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## Encountering "Agaat": Toward a Dramaturgical Method of Adaptation

Paul Adolphsen  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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**ENCOUNTERING “AGAAT”: TOWARD A DRAMATURGICAL METHOD OF  
ADAPTATION**

A Thesis Presented

by

PAUL ADOLPHSEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2015

Theater

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Approved as to style and content by:

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Megan Lewis, Chair

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Stephen Clingman, Member

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Harley Erdman, Member

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Penny Remsen, Department Head  
Department of Theater

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## ABSTRACT

### ENCOUNTERING AGAAT: TOWARD A DRAMATURGICAL METHOD OF ADAPTATION

MAY 2015

PAUL ADOLPHSEN, B.A., SEATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Megan Lewis

This M.F.A. thesis in dramaturgy presents the first-ever stage adaptation of South African writer Marlene van Niekerk's 2004 novel *Agaat*. Van Niekerk is an internationally acclaimed novelist, short story writer, poet, and dramatist particularly known for her lengthy novelistic excavations of Afrikaner identity, in which sexuality, race, and gender collide in compelling but fraught ways. Covering nearly fifty-years of South African history—from the establishment of apartheid in 1948 through the nation's transition to democracy in 1994—*Agaat* investigates everyday cycles of abuse and intimacy through the story of white farmer Milla de Wet and her coloured adopted daughter-cum-maid, Agaat Lourier. This thesis foregrounds the interconnections between theory and practice by presenting both the adaptation itself and a prolonged engagement with theories of adaptation and dramaturgy. It is framed, then, around a simple question: How might dramaturgy and adaptation, as cultural and artistic processes and products, encounter one another? Through analysis of current discussions in the fields of Adaptation Studies and dramaturgy, and reflections on the particular challenges and possibilities of adapting van Niekerk's novel to the stage, the thesis argues that adaptation can be understood as a mode of encounter that opens up spaces for connection between people, texts, and cultures. A

dramaturgical method of adaptation is concerned not with hierarchy, authority, and fidelity, but rather with viewing adaptation as a conversation between a network of resonances. The thesis begins with an overview of van Niekerk's work and context, moves to an examination of current conversations in Adaptation Studies and dramaturgy, and concludes with a prolonged reflection on the process of adapting *Agaat* to the stage.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

“Adaptation has run amok.”<sup>1</sup> So says Linda Hutcheon in the preface to her exhaustive book-length exploration of the subject, now in its second edition: *A Theory of Adaptation*. Indeed, the process and products of adaptation abound throughout literature, fine art, music, and theatre. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards an Oscar each year for best-adapted screenplay, and many blockbuster films are transcoded into videogames, spin-off novels, and a constellation of consumer products from toys to t-shirts. Even graphic novels become Broadway musicals, as in the recent case of *Fun Home*, adapted by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori from Alison Bechdel’s 2006 memoir. Epic narratives of empire are transformed into interactive board games, while television studios produce hit mini-series drawn from contemporary literature, as in HBO’s 2014 adaptation of Elizabeth Strout’s Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories, *Olive Kitteridge*.

In the theatre and beyond, adaptations run the gamut from highbrow to lowbrow, while at the same time disrupting traditional notions of fidelity, originality, and taste. Indeed, adaptation as a mode of cultural production blurs the border between “original” and “derivative” works, destabilizing hierarchies of authority and genre, and throwing into question perceived beliefs about the relationship between form and content. As Lindiwe Dovey writes, “[v]ia Adaptation Studies we are able to see not the so-called originality and genius of singularly unique works of art, but the contingency of art, and

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013) xi.

the need to explore the ways in which, and for whom, aesthetic value is created.”<sup>2</sup>

Adaptation, then, challenges the romantic notion of a singular and utterly unique artwork crafted by a solitary artist. What’s more, adaptations that move from a text-based medium to a performance-based one (like the adaptation at the heart of this thesis) also call into question the authority of the word (“*logos*”) in creating and ordering the world, and suggest other subjective and embodied ways of structuring experience and making meaning.

As we peer at the multitudinous examples of adaptation circulating globally today, many questions present themselves: What is lost when a work is transcoded across media? What is gained? How are critics to assess the merits of an adaptation? Via a comparative rubric that contrasts the adaptation to an authoritative ‘source’ text? Via a set of formal standards derived from the target medium? To what degree should critics consider the source text at all? Still other questions arise: What makes an adaptation an adaptation? What is the borderline between adaptation and appropriation? Between adaptation and outright intellectual or creative theft? Is it even productive to theorize such a pervasive cultural phenomenon as adaptation?

These are some of the foundational questions of the protean and interdisciplinary field of Adaptation Studies. For nearly thirty years, scholars of comparative literature, communications, film studies, translation, theatre, and other disciplines have sought to theorize adaptation while continuing to probe its outer limits and explicate new practices. Adaptation Studies traces its origin to the post-structuralist concept of intertextuality made popular in the 1960s by Julia Kristeva, who combined the structuralist theories of

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<sup>2</sup> Lindiwe Dovey, “Fidelity, Simultaneity and the ‘Remaking’ of Adaptation Studies,” in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner, eds. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) 163.

Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin to claim that all literary works are the product of their relationship to other texts. Also influential was Roland Barthes' 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author," which showed that meaning does not reside in the text itself, but rather in the complex interplay between reader and text. Intertextuality, then, suggests that, "neither the text nor its reader can escape the intertextual web of relationships that causes the reader to have certain expectations about both the content and the form of the works(s) he or she is reading."<sup>3</sup> The work of Barthes, Kristeva, and other post-structuralist writers is foundational to the work of Adaptation Studies scholars who attempt to define adaptation as a mode of intertextuality while examining how it challenges or supports theories of authority, language, and interpretation.

Traditionally, the field's literature has concerned itself with how specific case studies might shed light on the problems and possibilities of adaptation as an artistic and cultural practice situated within specific political and economic contexts. Much of the ever-evolving canon of the field concerns itself with filmic adaptation, and the ways in which cultural products like novels, short stories, plays, etc. have been made into motion pictures. These studies tend to ask: What is an adaptation's responsibility to its source material, if any? How do the narrative forms of one genre bend to a new set of aesthetic and formal demands? What is lost when we adapt a novel to the screen?

Recently, scholars of adaptation have worked to shift the conversation away from considerations of loss and toward a more holistic examination of adaptation's contingencies. These scholars claim that guiding questions like the ones above have fostered a reductionist and limiting obsession with source material, authority, and fidelity

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds., *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995) 159.

within the field. One such author is comparative literature scholar Linda Hutcheon. It was adaptation's ubiquitous nature that prompted Hutcheon to articulate a theory of adaptation. "Adaptations seem so common, so 'natural,' so obvious," she writes in her preface to *A Theory of Adaptation*, "—but are they?"<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon theorizes adaptations on their own terms, free of the comparative rubrics employed by many adaptation scholars. An obsession with fidelity to a source text, she argues, has created a trend in the field where pejorative and morally loaded language is used to denigrate adaptations as "derivative" and "secondary."<sup>5</sup>

Hutcheon's project continues to be influential in that it attempts to define what adaptations are (or can be) rather than what they are not (or could never be). *A Theory of Adaptation* explores the possibilities of its subject in a deceptively simple way structured around six questions that should be familiar to any high school student of journalism: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Hutcheon uses these basic questions to reveal the contradictions and possibilities inherent in adaptations. Throughout her book, she seeks to understand adaptation as process *and* product, action and object. Adaptation, for Hutcheon, is a deliberate and announced process of moving a work between three distinct but interrelated "modes of engagement": "telling," "showing," and "interacting."<sup>6</sup> This focus on the context of reception has shaped my process as an adapter, and in chapter two I will elaborate on how Hutcheon's theory influenced my work on this thesis.

Due to the mutable nature of the subject, new forays into the study of adaptation have been interdisciplinary and exploratory. This is readily apparent in the pages of the

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<sup>4</sup> Hutcheon xii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. xvi.

field's two journals, *Adaptation* (begun in 2008) and *The Journal of Adaptation and Film in Performance* (begun in 2007), which interrogate a wide range of genres, modes, and practices through a diverse assortment of articles examining both traditional acts of adaptation and more conceptual processes and products. With regard to performance studies, scholars like Katja Krebs<sup>7</sup> and Margherita Laera<sup>8</sup> have recently begun filling in a noticeable gap in this interdisciplinary literature, using the insights of Adaptation Studies to illuminate and expand our understanding of how transcoding, revision, and appropriation operate within theatre theory and practice.

The field's avowed interdisciplinary orientation, however, has been the subject of some professional anxiety and definitional uncertainty. Imelda Whelehan works through this crisis in her chapter "Where are We and are We There Yet?" in Laurence Raw's recent anthology, *The Silk Road of Adaptation*. Whelehan writes:

[F]or some, adaptation studies suffers from a certain critical naiveté, and as it gains momentum and breadth from scholars located in several disciplines, this sense of a lack of a theoretical core, and untheoretical responsiveness to texts is felt more keenly.<sup>9</sup>

For many, the dispersed methodologies and wide-ranging perspectives of Adaptation Studies provide no sense of cohesion to the disciplinary landscape. The field produces numerous comparative analyses of specific adaptations, the argument goes, but is lacking in any overarching theory. Too often, adaptation scholars attempt to define what they are

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<sup>7</sup> Katja Krebs, ed., *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Margherita Laera, ed., *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Imelda Whelehan, "Where are We and are We There Yet?" in *The Silk Road of Adaptation: Transformations across Disciplines and Cultures*, Laurence Raw, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) 15.

not, and this constant negative classification has produced a sort of disciplinary fatigue. Adaptation Studies, many observe, is at a crossroad.

Whelehan sees it differently. “Adaptation,” she writes, “*is* the crossroads.”<sup>10</sup> She understands Adaptation Studies as a nexus of relationships, a fluid matrix of practices and methods. This fluidity might cause anxiety, but it is also part of Adaptation Studies’ continued development and appeal. Interestingly, Whelehan suggests that Adaptation Studies might do well to drop the oft-used “interdisciplinary” moniker and embrace its complete rejection of hierarchical categorization in the academy. “True interdisciplinarity would be very hard to achieve for adaptation studies,” she writes, “given that it thrives as the outsider, offering challenges to the established disciplines and, in occupying this position, suggests the space in between – ‘inter’ – might be all that is left.”<sup>11</sup> In order to work through its disciplinary crisis, Whelehan argues, Adaptation Studies should fully embrace a liminal nature that reflects, in some ways, the “both/and” reality of its object of study. That is, if adaptation (after Hutcheon) is both process and product, embodying the slippery border between theory and practice, then its field of study should strive to engender that same fluid status for itself. At the end of her chapter Whelehan suggests that a first step toward actualizing this liminal identity lies in embracing “intermediality,” since it “suggests a ready engagement across media and less tolerance toward traditional cultural hierarchies.”<sup>12</sup>

It is here where potentially fruitful connections between Adaptation Studies and the theory and practice of dramaturgy arise. I define dramaturgy as a process-oriented,

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<sup>10</sup> Whelehan 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 22.



questioning mode of both analysis and synthesis. A dramaturgical approach is concerned with the structure and implication of creative choices within the composition, rehearsal, performance, and reception of theatrical work. As it is practiced in the United States, dramaturgy suffers from many of the same disciplinary anxieties and definitional uncertainties as Adaptation Studies. Like adaptation, dramaturgy is both a product and process. One does dramaturgy, but one also produces dramaturgical resources and effects.

In traditional rehearsal and production processes organized via a top-down collaborative structure, the dramaturg often inhabits an “outsider” space similar to the one Whelehan believes is occupied by Adaptation Studies. It is axiomatic in the field that the production dramaturg must possess a certain level of critical objectivity and distance in order to provide productive feedback about the work at hand while identifying opportunities for development that may emerge through the give and take of rehearsal. Dramaturg Anne Cattaneo, in her chapter in Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, and Michael Lupu’s landmark *Dramaturgy in American Theater*, defines the traditional role of the dramaturg as an informed outsider possessed of a critical distance:

As the director needs to work more intensely and closely getting the play on its feet, the dramaturg often begins to establish some physical distance from the rehearsal process. The dramaturg needs to view run-throughs of scenes, acts, and finally the entire play, with a more objective eye to what is and isn’t “working.”<sup>13</sup>

There has been much criticism, especially recently, of this traditional conception of the dramaturg’s objective eye. Shelley Orr, for example, writes persuasively that dramaturgs must refuse critical objectivity and instead practice what she calls “critical proximity,” a

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Cattaneo, “Dramaturgy: An Overview,” in *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, Michael Lupu, eds. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997) 10.

way of acting in rehearsal that demonstrates a deep and abiding commitment to collaborative work.<sup>14</sup> The practice of critical proximity creates a dramaturg who is not an object, but a subject, bringing their own embodied experience and artistic impulses to the theatrical process.<sup>15</sup>

Other dramaturgs, however, continue to find critical distance a helpful part of their professional practice. In reflecting on her work with Belgian choreographer Koen Augustijnen on the piece *Au-delà*, dramaturg Lou Cope describes how she viewed (and continues to view) her position as dramaturg:

It is my job, as she who sits on the outside of the inside looking in, to also look outwards and see ways in which the material being developed speaks, and is linked to, the growing worlds around it – the world of the piece, but also the world outside the cozy rehearsal room.<sup>16</sup>

Cope's vision of herself "on the outside of the inside" melds well with Augustijnen's own conception of the ideal dramaturg: "He or she is a good listener and a sharp third eye, at times taking distance to give the right feedback," he writes. "They ask essential and critical questions without blocking the process, with the goal of defining the artistic proposal."<sup>17</sup> Cope's understanding of the dramaturg's distance from the work at hand is not entirely at odds with Orr's call for a "critical proximity," since she sees herself "on the outside of the inside," a location that suggests a certain amount of investment and

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<sup>14</sup> Shelley Orr, "Critical Proximity: A Case for Using the First Person as a Production Dramaturg," *Theatre Topics* 24.3 (2014): 242.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 243.

<sup>16</sup> Lou Cope and Koen Augustijnen with contributions from Annie Pui Ling Lok, "Going 'Au-delà': A Journey into the Unknown. Reflections of a Choreographer and a Dramaturg," in *New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice*, Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 169.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 166.

subjective attention to the work. Cope, however, does find a degree of objectivity to be productive and even necessary. As the objective eye watching from a space between the private world of the rehearsal room and the public domain of performance, Cope can, in theory, identify and forge larger connections between the work and the world that other more proximal collaborators might not even notice.

For many, dramaturgy's ability to serve as a "crossroads" between inside/outside, objective/subjective, theory/practice is its greatest strength. Geoff Proehl has described the "both/and" nature of dramaturgy as a sensibility, an ability to appreciate and respond to a range of dramatic impulses that derive from the rich interrelationship of text and performance.<sup>18</sup> Dutch theorist and practitioner Maaïke Bleeker unifies dramaturgy's many possibilities by outlining a "mode of looking." She writes:

[The dramaturg] is not only an analytical, intellectual eye from the outside, but also a body who thinks along with the director or choreographer—that is, as a collaborator who moves along with him or her in a movement that involves both closeness and distance, both similarity and difference.<sup>19</sup>

Bleeker defines the dramaturg's work as a collaboration between the moving, feeling body and the sensing, observing eye. As with Hutcheon's theorization of adaptation, Proehl and Bleeker both understand dramaturgy as a process and a product, as a way of thinking and doing that produces specific *immaterial effects* (a sense of "cohesion" within a performance, intellectual or emotional "connections" in the mind of the spectator) and *material artifacts* (a program note, research protocol, or, as DJ Hopkins calls for, an

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Proehl, with DD Kugler, Mark Lamos, and Michael Lupu, *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Maaïke Bleeker, "Dramaturgy as a Mode of Looking," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 13:2 (2003) 163.

entire “countertext”<sup>20</sup>). For Prohel and Bleeker, dramaturgy is the practice of exchange between collaborators that creates the theatrical event, itself an encounter between the spectator and stage. This relational sense of exchange, or encounter, connects to the late Marianne van Kerkhoven’s understanding of dramaturgy as “a constant movement” between inside and outside. For Kerkhoven “[d]ramaturgy is...learning how to handle complexity...[it] is building bridges.”<sup>21</sup> Conceiving of the dramaturg as a “bridge” – between theory and practice, between the text and the production, between the audience and the stage—is a common image. I appreciate that van Kerkhoven sees dramaturgy not as the bridge itself, but as the action of “building bridges.” Thinking about dramaturgy’s in-between position as something altogether more active allows for new ways of working that see dramaturgical labor as both the practice and product of theatrical encounter, transfer, and connection.

I believe that dramaturgy, with its slippery identity, its insistence on complexity, its staging of encounters between thinking and doing, might be able to offer an example of the kind of “cross-roads” position that some adaptation scholars and practitioners are seeking to establish in their own work. In drawing this connection I do not intend to suggest a complete and uniform relationship between the specific concerns and methodologies of Adaptation Studies and dramaturgy. There are differences, to be sure. But what I am suggesting is that dramaturgs are uniquely suited to explore what it means to eschew hierarchical ordering of creative labor and to live in the gaps. This is

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<sup>20</sup> D.J. Hopkins, “Research, Counter-Text, Performance: Keywords for Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Magda Romanska, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 420.

<sup>21</sup> Marianne van Kerkhoven, “European Dramaturgy in the Twenty-First Century: A Constant Movement,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Magda Romanska, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 165.

something that adaptation scholars seem to be doing in the academy, and it is certainly a tension practitioners of adaptation engage with each time they set out to transcode a work of fiction, theatre, poetry, art, or song.

Dramaturgs adapt both texts and practices. Given this, one of the driving questions of this thesis is how the process of dramaturgy and practice of adaptation might encounter one another. How might these two ways of thinking and doing coincide? What can be mined from the overlap? This thesis uses one specific adaptation – my stage version of South African writer Marlene van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat* – to explore the larger answers to these questions.<sup>22</sup> Throughout I consciously pair theory and practice, since as a dramaturg I believe that practice rehearses and stages the possibilities imagined by theory. Or, in other words, theory engenders practice, and practice formulates theory. My work on *Agaat*, my engagement with theory, and my reflections on process seek to imagine the possibilities for an adaptive methodology inspired by a dramaturgical sensibility.

In chapter one I explore the context of Marlene van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat*, paying specific attention to the ways in which the novel “writes back” to the *plaasroman* tradition. Then, in chapter two I delve deeply into the theoretical frames that influenced my thinking about adaptation generally and my work on *Agaat* specifically. These include: Linda Hutcheon’s theory of “modes of engagement,” the intersections of adaptation and translation theory, various definitions of appropriation, and concepts drawn from my reading and practice as a dramaturg. In chapter three I reflect on the process of adapting *Agaat* for the stage. The structure of this chapter follows Hutcheon’s

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<sup>22</sup> See appendix for the second draft of my adaptation (March 2015).

observation that: “Adapters are first interpreters then creators.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, I will begin by a description of my interpretation of the novel and my reasoning for choosing to adapt it. Then I will move on to reflect on my creation of the adaptation itself, listing the questions that guided my drafting and describing the creative choices I took to produce the draft that is presented as part of this thesis. I will conclude with some thoughts about the value of adaptation for the stage, and what, if anything, a dramaturgical sensibility might be able to add to considerations of fidelity, value, and transculturation in adaptation.

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<sup>23</sup> Hutcheon 18.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONTEXT

#### Marlene van Niekerk

Marlene van Niekerk is an award-winning South African poet, novelist, short story writer, and dramatist. Born in 1954, van Niekerk grew up in the Overberg, the fertile region of the southwestern Cape where *Agaat* is set. She attended Stellenbosch University from 1973 to 1978, studying languages, literature, and philosophy. After school van Niekerk worked as a directing apprentice in theatres in Mainz and Stuttgart before going on to study philosophy and cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. Van Niekerk's academic training is apparent in her rigorously patterned works, which develop thick webs of intertextual allusions and visual and aural motifs that defy reductionist readings. Additionally, her experience in linguistics allows van Niekerk to, in her words, "mess"<sup>24</sup> with the limits of language and explore vivid, energetic, and often dense registers of expression in her prose and poetry. In addition to her acclaimed career as a writer, van Niekerk has also taught at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of the Witwatersrand. She currently teaches creative writing and Afrikaans and Dutch literature at Stellenbosch University outside Cape Town.

To date van Niekerk has authored four plays, one of which, *Die Kortstondige Raklewe van Anastasia W* (*The Short Shelf Life of Anastasia W*<sup>25</sup>) was produced at the Aardklop Festival in 2010 and at both the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees and the HB

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<sup>24</sup> Van Niekerk, Marlene, "New Culture for a New South Africa." Interview by Kurt Andersen. Audio blog post. *Studio 360*. 25 June 2010. Web. 28 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.studio360.org/story/108540-new-culture-for-a-new-south-africa/>>.

<sup>25</sup> Leon de Kock and Annel Pieterse, "A Vast Domain of Death: Decomposition and Decay in Marlene van Niekerk's *Die Kortstondige Raklewe Van Anastasia W*," *SATJ: South African Theatre Journal*, 26.1 (2012): 61.

Thom Theatre in Stellenbosch in 2011.<sup>26</sup> Because of its formal innovation, *Anastasia W* warrants some discussion as an index of van Niekerk's larger aesthetic interests as a writer and thinker. A genre-bending satirical cabaret/musical, *Anastasia W* was directed by acclaimed Afrikaner auteur Marthinus Basson, whose choice to bring a heady mix of performance styles to the production mirrored van Niekerk's "more is more" dramaturgical strategy. Leon de Kock describes van Niekerk and Basson's collaboration as "a baroque assault of forms, idioms, wordplay, lyricism, operatic tragic-comic interludes, Brechtian theatrical alienation, and ripping symbolic violence."<sup>27</sup> The play is loosely structured around the 2007 rape and murder of an 11 year-old girl from Mitchell's Plain, Anastacia Wiese. Wiese was raped and killed by her mother's boyfriend, who then hid the body in the ceiling where it was later found by the young girl's father. The play is a sustained and overwhelming cry for decency that "tears into a society that seems to accept the state of a nation where killing children is almost a sport."<sup>28</sup> According to de Kock, many audience members walked out of the performances in Stellenbosch, ostensibly offended or overwhelmed by van Niekerk and Basson's violent theatrical maelstrom.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Leon de Kock and Annel Pieterse 61.

<sup>27</sup> Leon de Kock, "Marlene Van Niekerk Blows up a Storm in Stellenbosch." *Stellenbosch Literary Project*. Stellenbosch University, 6 Apr. 2011. Web. 28 Mar. 2015. <<http://slipnet.co.za/view/reviews/marlene-van-niekerk-blows-up-a-storm-in-stellenbosch/>>.

<sup>28</sup> Diane de Beer, "Barrage against a Legacy of Violence." Review. *Tonight*. The Independent Online, 12 Apr. 2011. Web. 28 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.iol.co.za/tonight/what-s-on/barrage-against-a-legacy-of-violence-1.1055764?showComments=true#.VUAxFM4bN6I>>.

<sup>29</sup> De Kock, "Marlene Van Niekerk Blows up a Storm in Stellenbosch." <<http://slipnet.co.za/view/reviews/marlene-van-niekerk-blows-up-a-storm-in-stellenbosch/>>.



Attempting to connect the piece to van Niekerk's novelistic and poetic work, de Kock describes the play as a "Van Niekerkian bloody riot of creativity."<sup>30</sup> In its sheer ingenuity, dizzying profusion of forms, layered allusions, and unflinching illumination of that which many would prefer to ignore, *Anastasia W* resembles and recalls van Niekerk's lengthy novels, which, in the words of Lara Buxbaum, "engender multiple readings and evade definitive closure."<sup>31</sup> Like *Anastasia W*, Van Niekerk's novels are complex, layered, and lengthy, laced with literary and cultural allusions, and formally inventive at the level of both the sentence and plot. Van Niekerk has said, "I write because I do not know the answers,"<sup>32</sup> and the rigorously exploratory and radically capacious sensibility she brings to her work produces narratives of great power and nearly unlimited interpretive potential. Indeed, the intricacy of van Niekerk's writing, the expansiveness of her language, and the dense patterns of meaning that emerge from repeated readings have excited literary scholars and prompted a considerable amount of critical writing on much of van Niekerk's writing, especially her novels: *Triomf*<sup>33</sup> and *Agaat*.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> De Kock, "Marlene Van Niekerk Blows up a Storm in Stellenbosch."  
<<http://slipnet.co.za/view/reviews/marlene-van-niekerk-blows-up-a-storm-in-stellenbosch/>>.

<sup>31</sup> Lara Buxbaum, "Remembering the Self: Fragmented Bodies, Fragmented Narratives in Marlene Van Niekerk's *Triomf* and *Agaat*," *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif Vir Literatuurwetenskap*, 29.2 (2013): 91.

<sup>32</sup> Van Niekerk, Marlene. "Marlene Van Niekerk: 'So It Is a Risk, This Business of Writing.'" Interview by Hans Pienaar. *LitNet*. 2 June 2005. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.  
<[http://www.oulitnet.co.za/nosecret/van\\_niekerk\\_pienaar.asp](http://www.oulitnet.co.za/nosecret/van_niekerk_pienaar.asp)>.

