she too metaphorically compares to women, is when she discovers she is pregnant after twelve years of marriage (2006: 114). The fulfilment of this social contract briefly empowers Milla, but this empowerment does not last long under Jak’s defensive and violent retaliation. The gendered structure of Afrikaner Nationalism demanded women’s complicity, which was manipulated through religious duty that undermined effective resistance. Ania Loomba contends that in South Africa the family was central in creating Afrikaner Nationalism, where “white men were seen to embody the political and economic agency of the *volk*, while women were the (unpaid) keepers of tradition and the *volk*’s moral and spiritual mission” (2005: 160-161).

Akin to Coetzee’s assertion of an Afrikaner lineal consciousness, the Afrikaner Nationalist movement used the image of the *Volksmoeder* to create its own lineage, which served to limit and control the activity of women within the imagined community. This is seen in the pathology driven matriarchy foregrounded in *Agaat*. Elsie Cloete in “Writing of(f) the women of the National Women’s Monument,” illustrates how texts originally intended to commemorate the brave role of women in the Anglo-Boer War (in order to reify a particular nationalism while simultaneously working as an attempt to overlook the Afrikaner male defeat) were “manufactured, abandoned and then finally [used to bury] the women intended to bring it to fruition,” as their mobilisation was no longer necessary (1999: 137). Cloete draws a comparison between the National Women’s Monument⁵⁷ and the brochures used to re-member its symbolism with Coetzee’s relationship between a good farmer and his land as being a proprietorship that embodies a “marriage not so much between himself and the farm as between his lineage” (1988: 86). Cloete argues that these brochures no longer commemorate the deaths of the 26,370 women and children that died in British concentration camps, but rather the ideologies of the all-male commission. The brochures thus served as a patriarchal discursive tool to occlude women from Afrikaner history, while further ensuring the protection of the ancestral estate, not only for the (male) ancestors, but for the (male) descendants of the Afrikaner *Volk*. Cloete argues that until patriarchy is forced to re-examine the relationship between nationalism and gender, the configuration of nationalism demands complicity by women.

⁵⁶ Here Elaine Unterhalter refers to Cheryl Walker’s argument in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990). In response to criticism I note that while Unterhalter’s argument might refer specifically to interracial reproduction, my reference to her work here is with regard to the concept of “woman” and the “dominant ideological construction of gender” (Unterhalter, 1995: 228).

⁵⁷ This monument was unveiled outside Bloemfontein in 1913.

Agaat interrogates the characters' acceptance of gender dualisms, such as active/passive, public/private, intellectual/intuitive, egoistic/altruistic, competitive/nurturant, dominant/submissive, in order to detail the tragic consequences of the hyper-separation of these categories. Milla hierarchises and internalises Jak's superior status, linked to culture, which silences her potential for resistance. She marries Jak because she believes he is "everything" she is not, which foregrounds the privileging of Afrikaner patriarchy in terms of ownership of the land, and by extension, women through the marriage contract (2006: 25). While under the power of gendered dualisms Milla has no agency unless she is married to Jak. Complicity with patriarchal Christian Nationalism results in pain and suffering for Milla, which she projects onto Agaat, who, like Jesus Christ, becomes Milla's scapegoat. This behaviour is reminiscent of what Nietzsche called 'ressentiment,' which Laura Kipnis argues creates a perverse psychological bond whereby you denounce the pain of mastery while simultaneously wanting to retain the 'privilege' that is legitimated by patriarchal affiliations through marriage (2006: 36-7).

'Ressentiment,' then, is a method used to transform self-hatred into moral superiority and Felman and Heyns confirm that it is "the shifting of [power in] the relationships that are the point rather than any particular structure of power" (In Felman, 2007). The novel interrogates women's underestimation of their own insight and warns against what Nancy Armstrong calls a "feminism that sinks comfortably into the rhetoric of victimization" (1997: 919). Laura Kipnis refers to this formulation as the "inner woman" or "the collaborator within" who continues to perpetuate, and legitimate, inequality (2006: xii). Milla's mother articulates this wounded attachment, but it is also only near the end of her life when she feels free, and ironically empowered, to talk.⁵⁸ She states: "[t]oo much understanding of the evil-doer and too little indignation with the evil ... that's how women make a virtue of their own suffering and how men get away with murder" (2006: 144).

These gendered traits, as well as the oscillation between English liberalism and Afrikaner conservatism, result in Milla's and Jak's cultural backgrounds being determined variously by religious, scientific, technological and capitalist discourses. Both characters illustrate the characteristic nature/culture dualism, which results in Milla elevating the Word of God, and Jak the Word of Scientific reason, as the arbiters of thought. Thus, neither is able to critically analyse the environment's significance. This fundamental elision results in Jak's death being metaphorically described in extortionist terms, where he is staked through the heart by the branch of a tree. The nature Jak preyed on leaves him "shrike-spiked like a beetle" and displayed as if he were one of

⁵⁸ Gendered dualisms trap the category woman to such an extent that it is only at death that the poverty created by patriarchal discourse is mentioned. This is paralleled by Milla's epiphany at the end of the novel when she finally admits to abducting Agaat and thus her collusion with grand patriarchal conquering narratives.

Agaat's mounted insects that he defensively forced her to discard due to the possibility of "infest[ation]": a pertinent reminder of what will remain of the human race if ecological degradation is not addressed (2006: 156,633). Master narratives are hereby pinned down and interrogated by alternative perspectives that reveal Jak's legacy of meaningless medals and trophies as dangerous "toys" that leave the farm in the "pitch-dark" (2006: 197-8). The novel renders the master narrative a "spectacle" that dies a farcical death (2006: 156).

As Milla's disease progresses, she wonders whether she would have preferred to die a premature death like Jak, where he had no chance for second thoughts, no chance to "pose" (2006: 648). Milla's death is all about second thoughts, all about a questioning reflection that examines the reasons for her unravelling body during the last forty days of her life. This questioning is what differentiates Milla from Jak, and is indicative of the beginning of resistance that is necessary for Agaat's sake, and for the future of the community. I argue Milla hopes that no matter how much she has taken from Agaat, she has left her with enough to survive.⁵⁹ Milla's ethics, therefore, reflect some responsibility for ensuring the survival of future generations, whereas Jak's ethics are individualistically rights-based and determined on privilege. To reinforce the importance of accommodating rather than conquering ethics Marti Kheel argues that "the natural world will be 'saved' not by the sword of ethical theory, but rather through a *transformed consciousness toward all life*" (emphasis mine, 1993: 244).

The hope is that this questioning reflection might counter Milla's and Jak's reluctance to relinquish power within society through reminding them of the slippages in narrative polarisations and exclusions, such as the nature/culture dualism. In this regard Chaia Heller argues:

Nature is the water in our bodies and the wind in our hair. Within our bodies, each of us contains DNA from the first cells of evolution. Instead of trying desperately to know nature solely through language or contemplation, we must also begin to know ourselves. (1993: 232)

Here Heller's argument for "a lifelong process of critical self-reflection" (1993: 232) seems to rest on the belief that meaning should not exist independently of the senses, but that authenticity depends on a closer more intimate relation with nature (both inside and outside the body) that is capable of challenging remoteness in language. In an interview with Hans Pienaar Van Niekerk says that women need to "stand together and ... gain complete material and psychological independence" in order to become their own masters (Van Niekerk in Pienaar, 2005). Only when one begins to know

⁵⁹ Milla admits "inexpressible regret" over "fors[aking]" Agaat after "appropriating" her. In Chapter Four I argue that Agaat's recognition of the good in Milla's education, through continuing farming in the old inherited ways, enables Milla to die with the knowledge that she has given Agaat, "who remain[s] behind," enough to attempt the ecological recuperation of the eroded terrain (2006: 540-541).

oneself in this way is one able to engage in what Heller refers to as “authentic love,” which is a celebration of the distinctiveness of the Other. Authentic love is not based in abstracted romantic sentiment, but “emerges from an appreciation and knowledge of the particular needs, experiences and level of development of ... loved ones” (1993: 233).

Authentic love then resists abstraction from embodied needs. In *Agaat*, Jak avoids Thys’s proposal that he join the secret all-male Broederbond society precisely because of its tendency to intellectual abstraction, which results in Thys spending hours poring over the dictionary in an attempt to understand (2006: 638). Despite these abstractions the Broederbond’s ideologies became those of the ruling Nationalist Party, which foregrounds the difficulty of challenging entitlement narratives, as well as the importance of situated knowledges that might resist a reductionist stance toward nature. Jim Cheney argues that the price of this control is alienation, and that the birth of foundationalist and ahistorical theorising in the sciences and value theory involves a flight to objectivity that motivates a move away from the flux of personal, cultural and linguistic embeddedness to the ‘safe’ world of acontextual ‘truth’ (1994: 160-161). Cheney details how ecofeminists interpret this flight as implying alienation from both women and nature through their being historically linked through metaphor.⁶⁰ Donna Haraway refers to the West’s escalating dominations of abstract individuation as “an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space” (1991: 151). Similarly, Val Plumwood argues that “space colonisation is an extreme example of a rationalist project that misunderstands our nature as earth beings” (2002: 240).

Jak’s remoteness from his environment prevents him from seeing the consequences of his greed and privilege, which I argue encourages an aggressive will that steals from nature in order to survive. Similarly, Milla’s remoteness from the social-religious causes of her guilt and self-hatred result in her abducting Agaat and romanticising her indoctrinated dependence on Jak’s mastery in order to fulfil her destiny by producing a heir to farm Grootmoedersdrift. Milla’s knowledge of farming practice mitigates to some extent her alienation from nature, which enables her to conceive of ethics based on an ability to respond to the land. Nevertheless, Milla is paralysed by her obligation to uphold Afrikaner patriarchal tradition that dictates her “silence and forbearance” (2006: 48). In contrast, I argue Jak’s ethics are focused on restraining his aggression, which is used to obtain and

⁶⁰ Mark Gevisser details this gendered alienation when he writes that Epainette Mbeki, on the *Tim Modise Show*, said that the difference between her and Govan Mbeki was that he focussed on politics, which is “something very abstract,” as opposed to her emphasis on “the bread and butter of things” (2007: 39). Therefore, for practical reasons, Epainette Mbeki’s primary allegiance was to the Communist Party rather than the ANC with its abstracted and intellectualised ideologies. Her advice to her son, Thabo Mbeki, was that he should forgo his ego and have the humility to listen to others, no matter whether he agrees or disagrees with their opinions. Thabo Mbeki was president of South Africa from 1999 to 2008—refer www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mbeki/ for additional information.

retain ‘privilege.’ Greta Gaard similarly says that “men tend to focus on rights, whereas women tend to focus on responsibilities” (1993: 2). The focus on responsibility suggests an extension rather than a limitation of action, which implies an act of care. Marti Kheel argues that genuine responsibility for nature begins with the root meaning of the word—“our capacity for response” (1993: 260). The differences in Milla’s and Jak’s ethical systems relate to Carol Gilligan’s research that suggests men tend to have a sense of self as separate, as opposed to women who tend to regard themselves as interconnected. Gilligan argues that the responsive self is by definition interconnected and that in this framework “detachment, whether from self or others, is morally problematic, since it breeds moral blindness or indifference—a failure to discern or respond to need” (1987: 24). Antjie Krog argues that Gilligan’s ‘ethics of care’ indicate “that it is not a sense of justice, but of interconnectedness that guides people in general and women in particular as a moral force” (2009: 185).

Milla is portrayed as happiest when dealing with farm pressures by working with “people in a team” (2006: 89-90). Jak, however, “dreamed of a completely mechanised farm that would require only one or two pairs of hands,” with the aim to produce immediate financial gain (2006: 91). While Milla’s knowledge and practical experience provide her with an embedded capacity for response, her social-religious obligation to duty, being like a “Dutch house” (2006: 125,160,395,524), results in her paralysis and prevents her from adequately responding to her desires and anxieties. The focus on rights, however, implies a discursive conceptualisation of morality as the rational control of irrational and aggressive desires that defend privilege—perhaps why Van Niekerk provides Jak with the surname ‘De Wet.’ Milla’s obligation (marriage) to socio-religious duty stops her from adequately challenging Jak’s standpoint. This is seen in Milla’s failed attempts to educate Jak on the different soil types, which she importantly notes is “the beginning and the end of everything” (2006: 67). Milla’s circular narration conflates the nature/culture dualism, resulting in a challenge to biblical narratives. Jak undermines Milla’s knowledge through derisive sexual innuendo that culminates in his implication that Milla’s childless state is directly related to her capacity to farm productively.

Jak regards Milla’s failure to reproduce heirs (the prerogative for continued white elitist landownership) during the first twelve years of their marriage as a breach of their marriage contract. Milla does fall pregnant with a son, but ironically the heir and protector of Grootmoedersdrift ends up being her adopted coloured daughter, Agaat. Until Milla falls pregnant the internalisation of her essentialised identity as a reproductive receptacle impels her to ask whether she is “of the wrong nature” (2006: 89).⁶¹ This internalisation is a product of essentialisation, clearly marking the

⁶¹ Monique Wittig, like Judith Butler, argues against essentialist feminism. Similarly, in *The Coloniser and the Colonised* (1965), Albert Memmi argues that the colonialists’ need to protect hyperseparations from possible

difficulty in escaping these durable patriarchal constructions that create hierarchy from self/Other oppositions. These can be seen through the practice of gender prerogatives, which allow a masculine will, or ‘Reason,’ to set itself up in opposition to the entire natural world. To interrogate the naturalisation of the dominance by men requires recognition of the similarities between the categories of men and Others, as well as a concomitant investigation into the diversity within these categories. This is perhaps why Milla, who originally pitied Agaat’s deformity, changes her mind to state that “[e]very deformity is a weapon, a lever, the seat of power and devastation,” as they work against the polarisation and consequent naturalisation of essentialised concepts (2006: 495).

When Milla attempts to make Agaat’s deformed hand “human” Agaat hides her arm away, as if it were “private property” (2006: 518). With the development of Agaat’s rituals, explored in Chapter Three, the exposure of her deformed arm and hand become more prominent. To continue pitying a deformity would imply complicity with a society that discursively perpetuates the concept of ‘deformities’ or ‘perversions’ as intrinsic to defining ‘normality’ in opposition to the Other.⁶² Rather, these ‘deformities’ need to be reinvested with positive connotations to prevent them from being manipulated into ‘normalising’ tools. Donna Haraway argues that boundary creatures destabilise Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives. She says that “boundary creatures are, literally, *monsters*, a word that shares more than its root with the word, to *demonstrate*. Monsters signify” (emphasis in original, 1991: 1-2).

Agaat’s deformed hand is referred to as being like “the flat head of a snake,” which I propose as a positive revisioning of the biblical story of Genesis (2006: 656). In Genesis Adam’s lack of will power is attributed to Eve, whose lack of obedience is ascribed to the snake. Kheel reminds us that Eve is historically recorded as “the embodiment of evil for having trusted the word of an animal over God’s command” (1993: 252). Van Niekerk seems to be revising Oedipal myths to suggest that if Milla continues to ignore Agaat and nature she will represent the embodiment of evil in dying not only paralysed, but “sick with remorse” (2006: 190). The novel explicitly indicates that Milla’s paralysis and silence upholds Apartheid doctrine, which results in her being Agaat’s and nature’s enemy. Milla’s silence and dis-ease is attributed to her socio-religious beliefs that paralyse ethical behaviour. This is achieved by her actively camouflaging what happens behind closed doors, which upholds the *appearance* of benevolent patriarchal privilege, while further perpetuating it.

evolution resulted in a sociological point becoming a biological or metaphysical one (1965: 71-72), making this dualised outlook a definitive aspect of the category ‘woman.’

⁶² Refer to Dollimore’s *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (1991), specifically the chapters “Freud’s Theory of Sexual Perversion” and “Deconstructing Freud” for an interesting discussion on ‘normality’s’ reliance on ‘perversions.’

This hyper-separation of public and private is interrogated in numerous instances in the novel, such as Beatrice's sentiment that marriage is dependent on it being "hóly" and "private" (2006: 120); Jak's silencer on his gun (2006: 231), Milla's private covenant recorded in her diaries (2006: 653); the Broederbond being noted as an exclusively male secretive society (2006: 639); and the interrogation of the National Party's secrecy during the Angolan War (2006: 454-5).⁶³ Agaat, the snake, and all those silenced through the manipulation of abstracted power are reinvested with agency when their embodied natures are recognised and valued above abstracted God figures espousing religious and political rhetoric. Throughout Milla's life, but especially near its end, it is Agaat that Milla is dependent on, *not God*, which might be interpreted as a need for people to face their remoteness from those they rely on for survival. Through foregrounding the interdependence of beings one emphasises that an embedded reality is a more authentic understanding of possibilities than the abstracted sentimental notion of a transcendent God.

Milla's silencing is evident in the fact that she is complicit in her own physical abuse, as well as Jak's abuse of the children, land and animals. This participation is revealed through Milla's self-acknowledged job of "camouflaging" Jak's weaknesses (2006: 106,142-147). When Milla prevents her mother from reporting Jak's cruelty toward the dogs to the SPCA, Milla's mother asks if she "wants to carry on being [Jak's] dog" (2006: 144). The references to Milla being man's best friend, because she hides Jak's aggressive masculine will, are further extended through the political association of guard dogs used to defend white privilege in the Apartheid era. Likewise, Chaia Heller argues that romantic notions encourage a "way of knowing that is wedded to ignorance" and that it "camouflage[s] the lover's complicity in perpetuating the domination of his beloved" (1993: 222).

Milla "swallow[s]" Jak's derision because "spitting out" or retaliation would be taken as a personal insult (2006: 69). Therefore, Milla sews "camouflage onto [her] wedding dress" in order to hide the "scrapes and bruises" of the "battered bride" (2006: 47-8). Milla asks whether the "dream that surely there could someday be something móre somewhere," caused her to consent to being "a muse for life ... to ... the son of a provincial doctor" (2006: 344-5). At this point Milla becomes aware of the ways in which romantic ideas work to underpin a society that "'justifies' women's compulsory heterosexuality, motherhood, and submissiveness" (Heller, 1993: 232). Heller contends that "the romantic is unaware of woman's capacity for self-assertion through sabotage and

⁶³ Significantly, certain ANC officials have also stressed the need for privacy in political matters in post-Apartheid South Africa. Secrecy and silence are fundamentally defensive actions undertaken as a last resort to retain privilege.

resistance” and that romantic notions work to “keep the oppressed down while keeping the oppressors living a destructive illusion” (1993: 222,240).⁶⁴

In an attempt to lure Jak into showing tenderness and love towards her Milla arranges a romantic evening, which is motivated by “European yearnings” (2006: 344) of “impossibly beautiful [German] melodies” (2006: 345) learnt from her father. Later, Milla recognises these melodies as unsuited to her reality, as they prevented her from seeing more appropriate songs or words to rhyme with; words such as “Ewe, ram, kloof, buttermilk, barley, pizzle, ruttish, bluegum, wattle, lucerne flower, lark,” which clearly articulate contextualised or situated knowledge (2006: 345). The overarching effect of Western master narratives on indigenous cultures negatively affects Milla’s ability to know and understand herself. Milla acknowledges that her penchant for “Romantic German Lieder” had much to do with her lack of imagination when it came to assessing Jak (2006: 345).

It is not music, or imagination in general, that the novel renders problematic, but music that is not suited to the “topography of [one’s] first world,” which results in abstracted delusions (2006: 6). Indeed, Van Niekerk’s referencing of the *FAK-Volksangbundel*⁶⁵ as epigraph to *Agaat* suggests that if such music promoted the “growth, passion and expansion of the soul of the nation ... [so that] the indefinable element – the force and flavour of this Southland – [may] be found, felt and experienced, then the nation will press it to their hearts and adopt it as their own” (2006: Epigraph). Van Niekerk thus seems to turn away from a colonial narrative of conquest and domination to a humbler situated knowledge, grounded on love and intimacy with the land-as-soil. Similarly, Agaat attempts to show Milla that the farm does play its own particular music, as is symbolised by the intricate embroidery “design of musical notation” on her cap, which depicts various animals playing instruments (2006: 371-372). This is examined further in Chapter Four when looking at Agaat’s potential as an embroiderer of stories.

Agaat reveals that Milla’s and Jak’s marriage is built on romantic expectations that seem to develop from music unsuited to her world. This ‘music’ influences Milla’s responses and encourages her to accept a deluded reality. Milla expects Jak to sweep her off her feet and become her fairy tale knight in shining armour who saves her by sharing his independence and privilege as a master.⁶⁶ Jak

⁶⁴ Similarities can be mapped between Heller’s concept of romantic notions and Val Plumwood’s concept of remoteness.

⁶⁵ Translated as *National Anthology of Songs of the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisations*. While this anthology was undertaken in the name of building Afrikaner Nationalism, I argue that Van Niekerk’s inclusion serves perhaps to rescue it from the taint of Nationalism by reinvesting it with idiosyncratic community belonging in opposition to global Western metanarratives.

⁶⁶ Milla remembers believing that on full moon nights she could see “two bay horses in front of a buck-wagon with a wedding couple,” but simultaneously justifies this citation of a fairy tale as really quite harmless (2006: 295). Years later, when Milla overhears Agaat telling Jakkie his bedtime stories, she again wonders whether fairy tales can have

blames Milla's socio-religious background for her delusions about reality, arguing that this indoctrination requires her to be a victim, which merely reifies her worship of Jesus Christ's martyrdom (2006: 415-416). Further, he blames Milla's father for treating her like his "little princess" who is afraid of the "wolf in the dark," which he argues is the way she treats her son which will turn Jakkie into "a bloody faggot one day" (2006: 416). Paradoxically, Jak simultaneously refers to Milla as a hardy "pestilential species" (2006: 416), which might be interpreted as his fear over the growth of hybrid consciousnesses that deconstruct his privilege.

Jak regards Milla's romantic gestures as part of a manipulatory performance and reacts violently to her "affectations" that portray him as a fool who can be sexually manoeuvred into disregarding the years of abuse between them (2006: 347). When the fairy tale dream does not come true, as Jak's sarcasm during his wedding speech foreshadows, Milla clings to romantic fantasies by dreaming of an Edenic paradise garden in order to "safeguard" the illusion of a happy family (2006: 457). Milla's actions thus reveal the ways in which patriarchal nationalism ensured the silence of the *volksmoeder* in the face of conquering narratives.

2.3 Jak's 'System of Perfect Liberty'

Of all the constraints on the new [ANC] government, it was the market that proved most confining – and this, in a way, is the genius of unfettered capitalism: it's self-enforcing.
(Naomi Klein 2007: 207)

Agaat explores capitalism's influence on farming practices and the political policies of Apartheid, which were largely based on the efficient maintenance of privilege through mass production rather than the health of the nation. In the name of efficient production South Africa passed numerous laws, including the Natives' Land Act of 1913, after which the practice of sharecropping began to be phased out. With the development of capitalism came the need for labour. Therefore, the drive for urbanisation converted critical, multi-skilled and independent subsistence farmers into labourers, mainly mine workers, whose value was measured exclusively in terms of financial prerogatives. Here capitalism is definitively linked to racism and classism. Ania Loomba argues that Gramsci's notion that ideologies are more than material reality and that they 'create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.' "helps us to locate racism not just as an effect of capitalism, but as complexly intertwined with it" (2005: 31).⁶⁷

a "strong influence on a child's mind" (2006: 313). Jakkie's change from aeronautics engineer to ethnomusicologist validates this influence.

⁶⁷ Loomba quotes from Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) and also details how Stuart Hall uses Gramsci's ideas to think about the relationship between race, ethnicity and colonialism on the one hand, and capital and class on the other (2005: 31).

I argue that *Agaat* illustrates numerous ‘isms’ of domination as complexly intertwined with capitalism, which is evident in South Africa’s reasons for the appropriation of land. Land appropriation changed the people’s way of life in that what had been an end in itself, where economic and social life were the same, became a means to an end: production through labour for profit. Apartheid’s inability to protect even those it was created to serve, evidenced by the burgeoning poor-white working class, reflects this position. While I emphasise the importance of foregrounding situated knowledges, it is also necessary to connect these to global historical movements, which then suggest that a similar drive for power exists in British colonialism and American imperialism. I examine these ideologies to determine the ways in which they influence the characters in *Agaat* in a specifically South African context.

The urbanisation movement the *plaasroman* challenged in the 1930s mirrors industrialisation in eighteenth century England. In England the battle for land historically forced formerly independent subsistence farmers into towns and cities to search for work, which culminated in Britain’s official History insisting on the idea of ‘peaceful’ historical development. In a Foucaultian analysis of the structures in place, it could be surmised that urbanisation and industrialisation movements required labour which thus motivated the drive to privatise land. Thomas Princen details how English Parliament, from the mid 1700s, passed some four thousand private acts of enclosure covering some 7,000,000 acres until the General Enclosure Act of 1845. Similarly, South Africa’s passing of the Natives’ Land Act in 1913 allowed 80 percent of the land to be given to 20 percent of the population.⁶⁸ Up until then South Africa, like England, consisted of “independent, free and prosperous citizens” (Heilbroner in Princen, 2005: 126). Industrialisation was undertaken in the name of efficiency, which echoes the European masters’ requirements that the Afrikaner settlers farm more efficiently than the indigenous nomads. While these movements did dramatically increase production yields and land rents, *Agaat* details the damage to the environment, which continually succumbs to a litany of diseases (2006: 496), as unjustifiable in our contemporary period.

In *Agaat* the damaging consequences of land appropriation are depicted by Milla’s and Jak’s differences over the sharecropping arrangement between OuKarel Okkenel and Milla’s mother. Sharecropping in South Africa was a system of agricultural production in which landowners allowed tenants to work specific areas of their farms, as they didn’t have the capital or labour to farm this themselves, in exchange for a share of their crop. However, after the Natives’ Land Act sharecroppers were mostly reduced to tenant farmers and then farm labourers. Milla remembers that

⁶⁸ Information on the Native Land Act available on www.sahistory.org.za/pages/chronology/thisday/1913-06-19.htm. Downloaded 10 November 2009.

Jak eventually “succumbed to the pressure and restored half of the Okkenels’ status by making them foremen,” after which “the dependants came and presented themselves” (2006: 90).

Van Niekerk’s intertextual reference to Charles van Onselen’s *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, A South African Sharecropper 1894-1985* (1996) foregrounds a history that “if one went by the official record, never was” (Van Onselen, 1996: 3). After reading J.M. Coetzee’s *In The Heart of the Country* Agaat says that “she wouldn’t let a bunch of forward kaffirs get her down” (2006: 14). However, Milla notes *The Seed is Mine* “shut her up” (2006: 14).⁶⁹ This is an acknowledgement of the discursive power of stories, which have the potential to make people see the Other side of the picture. Kas Maine famously said “the seed is mine. The ploughshare is mine. The span of oxen is mine ... Only the land is theirs” and that he would never have land as he was “too black and too poor to become a capitalist” (1996: xvii,459). Van Onselen’s biography implicates capitalism, perhaps more than politics, in Kas Maine’s struggle to survive. With modernisation came a technological shift that further marginalised indigenous farmers and made white farmers progressively remote from the processes they relied on for survival. As I argue later in this chapter, this technological shift required that science replace religion as the overarching discourse.