<sup>33</sup> *Triomf* was first published in Afrikaans in 1994 and in English (translation by Leon de Kock) in 1999. De Kock's English-language version was first published in the U.S. in 2004.

<sup>34</sup> *Agaat* was first published in Afrikaans in trade paperback in South Africa in 2004. The English translation (by Michiel Heyns) was first published in South Africa in 2006. Heyns' English version was first published in the U.S. in 2010.

Van Niekerk has received international acclaim for *Triomf* and *Agaat*, both lengthy novelistic excavations of the Afrikaner psyche. In these novels, van Niekerk explores Afrikaner identity, and the ways in which it is shaped by the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and religion. Through her characters and their complicated, domestic relationships, van Niekerk examines a patriarchal culture based on repression, exclusion, and sexual domination, and works to skew the mythic narratives of origin, election, and superiority that gave rise to Afrikaner nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. History, then, and its repressed traumas, serve as fertile ground for van Niekerk, as she seeks to depict the ways interpersonal relationships bear the mark of Afrikanerdom's narratives of cultural belonging.

In this vein, *Triomf* and *Agaat* are both centered on the hierarchies and desires that shape domestic space, which at times serves as an index of larger national and ethnic communities, and at others serves as a tool for van Niekerk to tease apart how power affects interpersonal relationships. The place of the home, as a specific “center of felt value”<sup>35</sup> distinct from more generalized domestic space, also plays a central role in van Niekerk's forays into Afrikaner identity. For many of van Niekerk's characters, identity is tied directly to the land, to the bit of earth on which they live and over which they hold some dominion. Place—the family home, the family farm—provides her characters a sense of belonging, though this rootedness is usually anxious since it is more often than not predicated on the displacement of a racial other. Loren Kruger illuminates this very tension in her description of how black dispossession and white control are intertwined in Afrikaner narratives of place. “Located on the imaginary frontier, even if in fact in the

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<sup>35</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) 4.

midst of settlement,” she writes, “the family farm marks the colonial penetration of the hinterland and dispossession of the Africans, even as it claims to represent the natural rights of the Afrikaner.”<sup>36</sup> By examining the way Afrikaner ideologies of territorial expansion and dominion are formed by and influence everyday lived experience in particular domestic spaces and home places, van Niekerk calls into question oppressive modes of being and thinking while illuminating the cracked foundations of reductionist narratives – both in terms of Afrikaner nationalism and the contemporary discourses of the new “Rainbow Nation.”<sup>37</sup>

### ***Triomf* (1994)**

Of *Triomf*, South African writer and translator of *Agaat*, Michiel Heyns, observes: “It’s a very urban novel with a very deliberately unelevated idiom—*it’s very crude, extremely crude.*”<sup>38</sup> A testament to van Niekerk’s ability to write across varying registers while evoking disparate settings, the novel graphically portrays a poor Afrikaner family—The Benades—living in Triomf, a Johannesburg suburb built on top of the bulldozed remains of the once-thriving black neighborhood of Sophiatown. The Benades of Triomf are a grotesque parody of the family unit so central to traditional Afrikaner ideology: Mol, Pop, and Treppie are siblings, and the hulking man-child Lambert is the result of an incestuous relationship between Mol and one of her two brothers (van Niekerk leaves the question of paternity ambiguous throughout the narrative). Against the

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<sup>36</sup> Loren Kruger, “The Premodern Postcolonial? The Drama of the Autochthonous Settler,” in *Post-Colonial Stages: Critical and Creative Views on Drama, Theatre and Performance*. Helen Gilbert, ed. (London: Dangaroo, 1999) 32.

<sup>37</sup> This oft-cited term is attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who used it to describe post-apartheid South Africa in the months after the first democratic elections in 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Michiel Heyns. “The Last Farm Novel?: An Interview with Michiel Heyns.” Interview by Dedi Felman. *Words Without Borders* Jan. 2008. Web. 28 Mar. 2015. <<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/from-agaat>>.

backdrop of a South Africa transitioning to democracy, *Triomf* shows the Benade family stuck in insidious patterns of trauma and abuse as they dream of escaping to the North on the eve of the first democratic elections in 1994.

Here, then, place becomes central to van Niekerk's excavation of identity. As the refuse of Afrikaner nationalism—"The left-behinds of apartheid" according to Heyns<sup>39</sup>—the Benades occupy a marginal position in the national narratives of transition swirling around them. Though they fail to embody South African ideals of hegemonic whiteness, the Benades nevertheless move to Triomf, a place redolent of apartheid's whitewashing mechanisms. Leonard Thompson summarizes one of the many ways the apartheid government used a combination of law and violence to inscribe racial segregation onto suburban spaces like Triomf:

Under the Group Areas Act (1950) and its many subsequent amendments, the government divided urban areas into zones where members of one specific race alone could live and work. In many cases, areas that had previously been occupied by Blacks were zoned for exclusive white occupation.<sup>40</sup>

In 1955, Sophiatown, a flourishing community of black and coloured<sup>41</sup> people, was rezoned under this legislation. Residents were forced to move, the community was razed, and the neighborhood of Triomf ("triumph" in Afrikaans) was built. Triomf, then, serves as a potent symbol of the ways apartheid destroyed Black history and culture while reforming social and political space to meet the needs of white supremacy. The new

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<sup>39</sup> Michiel Heyns. "The Last Farm Novel?: An Interview with Michiel Heyns." Interview by Dedi Felman. *Words Without Borders* Jan. 2008. Web. 28 Mar. 2015. <<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/from-agaat>>.

<sup>40</sup> Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001) 194.

<sup>41</sup> *Coloured* is a South African term that designates a mixed ethnic origin, usually of European, Asian, Khoisan, and Bantu peoples.

suburb of Triomf provides the Benades with the racial cachet they dearly need as “poor whites” inhabiting a class position that locates them below their racial station in apartheid’s hierarchy. Whatever aspirational identity the family can derive from living in Triomf, however, is tenuous, since it is built upon the total destruction of a thriving black and coloured culture. The North for which the Benades pine, on the other hand, is rendered as a nostalgic and mythic racial homeland that might provide a sense of rootedness in a time of uncertainty, a utopian no-place to which the Benades can flee.

Additionally, the bodies of the Benades—broken, deformed, and ugly as a result of incest and poverty—are marked as incompatible with both the past (the unifying project of Afrikaner nationalism) and the future (the coming, reconciliatory democratic order). As Lara Buxbaum writes:

The metaphor describing the Benades as ‘things that get thrown away’ (*T* 467) could also refer to the elision of their stories, their narratives and their grotesque bodies from the official Afrikaner nationalist narrative and indeed from the unifying ‘rainbow nation’ narrative and ‘body politic’ of the transition and after.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, van Niekerk uses the Benades to explore how race and class intersect with place to complicate seemingly complete images of the white body and static narratives of family and nation.

In the Benades and their bleak situation van Niekerk finds fertile ground to examine one of her key interests as a writer: “the workings of power in intimate relationships.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, there are several, layered power dynamics at work in *Triomf*. All

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<sup>42</sup> Buxbaum 90.

<sup>43</sup> Leon de Kock, “Intimate Enemies: A Discussion with Marlene Van Niekerk and Michiel Heyns About *Agaat* and its Translation into English,” *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*, 25.3 (2009): 141.

three men of the family have had sex with Mol, and yet, despite the sickness—both physical and psychic—that these abusive relationships generate, the Benades stick together, poor whites made anxious by the shifting political landscape around them. Additionally, knowledge and history collaborate to create a hierarchy within the family, as those who know the truth of Lambert’s origins (Pop, Mol, Treppie) hold varying positions of power over him. Questions of lineage, then, threaten the family’s power structure and become urgent issues that push the novel forward. While the texture and complexity of van Niekerk’s novel render an allegorical reading insufficient, the anxieties around paternity and genealogy in the narrative nevertheless index the larger myths of origin forged by early Afrikaner nationalists who sought to fabricate a sense of racial cohesion and rootedness as the basis of an ethnic identity and political solidarity. *Triomf*, then, illuminates the unease that such an obsession with origins betrays.

#### *Agaat* (2004)

In a similar vein, *Agaat* serves as a meditation on origins – their seductive allure, their ability to shape experience, and their essential instability. Exuberant in its experimentation with form and breathtaking in its emotional and historic scope, *Agaat* has won numerous prestigious South African literary awards: The University of Johannesburg Prize (2005), the Hertzog Prize (2007), the Sol Plaatje prize for translation (With Michiel Heyns, 2007), and the Sunday Times Literary Award (with Michiel Heyns, 2007), among others.<sup>44</sup> The novel, along with van Niekerk’s other writings, has also

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<sup>44</sup> Leon de Kock. “Marlene Van Niekerk.” *Poetry International Rotterdam*. Poetry International, 24 Aug. 2013. Web. 28 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/23457/10/Marlene-van-Niekerk>>.

garnered her a nomination for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize, an impressive international honor that attests to the global scope of van Niekerk's work.<sup>45</sup>

The novel investigates everyday cycles of abuse and intimacy through the story of Milla de Wet and her coloured adopted daughter-cum-maid, Agaat Lourier. In the novel's narrative present, Milla is confined to her bed as she slowly dies of a motor neuron disease (ALS). As Agaat cares for Milla's dying body with an ambivalent mixture of love and malice, the origin of their complex relationship is revealed through a series of second-person flashbacks, journal entries, and stream of (sub)consciousness passages. The novel begins by depicting the end of Agaat and Milla's relationship, and then works forward toward a conclusion which reveals their beginning – a structure that highlights issues of origin, memory, and history. At nearly six hundred pages, the novel covers six decades of South African history from the election of the National Party in 1948 and the establishment of apartheid through to the country's first democratic elections in 1994. South African history, social thought, and cultural production is often placed within a post/apartheid temporal rubric that revolves around this 1994 transition to democracy. Many critics, like Sarah Nuttall in her 2009 book *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post Apartheid*, have sought to move away from reading the South African present solely through the lens of the apartheid past, and yet, the collective traumas of that decade-long system of racial segregation and denial of human rights continually returns within the social, cultural, and political life of the “rainbow nation.”

While much has been written about twentieth century South African history, a brief contextual discussion of the six decades covered in van Niekerk's novel (and my

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<sup>45</sup> The Man Booker Prizes. *The Man Booker International Prize 2015 Finalists' List Announced*. N.p., 25 Mar. 2015. Web. 25 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/news/man-booker-international-prize-2015-finalists'-list-announced>>.

adaptation) will nevertheless prove useful at this stage. *Agaat* begins in 1947, a year before the National Party won political control of the country. Leading up to the 1948 election, the National Party, which represented just 12% of South Africa's total population,<sup>46</sup> mobilized a broad coalition of support made up of rural and urban Afrikaners by "appealing to their ethnic and racial attitudes, as well as their material interests."<sup>47</sup> National Party leaders capitalized on white anxiety over racial purity and competition with African labor in urban areas to propose a system of complete racial segregation that would ensure Afrikaner political and cultural dominance. This program came to be known as apartheid ('apart-ness' in Afrikaans), and was built upon a sense of Afrikaner nationalism (explored later in this chapter) and a network of discriminatory legislation dating back to the turn of the century. These segregationist bills included the Natives Land Act of 1913 that allowed black Africans to own only 7% of South Africa's total land area (enlarged to 13.6% by the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936)<sup>48</sup>; the Urban Areas Act of 1923 that classified all urban areas as white and required all black African men to carry permits (or "passes") to be able to work and reside in said white areas; the Immorality Act of 1927 that prohibited sexual intercourse between a white person and a black person (later amended in 1950 to forbid sex between a white person and any non-white person)<sup>49</sup>; and the Representation of Natives Act of 1936 that served to further disenfranchise black and coloured people.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thompson 186.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson 184.

<sup>48</sup> Roger B. Beck, *The History of South Africa* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000) 113.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

<sup>50</sup> Thompson 180.



As developed by Prime Minister Hendrik F. Verwoerd, and set into law through a mass of new legislation following the 1948 election, apartheid left its mark on every aspect of South African public life: employment, housing, education, sports, entertainment, recreation, news, and communications. In *The History of South Africa*, Roger Beck makes a distinction between “petty” and “grand” apartheid. While these terms are specific to the critical moment in which Beck was writing (just six years after the end of apartheid), they nevertheless still help to communicate the vast reach of the apartheid system. “Petty apartheid,” for Beck, covers “the racist laws affecting one’s daily routine, beginning with birth in a racially segregated hospital and ending with burial in a racially segregated cemetery,” while “grand apartheid relates to land and political rights.”<sup>51</sup> In this sense, apartheid insinuated itself into every layer of life—personal and political—in South African from 1948 to 1994. Leonard Thompson in *A History of South Africa* lists four central concepts of apartheid:

First, the population of South Africa comprised four “racial groups”—White, Coloured, Indian, and African—each with its own inherent culture. Second, Whites, as the civilized race, were entitled to have absolute control over the state. Third, white interests should prevail over black interest; the state was not obliged to provide equal facilities for the subordinate races. Fourth, the white racial group formed a single nation, with Afrikaans-and English-speaking components, while Africans belonged to several (eventually ten) distinct nations or potential nations—a formula that made the white nation the largest in the country.<sup>52</sup>

Particularly insidious was the way in which apartheid’s racial hierarchy pitted Indian, coloured, and African people against each other, cultivating resentment while making the formation of interracial alliances difficult. The above tenets built upon previous

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<sup>51</sup> Beck 125.

<sup>52</sup> Thompson 190.

legislation, and were augmented by a slew of new acts and provisions that, to varying degrees based on apartheid's racial hierarchy, stripped African, Indian, and coloured South Africans of basic human and civil rights. The apartheid government exerted control over black South Africans by mandating that they live in eleven native "homelands" located throughout the country. The apartheid government saw these homelands as the sites of new African "nations." When these nations became self-governing the apartheid state would offer them "independence," which would, in turn, strip all their residents of South African citizenship. Overpopulated economic backwaters, the homelands were "administered under white tutelage by a set of Bantu authorities, consisting mainly of hereditary chiefs."<sup>53</sup> Male laborers left these homelands to work in the cities, and their movements were subject to harsh "pass laws" that regulated where and for how long they could stay in a particular area.

Social life under apartheid was carefully engineered so that whites—either Afrikaans or English-speaking—lived in ignorance of the situation of their Indian, coloured, and African compatriots. Apartheid had damaging effects on the psychology and wellbeing of those subjected to its structures of segregation, while perpetuating a sense of supremacy in white populations through ignorance, the propagation of nationalist narratives, and the calculated deployment of anti-Communist sentiment. Indeed, as Thompsons writes: "Whenever White encountered Black, White was boss and Black was servant. Indeed, Whites were conditioned to regard apartheid society as normal, its critics as communists or communist-sympathizers."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Thompson 191.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 200-201.

The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 defined communism in broad terms and invested the Minister of Justice with sweeping power over those he suspected to be communist sympathizers.<sup>55</sup> This act was one of a whole complex of laws that afforded broad punitive powers to the police and government to indefinitely detain individuals without trial and to ban any group suspected of posing a threat to public safety. Additionally, these acts ensured that there were few safeguards against police abuse of their extensive powers. Apartheid order was maintained in part through carefully calibrated public fear of the *swart gevaar* (the ‘black threat’) and the *rooi gevaar* (the ‘red threat’), two amorphous menaces that the government used to create a measure of anxiety in the white population. Additionally, in the 1960s and 70s, as European colonization came to an end in Africa and the international community became increasingly disapproving of South Africa’s system of racial segregation, apartheid leaders attempted to position themselves as ardent opponents of communism, a move they hoped would engage contemporary anxieties over Soviet expansion and the menace of the Cold War.

South Africa became embroiled in the Cold War in the late 1960s and 1970s as anti-colonial movements gained traction in Portuguese-controlled Mozambique and Angola and in British-controlled Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). These independence movements posed a threat to the apartheid state since they were fueled by a Marxist ideology that empowered the masses to overthrow oppressive regimes. Additionally, many anti-apartheid leaders were in exile in these bordering countries, learning and training within this charged atmosphere of revolutionary change. South African foreign policy during these years, then, took a decidedly anti-communist and pro-colonial stance,

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<sup>55</sup> Beck 129.

intervening in independence struggles in South-West Africa (now Namibia), Angola, Mozambique, and Rhodesia. This was a calculated move on the part of the apartheid government to shore up power at home while projecting “South Africa as a stable, civilized, and indispensable member of the ‘free world’ in its unremitting struggle against international communism.”<sup>56</sup> This image was carefully conveyed, in part, to distract both the international community and domestic white populations from the realities of apartheid and the struggles of the black resistance movement. As Beck writes: “South Africa played its Cold War card to retain support from conservative Western politicians and businesses: It pointed to the two Marxist governments [in Angola and Mozambique] and claimed the same would happen in South Africa if the White government were to fall.”<sup>57</sup>

White settlers in Rhodesia declared independence from Britain in 1965, and were soon involved in a civil war with the country’s majority black population.<sup>58</sup> The war ended and Zimbabwe gained independence with the election of Robert Mugabe in 1980. Another one of South Africa’s northern neighbors, Mozambique, declared independence in 1975. In the wake of Portuguese de-colonization the South African government helped fuel a civil war in the country by supporting the anti-communist Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO). The war in Mozambique, which was marked by massive human rights violations, finally ended in 1992 with a U.N.-guided transition to democracy.<sup>59</sup> While it was intervening in Mozambique, the South African government also fought what

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<sup>56</sup> Thompson 215.

<sup>57</sup> Beck 158.

<sup>58</sup> Thompson 213-214.

<sup>59</sup> Beck 174.

is known as the South African Border War (1966-1990). During this lengthy conflict, South Africa conducted large-scale invasions of Angola and continued its military occupation of South-West Africa.

After World War I, the League of Nations granted the South African government the territory of South-West Africa, formerly under the control of Germany. After the dissolution of the League of Nations and the end of World War II, the South African government applied to the U.N. for control of the territory. The U.N. suggested a trusteeship that would require close international monitoring, a deal insufficient for the South African government which continued to regard South-West Africa as a de-facto province of the republic.<sup>60</sup> In the mid-1960s the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) began to fight back against South African occupation, setting off a conflict over this northern territory economically and politically important to the apartheid state.

In 1975 Angolan rebels achieved independence from Portuguese rule. Soon after, South Africa sent troops from South-West Africa to support the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in hopes of stalling the fledgling Angolan government run by the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). South Africa's military activity in Angola was seen as part of the larger Cold War, since "the Soviet Union armed and transported Cuban troops to help the [MPLA] consolidate its control over rival African nationalist organizations and to resist an invasion launched by the South African army in collusion with the United States."<sup>61</sup> The conflict ended in 1988 with an accord between Cuba and South Africa brokered by the U.S. and the Soviet

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<sup>60</sup> Beck 158.

<sup>61</sup> Thompson 216.

Union that saw: 1.) The phased withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola and South African troops from Namibia, 2.) The eventual independence of Namibia in 1990, 3.) The end to South Africa's support of UNITA, 4.) The closure of African National Congress (ANC) bases in Angola, and 5.) South Africa's continued sovereignty over Walvis Bay in Namibia.<sup>62</sup>

The Border War was a lengthy conflict, costly in both money and lives. It is a particularly important part of South African history to highlight when considering *Agaat* since Jakkie de Wet—the son of Milla and her husband Jak—serves as a South African Air Force pilot during Operation Askari in Angola in 1983. In his history of South Africa, Thomson gives a sobering account of the Border War's cost: “According to a report by a British Commonwealth committee, South Africa's destabilizing tactics between 1980 and 1989 led to the deaths of one million people, made a further three million homeless, and caused \$35 billion worth of damage to the economies of neighboring states.”<sup>63</sup> The South African Border War was a traumatic event for many white South African men who were forced into compulsory military service. Many, like Jakkie in the novel, did not agree with the ideology for which they were fighting, and many more experienced wartime traumas that reverberate to this day within South African cultural and political life.

As South Africa descended into a state of emergency in the 1980s and pressure from the international community intensified, it became increasingly clear to Afrikaner leaders that apartheid would not stand and that a peaceable plan for transition of national leadership was needed. Throughout the final years of the 1980s the National Party, under the leadership of P.W. Botha, began conversations with the leadership of the banned

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<sup>62</sup> Thompson 239.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 236.

ANC, including Nelson Mandela. In 1990 Botha's successor, F.W. De Klerk lifted the ban on the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the South African Communist Party (SACP), suspended capital punishment, and freed Mandela and other political prisoners.<sup>64</sup> Several years of peace negotiations marked by violence, uncertainty, and the clashing of competing factions eventually resulted in the establishment of an interim democratic constitution on November 18, 1993.<sup>65</sup> After a fraught campaign and a peaceful election Nelson Mandela assumed the office of President on May 10, 1994, stating in his inaugural address: "Out of the experience of an extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud...Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another."<sup>66</sup>

The history outlined above plays out at the margins of *Agaat*, and van Niekerk explores its intricacies and particulars through the prism of Milla and Agaat's fraught relationship. Van Niekerk has pointed to the "entanglement"<sup>67</sup> between these two women as her main authorial interest: "I think my main motive...in this entire thing [*Agaat*] was the workings of power in intimate relationships, and I'm quite firm about that."<sup>68</sup> The flow of power between Agaat and Milla is complicated and marked by great circumstantial reversals. Van Niekerk has described *Agaat* as "a story of tables that are turned," and part of the pleasure of the novel comes from tracing the various power plays

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<sup>64</sup> Thompson 247.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 256.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 264.

<sup>67</sup> I discuss Sarah Nuttall's provocative concept of entanglement, and the ways it influenced my work on this adaptation, in chapter two.

<sup>68</sup> De Kock "Intimate Enemies" 141.

at work in its central relationship.<sup>69</sup> Frustrated with her abusive husband and despairing over her inability to conceive a child, and thus a legitimate heir to the family farm, Milla sets about to “rescue” the abused and beaten daughter of her former nanny. She takes the coloured child to her farm and sets about to cleanse her body and soul, instilling in her the Calvinist theology and gendered expectations of her own Afrikaner upbringing. Milla teaches Agaat to be a shining example of both white femininity and coloured servitude: pious, self-sacrificing, knowledgeable about house and farm.

The various meanings of Agaat’s name help to illuminate this dimension of her relationship with Milla. Agaat’s original name is Asgat, which means “ash-bottom” or “ash-arse” in Afrikaans. This is a pejorative name given to the little coloured girl who retreats deep into the ashy hearth in the wake of sexual abuse. After Milla “rescues” Agaat from the hearth and cleans her with mix of motherly care and anthropological fascination, she renames her Agaat, which comes from the Greek *agathos*, meaning good. However, as Milla notes, Agaat also means “agate,” a “semi-precious stone” that, tellingly, only shows its “value” after its been “correctly polished.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, Agaat is Milla’s God-given agate, hers to polish and make “good.” However, when she conceives a son, the tension of keeping a young coloured girl in the house as a quasi-daughter becomes too much for Milla and her husband Jak. After some deliberation and careful preparation, she exiles Agaat to the outside room, turning her into a nanny for the farm’s rightful white, male heir.

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<sup>69</sup> Van Niekerk, “New Culture for a New South Africa,” <<http://www.studio360.org/story/108540-new-culture-for-a-new-south-africa/>>.

<sup>70</sup> Marlene Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, trans. Michiel Heyns (New York: Tin House Books, 2010) 406.



This action reverberates throughout the novel as Agaat and Milla variously engage its implications and face its effects. Milla knows that she has made a mistake, but feels a compulsion to act anyway, fuelled in no small part by the conservative Afrikaner social context of which she is a part. As the son—Jakkie—grows up, he forms a tight bond with Agaat, a fact that makes Milla extremely jealous. Maid and madam spend much of their lives together, alternating between moments of real tenderness and explosions of harbored resentment and anger. After Jakkie has fled South Africa and Milla's husband has died, the two live what the novel suggests is a benign life on the farm – filled with routine and ordered by the racial hierarchy forged years earlier. In the 1990s Milla is diagnosed with ALS, and it falls to Agaat to care for her body as she slowly wastes away. But Agaat's caring is not solely palliative, for she uses Milla's increasing incapacitation to confront her with the sins of the past. As Milla and Agaat enter into their final act, the question of who will inherit the farm presents itself. Is it Agaat who will continue to tend the land after Milla dies? The two figures await an answer on death's threshold as South Africa itself undergoes a transition, from apartheid to democracy.

Through Milla and Agaat's various claims to each other's bodies and souls, van Niekerk teases out the ways landscape, gender, race, and spirituality were, and still are, layered onto Afrikaner identity. Specifically, the novel illuminates how questions of ownership and land are at the heart of Milla's sense of self and her identity as an Afrikaner woman. White control over African land has always been central to Afrikaner identity, providing a powerful sense of psychic and spiritual belonging. As Afrikaner writer Marq de Villiers observes of his grandfather: "Afrikaner history was bred into his

bone: the sour taste of defeat, yes, but also the sense of place, of belonging, of being *hiervandaan*, from here.”<sup>71</sup> Place serves such a central role in van Niekerk’s novels because it is essential to the Afrikaner identity she interrogates. As a people “no longer European, not yet African”<sup>72</sup> Afrikaners have historically constructed national myths around collective narratives of African origin in order to establish a cohesive sense of cultural and racial belonging that might be employed to various political and economic ends.