After marrying Jak, and on first moving to the farm, Milla advises OuKarel Okkenel that she is stopping the sharecropping agreement because his ploughing methods do not protect the soil blanket, which results in erosion (2006: 66). Later Milla acknowledges that it was a “mistake to abolish the sharecropping” and wonders why she did not instead educate OuKarel and his son Dawid to plough properly (2006: 91). This would not only have created support for her proposed farming practices, but would have prevented the influx of dependents who no longer received food from the sharecropping. Instead of empowering the farm people, Milla insists that she and a disinterested Jak, who she later acknowledges entertained romantic ideas “about how easy it is to grow rich from farming,” take over the sowing and farm “professionally” (2006: 351,66).⁷⁰

While Milla justifies the removal of the sharecropping agreement by emphasising the Okkenel’s lack of ‘good stewardship,’ she chooses to farm with Jak whose experience and knowledge the novel reveals as seriously lacking. When Milla attempts to reinstate the arrangement Jak refuses on the basis that there was never a “contract” and therefore no legal obligation (2006: 91). This mirrors the institutionalisation of unethical policies, such as those delineated in the Natives’ Land Act.⁷¹ Vandana Shiva argues in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) that

⁶⁹ Milla says that Agaat is silenced because of her “fennel seed,” which I discuss in Chapter Four (2006: 14).

⁷⁰ This episode might form a nationalist allegory of the coming to power of the National Party in 1948, which was also abstracted as a romanticised white capitalist privilege.

⁷¹ Currently, in South Africa, increasing pressure is being placed on the so-called ‘poverty stricken’ people in the Transkei to accept ‘progress’ by allowing the land they live on to be alienated for ‘development’ by multi-nationals.

Western development is really “maldevelopment” because it supports a paradigm that regards all work that does not produce profits and capital as non-productive (In Warren, 2005a: 142).⁷² This results in a denial of nature’s ability to renew itself, as well as of women’s work in producing sustenance in the form of basic needs.

Jak’s discourse on his mastery and privilege denies his dependence on the farm labourers, as well as his part in the creation of their poverty. The novel explicitly notes that Jak refuses to allow the Okkenels and their dependants to build additional houses or sanitation (2006: 90,284). Jak then uses the farm labourers’ poverty to reinforce the hyper-polarisation of his ‘superior’ status built on the labourers’ productive potential. *Agaat* thus illustrates the damaging consequences when people become abstracted from their way of life, which instead of being an end in itself, becomes a means to an end. Jak’s subjugation of the farm labourers is similar to the discursive Othering incorporated in Harry S. Truman’s inaugural speech as President of the United States in 1949. Truman defined the largest part of the world as ‘underdeveloped’ and touted greater production as the key to prosperity and peace. The discursive polarisation of ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ areas discounts diverse ways of living and characterises the third-world as poverty stricken. Therefore, people of the so-called third-world were defined not by who they were or who they wanted to be, but by what they were expected to become. Wolfgang Sachs thus notes that economic disdain had displaced colonial contempt (1999: 9). The project of anti-colonial imperialism resulted in most of the leaders of the newly founded nations of the South internalising the North’s self-image, which enabled America to emerge as the instigator of national self-determination, while simultaneously allowing a new type of world domination. This is emphasised in Nehru’s 1949 policy of economic development, in opposition to Ghandi’s, that highlighted economic development as the primary aim of India.

In *Agaat* Milla specifically challenges the capitalist practice of abstracting and then commodifying nature, which she regards as “sacrilege” (2006: 114). However, Milla simultaneously illustrates how difficult it is to negotiate these narratives of privilege. Similarly, Thabo Mbeki’s “neoliberal shock therapy program for South Africa” (Klein, 2007: 209), which called for privatisation, constraint on government spending, labour ‘flexibility,’ and freer trade and control on

South African programmes, such as *50/50*, have documented resistance from Transkei people who have denied a ‘poverty stricken’ status and instead emphasise embedded knowledge that allows them to flourish. Those people already alienated from their land live in conditions that can only be defined as poverty stricken.

⁷² Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000) analyses Nongqawuse’s prophecy that split the Xhosa nation into Believers and Unbelievers. Mda depicts this struggle as continuing today because people face disenfranchisement from their land and heritage by multi-nationals’ insistence on the appropriation of land to build casinos and luxury resorts for elites.

money flows, indicates the difficulty of letting go of entitlement narratives.⁷³ According to William Gumede “all were sworn to secrecy and the entire process was shrouded in deepest confidentiality lest the left wing get wind of Mbeki’s plan” (In Klein, 2007: 209), which is evoked through the trope of secrecy in *Agaat*. Stephen Gelb, an economist who participated in the drafting of the new program, said “this was ‘reform from above’ with a vengeance, taking to an extreme the arguments in favour of insulation and autonomy of policy makers from popular pressures” (In Klein, 2007: 209). Plumwood argues that capitalism wards off ethics through the “ideology of the private sphere” (2002: 53). This abstraction, what Plumwood calls ‘remoteness,’ encourages a wasteful society of undisciplined abundance and consumption. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) Adam Smith called this a “system of perfect liberty,” words which reified the rhetoric associated with commercial capitalism and encapsulated it as “freedom” (In Princen, 2005: 129). The capitalist discourse on freedom, variously argued under the banners of utility (Thatcherism) and liberty (Reagonomics), hid the disdainful attitude that developed towards the labouring classes, despite the fact that they were the product of the capitalist agendas of the elite.⁷⁴

Jak too is portrayed as being acutely aware of the need to hyper-separate private and public policy in order to defend his privilege in a system of free exchange, which is what Jak’s capitalist discourse regards as a ‘system of perfect liberty.’ The effect of Jak’s discourse is metaphorically embodied in the novel when the Jersey cows contract botulism, a nervous disorder analogous to Milla’s “bulbar paralysis” (2006: 155). Jak, instead of providing a nourishing terrain (which bores him and thus becomes Milla’s responsibility) screws a silencer onto the end of his hunting rifle and plays target practice in the fields (2006: 37,231). This results in him removing “cattle-troughs” containing vital nutrients from the lands (2006: 227). Jak’s need to keep his actions secretive mimics the covert behaviour the South African government was accused of during their involvement in the Angolan War. In place of these nutrients, Jak’s shooting practice litters the terrain with rusting empty tins, which the cattle then consume. Milla does not notice the depletion of the nourishing terrain,

⁷³ In the coming to power of the ANC in South Africa in 1994 a transition from a primarily socialist economic plan, as encapsulated by the RDP (Reconstruction Development Plan), to the neo-liberalist agendas incorporated in GEAR (Growth Employment and Redistribution), took place. While the RDP was ideologically focused on allowing the entire population access to resources, the transition to GEAR allowed for the legislation of a black bourgeoisie middle class. Naomi Klein, in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), details how Thabo Mbeki convinced Nelson Mandela to distance himself from previous statements favouring nationalisation. Instead, he encouraged Mandela to adopt a new economic plan that would communicate to the world that the ANC was ready to embrace the Washington Consensus. This is done in order to prove the ANC’s commitment to global capitalism with Mbeki going so far as to state: “Just call me a Thatcherite” (2007: 209).

⁷⁴ In 1755 an English clergyman revealed this general disdain towards the working class when he claimed that despite the miseries of their starving condition they made no scruple of wasting the best hours in the day for the sake of “gazing.” This clergyman argued that children should be off the street and in schools and workhouses gaining a habit of industry so that by the age of 6 or 7 they can be habituated, not to say naturalised, to labour and fatigue (Thompson in Princen, 2005: 127).

which results in the death of numerous individually named “descendants of the animals [she] had known as a child” (2006: 234). This moment is also indicative of Milla’s fundamental connection with the farm as opposed to Jak’s abstracted distance.

However, instead of admitting her lack of attention, Milla blames the young Agaat for not advising her of the “germs ... before they hatch” (2006: 232). The novel implicates both Jak’s aggressive masculine will, seemingly inherited from his ancestors who “tamed this land with their muzzle-loaders” (2006: 599), as well as Milla’s lack of attention to, recognition of and resistance to such damaging practices. Milla’s and Jak’s actions, or lack of action, result in Agaat’s alienation and Jakkie being sent to fight in the Angolan war, which has been referred to as South Africa’s Vietnam. This defensive focus in the book is portrayed as being due to a “bone-hunger” developed from a “degenerated appetite,” which results in an “unnatural craving” that infests the soil with a “poverty disease” (2006: 250-251). The colonisers’ defensive categorisation of the colonised as ‘poverty stricken’ is undermined, as no one escapes the consequences of a dis-eased world view.

Instead of Jak’s system of free exchange, or the extreme autarchic remedy of eliminating exchange, Val Plumwood argues that we have the option of restructuring exchange so that equivalent levels of “remoteness” are maintained. Plumwood suggests Johan Galtung’s concept of ‘self-reliance’ for overcoming build-ups of remoteness, which “encourages the empowerment of local communities and potential self-sufficiency in the area of basic needs, to provide economic security and reduce a community’s vulnerability to exploitation” (2002: 79). This system allows fair exchange systems to replace centrist exchange systems, thereby preventing the centre from importing positive externalities and exporting negative ones. The reduction of consequential remoteness allows international and planetary interdependence and interaction on a horizontal rather than a vertical level, advocating what Plumwood refers to as “fair trade” rather than “free trade” and “planetary organisation” rather than “globalisation” (2002: 79). Plumwood’s movements here are a definitive gesture towards Appiah’s “cosmopolitanism” (2009: xi).

Similarly, Van Niekerk’s novel reveals the need to transgress imaginary connections that construct borders and fences which develop into nationalism and patriotism. Agaat’s occluded world is mapped and delimited by the gate of Grootmoedersdrift:

The gate will hold her, its silver inner cross, the tensed wires and the pipes of which it’s constructed (...). The gate is closed, the road is white, the way is back and forward. And even further back to its unfindable starting point like all ways. Through the unknown, remembered gate, when the last of earth left to discover is that which was the beginning. (2006: 538-9)

This excerpt signals the need for anti-teleological narration in order to understand the unreal nature of borders, such as those of the farm, as well as the discursive boundaries constructed by the Word of

God and Science. Just as Milla cannot raise Agaat (her consciousness) in occlusion, so Agaat cannot farm in isolation. Milla says Agaat will need to consider the ecological damage surrounding the farm, that is the result of “the vanity of toil” and capitalist “barbaric” greed (2006: 538-9,113), before she can adequately begin the act of ecological recuperation. While Plumwood stresses the importance of reducing remoteness and emphasising links to place, she warns about complete autarchy that “may actually increase other kinds of remoteness and obscure certain kinds of non-local relationships, including ecological relationships” (2002: 76). Similarly, we will all need to address the ecological consequences of global warming, no matter how isolated, or ‘privileged,’ we may feel we are.

2.4 Enlightenment’s [T]reason

Agaat shows the polarisation of religious thought that justified the ‘Chosen People’s’ reliance on monological transcendent knowledge. However, there is another form of knowledge evident in the novel that requires hyper-separation. Jak is constructed as a product of the Enlightenment whose church is “skin-deep” (2006: 638). He believes that salvation is not attained biblically, but rather scientifically, as the Enlightenment’s emphasis on empiricism implied. Lynn White Jr. reminds us that scientists during the “long formative centuries of Western science” repeatedly emphasised that their reward was “to think God’s thoughts after him,” which he notes leads one to believe that this was their real motivation (1996: 11). Jak’s religious scepticism challenges the universal and transcendent ideal of knowledge that Platonic and Cartesian rationalism represent, which portrays knowledge as absolute and originating from nowhere.⁷⁵ Rather, the ideal of knowledge is shifted to the material realm.

This empiricism does not challenge the inferior status of the material realm, gendered as female, but recasts the knowledge relationship as between the superior, rational and active subject of knowledge (male) and the inferior, mindless and passive object of knowledge (female). Ironically, Jak’s representation in the novel as an inept farmer in comparison to Milla challenges this epistemological structure. Lynn White Jr. suggests the course followed in the development of knowledge production when he argues that modern science and technology is “at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man’s transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature” (1993: 12). Biblical narratives are again shown as the discursive source of hierarchical knowledge claims, which are not seen as a collaborative effort between knower and known.

⁷⁵ In contrast to Milla, both Jak and Agaat are aware of the extent religion is used to manipulate people, and accordingly they consciously use religion, often in conjunction with alcohol, to ensure co-operation (2006: 543).

The ecological degradation of the land reveals the damaging consequences of knowledge being seen as the creation of a rational (historically male) knower who monopolises agency and reason. Milla's promotion of the long-term benefits of mixed farming is counteracted by Jak's emphasis on production-orientated technology that rationalises "the commodity form and the subservience of knowledge to it" (Plumwood, 2002: 41). In contrast to Jak's reductive stance, Milla gestures towards an intentional recognition stance when she says:

It's all about synergies, Jak, (...). Nature is subtle and complex. Everything is important. (...)

You're a fine one to talk! Jak scolded, Subtle! Bah! Nature! And you can't get pregnant! (2006: 86-87)

Here Milla emphasises how ethics and agriculture should be based on a respect for the "rhythms of nature" as opposed to capitalism, which is in such a rush to increase production for profit that she refers to it as a "barbaric" form of "sacrilege" (2006: 113). Furthermore, Jak's facetious comparison between Milla's reproductive capabilities and the farm underscores the commodification inherent in their desire to reproduce an heir who will maintain their familial privilege. Jak ridicules Milla's attempts to educate him on the importance of respecting the soil's need to lie fallow to recuperate, as respect for the rhythms of nature meant it would be decades before the farm would become financially prosperous. Jak is not interested in Milla's view that "healthy soil yields healthy animals and ... people" (2006: 66). In contrast, Jak's "criterion for good healthy soil is a good healthy yield" (2006: 69).⁷⁶ Plumwood warns that "rationalised intensive agriculture" not only inflicts intolerable living conditions on animals, but increasingly requires "massive slaughtering to stem the disease outbreaks its conditions foster" (2002: 2). I examine the trope of 'slaughtering' in the novel in more detail later in this chapter.

When Milla insists that the base structure is respected Jak mortgages Grootmoedersdrift as security for a loan from the Land Bank to buy his own land. He pumps this land full of fertilisers and hybrid varieties of wheat, which yield five bumper crops in consecutive years. The farmers who witness Jak's farming practice say "[n]ever again Klipkous," rather the new hybrid varieties that yield "double-density" (2006: 70). Milla's father dies soon after Jak's rape of the land, which foreshadows the disease with which this drive for power infests the soil. Subsequent to Jak's farming 'success' he says to Milla that she must now show she can "increase abundantly" by having children

⁷⁶ Certain scientists perpetuate the belief that factory farmed animals confined to cubicles the sizes of their bodies until they are sent to slaughter are healthier than animals that roam free because they yield more produce. Neither the quality of the lives of the animals, nor the produce, is investigated as it does not relate to the production yield. Publicised discoveries of the atrocities found by investigators of organisations, such as PETA (www.peta.org), is informative of the sadistic dis-eased consciousnesses being created in these environments. Similarities may be mapped to the social conditions of any capitalist appropriated labour during tyrannical regimes.

(2006: 71). Significantly, it is only after Milla falls pregnant that she feels empowered enough to publicly challenge Jak's practices through deriding the pressure placed on farmers by "moneylenders" and "monopolies" (2006: 110).

Milla warns of the dangers involved when mortgaging your farm for "bought-on-credit-fertiliser" with its emphasis on "profits and costs and optimal utilisation of soil" (2006: 109,111). She reminds the community that Dirk du Toit, who bought Jak's land, was as good as bankrupt due to the depletion of the soil blanket that Jak's so-called scientifically-proven fertilisers and ploughing practice caused. The change from old farming practices to a capitalist emphasis on mass monoculture required a progressive dependency on technology in order to continually increase production outputs, as well as their alienation from the land. Milla's pregnancy enables her to publicly stand up to Jak and his capitalist promotion of mass monoculture, which she gets other farmers to agree "is a bigger problem than the so-called colour problem" (2006: 113). However, her pregnancy nevertheless results in her enforcing the policies of Apartheid when she moves Agaat out of the house. Milla's inability to gain physical and psychological independence prevents her from using her knowledge of land narratives to negotiate her anxieties and desires.

Jak's refusal to implement respectful soil cycles results in him ploughing "five discs deep," which destroys the soil blanket's moisture and minerals. Lynn White Jr. argues that the Northern European peasants' change in tillage mechanisms introduced a technological shift to a plough that "attacked the land with such violence" (1996: 8). This transformed land distribution in that it was no longer based on the "needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth" (1996: 8). This agricultural implement altered human beings' relationship with the land from being subsistent and "part of nature" to an "exploiter of nature." White affirms that "[n]owhere else in the world did farmers develop any analogous agricultural implement" and asks whether it "is coincidence that modern technology, with its ruthlessness toward nature, has so largely been produced by descendants of these peasants of northern Europe" (1996: 8). White suggests that it is this violent change in relationship with nature that formed the impetus for the industrial and technological revolution, which developed tools to assist an aggressive masculine will set itself up in opposition to the natural world.

Jak's discourse encapsulates abstracted and rationalised mechanistic narratives, which is evident when he gives Jakkie a tour of the farm to show him his new abattoir and his "Super Utility Merino" (2006: 592).⁷⁷ Jak states that the new abattoir will replace the messy slaughtering on the

⁷⁷ Jak's super utility merino has "one hundred per cent prepotency, a lambing rate of a hundred and fifty per cent, early weaning time and the greatest possible uniformity and regularity of build, plus then super wool qualities"

block under the Bluegums where the dogs lick, which always makes him squeamish. This ‘squeamishness’ is a fundamental result of Jak’s abstracted positioning, which he now wants to increase further through the mechanised system of slaughtering. This is echoed in the narrative of Jak’s desire for a son who he can prepare as a wartime aeronautics engineer and thereby retain his privilege while remaining remote from the killing process. Val Plumwood argues that science’s failure to research non-productionist goals “feeds the mechanist illusions that nature is passive and open for the taking” (2002: 40). She asserts that modern scientific knowledge endorses what Brennan refers to as “sado-dispassionate practices” of “emotional neutrality or the absence of emotion in certain contexts (most obviously that of harmful experimentation),” which is endorsed through science’s considerable investment in the subject/object dualism that is basic to the commodification of nature (2002: 41). The strategic boundary shifts between ‘science’ and ‘technology’ or ‘politics’ help maintain the ideology that ‘science proper’ can do no wrong by transferring ill-effects onto externalised activities or parties. Plumwood argues that Haraway’s term “technoscience” reveals the relationship between science and capitalism as being much closer than corporate or economic discourse would like to let on (2002: 243).

The novel at no point depicts Jak slaughtering under the Bluegums or killing in the name of the South African Defence Force. However, it does show Milla forcing a twelve year-old Agaat to kill her *hanslam*, as well as Jak’s inculcation of militarism in Jakkie so that he can fight his father’s “battles” (2006: 317). Both instances represent Milla’s and Jak’s attempts to defer their ‘duties’ onto their children. In contrast to Jak’s opinions, flagrantly and sadistically detailed despite his remoteness from the animals and slaughtering process he maligns, Milla only imagines the “disgrace” of the abattoir (2006: 591). During a demonstration Milla “couldn’t watch, the fear of the animals between the railings of the isolation pen, the swinging up onto the moving hook of the living animal, the blood in the drainage chutes, the screaming saw-blade” (2006: 591). Plumwood argues that these sado-dispassionate practices are a “deep moral failing” that commodifies nature and makes science the “servant of corporate and rationalist economy” (2002: 41).⁷⁸ Science’s disengagement enables it to occlude ethics just as effectively as capitalism does through the ideology of the private sphere. These mechanistic narratives told by a reductionist science must be challenged through

(2006: 593). Jak names this merino Hannibal, which symbolises how these technologically hybridised species cannibalise the older naturally evolving species.

⁷⁸ Marti Kheel reveals the consequences of this failure of perception through sado-dispassionate disengagement when she quotes Claude Bernard, the founder of modern medicine and the widespread use of animals in research: “The physiologist is not an ordinary man: he is a scientist, possessed and absorbed by the scientific idea that he pursues. He does not hear the cries of animals, he does not see their flowing blood, he sees nothing but his idea, and is aware of nothing but an organism that conceals from him the problem he is seeking to resolve” (1993: 257).

corresponding narratives that situate humans ecologically by writing “nature as agent, re-subjectivising and re-intentionalising the non-human as an ethical and intentional subject of narrative” (Plumwood, 2002: 54).

Milla’s inferiority complex impedes her ability to resist these reductionist narratives which disempower her. Therefore, Milla refers to herself as being as meek as a lamb, which enables her to be easily led to the slaughter (2006: 94,122,423). Agaat’s awareness of Milla’s self-regulated disempowerment is symbolised during a fire in 1976. The novel illustrates Agaat’s use of fire to purge tension within the household. Subsequent to a fight where Jak accuses Milla of needing him to mistreat her because this is what her matrilineal heritage dating all the way back to Eve has taught her (2006: 415), Agaat leaves a drowned lamb as symbol for the need for purging (2006: 422). The slaughtering trope is a signifier in the novel for deconstruction. Milla’s abduction and taming of Agaat, whom Jak calls Milla’s “pet woolly-lamb” (2006: 508) is juxtaposed with the slaughtering process. During Agaat’s nursing, Milla is referred to as Agaat’s “*sick merino*,” which implicates the dis-ease of master narratives and results in their interrogation and cannibalisation when Milla’s perspectives begin to alter (*italics in original*, 2006: 423). Jakkie clearly sees a violent impetus in the capitalist emphasis on production, which he relates to reproduction. Jakkie’s intentional recognition stance toward the more-than human world is evidenced when he says the community is a “disgrace ... with their stud farms breeding bulls for the abattoir and babies for the army” (2006: 589-590). Jak’s disengagement from ethical narratives enables slaughtering on Grootmoedersdrif to become “completely automated,” and consequentially completely remote from the processes required for survival (2006: 591). This episode demonstrates the divergent attitudes between Milla and Jak with regard to the killing of animals, and by extension, the ethical parameters that define their contrasting perspectives on farming.

Agaat demonstrates the importance of an intentional recognition stance, a counter-hegemonic practice that stands in opposition to the diminishing of this capacity in order to maximise what qualifies as resource. Chaia Heller asserts that women are generally allocated the responsibility of “caring for” Others, while men tend to be credited with “caring about” abstracted ideals (1993: 233). Heller thus reminds us that ecology developed from women’s labours of love in the home and that the term was coined by Ellen Swallow in the late 1800s. Swallow studied the “interrelationship among air, water, food, and human health” that resulted in the founding of the world’s first water purity tables and food purity movements. She encouraged women isolated in their homes to become scientists through sending them specimens, microscopes and lessons on how to maintain health in the domestic workplace. Swallow’s “home ecology” was later reduced to “home economics” by public

schools, suggesting the power of the essentialised category of woman perpetuated under patriarchal discourse (1993: 233).

The following textual analysis suggests the importance of Swallow's idea of home ecology, which perhaps will enable a fresh engagement with the environmental crisis. A year after the botulism disaster Jak introduces an additional seventy Simmental cattle in order to increase his stud material on the farm. The newly imported cattle have a "mindless hunger" and when a gate is left open they consume poisonous wild tulips (2006: 254). The medicine for the tulip poisoning is mixed in less than an hour under Agaat's supervision in the kitchen of Grootmoedersdrift and administered to the cattle by the women and children. Being a Saturday the male farm labourers, Jak, and the vet are away socialising and when they do arrive they are inebriated, effectively having avoided dealing with the consequences of their actions.

The medicine is concocted from a recipe recorded in the old *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa* and might be read as an example of embedded knowledge systems that enable a considered, situated response to the dangers posed. Agaat is able to mix the necessary medicine, lead the bull by the nose through the crush pen, where there is no escape should the bull decide to charge, and make it drink the anti-dote. Agaat tells Milla that while she is in the crush pen Milla is to walk along the wall behind her, but warns that she must not "put things in [the bulls] head," that she is to "[t]hink one thing and think it straight" (2006: 259). We are reminded that Milla and her mother are accused of sending "double messages," which result in unnecessary trauma and a flawed consciousness (2006: 305). Milla remembers "the sudden subservience of everybody, big and small" and how things "changed gear that afternoon on Grootmoedersdrift" (2006: 259). Agaat's skill and courageous actions which save the cattle reveal the importance of identifying responsible situated meaning in order to act as midwife in the birth of a new consciousness.

Jak is short-sightedly not concerned about mapping responsible meanings, as his only conscious anxiety is the maintenance of his privilege. He is guilty of what Haraway refers to as a "god-trick" (1991: 181) when he argues for scientifically enhanced reproductive standards for the Simmental cattle, but refuses scientific assistance himself. To alleviate tension within the household, due to Milla not falling pregnant despite her attempts to inseminate herself, Milla suggests they consult a doctor to determine whether science's modern techniques might hasten the process (2006: 88). Jak refuses because he cannot have his potency threatened, or his masculinity questioned through his possible infertility, which results in him entirely blaming Milla's emotional state for their inability to reproduce (2006: 87). Jak's attitude exposes the reason/emotion dualism that patriarchal society uses to free an aggressive will from ethical constraints. Nicole Brossard supports the ethical constraints that emotion places on people when she says emotion matters because "it exacerbates a

state of mind without which I would settle for *a bit* of equality and equity” (emphasis in original, 2005: 223). Jak displays no emotion over the pregnancy because he believes Milla feels enough for them both (2006: 52). Instead, Jak’s arrogant monological structure of knowledge mimics the tradition of knowledge that requires an inferiorised Other to be defined against, which is evident in his attempts to forcibly dominate women, people of colour and nature in general on the farm.

Milla opposes Jak’s sado-dispassionate introduction of dual-purpose Simmental cattle, as “to milk cows, help them calve and then after a few years to sell them for slaughter, [felt] ... like treason” (2006: 252). Jak wants to outfit the farm with a sperm installation kit, which means he can artificially inseminate the cows, save the prized Simmental bull, and make more profit. Jak’s remoteness from the consequences of the cows’ calving process, which he now wants to increase artificially, means he has no idea of the trauma it causes (2006: 352). Milla and Agaat act as midwives because Jak cannot witness the suffering, and in certain instances death, of the cattle trying to deliver calves too big for them (2006: 352). The difficult birthing process of the Simmentals is juxtaposed with Milla’s delivery of Jakkie. Milla remembers her pregnancy as not “laboriously artificial,” but an “entirely natural process,” which then condones Jak’s sexually violent practices. Jak’s method of farming with the Simmentals thus forms an allegory of Milla’s colonised status as woman (2006: 108). Jak, being “repelled by [Milla’s] pregnant body,” is absent from Jakkie’s birth, instead choosing to participate in an obstacle race at Witsand (2006: 173). Agaat, a child herself, is left to act as midwife to Milla who tells her the difference between delivering a child and a calf is that in cattle the cows are more important than the calf, whereas in humans the child is more important than the mother (2006: 177). This moment again illustrates Milla’s acceptance of her martyrdom under the Christian meta-narrative, which prevents her from using an intentional recognition stance to analyse the human species. Therefore, Milla allows Jak to turn her into a reproductive vehicle, while resisting a reductive stance when it comes to the Simmental cattle: illustrating the treason perpetrated in the name of ‘civilising missions.’

Agaat obliges us to consider conceptual linkages between violent representations in production and reproduction. Milla’s experiences lead her to relate a farmer’s violence towards the land to a husband who beats his wife every night (2006: 114). Her attempts to educate Jak on the soil types are undermined when he sarcastically asks “Mrs Soil Expert” whether the “resource” down below is “Crumpet catch” (2006: 68). Gendered dualisms have constructed women as the nurturers and educators in society, but when women are reduced to reproductive vehicles inferiorised with the rest of the material realm, the potential of these roles is limited. Jak’s defensive retaliation to Milla’s public comparison of violence towards the land and women reinforces Milla’s assertion that violent

farming practice is related to violence at home, which represents the creation of a violent consciousness. Jak argues:

If you want to be my soil, I'll do on it as I want to. (...) What does one do with soil, eh? (...). You drive a post into it, you grub it, you quarry out a dam! Or you dig a hole for yourself and fall your arse off into it. That's what happened to me! (2006: 115)

Jak's bitter 'defence' details the soil in reductive terms that reveal culture's colonisation of nature as production-orientated power play. Jak believes Milla has dug his grave by diminishing his power and privilege through focusing on the health of the nation as opposed to production. Jak, therefore, exemplifies ecofeminists' argument that anthropocentrism develops from a consciousness dominated by the performance of androcentric culture and the "pathology" of "power-based morality" (Gaard, 1993: 6).

When Jak moves the ideal of knowledge from the transcendent to the material realm he is able to 'justify' his sado-dispassionate practices. Donna Haraway and Val Plumwood both argue for an "*ethical* science" to counter sado-dispassionate science. Plumwood calls for an "integrated democratic science that is dialogical, non-reductionist and self-reflective" (2002: 53). Haraway similarly argues for the embodied nature of all vision to reclaim situated knowledge in order to overcome the unmarked conquering gaze that inscribes, but refuses to be inscribed. Haraway significantly refers to this inscription as a "god-trick" (1991: 189). Marti Kheel argues that nature has either been conceptualised as mindless matter that has already been conquered due to its relegation to an inferior material realm, or as wilderness or monstrous beast that must be tamed and conquered by an aggressive masculine will (1993: 246).⁷⁹ Both conceptualisations work to marginalise and conquer nature, one through the appropriation of reason and the other through an aggressive masculine will, which I explore further in "Conquering Narratives: Tug-of-War." Accordingly, it is important to understand the "dis-ease" that has infected the patriarchal world view before we can change our destructive relation to those Othered.

2.5 Conquering Narratives: Tug-of-War

Boundaries are not places where things stop, but where they begin.

(Irene Klaver 2005: 355)

Dualised gender categories in the novel result in a "tug-of-war" for the control of Jakkie's development, which Milla notes makes Jakkie "insecure and at the same time arrogant" (2006: 408). Jak is acutely aware of the need to hyper-separate gendered traits to prepare Jakkie to fight his

⁷⁹ Those Othered are then viewed as mere "matter," which Kheel significantly notes derives from the same root word as "mother" (1993: 246).

battles, as “enemies are legion” (2006: 317). While Jakkie is young Jak shows almost no interest in his development. However, he keeps examining Jakkie to determine if his son is developing muscles, as this sign of physical ‘strength’ encourages Jakkie’s appropriation by the ‘masculine’ realm that requires an aggressive will for defence purposes. Marti Kheel writes that feminist psychoanalytic and object-relations theory details a child’s first experience as a sense of undifferentiated oneness with the mother figure (1993: 247). However, a young boy, unlike a young girl, not only has to develop a sense of self as separate from the mother, but also in opposition to the mother. Through the discursive feminisation of the material realm this opposition further entails an opposition to nature.

Jakkie’s discursive feminisation is evident during his eighth birthday when Milla makes him sing for their guests while she accompanies him on the piano. The adults react with amazement, while the children ridicule him in “high false notes” calling him “glass-head” and “sissy,” which is a reflection of their essentialised gendered education (2006: 323). Jak too is embarrassed by Jakkie’s feminised behaviour and retaliates by making Jakkie dock his *hanslammertjie*’s (hand-reared lamb) tail in front of the guests. Kheel argues that today the “heroic battle against unruly nature is re-enacted as ritual drama in such masculine ventures as sport-hunting, bullfights, and rodeos” (1993: 246). She further links this behaviour to the degradation of women in pornography and rape. Jak is constantly trying to bribe Jakkie (just as Milla bribes Jak) with ‘masculine’ presents such as motor bikes, hang-gliders and planes, countering the perceived feminisation of Jakkie under Milla’s and Agaat’s supervision (2006: 323). This highlights the use of capitalist privileges to influence behaviour, confirming capitalism as imbricated in oppressive conceptual frameworks. Milla remembers her response to Jak’s bribery:

He’s a child (...). Let him be, he’s still collecting bird’s eggs, he’s still shooting his bow and arrow, he swims in the river, he plays hide-and-seek with Agaat, it’s his life, now you want to come and spoil him with dangerous things that make a noise and smoke up a stink here in the yard. (2006: 323)

Years later Milla significantly wonders how Agaat kept their collection of birds’ eggs unbroken all those years. In other words, in the face of the tug-of-war over Jakkie, Agaat manages to create the material conditions necessary for Jakkie to counter this overtly essentialised ‘masculine’ behaviour. This enables Jakkie to retain a type of consciousness that influences his decision in changing professions from an aeronautics engineer and wartime pilot to an ethnomusicologist with a concern for “the little grey bushes” (2006: 547,243).

Jak regards Jakkie’s concern for nature as a danger to masculinity and from 1971 he tries to remove Jakkie from Milla and Agaat’s influence. He places Jakkie in Paul Roos School to study science and maths because languages and music do not “pay the rent” and he does not want Jakkie to

waste his life on the farm as he had done (2006: 409). The novel reflects the capitalist tendency to hierarchise the sciences over the arts, which in its sado-dispassionate form encourages remoteness from embodied natures. Despite Milla encouraging Jakkie's love of music she cannot understand his giving up a "perfectly good engineering qualification in aeronautics" (2006: 15). Similarly, despite her believing Jak wrong in forcing Jakkie to dock his lamb's tail, she assists with the violent ritual because she "wanted to get it over and done with" and she did not know how else to deal with it (2006: 323). Milla constantly resists her social desires and anxieties and only during the "re-enactment" of her life on her deathbed does she discover "the shame/of motives late revealed/... Which once [she] took for exercise of virtue" (T.S. Eliot, 2006: "Little Gidding" epigraph).

Subsequent to Milla honouring the marriage contract's condition to reproduce, Jak's need to perpetuate a glamorous view of the body, both as physical and economic capital, becomes intensified. Jak refuses to apologise for his absence at Jakkie's birth and instead carries on "ad nauseam" about the small injuries he attained during the obstacle race, attempting to trivialise the traumatic injuries Milla endures giving birth to Jakkie. Jakkie is born in the middle of the Tradouw pass, which when translated from the Hottentot language means "the way of the women" (2006: 33,179). Jakkie is thus, by implication, a child of "the way of the women," and he comes to understand that his consciousness is informed—that is, situated—by his geographical placement:

Grootmoedersdrift, the middle farm, between Frambooskop to the east and The Glen to the west. Théré. From the middlest, inbetweenest place. Ambivalently birthed, blów, blów—that story!—waterfalls in my ears. Perhaps that was what delivered me from completedness. (2006: 6)

Here Jakkie resists damaging tug-of-wars underpinned by metaphors of completeness and purity, which he believes are countered by nature's land narratives that are always hybridised and evolving. I discuss metaphors of completeness, such as the rainbow, in more detail in Chapter Four. The shock and trauma of Jakkie's birth overwhelms Milla and her attempts to explain to Jak how Agaat saved their lives, managing to symbolically "carve" Jakkie out of Milla, are interrupted and silenced when he says he is "just glad [she's] safe" and he is "so proud of his son" (2006: 183,194).

In contrast to Milla, Agaat is not portrayed as a reproductive vehicle, which threatens male authority and Jak offers to buy her "a real city goffel" so that she no longer "stands drying up in the stable like an unserviced mare" (2006: 500). The novel details Agaat's probable inability to reproduce as due to her experience of "multiple penetration" that has "deformed" her potential as a breeding or sexual machine (2006: 478). This might be read as signalling the self-inflicted backlash of Western origin stories' naturalisation and essentialisation of women. Haraway's assertion that the cyborg "is not subject to Foucault's biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent

field of operations” (1991: 163), thus seems relevant to Van Niekerk’s representation of Agaat as an agent of regeneration.

Milla is relieved that Agaat’s medical prognosis suggests that she will probably not be able to reproduce, which might affect Milla’s ability to appropriate Agaat’s productive potential (2006: 166). Despite Milla’s own longing for a child, which results in her stealing Agaat, she forbids Agaat to conceive and tells her that conception results in “pain & suffering,” an opinion reiterated during Jakkie’s birth when Milla says that in Genesis children are born in “sorrow” (2006: 166,179). Jakkie’s conception, which I argue briefly empowers Milla, seems symbolic of the beginning of Milla’s recognition of there being an Other side to her story. Agaat’s traumatic delivery of Jakkie foreshadows Milla’s altering subjectivity where she, through Agaat’s interventions, begins to read discourses that her master narratives had previously hidden from view. The metaphorical birth of this mutating consciousness is portrayed as “unnecessarily dá-mag[ing]” Milla due to her restraining her desires to transgress dualistic thought and thus paralyses her because of her inability to entertain partial connection in a radically heterogeneous world (2006: 353).

Milla’s refusal to accept ambiguity and partial connection, results in traumatic anxiety over her belief that Jakkie’s birth necessitates Agaat’s occlusion in a racially divided world. Therefore, Milla initially rejects Jakkie whose birth she remembers:

You wanted to choke, you wanted to die, you wanted to get back in under the mountain, trail your heart behind you, drag it in, a bloody trail, a fist on bloody cords.
They dosed you with medicine. They said you were suffering from shock.
They sewed you up. (2006: 183)

Just as Agaat buries her heart on the mountain when Milla, after conceiving Jakkie, moves her out of the house; so Milla expresses a wish to bury her heart after giving birth to Jakkie. It is precisely this occlusion that the characters need to surmount before taking adaptive action. Jak’s remoteness from these painful negotiations of subjectivity (“necessarily requir[ing] a work of deconstruction” [Brossard, 2006: 104]), results in Jak becoming divorced from his emotions, which encourages his aggressive masculine will. In Chapter Four I investigate Milla’s and Agaat’s representations of occlusion in order to suggest that overcoming this involves living with ambiguities and partial connection, which Haraway calls “heterogeneous well-being” (1997: 95).

Milla’s refusal to accept ambiguity, which is similar to Jak’s, results in her becoming emotionally detached, which culminates in her initial rejection of Jakkie and in her body not producing milk (2006: 183). Instead, it is Agaat who overcomes her isolation and risks a nurturing role, literally breastfeeding Jakkie and thus foregrounding the constructed-ness of ‘mothering.’ Importantly, the novel does not essentialise the nurturing role, as Milla confirms that her father

speaks “the language of women ... better than her mother” (2006: 181). While Milla ironically becomes angry with Agaat for taking ‘her child’ into the “servant’s quarters,” she says nothing about spying on Agaat breastfeeding the “perfectly contented” Jakkie in the outside room (2006: 206). Milla cannot negotiate her uncertainties, which result in her being haunted by her memories of how she felt when Agaat speaks for the first time. She records her doubt as a question in her diary: “Can it be that you feed someone else and feel replete yourself with it” (2006: 521). Milla is marked on her forehead by “the lime of the little window through which [she] was peeping” at Agaat feeding Jakkie and Agaat then calls her “a blazed mare” (2006: 207). It may be argued that in this moment Van Niekerk is revealing the symbolic inscription of Milla’s white consciousness. Milla’s refusal to deal with her ambiguous emotions, resulting in her increasing need to self-medicate in order to silence her repressed desires and anxieties, eventually causes her paralysis.

Jak’s remoteness, on the other hand, results in his refusal to acknowledge Milla’s and Agaat’s roles in the reproduction process, which mirrors Western philosophical and religious doctrine.⁸⁰ On becoming aware of the community’s anger at him for deserting Milla during her pregnancy, Jak sexually abuses Milla on her first night home from hospital (2006: 194-5). Then, in an attempt to revive his ego, Jak noisily and impractically builds the infant Jakkie an electronically automated toy plane that disturbs Jakkie’s sleep, which then creates additional work for Milla and Agaat. The building of the plane ends up disastrously as Milla’s observation that the plane is completely “out of proportion” remains unsaid (2006: 196). The toy explodes before it leaves the ground and Agaat has to protect Jakkie from the flying propeller with her body. This episode elevates the material over the abstract and is a metaphorical warning of the destructive potential of Jak’s desire to prepare Jakkie as an aeronautics engineer. The plane’s destruction places so much exertion on the electrical supply that the farm is left in darkness, just as Jak’s and Milla’s perpetuation of so-called ‘enlightened’ policies deplete Grootmoedersdrift’s capacity to provide a nourishing terrain. Further, Agaat’s role as saviour figure, promoting regeneration as opposed to reproduction, is highlighted.

Jak’s lack of embedded knowledge, which characterises most of the projects he undertakes on the farm, results in his need to defend the borders that define centric cultural structures creating inequality. This translates into increased pressure on Jak to excel in physical prowess, which supports

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1990), traces the intimate relationships between sexuality and discursive practices, knowledge and power. If one accepts that the end goal of politics is power, and power is dependant on knowledge, which Foucault argues is dependant on the control of sexuality, one begins to understand Wittig’s statement that “it is oppression that creates sex” (1992: 2). Plato, in *Timaeus* (circa 360 BC), describes the transition from the masculine realm of privileged eternal forms or ideas to the intermediary child through the receiving principle (chora). Judith Butler argues that the feminine is cast outside the form/matter and universal/particular binarisms as “nonthematizable materiality” that reproduces what enters her, but will never resemble either the formative principle or that which it creates. The result is that the “female power of reproduction ... is taken over by phallogocentric economy and remade into its own exclusive and essential action” (1993: 42).

the notion of the body as a commodity to be perfected. Jak repeatedly tries to steal Jakkie away on mountain climbing expeditions in the Tradouw, perhaps emphasising Jak's consistent attempts at conquering 'the way of the women.' This is done in order to inculcate the personal and professional characteristics that climbing connotes: a strong sense of power, control, aggression, opposition and competition, which then mimics colonial conquering narratives. The Tradouw is the mountain range Jak and Milla first cross to get to their farm in 1947, it is the mountain range within which Milla gives birth to Jakkie in 1960, and it is the same mountain Jak repeatedly tries to summit and conquer from the time Milla honours their marriage contract (2006: 33,179).⁸¹ The logic of objectifying and naming exacerbates the motivating combination of ego, conquest and achievement in nature. Similarly, the naming of the defensive weaponry used during the Angolan war also works to andromorphize nature. Milla thinks that the "elephant tanks, the rooikat helicopters, the bush pigs, the bushbuck" seemed like an "armoured game reserve" appropriated in the name of "national interest" (2006: 504). Jak believes that by conquering women's ways he justifies his dominance and teaches Jakkie the same gendered lessons. When Jak takes his young son climbing for the first time he has to catch him as Jakkie's support ropes come undone. That Milla allows Jak to take Jakkie on dangerous expeditions, while leaving her to cope on the farm during the busiest times, might metaphorically implicate her as Jakkie's unravelling support rope (2006: 384,410). Jak's desperation to show Milla that he will not desert Jakkie is tragic, especially given that Jakkie's desertion from the Defence Force results in Jak's death.

Jak and Jakkie return from the expedition "battered people," just as Milla's marriage created a "battered bride" (2006: 47,408). These wounded consciousnesses prevent the characters from admitting responsibility for their part in the drama. Instead, Milla accuses Jak of wanting to kill Jakkie by turning him into a "boy-machine" that he can play with to his heart's content, which turns Jak's heart to stone (2006: 409). Jak accuses Milla of similar selfish motivations in her education of Agaat and Jakkie believes that even though Milla is "six feet under" she retains "remote control" of Agaat, who he refers to as the "Apartheid Cyborg" (2006: 677). These episodes highlight the programmatic effect of indoctrinated education.

To challenge conquering narratives that result in Agaat's isolation, Jakkie's involvement in the Angolan war, Jak's death and Milla's paralysis, an accommodating intentional recognition stance is required. Milla ironically accuses Jak of not taking the time to reflect on the "glories of nature," such as the "march rose," or the "great emperor butterfly," as he is too busy looking at things with a

⁸¹ Phillip Payne asserts that many climbing routes "conjure images of terror, bravery, and sexist innuendo, gender stereotypes, and male sexual gratification" (1994: 149).

conquering eye (2006: 414). Marilyn Frye defines the difference between a loving and a conquering eye:

The loving eye knows the independence of the other. It is the eye of a seer who knows that nature is indifferent. It is the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one's own will and interest and fears and imagination. One must look at the thing. One must look and listen and check and question.

The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention. This attention can require a discipline but not a self-denial. The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self (...). In particular, it is a matter of being able to tell one's own interests from those of others and of knowing where one's self leaves off and another begins. (1983: 75-76)

Frye's statement supports Van Niekerk's emphasis on the need to adopt an intentional recognition stance that pays attention to the Other without appropriating them. Milla acknowledges her lack of attention and is eventually able to say freedom from the Other and oneself depends on paying a certain kind of attention that does not "mark" or dominate the Other (2006: 250). Similarly, Agaat's ability to teach Jakkie an intentional recognition stance, which searches for consciousness where it may seem there is none, encourages accommodating narratives that have the potential to mitigate the "tug-of-war" over Jakkie and prevent his consciousness becoming dis-eased.

2.6 Conclusion: Dis-ease Embodied

[M]oral conduct cannot be understood apart from the context (or moral soil) in which it grows. By uprooting ethical dilemmas from the environment that produced them, heroic ethics sees only random, isolated problems, rather than an entire diseased world view. (...) There is an ecology to ethics (...). If we do not care for our moral landscape, we cannot expect it to bear fruit.

(Marti Kheel 1993: 259)

The dualistic discourse of those 'masters' who "came to play God the Creator" (2006: 401), ironised in the ambivalent characterisation of Milla, reifies culture above nature, while wilfully obscuring self-serving motivation for economic profit as a duty to civilise the 'reprobates' of the nation.⁸² Similarly, the ecological crisis seems to be the result of a 'cultured' mind that cannot acknowledge and adapt to its material body, or the embodied and ecological support base our bodies draw from. Enlightening civilisation, with its *laissez faire* capitalism, seems increasingly regarded as biased abstraction that traps the 'civilised' world in the golden frame of a capitalist inspired 'development' paradigm and a virtual reality stock [exchange] that prevents people from seeing and recognising the processes we require for our continued survival.

⁸² The colonial mission began as a cultural obligation, a civilising mission where Lord Lugard formulated the 'double mandate,' that is, economic profit and the elevation of the coloured races to a higher level of 'civilisation.'

Jak's inability to read meaning into his environment is attributed to this capitalist paradigm, where concepts of leisure and idleness are created and appropriated by the Masters to justify their continued privilege and represent "a strict consolidation of familiar hierarchical and patriarchal social relations" (Payne, 1994: 150). Payne's suggestion illustrates Jak's need to assert his rugged individualism which has its historical roots in the romanticism of the pioneering days and the bourgeoisie endeavours of the privileged classes. The "extreme pressure" this conditioning places on Jak is evident in Milla's observations of his "hard body" and the "emaciated appearance of his ankles and wrists" (2006: 350). The pressure inscribed on Milla's and Jak's bodies foreground the importance of reading the body as text for unearthing vital situated knowledge. Payne argues that the body is "more than a neutral, physical organism. It is the locus of the active, experiencing self," which then significantly departs from the "atomistic conceptions of agency and intentionality" that patriarchal society has encouraged (1994: 145). Van Niekerk's conflation of the culture/nature dualism, writing both the landscape of the farm and the landscape of the various characters' bodies as text, reminds us that the social, cultural and political narratives we tell engrave not only the nature outside our bodies, but also the nature inside them. That the characters and the environment are read as in ecological crisis is an admission of the amount of physical and psychological damage hierarchical claims of whiteness and the discourses of racial and cultural purity have caused.

The search for impossible wholeness, purity or completeness results in the fraying of consciousness. Instead the consciousness becomes a hole into which the characters fall and are trapped. While Milla continues to adopt the mantle of victim and does as "was done unto [her]," the legacy of the dis-ease of women's martyrdom will be the inheritance she provides her children (2006: 35). Agaat accuses Milla of continually giving her "double messages" while Milla blames her mother for not being able to articulate what she wants from her (2006: 305). Milla confirms that her mother's real problem is that she has "no image" on which to base her conceptualisation of Milla, as "there is only a hole" where her mother's consciousness should exist (2006: 93). We are reminded in this instance of Jak telling Milla that she is the soil in which he dug a hole for himself and then fell his "arse off into" (2006: 115).

That Milla's consciousness is a hole into which she falls is metaphorically supported when, on returning from the egoistic Ysterplaat medal parade (2006: 496), Milla (while searching for Agaat in the dark) falls into a hole on top of the rotting corpse of one of her beloved Jersey cows (2006: 510).⁸³ Jak admits to shooting the "stupid cow," as she had walked where she should not have, which

⁸³ Jak proudly refers to the Ysterplaat celebration as being due to South Africa bombing "the shit and toe-nails out of the Cubans." During the war Jakkie communicates less with his family and when they do receive photos from a fellow-pilot on leave Jakkie's inscriptions refer to himself in the third-person and include references to the Caiundo

constitutes a symbolic warning to Milla that she must play the game and stop her undermining practices (2006: 512). Milla runs home in a “flare of stench” (2006: 511) and Agaat, for the first time, verbalises her resistance to Milla by implying Milla’s stench might infect the milk she is working with: thereby reversing the implications that Agaat is the infection that threatens whiteness. Jak tells Agaat to inspect Milla for maggots that enter her body through the most vulnerable parts and devour her from the inside. However, as maggots only eat dead or rotten flesh the implication is that Milla is already decomposing due to her wounded attachment to victimhood. Ironically, it is Jak that warns Milla and Agaat to be careful of their appetites, which, like the “hungry cow,” may cannibalise Apartheid ideology and bring misfortune down on them all (2006: 379). In Chapter Three I map similar meaning in Milla’s search for the giant purple emperor butterfly, a carrion eater Milla only sees when following Agaat.

Significantly, Agaat’s name is a pun on the Afrikaans for ‘a hole,’ and “in spite of years of training in dissembling” Agaat is also guilty of attempting to “keep her household together” when she forbids Jakkie to speak up on her behalf at his birthday party (2006: 552). While Milla’s blindness to her own indoctrination is foregrounded, her awareness of the programmatic effect of repeated citation is seen through her education of Agaat, which includes learning how to handle the sharp objects that teach Agaat how to cannibalise oppressive doctrine (2006: 578). However, it seems Agaat’s love for Jakkie results in her attempting to silence the articulation of his beliefs. Milla recognises Jakkie’s expression as the same one she had so often seen in Jak, an expression which implied a “desire to inflict hurt” (2006: 603). The novel affirms that women’s complicity in retaining hierarchical social structures results in trauma for all concerned and Jakkie is driven to desert the Defence Force and flee the country.

These hierarchical structures result in Jak’s romanticised expectation of the pastoral playboy lifestyle and privilege of being a rich gentleman farmer, who does not have to get his hands dirty. Consequently, Jak becomes increasingly remote from the farm, which he then wants to turn into a sterile “laboratory” (2006: 228). Jak’s practice represents a denial of necessary labour, specifically female labour, which Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen remind us “produce approximately 80% of the world’s food supplies” (2005: 163). Despite Milla’s embedded knowledge Jak tells her that she must not preach to farmers on how to cultivate their lands, and that she must certainly not preach to him on politics (2006: 114,137). When Jak is denied the mantle of knight in shining armour, the protector of

attack being “a full-on international f-ck-up!” and that he hoped he would see them at the “survival parade” at Ysterplaat. Jak demands Milla and Agaat’s silence about the photos, which are symbolic of Jakkie’s fraying consciousness (2006: 498-9).

those Othered, it is an affirmation of one of the conditions that Chaia Heller confirms as necessary for a radical revisioning of the love of nature (1993: 219).

Instead of a knight in shining armour Jak becomes the “stud bull” to enable Milla to honour her part of the bargain and conceive (2006: 348). Jakkie’s conception is rendered a “noose” with which Milla necklaces Jak (2006: 108), who becomes good only for “decoration” (2006: 116). Jak says that he then became an “obelisk;” a monolithic structure carved as a monument or landmark that is characterised by total uniformity, rigidity and invulnerability (2006: 348). The pressure this exerts on Jak makes him bitter and brutal. The novel encourages one to see through the monolithic inscriptions of the so-called ‘civilised’ world, and thus prevent the dualistic structure of oppressive conceptual frameworks tying “the long rope of cause and effect together in a noose” (2006: 644).

Milla and Jak are both implicated in laying the romantic ambush, which traps them when they are unable to transcend the dualistic relationship between culture and nature, knight and helpless lady, and ultimately master and slave. Heller argues that we require “a radical concept of the love of nature that goes beyond current romantic notions of idealization, protection, and self-constraint” (1993: 228). I argue that Heller’s assertion that Nazi Germany’s romanticisation of a connection between nature and a non-existent good simple past is comparable not only to Apartheid, but to the pastoral vision contained in the *plaasroman* that was created in reaction to Afrikaner urbanisation. *Agaat* gestures towards the ecological regeneration of the material sphere that should never be defined as resource, but as interdependent agentic beings. Van Niekerk has thus not only written against the preconceptions of the romanticised nostalgic *plaasroman* genre, but emphasised the importance of an ecological consciousness that entertains an intentional recognition stance in a post-Apartheid South Africa.

3. Chapter Three: Ritualisation of Presence in Language

Very young I perceived language as an obstacle, as a mask, narrow-spirited like a repetitive task of boredom and of lies (...). It is in this sense that my practice of writing became at once a practice of intervention and a ludic experience. Very early I had a relationship to language of transgression and of subversion. I wanted strong sensations; I wanted to unmask lies, hypocrisy, and banality. I had the feeling that if language was an obstacle, it was also the place where everything happens, where everything is possible.

(Nicole Brossard 2005: 106)

3.1 Introduction

Van Niekerk's novel highlights the power of narrative and articulation and the potential for the revitalisation of linguistic concepts. I argue that Agaath's trickster potential enables her to play the language game, which then opens up avenues for escaping damaging conceptual frameworks that condone hierarchical thinking and 'isms' of domination. Nicole Brossard constructs a radical feminist response that creatively details the linguistic potential for undermining oppressive conceptual frameworks. She writes that while some dominated and exploited may live their anger and revolt without ambiguity, women, as a colonised, minoritised majority, speak the same language and internalise the subjectivity of the dominator, which results in an ambivalent zone of uncertainty (2005: 209).

Milla's paralysed body illustrates her traumatic inability to negotiate this ambivalent zone. Brossard argues that to counter language's pervasive erasure of self, we are obliged to perform "rituals of presence" in order to begin the work of representation (2005: 102). Brossard uses the metaphor of ritual to describe the series of "psychological and linguistic gestures" or postures performed, not only when we have to confront our censure and alienation, but also the joy when we are able to identify "inner certitudes" (2005: 102). These rituals trace a trajectory that goes from "fear to desire, from aphasia to memory, from fragmentation to integrity, from humiliation to dignity, from alienation to consciousness, from auto-censure to transgression" (2005: 102). While Brossard uses her metaphor of the ritualisation of presence in language to reveal "language does not know anything about women" (2005: 102), I find it particularly apt for unpacking Agaath's linguistic narrative potential for re-imagining relations with nature.

Agaath's potential to negotiate her linguistic terrain depends on what Brossard refers to as an act of ecological recuperation to "*imagine* not from, but around her perceptions, her certainties, and contradictions" (emphasis in original, 2005: 209). The significant connection between the oppression of women and nature is revealed when Brossard argues:

Men who have exploited women as nature (women and nature being to them an equation, woman being, like nature, nourishing and dangerous at the same time) are

now confronted with a nature saying 'no more' and with women saying 'enough of it.' I think this suggests a new posture of the body and the mind, new metaphors to imagine our future in the universe. (2005: 25)

Brossard's argument challenges the victimised status of both women and nature, and her new metaphors work towards allowing Others the ability to accommodate ambiguities and discontinuities. This might be compared to Donna Haraway's Cyborg metaphor, which offers "heterogeneous well-being" (1997: 95). In *Agaat* we are told that Milla's paralysis is the "*sickness of Grootmoedersdrift*" (italics in original, 2006: 235), translated as "Granny's Passion" (2006: 6). The word 'passion' originates from the sufferings of a martyr, which is the inheritance passed down to Milla's mother, Milla, and then Agaat. In *Agaat* matrilineal inheritance is an ambivalent concept, as while Milla is the fifth generation owner of the farm, she has also inherited a victimised status that looks to patriarchal structures to confirm agency.