The African farm has served, and continues to serve, as the epicenter for many Afrikaner narratives of place and origin. Historically, the transformation of the putatively empty African wilderness into a productive European farm was predicated on a rigid Calvinist theology, patriarchal social organization, and hard-working pioneer mythology. Particularly influential in establishing the farm as a locus of Afrikaner identity was the *plaasroman* (“farm novel”), “an ideologically important genre justifying colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land.”<sup>73</sup> Comprehending the central aims and characteristics of the *plaasroman* is especially helpful in gaining a full understanding of *Agaat*, which is positioned in a direct dialogue with the genre. Indeed, *Agaat* has been described as a “rewriting” or a “writing back” to the farm novel tradition as it emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>74</sup> Translator Michiel Heyns has said that the novel “really takes the *plaasroman* by

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<sup>71</sup> Marq De Villiers, *White Tribe Dreaming: Apartheid's Bitter Roots As Witnessed by Eight Generations of an Afrikaner Family* (New York: Viking, 1988) xxi.

<sup>72</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 11.

<sup>73</sup> Nicole Devarenne, “Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883-2004,” *Journal of South African Studies*, 35.3 (2009): 627.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 640.

storm,”<sup>75</sup> and van Niekerk herself has commented that examining the genre through a different lens was a central impulse of her work.<sup>76</sup>

### The *Plaasroman*

The *plaasroman* emerged as a genre during a time of great economic and cultural change for Afrikaners. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century rural Afrikaners moved to the cities in droves, experiencing urbanization as a “rapid, chaotic, and almost always traumatic process.”<sup>77</sup> Hermann Giliomee attests to the scale of this urbanization: “By 1890 fewer than 10,000 Afrikaners (two or three per cent) were urbanized; thirty-six years later, in 1926, 391,000 (41 per cent) lived in towns and cities, in 1936, 535,000 (50 per cent).”<sup>78</sup> Several factors spurred this mass exodus from the country to the city. According to J.M. Coetzee, in his book *White Writing*, Afrikaner flight from the farm was a result of “the increase of capital looking for secure investment, the growth of a transport network which opened new markets and made farming more profitable, inefficient farming on parcels of land that shrank with every generation, and the lure of city pleasures to the children of the patriarchs.”<sup>79</sup> Under Roman-Dutch Law,<sup>80</sup> a farmer was compelled to divide his land among his children, though, as Nicole Devarenne writes in her article *Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883-2004*, “as a result of the closing of the frontier and of the large size of Afrikaner families,

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<sup>75</sup> De Kock, “Intimate Enemies” 138.

<sup>76</sup> Van Niekerk, “New Culture for a New South Africa,” <<http://www.studio360.org/story/108540-new-culture-for-a-new-south-africa/>>.

<sup>77</sup> Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: C. Hurst, 2003) 323.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 323.

<sup>79</sup> Coetzee 78.

<sup>80</sup> Giliomee 321.

inheritances became too small to be viable farms.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, a generation of underclass, landless Afrikaners emerged “increasingly unable to feed their large families properly, many stunted in mental and physical development.”<sup>82</sup>

The closure of the frontier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the direct result of a tradition of poor farming practices. Most Afrikaners maintained a livelihood through agriculture, and as Giliomee writes, “farming in the western and southeastern Cape was relatively prosperous.”<sup>83</sup> However, as a small fraction of South African land is fit for the farming of crops, “stock farming developed as a way of life and means of subsistence” for many rural Afrikaners.<sup>84</sup> Overstocking combined with the depletion of the topsoil as a result of grass burning exhausted good pastureland and creates a “crisis in pastoral farming.”<sup>85</sup> Unable to transition from subsistence farming to “market-oriented farming,”<sup>86</sup> many Afrikaner farmers, who were in considerable debt already, sold their lands and moved to the city. “In a racially homogenous society the Afrikaner poor would have become the urban proletariat and worked their way up from that position,” Giliomee writes.<sup>87</sup> However, upon their transition to the cities, Afrikaners experienced competition for employment from English-speaking workers and African laborers working for much lower wages. The influx of rural Afrikaners into cities created a huge class of unemployed “poor whites,” which in turn created a crisis for those elite

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<sup>81</sup> Devarenne 628.

<sup>82</sup> Giliomee, 322.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 320.

<sup>84</sup> Giliomee 320.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 321.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 321.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 318.

Afrikaners set on establishing a cohesive national identity predicated on white supremacy and dominance over a black majority. According to Giliomee, “the main obstacle to such a consolidation was the presence of growing numbers of very poor white people on the land and in the towns and cities. Some were destitute and unemployable; others were unskilled or barely skilled.”<sup>88</sup>

It was against a backdrop of incredible flux that the *plaasroman* arose as one of many cultural tools deployed in the service of establishing a sense of racial superiority and continuity in an ailing Afrikanerdom. In general, the farm novel wove its narratives of national origin around a set of interconnected binaries that resonated strongly with Afrikaner communities caught up in a seismic transition: farm vs. city, natural vs. urban space, agrarian past vs. capitalist modernity, romanticism vs. realism. Devarenne provides a handy list of some of the themes that arose out of this matrix of contradictions:

The corrupting influence of the city and of modernity, and particularly of the mines, with their promises of get-rich-quick; the importance of hard work for the white Afrikaner’s spiritual development; the alleged opportunism of Jewish financiers and Muslim shop-owners, and indolence of black and ‘coloured’ labourers; the grinding hardship of life on the farm; and social problems such as poverty and illiteracy among Afrikaners.<sup>89</sup>

Here Devarenne summarizes how the genre relied on the delineation of racial difference triangulated with issues of class and religion. The *plaasroman* served as an important tool to solidify an ethos of pious hard work, a sense of racial superiority, and a feeling of rootedness in the African soil.

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<sup>88</sup> Giliomee 315.

<sup>89</sup> Devarenne 629.

One of the abiding concerns of the farm novel was the establishment of “assumed [white] ownership and domestication of the African land.”<sup>90</sup> Van Niekerk herself identifies this as the central element of the *plaasroman*: “There’s always a very deep male concern with the soil, and with the fertility of the soil, and especially the ownership of the soil [...] It’s a politically contested business: ownership of soil.”<sup>91</sup> In her comments, van Niekerk gestures to the gendered dynamics of the *plaasroman*’s depiction of land ownership. In the farm novel, the land is figured as feminine while the farmer is always masculine. In order to control the feminine land, the masculine farmer must penetrate it by inscribing it with the plow. In her book, *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock identifies the feminizing of land as a central trope in colonial discourse. She traces its origin to Enlightenment conceptions that saw the pursuit of knowledge as “the male penetration and exposure of a veiled female interior; and the aggressive conversion of its ‘secrets’ into a visible, male science of the surface.”<sup>92</sup> As male settlers and colonizers explored and overtook the “unknown world,”<sup>93</sup> they feminized the land through ritual means in an attempt to overcome the anxiety of the boundary-less liminal zones and moments of transition engendered by their colonial project.<sup>94</sup>

Not only does the *plaasroman* participate in this tradition by sexualizing the land in order to cope with male anxiety, it also routinely describes African geography as vast,

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<sup>90</sup> Caren van Houwelingen, “Rewriting the Plaasroman: Nostalgia, Intimacy and (un)homeliness in Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*,” in *English Studies in Africa: A Journal of the Humanities*, 55.1 (2012): 93.

<sup>91</sup> Van Niekerk, “New Culture for a New South Africa,” <http://www.studio360.org/story/108540-new-culture-for-a-new-south-africa/>.

<sup>92</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 23.

<sup>93</sup> McClintock 23.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

empty, and indecipherable. Thus, the action of inscribing the land both sexualizes it and makes it legible through the encoding of meaning. Plowing establishes a personal connection between farmer and land, while also reminding the farmer of their connection to Afrikanerdom, which derives its collective identity from the soil itself. “Inscribing the land with the plough was to encode the identity of the Afrikaner community upon and within it,” Caren van Houwelingen writes, “to mark and transform the earth so that it served as a constant reminder of one’s culture and heritage.”<sup>95</sup> Plowing the land was a gesture that connected the farmer to a long, patriarchal line of white Afrikaners laboring in the same way for the same goal – the domestication and flowering of the soil granted them by God.

A sense of divine election was foundational to the establishment of Afrikaner nationalism and permeated the relationship between farmer and land as set out in the *plaasroman*. Bruce Cauthen observes:

The concept of chosenness, that is of a particular people especially anointed by the Deity to discharge a providentially-ordained mission, to fulfill a holy and cosmologically-determined destiny, or who collectively possess a divine warrant to subdue, and propagate the faith in, a heathen land, has been throughout history a uniquely potent catalyst for social mobilization and national coherence.<sup>96</sup>

In his book, *Ideology of a Frontier*, J. Alton Templin traces the origins of this sense of “chosenness,” arguing that the experience of the Great Trek into the interior of South Africa in the 1830s and 40s combined with the development of an Old Testament centered Biblical exegesis helped to establish within Afrikaners a sense that they were a

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<sup>95</sup> Van Houwelingen 97.

<sup>96</sup> Bruce Cauthen, “Covenant and Continuity: Ethno-symbolism and the Myth of Divine Election,” *Nations and Nationalism* 10:1-2 (2004): 20.

chosen people, a “New Israel” who had completed a “New Exodus” into the interior of dark Africa.<sup>97</sup> This method of Biblical interpretation, Templin writes, was founded on a determined attempt to find direct correlations between the events recorded in the Old Testament and the Afrikaners’ own struggles as a people. “The Boers assumed that if they looked to the Bible in humility,” he writes, “they could find answers for their needs; nothing would be hidden from them. Consequently, the situations which seemed to reflect a biblical event were interpreted as direct signs from God.”<sup>98</sup> Particularly influential, then, would have been the narratives surrounding the Promised Land so central to the story of the Israelites. For the descendants of the Voortrekkers, those Afrikaners who had ventured into the wilderness, the north was their land of milk and honey, their place in the world guaranteed by God in exchange for their continued piety and obedience.

Templin argues that this sense of election, however, was adapted from this theological context to a distinctly sociocultural one. Soon, he writes, Afrikaners believed that they were a people set apart because of particular and intrinsic social, cultural, and racial advantages, many of which could be perceived as outward manifestations.<sup>99</sup> Slowly, church and society merged so that, “those who were faithful members of the Afrikaner community were automatically part of God’s faithful invisible community of the elect.”<sup>100</sup> As is the case in the *plaasroman*, a sense of exceptionalism and election was maintained through the strict articulation of difference: Those outside the *volk*, Africans

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<sup>97</sup> J. Alton Templin, *Ideology on a Frontier: The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652-1910* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984) 282.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 282.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 283.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 285.



and the British, were cast as heathens and misguided Christians, respectively.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the theological foundations of Afrikaner nationalism, which in turn undergirds the ideology of the *plaasroman*, conceived of the *volk* as a people elected by God to have dominion over African land, and to thus place themselves there as a people.

In the *plaasroman*, the farmer's dominion over the land must be continually affirmed, generation after generation, through what Coetzee calls "good stewardship of the ancestral estate." "To be a good steward," he continues, "is to make the earth bring forth manifold and the flocks increase...it is to build upon the inheritance."<sup>102</sup> Here the *plaasroman* rejects the increasing capitalist ventures and free-market strategies of its economic context in favor of a form of ownership that receives its legitimation through the bloodline. The farm was paid for not in money but through the forefather's blood and tears. As Coetzee writes, "[the forefathers] hack [the farm] out of primeval bush, they defend it against barbarians, they leave their bones in its soil. Inherited ownership of the farm therefore becomes a sacred trust: to alienate the farm means to forsake the bones of the ancestors."<sup>103</sup> Future generations have a responsibility to continually rehearse patriarchal values and to tend to the land in a way that will honor those that came before. In this way, to belong to the land means to see oneself as a link in a long chain of farmers receding into the past and extending into the future. The *plaasroman* abetted the unifying and mythologizing project of Afrikaner nationalism by showing that "the unit of life is the lineage, not the individual."<sup>104</sup> This sense of self, in turn, bred a conception of

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<sup>101</sup> Templin 286.

<sup>102</sup> Coetzee 85-85.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>104</sup> Coetzee 109.

individual identity as constituted by and subsumed into the “imagined community”<sup>105</sup> of the *volk*, or the Afrikaner nation chosen by God.

Writers of *plaasromane*, Coetzee observes, saw the rural crises of the 1920s and 30s “as a conflict between peasant and capitalists modes of production.”<sup>106</sup> *Plaasroman* authors developed this conflict, casting it as a battle between two distinctly opposed ways of valuing the land itself. Emerging capitalist ideas were represented through broad, stereotypical “townsmen” characters, more often than not troped as English or Jewish. These characters lacked the lineal consciousness of the Afrikaner, and thus the right to ownership of the land. Coetzee sums up this conflict between past and present, rural and urban, capitalism and peasant order when he writes: “By and large, the programme espoused by the *plaasroman* is one of a renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to the earth.”<sup>107</sup> Jennifer Wenzel reminds us that this can be read as a reaction to the economic turmoil engulfing rural Afrikaner communities at the turn of the century: “The *plaasroman*,” she writes, “thus performed a curious ideological function, since it glorified a form of peasant agriculture and land ownership that was increasingly being replaced by a capitalist mode of commercial production.”<sup>108</sup> In this way, the farm novel perpetuated a myth of natural white ownership of African land in a time when the larger Afrikaner community was experiencing a widespread sense of loss and displacement at the hands of new, commercialized farming practices.

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<sup>105</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

<sup>106</sup> Coetzee 97.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>108</sup> Jennifer Wenzel, “The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The *Plaasroman* Tradition in an Era of Land Reform,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*. 46.1 (2000): 94.

In a time of great economic and cultural upheaval, then, Afrikaans writers of *plassromane* employed, to use Svetlana Boym's term, a type of restorative nostalgia. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym distinguishes between two, interpenetrating modes of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos*, that is, a returning home. Restorative nostalgia "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home," looking selectively back to the past to invent traditions that are "conservative and unchangeable."<sup>109</sup> These projects often "[build] on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offer a comforting script for individual longing."<sup>110</sup> Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, stresses *algia* (longing) and "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity."<sup>111</sup> In their attempts to establish a national sense of belonging by fabricating origin narratives closely tied to the land, writers of the *plassroman* engaged in a powerful form of restorative nostalgia. Through their stories of toil and sacrifice these writers displayed the farm as a "home" that could be recuperated, a place of natural order contrasted to the hectic disarray of urban space.

Gender, too, played an essential and constitutive role in the nostalgic restoration of a mythic Afrikaner homeland. Discussing writer C.M. van den Heever's farm novels, Devarenne writes that his "works lent credibility to a story about Afrikanerdom's rural origins that provided an illusion of continuity in Afrikaner history, described an unchanging Afrikaner identity and depicted Afrikaner women as *volksmoeders*, or

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<sup>109</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) xviii.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. xviii.

mothers of the nation.”<sup>112</sup> The *volksmoeder* was an icon of Afrikaner womanhood that defined appropriate white femininity as stoic, self-sacrificing, and pious. Afrikaner men were responsible for plowing the land and upholding a lineal consciousness. The *volksmoeder* was seen as no less important to the project of consolidating a sense of collective Afrikaner identity, especially as the space of the home came to serve as a microcosm of the nation. The mother of the nation was responsible for the literal reproduction of the *volk* itself and for maintaining an ordered house wherein the patriarchal and Calvinist values of Afrikanerdom were rehearsed by the next generation.

In her discussion of *The Tweede Trek*, a 1938 “orgy of [Afrikaner] national pageantry,”<sup>113</sup> Anne McClintock writes that “a racial and gendered division of national creation prevailed whereby 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 spiritual mission.”<sup>114</sup> The *plaasroman* and other cultural products of the 1920s and 30s used strict gender boundaries to define Afrikanerdom, positioning the male as a generative, forward-driving force and the female as a reflective, interior, sustaining influence. McClintock, however, is quick to point out that the *volksmoeder*, while oppressed by a hierarchical social structure predicated on strict gender binaries, was nevertheless complicit in the epistemological violence of the colonial project. She writes that white women were “active, but decidedly disempowered, participants in the invention of Afrikaner identity. As such, they were complicit in deploying the power of

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<sup>112</sup> Devarenne 632.

<sup>113</sup> McClintock 371.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 377.

motherhood in the exercise and legitimation of white domination.”<sup>115</sup> The *plaasroman*, then, used gender and the icon of the *volksmoeder* as a way to structure the protagonist farmer’s relationship to the home, the soil, and the nation.

However, as Coetzee addresses, the taming of the seemingly open African land was historically accomplished through the use of black labor. This reality seriously undermined Afrikaner ideology, and thus remained absent from its literature, including the *plaasroman*. For Coetzee, the absence of black labor from the *plaasroman* is a collusion of generic demand and contextual reality. That is, the farm novel, harkening back to the European tradition of the pastoral, was under obligation to show the farmer working his land, in an attempt to legitimate the form’s nostalgic return to a peasant order.<sup>116</sup> However, if the *plaasroman* was to show that the land belonged to the white race, it could not represent the reality of black labor. Thus, for Coetzee, “the constraints of the genre therefore make silence about the black man the easiest of an uneasy set of options.”<sup>117</sup>

The occlusion of black labor and the substitution of white fortitude is one of the many characteristics of the *plaasroman* that van Niekerk deconstructs. For example, Agaat, who already inhabits an uneasy racial position as a coloured woman, never speaks in her own voice. Rather, she is “translated” by Milla in all four of the novel’s interwoven timelines. Even Agaat’s origin narrative—which Milla watches her whisper to Jakkie again and again throughout the novel—is revealed in the epilogue not in her own voice but through Jakkie’s memory. In her version of the *plaasroman*, then, van Niekerk makes

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<sup>115</sup> McClintock 379.

<sup>116</sup> Coetzee 5.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

black and coloured labor visible, but suggests the insidious nature of racialized oppression by rendering the visible and laboring coloured body voiceless. This question of voicing was central to my work as an adapter. How can a stage adaptation communicate Agaat's silence while still fulfilling the practical necessity of having the character speak dialogue on stage to move the play forward? When does Agaat speak and when does she stay silent? Is there a way to literalize Milla's silencing power? Or perhaps a way to make the audience aware that they are not receiving the whole story, that the character of Agaat has more to say and both cannot and will not articulate it? These are some of the questions I asked at the beginning of my process and in chapter three I will examine some of the answers I discovered as I adapted the novel.

The nature and extent of van Niekerk's critique of the farm novel have been the subject of some critical investigation. Caren van Houwelingen argues that van Niekerk engages the tradition of the farm novel to ask "whether a painful and oppressive past can be revisited in a meaningful way."<sup>118</sup> Van Niekerk finds her answer in a sort of "complicitous critique" that "partially reinstates the politics of the genre" while illuminating "the unspoken inconsistencies that saturate it."<sup>119</sup> Van Niekerk is able to achieve this by examining the intersections of ideology and the mundane, with the farm itself serving as "the main spatial locus where the quotidian and the political become explicitly entangled."<sup>120</sup>

Devarenne also acknowledges the way van Niekerk dances with complicity in her writing, as she describes *Agaat* as a rewriting of the *plaasroman* that both acknowledges

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<sup>118</sup> Van Houwelingen 95.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

and critiques the farm novel as a “mouthpiece for white supremacy, misogyny, xenophobia, anti-metropolitanism and resistance to change.”<sup>121</sup> Devarenne claims that van Niekerk “gestures towards a missing narrative” – Aagaat’s story – which Milla’s “white imagination” desires to subsume within the reductive and epistemologically violent genre of the *plaasroman*.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, Devarenne briefly notes that van Niekerk “digs up the misogynist foundations” of the farm novel itself, and the ways in which the discourses of *plaasroman* served to normalize the reductive construction of gender at the heart of Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>123</sup>

Through various techniques, literary devices, and motifs, van Niekerk also interrogates the structures of gender and sexuality that undergird the *plaasroman*. The gendered division of labor so central to the work of Afrikaner nationalism is indexed by one of the three epigraphs placed at the beginning of *Aagaat* – a passage from Mrs. E. (Betsie) Verwoerd’s *Borduur So (Embroider Like This, 1966)* in which the author—the widow of Prime Minister and “architect of apartheid” Hendrik Verwoerd—describes the usefulness of such domestic and female handicrafts to the establishment of a civilized nation.<sup>124</sup> In teaching Aagaat to embroider, Milla uses a female domestic task to “correct” the coloured child’s “uncivilized” tendencies, and in so doing engages in the same kind of gendered labor that McClintock locates at the center of Afrikaner nationalism. Milla,

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<sup>121</sup> Devarenne 641.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> A section from Mrs. E. (Betsie) Verwoerd’s foreword to the 1966 book *Borduur So [Embroider Like This]*: “That is the beauty, the value of this book: that it was born out of love and inspires to love, that nobody can doubt. And with that a great service if 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 from the uncivilised” (*Aagaat* ix).

however, also upends traditional notions of Afrikaner femininity since she takes an active role in farming the land at the expense of her culturally sanctioned roles as procreator and nurturer.

The history of Grootmoedersdrift, the farm on which *Agaat* takes place, also serves as a powerful locus for van Niekerk's critique of the *plaasroman* and its gendered manipulations of land and belonging. Grootmoedersdrift—translated in the novel as “Granny’s Ford” or “Granny’s Passion”—is named after Jakkie’s “dreaded great-great-granny Spies.”<sup>125</sup> Grootmoedersdrift, then, is an atypical farm for the *plaasroman*, carved as it was out of the African wilderness not by a stoic male farmer, but by a fearsome matriarch. In a speech to Milla and Jak on the eve of their marriage, Milla’s mother invokes the “lineal consciousness” Coetzee identifies as so central to the *plaasroman*: “You don’t throw away your birthright... that which your ancestors built up in the sweat of their brow, that you look after and that you live up to.”<sup>126</sup> It is Milla, not her husband Jak, who is tasked with being the steward of Grootmoedersdrift. Debates over the best way to tend the land and honor its white matriarchal lineage form one of the central conflicts in Milla and Jak’s marriage. Milla seeks to farm the old way, using methods that attempt to nostalgically commune with the land and activate some mythological original connection to it. Jak, serving as the force of modernity and capitalism, wants to use fertilizer and work the land and animals so they turn a profit. Throughout the novel Jak is rendered as an impotent *Boer*—“He was no farm boy. His hands were soft”<sup>127</sup>—who compensates for his emasculation by toning his body and beating his wife. In my

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<sup>125</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat* 5.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 20.



adaptation I worked hard to illuminate this conflict, and to place it at the center of Milla and Jak's relationship.

As I discovered, imbricated in this conflict over how best to farm the land is the larger question of who will carry on its legacy of female labor and control. In the patriarchal world of Afrikaner nationalism and the *plaasroman*, the rightful heir would be a white male child, reared first in the home by the *volksmoeder* and then taught the ways of farming and the legacy of the *volk* by his father. Grootmoedersdrift essentially has two heirs. First, there is Jakkie who abdicates his lineal responsibility to the farm by fleeing South Africa for Canada in 1985. And then, there is Agaat, both daughter *and* servant. Following the matriarchal logic of Grootmoedersdrift, Agaat is the perfect heir apparent. She knows the land like the back of her hand and has learned the operations of the farm thoroughly throughout the years. And yet, in terms of the *plaasroman*, Agaat is not an inheritor, as her ownership of the farm would negate the genre's carefully constructed myth of white supremacy. When considered in the context of current South African debates over land rights and restitution, the question of who will inherit Grootmoedersdrift becomes especially urgent. Agaat's ultimate possession of the land in the wake of Milla's death can be read as a restitution, a return of the land to its rightful owner. However, van Niekerk troubles this easy conclusion. As she has pointed out in an interview, Agaat will more than likely run Grootmoedersdrift with an iron fist, utilizing the same draconian tactics as her white *baas*/mother.<sup>128</sup>

In the novel's epilogue, Jakkie expresses doubts that Agaat will ever be able to farm the land free of Milla's influence:

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<sup>128</sup> Van Niekerk, "New Culture for a New South Africa," <<http://www.studio360.org/story/108540-new-culture-for-a-new-south-africa/>>.