Agaat explicitly interrogates this matrilineal heritage in order to recuperate it from paralysing orders of inherited rhetoric. Brossard asserts that recourse to fiction encourages one to "juggle with words" (2005: 209-210), which is why Jak opposes Milla's teaching Agaat to read, because if one teaches "a baboon to read tonight ... tomorrow he'll be dictating to you" (2006: 167). When Agaat deconstructs Milla's life story, by allowing the reflection of Othered perspectives, she provides Milla with some freedom from overarching patriarchal narratives and begins Brossard's work of ecological recuperation. Heyns rightly suggests, in an interview with Russel Brownlee (2006), that *Agaat* "is a novel about language as much as about characters and events." He also notes Van Niekerk's criticism of both Milla and Jak as characters, but he confirms that she is particularly interested in Milla's manipulation of power, to the extent that she wants to nullify the mixed good intentions Milla has (In Felman, 2007). Van Niekerk, perhaps unfairly, argues that Jak is no match for the "conniving" Milla (In Pienaar, 2005), and neither for Agaat, the daughter-servant-master who was trained so well by her mother-madam-patient. What is emphasised, then, is that there is no simple, neat division between colonisers and colonised, and that both are implicated in a complex web of discursive negotiations. In *Agaat* the shifting of power in the relationships suggests this complex linguistic negotiation between all the characters involved.

Agaat learns from both Jak's and Milla's interactions that language constructs (and results in) both their eroded consciousnesses, which then mirrors the erosion of the exterior landscape. When Agaat deconstructs the nature/culture dualism, by reading the farm as an alternative embodiment of her own nature, she is able to read an Other side of the story. In this chapter I explore Milla's changing conceptions, urging her to begin the project of re-narrating her life in order to challenge her alienation by representing herself in discourse. This, I argue, requires her to alter her focus from

conquering to accommodating narratives and “Do It Yourself” prurience (2006: 302). Unfortunately, by the time Milla realises her capacity to challenge the governing order of rhetoric she is paralysed by her indoctrination. Milla, therefore, has to rely on Agaat to help her re-imagine and re-narrate her desires before she dies. Chapter Four examines in greater detail Agaat’s re-narrativisation of Milla’s discourse in order for Milla to die, possibly, more at peace in the shifting context of postcolonial South Africa.

3.2 The Goddess Trembles

The undermining of Milla’s goddess status depends on her ability to transform her relationship to writing and to reality. For Milla and Agaat to move from a position of alienation in language, to a position of ecological consciousness, requires rhizomatic thinking that Brossard’s “rituals of presence” (2005: 102) promote. Brossard argues that, while a ritual is always programmed, we are able to risk forgetting that “interior programming” when writing and “dare to use a word that astonishes us ... [because] we always have a certain lead on our thoughts” (2005: 102). Milla’s diaries describe her attempts at anti-establishment thought. However, this trajectory requires the transformation of the goddess figure into the cyborg or coding trickster, which “suggests our situation when we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while we will be hoodwinked” (Haraway, 1991: 199). Haraway says that while both mastery and fidelity are “bound in the spiral dance” she “would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (1991: 181). Brossard’s series of “psychological and linguistic gestures” trace different practices of ritual capable of transforming one’s semantic playing field (2005: 102). Brossard names her ritualised trajectories: “ritual with trembling, ritual with shock, ritual with sliding, and ritual with breath” (2005: 102). She argues that this practice begins with the “ritual with trembling,” which denotes a remembering of “childhood” in order to articulate that still “unspeakable” cryptic moment in life when something “began, stopped” (2005: 102). It marks the beginning of an attempt to untie the noose of words that threatens to strangle desires and anxieties.⁸⁴ While Brossard argues “you cannot stop” the ritual with trembling, she also asserts that the trembling may continue for years, or at least until it is transformed into revolt against that which shatters honest reflections (2005: 103).

Agaat’s re-working and re-narrativisation of Milla’s diaries is one of the catalysts for this event. The ritual with trembling “lets us exist” by recognising the urgent need to release desire from

⁸⁴ This might then enable Chaia Heller’s notion of “authentic love” to materialise. Heller’s authentic love is a celebration of the distinctiveness of the Other that “emerges from an appreciation and knowledge of the particular needs, experiences and level of development of ... loved ones” (1993: 233), which gestures towards the importance of Haraway’s situated knowledges.

the symbolic order, which then “permits us to exorcise fear, to make the first stories burst forth, and to make the body and thought available for new emotions” (2005: 103). *Agaat* maps the last forty days of Milla’s life, where she is struggling to come to terms with her imminent death and attempting to negotiate her fragmented reflections. In confrontation with the ultimate unknown Other, her own death, Milla desires to *remember* an “honest likeness” of her lived experience and wants the chance to “write” her own “autobiography” so that the self reflected in the “mirror” is not a “shadow[y]” stranger (2006: 21-2). This requires that Milla confronts her avoidance of her “cryptic” (2006: 653) beginnings, which sustained her longing for the fairy tale illusion of marriage and an impossible life of happily-ever-after. In confronting her death, Milla’s fear of her cryptic beginnings is turned into the desire to be more than a “squatter” in the “ruin” of her body (2006: 244), which she now feels is representative of a life of “farce” (2006: 153).

Milla’s paralysis isolates her from the narratives traditionally used to justify her actions (2006: 163), which mirrors the quarantined life she created for Agaat. She wonders how to remember without the proof used to confirm her ‘entitled’ connection to Grootmoedersdrift. She thus yearns for the maps of the farm in an attempt to alleviate her alienation from nature. Agaat deliberately ignores this yearning, just as Milla and the history of colonisation ignored indigenous histories. Instead of giving into her desire to express caring emotion towards Milla, Agaat concentrates on the dutiful performance of practical nursing matters. Agaat thus mimics Milla’s insistence that she not succumb to her desire to love Agaat, which is “against the rules” of Apartheid doctrine (2006: 519). When Milla becomes as vulnerable as a child near the end of her life, Agaat is able to simulate the “murky realm of mothers” (2006: 679) to show Milla that caring involves more than seeing Agaat, and by extension the Other, as a “dark little cubicle” (2006: 576) into which Milla can stockpile the required syllabus for the upholding of her own obligation to duty. An ethics of caring implies the ability to read the Other side of the story, which obliges a reading of the world as active agent speaking a “powerful infidel heteroglossia” (Haraway, 1991: 181). Through Milla’s paralysed interactions with Agaat on her deathbed, Milla realises to some extent that her provisional advantage of being the storyteller will finally be undermined, as she will not live long enough to read Agaat’s alternative narratives (2006: 244). Agaat’s objective is to communicate to Milla that she has been writing herself into the world all along. Milla’s problem is that she has been translating Agaat all along. The novel thus warns that the “wheel always turns” (2006: 75) and historical advantage lasts only until various alternative histories redress this imbalance.

In *Agaat* alternative histories are expressed through nature's ability to render the dominant language unfamiliar by refusing to countersign its meaning.⁸⁵ Gayatri Spivak argues that if the social sciences describe the rules of the game, literary reading teaches us how to play (2002: 22). She uses the philosophical works of Levinas, Kant and Derrida to note that it is the eruption of the ethical that interrupts and postpones the varieties, grounds and validity of knowledge (2002: 18). In *Agaat* this ethical eruption occurs through the recognition of land narratives. Spivak argues that "fiction offers us an experience of the discontinuities that remain in place 'in real life' ... which is an indeterminate 'sharing' between writer and reader, where the effort of reading is to taste the impossible status of being figured as object in the web of the other" (2002: 18). I argue that Van Niekerk's novel persistently encourages the reader to counterfocalise from the Other's perspective. Spivak says "metaphor leans on concept and concept on metaphor; logic nestles in rhetoric" (2002: 22). Therefore, the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction enables the accommodation of discontinuities between the ethical, epistemological and political.

Agaat demonstrates that these discontinuities must be accommodated to prevent paralysis. This requires the embodied nature of all vision to overcome the "god-trick" that inscribes, but refuses to be inscribed (Haraway, 1991: 188-189). In "Can the Subaltern Speak" Spivak argues that until the Other has a presumed collectivity of listening to and countersigning subjects in the public sphere, their discourse is ineffectual, as consciousness cannot be raised in "quarantine" or "isolation" (2006: 591,653). Milla's paralysis and approaching death impels her realisation that she might have endorsed Agaat's agency, but by being "mute and dense" she was instead Agaat's "adversary" (2006: 249). Jak tells Milla to take her tranquillisers, so that she will not interfere in important masculine decision-making (2006: 604). Milla is thus silenced and becomes increasingly unable to accommodate discontinuities and Haraway's "heterogeneous well-being" (1997: 95).

When Agaat is 'domesticated' she buries this so-called civilised self, her heart, on being kicked out of the house and becomes the book's unconscious, or what Van Niekerk refers to as the "ghost of all the characters' desires and anxieties" (In Smith, 2004: 8). J.M. Coetzee defines the problem of consciousness, which he believes is inherent in the *plaasroman*, as being largely due to the fact that "once natural man (sic) becomes able to articulate his essence in language, he is thereby removed from the realm of nature" (1988: 88). Coetzee argues that language is too remote from the material realm and encourages violent politics. This enables writing to become what Levi-Strauss

⁸⁵ Zoë Wicomb, in "Why I Write," confirms that the "oppositionality of writing" resides in "the known which ... turns out to be what we had not known" (In Driver, 2001: 251). The importance of diverse situated knowledges is confirmed by Jakkie's concern over the homogenisation or extinction of Others in South Africa, which Canadians are not interested in because "the topography of [his] first world" is too remote to them (2006: 6).

called “a technology for mass exploitation” (2001: 1417). It is important to note that remoteness is identified in the oppression of all Others. This affirms self/Other oppositions as deeply problematic.

I argue that Agaat counters this remoteness by reinvesting language with situated knowledge so that truths might exist in “what is said, not what is not said” (Coetzee, 1988: 81).⁸⁶ A living word never relates in a singular, unitary way to its signified. Van Niekerk’s novel questions the “Light of the Word that the Dutch supposedly brought here on the Dromedaris” (2006: 401). Thus the novel is at least partially an attempt to show how language can make us remote from, and thereby encourage contradictions with, our experiential world. Van Niekerk’s articulation of Agaat’s embedded knowledge enables the character to portray the land and natural elements as if speaking on her behalf. This establishes Agaat as a *natuurmens* (1988: 88) whose consciousness extends beyond the limitations of the dominant language.

Agaat understands that the consequences of destroying nature must not become the ultimate illusion. This rejuvenation of empirical knowledge seems reminiscent of the modernist sensibility in the work of T.S. Eliot. Michiel Heyns identifies Van Niekerk’s allusion to Eliot’s “search in *Four Quartets*, for a condition of surrender from the urgencies of human desires, for a merging with a larger order of being, [which] is paralleled by Milla’s struggle for release from the pettiness of her existence” (2009: 132). Here, Heyns’s invocation of Milla’s struggle for release from centralised constructions, as well as Milla’s acknowledgement that she wants the chance to re-write her “unconsidered writings” (2006: 11), suggest that Milla is attempting to think around the symbolic. Brossard says that “the body trembles” when “she who did not dare to desire” begins to (2005: 103). Milla’s changing concept of desire is encouraged by Agaat re-investing the farm with meaning. When nature endorses Agaat’s meaning, thereby implying the creation of listening attentive subjects and agentic beings, the ethical impulse is translated into the political.

Agaat’s mirroring of Milla’s education teaches Milla to re-imagine her world. Brossard confirms that the “re-invented language is above all an unedited space in which the un-thought of the world suddenly takes the form of evidence” (2005: 106). Agaat’s ability to weave alternative meanings into the dominant language enables Milla to rewrite the meaning in her diaries by finding “a sentence hidden amongst words” (2006: 164). This important step begins the process of thinking around the symbolic and increases Milla’s potential to move on to the “ritual with shock” that “permits [her] to affirm” herself (2005: 105).

⁸⁶ For Donna Haraway this implies “a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (1991: 181). Mikhail Bakhtin affirms that living language exhibits heteroglossia, which is the “internal stratification” of language that celebrates the multiplicity of forces at work (2001: 1188). Language is always “open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, on the contrary, by the ‘light’ of alien words that have already been spoken about it” (2001: 1202).

3.3 Freeing Desire in Unseasonable Times

Ag, that I could speak now! I would want to ask her if she remembers. The butterflies we picked out of pools. After the showers that fell so unseasonably that first year after I got her. Too heavy to fly, trapped by the rain. We took them out of the mud, blew on the stuck-together wingtips until we found fingerholds, carefully, carefully like wet scraps of tissue paper we pulled the wings apart so that one shouldn't come off on the other.

(2006: 646)

Agaat contains numerous allusions to butterfly tropes that become symbolic of the metamorphosis that is possible when we risk seeing and counter-focalising from Othered perspectives. This potentially frees desire from the noose of pioneering or conquering narratives perpetuated by oppressive conceptual frameworks. Agaat's ability to inscribe her world is dependent on Milla's teaching her to risk being open to the world's dialogues, and thereby resisting the nature/culture dualism prevalent in language. Agaat's first smile occurs after Milla shows her how to save dozens of butterflies drenched in an "unseasonable" shower of rain (2006: 525). This, I argue, becomes symbolic of Agaat's ability to save desire from the jurisdiction of dualistic thought that dictates the assimilation of Others. In this textual moment Milla is unsure whether her distant childhood memory will save the butterflies, but both of them spend hours carefully separating the butterflies' wings, placing them on the wall of the irrigation furrow to dry in the sun. Milla remembers Agaat looking at the half-dead creatures as if she would prefer to step on them, but then magically they begin to stir and the "whole wall seemed to be breathing with wings opening and shutting." Then "Agaat SMILED!" (2006: 525,646). Agaat's desire changes from a destructive urge to kill the butterflies, to joy over their flourishing. Agaat is thus, through Milla's intervention, able to liberate the butterflies and celebrate the metamorphic capacity that "texture[s] ... reality with a new sense" (Brossard, 2005: 105).

Milla tells Agaat that only good people see the giant emperor butterfly (*Apatura iris*) whose blue eye, on the inside of one wing, "guards the secret of the soul" which "dries out in captivity" (2006: 571). Milla teaches Agaat that her soul is holy. It represents "everything that's wild everything that's free, everything that we didn't make ourselves, everything that we can't cling to & tie down" (2006: 627). This suggests that language itself ties the material world down into signifying systems. Agaat intelligently counterposes that Milla "caught" and "tamed" her (2006: 627). Milla's inability to negotiate partial connections and undermine the nature/culture dualism is revealed when she refuses to see her 'adoption' of Agaat as abduction. Moreover, despite Milla's recognition of the agency of earth Others in this moment, Agaat's admonishment illustrates how deeply Milla is embedded in this Othering practice.

The ability to see the butterfly symbolises the capacity to search for alternative possibilities and to find new meanings. Significantly, it is only when Milla follows Agaat, who in her turn takes the young Jakkie on a search for the giant emperor butterfly, that Milla sees it for the first time. Agaat thus symbolically leads Milla to a location in which she becomes capable of seeing possibility outside her indoctrination. When Agaat shows Jakkie the emperor butterfly, she says that as soon as it unfolds its wings, it is the “Eye of Everything [and] the story is told from generation to generation” (2006: 298). Here Agaat suggests that once you have risked opening your eyes to the agency of Others, “the possibilities are endless” (2006: 625). This is a far greater legacy than discourses encouraging spurious and essentialised categories such as race, gender and nature.

Milla’s paralysis is the literal embodiment of the extreme effort that goes into catching and taming people’s desires through essentialising discourse resulting in the stagnation of language. Milla acknowledges this as wrong when she says:

Such a run-up, such momentum, so much hope, so much effort, such a wager. To catch the butterfly. And then when it’s in your hand, it’s a fluttering against your palm, the gold dust disperses on your thumb, the rainbow fades, the antennae falter against your wrist. Paradise is lost when its boundaries come into sight. (2006: 586)

Here Milla articulates her understanding that the need to control people’s desires already implies the loss of paradise. Instead a counter-hegemonic practice of openness towards and recognition of the agentic and dialogical potentialities of earth Others is promoted in the novel: what Val Plumwood calls an “intentional recognition stance” (2002: 177).⁸⁷ It is significant to note that Plumwood refers to rich intentionality as “the butterfly wing-dust of wonder that modernity stole from us and replaced with the drive for power” (2002: 177).

Rich intentionality is portrayed in Agaat’s transformation of Milla’s “Greeting to the Sun” dance (2006: 632). This was a dance Milla taught Agaat to counter Agaat’s inclination to withdraw from the world. Agaat transforms this dance into the “so-called emperor butterfly” dance (2006: 632). Milla and Agaat chase each other around the garden while Milla tries to teach Agaat a dance that merges yoga (East) and ballet (West) traditions. In response Agaat shows Milla “the quick flashing-open of the wings & the tilt & the sheer ascent & the tumbling & the drop of the great forest butterfly” (2006: 633). Agaat re-signifies Milla’s dance to foreground her situated knowledge and ensure the butterflies (desires) of Grootmoedersdrift do not become assimilated by a foreign frame of reference. The ability to read the language of the great emperor butterfly teaches Agaat not only to be

⁸⁷ Plumwood argues that we have been deprived of these potentialities due to Western reductive traditions of stealing intentionality from nature and discursively offering it back as our “own projections.” This Western stance aims to reduce intentionality in order to maximise exploitation, rather than “the recognition stance [that] aims for the greatest range of sensitivity to earth Others” (2002: 177).

open to situated knowledges, including her own desires and anxieties, but how to handle the ‘buffeting winds’ that come with fragmentation and representation in discourse.

Van Niekerk emphasises the necessity of interrogating language, and by extension the need for Othered perspective, when she foregrounds mortality in evolutionary succession by having Agaat say that to “break and be broken” is “the law of life” (2006: 380). Agaat’s three day isolation of Milla in a sterile room mirrors Milla’s first lesson to Agaat on how to prepare a slaughter animal (2006: 81,96,128). Milla locks the young Agaat up for “three days without food” because she refuses to speak properly (2006: 523). This is indicative of the ways in which Milla attempts to break-in Agaat so that she can rewrite her in her own ‘civilising’ language. Milla tells Agaat that the slaughter animal “must eat nothing for 3 days so that the gut can be nice & clean & the last day you give bran that absorbs everything that could still be in the stomach & it washes out easily now” (2006: 96). Agaat’s simulation of this event suggests she is preparing Milla’s discursively constructed constitution for the linguistic deconstruction necessary for new perspectives. In the novel the necessary deconstruction of language is analogous to the slaughtering trope in the sense that it requires a violent response to “the monolithic patriarchal sense which seems to shatter fervour, aspirations, memory, and [Othered] identity” (Brossard, 2005: 103). I compare Brossard’s “ritual with shock” to the trope of slaughtering in the novel, which illustrates the violence this ritual necessitates (2005: 103). Brossard confirms that it is the most violent of rituals because with fragmentation one incurs the risk of wounding, or the solipsistic belief “that nothing but our energy makes sense any longer” (2005: 104). Van Niekerk shows that unless Milla and Agaat are able to deconstruct concepts in language and thereby live with ambiguities, they will be blinded to the extent of their wrong doing by “a rule of rhetoric and a rule of order” (In De Kock, 2009: 143).

Milla teaches Agaat the seven lessons of sheep slaughtering on her birthday, the same day she makes Agaat slaughter her hand-reared *hanslammertjie* and moves her out of the house. The novel details that Milla not only renames Agaat, but decides when her birthday will be celebrated. Milla then repeatedly forgets Agaat’s birthday, yet teaches her it is the day on which God gave life to her (2006: 446). This is ironic in the sense that it also represents Milla’s God-like ‘authorship’ and abduction of Agaat. When Milla pretends that Agaat’s isolation in the outside room is “heaven” (2006: 446) she deconstructs her paradisiacal metaphors. Instead, Agaat’s isolation reveals what Jakkie later admires as the Lord’s “aesthetic flair in creating a world that is at one and the same time both heaven and hell” (2006: 676).

Milla then gives Agaat seven servant’s uniforms, symbolic of the subservient status that is her cross to bear after becoming a child of the Lord who is simultaneously Othered under discourses of racial purity. Agaat disappears in the middle of the night and Milla, with the aid of binoculars, sees

her in her new servant's uniform performing "odd steps & gestures" (2006: 150) on top of the mountain. This seems symbolic of Agaat's attempts to respond to and re-narrate the monologues of monolithic discourse. Milla continually tries to determine the meaning of Agaat's rituals, which she refers to as her "St Vitus's dance."⁸⁸ Milla describes Agaat's midnight manoeuvres in her diary:

Could the binoculars have been playing tricks upon me? Hr arm a pointer? Pointing-out pointing-to what is what & who is who? An oar? A blade? Hr fist pressing apart the membrane & the meat as if she's dressing a slaughter animal? But not a sheep, as if she's separating the divisions of the night. Or dividing something within herself. Root cluster. (2006: 151)

Here the relationship between discursive deconstruction and the literal slaughtering process is revealed. This foregrounds Milla's attempts to understand the violence involved in the deconstruction of meaning. As a *natuurmens* Agaat finds meaning beyond the symbolic realm of signification, as meaning is read directly from the material world. In this moment it might be argued that Van Niekerk is demonstrating that narrative is capable of offering escape routes that resist the symbolic order.

Agaat's line of flight involves burying her civilised self—her namesake, 'good'—that Milla tries to inculcate, along with her suitcase of treasures which were part of who she was before she was banished from the house and branded a servant. Agaat's potential for rhizomatic thinking is evident in her ability to propagate growth from "root cluster[s]" in unforeseen directions (2006: 151). This allows Agaat to overcome defensive conquering desires and instead affirm herself in dialogue with the environment. A change in perspective requires the space for alternative meanings to emerge. Agaat's imaginative and cognitive approach to challenging meaning in discourse works by displacing "slightly but sufficiently the semantic aura of words in such a way that they produce an unforeseeable resonance without alteration in the signifier" (2005: 104). Brossard imagines her 'ritual with sliding' being expressed as

rare gestures, unedited poses, an alarming intensity that transforms the tenses of verb; you would have to imagine the body in the most fascinating of slow motions. It is a ritual that demands a great sense of equilibrium, for it presumes that numerous forces working simultaneously converge. These forces can be named: desire, sensation, emotion, idea, knowledge, consciousness, memory. The energy charge they contain can be called tension, concentration, or attention. (2005: 104)

This description is similar to Milla's description of Agaat's rituals, which are described as "odd steps and gestures" (2006: 150). It is not only in these strange gestures that Agaat begins to communicate beyond Milla's inflicted socialisation, but also in her re-narration of prominent cultural texts.

⁸⁸ St Vitus's dance is also known as Sydenham's Chorea and refers to an "acute disturbance of the central nervous system characterized by involuntary muscular movements of the face and extremities" (www.saintvitus.com—accessed 29 December 2009). St Vitus is invoked against diseases, such as epilepsy and nervous disorders. Further, it is an intercession against dog and snake bites.

By practicing the ‘ritual with sliding’ Agaat is able to re-territorialise and re-order Milla’s culture, symbolically represented by the books *Borduur Só* (1966), the *FAK-Volksangbundel* (1937) and *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* (1929). Milla leaves these three texts next to Agaat’s bed as the foundation for her cultural education when she isolates her in the outside room.⁸⁹ Significantly, Van Niekerk places extracts from all three texts as epigraphs to the novel. Agaat, similarly, places these books next to Milla’s bed as “exhibits” at the end of her life (2006: 449). When Agaat re-introduces the alphabet chart, on which Milla taught her to read as a child, she spells out Milla’s desires and anxieties so that Milla “can hear what [she] sound[s] like” (2006: 437). Agaat’s “prefabricated phrases” impede Milla rather than assist her. Milla’s “language feels like a brutal instrument” with which Agaat is “torturing” her as Milla becomes “a poet of losses, a teller of legends” (2006: 438).

Milla, in facing the deconstruction necessary for a revolt against suffocating semantics, feels “so powerless” and “needy” that she “attacks” Agaat in an attempt to defend her discourse and prevent its mutation through semantic slippage (2006: 442). Milla interrogates Agaat, who she calls a “noonday witch” practising “satanic rites,” about the fires, rituals and missing suitcase that Agaat buries her heart in when Milla isolates her (2006: 443-445). Agaat reformulates Milla’s questions in Milla’s voice and answers by referring to the three cultural texts given to her by Milla. Agaat’s ventriloquism is representative of the voice of the coloniser recast by the colonised to attain recognition of the impact of the coloniser’s teachings. This mimicking of power is what Van Niekerk asserts was the main impetus for the novel (In De Kock, 2007: 18). When Agaat converts Milla’s monologue into a dialogue, Milla interprets Agaat’s re-articulation of her desires as raving, and says the “mute cannot rave! But they can hear!” (2006: 450). Agaat then tells Milla not to be scared of “the little light” going on and off in her head. As Milla’s perspectives change she sees her selfishness, but becomes defensive and furiously spells out “there are boundaries” (2006: 451). Milla has not grasped that the life of a language, its “aura,” is “infinitely greater in what it connotes than in what it denotes” (Brossard, 2005: 104). In other words, metaphor and semantic slippage is more powerful than literal interpretation.

Two days before Milla’s death Agaat performs her ritualised St Vitus dance in front of Milla’s bed. She places her knuckles in her mouth and then removes them bleeding to pray.

Lord God in heaven, comes her voice.
 Héár me!
 Foot-rot!
 Stinking smut!

⁸⁹ These texts are translated as *Embroider Like This*, *National Anthology of Song of the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisations* and *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*.

(...)
 Pip!
 Roup!
 Glanders!
 Greasy heel!
 Contágious abórtion!
 Wáterpépper knótwééd!
 Who do I have other than you? Don't go away from me! Don't leave me! What
 would I ever do without you, with my words?
 I'm lóóking for the suitcase!
 Have mercy on me!
 For thy Name's sake.
 Amen. (2006: 496)

Agaat's prayer, containing a blasphemous litany of diseases she has liberated the farm from, does not imply the desolation of her faith, but rather a denial of the exclusive and absolute way knowledge is appropriated by the 'Chosen' under discursively managed religious discourses of racial purity. Agaat's faith lies in her litany of situated responses to the crises on Grootmoedersdrift, and forms the centre of her blasphemous ecological faith.

By "locat[ing] her injustice in the very hymns of [Milla's] own church, in the very mouths of the prophets of the Old Testament" (2006: 233) Agaat renders blasphemy a faithful concept. Haraway defines her own "ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism," as "faithful as blasphemy is faithful," rather than "reverent worship and identification." Haraway suggests:

Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play (...). At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg. (1991: 149)

Agaat's imaginative interventions enable Milla to replace God's monologues, eventually acknowledged as the "great mask" itself, with the less innocent, but more honest cyborg dialogues of Agaat (2006: 270). Agaat concentrates and pays attention to words in order to seize the potential of rewriting the order of her world.⁹⁰ By mirroring Milla's lessons back at her, Agaat is able to teach Milla to free her desire and name what she had always wanted to believe: that heaven is Grootmoedersdrift and that life is not predetermined or predestined. These lessons foreground an intentional recognition stance that encourages an active engagement with the environment through

⁹⁰ Agaat's attention to words is evidenced when she makes a study of the medical terminology of Milla's disease (2006: 240). Brossard too concentrates on "words (their sonority, their orthography, their usual sense, their potential polysemy, their etymology)" (2005: 104).

reinvesting it with agentic and dialogical potentiality. In this way Milla and Agaat signal the possibility of moving on to Brossard's "ritual with breath," which seeks to recognise repressed or unconscious desires and is therefore practised "absolutely without mask" (2005: 105).

3.4 Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall

If I can get her to grasp the analogy. Mirror, map, reproduction, repetition.

(2006: 133)

Jak refers to Milla's diaries as "one long string of ramble as if [she were] bloody mixed-up in [her] head" (2006: 316). He asks Milla if she thinks she can "make time stand still" (2006: 316) by writing nonsensical sentences. Milla struggles to understand the "veritable Babel" Agaat makes of her words (2006: 365). Bakhtin refers to the "Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages" as the "unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object," whereby not only the contradictions of the object are portrayed, but the "dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it" (emphasis in original, 2001: 1204). Agaat's rhizomatic thinking enables an intentional recognition stance that encourages diverse inclusionary dialogues with her environment, which changes the exclusionary order of rhetoric in her world.

Agaat regenerates language through reading the landscape as an alternative embodiment of her own nature. She is not just a self in the mirror, the self that is reinforced as an autonomous, independent subject. Gerald Gaylard asserts that fictions concerned with destabilisation and alteration inevitably have transformation and change as their central theme. A

preponderance of images ... defamiliarise a simple Cartesian notion of identity and decentre the subject so that knowledge and ontology are questioned. Thus a common image is that of the apparently meaningless amorphous swamp of life, unassimilable information, the copia. Descriptions of this multitude are often embodied in the inordinate list, torrential morass or babbling. (2005: 135)

Here Gaylard foregrounds the need to re-intentionalise the more-than-human world in order to deconstruct Western logos that yearns for 'perfect' communication. In the novel communication is problematic because Milla translates Others (including her Othered unconscious) into her language, a language which claims the "Light of the Word" (2006: 401).

In order to tarnish the light of the word and resist entitlement narratives, Milla needs to engage with the ethical eruption of counter-focalisation, which might allow her to understand what it must be like to experience life from Agaat's perspective. Milla says understanding the Other depends on it being "explicate[d]" in a language "other than the tongue" she had taught Agaat (2006: 554). Here Milla gestures towards the existence of languages prior to the arrival of the Dutch in the Cape.

Haraway writes that cyborg politics “is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication” (1991: 176). Therefore, cyborgs insist on “noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine” (1991: 176).⁹¹ To this end, Agaat re-introduces the riddles and rhymes Milla taught her and appropriates their meaning for her own subversive regeneration. Agaat emphasises that language is “something one can taste” (2006: 519), and that its texture and flavour might save Milla from her “*still mephitic pool*” (italics in original, 2006: 50) that can offer nothing except her own narcissistic reflection. I argue that Agaat shines light on the marginalised environment, what the novel refers to as the “underworld” or the soil on which we all rely for survival (2006: 55), in order to teach Milla to include, rather than to convert or assimilate, the language on the Other side of the mirror; the “language of reed and rushes” (2006: 555).

In the novel, Agaat’s and Milla’s “dictionary games” resist the language of the dominant order (2006: 153). This is witnessed during a scrabble game where Jakkie challenges Agaat’s word “Karooquickgrasses,” as it does not appear in the “Chambers dictionary,” but only in the old *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa* (2006: 413). Milla confirms Agaat the winner of the game because “there’s more to a language than is written in a dictionary ... and there would have been mighty little happening on Grootmoedersdrift if you’d had to farm only with the words in Chambers” (2006: 413). Milla’s recognition of the importance of material, situated knowledge is a key point in this moment. Agaat’s imaginative ingenuity for rhizomatic thinking is highlighted when she completes the word “Karooquickgrasses” on the end of the word “tricks.” This foreshadows Agaat’s trickster status in her capacity to revitalise language so that derogatory phrases such as “know your place” (2006: 404,659) become a symbol of *potency* as opposed to servility. Milla’s and Agaat’s dictionary games challenge the trauma evident in the silencing of Agaat at the beginning and the silencing of Milla at the end of their relationship. Their difficulty in articulating authentic emotion in the dominant language results in communication through eye-language games. Milla remembers their eye-language games as “progress through misunderstanding” because it allows sense to negotiate “detours” (2006: 11-12,517). When Milla is silenced near the end of her life she thinks of their games as a “retarded logic” that breaks down each of her “intentions into the smallest intermediate steps” (2006: 11). Van Niekerk thus highlights the ways in which these language games assist in the work of deconstruction.

Agaat’s objective is the re-narration of Milla’s culture before her death, which has to take place through language. Language is the tool we use to write ourselves into the world. If this tool

⁹¹ This allows the subversion of “desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of ‘Western’ identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind” (Haraway, 1991: 176).

does not reflect intimate knowledges it becomes difficult to counter the trauma of one's non-representation in language. In this regard Haraway writes that "to recognize oneself as fully implicated in the world, frees us of the need to root our politics in identification, vanguard parties, purity, and mothering" (1991: 176). That is, it allows for a potential re-negotiation of essentialised inherited categories of race, gender and class. At the beginning of Milla's forty days in the wilderness Agaat empties Milla's bedroom of everything "redundant" (2006: 17), turning it into a sterile hospital-like environment as dictated by a duty for 'efficient' management. As mentioned earlier, Agaat's actions signify Milla's preparation for slaughter and the beginning of the re-negotiation of Milla's and Agaat's inherited cultural narratives. The concept of duty being the slave to 'efficiency' not only represents the coloniser's justification for their prior right to land, but also Dr Euthanasia Leroux's sado-dispassionate Western medical training⁹² and Milla's education that demands behaviour reminiscent of a 'good' duty-bound Dutch house. Owing to Milla's indoctrination, based on a Kantian restraint of will, she thinks it "a miracle" that Agaat left the "three-panel dressing table" (2006: 18), in which she can see her reflection in the central pane.⁹³ Van Niekerk confirms that she gave each of the characters mirrors in order to emphasise the narcissism inherent in them. Agaat is given a cracked mirror, Jak a full-wall mirror, and Milla the mirror "with wings that can be adjusted by somebody else; and a broken middle pane that reflects differently" (In De Kock, 2009: 149).

Milla perceives her reflection as strange, which reveals the symbolic importance of the mirror. This encourages her to challenge the dream-like feeling of not being known to herself. Her feeling of alienation, expressed as "walking just above the ground on somebody else's farm" (2006: 148), is evident when Milla senses she has done Agaat wrong, but cannot articulate it. Agaat significantly says that the "eye is the window of the soul, but a mirror helps" (2006: 160), suggesting that the recognition of the Other requires recognition of the self's desires and anxieties. Importantly, in the seventh chapter of the novel Agaat moves the wings of the dressing table mirror, literally changing the angle of reflection "so that the light comes and announces itself in [Milla's] room like an unfamiliar word" (2006: 153). Milla is thus encouraged to see the Other side of the story and, by extension, a more honest or at least different, reflection of herself in the mirror. In the same chapter the novel's four narrative techniques change sequence for the first time (foregrounding Milla's

⁹² Dr Leroux's recommendation of assisted suicide is symbolic of rationalised production-orientated discourse that has become divorced from emotion, and which Plumwood argues is "a deep moral failing" (2002: 41).

⁹³ The central pane of the dressing table is shattered by Jak in 1960 to prevent the newly pregnant Milla laughing at his defensive need to violently dominate her. Milla then thinks Jak is good only for decoration because she is going to be a mother (2006: 116). Milla's desperate need to be a mother emphasises her alienation and thus her need to become what Haraway refers to as being "fully implicated in the world" (1991: 176).

stream of consciousness section that articulates her desires) thereby reinforcing Agaat's influence in literally transforming the linguistic order of their shared narrative.⁹⁴ However, it is not easy for Milla to let go of her indoctrinated conquering narratives, which result in her describing the adjusted side panels of the dresser as being "like the wings of a thing flying forward, and stumbling the last stretch, yearning to catch up with something, to capture" (2006: 153). The "vision" of blues Agaat arranges in the mirrors for Milla is a mimicking of Milla's showing Agaat how to save the butterflies in unseasonable times. By reminding Milla of the importance of always being open to the world's meaning, Agaat encourages Milla to read these Others without appropriating them. This again foregrounds an intentional recognition stance that is capable of seeing Other's, and one's own desires, without capturing them as an exhibit of paradise lost.

Being open to the world's meaning suggests the ability to read Other languages and Milla wonders "now that words fall evermore into disuse" if Agaat will use "light-and-shadow chess" to recast meaning (2006: 153). In a simulation of Milla's allowing Agaat to play with the shadowy reflections of candles on the walls of her locked bedroom, Agaat carries a candle into Milla's sterile room where she lies locked in her body. This again foregrounds the changing light, and by extension atmosphere, of Milla's room, which makes the "shadows dance" (2006: 163). Agaat transforms the sterile environment by throwing light on the "underworld" (2006: 55). The light re-illuminates the artefacts Agaat brings into Milla's room. Jakkie refers to these artefacts as "samples of some weird mnemonic" (2006: 679), a code that aids Milla's memory by foregrounding Othered narratives, which might provide a more honest account of her life. Significantly, this underworld surfaces from the basement (2002: 212), with its Freudian connotations of the unconscious. In addition, it is finally dug up from being buried underground (2006: 647). All of this suggests the radical repression the characters endure. Bakhtin writes that each word enters a "complex play of light and shadow" (2001: 1203) and he imagines the intention of a word as a ray of light and the reflection as coloured by heteroglot social opinion. Agaat's "veritable Babel" (2006: 365) changes the social atmosphere of Milla's words to make the "facets of the image sparkle" (Bakhtin, 2001: 1203).

The changing reflections make Milla imagine a mirror as preserving "a record of light, thin membranes compressed layer upon layer that one has to ease apart with the finger-tips so that the colours don't dissipate, so that the moments don't blot ..." (2006: 163). This imagery is analogous to Milla's lessons on how to save the butterflies through gently parting their wings (2006: 646), which

⁹⁴ In the seventh chapter the first-person present narration is followed by the italicised stream of consciousness section, diary entries and finally second-person narration, or what Van Niekerk refers to as Milla's "court of conscience" (in De Kock, 2009: 143). Until this chapter the order of the four narrative techniques had been first-person narration, second-person narration, stream of consciousness—what De Kock referred to as third-person narration, and the diary entries.

represents accommodating rather than conquering narratives. By this time Milla has lost control of the muscles in her eyes, but Agaat literally opens them for her and makes her see.

Now it's my turn. My upper lash is pulled up, fingertips pull down the lower lid. My eye is lost, I can't find the seeing-slit.
Up, Agaat whispers, look up!
She presses on my eyeball, light rolling movements upwards.
Come, eye, come!
There it is!
I see you!
And I see *yóu*! (2006: 647)

That Agaat has to intervene so violently to change Milla's visualisation emphasises the extent of her painful neglect of Agaat. By showing Milla their "story in a mirror" (2006: 163) Agaat illustrates the ways in which language constructs and articulates the Other.

The novel repeatedly foregrounds the importance of reflective surfaces and in Milla's and Agaat's mutual recognition of each other, Milla says:

She looks at me as one would look at a dam full of water. She doesn't prick through my cornea. She doesn't penetrate me with a blunt object. She doesn't fish in vain for the end of the rainbow.
She's accepted that it's beyond her, me and my dying.
She smiles at me.
I see my reflection in her eyes. (2006: 647)

Through Van Niekerk's complex negotiation of narrative perspective it might be argued that Milla is eventually able to see herself through Agaat's eyes. Milla describes Agaat's Othering as a need to "roast through all the way to the pips and dispose of her whole self and selfishness," to become her own master, no longer hungering after "otherman's heart or liver no longer thirst[ing] after otherchild's tears" (2006: 584). Milla, who now refers to herself as "the baked bat" (2006: 583), is able to see Agaat without assimilating her as a reflection of her own eye. Van Niekerk thus shows that it is important to look in the mirror and see a vision that is fair, rather than the fantasy of seeing the 'fairest of them all.'

3.5 Urgent Call of Nature: Scourge of the Seven-Year-Itch

Is itching pain? How must I reply? No itching is not pain. It's suffering, yes, but it's like somebody who suffers an urgent call of nature. Relief is what one wants. Not comfort. Not nursing. People with an itch and people with an urgent call of nature, they belong in a farce. In a Greek comedy, perhaps? A philosopher shitting in the shadow of national monuments; a guffawing catharsis. The yearning for inconsolability is something else. That's for tragedies. But nobody itches in tragedies.

(2006: 304)

While in colloquial speech an “urgent call of nature” refers to the body’s need to defecate or urinate, freed from this euphemism, it might be considered an urgent call for an intentional recognition stance. I argue this in the sense that the “urgent call of nature” requires an “excavation for an exposition” of the symbolic order (2006: 397). This allows for what Heyns refers to as a “surrender to the urgencies of human desires” in order to merge “with a larger order of being” (2009: 132). Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject refers to one’s reaction to an impending breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between self/Other. The abject draws one “toward the place where meaning collapses” (1982: 2). She argues that “abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (1982: 10). The abject then represents primal repression that occurs before the split between conscious and unconscious, self/Other and signified/signifier, that is, before language.

Milla’s repression of her desires is partly ascribed to the concept of salvation that her Christian Nationalism inculcates. Salvation resists the careful consideration of meaning, as it denies active agency and advocates restraint in the face of predetermined destinies that guarantee a life of completeness. The abject, on the other hand, “does not respect borders, positions [and] rules,” and therefore “disturbs identity, system [and] order” (1982: 4). The abject is associated with pre-lingual responses and is connected to fear and *jouissance*, rather than restraints of the symbolic order. For Kristeva, phobias such as Milla’s nervous disorder, are linked to “disappointed desires or ... desires diverted from their objects” (1982: 35). Situated knowledges as embodied meaning is thus linked to the abject that challenges and resists metaphors of completeness. This serves as a further call to re-invest language and to “*unthink the symbolic*” order of patriarchal and so-called rational responses to the ecological crises (emphasis in original, 2005: 251).

The novel illustrates the ways in which a denial of desire and agency enables those in power to use the concept of restraint to train willing ‘soldiers’ who are prepared to defend the boundaries of self-created privilege. Therefore, the military defeats suffered by South Africa during the Border War (as the Angolan War was also known) brought home the agency of the ‘enemy’ and were considered

a decisive factor in bringing about the end of Apartheid. Furthermore, Jakkie's assertion of active agency, by deserting the Defence Force and refusing to sacrifice himself for his father's "pathetic National Party," results in Jak's death (2006: 589). Similarly, if biblical narratives had depicted Jesus Christ as resisting his Father by refusing martyrdom and the carrying of his cross, he too would have refused inherited guilty baggage which necessitates salvation.

Milla's abduction of Agaat illustrates the ways in which concepts of salvation centralise desire, which seems symbolic of conquering narratives that define desire as a "yearning to catch up with something, to capture" (2006: 153). Kristeva says that while the "abject cannot be assimilated" it "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (1982: 1). Milla senses that her desire to take Agaat is wrong, but is unable to articulate this. This foregrounds her difficulty to attain physical and psychological independence. Thus, when Agaat resists Milla's attempts to capture her and forces Milla to emphasise inherited conquering narratives by making her chase her and pin her down, Milla becomes angry and threatens to tie Agaat to a pole "like a baboon" until she is "tame" (2006: 670).

Covenants of Promised Lands and paradisiacal completeness blind Milla to rules of rhetoric that dictate the subservience of Others. Kristeva relates abjection to the primitive effort to separate culture "from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (1982: 12-13). This supports my argument that the removal of pagan animism enabled the reduction of nature to the level of the symbolic. Haraway importantly notes that innocence too easily insists on the corollary of victimhood (1991: 157), which Van Niekerk's novel reveals as the "*sickness of Grootmoedersdrift*" (italics in original, 2006: 235), translated as "Granny's passion" (2006: 6). Frantz Fanon argues that humankind attains freedom when "set free of the trampoline that is the resistance of others, and dig[s] into its own flesh to find a meaning" (1986: 11). Milla, like her mother before her, only begins to set herself free near the end of her paralysed life of habituated restraint. Milla relies on Agaat's literal and figurative digging into the flesh to foreground the potential for resistance to centralised structures.

Embodied objectivity is difficult to achieve through the dictates of civil or institutional duty that demands the tyranny of imposed notions of subjecthood and belonging. By thinking around dualistic thought a "Do It Yourself" (2006: 302) regeneration becomes possible, one that is capable of accommodating alternative perspectives while acknowledging one's personal experience. This contradicts the Dominee's Christian Nationalist dogma that people are "conceived and born in sin" and in need of salvation outside themselves (2006: 565). Ironically, however, it is the trickster, Agaat, who is the 'saviour' and catalyst for 'salvation' of a different sort.

In a humorous rewriting of the crucifixion myth, one that Milla notes is “less far-fetched” a doctrine than the “Resurrection after three days,” the novel undermines the concept of salvation (2006: 302). Marti Kheel argues that salvation involves a restraint of errant passions, which is evident in the Church’s change in moral focus from “prudence to obedience” when passions eluded the Church fathers’ control (1993: 253). Similarly, patriarchal discourse attempts to keep private, feminised emotions from entering the public ‘reasoning’ domain, which might threaten control.⁹⁵ The word ‘passion’ has its origins in the submissions and sufferings of the pain of a martyr, particularly those of Jesus nailed to his cross. Jak notes that Jesus is Milla’s justification for accepting her victimised status (2006: 413-414). The Dominee reinforces the concept of martyrdom at Agaat’s christening, which concludes with Agaat asking: “Where is the cross I have to shoulder?” (2006: 569). Significantly, the straps of Agaat’s servant’s uniforms form the cross on her back. Agaat’s re-narration of inherited subservience transforms her servant’s caps into a “crown of glorified cotton” (2006: 55). This parody of the cross encourages liberation from manipulatory concepts, such as, martyrdom, salvation and innocence.

Martyrdom is also parodied in Milla being inflicted with pruriency on her deathbed, which is described as the “Scourge of the Seven-Year Itch” (2006: 301). The seven-year itch refers to marital infidelity and reinforces Van Niekerk’s criticism of a heterosexual marriage contract, which seems to have infidelity written into it idiomatically. In addition, the number seven is powerfully symbolic in the novel. After seven years of marriage and loneliness on Grootmoedersdrift Milla abducts Agaat on the 16th December 1953, the Day of the Covenant (2006: 92). Seven years later on Agaat’s birthday, the 12th July 1960, Agaat is moved out of the house when a pregnant Milla implements the policies of Apartheid in their home. It may be argued that Van Niekerk sees Milla’s betrayal of Agaat (a kind of infidelity in itself) as a radical neglect of her material world, which is evidenced in her “inexpressible regret” over

little Agaat, my child that I pushed away from me, my child that I forsook after I’d appropriated her, that I caught without capturing her, that I locked up before I’d unlocked her!

Why did I not keep you as I found you? What made me abduct you ... (2006: 540).

Pruriency is defined by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as literally the “physical fact or sensation of itching,” or figuratively, as the “quality or condition of mental itching” (2007: 2386). Milla’s lifelong submission to martyrdom, in relation to both religious and patriarchal discourse, is portrayed as the cause of her paralysis that concomitantly prevents her from alleviating unpleasant

⁹⁵ Jak says “[y]ou may think you know all about farming, Milla, but you mustn’t come and tell me about politics” (2006: 137).

sensations such as itching. This itch becomes a metaphor in the text that Van Niekerk employs to reveal needs that are persistently repressed. When Milla cannot scratch her metaphorical itch she attempts to undermine the Bible and its doctrine of martyrdom that encourages living with unpleasant sensations. She does so by turning to a “Do It Yourself” life-skills booklet that details relief being attained when you realise that “what you assumed to be one sense impression with one name, is in fact a sequence of different impressions, nameless and unnameable” (2006: 302). Milla’s description of an unpleasant sensation relates to Marilyn Frye’s analysis of oppression as a “network of systematically related barriers” that are imperceptible, not “accidental, occasional or avoidable,” and which collectively work to “immobilize, confine and restrict” freedom (2005: 72,86).

Van Niekerk shows that relief from oppression is dependent on Milla’s acknowledging these unpleasant sensations as a result of a network of power manipulations that might be altered through re-signifying familiar doctrine. This involves turning away from abstracted, transcendental and restraining meanings contained in the word ‘passion,’ to an embedded self-acknowledging meaning contained in prurience.⁹⁶ Thus, if Milla cannot scratch her own itch she determines she will need to rewrite the “Book ... from front to back” in order to dodge “arrow-headed letters” straying “from a text” (2006: 303). Here Milla reveals not only the power of biblical discourse, but also the violence that tragic covenants of salvation inflict. Joseph Meeker argues that tragedy “as a literary form and as a philosophical attitude” seems to be an “invention of Western culture, specifically the Greeks,” and is “conspicuously absent, for instance, in Oriental, Middle Eastern, and primitive cultures” (1996: 157). Stephen O’Leary defines the difference between tragedy and comedy as a choice of frame:

Tragedy conceives of evil in terms of guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, its plot moves inexorably toward sacrifice and the ‘cult of the kill.’ Comedy conceives of evil not as guilt, but as error; its mechanism of redemption is recognition rather than victimage, and its plot moves not toward sacrifice but to the exposure of fallibility. (1994: 68)

This excerpt not only supports Meeker’s argument that tragedy is an unrealistic view of ecological evolution, but suggests that a change in literary mode has the potential to transform an event.

As I argue, Milla wants to re-write the “unconsidered” meaning contained in her diaries, but is impeded by her “yearning for inconsolability” or to be a suffering martyr (2006: 11,304). To prevent herself stagnating further than she has without speech and actions, Milla longs for the maps of Grootmoedersdrift so that she can place her world inside her (2006: 40,80,105,399). Agaat relieves Milla’s tragic disposition through demonstrating that the “earth like heaven is not above us,

⁹⁶ Michiel Heyns, in *The Reluctant Passenger* (2003), has Andrew Conroy ask whether people have learnt to distinguish between passion and prurience – “from the Latin prurire, to itch.” Conroy refers to passion as the “great goat-bleat of the modern age” that has been commodified into “a holy duty, an ennobling state, a higher mode of being” (2003: 306-307). Conroy’s death seems to be due to his inability to distinguish between these two concepts.

but inside us” (2006: 399). Agaat’s nursing of Milla enables her to challenge Milla’s alienation from nature and foregrounds that Milla, on dying, will return to the earth of Grootmoedersdrift, which Milla eventually acknowledges as heaven (2006: 555). Van Niekerk is harnessing the metaphoric potential of physical constipation as a side-effect of repression, of being “force-fed” (2006: 681) a particular discourse that she cannot swallow and digest. This is evident when Agaat bribes Milla into relieving herself before unveiling the maps of Grootmoedersdrift. Agaat requires a “poop for a peep,” a “panful for a panorama of Grootmoedersdrift” (2006: 397). Agaat reminds Milla of the power of conquering narratives and thus alleviates Milla’s blocked constitution by allowing her to hear the Other side of the story. By resisting the status of tragic victim, Milla changes the definition of her life’s performance from “drama” to “farce” (2006: 304). This transition in literary mode marks Milla’s butterfly-like metamorphosis, from the tragic depiction of noble creature sacrificed for her beliefs, to the comic depiction of fallible absurdities, depicted farcically as “an urgent call of nature” (2006: 304). The recognition of Milla’s repressed desires enables her to resist Dr Euthanasia Leroux’s attempts to define her life only in terms of “illness and suffering” (2006: 238).

The tragic view, according to Meeker, depends on the belief that humans exist in a state of conflict with powers that are greater than themselves, and this encourages a conquering mindset to defend human mastery in the face of destruction. Comedy, however, is less concerned with abstracted cultural morals, and instead focuses on our capacity for survival. Comedy more readily minimises aggression, while encouraging diversity, and fundamentally seeks to establish equilibrium. Therefore, Meeker argues the “comic mode of human behaviour represented in literature is the closest art has come to describing man (*sic*) as an adaptive animal,” which resists monolithic passions (1996: 168). Meeker argues:

In the present environmental dilemma, humanity stands like a pioneer species facing heroically the consequences of its own tragic behavior, with a growing need to learn from the more stable comic heroes of nature, the [other] animals. (1996: 164)⁹⁷

Agaat’s rituals might be viewed as a celebration of the renewal of biological welfare despite metaphysical despair, as they enable her to respond to situations with an “energetic” step (2006: 677), rather than Milla’s paralysing tragic abstractions which only result in parody. Survival does *not* need to depend on the fittest conquering the weakest, as too many narratives have led us to believe, but on the evolutionary capacity for adaptation and accommodation. I suggest *Agaat* is imbued with macabre humour in order to recognise human fallibility and negotiate a legacy of martyrdom, which is detailed in the grotesque realism of the nursing of Milla’s paralytic body.

⁹⁷ Meeker’s statement is particularly apt in the face of the outcome of the 2009 Copenhagen conference on climate change. The organisers of 350.org said “our leaders have been a disappointment, and the talks have ended without any kind of fair, ambitious, or legally binding global agreement.”

It may be argued that a comic modernist sensibility is enabling, allowing one to change oneself rather than the environment. It certainly appears that Van Niekerk's treatment of Milla is imbued with this spirit. Van Niekerk's macabre parodies undermine Apartheid through incorporating what Bakhtin describes as the carnivalesque: those forms of unofficial culture that resist official culture through laughter, parody and grotesque realism (2001: 1187). This seems similar to Haraway's "powerful infidel heteroglossia" by means of which she theorises "the complications of language, the frustrations of communicating experience, and the necessity of negotiating rather than policing boundaries that are becoming increasingly unstable" (2001: 2268).

Religious rhetoric is one such example of the policing of boundaries. It reinforces Milla's victimised status that paralyses her agency, making her dependent on Agaat for the "laxation of [her] sensitive system" (2006: 399). Agaat undermines God as the saviour figure of guilty people and instead suggests a deformed figure of linguistic regeneration and liberation in His place. Haraway argues that in order to challenge the politics of grammar, we require monstrous linguistic figures that expose nature as a trickster with agency, which offers the potential to live "without defended subjects" (1991: 3). In other words, Van Niekerk emphasises that subjecthood can no longer be defined by "master subjects, nor alienated subjects, but—just possibly—multiply heterogeneous, inhomogeneous, accountable, and connected human agents" (Haraway, 1991: 3). Here Van Niekerk demonstrates accommodating narratives rather than conquering ones.

For Milla to resist her existence being defined, like Jak's, as "a Leon Schuster farce," she needs to acknowledge the damaging consequences of inherited narratives, which she has defended with her life (2006: 155). The abject marks what Kristeva calls "primal repression" or archaic memory (1982: 12) and refers to that moment in our psychosexual development when we establish boundaries between human/animal and culture/nature. By listening to and accommodating the profuse and urgent calls of nature, Agaat enables what Milla refers to as "a Revolution of the Shitting Classes" (2006: 396). Van Niekerk's graphic description of Milla's relief from the Scourge of the Seven Year Itch reveals the destructive consequences of Milla's life under a strict symbolic order. However, in including the abject, Agaat's treatment promises relief, making Milla recognise that there is always another side to the story. The symbolic disintegration of Milla's abstracted cultural metaphors of completeness is expressed figuratively to the tune of "crapulent opening chords" (2006: 304,398). This culminating farcical moment heralds an urgent call of nature, which freed from the euphemism, offers symbolic relief from civilisation in both its repressive and protective guises.

3.6 Conclusion: The Butterfly Liberated

Remediation is nowadays possible for all kinds of handicaps.

(2006: 479)

Agaat's linguistic narrative potential for re-imagining relations with nature highlights the novel's emphasis on repressed materiality. This is evidenced in the foregrounding of matrilineal heritages, which suggests *Agaat* as a rhizomatic novel attempting to imagine around oppressive conceptual frameworks. Milla's approaching death results in her changing conceptualisation of desire, which allows her the possibility of accommodating Agaat and those Othered by dominant discourse. In accommodating those Othered it is possible to resist a tragic disposition and to reveal discontinuities between the ethical, epistemological and political. As I have shown the butterfly trope foregrounds an intentional recognition stance, which encourages us to be responsibly open to our environment's meaning. Further, Agaat's rituals are compared with Brossard's "rituals of presence" (2005: 102), which I have argued enable her to resist alienation.