The farm made over to Agaat. She can bequeath it one day to whomever she wants...Calloused, salted, brayed, the lessons of the masters engraved in her like the law on tablets of stone...She knows the soil...She'll look after herself...The promised land is hers already, her creator is keeping remote control. Six feet under.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, through the complicated relationship between Agaat and Milla (her “creator”), van Niekerk troubles the sublime lineal consciousness of the *plaasroman*. In a South Africa still struggling with issues of land rights and restitution, *Agaat* illuminates the ways in which apartheid’s racial and gender entanglements still linger and affect the present, and by extension, the future. In my adaptation, then, I sought to fully engage these questions of legacy and inheritance. One of the main questions I want the adaptation to ask is: Who will inherit Grootmoedersdrift? In posing this question I strove to maintain the ambivalence so present in van Niekerk’s novel, attempting to use both language and movement to show the physical and emotional entanglement that marks Agaat and Milla’s lives and complicates the possible future of Grootmoedersdrift.

To my mind, *Agaat* can certainly be read as an interrogation of the farm novel. While not an announced transcription of an already extant *plaasroman*, *Agaat* nevertheless hails the ideological underpinnings and formal and aesthetic concerns of the farm novel as intertexts which allow for a revisionist interrogation that engages with the foundational myths of Afrikaner nationalism. In my thinking about *Agaat* and its connection to the legacy of the farm novel, I continue to ask questions about allegory and my position as an outsider interpreting and then adapting this culturally specific text. To what extent, I wonder, should we read Milla and Agaat as allegories of white and black South African collectivities? Like many, I was taken with the fraught relationship at the

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<sup>129</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 568.

core of the novel, and with how Milla and Agaat's history illustrates the confounding ways love and possession, consumption and violence, understanding and ambivalence operate in intimate relationships shot through with racial tension. Is there a way to read their relationship as an index of South African history? Can one read the novel as a microcosm reflecting the macrocosmic political shifts occurring outside the narrative's frame? Or would such a reading just participate in trends of interpretation that cast any South African cultural production as allegorical, flattening out complexity and ignoring ambivalence?

In my work as an adapter I have tried to confront these questions of interpretation and representation head on. In thinking through these questions I have returned again to Linda Hutcheon's observation that "adapters are first interpreters then creators."<sup>130</sup> It is my job then, as an adapter, to interpret the "source" text in a way that is aware of context, open to multiple meanings, and conscious of my own position as outsider. This contextual knowledge—the product of what I am arguing is an encounter—becomes the foundation for a completely new work. In adapting *Agaat* I constantly shuttled between attending to the novel's complexities and making the specific and concrete choices necessary to tell a compelling story on stage. At every step of the process, I asked questions about representation, fully aware that my choices as an adapter make meaning, and that this meaning has the potential to both spark positive encounters and to flatten meaning or misrepresent. In order to avoid this, then, I continue to see the process of product of adaptation not as a hierarchy of relationships but rather as a network of exchanges. My adaptation comments on and is drawn from *Agaat*, and the novel shapes and productively contests my adaptation. The choices I make as an adapter

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<sup>130</sup> Hutcheon 18.

involve questions of audience and reception and culture. What of the original context do I include? What do I leave out of the frame? In the section that follows I explore the specific theoretical lenses that influenced my work as an adapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORIZING ADAPTATION

#### Theory & Practice

My process in adapting *Agaat* was purposefully dramaturgical, in that it engaged both theory and practice as two sides of the same coin. My work on the adaptation sought to bridge ways of thinking about adaptations with methods of making them. By necessity, then, this project embraces a degree of uncertainty. My work was propelled by questions, by the unknown, by impulse and subjective feeling. At the same time, I applied more logical thinking to my work, as I interpreted van Niekerk's novel and structured my adaptation. In this way, my work shuttled between a *questioning mode of creation* and an *analytical mode of reflection*. At each step, I worked hard to inhabit the space between these two modes, though sometimes one would take precedence over the other. Nevertheless, I identify this attempt to work in the gaps, to see the boundary between theory and practice as a space of encounter and possibility, as indicative of a distinctly dramaturgical sensibility. And after reading Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* I believe that the very in-between space in which dramaturgs live is similar to the liminal juncture inhabited by the adapter.

#### Process & Product

In an attempt to live into this adaptational and dramaturgic ideal, I utilized several theoretical frames pulled from adaptation studies, translation studies, postcolonial theory, and dramaturgy to both shape and challenge my process as an adapter. Several dimensions of Hutcheon's theory of adaptation have been influential to my developing practice. Hutcheon's groundbreaking book attempts a serious and extended examination

of the diverse terrain of adaptation practice across a wide range of media. She takes as her starting point a critique of the comparative analyses and rubrics of fidelity that have, according to her, for too long relegated adaptations to the status of derivative works unworthy of critical or academic attention. Hutcheon attempts to look at adaptations on their own terms as “inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts.”<sup>131</sup> Yes, adaptations share a relationship to the text (or texts) from which they spring, but this relationship need not be a hierarchical one, Hutcheon argues. Rather, she suggests three criteria for the evaluation of adaptations *as adaptations*. First, Hutcheon defines adaptations as formal products that are “announced and extensive transposition[s] of a particular work or works.”<sup>132</sup> These transpositions can occur across medium, context, and ontology (i.e. “from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama.”<sup>133</sup>). Next Hutcheon writes that we must understand adaptations as processes of creation. That is, “the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation.”<sup>134</sup> And finally, given their status as both product and process, we must begin to understand adaptations through the lens of reception, since all adaptations are, to varying degrees, encountered by their audiences as intertexts.<sup>135</sup> One of Hutcheon’s main claims is that we must begin to see adaptation as both a process and a product variously informed by the particularities of audience reception.

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<sup>131</sup> Hutcheon 6.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

Understanding adaptation this way disrupts the aesthetic and formal hierarchies that have relegated adaptations to the dustbin of derivative works. Instead of a focus on originality and legitimacy, adaptations can push us as readers and spectators toward more complex (and ultimately fruitful) spaces of encounter, movement, and interpretation. “[A]daptation teaches that if we cannot talk about the creative process, we cannot fully understand the urge to adapt and therefore perhaps the very process of adaptation,” Hutcheon writes. “We need to know ‘why.’”<sup>136</sup> Adaptations ask us to interrogate intention and to think critically about the various impulses that undergird our creative choices. In this sense, then, Adaptation Studies, in its insistence on the analysis of both process and product, might offer an alternative to post-modern criticism that generally does not consider authorial intent or subjective experience. As Hutcheon writes:

By their very existence, adaptations remind us there is no such thing as an autonomous text or an original genius that can transcend history, either public or private... The process of adapting should make us reconsider our sense of literary critical embarrassment about intention and the more personal and aesthetic dimensions of the creative process.<sup>137</sup>

Hutcheon’s comments resonate with current thinking on the role of the dramaturg. Orr, among others, has argued that dramaturgs must foster a sense of “critical proximity” and that attention to their own artistic impulses and intentions will make them stronger and more effective collaborators.<sup>138</sup> In much the same way, Hutcheon suggests that critics might do well to insert subjectivity and consideration of authorial intent back into their work, a move that will require new methodologies and fresh ways of regarding adapted

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<sup>136</sup> Hutcheon 107.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>138</sup> Orr 241.

work. A move, moreover, that will require equal attention to product and its more slippery partner, process.

Hutcheon suggests that we might achieve this shift by looking at how adaptations shuttle between what she calls “modes of engagement.”<sup>139</sup> To move away from formal critiques and comparative analysis, Hutcheon argues, we should begin to look at “how adaptations tell, show, or interact with stories.”<sup>140</sup> The first mode of engagement she identifies is the “telling” mode, most often employed in written narrative. In this mode, the reader engages with the text through their imagination, conjuring in their mind the places and characters evoked through the specific language deployed by the author. Hutcheon argues that this process of imaginative engagement is “unconstrained by the limits of the visual and the aural.”<sup>141</sup> I would argue that our experience of the visual and aural in everyday life, no matter how “constrained” or “limited,” is a key building block of our imaginative capacities. Sound and image are constitutive parts of the process of imagination even if they are not embodied in material essences. When I imagine a place, I “see” it and I “hear” it – I am affected bodily by these imaginative projections. What’s more, I draw upon reserves of past visual and aural sensations to create an imaginative world. While I do not have time in this thesis to explore the particularities of the human imagination, I would suggest the limits of the visual and the aural might not be as concrete as Hutcheon would have them.

Most performative media, such as theatre, television, and film, employ Hutcheon’s second mode of engagement: The “showing” mode. In being shown a story,

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<sup>139</sup> Hutcheon 22.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Hutcheon 23.



rather than being told it, we are likely to experience the story in a chronological, forward driving way, even if it is elliptically or retrospectively structured. In reading a novel we can stop reading at any point and pick up the narrative later by returning to the book, but with live performance we must experience the unfolding of the narrative, no matter its structure, in real time. There is a set amount of time in which the performance can be experienced, be it five minutes or five hours. The advent of recording technology, both current digital models and increasingly obsolete analogue systems, has considerably muddied this distinction between the “telling” and “showing” modes of engagement. Indeed, in watching a film or television show on a DVD we have the same ability to start, stop, review, and jump the narrative as we do when interacting with a print book. The mode of engagement in this situation, then, is both similar *and* different. We are shown a story through a DVD and we’re told a story through a novel or short story, but in both instances of reception, however, the spectator (or consumer) may interact with the narrative and thus change how they experience it.

In fact, interactivity forms the final mode of engagement in Hutcheon’s formulation. In this “interacting” mode, audiences (like the readers and watchers I discuss briefly above) relate to the story in ways that alter its narrative. This is most prevalent in video games and new media, where spectators are immersed in the world of the story and hold various levels of agency over its construction. Adaptations, as process and products, do not express and engage with these modes in a straightforward, linear way. Indeed, the excitement of adaptation—its allure and, as Hutcheon would say, its pleasure—comes from the fact that these modes are often mixed. Site-specific performance can include moments of overt audience interaction and novels can require more active participation of

their readers through the use of narrative devices and extra-textual methods. Video games, in turn, can show complex narratives even as their players variously write and re-write them in the moment. Hutcheon's modes of engagement, then, provide a handy rubric for thinking through adaptation as process and product, even if many adaptations employ more than one of these modes in complex and interpenetrating ways.

Of particular interest to my project are the different ways that dialogue operates between modes of engagement. In all three modes, dialogue serves to develop character, define conflict, and create emotional depth. Dialogue in a novel and on the stage help to express a character's inner thoughts and desires. These articulations, however, are contingent and filtered through a whole host of contextual circumstances. In fact, as in life, characters in novels and plays oftentimes say exactly the opposite of what they mean, or cloud the meaning of their speech with a host of sub-textual techniques. People dodge, insinuate, exaggerate, extrapolate. In encountering characters in novels and plays we as readers and audience members must do the interpretive work of teasing out their underlying desires and hidden drives. This, in fact, is part of the pleasure of reading a story or watching one play out before us on stage.

The telling mode of engagement uses methods other than dialogue to illuminate objective, allowing readers access to the inner thoughts of a character (as unreliable as they might be), or supplying description, commentary, or narrative that helps to elaborate on situation and circumstance. Dialogue becomes important in the showing mode since it must express story and character without the aid of textual techniques. In realist theatre, stage dialogue seeks to represent human speech patterns while also communicating character objective. This often means that audiences must interpret subtext, since

characters rarely says what they mean. However, there are many other ways for a character to speak on stage, and theater artists from different traditions and historical contexts have experimented with how to render on-stage speech as poetic, narrational, improvisational, etc.

The contexts of delivery and reception are also important to keep in mind when thinking about dialogue in the telling and showing modes. Dialogue in a novel or short story is meant to be read, whereas dialogue in the showing mode is meant to be spoken aloud by a performer. The dialogue in a play, even if it is heightened or poetic, must be active, fueled by concrete character motivations and clear obstacles. The full meaning of the dialogue (whatever that might be) cannot be activated until a live performing body vocalizes it. In performance, the meaning expressed by this spoken dialogue is augmented by the material realities of production: Space, costumes, lights, sound. Dialogue in a novel, on the other hand, is augmented through the author's use of various narrative devices. Its meaning is activated when read within the context of the larger story of which it is a part. A living, performing body is also required to activate dialogue written in the telling mode, though this act is considerably less public than the enunciation of dialogue before a spectator. To be sure, the characteristics above are generalities, and there are certainly many novels with "theatrical" dialogue and many plays with "literary" speech. For my work on *Agaat*, however, it was helpful to explore the ways speech and dialogue change when transcoded across media.

For Hutcheon, media—the material means of an adaptation's expression—matters. When a story moves from the "telling" mode to the "showing" mode, narrative and description are transcoded into speech and action. For plays following a traditional

dramaturgical form, this shift from one mode of engagement to the other means that interior thoughts are transformed into exterior action, while the past is revealed in the present through the use of exposition and character action rather than described memory. For my own work on *Agaat* this was a foundational shift that I encountered every time I sat down to write. How to take van Niekerk's layered and evocative narration and transform it into active, motivated, and justified dialogue for the stage? A novel can tell, but a play must show. Throughout theatre history there have been playwrights and practitioners who have successfully refuted this axiom, creating performances of great depth and meaning that blur the lines between narration and dialogue. In particular, contemporary devising groups like Elevator Repair Service (New York), the Tectonic Theatre Project (New York), and the Rude Mechanicals (Austin, Texas) have developed works that upend the division between showing and telling by exploding the usual relationships between actor and character, stage and spectator, fiction and reality. Despite the innovative explorations of these companies, live performance does demand a degree of action that the novel does not. I set out to adapt *Agaat* as a traditional, written play and not as a devised piece or a post-dramatic event, and as such many of the artistic choices I made as an adapter centered on taking what worked well in the "telling mode" and transcoding it to succeed in the "showing" mode. To make these instances of transcoding work, however, I have utilized a wide array of theatrical devices intrinsic to the showing mode of engagement.

For example, in my adaptation of *Agaat* three different actresses play the character of Milla de Wet at three different stages in her life. One actor plays Milla from twenty to thirty-four years old (Maiden), another actor plays her from thirty-four to fifty-

six years old (Mother), and the final actor plays Milla on her deathbed at seventy years old (Crone). I decide to break up the character of Milla like this in order to adapt a technique that van Niekerk employs to great effect in the “telling” mode, but that would make little or no dramatic sense on stage. Namely, van Niekerk writes sections of Milla’s story in the second person, which helps to emphasize the reflective thrust of the novel. In these sections, it feels as if an older version of Milla is looking back on her past self and critiquing her ill-conceived decisions. There is an accusatory and interrogatory sense to these second person sections that would be difficult to render in active dialogue employed by stage characters to achieve objectives in the present. In *Agaat*, the past is palpably present, and having three versions of the same character speaking to each other across time and space seemed like a way in which the “showing” mode could ask some of the same questions of identity and memory that van Niekerk’s novel explores. In this example, then, Milla’s interrogation of her past self—so evocative and poignant in the novel—is made active through its embodiment in three different, but closely related, characters.

Hutcheon also identifies and explore the change in audience perception that is required by the shift from telling to showing modes of engagement. “When theorists talk of adaptation from print to performance media,” she writes, “the emphasis is usually on the visual, on the move from imagination to ocular perception.”<sup>142</sup> Hutcheon goes on to say that it is not only the visual, but the aural that takes precedence in adaptations that move from text to performance. In general, this move prompts the viewer to rely more on their perception of what is before them than on their imagination. A reader of *Agaat* crafts Grootmoedersdrift, *Agaat*, Milla, and Jak through acts of imagination, and can

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<sup>142</sup> Hutcheon 40.

revisit these places and characters by picking up the book and re-reading specific passages (or by simply remembering the process of reading). When watching a performance, Hutcheon observes, the audience is not using their imagination but their perception (both visual and aural) to interpret the work before them. I believe that this division is too reductive, as all theatre requires a fairly large imaginative leap on the part of its audiences: To believe that the person performing is really the person they say they are even though a whole host of context clues suggest the exact opposite. Theatre and performance, like written narrative, thrive on the imagination of the spectator. However, this is not a zero sum game. I agree with Hutcheon that the 'showing' mode does engage the visual and aural sense to a degree that the novel or short story cannot. But that doesn't mean that it requires no imaginative investment on the part of an audience.

Though she seeks to get away from any comparative rubric that locates adaptations as "lesser-than," Hutcheon does acknowledge that loss is a constitutive part of both the process and product of adaptation across any mode of engagement: "A novel, in order to be dramatized, has to be distilled, reduced in size, and thus, inevitably, complexity."<sup>143</sup> Hutcheon is right to bring up the question of simplification in the adaptation of long, complex works to the stage, especially works like *Agaat* that rely on a host of sophisticated literary devices to open up interpretive possibility: The play of metaphor, the use of differing modes of address, the development of complex plots that layer time and space. Through the process of adaptation to the stage, a novel will undoubtedly experience some flattening out in terms of the possible registers of meaning its construction might produce. However, Hutcheon's arguments suggest that this simplification should not be seen not as a loss of complexity or as an irredeemable

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<sup>143</sup> Hutcheon 36.

alteration of the text, but as a transformation of how that original text might have communicated its meaning. Hutcheon observes that adaptations say things differently than their source texts. “They use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on,” she writes. “But the stories they relate are taken from elsewhere, not invented anew.”<sup>144</sup>

The adapter, then, begins their work by teasing out what the source text means to them. This encounter with the text is ongoing, and may at times be marked by an uneven power differential between adapter and text. The adapter’s various subject positions shape this interpretive process, which results in one, subjective, and felt understanding of the source text out of a diverse range of possibilities. It is the craft of the adapter to choose from within this interpretive abundance the concepts and impulses that will yield the most provocative results when expressed and explored through their chosen mode of engagement. Moving a text across media, however, does not mean the simple reproduction of a pre-existing and concrete meaning within a new set of formal categories. As Hutcheon writes, “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication.”<sup>145</sup> Adaptations are the product of the dynamic push and pull of interpretive encounters marked by loss *and* gain, by a search for equivalency not a demand for substitution.<sup>146</sup> In this regard, then, the process and products of adaptation produce a multiplicity of meanings that exists not in a hierarchy, but as a network of resonances, an intertextual conversation.

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<sup>144</sup> Hutcheon 3.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 16.

Hutcheon's reevaluation of adaptation as process and product provided me with a lens through which to understand my work on *Agaat*. In particular, I found that considering "modes of engagement" helped me to make specific choices about macro structural elements (e.g. the presence of three actors playing Milla) and small moments (e.g. the substitution of a word that works well on the page but would be needlessly difficult for an actor to enunciate). Hutcheon also allowed me to conceptualize my relationship to van Niekerk's text as an *encounter*, and not as a relationship where I had to be anxious of my perceived fidelity to the source text. Understanding the ways in which adaptations are "inherently 'palimpsestuous'"<sup>147</sup> allowed me the freedom to interpret van Niekerk's novel while making its expression on stage distinctly my own.

This, then, might be the answer to the fidelity debate that continues to occupy many adaptation studies scholars. The goal of the process of adaptation is twofold: 1.) To interpret the source material with a sense of responsibility *and* exploration and, 2.) To craft a piece of work that stands alone while expressing this interpretation of the original work through the particular strengths of its own medium. Hutcheon summarizes it well: "Perhaps one way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one's own and thus autonomous."<sup>148</sup> In my work on *Agaat* I sought to respectfully interpret van Niekerk's text and then *make it my own*, a process that brings up questions of translation and appropriation.

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<sup>147</sup> Hutcheon 6.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 20.



## Translation & Adaptation

In my exploration of the field of Adaptation Studies, and in my work with van Niekerk's novel, I found the current conversation about the relationship between translation and adaptation to be particularly helpful. Many scholars in both fields have focused on this complex interplay, with some positing a Janus-like relationship between the two processes and others insisting on the differences between them. Mark O'Thomas argues that adaptation is different from translation in that it "take[s] place across media rather than cultures – literature into film, diary extract into play, etc."<sup>149</sup> O'Thomas echoes Hutcheon here by viewing both adaptation and translation as process *and* product. His definition, though, ignores the ways in which media are shaped and inflected by cultural forces, and thus ignores the important questions of reception and context an ethical process of adaptation must ask. Katja Krebs observes that many critics divide adaptation from translation in terms of their relationship to source material: "[A]daptation tends to be viewed as a creative version, rewriting of, or commentary on a source as opposed to translation that presumably offers sameness and strives for equivalence."<sup>150</sup> Krebs concludes that this is a tired binary, productively blurred by the dramaturgical practice of theatre creation, which "destabilizes notions of single authorship and 'originality,' ... [and] disallows a distinction between adaptation and translation more than other acts of writing."<sup>151</sup> Krebs' desire to move away from a cult of originality and

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<sup>149</sup> Mark O'Thomas, "Turning Japanese: Translation, Adaptation, and the Ethics of Trans-National Exchange," in *Adaptation Studies: New Approaches*, Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins, eds. (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010) 46-61.

<sup>150</sup> Katja Krebs, "Translation and Adaptation – Two Sides of an Ideological Coin," in *Translation, Adaptation, Transformation*, Laurence Raw, ed. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012) 43.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

toward a more fluid sense of authorship resonates with my project, which sought to create an adaptation that would stand on its own while also serving as a provocative site for engagement with its initial source.

In his introduction to *Translation, Adaptation and Transformation*, Laurence Raw also calls for a blurring of interdisciplinary lines when he writes:

By focusing on transformative processes such as transfer and re-presentation, I view translation and adaptation studies within a more all-inclusive framework that recognizes the demands of ‘a globalizing world demanding flexibility and respect for difference in cultural traditions.’<sup>152</sup>

Raw views translation and Adaptation Studies as marked by culture, and foregrounds this fact by suggesting a fluid line of demarcation between the two practices that acknowledges their global scope. Raw’s conception also acknowledges a certain intercultural conversation inherent in the processes and products of both adaptation and translation. Translation and adaptation, Raw argues, will always occur across culture, and it is the job of practitioners and scholars to attend to the ways these processes and products variously engage difference.

Michiel Heyns, in his reflection on translating *Agaat*, articulates how questions of culture influenced his work. To begin, he suggests a definition of translation that both resonates with Raw’s understanding and develops a sense of text as territory. The translator, in Heyns’ view, is a “licensed” trespasser who ventures into a foreign land, encounters its peculiarities and geography, and then is tasked with giving “as accurate an account of this territory as he can, to enable his audience to understand something of this

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<sup>152</sup> Laurence Raw, “Introduction: Identifying Common Ground,” in *Translation, Adaptation, Transformation*, Laurence Raw, ed. (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012) 3.

territory in their own terms but without losing the sense of foreignness.”<sup>153</sup> Heyns is here indexing a common conundrum faced by translators, one that was originally identified by Lawrence Venuti as the question of whether a translation should foreignize or domesticate its source text for the target audience.<sup>154</sup> Heyns sees foreignizing as a central impulse in his work, and thus his definition of translation is inflected with a sense of encounter, a conversation between translator, “landscape,” and audience. These different but connected encounters must pay attention to difference even as they seek to achieve a level of intercultural understanding.

Heyns applies this territorial and conversational conception to his work on *Agaat*, a novel certainly marked by a specific culture. To what degree, he asks, should an English translation of the novel bend to become intelligible to an audience unfamiliar with Afrikaans or South African culture? Heyns writes:

There seemed little point in trying to situate *Agaat* in some international no-place, even if it had been possible to do so: the novel has its being and its meaning inextricably in the Overberg, and though its cultural frame of reference is very wide, it is in the first place founded on an Afrikaans culture<sup>155</sup> (127).

Heyns’ work on *Agaat* was guided by the conviction that any English translation of the novel must encourage an encounter with the story’s cultural context. Heyns worked closely with van Niekerk herself to achieve a translation that kept the texture of the original while finding equivalent registers to communicate *Agaat*’s dense levels of meaning. At times, Heyns actions may have veered into adaptation, though if we agree

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<sup>153</sup> Michiel Heyns, “Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain: On Translating *Agaat*,” *Journal of Literary Studies/ Tydskrif Vir Literatuurwetenskap*, 25.3 (2009): 125.

<sup>154</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995). 20.

<sup>155</sup> Heyns, “Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain,” 127.

with Hutcheon that an adaptation must be an announced transposition of another text or texts, then as a whole his project was indeed a highly collaborative translation that sought to produce a work still marked by culture and open to continuing intercultural conversations. In my work as an adapter of this culturally specific text I asked many of the same questions as Heyns, attempting to walk the line between domestication and foreignization. The draft of my adaptation submitted as part of this thesis stays very close to the cultural context of the novel while using the particular elements of theatre—live bodies, sound, light, breath, spoken word, open-ended physical images—to convey the emotional essence of the story itself. In chapter three I will reflect more on this process, influenced as I was by Heyns' own encounter with van Niekerk's inspiring text.

### **Appropriation & Encounter**

While scholars like Raw and Krebs, and practitioners like Heyns, are still debating the borderline between adaptation and translation, their conversations are becoming increasingly global in their scope. The intercultural nature of these conversations, and the realities of my own work as a North American dramaturg adapting the work of a South African novelist, foreground the need for further theorization and critique of the ways that texts move between genres and cultures. Appropriation is one concept that proved particularly helpful in developing my understanding of how a dramaturgically informed practice of theatrical adaptation might engage with pressing intercultural concerns. In her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders parses the relationship between these two terms. Paying particular attention to the workings of intertextuality, Sanders writes that adaptations, “[signal] a relationship with an informing

source text or original.”<sup>156</sup> Adaptations announce their connection to their origin while striving for a degree of faithfulness. Appropriation, on the other hand, is the “wholesale rethinking in terms of the original,” where the source text may be acknowledged, but usually in ways that are not as clear or straightforward as in adaptation.<sup>157</sup> While adaptations seek to maintain some line of communication between themselves and their source text, appropriations frequently work to dismantle the generic assumptions and repressive techniques of their original material in order to create a “wholly new cultural product and domain.”<sup>158</sup> For Sanders, appropriations can often take on a decidedly political stance frequently absent in adaptations. In this sense, then, Sanders sees appropriations as encounters between a source text and a new work purposefully positioned in a stance of antagonism and critique. The encounter of appropriation is not one of equanimity and curious exchange, but rather an often radical attempt to regain agency, illuminate the inequalities of the past, and to establish counter-narratives.

It is pertinent to acknowledge that Sanders only looks at appropriation through the lens of subversion and resistance. However, appropriation can, and has been, employed toward less ethical and liberatory ends. As post-colonial theory and research has shown, appropriation—the “wholesale rethinking” of a narrative, be it personal, cultural, racial, national—is a tactic that has been used to disastrous effect time and time again by imperial power. Appropriation might very well be used to illuminate gaps in our understanding, but it can also be used to paper over telling lacunae and silence those that would speak out. With this in mind, it might be more accurate to discuss *modes* of

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<sup>156</sup> Julie Sander, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 26.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* 26.

appropriation, which can be variously subversive and oppressive in their relation to literary, cultural, and social narratives.

In the introduction to their well-edited *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner complicate Sanders' distinction in a similar way, claiming that "appropriation can be understood *as part of the process of adaptation*" (emphasis mine.)<sup>159</sup> As two interrelated registers of one multi-tonal process, adaptation and appropriation cannot be quite so easily disentangled. To support this claim, Nicklas and Lindner turn to Hutcheon's definition of appropriation as "taking possession of another's story and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interest and talents."<sup>160</sup> Appropriation, then, is not so much a matter of acknowledged proximity to a source text, but rather the way in which "material is broken up to become part of a new living organism," an effect of the adaptation process.<sup>161</sup> In chapter three I take a look at the ways I "broke down" van Niekerk's story of violence in intimate relationships and 'filtered' it through my own sensibilities. This metabolic process was marked by my own subject position as, among other things, a white, male, North American adapter. For instance, I was aware that Agaat's voicelessness posed a challenge to my work, since there was a very real chance that my adaptation might reiterate this silencing. Additionally, as I adapted Jak's many speeches I walked the line between explaining all his cultural and historical references and leaving some of them possibly obscure to an audience unfamiliar with South African politics during the

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<sup>159</sup> Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner, "Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation," in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner, eds. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) 5.

<sup>160</sup> Hutcheon 18.

<sup>161</sup> Nicklas and Lindner 6.

historical period of the story. Finally, throughout my process I took passages from van Niekerk's novel that I thought were beautiful and provocative and filtered them through my own theatrical sensibility, emphasizing and drawing out some images and reducing others.

This last point is particularly true of scenes in the novel where the movement and position of characters in space took precedence over dialogue, as in the moments when Milla spies Agaat and Jakkie whispering by the fire. In general, I would not describe my adaptation of *Agaat* as an appropriation as defined by Sanders. Instead of actively seeking to subvert the politics of van Niekerk's text, or to rewrite it wholesale, I sought instead to communicate my specific interpretation of the novel through specific theatrical means that I hope highlight the novel's critiques of normative South African histories and the *plaasroman's* complicated legacy. This then, prompts a larger question about the divisions between appropriation and adaptation. Can appropriation only occur when there is a difference of political ideology or some sort of inequality in terms of formal or social status? Furthermore, following Nicklas and Lindner, might all adaptations be said to employ varying degrees and modes of appropriation, some radical, others conservative?

While I agree with Nicklas and Lindner's claim that adaptation and appropriation are two sides of the same coin, I don't think that this necessarily negates Sanders' observations about the possibilities of appropriation. In fact, Sanders' understanding of appropriation's radical potential to craft a new cultural product seems to converge with, not diverge from, Pascal and Lindner's image of adaptation's metabolic operations. I would like to move toward an understanding of adaptation as a process of encounter between an informing source and a new work in which appropriation—the critique of the

source text's underlying assumptions and gaps—occurs at varying levels and to differing degrees. Part of Sanders' argument is that encounter—both in its combative and conciliatory modes—is part of the pleasure of adaptation. Echoing Hutcheon, she writes: “[A]s both procedure and process, adaptation and appropriation are celebratory of the cooperative and collaborative model.”<sup>162</sup> In adaptation, texts variously collaborate and argue, and in their exchange ask important questions about our assumptions surrounding form and content in art. As an audience, it is a pleasurable experience to become a part of this encounter: “It is the very endurance and survival of the source texts that enables the ongoing process of juxtaposed readings that are crucial to...the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or the spectator in tracing the intertextual relationship.”<sup>163</sup> While I am interested in exploring the collaborative nature of adaptation as encounter, it is important to remember that appropriation flows in different directions depending on context, and can be used both to resist and perpetuate oppressive systems of control.

The “metabolic”<sup>164</sup> and pleasurable process of breaking down a source text takes on particular piquancy when considered in intercultural and post-colonial contexts. In their canonical book, *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial writing itself is a type of adaptation from the margin to the center, achieved through the interplay of two processes: abrogation and appropriation. According to Ashcroft et al, “abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in

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<sup>162</sup> Sanders 4.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>164</sup> Pascal and Lindner 6.



the words.”<sup>165</sup> Appropriation, on the other hand, is “the process of capturing and remoulding language to new uses,”<sup>166</sup> a practice deployed to various degrees by both colonizer and the colonized. Ashcroft et al. claim that culture is an essential concern in adaptation, which they define as, “the process by which...language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience.”<sup>167</sup> In post-colonial contexts adaptation is an essential cultural process, one that can establish the groundwork for the eventual abrogation of imperial language.

In line with the larger project of their book, Ashcroft et al. focus on how the subaltern writer and speaker might use abrogation and appropriation as tools against the hegemony of colonial discourse, how these two interconnected practices can combine to create a process of adaptation that re-conceives the center. The flow of adaptation, however, can be reversed and the process of “capturing and remoulding language to new uses” employed to silence and dominate the Other. If, as Pascal and Lindner point out, appropriation is a part of adaptation, what are the dangers of moving a text across cultures, especially when histories of colonialism and imperialism are at stake? What spaces of understanding and connection can this practice open up? Alternately, how might these practices open up spaces for the re-inscription of legacies of colonial exploitation and epistemological violence? As Sanders writes: “[T]he question always has to be posed ‘who is appropriating who?’ and ‘on what terms?’”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 37.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>168</sup> Sanders 99.

## Entanglement & Dramaturgy

As I explored the answers to the above questions in my work on *Agaat*, I was influenced by two modes of seemingly unrelated thought that provided ways to engage with the problems and possibilities of intercultural work. Sarah Nuttall's book *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* provided me with a theoretical frame that answers Ashcroft et al.'s important questions while also complicating some of their nearly thirty year-old project's formulaic and prescriptive binaries. Specifically, Nuttall provided me with the concept of "entanglement," which is a mode of reading that I think can be applied to the context of intercultural adaptation in productive ways. Nuttall describes entanglement this way in the introduction to her book:

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored, or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication.<sup>169</sup>

For Nuttall, entanglement serves as a powerful descriptor of life in contemporary South Africa, where the lines that determine belonging are often difficult to tease apart. The term offers Nuttall both a nuanced way to consider how literary and cultural texts construct identity, and a lens through which to critique and supplant the apartheid/post-apartheid binary that has defined public and academic discourse over the last twenty years. According to Nuttall, entanglement proposes "a method of reading which is about a set of relations, some of them conscious but many of them unconscious, which occur

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<sup>169</sup> Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits UP, 2009) 1.

between people who most of the time try to define themselves as different.”<sup>170</sup> Interacting with Leon de Kock’s notion of “the seam,”<sup>171</sup> Nuttall uses entanglement as a way of reading that seeks out connection in spaces previously viewed as divisive. In this sense, Nuttall’s project is concerned with moments of encounter that shape life and artistic expression in South Africa. Where, she asks, are the unexpected points of intersection? How can we understand these moments of connection—marked by histories of violence and intimacy—as “complex temporalities”<sup>172</sup> far more complicated than the easy interpretations put forward by reductive apartheid/post-apartheid rubrics?

Entanglement, then, as an image and a mode of reading offers a provocative lens through which to view *Agaat*. Milla and Agaat’s story is a story of entanglement. Agaat is Milla’s daughter, but she is also Milla’s servant, her nurse, her confessor, and her friend. Milla, in turn, is Agaat’s mother, but she is also her oppressor, her teacher, and her patient. Thanks to Milla’s initial, ambivalent decision to “adopt” Agaat, these women are tied tightly together in a relationship shot through with shifting registers of love and hate, care and abuse, ignorance and understanding. The action of the novel, with its four interwoven narrative “threads,” shows the various ways these two women navigate their entanglement – a dance which, in turn, defines their identities. It would be easy to read Milla and Agaat as allegorical representations of white and black South Africa entangled as a result of the violent history of colonialism and apartheid. However, van Niekerk’s layered, formally inventive, and rigorously complex novel denies such an easy

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<sup>170</sup> Nuttall 12.

<sup>171</sup> Leon de Kock, “South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction,” in *South Africa in the Global Imaginary*, Leon de Kock, Louise Bethlehem, Sonja Laden, eds. (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2004).

<sup>172</sup> Nuttall 11.

interpretation, and instead prompts the kind of nuanced reading Nuttall advocates for in *Entanglement*, a kind of reading that attends to “those sites and spaces in which what was thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together to find points of intersection in unexpected ways”<sup>173</sup>

Nuttall’s extended engagement with entanglement resonates with my own ideas about adaptation as a process of encounter between two texts. I am wary of drawing too fine a comparison with Nuttall’s work, since her ideas come out of the specific context of a transitioning South Africa and address themselves both to cultural products and to the lived experience of people daily navigating the gap between past and future. However, in its search for moments of intersection, in its acknowledgement that meaning is made through relation, in its clear-eyed belief that connection can be both negative and positive, I think entanglement offers a way for the intercultural adapter to understand their position and to attend to the questions asked above. The adapter inhabits the intersection between cultures, audiences, and texts. The process of adaptation renders them entangled. They possess a dual responsibility, to follow their own individual artistic impulse while also seeking out ways to foster an open and expansive encounter between the cultures, texts, and publics they are located between.

In thinking through this position, I also find compelling connections to current debate among professional dramaturgs, literary managers, and theatre scholars as they grapple with the aesthetic implications and institutional responsibilities presented by increasing globalization. Magda Romanska’s impressive new anthology of essays on the theory and practice of dramaturgy attempts to widen the field by including various international voices in its five hundred and twenty seven pages. Many of the essays

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<sup>173</sup> Nuttall 20.

collected in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* view dramaturgy as a tool for bridge building between cultures, as a theoretical and methodological lens—much like entanglement—that attends to moments of intersection. This image is a common one, as it is axiomatic in the field that the dramaturg serves as the bridge between audience and stage. Writing about the state of European dramaturgy in the twenty-first century, Marianne van Kerkhoven (whom I quoted in my introduction) echoes this truism: “Dramaturgy is for me learning how to handle complexity, It is feeding ongoing conversation on the work; ... Dramaturgy is building bridges; it is being responsible for the whole. Dramaturgy is above all a constant movement. Inside and outside.”<sup>174</sup>

Other authors in Romanska’s anthology take up van Kerkhoven’s sense of dramaturgy as a connective and energetic force in their examination of theatre practice in intercultural contexts. Tom Sellar argues that the dramaturg must become a globalist, championing new processes of creation while opening up spaces of international exchange.<sup>175</sup> Expanding on the image of the bridge, Walter Byongsok Chon sees the dramaturg as particularly well suited to the role of cultural liaison.<sup>176</sup> Debra Caplan, in her chapter on multilingual theatre, draws a connection between the work of the translator and the dramaturg:

Just as the theatre translator must simultaneously consider the play’s production and reception history alongside linguistic, historical, and cultural references in preparing the translation, so too must the dramaturg consider how best to convey (that is, translate) this network of allusions

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<sup>174</sup> Van Kerkhoven 165.

<sup>175</sup> Tom Sellar, “The Dramaturg as Globalist,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Magda Romanska, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 113-117.

<sup>176</sup> Walter Byongsok Chon, “Intercultural Dramaturgy: Dramaturg as Cultural Liaison,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Magda Romanska, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 136 – 140.

and semiotics into something that performers – and ultimately, spectators – can access.<sup>177</sup>

Caplan's assertion is particularly provocative when considered against current debates about the relationship between translation and adaptation. If, as Katja Krebs argues, translation and adaptation are two sides of the same coin,<sup>178</sup> how might we theorize their intersection with the intercultural work of the dramaturg? How might this intercultural work, in turn, attend to and engage the various entanglements and boundaries we encounter as a part of our globalized world? The dramaturg is a figure that, like the adapter, is alive to potential intercultural encounters and attentive to the structures of inequality that mark these important conversations. A method of adaptation guided by a dramaturgical sensibility, then, lives into the complexity of these global encounters, feels for their reverberations, and embraces the uncertainty and potential of their processes. In short, a dramaturgical sense of adaptation affirms relation, in all its complexity, as the core of our continuing labor: on stage and off.

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<sup>177</sup> Debra Caplan, "The Dramaturgical Bridge: Contextualizing Foreignness in Multilingual Theatre," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Magda Romanska, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 143.

<sup>178</sup> Krebs 43.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROCESS

#### Why *Agaat*?

I first encountered *Agaat* in a course on South African literature taught by Dr. Stephen Clingman in Fall semester 2013. I was immediately struck by the sheer size of the novel. Van Niekerk's nearly six hundred-page story is epic in its scope, starting in 1947 with the marriage of Milla Redelinghuys to Jak de Wet and ending with Milla's death in 1996. The novel's fifty-year timeline is significant in that it roughly mirrors the decades in which South Africa labored under the system of racial segregation known as apartheid. What I continue to find impressive about van Niekerk's achievement is the way she uses language and form to examine the particularities of this fraught history. By examining the lived reality of apartheid through the prism of several complex relationships, van Niekerk demonstrates how political events and social structures profoundly mark intimate relationships. *Agaat* never enters into the realm of outright allegory, nor is it entirely apolitical. Rather, van Niekerk is able to illuminate with great complexity the axiom that "the personal is political," by weaving a story of startling closeness that interrogates South African history in all its prismatic complexity.

I was also initially taken with the complexity of the novel's narrative, which shuttles between various temporal locations, tenses, points of view, and modes of address. Due to its dense and layered quality, *Agaat* presents a challenging though pleasurable reading experience. As I read the novel I began to comprehend its various narrative threads, teasing out who was speaking while also appreciating the ambiguity of voice and perspective that seemed to be an essential part of van Niekerk's project. And

yet, despite *Agaat*'s provocative intricacy and formal complexity, I found myself most moved by its moments of beautiful, everyday intimacy: Milla crawling into the younger Agaat's bed to seek solace from her abusive husband, Agaat whispering into Jakkie's ear before a roaring fire, adult Agaat pressing her weary forehead to Milla's withered feet in an odd moment of supplication and exhaustion. The beauty of the novel, for me, was in the way van Niekerk could contrast these hushed moments of connection with other spectacular instances of manipulation and abuse. As Jakkie observes about his experience growing up on Grootmoedersdrift: "...Took me years to fashion my own rhymes to bind the sweetness, the cruelty in a single memory."<sup>179</sup> That is the magic that van Niekerk works with *Agaat*, a story that "binds" generosity and selfishness, caring and abuse in a single, potent "memory."

It was the theme of memory—and the various ways it is formally expressed—that also intrigued me about *Agaat*. The novel is filled with lists of objects and instances of routine. Reading the novel one gets a distinct feeling for the material life on the farm at Grootmoedersdrift: The soil and the shearing, the butchering and the milking. The novel is replete with description of farm labor and catalogues of the various implements required to tend the land and the livestock. Van Niekerk creates a dense material world not only to communicate the realities of her setting but also to examine the workings of memory. For Milla, the novel's fractured—if constant—voice, particular objects trigger immediate recollections of countless past sensations. Thus, throughout this novel crammed with the concrete things of this world – buckets and pans and skulls and maps – there is a constant flow of that which cannot be materialized: Memories, senses, and experiences. Memory constantly punctuates the contemporary moments of the novel,

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<sup>179</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 3.



suggesting an image of the present as a place of encounter where the past and the future become entangled. It is from this entanglement that Milla and Agaat seek some sort of reconciliation, or at least an agreed upon version of what has happened. Unfortunately, this uniform interpersonal history is never articulated, and the novel's structure and themes suggest that such a unified view of the past is impossible.

The tension between the material and the ephemeral, between that which can be recorded and that which escapes the archive, reflects the underlying conflict at the heart of Milla and Agaat's relationship. Milla seeks throughout the novel to understand Agaat, to subsume her within what Nicole Devarenne calls her "white imagination."<sup>180</sup> She does this by obsessively recording her attempts to domesticate the young Agaat and by teaching the child all the lessons she herself learned from her domineering and pious mother. Agaat employs various methods to resist Milla's attempts at possession: Dancing, singing, whispering stories in Jakkie's ear, putting on a mask of servility, and repurposing the art of embroidery to tell her own version of the story of Grootmoedersdrift. Through the formal inventiveness of her novel, van Niekerk combines the epic and the quotidian while teasing out the ways our lives are shaped by both the material world and the space of memory.

In addition to the novel's dense and formally innovative layering of history, memory, and intimacy, a large part of my initial interest in the novel came from Michiel Heyns' masterful translation, which captures the intricate poetic energies of van Niekerk's original Afrikaans. The language of the translation possesses a rich and lyrical quality, moving quickly between differing registers: One moment the language is grotesque, the next elegiac; sometimes it is crude, other times impossibly delicate. It was

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<sup>180</sup> Devarenne 641

the vitality and rhythm of the language that drew me to *Agaat*, and in my reading I often found myself speaking passages out loud simply to hear the words in space. In his translation, Heyns deftly walks the line between domestication and foreignization,<sup>181</sup> inserting bits of English poetry in place of Afrikaans verse and keeping some Afrikaans important for evoking South African culture and context. All in all I found in Heyns' version of *Agaat* a fertile source filled with language and imagery I was excited to see and hear on stage.

In many ways, Heyns' English translation was informed by the same dramaturgical sensibility with which I approached my adaptation of *Agaat*. Heyns' process of translating *Agaat* was highly collaborative, and he worked closely with van Niekerk to fashion a version of the text that created similar effects in English as it did in Afrikaans. Heyns and van Niekerk would read sections of the translation out loud, engaging in the give-and-take of collaboration in order to arrive at a version the suited them both.<sup>182</sup> Heyns' work on *Agaat*, then, was undergirded by a sense of encounter and conversation. In his essay, "Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain: On Translating 'Agaat,'" Heyns develops this conception of translation as an encounter by quoting Umberto Eco: "[T]ranslation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures – or two encyclopedias."<sup>183</sup> This sense of translation as a cross-cultural negotiation entails a great deal of sacrifice and gain, and its ultimate product is always marked by the particulars of this tension. The marks of this crossing do not betray an insufficiency, but rather the reality of what happens when a text moves between

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<sup>181</sup> Venuti 20.

<sup>182</sup> De Kock "Intimate Enemies," 136.

<sup>183</sup> Heyns, "Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain," 127.

languages and cultures. In this sense, Heyns' superb translation of *Agaat* is the product of a sustained series of encounters, between himself and the text, himself and van Niekerk, and between the translated text and the target U.K., U.S., and English-speaking and reading South African audiences.

Finally, I was compelled by the fraught relationships at the center of the novel. As I read *Agaat* I was taken with the ways *Agaat* both tends to—and tortures—Milla while she is on her deathbed. The shifts in power that occur in these scenes set in 1996 were all the more fascinating to me when presented in relation to the ways Milla herself cared for and abused *Agaat* for nearly forty years. Originally, it was the complexity of this central relationship that fascinated me. However, now that I have had such an extended engagement with van Niekerk's novel through the process of my adaptation, I'm also increasingly interested in the relational triangles that surface and resurface throughout the story.

For me, then, Milla and *Agaat*'s story has all the makings of great theatre: A specific setting, richly detailed characters with urgent needs, a high stakes conflict, evocative language, a truly human scope, and compelling intellectual questions. Yet a novel of this size, complexity, and cultural specificity presents a host of challenges to the potential theatre adapter. My process was fueled by an understanding of these challenges not as limitations, but as opportunities for an extended encounter with van Niekerk's compelling and complex story.

### **Starting Impulses & Foundational Questions**

The beginning of my work on *Agaat* was fueled by several foundational questions that I returned to again and again throughout my process, questions I will continue to ask

as I develop this adaptation further. My primary concern in my early work on the adaptation was with structure and the ways in which my version of *Agaat* would variously mirror, augment, or altogether re-work the complex narrative structures of van Niekerk's novel. As I said above, I was initially drawn to *Agaat*'s intricate organization, and in my early drafting I paid close attention to van Niekerk's plotting in an attempt to create an adaptation that would produce the same effects as the novel's original structure but in a way that succeeded in what Hutcheon calls "the showing mode" of engagement.<sup>184</sup>

In order to complete this structural transposition, I needed to fully understand how *Agaat* functioned at the level of plot. To achieve this understanding I embarked upon a thorough and painstaking re-reading of the novel in which I defined the main action of each of *Agaat*'s twenty chapters. This labor allowed me to create an extensive outline of the novel, with detailed notes about the main events and shifts in circumstance. Later in my drafting process I used this outline to determine the essential events that I wanted to dramatize in my adaptation. Throughout this re-reading I highlighted dialogue and narrative I thought would work particularly well on stage, assigning each character a different color. This method allowed me to identify sections of dialogue that I could adapt, and more importantly, could stitch together from different parts of the novel. Indeed, sometimes the characters would discuss or fight over the same issue at three different places in the novel. This was notably the case with Milla and Jak's early disagreements about how to farm Grootmoedersdrift. In my re-reading I would make note of these recurring arguments, and then, during my drafting period, I stitched them together into a single scene. In later versions I then went back to these "Frankenstein's

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<sup>184</sup> Hutcheon 22.

monster” scenes and clarified their action while heightening the stakes. The method of highlighting dialogue also gave me a visual representation of who talks when in the story. There are some stretches of the novel that were entirely orange (Jak’s color), while others that had a profusion of green (Milla) and yellow (Agaat) in quick succession. Having a sense of where the weight of dialogue might fall at different points in the story helped me know where I needed to either invent dialogue or steal lines from other parts of the novel.

This prolonged engagement with the text itself was instrumental in allowing me to plot the course of my work later, as it allowed me to understand van Niekerk’s novel at several different levels and thus craft an interpretation of the story that would serve as the basis for my adaptation. First, I asked questions about structure: What is the story of *Agaat*? How does van Niekerk plot this story? What does she include? What does she leave out? What are the main questions that drive this plot forward? What are the emotional and intellectual effects of van Niekerk’s plotting? I set out to draft a piece that would focus on the relationship between Milla and Agaat. The main question I wanted the adaptation to ask was: How did these two get to where they are today (1996)? And: Will they ever reconcile? In order to explore these questions I knew that I would need to include at least two main actions: The story of Milla and Agaat from 1953-1985, and the final days of Milla’s life in 1996. How, precisely, to structure these two stories was the central question I asked as I began to draft. In order to find an answer I paid close attention to the four narrative “threads” that van Niekerk weaves together in *Agaat*, hoping to use their formal particularities as inspiration for the structure of my stage adaptation.

### **Thread One: The Narrative Present**

Set in 1996, the first narrative thread of the novel is told through Milla's first person point of view as she slowly wastes away from ALS. There is a great deal of uncertainty in these sections of the novel since they are filtered through Milla's dying consciousness, warped by disease and guilt. Milla is an unreliable narrator throughout van Niekerk's novel, and in these scenes in particular her attempts at understanding Aagaat's opaque motives can never be taken as truth, must always be filtered through the reality of her illness and of the long traumatic history she shares with Aagaat. In these sections of the novel, Aagaat and Milla communicate using an elaborate language of the eyes. We observe the origins of this language later in the novel, in a poignant scene where Milla teaches a younger Aagaat how to say 'thank you' with a nod and a blink. However, despite the fact that Milla and Aagaat have been using this system for close to forty years, it is nevertheless a slippery form of communication that relies on large interpretive leaps, assumptions laced with guilt, and a certain amount of disingenuous performance. In that sense, it adds instability to this narrative thread already reliant on the fragmented consciousness of a dying mind.