Discursive oppositions are interrogated in the novel, for example through Milla's surname, which as mentioned earlier, means "house of reason" (2006: 238). Milla expresses an understanding of the power of naming when she uses her name to undermine the gendered dualism reason/emotion. Milla's doctor, "Euthanasia-Leroux-MB Ch.B.," emphasises that he wants to "alleviate all and any suffering" caused by her nervous disease, bulbar paralysis, and that she is lucky not to have any "dependents" to "hamper" his 'reasonable' suggestion of assisted suicide (2006: 238). As I have shown, in the seventh chapter Agaat moves the wings of Milla's dressing table mirror. This changes the social atmosphere of Milla's sterile hospital room by including artefacts from Milla's life histories, which in turn increases her capacity to imagine around oppressive conceptual frameworks and visualise her repressed desires. The vision arranged for Milla by Agaat in the mirror allows them both to re-experience saving the butterflies, which illustrates the ways in which an intentional recognition stance might alter the trajectory of desire from a wish to conquer, to a desire to accommodate.

Agaat's negotiation of Milla's knowledge of the land highlights the agentic and dialogical potentialities of repressed Others. Jakkie calls Agaat an "Apartheid cyborg" (2006: 677) whose nursing of Milla during the last forty days of her life results in a "kangaroo court" (2006: 680) type interrogation of "force-fed" beliefs (2006: 681). Agaat's mimicking of the "murky realm of mothers" (2006: 679) foregrounds the carer's task as involving more than the dutiful socialisation of the Other. The objective of caring is not to identify, conquer or assimilate, but to map what Brossard refers to as "rituals of presence" (2005:102). Milla's forty days in the wilderness before her death are an attempt

to rejuvenate her subjective discursive terrain by uncovering the good in her repressed desires—the untamed landscape—that ‘civilising’ white light blinds her to. Milla resists the doctor’s reasoning that seeks to erase her from history, just as the Genesis Creation story erases a past containing significant material meaning. Instead, Milla acknowledges that no one can erase a life lived (2006: 581) and, as I argue, the relative goodness of her life depends on whether she has provided Agaat, and the farm, with enough to survive in the future. Milla’s metamorphosis in language and culture depends on her mapping possible interconnections, as is suggested by the meaning of her first name, “Map butterfly” (2006: 274). In facing her own death Milla, like her mother, resists her indoctrinated dutiful restraint and attempts an honest analysis of her life. Agaat demonstrates that concepts of salvation need to be undermined, and this requires that the passive suffering of passions be replaced by “Do It Yourself” prurience (2006: 302).

Agaat’s ability to turn Milla’s knowledge into a “veritable Babel” (2006: 365) illustrates the potential of what Haraway calls “powerful infidel heteroglossia” (1991: 181), which might unlock the capacity for a deeper connection between language and nature. As I have shown the number seven is significant in the novel. Van Niekerk’s literal change in the order of narrative in chapter seven, for example, foregrounds Milla’s repressed desires articulated in the stream of consciousness sections. It also reinforces Agaat’s technique of demonstrating meaning outside of the symbolic, which prevents reductive categorical assertions. Milla’s “unconsidered writing” (2006: 11) is explicitly reflected back at her through Agaat’s rewriting of her diaries. This challenges the ‘goodness’ in the original biblical phrase, “And then God saw that it was Good” (2006: 681), in the sense that it now includes Agaat. Instead of metaphors of completeness Milla is reminded of the anti-teleological nature of life and thus her responsibility for the development of a sound base structure, which I examine in more detail in Chapter Four. The words from the book of Genesis above are the same words Agaat inscribes on Milla’s headstone when she dies at the age of seventy. With liberation from master narratives it might become possible for Milla to see the good in her life, and in Agaat’s, because she is no longer naively searching for salvation at the end of the rainbow, which is an apocalyptic trick of the light.

4. Chapter Four: Vestigial Stories Embroidered

4.1 Introduction: Of Ecological Tricksters and Apartheid Cyborgs

Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?
(Donna Haraway 1991: 178)

As a trickster Agaat is portrayed as re-imagining situated knowledges through avoiding an active/passive split, as contained in Western logos and echoed in Apartheid doctrine. I argue that Agaat's conception of the world as *active* agent has its roots in pagan animism. This enables her to re-write the origin stories of the "underworld" (2006: 55) by giving those Othered agencies. This is an act of ecological recuperation. Agaat's tricksterism counters acontextualised and exclusionary concepts, such as Truth, Law and God. This ensures she is not alienated from the ecological community, which we all share, and upon which we all rely for survival. Dorothy Driver asserts that the very "ambiguity, ambivalence and nuance" of identity in the new South Africa has freed South Africans from the discursive formations imposed by Apartheid (2001: 250). In an interview with Hans Pienaar (2005), Van Niekerk however warns of Agaat's coercive potential, where the real possibility exists that she may be worse than her masters who trained her.

Agaat's blasphemy is not apostasy, as she does not abandon her ecological faith in negotiating historical narratives that expose oppressive entitlement frameworks. Instead, Agaat emphasises her faith through being interconnected with her environment as opposed to accepting the trauma of alienation. Similarly, Donna Haraway's seminal work on cyberfeminism encourages communities "to remain attuned to specific historical and political positionings and permanent partialities without abandoning the search for potent connections" (1991: 1). Haraway replaces Oedipal myths with the metaphorical cyborg, which represents embodied objectivity about "limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (1991: 190). She argues that we live in an era of global technoscience, governed by emerging networks of power that she refers to as the "informatics of domination," which surpass the ethical and political mechanisms of the old strategies of Marxist, liberal and conservative origins (1991: 161). Instead of defending outdated boundaries represented, for instance, in the nature/culture split, she argues for "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (emphasis in original, 1991: 152). Haraway's suggestion here holds specific relevance for Agaat's subversion of Milla's cultural education.

The textual exploration of the possibilities of trickster subjectivity emerges in the characters of Milla and Agaat. However, it is Agaat who emphasises the narrative capacity of monstrous

linguistic figures for unearthing relations with nature, while the characterisation of Milla demonstrates potential problems with tricksterism, which I explore in greater detail in this chapter. Van Niekerk said her interest in “the workings of power in intimate relationships” reveals the ways in which “someone who is subjected to a form of power” can make themselves stronger through the process of mimesis (In De Kock, 2007: 18). Bhabha’s notions of “mimicry” and “hybridity” in his analysis of identity are relevant here. Bhabha emphasises a “Third Space of enunciation” (2001: 2396) that develops from a “slippage” or “excess” (1994: 85-92) in the ambivalent imitation performed by the colonial subject. This ‘Third Space’ allows the potential for the revision of colonial discourse and the development of new hybrid identities working against restrictive notions of cultural identity. Ella Shohat asserts that to counter criticisms of Bhabha’s universalising of this hybrid colonial self we need to “discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity” (In Loomba, 2005: 150). This, I argue, reinforces the necessity of writing that emanates from situated knowledges.

The third space of enunciation is characterised by boundary creatures able to destabilise Western master narratives. It is the space of trickster figures, such as Ananse in West African folklore, or Haraway’s Cyborg, to which Jakkie compares Agaat when he refers to her as “Apartheid Cyborg” (2006: 677). Jakkie implies that Milla’s education has been inscribed machine-like into Agaat’s “flesh” and “bones” (2006: 579,682). However, this does not necessarily prevent learning and adapting, as Milla confirms when she notes Agaat “corrects her composition” (2006: 15). Deleuze and Guattari argue that a “map” has the potential to transform the subject it represents, while “tracing” merely duplicates (2001: 1596). That Milla, the “map butterfly,” is dependant on Agaat as catalyst for her metamorphosis implies Milla is only “[l]iberated in the occluded valley” (2006: 274). Haraway asserts that “partial connection” promises objective vision and a “knowing self” seeking the subject position “not of identity, but of objectivity” (1991: 193). Agaat’s intentional recognition stance, which Milla refers to as “second sight” (2006: 625), enables her to adapt and respond to circumstances involving animals and machinery on the farm. This assists her in handling Milla’s encroaching paralysis. She thus becomes a liberatory figure.

Agaat avoids the traumatic categorical assertions required of masters by re-signifying the concept of mastery. Instead she concentrates on skills developed through experience. This requires rhizomatic thinking that involves what ecofeminists are perhaps most insistent about: the reading of the “world as active subject; not as resource to be ... appropriated in bourgeois, Marxist, or masculinist projects” (Haraway, 1991: 199). Deleuze and Guattari’s language of becoming rather than being (2001: 1595), and Haraway’s “embodied objectivity” (1991: 188) that is about “splitting, not being” (1991: 193), illustrates that humans do not have dominion over the world. Haraway confirms that we merely live here and “try to strike up non-innocent conversations by means of our

prosthetic devices, including our visualization technologies” (1991: 199). Knowledge claims need to be situated, not ‘innocently’ originating as if from nowhere. They need to be called into account to prevent the god-trick that dazzles with its “blinding—illuminations” (1991: 191).

To thwart the dis-ease of linear narratives, circular notions of time are emphasised. Milla’s refusal to analyse her cryptic beginnings with Agaat results in her being haunted by the image of the whirligig. This is a metaphor used in the text to suggest the capacity of circular narratives to represent an Other side of history. I argue that while Milla does not overcome her ambivalence, Agaat does save her from the trauma of linear narratives and “*moieties dreamt*” (italics in original, 2006: 673) by allowing her to see the Other side of her own story. Agaat tricks Milla into seeing through her egocentric constructs by giving Milla “a dream from the point of [her] needle” (2006: 395). I argue that Agaat’s embroidery emphasises feminised, occluded histories and situated knowledges and I show how it contextualises damaging generalisations. Agaat’s embroidery thus becomes an alternative form of signification that symbolises her legendary storytelling potential, a potential to create an alternative to universalising and essentialising discourses.

Agaat is thus able to imagine alternative identities and conceptual spaces, distinct and removed from reproducing rigid and damaged subjectivities and identifications, as will be shown in the following discussion. Haraway suggests that cyborgs are suspicious of holistic politics that depend on metaphors of rebirth, which rely on reproductive sex, and that cyborg politics is more concerned with regeneration after injury.⁹⁸ This, as already suggested, is why Van Niekerk characterises Agaat as being asexual and born with a deformed right arm, which is as a result of prenatal abuse. Haraway asserts that “cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction” (1991: 150). This works against heterosexist normativity and restores some of the “lovely replicative baroque of ferns and invertebrates” (1991: 150). This is evidenced in Milla’s imagining of Agaat’s writing the earth as fossilised “fern” (2006: 250). Van Niekerk clearly sees Agaat as an agent of regeneration rather than of reproduction. Her rituals, culminating in the exposure of her mangled forearm appearing like a portentous snake in the grass of the ‘Edenic Paradise’ on Grootmoedersdrif (2006: 173,365,495,656), become a potent metaphor for a politics that ecologically recuperates the Othered narratives of biblical discourse.

⁹⁸ Haraway too reads the body as text and writes: “For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as the loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with the constant possibility of twinning or other odd topographical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender” (1991: 181).

4.2 Minister of Fennel Speaks Through the Burning Bush

To learn how to speak
With the voices of the land,
To parse the speech in its rivers,
To catch in the inarticulate grunt,
Stammer, call, cry, babble, tongue's knot
A sense of the stoneness of these stones
From which all words are cut (...)
To write a poem with words like:
I'm telling you,
Stompie, stickfast, golovan,
Songololo, just boombang, just
To understand the least inflections,
To voice without swallowing
Syllables born in tin shacks ...

(Jeremy Cronin, *Inside and Out* 1999a: 48)

In Van Niekerk's novel *Agaat* reworks patriarchal origin stories that result in occlusion by imaginatively ritualising her memories of land narratives as an alternative embodiment of her own nature. This enables her to weave new meanings into cultural narratives and artefacts. Haraway's ironic political myth is "about the power to survive," not through subscribing to potent Oedipal myths, but through "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (1991: 175).

Haraway argues that these tools are accessed through language and

are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualism of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. (1991: 175)

Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari argue that writing should map routes around oppressive conceptual frameworks. That *Agaat* is able to survive being cast as both daughter and servant and with an "energetic" step (2006: 677), confirms that she has learnt the ability to embrace permanently partial affiliations. Milla is, however, continually searching for causes and effects to diagnose and cure her ambivalent status, which results in her paralysis.

In contrast *Agaat* encourages the regeneration of wounded subjectivities. While Van Niekerk acknowledges *Agaat*'s potential to be worse than her manipulating masters, I argue that *Agaat*, by replacing Oedipal myths with situated knowledge, avoids becoming lost in a maze of deceit. Haraway reminds us that cyborgs are "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" and they are often "unfaithful to their origins" (1991: 151). Gerald Gaylard recognises the trickster's potential to expose boundaries, but simultaneously warns of three likely problems that this consciousness might develop. Firstly, the "danger of solipsism" (2005: 283) results when tricksters become preoccupied with their desires and weave deceitful stories. Secondly, transformation can lead to both selfishness and self-destruction in the sense that "tricksters often prey

vampirically on people's fears, and thereby increase superstition rather than decreasing it" (2005: 283). Thirdly, "destructiveness is inevitable" if the boundary keepers refuse to give up defending their borders (2005: 283). Gaylard says that tricksterism might be criticised because it is essentially anti-social (2005: 283-4).⁹⁹ However, when society itself is so dangerously at odds with the environment supporting it, tricksterism becomes a necessary and powerful politics.

In order for Agaat to imagine around oppressive conceptual frameworks she needs to rework Milla's indoctrination by Oedipal origin stories. When Milla steals Agaat from violent family circumstances on her mother's farm, it takes tremendous effort before Milla is able to transform and ambiguously 'civilise' Agaat from being as "dense as stone" into a "blank page" ready for inscription (2006: 472,478). Jak presciently warns Milla about this 'breaking-in' of Agaat, and tells her to be careful of her "story" because the one she "fobbed" off on him "didn't work so well" (2006: 478). This emphasises the power and instability of discursively created terrains. During Agaat's nursing of Milla, Agaat recites the riddle "in the road is a hole, in the hole is a stone, in the stone is a sound" (2006: 60). This riddle that may be read as an intentional recognition stance reflecting Agaat's "tremendous art," which Milla acknowledges in Agaat's nursing of a "half-dead relic" as if she were "a whole human being" (2006: 188). This art is evident in Agaat's childhood "second sight" that is capable of determining whether a stone contains a fossil by holding it (2006: 625). Agaat's ability to read stones foregrounds the agentic capacity of the environment in that stones do *speak* if you know how to *listen*. Importantly, one of the meanings of Agaat's name is a "semi-precious stone" (2006: 487).¹⁰⁰ The skill of searching for consciousness where it may *seem* there is none signals rhizomatic thinking that counters centralising and immobilising doctrine. While Milla seems practiced in rhizomatic thinking, learnt by analysing land narratives on the farm, she is unable to fend off the programmed centralised thinking of Afrikaner Christian Nationalism, which results in her articulating "double messages" when lost in a labyrinth of dualisms (2006: 305). Instead, Milla continually tries to civilise or "wash white" the stolen Agaat to "make a human being of her" (2006: 576).

Milla discovers the abused and deformed Agaat crouching in the blackened hearth of the labourer's cottage with the knuckles of one hand crammed into her mouth in a self-silencing gesture. When Milla makes eye contact with Agaat, she says Agaat begins "trembling" (2006: 656,665). This

⁹⁹ Here Gaylard incorporates Peter Stallybrass' critique of Bhaktin's carnival, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), which refers to "its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes *weaker*, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who 'don't belong' – in a process of *displaced abjection*); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture; its licensed complicity."

¹⁰⁰ The Dominee says the value of a semi-precious stone is seen only if it's correctly polished, reminiscent of Afrikaner Christian Nationalism's prerogative that salvation is found outside oneself (2006: 487).

is reminiscent of Brossard's "ritual with trembling" that "lets us exist" (2005: 105). Milla asks Agaat her name and she hears

ggggg clearly, like a sigh ... like a rill in the fynbos, very soft, and distant, like the sound you hear before you've even realised what you're hearing.
That was the beginning. That sound ... Ggggg at the back of the throat, as if it were a sound that belonged to yourself. (2006: 657)

Here, Agaat's name evokes the "guttural" and perhaps the pre-lingual (2006: 520), which makes Milla think of the "impersonal unity of all living things" (2006: 521). Milla struggles to "write" her experience down, as her "words spoil" (2006: 520) this experience that stands outside symbolic language. While Milla senses her wrongdoing towards Agaat, who she periodically admits feeling "one" with (2006: 521) and which is representative of her Othered unconscious, she cannot name this wrong. Thus, Milla remembers Agaat smelling of "iron" and "blood" (2006: 657), which is what she tastes each time she senses her wrongdoing towards Agaat. This seems to confirm Gaylard's second problem with tricksterism: the tendency to "prey vampirically on people's fears" (2005: 283). In an interview with Leon de Kock, Van Niekerk admits to including several vampire motifs in the novel, and says that Milla is "a vampire" who has no life of her own and instead "sucks the blood" from Agaat "when she breathes in her name" (2009: 142).

Milla's attempts at taming and converting Agaat into her rule of rhetoric perpetuates oppressive conceptual frameworks that bind Agaat and her unconscious self, which then devours Milla from the inside. Milla's inability to overcome her internalisation of paralysing narratives causes her destruction. Agaat's older sister, Lys, tells Milla that Agaat's name is "Asgat" (ash arse) because she continually seeks refuge in the fireplace, just as Milla seeks refuge in paradisiacal metaphors of heaven (2006: 666). When Milla lies paralysed as stone, she describes her understanding of Agaat's refuge in the fireplace as her wish to be occluded under the soot, under the stone strata, under the foundations of the tyranny of prescriptions that threaten to "split you into parts ... till you scream, till you sing, till you dance to their tune" (2006: 249). Haraway argues that

the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position not of identity, but of objectivity; that is, partial connection. (1991: 193)

Milla's impossible search for an Edenic paradise prevents partial connections and results in her wanting to vanish, as is suggested through her self-medication and resultant paralysis. On nearing death Milla wonders how to free Agaat from the prescriptions that result in occlusion, and admits that creation is not about reproducing the self, but about freeing the Other and therefore oneself (2006:

250,540). Milla's recognition that we write the earth as fossilised stone (2006: 250), emphasises the ways in which stones, and by extension, landscapes, do speak. This reminds Milla that she is not alienated from nature, which gives her the confidence to change her ways of seeing.

Lys tries to explain Agaat's sexual and physical abuse her step-father and brothers by saying it is "as if they want to go Satan one better with fire" (2006: 665), emphasising the tricksters potential for self-destruction. However, Agaat eventually climbs out of the fireplace, out of her occlusion, and learns to use fire productively in ways that allow her to overcome her self-destructive urges. This enables her to begin rewriting her origin story. Agaat uses situated knowledges, which provides her with the possibility of writing the world rather than merely being written by it. In this regard she takes the image of fire, with all of its associations of brimstone and hell, and reinvests it with a positive origin story of her own. This is foregrounded in her fairy tale she tells Jakkie every night, which conflates the nature/culture dualism:

And it crackled and sputtered and the sparks they flew and the fire it flared up and the flames they beckoned with hot red hands and they said:

Come, little child, come! And dance and sing because we are the place you come from! You come from the hearth, you come from the wind, from the glow of the wood, from the soot-black chimney that sucks up sparks and that speckles the lily with ash, you come from the smoke that turns the sun red as copper and the moon as yellow as gold. (2006: 688)

Here Agaat's faith is explicitly interconnected with land narratives. Her sense of elemental belonging assists her in rewriting her origins to ensure she circumvents the exclusionary doctrine of the entitlement narratives of 'Chosen People.' Furthermore, by speckling the "lily with ash," Agaat metaphorically discolours the whiteness of the flower and its association with purity.

However, Milla is uncomfortable with her own, as well as Agaat's, subversive potential. This is revealed when Agaat draws a picture of Milla as her angel with wings. Milla helps Agaat redraw the picture because "only Lucifer the rebellious angel has such spindly black wings" (2006: 623). That Milla is bat-like suggests that she has subversive qualities similar to Agaat who is described as mole-like (2006: 527). Both bat and mole have alternative sensory capacities, both are nocturnal and both emerge readily in superstition. When Milla shows Agaat a bat cave she is fascinated by "a mouse that can fly," and Milla catches one to show her the "membrane between the spokes & the big ear for receiving the bounced-back squeaking sounds & the pig-like little snout-beak" (2006: 631). This imagery suggests that while Milla is capable of hearing alternative inflections, she cannot accommodate them. Therefore, when Agaat looks like she wants to follow the mole underground, Milla says "you're not a mole ... you're an above-ground creature, you walk in the light" (2006: 527). Deleuze and Guattari argue that burrows are rhizomatic in "functions of shelter, supply,

movement, evasion, and breakout” (2001: 1604-1605). Here Milla’s denial of the Other side of her story is evident, which promotes her attempts to abduct Agaat’s agency.

Milla’s and the Dominee’s renaming of Agaat (the Dutch for Agatha which originates from the Greek for ‘good’) attempts to convert Agaat’s origin story. The Dominee says Agaat’s new name is a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” like a “holy brand,” and congratulates Milla on saving “another heathen soul,” which ‘justifies’ her stealing of Agaat (2006: 487). Years later Milla overhears Agaat’s response to Jakkie’s questions on her Promethean-like origins and naming:

I crawled out of the fire ... I was dug out of the ash stolen out of the hearth fell out of a cloud came up with the fennel washed down in the flood was mowed with the sickle threshed with the wheat baked in the bread. No seriously asks Jakkie what kind of a name is that? Nobody else has a name like that. Baptised like that left like that. But it’s actually Á-g-g-g-g-gaat that goes g-g-g-g like a house snake behind the skirting board. Gaat Gaat Gaat says Jakkie, sounding the g in his throat as if he’s gargling, it’s a name of nothing. That’s right says A. it’s a name of everything that’s good. It’s everything and nothing six of one and half a dozen of the other. (2006: 365)

Here Agaat is metaphorically linked to the Biblical snake and Prometheus, which further reinforces her subversive trickster abilities, inasmuch as both the snake and Prometheus were the legendary catalysts for the punishment of humanity, thus severing the link between God(s) and humans. Agaat resists the abstracted origin stories Milla and the Dominee impress on her by re-writing her origins through the use of metaphorical allusions to land narratives. Her “forked” tongue redefines the meaning of a self-fulfilling prophecy through rendering the “holy brand” simultaneously “everything and nothing.” Milla tells Agaat that unless she is baptised and confirmed in the Christian faith, she will remain as purposeless as a “floating seed in the wind” that never becomes grounded and bears “good fruit” (2006: 563). Not to accept the Christian faith implies purgatory, but Agaat confirms that she knows fire and would rather burn than subscribe to foreign concepts.

In order to prove to Milla that she is rooted in her environment, Agaat begins to propagate the hardy fennel plant as her “trademark” (2006: 312).¹⁰¹ Milla teaches Agaat that fennel tastes like liquorice, the “drop” sweet she gives Agaat when she is good. When Agaat’s fennel becomes so prolific that it taints the cow’s milk with the sweet taste of liquorice, she affirms herself as “fully implicated in the world” (Haraway, 1991: 176), capable of writing her own destiny through ‘tainting’ the colonised space of the farm with the goodness of fennel. Milla tells Agaat that she is “infesting” the farm and Jak refers to her as the “Minister of fennel,” which is indicative of Agaat’s mirroring of mastery and her wish to dominate (2006: 629). A comparison can be drawn between Agaat’s actions

¹⁰¹ Fennel is generally considered indigenous to the shores of the Mediterranean but now grows wild over most of the planet, particularly in areas colonised by the Romans.

and the Prometheus myth when Agaat uses the fennel plant to write her environment and thereby steal fire (origin stories) from the masters (gods).

Agaat's sowing of fennel seed thus mimics a pioneering logic, which Joseph Meeker asserts has been prevalent since the emergence of humanity, and which is a reflection of religious and philosophical logic (1996: 162-163). As Agaat shows, pioneering does not lead to the propagation of diversity, rather encouraging the reincarnation of the same, which then homogenises and destabilises the environment. Instead of accommodating ourselves in interdependent ecosystems humans have reduced evolutionary capacities through destroying diversity. To realise oneself as "fully implicated in the world" (Haraway, 1991: 176) encourages solidarity, which by definition opposes essentialised identities that create defensive conquering mindsets. This is akin to Jak's Afrikaner Nationalist need to defend against the black threat (*swart gevaar*) or the communists.¹⁰²

Pioneer species dominate in the early development stages of an environment. What we term weeds or invasive/nuisance plants are the species adapted enough to risk and survive inhospitable terrains. Jak attempts to inculcate a pioneering character in Jakkie for defence purposes, and Milla imagines a "diehard species" (2006: 16) when trying to write her "autobiography" at the end of her life (2006: 21). This pioneering impetus is evidenced when Agaat is depicted as "infesting" Grootmoedersdrift with the fennel plant (2006: 14,204,629,676). Pioneering logic becomes problematic when invasive species resist co-operation in favour of competition, which results in the depletion of the ecosystem. Evolutionary processes are not a battle fought to determine the exclusive survival of the so-called 'fittest' species, but are rather dependent on adaptation and accommodation to ensure the proliferation of as many species as possible. Jak represents the Tennysonian depiction of nature as "red in tooth and claw" (1983: 710),¹⁰³ translating his ancestors' pioneering logic into the defence of territory with "muzzle-loaders" (2006: 599). While pioneering logic might have influence in difficult times, the potential to accommodate Others is foregrounded as vital for healthy, stable and diverse ecosystems.

In order to convert conquering narratives of a pioneering logic into narratives of accommodation, Milla challenges Agaat's alienation in discourse. To this end Milla harnesses Agaat's fascination for fire, which encourages her recognition of the potential of her breath that, like fire, can purge oppressive meaning. Milla does so by giving Agaat her father's bellows as an "extra lung to breathe along with [hers], a fire-fiddle, a puffing book with hundreds of pages" (2006: 525-526). Here the handing down of a part of Milla's father's heritage might suggest that she wants to

¹⁰² Willie Burger in "Karnaval van die diere: die skrywende waterkewer eerder as die jollie bobbejaan" asserts that Jak defines himself against these same Others.

¹⁰³ This quotation is found in Canto 56 of Alfred Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam A. H. H.," (1850).

share her father's responses to this "so-called civilisation" (2006: 75). Milla tells Agaat that "the direction of a gaze is a blowing wind," which conflates the nature/culture dualism. Agaat begins to start fires "with the wind of [her] words" and, like God, speaks through the burning bush (2006: 526). This foregrounds the ways in which even biblical narratives were originally constructed from situated knowledges.

Agaat, in her turn, teaches Jakkie to have faith in his breath by playing a game where they call each other across long distances on the farm, using various implements, including a ram's horn (2006: 364).¹⁰⁴ This game seems to develop from Agaat's christening where Milla tells her to "listen well" to the organist's music that sounds like "harps and trumpets," because it is the "voice of the angels of the Lord" calling her "to his flock" (2006: 567). Agaat is not only teaching Jakkie to have faith in his breath, but simultaneously she replaces the call of the Church with the various calls of the farm. On Jakkie's return to Canada after Milla's funeral, Agaat insists that he accept "the blue Delft Birth-plate and the parcel of fennel seed, the horn and the bellows" (2006: 676). Here Agaat is symbolically giving Jakkie his own situated origin story, permeated with both Milla's and her own pioneering logic, affirming faith in him. Agaat says that if he blows her a note, she will "hear it" (2006: 676). She thus foregrounds her intentional recognition stance and liberates Jakkie by celebrating the good in their shared past.