These scenes set in 1996 also serve as rehearsals for the possibility of Milla and Aagaat's reconciliation. Milla, as she is dying, is fueled by the desire to see the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, and in so doing to locate herself once more on the land that has been so important in the development of her identity. Milla also searches for a language with which to communicate with Aagaat, alternating between seeking forgiveness and defending her past actions. The slow pace and inaccuracy of the varying methods Milla employs is excruciating, and contributes to a palpable sense of confinement in these

sections of the novel. As is the case throughout van Niekerk's book, Agaat's motives in these sections are unclear. At times it appears that she is trying to punish Milla for past abuses, while at others she seems to offer a kind of understanding through bodily proximity – whether feeding, washing, or holding Milla. Milla's bedroom on Grootmoedersdrift becomes a court room where abuser and abused painstakingly remember their past in an attempt to come to an understanding of it. The language they ultimately find and the history they agree upon, however, is uneasy, ambiguous, and never fully voiced.

Agaat also uses her access to Milla's body as a tool for revenge, exerting control over her old mistress' most basic bodily functions in a manner similar to a farmer. Agaat tends to Milla's dying body as if it were land, and this connection between the female farmer's body and the soil she tilled is made directly in several parts of the novel. Early on Milla observes of Agaat: "She'll want to judge me in as many categories as she can think up, that's certain. Sphincter pressure, melting-point, share suction, sowing density, rust resistance..."<sup>185</sup> In this moment, what should be a list of human statistics—heart rate, blood pressure, weight, etc.—becomes an exhaustive list of evaluative criteria for plants and land. Just like a farmer, Agaat tests the land of Milla's body, categorizes it, and then applies specific methods to make it bear fruit. Milla, too, describes the interior and exterior of her body as a landscape: "My kneecaps form two bumps, the flesh has fallen from my thighs, between my hips there is a hollow."<sup>186</sup> Milla's exterior body is wasting away, becoming a fragmented collection of planes, "hollows," and "bumps." However, while her exterior is figured as mere surface, Milla sees her interior life as still verdant. "I

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<sup>185</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 17.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

feel around inside me. There's still vegetation, there's water, there's soil," she says early in the story.<sup>187</sup> While Milla's exterior resembles a barren plane, her interior life still contains the materials needed to grow something, and in these sections of the novel Milla tries to bring forth understanding, to plant reconciliation, to till the fraught soil of the past with Agaat so that something might grow. Though the possibility of something growing from Milla's interior is troubled by the reality of her illness: She cannot write, she cannot speak, and even her drooping eye-lids eventually render her language of blinks useless.

In considering how to adapt this first narrative thread, several questions presented themselves:

1. How to render Milla's voice in these scenes, and how to communicate its unreliability to an audience?
2. How to communicate the sense of confinement so beautifully rendered in the novel?
3. How to show Milla's desire to understand Agaat, to forge some sort of reconciliation before she dies?
4. In more practical terms, what's the best way to render Milla and Agaat's language of the eyes on stage?
5. Will there be one actor performing Milla throughout her life? If so, will she continue to climb in and out of the hospital bed? How would this communicate the ideas of confinement and decay that I hoped to emphasize?
6. How would having one actor performing Milla change the audience's perception of the spatial and temporal realities of the world of the play?

After my re-reading of the novel I determined four different ways to answer the above questions. The first impulse was to write all the scenes set in 1996 so that all the audience hears is Agaat speaking to Milla. In this scenario, the only way the actor playing Milla could express the character's inner thoughts is through her eyes, as in the novel. This was the most radical scenario as it rendered Milla entirely mute, removing her voice entirely. My second impulse was identical to the first, with one exception: Some sort of technical

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<sup>187</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 14.



enhancement (live-feed, voice over, etc.) that would serve to clarify Milla's interior monologue. This method would maintain Milla's silence while mediating the reality of her interiority.

Another option I toyed with was writing the 1996 scenes so that the actor playing Milla would perform all her lines, but the actor playing Agaat would only respond to her eye movements. This method would have given the audience much more information, but would have removed too much of the ambivalence and frustration that gives these scenes their interest. My final impulse was to split the character up into other versions of herself so that the actress playing Milla in 1996 would simply stay in the hospital bed and move her eyes while other versions of the character would speak her interior lines aloud. Agaat would still only respond to Milla's eyes, but the audience would have a better sense of Milla's interior desires. This was ultimately the method I chose, and as I drafted three versions of Milla emerged: Milla/Maiden (twenty to thirty-four years old), Milla/Mother (thirty-four to fifty-six years old), and Milla/Crone (seventy years old). I also suggested that a live-feed of Milla/Crone's eyes be projected somewhere on the stage, so that the audience would get a sense of the particularities of her language of blinks and glances. I chose this method because I felt that it literalized Milla's fragmentary consciousness in this scene, which strives but often fails to connect with Agaat. Having an actor restricted to a hospital bed for the whole play, silent and still, conveys the sense of confinement so palpable in these sections of the novel while also making Milla's dying (white) body visible. I decided that the only line Milla/Crone would speak aloud in the whole play would be "Agaat" – her last word before dying. This choice, I think, communicates the

way Agaat and Milla find themselves entangled until the very end. As Milla says of Agaat: "...a piece, you are a piece of me, how am I to quit you?"<sup>188</sup>

### **Thread Two: Second-Person Recollection**

For a large portion of *Agaat* van Niekerk utilizes a second person narrative mode in which Milla addresses herself by second-person personal pronouns. These sections of the novel cover nearly forty years of Milla's life, from her marriage to Jak de Wet in 1947 to his death and her son Jakkie's flight from South Africa in 1985. Through second-person narration van Niekerk is able to produce an effect that is both accusatory and reflective, as the narrative voice feels like an older Milla critiquing the actions of her younger self. Indeed, these second-person sections are propelled by incessant questions, a barrage of queries that betray Milla's obsession with achieving a whole and ordered sense of what exactly happened between her and Agaat.

I found these sections to be an initial obstacle since they cover most of the action I hoped to put on stage, but in a mode of address foreign to the realities of live performance. How, I wondered, could I tell the story of these sections through active and justified dialogue while still maintaining a palpable, though impressionistic, sense of contemplation and indictment? The decision I had made earlier to divide the character of Milla into three versions of herself provided a solution, as the different temporal incarnations of the character allowed me to have an older version of Milla literally address her younger self on stage. In this way, my adaptation could blur the past and the present while achieving the accusatory sense of van Niekerk's second-person narration. Additionally, this technique allowed me to play with the theme of voicing so present in *Agaat*, as versions of Milla variously question, scold, remember, and address their past

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<sup>188</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 162.

and future selves. Whether these selves can hear the messages from the future, can sense how their story will end, is left ambiguous, and the agency of Milla's fragmented voices becomes a matter of uncertainty. Finally, this choice also made manifest the larger theme of surveillance that runs throughout the novel. Convinced that Agaat is smarter than she lets on, Milla is constantly spying on her, attempting to understand her by observing her in private. Once again, how much Agaat is aware of the white madam's surveillance and snooping is unclear in the novel – an ambiguity I wanted to achieve in my adaptation as well.

In dramatizing these sections of the novel, then, I both transcoded van Niekerk's original narrative to work within the circumstances of the showing mode while also inserting the method of active address described above. At this stage I think an example from my adaptation will help explain this technique. Below is a section of second-person narration from the novel where Milla is giving birth to Jakkie. I quote from the novel at length to show the ways in which my work as an adapter can be seen as a process of distillation wherein I extract clear character objectives and emotion from van Niekerk's rich narration and Heyns' evocative language:

Is it very sore? you heard a whisper to one side of you, as soft as if somebody was twirling the tip of a feather in your inner ear.

You couldn't stop the tears.

Never mind, you heard, or thought you heard, deep in you, a sound stirred lightly in your navel.

There is nothing, the voice said, nothing to about cry.

There is nothing.

The sound of feathers being settled in place before nightfall.

Never mind.

The sound of a rivulet trickling from a slope after its rained high up the rock faces.

Nothing to about cry. Afaat's first grammar.  
You drew courage from that. You started the car  
and looked at Afaat. Her face was neutral, you must have  
imagined things.

It was almost twelve o'clock. Fortunately the road  
was drying out. You drove hard. The rock faces loomed up,  
closer all the time, rougher, greyer, swallowing you.  
Deeper and deeper, it felt you were sinking into the body of  
the mountain, deeper into the black shadows, with every  
corner that you took.

What does the river look like? You asked Afaat to  
divert her attention.

Full, she said.

What else?

Shiny.

Is it far down?

Far. And near.

She whispered. There was a white ring around her  
mouth.

Suddenly it was lukewarm between your legs.  
Inside you something dropped and heaved and pushed. It  
was your time. It wasn't going to take nine hours, Ma was  
wrong. I would be Afaat's baby, you knew, but you didn't  
say it out loud.<sup>189</sup>

I was first struck by the urgency of Milla's situation in this passage. She is in labor and driving frantically to the hospital. Soon it becomes obvious that she will have to deliver the baby before she reaches the other side of the pass. The only person present to help is Afaat – a terrified and inexperienced midwife. In this scene, Milla must boost Afaat's confidence by projecting an air of composure even though she is in great pain. She must prepare Afaat for what is to come. What is so remarkable about this scene is that Afaat, no doubt perplexed by what is happening to her *même* (mother) and terrified at the prospect of cutting her, nevertheless sees through Milla's screen and attempts to comfort her. These were the stakes and actions I hoped to communicate in my adaptation of the scenario. Below is my first attempt at the scene. In this early draft Milla/Crone

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<sup>189</sup> Van Niekerk, *Afaat*, 149-150.

speaks from her hospital bed. In subsequent drafts I cut all of Milla/Crone's lines since I believed her situation would be more clearly and powerfully communicated if the actress playing her were completely silent and immobile throughout the play.

**AGAAT:** Is it very sore?

**MILLA/CRONE:** You heard a whisper to one side of you, as soft as if somebody was twirling the tip of a feather in your inner ear.

**MILLA/MOTHER:** Never mind, you heard, or thought you heard, deep inside you, a sound that stirred lightly in your navel.

**AGAAT:** There is nothing. Nothing to about cry. There is nothing.

**MILLA/CRONE:** The sound of feathers being settled into place before nightfall.

**MILLA/MOTHER:** Never mind.

**AGAAT:** Nothing to cry about.

**MILLA/MOTHER:** Agaat's first grammar.

*(Milla/Maiden continues driving.)*

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** What does the river look like?

**AGAAT:** Full.

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** What else?

**AGAAT:** Shiny.

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** Is it far down?

**AGAAT:** Far. And near.

**MILLA/CRONE:** Suddenly it was lukewarm between your legs.

**MILLA/MOTHER:** Inside you something dropped and heaved and pushed.

**MILLA/CRONE:** It was your time.

**MILLA/MOTHER:** It would be Agaat's baby, you knew.

**MILLA /CRONE:** But you didn't say it out loud.

*(Agaat puts newspaper on the ground and Milla/Maiden lies down.)*

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** Sing! Sing me something!

**AGAAT:** Breathe. You said I had to tell you to breathe, breathe, and blow. Blow! Blow!

In the above version I weave Milla/Crone and Milla/Mother's narration together with Milla/Maiden and Agaat's dialogue in the present. In this way I hoped to transcode van Niekerk's second-person narration into the forward-driving movement of stage action. The two observing Millas give the audience access to Milla/Mother's interior thoughts while also communicating her physical and emotional status. In this section Milla/Mother is working hard to both calm Agaat down and to weather the pain of her latest contraction. These objectives can be seen clearly in her short, clipped dialogue with Agaat two-thirds through the above version. An edited version is below:

**CHILD AGAAT:** Is it very sore?

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** What does the river look like?

**CHILD AGAAT:** There is nothing to cry about.

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** What does the river look like?

**CHILD AGAAT:** Full.

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** What else?

**CHILD AGAAT:** Shiny.

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** Is it far down?

**CHILD AGAAT:** Far. And near.

**MILLA/MOTHER:** Suddenly it was lukewarm between your legs. Inside you something dropped and heaved and pushed. It would be Agaat's baby, you knew.

*(Milla/Maiden stops the car and Child Agaat puts the blanket down on the dirt. Milla lies down.)*

**MILLA/MAIDEN:** Sing! Sing me something!

**CHILD AGAAT:** Breathe. You said I had to tell you to breathe. Breathe and blow.

In the above version I removed Milla's language about Agaat's feather-like voice, and instead just started the section with Agaat's question "Is it very sore?" While this decision loses almost all of the poetry and ambiguity of van Niekerk's original, I felt that the most important part of this section was Milla/Mother's attempt to calm Agaat and herself by asking questions about the river rushing by below. The removal of all of Milla/Crone's lines and most of Milla/Mother's language helps to streamline the section, and the curt dialogue that opens it allows for a build in tension to Milla/Mother's important realization that "It would be Agaat's baby." In this small section, then, I worked to distill the stakes of van Niekerk's second-person narrative in a way that would work structurally on the stage. All but the most important narrative was excised to make way for what I hope is as taut section of dialogue that leads direct into the emotional high point of Jakkie's birth.

As the above example illustrates, in my adaptation of the second-person sections of *Agaat* I strove to find a balance between active dialogue that moves the plot forward

and more reflective narration that adds poetic dimension to the story unfolding on stage. In these scenes I made specific choices to have either Milla/Mother address Milla/Maiden or Milla/Maiden address Milla/Mother, each version of Milla commenting on the action occurring before them. As the draft submitted as part of this thesis shows,<sup>190</sup> I decided that Milla/Crone would not take part in the interrogation of her past self, as she is confined to both her body and the hospital bed. By attempting to balance action with narration, forward-moving dialogue with reflective or interrogatory speech, I hoped to create an adaptation that would both succeed on stage while providing audience members with an affective experience equivalent, not equal, to the experience of reading van Niekerk's complex novel.

### **Thread Three: Stream of (Sub)Consciousness**

The third narrative thread I identified in my preliminary reading and exploration of the novel is difficult to describe. This thread is made up of unpunctuated, stream of (sub)consciousness sections set off by italics. These sections chronicle the history of Milla's illness, their fragmented and amorphous form mirroring the increasing illogic of her confused thoughts. These sections help to develop certain themes throughout the novel, most notably the recurring image of the sacrificial lamb, directly connected to the two *hanslammers*—Agaat's and Jakkie's—that make significant appearances later in the novel.

I wondered how I could use these sections in my adaptation. At first I thought that they might be able to serve as “connective tissue,” choral odes recited by all members of the ensemble that would serve as transitions between scenes. However, as I began to formulate a list of the most important scenes from the novel, these sections never made

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<sup>190</sup> See appendix.



the cut. I ultimately decided that the section of the story covered by these sections (events on Grootmoedersdrift from 1985-1996) was not essential to telling Milla and Agaat's story. I knew that I could communicate very quickly to an audience that Milla was dying without having to include potentially confusing or obscure transition moments into an already complex play. Thus, I decided to excise the stream of (sub)consciousness sections altogether from my adaptation.

#### **Thread Four: Journal Entries**

The fourth and final narrative thread in *Agaat* is comprised of a series of entries from Milla's diary, spanning twenty-six years from 1953 to 1979. These journal entries cover Milla's adoption and training of Agaat, Milla's pregnancy, and her decision to make Agaat into a household servant in 1960. The journals also cover events on Grootmoedersdrift from 1960 on, and focus on the development of Milla and Agaat's relationship. The last entry, dated 9 July 1979, reads in part: "Now with Jakkie gone like that & doing his own thing I get the feeling that the diary-keeping doesn't really make much sense any more. Don't have that much to report on any more. Agaat is Agaat. I think I made the best of hr that I could."<sup>191</sup> For Milla, the journals are an essential part of the divine calling she felt to "make the best" of Agaat, to save her from the life of "darkness" and "barbarism" she would have lived. Agaat's "salvation" is certainly ambiguous in the novel. On one hand, Milla does rescue Agaat from a life that would certainly have been marked by hardship, poverty, and all manner of abuse. However, on Grootmoedersdrift Agaat is subjected to a more insidious form of mistreatment, one that seeks to mold her into a good Afrikaner girl and an even better coloured servant. There is tenderness in the moments of instruction that Milla records in her journals, but there are

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<sup>191</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 359.

instances of cruelty as well. Through Milla's discipline and surveillance as recorded in the journals Agaat becomes isolated and stoic, unable to explore and express an individual identity. And yet, Milla's journals do show how she and Agaat form a not-quite mother-daughter attachment, a bond violently ruined by Milla's decision to move Agaat to the outside room and make her the nanny of their soon-to-be-born child.

It is this move from the inside to the outside, from family to servant, from belonging to longing that forms the traumatic kernel of Milla and Agaat's relationship. It is this betrayal that the two of them work to comprehend in the last days of Milla's life, each seeking justification and reconciliation in different measure. The journals, then, serve as a vehicle for this reckoning. Milla herself sees the journals as "a record...of her [Agaat] being chosen and of the precious opportunities granted to her on the farm Grootmoedersdrift of a Christian education and of all the privileges of a good Afrikaner home."<sup>192</sup> The journals are Agaat's history, written by her mother and her oppressor. This characteristic of the journals takes on a certain piquancy when it is revealed that Agaat has taken to reading sections of them out loud to Milla on her deathbed. We discover that Agaat takes great joy in reading back to Milla her own chronicle of their relationship. But this is not simply a repetition of past trauma, as Agaat makes sure to use a red pen and correct Milla's idiosyncratic spelling and grammar. In so doing, Agaat subtly corrects their history, filling in the gaps of Milla's faulty and biased recollections in order to create her own edited version. Agaat is solely in charge of what history is retold within the chamber of "retribution"<sup>193</sup> that is Milla's bedroom on Grootmoedersdrift. She uses

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<sup>192</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 567.

<sup>193</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 34.

the journals as a way to accuse Milla of mistreatment, to articulate all the facts before the Ounooi dies.

The novel first introduces journal entries spanning from 1960 to 1979. Toward the end of the novel, Agaat (in 1996) discovers an earlier stack of journals that outline the events leading up to and immediately following her “rescue.” As Milla slowly slips toward death Agaat rehearses their interpersonal myth, their intimate and fraught origin story by reading these journals aloud. *Agaat*, then, begins with an ending (Milla wasting away) and ends with a beginning (the recounting, via the journals, of Milla’s “adoption” of Agaat). I find this to be a compelling structure, and van Niekerk deftly plots her novel around this question of origin. How, the reader asks, did Milla first come to “possess” Agaat? Where did their relationship begin? Milla herself asks this question on her deathbed, hoping that the establishment of a satisfying origin story may achieve the forgiveness and reconciliation she and Agaat variously seek. A backwards-moving structure like I am describing is difficult to achieve on stage, and in my adaptation I wrestled with how best to plot the events of the story in a way that would maintain the suspense of van Niekerk’s original structure while not confusing the audience unduly. I’ll talk more about the decisions I made in terms of plot in the sections below dealing with my first and second drafts.

Despite these structural questions, I knew from the beginning that the journal entries were to play an important part in my adaptation, as ways of moving the plot forward, developing Agaat and Milla’s relationship, and providing much-needed exposition. I found something very compelling about the image of the maid confronting the madam with her own record of their relationship, originally composed as a sort of

didactic history lesson and spiritual testimony. The relationship between maid and madam is a potent image in South African culture. During apartheid, many black and coloured women left their families in the homelands and townships to work as maids and nannies in white households. Laboring under precarious employment situations, these domestic workers nevertheless formed strong attachments to their white charges, often at the expense of their own children whom they had to leave in the care of relatives back home. Today, the image of the maid and the madam serves as an index of, to use Nuttall's suggestive concept again, apartheid's ruthless entanglements, which mixed the familiarity and intimacy of proximity with the racial contempt born of white supremacist logic. The ambivalent position of the maid, both interior and exterior to the domestic space of the white family, has notably been examined by Jacklyn Cock in her 1989 book *Maids and Madams: Domestic Workers Under Apartheid*,<sup>194</sup> and by actress Thembi Mtshali-Jones in her one-woman show *Woman in Waiting*.<sup>195</sup> In *Agaat*, van Niekerk examines the way power operates in the relationship between maid and madam, even as Milla and Agaat mess with and upend the expectations of these positions. By reading the journals aloud and correcting Milla's account, Agaat refashions the tool of her oppressor to turn the tables and acknowledge the gaps in the official history of Grootmoedersdrift. In my adaptation I wanted to foreground the power of this act (especially in terms of the maid/madam relationship), and examine how it interacts with the larger tensions around voicing present in the story.

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<sup>194</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams: Domestic Workers Under Apartheid* (London: Women's Press, Ltd. 1989).

<sup>195</sup> In *Woman in Waiting* (First performed at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown South Africa in 1999), Mtshali-Jones shares her experience as a domestic worker during apartheid through song and spoken-word, testifying to the ways her identity was marked by her work as a "maid." For more info visit <<http://www.yfarber.com>>.

Technically, the journal entries posed an interesting conundrum: Should I stage Aagaat reading the journals aloud in 1996, or should I dramatize their content within a chronological timeline? For the scenes where I adapted the journals entries I ended up opting for an approach wherein the adult version of Aagaat reads a few introductory sentences from an entry and then, as the lights shift, the audience is brought into a scene where events recorded in the journal play out in real time and present dialogue. In this way I could show how Aagaat uses the journals against Milla on her deathbed, while still moving the plot of the adaptation along in a relatively chronological way.

Thus, my choices as an adapter were influenced by an attention to the specific needs of what Hutcheon calls the “showing” mode of engagement. In my reading of the novel I identified the main narrative and textual strategies employed by van Niekerk and then searched for equivalent theatrical and dramaturgical techniques to achieve the same effects. For the journal entries, then, this meant using light to shift between times and spaces to literalize the layering of past and present so delicately rendered in *Aagaat*. I also utilized differing modes of enunciation (reading aloud, narration, dialogue, recorded speech) to achieve the sense of double voicing inherent in van Niekerk’s text. Finally, I relied on the embodied movement of the actors (written into my adaptation through stage directions) to portray the physical and material realities of Milla’s journals.

In transcoding van Niekerk’s text into embodied movement on the stage I was inspired by Mark Fleishman’s incisive observation that “the physical image is multi-valent, ambiguous and complex. It leads to a proliferation of meaning which demands an imaginative response from the spectator.”<sup>196</sup> Throughout my adaptation I attempted to use

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<sup>196</sup> Mark Fleishman, “Physical Images in the South African Theatre,” in *Theatre and Change in South Africa*, Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs, eds. (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996) 207.

the qualities of live performance—sight, sound, breath, body—to create moments that would incite such imaginative responses and evoke a whole spectrum of interpretive possibilities. In her writing, van Niekerk delights in a textual patterning, a layering of metaphor, and the development of evocative images that also require a similar imaginative investment on the part of her readers. Thus, through the use of specific physical images in my adaptation I hope to illicit a range of responses in the theatre spectator equivalent to the imaginative leaps van Niekerk encourages through her various narrative and textual methods.

An example from the adaptation might be useful in clarifying my last point.

Below is a section from one of Milla's journals that served as a provocative starting point:

*Half past two*

Now did you ever! A. is on the mountain in her new uniform! I was standing on the stoep just now first I thought I heard singing then I thought I saw something white stirring on the little foothill thought at first it was the guano bags I tied there to show where the wattles must be hacked out then it turned out it was A. all the time. Could make out clearly with J.'s binoculars. Can't see what she's getting up to there odd steps & gestures against the slope.  
[...]

That to-do on the hill I can't figure it out. Sideways & backwards knees bent foot-stamping jumping on one leg jump-jump-jump & point-point with one arm at the ground. Then the arms rigid next to the sides. Then she folded them & then she stretched them. Looked as if she was keeping one arm in the air with the other arm & waving. Thought at first oh I'm so late I suppose it's been carrying on for a long time the nocturnal meetings but I didn't see anybody coming no whistling or calling just the thrumming two three notes over & over.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 126.

This was one of the passages that initially struck me when I first read *Agaat*, and I knew from the beginning that I would adapt this scene. A potent distillation of one of the novel's central tensions, this scene shows Agaat dancing in her new, white uniform while Milla peers at her through binoculars. Here is the maid, speaking in a language of the body. Here is the madam attempting a translation through her binoculars. Agaat's dance is an expression of her interior self that we as readers are never allowed to understand, a physical image left purposefully obscure. For Milla, Agaat's dance is perplexing, and she attempts to understand and categorize it by describing it in her journals. Here is a central tension in Milla and Agaat's relationship: Milla's ravenous desire to fully understand, and thus possess Agaat, and Agaat's various attempts at refusing this total objectification. Since the basis of this tension is the inability of the written word or the perceptual intellect to fully comprehend the movements of the live body, I thought that this scene would be especially potent in an adaptation that moves from a text-based mode of meaning making to a performative one.

Below is my adaptation of the above section of Milla's journal:

*(Moonlight. Child Agaat dances to an unheard song. Her movements are solemn and calculated – a dance she has done many times before. Milla/Maiden enters and observes the dance.)*

**MILLA/MAIDEN**

*(Singing.)*

HANSIE SLIM, BERG WIL KLIM  
IN DIE WYE WÊRELD IN  
STOK EN HOED, PAS HOM GOED  
HY IS VOL VAN MOED.  
MAAR DIE MOEDER HART VOEL SEER  
HANS IS IN DIE HUIS NIE MEER  
HOOR NOU NET  
MOEDER SUG  
HARDLOOP GOU GOU TERUG

*(Milla/Maiden watches child Afaat dance. The sound of wings flapping.)*

In my adaptation Milla/Maiden sings *Hansie Slim*, a popular Afrikaans nursery song, as she watches Afaat dance. We see Milla observing Afaat, consuming her moving body with her eyes. Milla's singing also attempts to place Afaat's bodily expression within the context of Afrikaner domesticity and child rearing by "scoring" her movements with a familiar song. But the effect is jarring, since Afaat's particular movements in no way coincide with Milla's lullaby. Thus the physical image of this scene, in collaboration with its aural expression, communicates the tension at the heart of Milla and Afaat's relationship while avoiding closing down meaning or ambivalence.

### **Afaat's Silent Voice & Liminal Position**

Interpreting the novel in this way—through its four narrative threads—prompted me to ask the questions outlined and explored above. As I took a step back, and looked at *Afaat* as a whole, still other questions presented themselves. First among these was the question of Afaat as a character, and the specific complication her silence posed to my theatrical adaptation. Indeed, as I have previously stated, Afaat never speaks in her own voice throughout the novel – she is always "translated" through Milla's voice or consciousness. This fact indexes the larger conflict at the heart of their relationship between possession and expression, between consumption and true understanding. Afaat and Milla are entangled (to borrow Nuttall's useful term again), and the novel itself shows both the history of this entanglement and the ways in which the maid and the madam attempt to navigate their complicated relationship. As an adult, Afaat inhabits a completely liminal position on Grootmoedersdrift, an in-between status imposed upon



her by Milla. On one hand, she is not “black” enough to live or interact with the farm laborers, indoctrinated against mixing with those workers who are below her. And yet, Agaat is not “white” enough to be fully a member of the de Wet family. Milla’s initial act of “rescue” thus renders Agaat as a ghost within the hierarchical structures of labor that shape all dimensions of life on the farm. If Agaat has ever had a consensual sexual relationship or developed a friendship with anyone other than Jakkie, van Niekerk’s novel does not show it. Alone and repressed by Milla’s previous discipline, Agaat lives a life of staunch service, pure and stoic, a perfect “Afrikaner skivvy” in Jak’s typically insensitive parlance.<sup>198</sup>

Agaat is an opaque character, hemmed in by her situation and silenced by van Niekerk’s intentional narrative devices. She serves as a mirror, a surface onto which Milla, Jak, and Jakkie can project their anxieties and conflicts. How, then, to adapt this character to the stage where she will be performed by a living actor with a voice? I began to answer this question by viewing Agaat’s silences not as obstacles to be overcome or explained away by my adaptation, but rather as telling gaps that, if acknowledged in a theatrical way, could actually highlight the relational tensions so central to van Niekerk’s story. In short, by foregrounding Agaat’s opacity in my adaptation, and by showing how all the characters in the story silence her, I hope to confront audiences with the ambiguous position she daily inhabits. However, in the novel Agaat is not entirely without agency, and it is the various ways she resists Milla’s consuming and controlling methods that make her such a compelling and richly drawn character. I wanted also to highlight this aspect of Agaat’s character, suggesting to the audience that sometimes Agaat’s silence is a choice. Thus in my rendering of the character I tried to walk a similar

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<sup>198</sup> Van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 499-500.

line as van Niekerk, illuminating the situation that made Agaat the way she is while also hinting at the larger more complicated narrative she holds within herself.

In order to achieve this I inserted several wordless scenes into my adaptation – moments where Agaat does not use language, but rather speaks with her body. These moments are made up of “physical images” (to use Fleishman’s term), and their meaning is predicated on the imaginative leap of the audience. Open to interpretation and unable to be reduced to text, these moments serve to highlight the gap between how Milla, Jak, and Jakkie understand Agaat and how Agaat herself might conceive of her situation. One such moment is the solemn dance referred to above. Another moment occurs in 1996:

### SCENE THREE

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Sunrise casts orange and yellow and red over the soil of Gdrift. Eventually the light discovers Agaat, sleeping on a cot. She wakes up and sits on the edge of the cot, rubbing her eyes. She looks out, stands and stretches. She puts on her black uniform and apron, and her white embroidered cap. She looks at the audience. Is this the first time she’s acknowledged them? A small smile. It feels like she’s going to say something and then she turns on her heel, collapses the cot with a flourish, and exits.)*

It is my hope that, in rehearsal and performance, the actor playing Agaat would find a physical vocabulary for this moment – a sense of style that sets this moment apart. This scene is also an example of another tactic I used, wherein I played with Agaat’s relationship with the audience. At several points throughout the adaptation it appears as if Agaat is going to break the silence and testify to the audience. At each of these moments she chooses not to. The one exception is the last moment of the play. In this moment, as it stands in the draft submitted as part of this thesis, Agaat opens her mouth wide to speak and then the stage is engulfed in a bright white light. After hearing this moment read

aloud and thinking more about the stakes of Agaat's voice in the adaptation I would like to play with this ending moment so that it is Agaat who makes the decision to end the performance without telling the audience her full story. In this way, her agency stays intact and the ambiguity surrounding her motivations is maintained.

### **Milla & Jak**

In my preparations and initial drafting I also asked questions about the relationship between Milla and Jak. What is the central conflict of their relationship? What does Milla want from Jak? What does Jak want from Milla? It became apparent early on that the land of Grootmoedersdrift serves as a locus for tensions between the two. Milla seeks to tend the land in the traditional way, through tried and true methods she learned from her mother. Jak, on the other hand, want to use the latest technologies and fertilizers to increase the farm's yield, paying little attention to the long-term health of the soil. Milla is headstrong and sure of her position. Jak rapes and abuses Milla, threatened by her assurance and competence and confused about his place as the impotent *baas* of matriarchal Grootmoedersdrift. In writing this relationship I wondered how I could ethically represent Milla's rape in a way that communicated the particular traumatic break it engenders in her without validating or otherwise excusing Jak's actions. What, I asked, is the utility of showing rape as realistically as possible on stage? Can rape be represented in a symbolic way that provides distance for the spectator to understand both the violation of the act and its various reverberations? These questions caused me to wonder about the role of sexual violence in the novel and in my adaptation. I finally decided to represent the rape through the aural and visual possibilities of theatre. For both moments where Jak rapes Milla I suggest that the stage goes dark and that that a

live-feed of Milla’s eyes is projected. In the dark we can hear fumbling and Jak’s panting. The other versions of Milla “remember” the violation and narrate the rape. In this way I hoped to represent these moments of sexual violation in a way that communicated their horror while still providing distance for the audience.

### **First Draft**

In December 2014 I set about drafting the adaptation. I began by looking over the detailed outline of the novel I had created in the Fall. Knowing that adaptation is a “surgical art,”<sup>199</sup> and that I needed to cut quite a bit from this sprawling story, I made a list of the scenes that I wanted to adapt. At this stage I sought to follow the structure of the novel closely, which meant that the main thrust of the adaptation’s narrative would go from 1947-1985, placing the scenes set in the 1950s with Milla and the young Agaat toward the end. This timeline would be interrupted at intervals by scenes set in 1996. Before I began drafting I created a list of scenes:

1. **1996:** Milla asks for her hand splint so she can write the word ‘maps,’ Milla tries to voice an ‘m’ but Agaat does not understand.
2. **1947:** Jak and Milla marry. Jak and Milla argue about the best way to farm Gdrift. They cannot conceive a child.
3. **1996:** Agaat wakes up, and recognizes the audience for the first time.
4. **Journal Entry:** Milla prepares Agaat’s room.
5. **1960:** Milla discovers she is pregnant.
6. **1960:** Milla teaches Agaat how to slaughter a sheep. She shows Agaat her new room. Milla watches Agaat dance on the hill.
7. **1996:** Agaat tries to figure out what Milla wants.
8. **Journal Entry:** Milla teaches Agaat about embroidery.
9. **1960:** Milla gives birth to Jakkie with Agaat’s help.
10. **Journal Entry:** Milla punishes Agaat after the incident with the christening robe.
11. **1996:** Milla overhears Agaat making funeral preparations with Beatrice.
12. **1968:** Jakkie’s eighth birthday, Milla jealous of Agaat’s bond with Jakkie.
13. **Journal Entry:** Milla spies Agaat telling Jakkie a story she cannot hear.

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<sup>199</sup> H. Porter Abbot, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 108.

14. **1972:** Milla tries to rekindle her sexual relationship with Jak and it fails miserably.
15. **Journal Entry:** Gdrift when Jakkie is away at school.
16. **1976:** Jak suddenly returns from a hike to berate Milla. A fire starts on Gdrift.
17. **1996:** Speaking through the alphabet chart, Milla accuses Agaat of starting the fire and of stealing Jakkie from her. Agaat tells Milla that she discovered the first parcel of journals from 1953 on.
18. **Journal Entry:** Milla's first attempts at communicating with Agaat, and why she named her Agaat.
19. **1984:** Jakkie is awarded a medal for his participation in the South African Border War.
20. **1954:** Milla teaches Agaat how to make fire. Agaat speaks her name to Milla for the first time.
21. **1985:** Milla accuses Agaat of being a witch.
22. **Journal Entry:** Agaat asks Milla where she came from.
23. **1985:** Milla and Jak throw Jakkie a huge party. There is a fire. Jakkie escapes to Canada.
24. **Journal Entry:** Milla seeks comfort from Agaat in the wake of Jak's abuse.
25. **1985:** Jak dies suddenly in September.
26. **1953/1996:** Milla discovers Agaat. She takes Agaat to the dam to wash her off. Agaat runs and Milla tackles her. Milla takes her last breath.

This list is admittedly too long, and as I drafted I found myself cutting scenes that I found to be redundant and combining scenes that were too fragmentary to stand on their own. I used many of the strategies discussed above: Walking the line between active dialogue and narration, dividing Milla up into three characters, dramatizing the content of the journal entries, leaving out the stream of (sub)consciousness passages, exploring ways in which narrative could be replaced by “physical images.” In general, this version was very close to van Niekerk's novel: It followed the same structure and relied heavily on her words (as translated by Heyns) to form most of the dialogue. In this draft Milla was the only divided character, all others—Agaat, Jak, and Jakkie—were to be played by one performer. Additionally, this version ended with Milla's death, which was directly preceded by the scene in which she “saves” Agaat.

As I drafted, certain motifs and images began to emerge. I had not planned on emphasizing these, but as I wrote they presented themselves, and—following the impulse—I developed them throughout the piece. The first image to present itself was the Emperor butterfly. We first hear of the Emperor butterfly when Milla is teaching Agaat about heaven and hell. The Emperor, Milla tells her, comes to those who are good. Later, Milla spies on Agaat and Jakkie as they set a trap for the rare and beautiful insect. Thus the Emperor serves to illuminate the connections between Agaat, Milla, and Jakkie. The Emperor is an aspirational myth, a sublime secret passed down through the non-biological line. It is a promise that truth and goodness will eventually come to those who wait – a central axiom of Milla’s Calvinist theology. Throughout this first draft, and the version of the adaptation presented with this thesis,<sup>200</sup> I suggest the reoccurrence of the sounds of wings flapping, an oblique reference to the coming of the Emperor, to the eventual reconciliation over which Agaat and Milla battle at death’s threshold.

The continued appearance of the *hanslammers*, orphaned or rejected lambs reared by hand, became another handy way to compare Agaat’s and Jakkie’s educations. We first see Agaat forced to slaughter her *hanslam* on her birthday. Later, Jakkie is forced to dock his *hanslam*’s tail. Both of these moments serve as traumatic markers in Agaat’s and Jakkie’s lives – instances where they are forced by those in authority to kill or maim that which they love. There is a rich metaphorical dimension to the image of the *hanslammer*. Agaat, in many ways, is the *hanslammer*: She is an orphan, raised by Milla’s hand and then irrevocably damaged when she’s put in the outside room and turned into a domestic servant. Jakkie, too, can be seen as a *hanslammer*, raised not by his mother’s hand but by Agaat’s. The presence of the *hanslammer*, then, reflects the

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<sup>200</sup> See appendix.

various sacrifices made by characters in the story as they navigate their entangled relationships on Grootmoedersdrift.

I also attempted to weave fire and breath throughout the adaptation, two connected and provocative themes. Fire in this story provokes connection and expression. Milla uses fire to entice young Agaat out of the hearth in which she has been forgotten, and to elicit her first words. Fire serves as a way to hail the Other, to connect and find warmth, but it is also a destructive force. The relationship between Agaat and Milla is like fire in this way – each woman finds differing degrees of belonging and hurt in their forty year-long entanglement. It is breath, too, that kindles Agaat and Milla’s initial connection. Little Agaat and Milla repeat the guttural ‘g’ of her name before finally enunciating it – an excruciatingly intimate moment, made all the more tender by its comparison to Milla’s later mistreatment of Agaat. Thus, breath and fire were two ways for me to explore the way Agaat and Milla’s relationship is both life giving and destructive.

Language and dialogue became central questions I had to engage every time I sat down to write. As I’ve discussed, Heyns’ English translation of van Niekerk’s Afrikaans is evocative and poetic. This is what I fell in love with when I first read the novel. And while this heightened language works well for some parts of the adaptation, there were other parts where I had to alter the dialogue already in the novel or completely create my own. It was in these situations where my encounter with the text was staged again and again. At times I simply transcribed the words that were on the page, since Heyns and van Niekerk’s dialogue was specific and active enough to sound good in the mouths of actors. However, with the more literary passages, I had to transcode the novel’s language

to work within the confines and expectations of the “showing” mode of engagement. In these lines I often worked to maintain the syntax of the Afrikaans and to evoke the rhythm of spoken South African English. These decisions were not only aesthetic, but also contextual. I had to decide early on which Afrikaans words to keep in this English adaptation and which to translate or excise. The most important word I decided to keep was *Grootmoedersdrift*. I decided to leave the name of the farm in Afrikaans partly because of the lack of a suitable English translation and partly due to a desire to keep some foreignizing element in the adaptation.<sup>201</sup> There were other Afrikaans words – *Nooi*, *Ounooi*, *Hanslammer*, *Kloof*, etc.—that I decided to keep in order to create a linguistic texture that will hopefully make audiences outside of South Africa aware of their distance from the world of the play. I also chose to keep the various derogatory words and racial slurs employed by Jak, another attempt to stay true to the historical context of the story.

By the end of February 2015 I had created a preliminary and very rough draft of the adaptation. I decided to title the adaptation *Agaat*, in an attempt to both signal a direct relationship with van Niekerk’s novel and to foreground Agaat as the main character. Her position as protagonist, however, is fraught since in the novel and my adaptation it is Milla who drives the action. Thus, the title *Agaat* is purposefully misleading, and indexes not the protagonist herself but rather the protagonist’s main goal. Milla is driven throughout the story by her desire to possess Agaat, for in understanding Agaat, Milla hopes to begin to comprehend herself. The tragic reality of this novel is that the title character never gets to pursue her desire, never gets to tell her story, but rather has to navigate her entanglement with the non-titular protagonist.

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<sup>201</sup> Venuti 20.



I was generally pleased with the first draft I created by the beginning of March 2015. It followed the structure of van Niekerk's novel, utilized both her text and my own written dialogue, developed some provocative themes and motifs, foregrounded Agaat's silence, and established some dramaturgical conventions that I still think are compelling ways of encountering the novel's particular challenges. As I moved on to the next draft, however, I had a list of changes that would hopefully condense this over-long draft, streamline the action, and make the timeline clearer.

### **Second Draft**

My first order of business with the second draft was to reconceive of the journal entries. In the first draft I had written the journal entries so that they operated like split-scenes. On one side of the stage there was Agaat at Milla's hospital bed, reading the journals aloud. On the other side of the stage there were the characters acting the scene out. I ran into the problem, then, of sometimes needing Agaat to be in two places at once. That is, she would need to be both reading from the journal at the bedside *and* acting in the scene on the other side of the stage. I toyed with the idea of the characters addressing an imaginary younger Agaat, but ultimately decided to clean these scenes up. In order to do this I needed to split the character of Agaat up into a younger and older version of herself. This constituted one of the biggest changes between the first and second drafts. With two Agaats to play with, the journal entries changed. I was able to have adult Agaat read from the journals and child Agaat act out the scene on another part of the stage. This change required me to create more dialogue for these scenes, since the journal entries in the book are written in incomplete sentences with abbreviations and no sense of punctuation.

In this second draft I also decided to split the character of Jakkie up into his older and younger selves. This was done as a result of hearing Dr. Megan Lewis' son, Tristan Lewis-Schurter, read the part of Child Jakkie in one of many informal readings in Megan's office during Spring semester 2015. Having a child's voice read the lines immediately changed the stakes of the scenes he was in. With Tristan reading the role, Child Jakkie's interactions with Agaat not only sounded more accurate but also took on the intimate feeling of a mother/child conversation that I hoped to achieve with earlier scenes between Milla and Child Agaat. Thus, having child actors perform the younger versions of both Jakkie and Agaat helps to draw connections between their two experiences and the ways familial patterns of relation between mother and child are rehearsed throughout the story. This choice left Jak as the only character without a divided self, a fact that came up in discussions of the adaptation after its first public reading on April 10, 2015. I will discuss the audience reaction to that reading and the things I learned about the adaptation from that experience in a later section of this chapter.

In this second draft I not only divided the characters of Agaat and Jakkie but I greatly reduced the number of lines spoken by Milla/Crone. In my first draft Milla/Crone spoke from her hospital bed, a choice that, as I thought about it more, seemed bizarre. In order to communicate the sense of confinement so palpable in the novel I decided that we would only hear Milla/Crone's voice three times in the play. First in the prologue, then through a voice-over where she addresses Agaat as she speaks with Nooi Beatrice on the phone, and finally through her dying breath. In future versions of the play I would like to

experiment with cutting all of Milla/Crone's lines except for her final breath, where she says "Agaat," an index of how entangled her sense of identity has become.

Throughout the second draft I attempted to subtract excess language and streamline dialogue. This was a process of going line-by-line and determining what information had to be there. While this did produce a more compact draft, I think it ultimately removed some of the nuance from the lines and obliterated a lot of subtext. One of my goals for future drafts is to find places where subtext can be added back in, where characters can be cagey and not so direct in their communication with each other. I particularly shaved a lot of language off of Jak's two big monologues in the second half of the play, really trying to understand the motivations behind each outburst. While I think I come close to this in the draft submitted as part of this thesis,<sup>202</sup> I am looking forward to making these scenes even more direct in future versions, getting very specific with what, precisely, Jak is trying to accomplish through his long, violent, and verbally abusive pronouncements.

The most important change I made with the second draft, however, was to completely restructure the plot and tell the story in a more chronological way. A structure that closely followed the novel was not working. Weaving three distinct timelines together was needlessly confusing and messed up the continuity of the characters' stories. For example, my first draft had a succession of scenes where Milla alternated between being pregnant and not. This tapestry-like structure works for a novel, and I think it could work for a film adaptation, but it was ultimately unsuccessful for the "showing" mode of engagement that relies on the forward movement of action in real time before a gathered audience. As I articulate above, one of the things that first drew me to *Agaat* were the

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<sup>202</sup> See appendix.

ways in which the past collided with the present. I attempted to keep this sense by essentially weaving two timelines together in the second draft. The first timeline takes place entirely in 1996 in Milla's room on Grootmoedersdrift. This section moves forward in a chronological fashion and tells the story of how Milla attempts to find some form of reconciliation, or at least truce, with Agaat in the last days of her life. The second timeline spans from 1953-1985. This timeline tells the story of Milla as she marries Jak, adopts Agaat, gives birth to Jakkie, and navigates her jealousy and anger over the loss of her son to Agaat and the slow unraveling of her husband. This section is also told in a chronological way with one notable exception: The scene depicting Milla and Agaat's first meeting does not come where it should chronologically, but is rather located as the penultimate scene. Through this plot device I tried to create an effect equivalent to the one evoked by the novel's intricate narrative structure. That is, by placing this scene at the end of the play, I foreground the questions of origin so central to Milla throughout the story. Milla desires to reconcile with Agaat, to understand what she has meant in her life. In order to do this she frantically searches for the beginning, for the origin story that has been foundational to their interpersonal myth. The adaptation then asks: How did they start? Where did they begin? This question propels Milla through the scenes set in 1996 *and* the scenes set between 1953-1985. She seeks to know where she began with Agaat so she can gain some knowledge of herself.

The question then becomes: Will Agaat speak? Will she tell us her story? To answer that I wrote a short epilogue that returns to Jakkie as he is flying back to Toronto after burying his mother. He remembers the origin story Agaat used to tell him over and over again, a story Milla desperately wanted to hear. In the epilogue of the book we do

get to hear the story, albeit filtered through adult Jakkie's memory. But in my adaptation we do not hear the full story. Agaat, her feet firmly planted in the Grootmoedersdrift soil, looks at the audience, she begins to speak, and then the lights go down. We will never know the whole story. We will always be guessing, searching for the beginning, teasing out the entanglements of the past in the present. Agaat's silence about her experience speaks louder and with a greater force than Milla's nearly six hundred pages of narration. The two are a piece of each other. It was this reality—the fact of Agaat's voicelessness and Milla's need to fill the vacuum—that struck me the first time I read van Niekerk's novel, and it is that dynamic that I am eager to explore in future drafts.

### **Public Reading**

On April 10, 2015 I produced the first public reading of my adaptation at EastWorks, a converted mill in Easthampton, Massachusetts that now hosts business space, work/live lofts for local artists, restaurants, and a series of performance spaces. This was the first time I heard the adaptation out-loud, and my goal for the event was to gauge if the story made sense to an audience hearing it for the first time. After two drafts I was too close to the work to really understand what was missing and what was superfluous, so I needed to hear the piece in front of an audience that had no knowledge of the book. In addition, I was interested to see how this very South African story read to a U.S. audience with varying degrees of familiarity about the history covered in the adaptation. Thus, the questions I was asking going into this reading were broad. I wanted to know what images, ideas, or moments stuck with the audience, and I wanted to know what they were confused about in terms of the story. In order to present this draft in the best way possible, I strove to find actors for the reading who could make bold choices

and thus show me the ways my lines and characters could be interpreted by other artists. I was very pleased with the cast I assembled, which was made up of the following UMass and Pioneer Valley community members: Emma Ayers (Milla/Maiden), Tiahna Harris (Child Agaat), Alison Kerr (Milla/Crone), Tristan Lewis-Schurter (Child Jakkie), Trenda Loftin (Agaat), Cory Missildine (Jakkie de Wet), Julie Nelson (Milla/Mother), Michael Schurter (Jak de Wet), and Alex Salazar Greenstein reading stage directions.

Through their insightful questions in rehearsal these actors helped me to streamline action and clarify character objectives and obstacles. This, in fact, is an element of theatrical work that is important to foreground in a discussion of how a dramaturgical sensibility might shape a method of literary adaptation for the stage. In previous chapters I have written of adaptation as an encounter, as a conversation between two texts that produces a completely novel product that nevertheless bears traces of its process of creation. In short, adaptation is both the process and product of encounter. There are many dimensions to this encounter when a text is moved from the “telling” mode of engagement to the “showing.” There is the encounter between text and adapter, between text and director, and between text and actor. In each of these encounters a certain degree of interpretation takes place, and through that personalized response an adaptation is produced. As Hutcheon writes: “Adapters [playwrights, directors, actors, dramaturgs] are first interpreters then creators.”<sup>203</sup> In the rehearsals leading up to the reading the actors asked me important questions about form and content as they brought their own distinct sensibilities to bear on the work. They asked penetrating questions about character, pointed out when things were confusing, and made beautiful and unexpected connections between character and themes within the adaptation itself. This

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<sup>203</sup> Hutcheon 18.

conversation enriched my adaptation, which up until that point had been a fairly solitary endeavor. The rehearsals for the reading made me hungry for the opportunity to work with actors on this play over a prolonged time. This collaborative approach to adaptation is exciting and, I argue, unique to a process guided by a dramaturgical sensibility that seeks out moments of connection and privileges subjective proximity to the work.

The reading itself went very well. The venue at EastWorks was inviting and felt full with the twenty-five or so people who showed up. We had wine and food and started fifteen minutes late because everyone in attendance was chatting and having a good time. This feeling of friendliness and engagement continued throughout the evening and a fair number of the audience stayed afterwards to participate in a short post-show discussion. In thinking about the various layers of encounter that produce adaptation, it is important not to discount the physical and material realities of reception. Location matters, and the space in which a performance occurs, combined with the way the event is framed, influences the registers of meaning it can communicate. Jane Barnette emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the context of reception in her explication of the three interlocking steps of “adaptation dramaturgy”: “[T]he development of the script, contextual research, and audience outreach.”<sup>204</sup> Barnette sees dramaturgical thinking as uniquely suited to both providing context for audiences and asking important questions about the moment of exchange between stage and audience. In producing the reading I followed Barnette’s lead, and focused on creating a welcoming environment that emphasized the communal and conversational experience of encountering the first reading of a fresh play.