When Milla asks Agaat who taught her about fire, Agaat, still not speaking, answers with her eyes, which Milla translates as "[t]he Nowherewoman, the woman without name, who is everywhere but who can't be seen, she taught me about starting a fire" (2006: 516). "Nowherewoman" might be interpreted as a comment on the feminist consciousness of the absence of women, except as objects of men's desire. Simultaneously, though, it constitutes an acknowledgment of women's potential to use fire and act of their own accord. Agaat is telling Milla that every woman has the potential to cannibalise concepts, but that this potential has been paralysed due to her looking to patriarchal structures to confirm her existence. This habituated oppression relies on the internalisation of Oedipal origin stories that produce docile bodies, that in turn demonstrate dutiful restraint. Milla's avoidance of Agaat's origin story in her diary results in her "deathbed bec[oming] the fireplace" (2006: 654). I propose that "nowherewoman" metaphorically invokes Gaylard's "nowhere land" (2005: 145). Gaylard argues that in postcolonial literature "nowhere land" is a place not "consumed

¹⁰⁴ The ram's horn might be symbolic of the ram's horn shofar used in Jewish religious services. The blast of a shofar from the clouds on Mount Sinai made the Israelites tremble in awe (Exodus 19, 20). The first day of the seventh month is termed "a memorial of blowing" (Lev. 23, 24), or "a day of blowing" (Num. xxix. 1), the shofar. The shofar says: "Wake up from your (moral) sleep. You are asleep. Get up from your slumber. You are in a deep sleep. Search for your behavior. Become the best person you can. Remember God, the One Who created you." Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4. Information obtained from www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shofar. Accessed 10 October 2009.

by modernity, and therefore where the mythic arises" (2006: 145). "Nowhere land" thus stands in contrast to the pastoral/Edenic and symbolises a wilderness of trespass, disorientation, loss and danger. Hence the dramatic landscapes of "nowhere land," whether physical or theoretical, stand outside the temperate modernised North, and represent an "image of mutating subjectivity" more suited to an African reality than the sterility of the European city (2005: 145).

Milla encourages Agaat's subversive potential when she says: "Your mouth is a spark, the roof of your mouth is fire, the shaft of the flame is your tongue!" (2006: 528). Here Milla illustrates that Agaat's words are signifying tools capable of undermining exclusion. Milla senses there will be consequences to her education of Agaat, which is revealed in Milla's nightmare about pulling out Agaat's tongue while she laughs at Milla from the back of her throat. Agaat's tongue then pulls Milla off her feet and into Agaat's mouth (2006: 482). Milla's dream explicitly foreshadows Agaat's discursive re-signification of Milla's culture. In changing Milla's monologues to a dialogical interaction with the environment, Agaat offers a loving acquaintance filled with a history of diverse yet interconnected ancestors. Agaat's conversations with the plants and birds emphasise this feeling of belonging that Milla argues allows these Others to "flourish" (2006: 281,628). Milla, however, does not acknowledge this as a mutual flourishing, which emphasises her struggle to understand Others at all.

Agaat's sense of belonging is evident in the fossils, skulls, shells, pebbles, horseshoes, marbles and other memorabilia found on the farm and at Witsand (where the family holidays annually), which she plasters around her fireplace. Milla calls the paganistic mouldings "Romish and creepy" and not something she (Western civilisation) would regard as a "work of art" (2006: 268). Early one Sunday morning Milla, in her pyjamas, interrupts Agaat's only time off to ask assistance in planning her paradise garden. On seeing Agaat in her room, despite its immaculate and brightly lit state, Milla feels "naked" (2006: 462) in the face of what she previously referred to as not a "work of art." Seeing Agaat in this way makes Milla feel out of place and disconnected from her environment, whose "feral" (2006: 461) or wild side Milla had persistently ignored throughout her life. She describes seeing Agaat sitting and embroidering with

her bare feet on a little mat of sewn-together moleskins (...). It was the first time in twenty years that you'd seen her without her cap (...).

The unkempt hair mass made her look feral. You wanted to look away, but you couldn't. The hair filled the otherwise tidy room like a conspiracy against everything in league with daylight and subordination. From the enormity of hair your eyes strayed to the grisly cement-work around the fireplace. To and fro you looked, at her head and at the clusters of shells and skulls and quartz pebbles and marbles and little slivers of iron, rivets. It was as if Agaat had recreated her unkempt self there in low relief. (2006: 461)

Milla's extreme remoteness from Agaat is revealed when she says she has not seen her without her servant's attire in "twenty years," and when Agaat sticks out her chin to manifest her displeasure, the effect without the cap changes from arrogance to "vulnerability" (2006: 462). In this moment of mutual nakedness, Milla feels the need to apologise, but becomes defensive and angry instead. Agaat's place-based spirituality, on the other hand, entices her out of her occlusion and enables a sense of belonging by acknowledging her environment as a "work of art," countering Milla's abstraction from her environment.

Milla too gestures towards pagan animism at times and when she hears in advance that the river is coming down in flood, she takes Agaat to the drift and pretends to call the river by its name. When the river responds, making Agaat believe Milla "can do magic," and floods past in a "roiling, rustling mass of words," Milla says, "Listen ... I have the river in my mouth, it's the beginning of all things" (2006: 527). Later, when Milla writes down her interpretation of this event in her diary, she asks whether her metaphorical reinvention of the Bible's Creation story is blasphemous, but then takes this questioning no further.¹⁰⁵ Milla here is in "danger of solipsism" (Gaylard, 2005: 283) when she weaves stories that trap her in their double meanings. Furthermore, Milla's river tale is both selfish and destructive because it is disingenuous, promoting her god-like status by exploiting Agaat's innocence. Lastly, Milla's "destructiveness is inevitable" (Gaylard, 2005: 283) if both her and Jak refuse to give up defending the borders of 'privileged' entitlement. We thus see the ways in which Milla falls into all of Gaylard's traps of tricksterism, confirming the trope of her consciousness being a hole into which she repeatedly falls.

While Milla emphasises Agaat's need to call "things by their names" to prevent them from having power over her, she struggles with this lesson herself (2006: 527). Agaat's potential to name her anxieties and desires enable her to become responsible for how she views the world. Her pagan animism allows her to map meaning and articulate this meaning without dominating, which, by extension, suggests she avoids becoming defensive. Agaat's potential for an intentional recognition stance entices her to climb out of her occlusion through harnessing her own fiery energy, which marks a transition from Brossard's "ritual with trembling" (2006: 102) to the "ritual with shock" (2005: 103). When Agaat regenerates her wounded consciousness by rewriting her origins she ensures that she is not alienated from her environment. In taking active control over her life in the

¹⁰⁵ Nicole Brossard also refers to a river when examining the potential within language to challenge concepts: "Digging in the dictionary as others turn the soil to unearth evidence of ancient lives, I have always felt the need to understand, down to the very root, how each word could emerge from its bed like a river or, suddenly drawn to a luminous source, split in two, confounding all expectations" (2005: 93). Bakhtin asserts that "the living utterance ... cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (2001: 1202).

microcosm of Grootmoedersdrift, Agaat resists religious entitlement and re-writes the order of her world by adopting what Brossard calls a “ritual with sliding” (2006: 104).

4.3 Writings of the Whirligig

Give me one matter of concern and I will show you the whole earth and heavens that have to be gathered to hold it firmly in place.

(Bruno Latour 2004: 246)

When Milla tries to describe the beginning of her relationship with Agaat, which she significantly never records in her diary, it is always interconnected with the memory of the “weltering writing on water” of the whirligigs (2006: 658). This memory depicts reflective surfaces and writing as powerful arenas for confrontation between self and Others. The metaphorical whirligig, symbolic of multiply overlapping and circling meanings, becomes the anti-dote for Milla’s literal thinking and other dis-eases. Dr Euthanasia Leroux tells Agaat that Milla’s illness causes her to become “isolate[ed]” and “dement[ed]” and she must attune herself to “literal meanings” and “essential needs, without subtle intentions” and “complicated messages” (2006: 211). Milla’s medical treatment encourages her to admit to her problem of taking “the Word so literally” (2006: 561), which then assists her understanding that she could have accommodated Agaat if she had resisted covenant ideology.

The novel illustrates the need for reflection and repetition in communicating with Others in a heterogeneous world.¹⁰⁶ This might enable recognition of languages on the Other side of the mirror (self). The novel’s metaphorical allusions to the search for the “carrion eater,” variously referred to as the “Apatura Iris” or “giant purple emperor butterfly” (2006: 298), suggests Milla’s desire to accommodate conflicting emotions and challenge oppressive concepts. Milla lives long enough to see Agaat’s reflections on her diary, displayed as a “story in a mirror” (2006: 163), which assists her in accommodating the “ambiguity” of the farm, “her inability to act rightly and justly” (2006: 293). Agaat’s recasting of Milla’s lessons challenge the provisional advantage provided by “the brute energy of a good start” (2006: 31). Instead, Agaat’s narratives reveal “ownership and history and heritage” as colonising missions (2006: 31).

¹⁰⁶ Deleuze and Guattari confirm that rhizomatic thinking is not teleological and while it is structured by dialectics it is not organised by moments of synthesis (2001: 1596). Donna Haraway takes a similar position when she says “dialectics too is a dream language, longing to resolve contradiction. Perhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos” (1991: 173). Haraway’s hope here is again echoed by Deleuze and Guattari when they argue that the rhizome “replaces, or at least complements, history (the story people tell) with geography (the ground they inhabit)” (2001: 1595). This enables a more realistic interpretation of events than the conquering, and therefore vestigial, narratives of History.

Milla repeatedly tries to record the beginning of her relationship with Agaat, but says it “feels too long” and she cannot pinpoint when it began exactly (2006: 471). The whirligigs circling “round and round, the door creaking open,” make Milla realise that she needs “to look beyond the trees and see the forest” (2006: 471). However, for Milla to attain anything approximating an “honest likeness” (2006: 21), she needs to re-conceptualise the beginning of her relationship with Agaat. She needs to accept it as selfish abduction rather than a civilising mission. In *Agaat* discontinuities, such as those set up by the nature/culture dualism, reveal how culture assimilates the Other and reproduces the self. Milla confirms that her and Jak’s “pronouncements,” “prescriptions” and “prohibitions” implanted a “wall, a heart of stone” (2006: 554), which was all Agaat was capable of returning. In the second-person “court of conscience” (Van Niekerk in De Kock, 2009: 143) section, Milla remembers Agaat as follows

a whole compilation of you, she contained you within her, she was the arena in which the two of you wrestled with yourselves.
That was all that she could be, from the beginning.
Your archive.
Without her you and Jak would have known nothing of yourselves.
She was your parliament, your hall of mirrors. (2006: 554)

This excerpt reveals not only Milla’s assimilation of Agaat, but also the ways in which the inclusion of Othered reflections enables greater knowledge of the self, by undermining homogeneous monolithic narratives. Instead of teleological progression that creates a longing for resolution, Agaat offers Milla an aperture—an arena providing a “hall of mirrors” (2006: 554) that reflects meaning in unforeseen directions and enables Milla to navigate through a maze of dualisms.

In an interview with Francois Smith, Van Niekerk confirms that by parodying the beginning of the novel, through placing it in a prologue, she suggests that the beginning is not really the beginning, and similarly that the end is not the end; it is just that the reader interprets it that way (2004: 8).¹⁰⁷ The end of the novel, culminating in Milla’s death, reveals the previously repressed subject of the beginning of Milla’s and Agaat’s relationship. This suggests that cyclical notions of time are a more authentic reflection of experience than a teleological, non-repetitive, linear framework, which underpins both religious and ‘rationalised’ sado-dispassionate practices advocated

¹⁰⁷ The Afrikaans reads: “Deur die begin in 'n proloog te parodieer sê jy die begin is nie werklik die begin nie, en net so is die einde nie werklik die einde nie—jy dink maar net dit eindig daar. Die moment van closure word gekompliseer en dit word 'n aperture.” *By parodying the beginning in a prologue you are saying that the beginning is not really the beginning, and just so the end is not really the end—you just think it ends there. The moment of closure is complicated and becomes an aperture.*

by production-orientated discourse. I have already argued that a linear concept of time promoted damaging creation stories that are at odds with evolutionary and ecological processes.¹⁰⁸

Milla's fear of risking alternative readings confirms her awareness that these might affect her 'privileged' status. Instead, she abducts and isolates Agaat as a "separate chapter" (2006: 653) to prevent her own mistakes being exposed. Milla eventually admits that the beginning, especially the early years, was not "a story on its own" (2006: 653) and that it was meant to be an integral part of the greater family saga. That Milla does not articulate her concern over her cryptic beginnings with Agaat results in her being haunted by the image of the whirligig, the *Gyrinus natans*, whose scientific name Milla wanted to look up, but admits that her preoccupation with the Latin name was "Excuses, all of it" (2006: 653). Her interest in finding the exact scientific description points to an emerging recognition of Linnaeus' system of categorisation that is implicated in creating the very hierarchies that exclude Agaat. Her admission also suggests Milla's awareness of her selfish motivations in denying the truth of her relationship with Agaat. The whirligig is a recurring image that signals the necessity of returning to the beginnings in order to find some closure, and thus problematizes the teleological separation of beginnings and endings.

After first seeing Agaat crouching in the fireplace of the labourer's cottages, Milla walks to the dam on her mother's farm contemplating the "impersonal unity of all things" (2006: 521) that she senses when hearing the guttural sound of Agaat's untranslatable name, which sounds of everything. Milla sits on "a tree-root with [her] feet in the water, and trie[s] to fathom the feeling, the vague sweetness and sorrow" (2006: 658). She is seemingly attempting to conduct sense "well beyond the signified" (Brossard, 2005: 105) in order to hear the voices of Others. She sounds the guttural "Ggggg" of Agaat's name and, on opening her eyes, sees the world as "bright and strange" (2006: 658). It is in this moment that Milla, in her identification with Agaat, is able momentarily to escape the rigid confines of the symbolic order. Milla holds her breath waiting:

There was nothing except fine circles on the surface, the water insect and its little twin shadow, the hooked scribble-claws, broader around the ankles as if wearing boots, with also their reflections, and between the two sets of claws, between above and below, a single ripple inscribing the surface of the water with rapidly successive perfect circles, overlapping, circling against one another, fading away, starting anew, a weltering writing on water. A fugue it reminded you of. You could hardly imagine that it was the work of a single creature. (2006: 658)

¹⁰⁸ Francis Wilson's *Dinosaurs, Diamonds and Democracy: A short, short history of South Africa* (2009) provides a succinct overview, and recommendations on further reading, on evolution in South Africa. Wilson's overview dates back 3.5 billion years and includes information on the "Cradle of Humankind, a World Heritage Site outside Johannesburg" that "bears testimony to the importance of South Africa in the evolution of human beings" (2009:7). Wilson says that "one particularly haunting aspect of the systematic extermination of the San by European invaders was that they were in a sense destroying their own ancestry (2009:47-48). Wilson's statement here emphasises the importance of cyclical notions of time.

Here the metaphor of the whirligig explicitly foregrounds the importance of a circular notion of time that reminds us of forgotten beginnings and the “impersonal unity of all things” (2006: 521). On returning to the farmhouse hours later Milla *wants* to respond to her mother’s angry concern that something might have happened by saying “something did ... I myself happened, my almost forgotten self” (2006: 658). Instead, Milla says “nothing” and steels herself against the “tone” of her mother’s voice (2006: 658). Despite Milla’s concern over the “beauty” of the whirligig’s existence, however “insignificant” it may seem (2006: 659), she is not able to communicate this, not even to her mother. She is thus not able to sustain an intentional recognition stance, or, in other words, grant agency to the Othered environment.

In spite of Milla’s feet being in the symbolically fluid water she is represented as firmly grounded in paralyzing structures. It appears to be intentional that Van Niekerk depicts Milla as seated on a “tree-root” (2006: 658) like a “burnished throne” (2006: 493).¹⁰⁹ She is in an ideal position to negotiate the rhizomatic meaning of the whirligigs, the little water insects whose anatomy has evolved to make each eye capable of seeing above and below the water at the same time, but she is unable to relinquish her position of privilege.¹¹⁰ Van Niekerk’s use of the whirligig as a metaphor for writing and for inhabiting ambivalent spaces is evident in this moment. Nicole Brossard asserts that writing

translates that enigmatic but reflective operation whereby we process and can transform our version of reality, that is change its metaphoric and semantic course. Writing is a wager of presence in the semantic, imaginary, and symbolic space. It prepares the advent of sense, and renders compatible the dreams and utopias that are grafted to our desires, giving them baroque forms, tragic or smiling forms. (2005: 101-2)

Here the emphasis is on how the practice of writing allows for recognising Othered languages—the “language of reed and rushes” (2006: 555). Milla’s fascination with the writings of the whirligig is because the whirligig is suited for a life at the interface of water and air, which is reminiscent of Milla’s dying wish to be able to see “outside and inside at the same time” (2006: 209)—to be able to recognise her own, as well as Other’s, reflections in language. This might enable Milla to “transform [her] version of reality” (2005: 101).

¹⁰⁹ Michiel Heyns affirms the words “burnished throne” (2006: 493) used to ironically describe Milla’s wheelchair, are an exclusive addition to the English translation. The historical meaning of these words is revealed through the intertextual reference to the splendour of Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is firstly ironised through T.S. Eliot’s usage of this in *The Waste Land* to represent the neurasthenia of his character, and now further ironised by Heyns’s usage (2009: 132).

¹¹⁰ Information on *Gyrinus natans* found on www.tolweb.org/Gyrinidae/8882.

Agaat aids Milla's transformation by expertly weaving new narratives concerning their shared past. These techniques include the "old trick" of "tone and emphasis" that allows her to appropriate "prefabricated sentences" to her own purpose (2006: 189). Milla refers to this as the "old parrot ways" or "[d]ouble-barrelled mimicry" with which Agaat "invents her own language" to translate Milla's "remorse" (2006: 189-190). Brossard argues that the "ritual with breath" "distance[s] parasitical sounds, to accord our mental and psychological time to cosmic time" so that "availability" is total (2005: 105). She argues that this is the most difficult task, as generally we mask what we are saying by speaking "too high or too low, too fast or too slow" (2005: 105). Total availability encourages one to give up mastery, as well as the alienation that goes with it. I argue that Agaat facilitates this conscious awareness in Milla before her death. Milla's struggle to communicate with Others, who can only be known through language, results because of her translating Others into a language that promotes racial, gendered and capitalist responses. Therefore, Milla and Agaat must negotiate language as the mirror, or membrane, between self and Other to devise an "adequate language" in which to attempt an understanding of a more permeable world (2006: 555).

When Milla teaches Agaat to speak she tells her that the smoke from the fire turns into clouds that bring rain (2006: 529). Clouds, like the whirligig, represent the interface between water and air. The novel is careful to depict this ecological process as capable of bringing either seasonable or "unseasonable" rain (2006: 194,646). Similarly, Haraway's cyborg is an imaginative fiction that reweaves situated knowledges to expose "fruitful couplings," which may have frightening or agreeable outcomes (1991: 150). For Haraway the metaphor of the cyborg is about "consciousness—or its simulation" (1991: 153). In "Cyborgs at Large," an interview with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, Haraway was asked in what ways she proposed to prevent cyborgism from being a myth that can swing both ways, especially in a volatile social climate bereft of secure guarantees (1991: 1-20). Although Haraway acknowledges that her 1985 cyborg did not contain much of an unconscious or, more importantly, that which resists in the unconscious, because of the removal of potent Oedipal myths, she confirmed this lack was addressed in her 1988 essay where she describes resistance being attained through situated knowledges.

In the novel, Agaat recasts situated farm knowledges to challenge oppressive conceptual frameworks and prevent this becoming the legacy passed down to one's children, a leitmotif imbued in the composition of the book through the trope of the "*sickness of Grootmoedersdrift*" (italics in original, 2006: 235). This emphasises the importance of situated knowledges for creating resistance to the status quo. Milla remembers Agaat preparing her last meal and describes her as a "shadow on her knees" like a "cloud dripping onto a cloud" (2006: 580). This imagery suggests the birth of Milla's hybrid consciousness capable of seeing the shadows and clouds of mutating subjectivities.

The ability to see the Other represents an escape from the “prison-house of language” (Jameson, 1972), possibly predicting an imminent ‘rainfall’ of alternative perspectives. Milla dies without reconciling her ambiguities, which no “*glue nor thongs or balm or coalescence or grafting or oculation or welding*” (italics in original, 2006: 672) will mend. Yet Agaat is depicted as “*rescuing Milla from her moieties dreamt*” (italics in original, 2006: 673), suggesting that Agaat has led Milla to a place of “heterogeneous well-being” (Haraway, 1997: 95). Milla’s death is described as follows:

*is this the beginning now this lightness? can I venture it on my own? am I at
last membrane between a willow and its reflection? A meniscus that transmits an
image? ... Yes without lamentation without sighing a permeable world ... where to
the smallest circling water-creature zealously writing everything reflects so with
open eyes into the white light so whispering to my soul to go
in my overberg
over the bent world brooding
in my hand the hand of the small agaat* (italics in original, 2006: 673-4)

This poetic stream of consciousness section indicates that Milla’s availability has become total, that she can discern the membrane (meniscus) between self and Other. The language is conspicuously lacking in religious metaphors of purity and completeness and instead describes meaning in terms of situated knowledges. Milla’s words seem more honest in this moment and suggest her awareness of her desires and anxieties. Brossard confirms that the “ritual with breath” is practiced in “solitude” and is “most closely related to poetry” (2005: 105), which the stream of consciousness section exhibits. Furthermore, Van Niekerk again parodies the concept of beginnings and endings through depicting Milla’s death as a beginning. Agaat uses Milla’s discursive gift of an extra lung, the “bellows-book” (2006: 530), to keep Milla alive long enough so that she can unbury her heart and communicate her understanding that their breath is attuned to the cosmos, allowing them to see Othered reflections.

While it is too late for Milla to make amends for her actions, her recognition of her complicity in the abduction of the land and Agaat, enables her to die holding Agaat’s hand. This importantly foregrounds Milla’s assistance in encouraging discursive change that resists dualistic thought. Milla confirms that if

the new heaven and the new earth were to be an empty, light place without discord or misunderstanding, then you would in spite of everything prefer life on Grootmoedersdrift with Agaat to beatitude, and surrounding you, instead of the heavenly void, the mountains and rivers and humped hills of the Overberg. And you would between yourselves devise an adequate language with rugged musical words in which you could argue and find each other. The language of reed and rushes. (2006: 555)

Here Milla confirms her preference for the buffeting winds of material reality, to the boredom of narratives of completeness. Agaat allows Milla to rewrite the conquering narratives imbricated in the dominant of language so that she might climb out of her purgatory and die in an accommodating “(sonorous) field of vision” (Brossard, 2005: 105).

4.4 Embroidering Genesis on Grootmoedersdrift: Carnival of the Animals

If ecofeminists are sincere in their desire to live in a world of peace and nonviolence for all living beings, we must help each other through the pains-taking process of piecing together the fragmented world view that we have inherited. But the pieces cannot simply be patched together. What is needed is a reweaving of all the old stories and narratives into a multifaceted tapestry.
(Marti Kheel 1993: 261)

Van Niekerk’s book insists on the need to be open to the world’s languages. This is evident when Milla realises that for her to understand Agaat she requires Agaat to “explicate” in an “other” language (2006: 554). Agaat confirms that “love will find a way to get the camel through the needle’s eye” (2006: 189); that she will weave stories to ensure that even Milla, the “tortiss” (2006: 75,652), will be saved.¹¹¹ Milla’s outdated world-views are endangered much like the “tortiss” is. Both Milla and the prehistoric “tortiss” suggest a struggle to adapt to change. Agaat allows Milla to die with the consolation of holding her hand, which is reminiscent of the dream Milla originally had of her life with Agaat (2006: 661,674). Despite the fact that Milla and Agaat might be trapped in a very damaging relationship there are aspects of their final moments of communication that offer at least some hope. Agaat manages to challenge some of the oppressive discourses she has inherited through incorporating alternative systems of signification that recognise “the language of reed and rushes” (2006: 555). In this way nature might emerge as a legend storyteller, or what Haraway refers to as the potent trickster, who teaches us how to map lines of flight rather than clipping our wings.

I relate Agaat’s embroidery work in the novel to Karen Warren’s praxis where theory is metaphorically considered in terms of quilting. Warren defines her philosophy as rejecting Western conceptions of “necessary and sufficient conditions,” which she refers to as “if and only if” conditions (2000: 66). She argues that theory is not about identifying a set of “essential properties,” as theory is “not static,” but “always *theory-in-process*” (emphasis in original, 2000: 66). Thus Agaat embroiders the patriarchal stories through an act of ecological recuperation that allows Milla to acknowledge that there are other ways of seeing and depicting the world. Warren argues that the metaphor of quilting reminds one that theory requires some necessary conditions, but that these

¹¹¹ Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, which illustrates how Agaat reinvests “prefabricated sentences” with her own meaning (2006: 189).

boundaries do not dictate the content of the theory. The necessary conditions of an ecological feminist quilt might therefore propose that anything intentionally supporting ‘isms’ of domination, such as naturism, sexism, racism, classism and so on, are not included. However, the actual designs—the so-called sufficient conditions—emerge from the “diversity of perspectives of quilters who contribute, over time, to the making of the quilt” (2000: 66). Sufficient conditions cannot, therefore, be determined before the time because they depend on the “social, historical and material contexts” of these perspectives (2000: 67).

I argue that Van Niekerk’s reasons for including Agaat’s embroidery, which is an alternative language of signification, corresponds to the three reasons Warren identifies for choosing the metaphor of quilting for an alternative philosophy. Warren argues that quilts are “highly contextual” and their point is not to provide “one image or one story, based on one and only one view of reality; it is to have a *variety of images or stories*” (emphasis in original, 2000: 67). When looking at Agaat’s embroidery Milla thinks:

So many tiny details, in places it looks like musical notation. A piece of sheet music? What could it be? If Agaat could compose? A symphonic tone poem? Or programme music, like *Carnival of the Animals*? An aria for two female voices and farm noises? (2006: 650)

The inclusion of Othered narratives on the farm is foregrounded in Agaat’s embroidery, which Milla compares to an “aria for two female voices and farm noises.” Furthermore, the musical motif blurs the boundaries between categorically separated art forms. Van Niekerk shows that the discursive silencing of those Othered in patriarchal discourse results in language being “out of proportion,” which is damaging (2006: 196).¹¹² Agaat’s embroidery technique seems similar to Milla’s advice on how to plan “in tune with the seasons ... just like rehearsing a piece of music” (2006: 16-17). Here concern over recognising the vast potentialities existent in evolutionary processes is revealed.

Agaat works on her patterns “as if her life depended on it,” unpicking and redoing work because proportion “takes much longer” than you think (2006: 16,440). Milla remembers Agaat’s response to Jakkie’s curiosity over her ability to sew a story with a needle:

You fetch it and stretch it and tie it together, you said, you prod it and prick it, you slip it and snip it, you slide it in cotton-thread frames, you hold it and fold it, you pleat it and ply it, you bleach it and dye it and unravel again, you stitch on the stipple, you struggle with pattern, you deck it and speck it in rows and in ranks, in steps and in stripes and arches and bridges, and crosses and jambs of doors and of dams, you trace it and track it and fill it and span it and just see what’s come of the cloth, a

¹¹² This is evidenced in the novel when Milla does not speak up about Jak’s construction of a toy plane being “completely out of proportion,” which then explodes and almost kills Jakkie, who is saved by Agaat protecting him with her body (2006: 196).

story, a rhyme, a picture for the pillow, for the spread on the bed, for the band round the cuff, for the cloth on the table, for the fourth dress of woman. (2006: 649)

Here Van Niekerk writes against the rational longing for ‘perfect communication’ by pushing at the limits of language. This is evident in the rhythms and rhymes of Agaat’s description of her work. Agaat’s embroidery is definitively related to her capacity to rewrite rhymes and stories. It shows Agaat’s potential to take that which has been programmed into her and reinvest it in a powerfully poetic way. Her skill at storytelling depends on her ability to adapt and alter her patterns to the social, historical and material contexts of the voices she includes.¹¹³ Van Niekerk thus again emphasises the amount of work involved in working towards proportion and harmony in a continually altering world, as well as the versatile and imaginative ways in which Agaat is able to acknowledge the intentionality of Others.

Agaat’s embroidery thus repairs the family fabric by including repressed stories and this allows for truer reflections to assist in understanding and responding to Others. This is illustrated in the novel when Milla is finally able to interpret the embroidery on Agaat’s servant’s cap, which only Jakkie had ever been allowed to look at. Milla says it is expertly embroidered, “darkly lit in silhouette and from the front etched in relief,” which results in Agaat’s patterns displaying a “jewel like contrivance” (2006: 371) that changes with the light. Milla thinks the cap’s musical design looks like permeable “clouds” that make “everything [seem] possible” (2006: 372). She sees musical instruments, bent wrists and fingers playing, angels’ wings branching out of the backs of the musicians, while the faces of the players are those of non-human animals. Agaat’s music is both “negative and positive simultaneously” (2006: 371), which suggests Milla’s recognition of her wish to see the world “outside and inside at the same time” (2006: 209). Milla’s changing faith, symbolised in the merging of angels and farm animals, seems reminiscent of Milton’s and Blake’s heretical views that renounced the mind/body dualism and mechanistic determinism. Here Van Niekerk intentionally collapses the nature/culture dualism that essentially encourages the exclusion of non- and Othered humans.

Milla’s potential to re-think the symbolic order is encouraged by Agaat’s skill at texturing it with languages on the other side of the mirror.¹¹⁴ Agaat’s handiwork converts her Othered status by turning her servant’s cap into a “crown of glorified cotton” that Milla thinks represents her “dominion over the underworld” (2006: 55). By recognising “harmless negative music,” the sound of the musicians moving behind the musical score, and the “soil without the cultivation” (2006: 369),

¹¹³ Warren confirms that alterations do not ruin or devalue the work, but are welcomed as preserving it from the dictates of time, circumstance or wear-and-tear, as theory is always in process (2000: 67).

¹¹⁴ Jakkie goes to sleep at night reading Agaat’s embroidery on his pillowslips with his fingers (2006: 587).

Milla resists her yearning for the abstractions of Western civilisation, as reflected in her longing for “Romantic German Lieder” (2006: 345). Agaat’s legendary storytelling capacity carries the torch to the underworld and allows Milla to hear the “thin distillation of yard noises” as a “soundtrack of a dream” (2006: 371). Milla wonders if it is “already the light of another order” (2006: 371). When Milla foregrounds the untamed landscape she illustrates the ways in which Agaat’s embroidery is in effect a re-narration of inherited, vestigial, linear narratives. Agaat’s embroidery is thus a political statement that resists the omission of Othered stories by sewing them into her patterns, and as Milla disengages from patriarchal discourse, she begins to see the Other side of her story.

Agaat’s ability to make Milla see the Other side of history is further evidenced in her wall-hanging of her “great rainbow” (2006: 217). Agaat embroiders the rainbow when Jakkie is banished to boarding school. She gives the wall-hanging to Milla while they nervously wait for Jak and Jakkie to return from the Tradouw mountain expedition, and then she hangs it on the wall of Milla’s sick-bed one grey evening (2006: 217). Agaat’s “great rainbow” thus appears during difficult times, which helps Milla visualise the role of essentialised discourse as damaging and unrealistic. This is because the rainbow, like Milla’s covenant, is a symbol of what Milla suffers from: a striving for the illusion of perfect discourse that culminates in a longing for an impossible happily-ever-after. Agaat says that everyone thinks they know what a rainbow looks like, but when they are up close they will wonder what they are seeing (2006: 217). The embroidery is in fact the inside section of a rainbow and makes Milla think of an embroidery of “nothing and nowhere” (2006: 218). This recalls Gaylard’s definition of “nowhere land” outside the domestic realms and ‘realisms’ of the pastoral Edenic and instead representing a wilderness of “mutating subjectivity” (2005: 145).

In the morning’s changing light the embroidery transforms from “an empty bright stage-set” to “a hole” and Milla thinks: “Dark rainbow” (2006: 236). Here Milla’s admittance that rainbows might represent the darker side of life is symbolic of her mutating understanding of metaphors of completeness. Jeremy Cronin similarly warns about the damaging consequences of metaphors of completeness when he interrogates the “rainbow nation” metaphor used to describe a multi-racial, post-Apartheid South Africa.¹¹⁵ Cronin argues:

Identity formation as well as the myth of the ‘rainbow nation’ and its performative intention have served to discursively create a national identity that has been top-down in its constitution and implementation. As a result, true reconciliation has been foregone in place of a simplified and somewhat candy-coated myth of peace that has served to reconcile those on the inside whilst pitting them against those on the outside. Allowing ourselves to sink into a smug rainbowism will prove to be a terrible betrayal of the possibilities for real transformation, real reconciliation, and real

¹¹⁵ Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew the metaphor of the rainbow from the story of Noah in the Old Testament and refers to the “Rainbow People of God” in illustrating ensuing peace in post-Apartheid South Africa.

national unity that are still at play in our contemporary South African reality (1999b).¹¹⁶

Here Cronin's statement supports Van Niekerk's analysis of the need to transform our discursive landscape. The novel interrogates generalisations so that the Other side of history is not a tale of oppression and violence. The metaphor of happily-ever-after rainbow, traced to Noah's ark, and saving the animals two by two from ecological destruction, is ironised as a damaging refusal to let go of conquering narratives in the current environmental situation.¹¹⁷ That is, survival is once again predicated on self/Other oppositions and 'civilising' missions. Agaat's introduction of the rainbow during dark times in Milla's life challenges colourful promises packaged as pots of gold by teaching Milla that rainbows do not represent happily-ever-after. Fortunately perceptions can change and completeness would mean the "death of the song, of the small dusty tale" (2006: 219). Agaat's undermining of essentialised narratives assists in visualising new metaphors and ways of seeing.

Agaat's embroidery not only has practical comforting uses, but gives "shape and form to the experiences of those whose stories are not told in literal discourse" (Warren, 2000: 68). Van Niekerk's epigraph from *Borduur Só* highlights the beauty and value of the novel as emerging from, and inspiring, love, and

with that a great service is done to the nation, for who feels for beauty, on whatever terrain, has a contribution to make to the cultural development of the nation.

The area this book makes its own, is a specifically feminine one and through that contributes to the refinement and beautification of the domestic atmosphere. Such an atmosphere distinguishes the culturally aware nation from the uncivilised. (2006: Epigraph)

In this act of ecological recuperation Van Niekerk rescues the name Verwoerd from eternal damnation by celebrating the Apartheid leader's wife's contribution to alternative forms of signification. Van Niekerk clearly emphasises the need to bring proportion back into our discursive terrain by highlighting stories that have been repressed by patriarchal history. These stories reveal vestigial patriarchal narratives as "uncivilised" in their refusal to negotiate the Other side of history. Milla says embroidery creates a comforting atmosphere keeping you "humble" by focusing the "attention" (2006: 170). She actively supports Warren's third reason for using quilting as a metaphor, but is ambiguously dependent on Agaat to lead her to a location where she can recognise situated

¹¹⁶ Jeremy Cronin is an academic, poet and politician—currently Deputy Secretary General of the SACP and Deputy Minister of Transport. This statement was made at the "TRC: Commissioning the Past" conference at Wits University held 11-14 June 1999.

¹¹⁷ Noah's ark was built in preparation for forty days and nights of rain. After the storm God set his "bow in the cloud" and the rainbow became the sign of the covenant between Him and Noah. God said: "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Genesis: 9.11). That there was an unseasonable storm in the first place undermines metaphors of completeness, which are further ironised by our current environmental dilemma.

knowledges, and thus contextualise oppressive conceptual frameworks. Agaat's embroidery consciously includes, but rewrites oppressive conceptual frameworks by foregrounding nurturing and accommodating narratives as opposed to conquering ones.

In an attempt to alleviate Agaat's fear of baptism, an impression attained from her horrific medical treatment at Milla's doctor and dentist, Milla tells her about these feminised histories. They are recorded in signifying garments named the "four dresses in a woman's life in Christ" (2006: 563): the christening-dress, confirmation dress, wedding dress and shroud. Milla shows Agaat two of her dresses. In both cases they are symbolic of her situation. Milla's christening dress is full of moth-eaten holes, suggesting the deterioration of this signifying garment, and foreshadowing her turning away from her indoctrinated Christian Nationalism. Her wedding dress has voile sleeves and a stiff lace, stand-up collar sewn on to camouflage the bruises from the first of many beatings Jak gives her (2006: 47,563). This symbolically suggests the extent of her complicity in upholding patriarchal power illustrating that patriarchal control relies on female compliance. Milla sews herself into her wedding dress. Her mother, thinking the additions are a result of Milla's believing she is too good for a fabric originally meant for a "bedspread," tells her to get used to it as from now on she is the bed (2006: 47). This observation reinforces the objectified and abused sexual object that Milla becomes in her marriage. Her confirmation dress is completely absent from the novel, suggesting that her religious indoctrination is not entirely complete. Her shroud becomes symbolic of Agaat's reweaving of Milla's education, as I shall demonstrate in the following discussion.

Agaat's first embroidery lesson takes place after her first ritual on the mountain where she buries 'good,' her civilised self inculcated by Milla. Thus Agaat responds to Milla's lessons with affected subservient airs, which force Milla to over-emphasise her performance of the role of master. This makes Milla angry because she feels the need to justify her actions. Milla tells Agaat that to master the art of embroidery she needs to find subjects for her patterns and tells her about the art's religious history from the wall hangings of the tabernacle to the *Opus Anglicanum*, as well as the

embroidered cloths in which the mummies of Egypt were wrapped for the long journey to the realm of the dead & of the pelicans & the jackals & all the figures of the gods & of how everything was embroidered with the greatest of care on fine woven cloth so that the deceased should not feel alone & would arrive in the kingdom of heaven completely wrapped up in his culture & history & faith. (2006: 169)

Here Milla's depiction of embroidered history seems to gesture towards a revitalisation of pagan animism; the removal of which Lynn White Jr. argues enabled human's exploitation of nature and its reduction to the level of the symbolic (1996: 10-11). In addition, Milla educates Agaat on embroidered National art from the time of Van Riebeeck's arrival in the Cape and tells her that, as in every art form, you start with the "simple & then you practice faithfully every day until you're ready

one day to tackle the scenes from Hist. & then Heaven” (2006: 170). Milla’s diaries attempt to record what the foreword of *Borduur Só* details as the feminised histories that do not form part of official history. However, Van Niekerk illustrates Milla’s complicity in patriarchal oppression when she emphasises Milla’s attempts to keep her diaries private. Milla cannot understand why Jak finds her diaries threatening because she is not trying to write a “history book,” but a contextualised account of “home & hearth” (2006: 201). Nonetheless, Milla tells Agaat that she will one day be able to tackle historical records and that she must be “knowledgeable” to prove Milla has not wasted her time (2006: 201). Agaat’s mastery of embroidery, symbolic of her storytelling potential, is affirmed when she reinvests “the scenes from Hist. & then Heaven” by sewing Othered perspectives into her patterns. This allows Milla the possibility of liberation from the “on/off Cartesian concept of consciousness” and the “Great Chain of Being” (Plumwood, 2002: 176).

Milla gives Agaat her most precious fabric, Glenshee linen from her mother’s trousseau, for “one day when she’s grown up” and mastered the art of embroidery (2006: 171). By appropriating the concept of mastery while ironically playing Agaat’s master, Milla illustrates her ambivalence towards the concept. Milla envisions Agaat hiding the fabric in a “clean safe place,” like she taught her to keep “precious objects” (2006: 172), until she knows what to do with it. This is what Agaat does when she buries her heart, and further, what Milla attempts to do with her diaries. Walking in her “new clockwork-step” (2006: 173), which suggests Agaat’s affected subservience, and by extension Milla’s façade of mastery, Agaat demands “mothballs” to ensure the preservation of the fabric (2006: 173). Milla determines not to get upset by her “tricks,” and when providing Agaat with mothballs, she records the following in her diary:

From the moment that precious cloth left my two hands I’ve felt there is a snake in the grass as sure as my name is Milla de Wet. Must remember to store the mothballs in a different place. (2006: 173)

Milla senses “deep in [her] bones” that her transgressive education of Agaat will come back to haunt her (2006: 173). It is evident that her fears are not unfounded when Agaat weaves the more inclusive narrative of Grootmoedersdrif into Milla’s shroud.

Agaat weaves this fuller narrative into Milla’s shroud to ensure that Milla does not die alienated from nature, and that when returning to her heaven, the earth of Grootmoedersdrift, she is “wrapped up in [a more inclusive] culture & history & faith” (2006: 169). The desire to liberate nature from culture’s colonisation is emphasised in the unveiling of the shroud. In the same moment Milla’s farm labourers come to say goodbye and tell her that she was “góód” (2006: 650) to them and that they will continue farming with Agaat, just as they did with her. Agaat opens the *Handbook for Farmers in South Africa*, which Milla thinks is the Bible, and reverentially describes the earth’s

reduced carrying capacity due to erosive processes (2006: 651). She reads the passage in the Handbook underlined by Milla, which says this book will assist “material growth just as the Bible helps ... spiritual growth” (2006: 75). Agaat’s choice foregrounds the material terrain and highlights her acceptance of Milla’s teachings which promoted the protection of the “earth, the little pans & the vleis & the ‘tortisses’” from “so-called civilisation” (2006: 75). The extract confirms Agaat’s acceptance of this inherited responsibility, which is an affirmation of the partial goodness of Milla’s education of Agaat.

The undertaker calls the shroud “Genesis and Grootmoedersdrift in one, a true work of art, must have taken a lifetime, every stitch in its place” (2006: 677). Milla says Agaat is the “embroiderer of deathbed stories” (2006: 395) who spends a lifetime sewing her shroud that depicts not a “pretty” or romantic story, but “a guide to dying, a do-it-yourself book with illustrations” (2006: 650). Milla’s shroud represents a less prescribed destiny which is more authentic than salvation. This recalls Milla’s “Do It Yourself” (2006: 302) pruriency she determines as necessary to rid herself of the “Scourge of the Seven-Year Itch” (2006: 301). While Milla’s negotiation of new meanings is possible only because of her confrontation with her death, and, most importantly, her situated history, it nevertheless offers her the possibility of escaping the trauma of inherited narratives and discover the liberating potential of honest self-reflection. While this re-conceptualisation takes forty-three years, Milla does live long enough to understand what Agaat endured with her. The novel does not depict Milla dying stuck in the drift, as Jak’s death implies. Rather she is able to cross sides and imagine being figured as object in the tapestry of the Other.

4.5 Conclusion: An Aria for Two Female Voices and Farm Noises

Van Niekerk’s insertion of pagan animism into Agaat’s characterisation offers the potential to revitalise language. The challenge to language’s inclination to polarise self/Other oppositions is undertaken by adopting an intentional recognition stance that admits Othered perspectives and thus reinvests language through an act of ecological recuperation. Perhaps circular narratives offer a truer reflection of materiality than a teleological, non-repetitive, linear framework which resists evolutionary succession. Relief from linear narratives of biblical entitlement is attained through an acceptance of ambiguity. This enables a more effective negotiation of diverse speaking voices that fall outside of the symbolic order. These Othered languages are represented in Agaat’s embroidery designs that signify feminised, occluded histories and situated knowledges.

While Van Niekerk’s novel persistently and radically identifies and interrogates oppressive conceptual frameworks, it does not provide solutions to our dilemmas. Rather, it might be seen to

offer a tentative return to Eliot's modernist sensibility as a position from which to begin the work of regeneration. Frank Kermode and John Hollander assess the significance of Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

the effect [of the poem] is intended to be musical, suggestive as the interplay of leitmotifs, a complex image of a mythic integrity against a background of actual sterility and decadence. (...) later [Eliot] would argue that the structures of truth[s] persist throughout the tumults of heresy, and here he is neither merely stating decadence nor proposing remedies for it, but providing an image of an accessible integrity that somehow persists; just as the right questions exist to be asked, the right conduct is knowable, even if the questions are not asked and the knowledge not applied. This is the sense in which the past interpenetrates the present, 'quick, now, here, always'; the poem is a kind of Mass, itself the image of ... eternal truth[s] in the midst of flux or chaos. (1973: 1983)

Similarly, Van Niekerk's book is a random collection of material, partially integrated into a restatement of a myth, what Claude Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*.¹¹⁸ This reinstatement of myth, as Levi-Strauss argues in "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955), "make[s] order out of the simultaneity of conflicting theories," which offers the possibility of narrating "over, without resolving, a cultural contradiction" (2001: 1416-1417).

Van Niekerk confirms that *Agaat* does not propose models and programmes for land reform or allegories for transformation in general, arguing instead that the novel is "raw material that may become provisionally explanatory and coherent when your interpretational desire orders it that way" (In Pienaar, 2005). *Agaat* demonstrates that oppressive conceptual frameworks might become the "noose" (2006: 644) on which we hang ourselves, and thus offers narrative alternatives. Van Niekerk achieves what Ingrid de Kok defines as the role of literary projects when she says their function is not to "authorise or resolve," but "to unwrite, retell, and reorganise the nature of the record, investigating the relationships between stories and history, staging the drama of individual and collective experiences and perspectives, examining discontinuities and lacunae" (1996: 5). In order for Milla to survive "the shame of motives late revealed" she needs to learn to read for herself again and thereby understand that "the possibilities are endless" (2006: 625).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966) uses the word *bricolage* to describe any spontaneous action, which then details the patterns of mythological thought in order to show that meaning in myth arises from pre-existing ideas in the imaginer's mind. Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983) identify *bricolage* as the characteristic mode of production of the schizophrenic subject.

¹¹⁹ Heyns includes as an additional epigraph to the English translation the following excerpt from T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding": "And last, the rending pain of re-enactment/Of all that you have done, and been; the shame/Of motives late revealed, and the awareness/Of things ill done and done to others' harm/Which once you took for exercise of virtue." Heyns confirms that both he and Van Niekerk felt that it expressed the central idea of *Agaat* and sums up Milla at the beginning of the novel, where we become aware that the text traces Milla's negotiation of her fragmenting body (In Felman, 2007).

5. Conclusion: Fertile Terrain

Shall I come to rain? Shall I be brought to fruition? Sweet? A sweeter ending than one would have expected after this?

(2006: 580)

In Chapter One I interrogated the novel's depiction of biblical narratives that discursively hyper-separate people into 'Chosen' and 'Reprobate' categories, which results in people becoming defensive, while simultaneously arrogant. In this regard I highlighted the damaging consequences of covenant narratives which promote a sense of entitlement in relation to territory and the beings inhabiting it. In Chapter Two I examined the ways in which the legacy of master narratives has been reinforced by capitalist, scientific and technological representations of nature. This results in the carving of ecologically simple farmlands (mass monoculture) out of radically diverse and complicated wilderness. These trajectories depict a production-orientated culture that cannot acknowledge or adapt to its materiality, or the embodied and ecological support base our bodies draw from. Particularly pertinent examples of this phenomenon are Jak's experimentations with "double-density" (2006: 70) wheat production and his abattoir that results in slaughtering becoming "completely automated" (2006: 591).

In Chapter Three I explored the ways in which the novel foregrounds discontinuities between the ethical, epistemological and political, which emphasises the need to imagine around oppressive conceptual frameworks. To this end I invoked Brossard's radical feminist theories on re-narrating presence in language to think through the nature/culture dualism. Both the butterfly trope and the "Do it Yourself" prurience (2006: 302) were examined to suggest ways of thinking outside of the dominant in language. In Chapter Four I explored what might be done to reinvest a repressed materiality and chart a transition from pioneering logic (which makes us forget that humans are also animals reliant on stable, and therefore diverse, ecosystems) to a necessary affinity with all beings that share the environment. I argued that Agaat, as an "Apartheid cyborg" (2006: 677), is a powerful presence in the novel who is able to rewrite vestigial narratives inherited. Furthermore, Milla demonstrates the potential to challenge these narratives, although she remains locked into the ambivalences that emerge in her socialisation as a white South African Afrikaans speaking woman. It is left to Agaat to re-signify the world in ways that include and celebrate Othered narratives. Van Niekerk's deployment of the whirligig as a central motif signifies this potential. *Agaat* reveals the ways in which patriarchal language has become riddled with the sediments of sexist, racist and naturist biases which generate an alienated and victimised status. This is the legacy of oppressive conceptual frameworks.

That communication with Others, within the parameters of patriarchal discourse, is portrayed as such a struggle in the novel, suggests Van Niekerk's need to rework discursively Milla's relations to nature and thus negotiate the linguistic terrain as a permeable membrane between self and Other. This requires that Milla change her narrative focus from discourses encouraging a selfish assimilation, to discourses of necessary accommodation. In order to attempt discourses of accommodation it is suggested that dialogue replace God-like monologues. Van Niekerk's novel details culture's colonisation of nature, and exposes the scaffolding of this linguistic domination, to advocate a revitalisation of languages by including Othered reflections in discourse. While I recognise that accommodating narratives are also premised on exclusion, I believe it is an ethical imperative that we become self-reflexively aware of these exclusions in order to challenge the damaging complacency encouraged by conquering narratives. My argument on the revitalisation of language in *Agaat* turns to the creation of a trickster consciousness that is able to simulate politics in order to challenge conceptual foundations. Val Plumwood affirms that "as Donna Haraway has stressed, it is important to be able to see the world—even a glimpse can be life-changing—in the guise of another subject, even as a knowing humorous mind, a deceiver" (2002: 228). Nature's diverse languages tell Milla that life is cyclical and as mortal beings we can never have final control over the planet. Van Niekerk's novel resists a linear concept of time in favour of a cyclical notion that more adequately represents the replications, repetitions and reflections necessary in ecological and evolutionary succession. As Milla begins to "unthink the symbolic" (Brossard, 2005: 251) through *Agaat*'s revitalisation of language and History, and as she begins to disengage from the discursive power of patriarchal narratives, she might start to understand the rhizomatic meaning contained in the circling whirligig and other land narratives. *Agaat*'s example encourages Milla's mutating subjectivity, as symbolised by her ability to see the clouds and shadows that represent the stories on the Other side of oppressive conceptual frameworks. This sensitivity to earth Others promotes Haraway's concept of "heterogeneous well-being" (1997: 95) that celebrates ambiguity and permanently partial connections which resist self/Other oppositions. *Agaat* demonstrates Haraway's feminist version of objectivity that is about "limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object" (1991: 190).

The novel's circular narration recasts not only the cryptic beginnings of Milla's relationship with *Agaat*, but also Milla's cultural heritage, which is mapped from Jan van Riebeeck's arrival in the Cape in 1652. To prevent the vision of those masters who came to play God, and in doing so, providing the foundation for an eroded material reality, I suggest we require Val Plumwood's "intentional recognition stance" (2002: 177) that is similar to Haraway's feminist version of "embodied objectivity" (1991: 189) in that it resists Others being defined as resource. An intentional

recognition stance potentially counters the reductive stance of many Western discursive practices used to justify the taking of land from indigenous people, whose oral histories are undermined by written histories. The attempts by the Western colonial masters to define the Other as discursively deficient in relation to the centre is essentially the structure underlying centric thought that establishes isms of domination. Edward Said's theories illustrate the importance of a conscious awareness of the ways in which discursive power is attained. He argues that the Other is "contained and represented by dominating frameworks" because those in power are capable of constructing their own self-reinforcing reality that is an expression of Eurocentric knowledge (1978: 40). In this instance both Milla's and Western colonisation of the Other is exposed as a reductive attempt to maximise resources.

In what might be read as a self-reflexive comment on reader reception, Van Niekerk writes that the "book in hand" may make the reader feel "too burdened by the contents to read it to its conclusion, and yet feels obliged, compelled. Even though the ending is predictable and has been foreseen for too long" (2006: 643). The novel's reflection of the predictable and macabre ecological crises illustrates the impoverished terrain as a tough narrative to swallow. Yet digest Milla must, in order to assist Agaat in acknowledging the good in her education and thus avoid the catastrophic delusion that they are isolated from the consequences of environmental degradation. I argue that Milla's and Agaat's relationship, while exposing the agony of docile bodies tied to the rack of oppressive conceptual frameworks, precipitates the birth of a hybrid consciousness. This mutating subjectivity proves capable of preventing languages' stagnation by incorporating alternative meanings in Othered narratives that might enable us to respond to the ecological crises rather than selfishly cling to outdated traditions. Agaat suggests that liberation comes from seeing one's place in the environment, and thus she relates the spiritual erosion of the people to that of the soil. Her re-narration encourages a mutual flourishing that increases her potential and the potential of the environment to respond to crises, and thereby works towards accommodating even the slowest evolving species, in this instance, Milla the "tortiss" (2006: 75,652).

Agaat revises Afrikaner Covenant ideology into a respectful land covenant that allows Milla to counterfocalise her diaries and Agaat to unbury her heart. In a more-than-human world it is vital one speaks a "powerful infidel heteroglossia" that resists the illusion of 'perfect' communication. This offers the possibility of partial connections in a radically interdependent, but heterogeneous world. Agaat assists Milla to recognise her narcissism and this enables Milla to master her "interpretational desires" (Van Niekerk in Pienaar, 2005) and gain some psychological independence. Brossard calls this the ability to "accord our mental and psychological time to cosmic time" (2005:

105), which I argue is a gesture towards Appiah's "citizen of the cosmos" (2007: xii). Both these trajectories signal the importance of Othered narratives on our planet.

I am reminded of Coetzee's question as to whether it is "a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds" (1988: 81). Brossard argues that the 'ritual with breath' allows one to hear the "music that we carry in us, music made of silences and harmony" (2005: 105). Just as an orchestra is dependent on each of its musicians for harmony, so our planet depends on each of its species for survival. Through her embroidery Agaat enables Milla to hear the voices of her world speak as a musical score that is simultaneously self and Other. Naïve metaphors of covenants, rainbows and heaven that represent a "light place without discord or misunderstanding" (2006: 555) are countered by the novel's foregrounding of embedded material knowledges. Van Niekerk recognises the need for proportion in our discursive terrain and, therefore, challenges discourses that encourage martyrdom and a life-long yearning for 'completeness.'

Resistance to metaphors of completeness is evidenced when Milla begins to stop longing for what she now refers to as the "heavenly void" (2006: 555). Instead she confirms her preference for the "mountains and rivers and humped hills of the Overberg" where she and Agaat might "devise an adequate language with rugged musical words" with which to communicate with each other (2006: 555). The "language of reed and rushes" (2006: 555) teaches Milla that metaphors of paradise need to be redefined as metaphors of "nowhere land" (2005: 145). This requires an understanding of the tentative nature of rainbows, whose colour dissipates the closer one gets, thereby reminding Milla that metaphors of completeness are a trick of the light.

Milla relies on Agaat's imaginative ingenuity that invokes the trickster to recast and revitalise her knowledge. Agaat reinvests nature with meaning by re-signifying marginalised narratives and thus offers hope in the imaginative creation of exciting and diverse possibilities. Haraway argues that in

the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history (1991: 158).

Here Haraway identifies the deconstruction of subjectivities as hopeful, but Brossard warns that the work involved in representing language has the potential "to exhaust the most vulnerable, while electrifying the most audacious" (2005: 102). Milla is paralysed by her attempts to ritualise her presence in language, which prevents her from climbing out of her occlusion. Agaat, however, always retains her "energetic" step (2006: 677) and embroiders the vestigial patriarchal narratives

into a multi-faceted tapestry that reveals more than just the tip of the iceberg, thereby encouraging one to change one's [dis]course. Agaat's cyborg dialogues expand the *plaasroman*'s emphasis on lineal consciousness to an ecological consciousness, thereby adapting the traditional *plaasroman* to enable its continuation in an ever evolving world.

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