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<sup>204</sup> Jane Barnette, “Literary Adaptation for the Stage: A Primer for Adaptation Dramaturgs,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, Magda Romanska, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015) 295.

The post-show discussion was particularly helpful in giving me a sense of what is working with the current version of my adaptation and what is still confusing or missing altogether. To begin the discussion I asked the gathered crowd what images stood out to them, what moments they were still thinking about. I hoped this question would give me a sense of what parts of the adaptation capture attention and evoke emotion. I receive a broad range of responses that gave me the sense that many of the central themes I sought to express had been clear. One audience member said that the Emperor butterfly struck her as a clear motif while another traced the color red through the play as a symbol of sacrifice – an unintentional theme that I'd like to explore in a more deliberate way. Some audience members commented on the silences in the text, and said they were intrigued by the moments when characters experienced a loss of language. I was glad to hear these comments as they confirmed for me that issues of voice and silence are at the heart of this story and are generally well woven into the current draft. Several audience members said that they were struck with various images from Milla and Agaat's relationship:

Milla/Maiden handing Agaat her uniform, the birth scene, the torture and tutelage of the 1996 scenes, Milla/Maiden tackling Child Agaat to the ground. That so many spectators remembered these moments confirmed that, as it stands in the version submitted as part of this thesis,<sup>205</sup> the relationship between Milla and Agaat is generally clear and compelling. One audience member said that she remembered the moment when Jak calls Milla out for being a leech. This particular audience member wondered if Milla was really this way, or if Jak was overreacting.

This comment about Jak served to transition the conversation toward my second question: What are you still confused about? Several audience members brought up good

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<sup>205</sup> See appendix.



questions about the character of Jak. Why, one person asked, is Jak the only one who is not split up into different versions of himself? Going off this question another person commented that Jak seemed to dominate much of the play, and wondered if he was such a large presence in the book. These are good questions, and ones that point to a definite place for improvement in future drafts. What is Jak's role in the play? What is his arc? His abuse is unrelenting and he tends to dominate any scene he is a part of. If his death offers any sort of pay-off it is simply the justified end of a terrible man. Jak is very abrasive in the novel – he is a rapist and a chauvinist. But I think that my adaptation as it stands has put too much emphasis on Jak's broad traits. He is also a man suffering from the inflexible ideals of masculinity put upon him by Afrikaner nationalism. He is a failed farmer and a failed father. In future drafts I want to explore what Jakkie's attachment to Agaat means for Jak and how he attempts to win the boy back and then, ultimately, mourns his figurative loss, which prefigures the child's actual escape from the country.

One audience member asked what my ideal audience for this adaptation is. I found this question to be particularly provocative. In the days since the reading I have been thinking quite a bit about it, and have come to realize that the answer I give will greatly influence both future drafts of this adaptation in particular and, more generally, has the possibility to shape and develop my understanding of adaptation as a dramaturgical, and multidirectional encounter between texts, people, and cultures. As both process and product adaptations have the potential to serve as potent sites of intercultural encounter where new ways of being and of understanding the world can be explored. Audience is an essential component of this work, as the spectator serves as both co-creator *and* consumer of the encounter. It is my hope that my adaptation will serve as

a place of exchange between South African and U.S. cultures, where audiences from both nations can explore how their histories diverge and converge. In order to achieve such an intercultural ideal, my adaptation must possess enough cultural specificity to remain a uniquely South African story while also exploring the human truth at the heart of the story's key relationships and conflicts. Right now I think my adaptation, in its adherence to many of the formal and linguistic methods of van Niekerk's novel, is geared more toward a South African audience and would be especially successful if performed by South African artists. However, it is my goal to produce an adaptation that will play equally well in the U.S. and in South Africa. In future drafts I will work hard to explore this fine line.

### **Future Work**

I left the reading with a clear idea of what is working well in the current version of the adaptation and what requires more work. After some reflection and discussion I think that the more chronological structure—with the flash-forwards to 1996 and the singular flashback to 1953—makes the most sense in that it is easy to follow while still being centered around the provocative and driving question of origin. Based on audience reaction, I think that many of the themes and motifs I sought to develop throughout the play—the fire, breath, the Emperor butterfly, the sound of wings flapping, the *hanslammers*—are reading well, serving as evocative, non-textual elements that contribute to the overall emotional tenor of the piece. In terms of core character relationships I think that this draft does a good job of clearly showing Milla and Agaat's forty-year relationship. The scenes between Milla/Maiden and Child Agaat are particularly compelling, as are the later scenes between Agaat and Child Jakkie. Adult

Jakkie, while a small character, is also well developed, and I think his monologue about leaving the air force works to communicate his dissatisfaction both with the insular community of the Overberg and the paranoid, and racist National Party.

In future edits of the adaptation much of my focus will be on action and character – two basic, dramaturgical components that are too vaguely defined in my current draft. This realization came after some reflection on the reading and after a fruitful conversation with Dr. Harley Erdman a week later. While the structure of the adaptation works, and achieves a sense of closure by the final scene, the events of the story are still not propelled forward by a compelling action or question. What drives each of the characters throughout the play? What is in their way and what do they do to achieve their goals? These are the foundational questions I will be asking as I return to the adaptation. By asking these dramaturgical questions about action and character I hope to determine what I absolutely *need* to tell this story. Which events *must* occur for us to get from the beginning to the end? What is the central conflict that pushes these events forward? When I have answered those questions—when I know what I need—then I can begin to determine what I can cut. These are questions that I have asked at every step of my process, and as I continue to encounter this story again and again in different working contexts I hope to find ever-more specific answers.

While I think the adaptation's conclusion is effective, I do think that some attention to the play's various framing devices is warranted. As Harley pointed out in our meeting, I am currently utilizing four framing devices, and their cumulative effect is to muddy the first several scenes of the play. After hearing the latest version I am questioning the utility of the prologue and the epilogue, and agree with Harley that I need

to simplify the play's framing devices. All that is needed in one potent image to begin the play and start the action. What this image is I don't yet know, though I am leaning toward writing a wordless scene that indexes the penultimate scene where Milla tackles Agaat. This framing device would foreground the questions of origin that I think should serve as a backbone for the piece in the future.

As a result of my meeting with Harley and my own reflections on the reading, I also want to take another look at the central relationships of the adaptation. As I see it, throughout the story the characters form a series of shifting triangles. First there is Milla, Jak, and the baby they are supposed to have but don't. Prompted by this imbalance, Milla decides to "adopt" Agaat. The resulting triangle between Agaat, Milla, and Jak is unstable and anxious, and Agaat is soon replaced by Jakkie. The triangle between Milla, Jak, and Jakkie does not last long, however, as Agaat variously replaces Milla and Jak as she bonds with Jakkie. The rest of the action through Jak's death and Jakkie's escape deals with the shifting power dynamics of this final triangle. Within this triangular structure, then, the scenes set in 1996 become uncomfortable, as they portray a dyadic relationship between Agaat and Milla, their third point absent. In future drafts I want to pay attention to what each of the characters wants from the others when they find themselves in these recurring triangulations. I need to be relentlessly clear about the competing desires at work in this play, because a strong sense of conflict will help me to determine what I need and what I can cut.

After the reading I found myself having conversations with several people about the character of Agaat. Some found her opacity to be an intriguing conundrum while others wondered why she had to stay so silent in a play that bore her name. This division

of opinion indexes the fundamental tension at the heart of the character, which I have discussed at length elsewhere in this thesis. Those who found Aagaat's opacity problematic brought up the good point that the adaptation serves to re-inscribe the violence it seeks to critique by rendering Aagaat voiceless. I was very cognizant of this possibility as I drafted, and while I believe that the ambiguity of Aagaat's enunciation works for most of the adaptation I do agree that the final moment strips Aagaat of her voice. The final stage directions read as follows: "*Aagaat opens her mouth wide, as if to speak. A white light. Bright. Overwhelming. Then: Blackout. Silence.*" After some reflection I see how this stage direction, and the action it suggests, actually works against what I am trying to illuminate about Aagaat. Rather than deciding to tell us her story at the end of this play, Aagaat is silenced by a bright white light. In future drafts I would like Aagaat to open her mouth and then decide to keep the story to herself. This action continues a trend established elsewhere in the adaptation and ends the play on a note of ambiguity. Milla has died, the farm has gone to Aagaat, but will we ever hear her side of the story?

Beyond this final moment I will continue to explore ways that Aagaat can express herself beyond and outside spoken text. As it stands now, there are sections of the adaptation where Aagaat moves without words: She wakes up on Grootmoedersdrift, she dances on a faraway hill, she washes Milla/Crone. There is room in this draft for more of this type of movement, which can both supplement and replace spoken language. While I do not want to reduce Aagaat's expression to movement only, which would risk re-inscribing tired tropes of the unintelligible moving African body, I do think that allowing

the character Agaat additional registers not available to the white characters might go a long way in exploring the ambiguity and ambivalence at the heart of her character.

Finally, as I continue to edit the adaptation I will be focusing on my decision to divide the characters into different versions of themselves. On one hand, I think this dramaturgical strategy works in that it finds a theatrical equivalent for the fractured nature of identity in van Niekerk's novel. However, as I learned from the April 10 reading, dividing up all the characters but Jak gives him a certain power and authority that produces an imbalance in the play. Additionally, as Harley pointed out, the conceit of dividing characters between performers feels, in this version of the adaptation, as a solution to a problem posed by the novel and not a fully fleshed out and dramatically necessary element. As I develop the piece I will pay close attention to how these divided characters operate and how they either clarify the play's central conflict or just muddy its overall effect. Maybe I will revert back to my first draft where only Milla was divided. I'm increasingly interested in how the adaptation might feel if there were one performer playing Jak, Jakkie, and Agaat and two performers playing Milla – one confined to the hospital bed and one who acts the role itself. This decision would rely on the versatility of the performer to portray changes in age through their bodies and voices – a distinctly theatrical effect.

My ultimate goal for this adaptation is to have it performed in South Africa with Afrikaans-speaking performers and collaborators. In this context I would be open to working closely with a director or co-adapter to import Afrikaans back into the adaptation to create a bi-lingual piece. This, of course, would take the play in a very different direction, but it is not an avenue I am completely writing off at this point. As I

will be in Cape Town from September 2015-May 2016 it is my hope to share a future draft of the adaptation with van Niekerk, and to get her feedback and impressions. I would also like to share the adaptation with theatre-makers there that might be interested in collaborating on this piece. My goal is to produce a Cape Town reading of the adaptation some time in 2016 at the Theatre Arts Admin Collective, a Cape Town arts advocacy organization and producing house. I will invite local writers, directors, and actors to this reading in the hopes of generating enough interest for a production. Eventually, I would love to see the play produced at a university or theatre in Cape Town, perhaps at Stellenbosch University where van Niekerk teaches and Heyns has been a professor. Once I am more established as a theatre maker and educator, I would like to pursue an international production of the adaptation, with a combined South African and American creative team and cast. It is my hope that this adaptation becomes the catalyst for continued international collaboration and encounter throughout my career as a dramaturg, adapter, educator, and scholar.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As I worked on this thesis I explored the metaphor of encounter as a way of encapsulating the possibilities and tensions inherent in both adaptation and dramaturgy. The Oxford English Dictionary offers this definition of encounter: “[A] meeting face to face; a meeting (of adversaries or opposing forces) in conflict; *hence*, a battle, a skirmish, duel, etc.”<sup>206</sup> For me, the process of adaptation is a “meeting face to face” between texts, people, and cultures. As in the definition above, this often takes the form of a conflict between opposing forces. From the “skirmish” of adaptation a new product is created that both stands on its own and bears the mark of the battle from which it emerged. Far from being a negative component of adaptation, conflict is essential to the creation of vibrant and compelling adaptations. I want to move toward an understanding of adaptation as encounter shot through with productive tension, with the give and take of opposing forces, and with a sense of conflict among a network of relations. While encounter is combative by definition, it also suggests a broader sense of charged communion, where meaning is exchanged between two positions. I see adaptation as the process and the product of this electric conversation.

The “face-to-face” encounter of adaptation, however, is also often marked by an inequality of position, and certain dynamics of power and control. As I have argued, appropriation, in both its oppressive and liberatory registers, is a part of adaptation. Julie Sanders acknowledges a political dimension to appropriation, suggesting that it is a practice that speaks back to power through the radical re-writing of a source text. Post-colonial theory, however, has shown that appropriation can also be used to silence

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<sup>206</sup> “Encounter.” Def. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 27 Mar. 2015. <oed.com>.



subaltern voices and commit acts of epistemological violence in the name of imperial progress. Thus, the encounter of adaptation as I define it is inflected with varying degrees of appropriation and always marked by the power differentials of its various contexts. Given this, a dramaturgically informed process of adaptation must pay attention to difference even as it seeks a level of intercultural understanding. The adapter inhabits the intersection between cultures, audiences, and texts. The process of the adaptation renders them entangled, to once again employ Sarah Nuttall's term. In adapting *Agaat* it was my job to interpret van Niekerk's work in a way that was aware of context, open to multiple meanings, and conscious of my own sociocultural and political positions.

Throughout my thesis I have asked the question: How might adaptation and dramaturgy encounter one another? Perhaps the most substantial point of connection is their similar definition as both process and product. One can *produce* dramaturgy or an adaptation, and one can *perform* dramaturgy or adaptation. Both are modes of doing as much as they are singular and concrete artifacts. Adaptation and dramaturgy confound usual critical methodologies by demanding an analysis of process and intent. As process and product, adaptation and dramaturgy remind us, as Lindiwe Dovey writes, of the "contingency" of art<sup>207</sup>. That is, all art is the product of a series of extended encounters, and to reach a holistic understanding we must take this process into consideration. This, in turn, destabilizes traditional privileging of "originality." If we begin to understand adaptation and dramaturgy as both process and product, then we may begin to see how art and culture are the result not of a hierarchical order but rather of a complex series of conversations. This is certainly not a new idea, and owes a debt to the theory of intertextuality developed by Kristeva, Barthes, and others in the 1960s and 70s. What I

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<sup>207</sup> Dovey 163.

hoped to do in this thesis was to take current ideas about adaptation and explore how they might interact with contemporary discussions of dramaturgy, through the adaptation of Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*. Marianne van Kerkhoven, the late doyenne of European post-dramatic theatre, writes that, for her, dramaturgy is "constant movement. Inside and outside."<sup>208</sup> I would extend van Kerkhoven's observation to adaptation. As process and product adaptation stages the active building of bridges between people, texts, and cultures.

My encounter with *Agaat* was marked by a great deal of uncertainty. Each time I sat down to adapt the same question came into my head: How to do it? My process, then, was exploratory and propelled by questions. At times, when I did not know how to proceed, I simply chose a course, understanding that I could always alter the decision later on down the road. My encounter with the text was one of subjective feeling and impulse. Throughout this thesis I have tried to explain and justify my choices, but to a certain degree my process of creation denies this analysis since it relied so heavily on a sense of experimentation and improvisation. My work on *Agaat* walked the line between a questioning mode of creation and an analytical mode of reflection. This, I think, is a core tension both in adaptation for the stage and in the work of the dramaturg: To pair theory and practice, to examine process and product, to feel for the emergence of meaning and articulate its various implications.

The goal of adaptation for the stage, then, might be described as two-fold: 1.) To interpret the source material with a sense of responsibility *and* exploration, and 2.) To craft a work that stands alone and expresses the adapter's subjective interpretations through the strengths of their chosen mode of engagement. This is what I worked to

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<sup>208</sup> Van Kerkhoven 164.

accomplish in my adaptation of *Agaat*, and I will continue to pursue these goals in my future work. The processes and products of adaptation, informed by a dramaturgical sensibility, have the ability to both open up and illuminate spaces of encounter in our increasingly digitized and globalized world. Adaptation and dramaturgy as interpretive and generative tools upend our assumptions about novelty and originality, encourage us to be alive to meaning in all its forms, and offer the unparalleled opportunity to explore what it means to meet “face to face” again and again.

**APPENDIX**

***AGAAT* ADAPTATION DRAFT TWO (MARCH 2015)**

*Agaat*

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An adaptation by Paul Adolphsen  
From the novel by Marlene van Niekerk  
English Translation by Michiel Heyns

Paul Adolphsen  
29 Summer St.  
Amherst, MA 01002

[padolphsen@earthlink.net](mailto:padolphsen@earthlink.net)  
206-919-5430

## CHARACTERS

**Agaat:** 12 to 48 years old

**Child Agaat:** 6 to 12 years old

**Milla/Maiden:** 20 to 34 years old

**Milla/Mother:** 34 to 56 years old

**Milla/Crone:** 70 years old

**Jak:** 20 to 56 years old

**Child Jakkie:** 4 to 9 years old

**Jakkie:** 16 to 36 years old

## SETTING

In and around the farmhouse on Grootmoedersdrift, in the Overberg region of the South-Western Cape. The playing space is vast and open. The ground is covered in dirt. Simple furniture— tables, chairs, benches—can be brought on as needed to form the car, airplane, dining room, living room, etc. The only furniture that stays on stage for the entire play is Milla/Crone's hospital bed and Agaat's nursing equipment – gleaming white in contrast the dirt of the stage floor.

There are several moveable, rectangular scrims that can be used to create different spaces. At times they appear fantastically embroidered, white on white, shimmering and shifting. In scenes set in 1996 Milla/Crone's eyes are projected on the scrims via a live-feed. Sometimes the scrims show the sun rising, other times they show the landscape rushing by outside a moving car. Above all, the transitions between scenes should be fluid, shaped by light.

## PROLOGUE

*(Darkness. A lit match suddenly illuminates two figures: Milla/Maiden and Child Agaat crouched on the ground. The match extinguishes. Milla/Maiden lights another and passes it to an eager Agaat, who holds it seriously in her hand. The two look at each other and blink their eyes slowly. The match goes out again. The sound of wings flapping in the darkness.*

*Projection: Toronto → Cape Town.*

*Lights up on Agaat. She cups her hands to her mouth as if to shout. Lights down on her, up suddenly on Jakkie.)*

JAKKIE

Gaat. *(Beat.)* Have been having the same dream, over and over recently. Gaat calling me, us calling each other. The calling with our hands cupped in front of our mouths. She in the yard down below in her white apron, visible to me where I'm hiding. *(Beat.)* Sleepless in Toronto. Night music. Till I drift off again...

*(Lights and music shift. Jakkie is at a bar with two of his colleagues. We don't see them, we just hear Jakkie's responses to their questions.)*

JAKKIE

It's called *Grootmoedersdrift* *(Beat.)* *Groot-moeders-drift* *(Beat.)* It's difficult to translate...Granny's Ford? *(Beat.)* A drift's where the soil gives way. *(Beat.)* Its named after my great-great-granny Spies—on my mother's side – pretty tough woman. Farmer. *(Beat.)* In the Cape Province. In the south-west. *(Beat.)* Here, I'll draw it.

*(He does. Lights up on Milla/Maiden at a writing desk. She is flanked by two other versions of herself: Milla/Crone and Milla/Maiden. Something in their appearance links all three figures. The way they wear their hair? The color of their dress?)*

JAKKIE

Drew a map, lifted out a little block from the map of Southern Africa, from the lower end, from the south-western Cape Province, enlarged it freehand.

MILLA/MOTHER

On the dirt road between Skeiding and Suurbraak.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Parallel to the motorway of the Garden Route.

MILLA/CRONE

Between Swellendam and Heidelberg.

MILLA/MOTHER

There.

JAKKIE

There.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Between Frambooskop to the east and The Glen to the west.

MILLA/MOTHER

There.

JAKKIE

There.

MILLA/CRONE

From the middlest, inbetweenest place. Ambivalently birthed.

MILLA/MOTHER

There.

JAKKIE

There.

*(Lights down on the Millas. Jakkie's colleagues:  
"But what's it like there, Jak?")*

JAKKIE

What is there to say? It's beautiful. *(Beat.)* The eternal question when I arrived. What's it like, there where you grew up? Your country? A very heaven, the time of my childhood. How could I tell that to anybody in this city? Took me years to fashion my own rhymes to bind the sweetness, the cruelty in a single memory. And then:

*(Lights up suddenly on Agaat, hands cupped to her mouth.)*

AGAAT

MÊME DYING STOP CONFIRM ARRIVAL STOP LOVE AGAAT

## SCENE ONE

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Milla's bedroom on Grootmoedersdrift. A large hospital bed dominates the space. Around it are a three-tiered hospital trolley with a washbasin and nursing equipment and a silver over-bed table on which rests a stack of blue journals and a small black box. The scrim is alive with the clear blue of a November morning.*

*At this advanced stage of her illness Milla/Crone can no longer speak. She and Agaat communicate through an elaborate language of the eyes, which the audience can see projected via a live-feed on the scrim. In these scenes Milla/Crone's interior thoughts are voiced by Milla/Maiden and Milla/Mother. Agaat takes her cues only from Milla/Crone's eyes.*

*Milla/Crone moves from Milla/Mother's writing desk and gets into the hospital bed – a slow, deliberate dance. This is where she will remain for the rest of the play.*

*Agaat enters, singing. She goes to the bed and bends down to make eye contact with Milla/Crone.)*

AGAAT

Good morning, Ounooi. And how are we today?

*(She cranks up the bed and adjusts Milla/Crone.)*

AGAAT

Wake and shake, make and take.

*(She wipes Milla/Crone's mouth with a wet sponge.)*

AGAAT

There we go. Any movement down below last night?

*(She replaces Milla/Crone's diaper. Agaat catches her eyes, which have been frantically gesturing to a box on the over-bed table. We see this on the scrim.)*



AGAAT

Ai, Ounooi, what's the matter? What? You want me to read to you? It's not reading-aloud time yet. We haven't even had breakfast.

MILLA/MAIDEN

The box.

AGAAT

Whatever it is you want must wait. Later.

MILLA/MOTHER

Do as I say.

AGAAT

Do you want to read your covenant once more? Just can't get enough of it, can you? Perhaps it'll give you an appetite.

MILLA/MAIDEN

No, that's not it!

AGAAT

No? What do you want to read then, Ounooi? (*Paging through a magazine.*) Four ways of getting your husband on your side and keeping him there?

MILLA/MOTHER

I don't want to read.

AGAAT

What else? New developments in the practice of crop and pasture rotation: The southwestern districts after 1994? You know all about that. What about: The future of small-grain cultivation in South Africa? That's just up your alley, Ounooi: the future.

MILLA/MAIDEN

No, no, no – don't come with your silly games now!

AGAAT

Now where are all the *Fair Ladies*? They *were* here. (*She rummages around the room for the magazines.*) Ounooi, you're making me late now. Wait. Here's one. "Fine Foods for Fine Occasions."

MILLA/MOTHER

Not the magazines! The box!

AGAAT

(*Following Milla's eyes and realizing what she wants.*)

No.

MILLA/MOTHER  
YES.

MILLA/MAIDEN  
YES.

AGAAT

*(Putting the hand-splint from the black box on Milla/Crone.)*

Ai, Ounooi, this old thing? What more could you have to write? It's all in your journals. We'll get to those later, the two of us. Won't we? *(Beat.)* There. All set.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Pen please. And paper.

MILLA/MOTHER

I can't write on air.

AGAAT

Now where did I put that paper? It's been so long since you wrote on your own, Ounooi. Can't even find a proper pen.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Now you're acting stupid.

*(Agaat makes a big to-do out of finding a clipboard and paper. In the hubbub she knocks over the journals.)*

AGAAT

Mustn't get our reading out of order here.

*(She finds a clipboard and searches for a pen.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Provoking me on purpose!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Where's your dear red pen, Agaat? The one you use to correct my journals like a schoolteacher? As if I had to pass a test!

*(Agaat finds a pen. She tests it on her hand.)*

AGAAT

It writes.

*(Agaat places the pen in the splint and positions Milla/Crone's hand above the paper.)*

AGAAT

*(A real plea.)*

Ounooi, you're making life so difficult for yourself. How on earth do you think...

MILLA/MAIDEN

Be quiet and leave me in peace. Move your hand.

*(Agaat exits.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Now I must begin. Now I must write. Now I must make it worthwhile. What I unleashed.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I feel around inside myself. There's still vegetation, there's water, there's soil.

MILLA/MOTHER

Where does something like this begin? Your destiny? With the diagnosis? Three ugly letters.

MILLA/MAIDEN

A.

MILLA/MOTHER

L.

MILLA/MAIDEN

S. Or with Agaat's emptying of the room? With the three-paneled mirror at the foot of my bed, so that I can keep myself company when she's not here? With her record of my illness on the wall? She judges me in as many categories as she can think up: Sphincter pressure

MILLA/MOTHER

Melting-points

MILLA/MAIDEN

Share suction

MILLA/MOTHER

Sowing density

MILLA/MAIDEN

Rust resistance

MILLA/MOTHER

Siphon level

Tailwind MILLA/MAIDEN

Drainage slope MILLA/MOTHER

Crimp index MILLA/MAIDEN

Inverse proportion MILLA/MOTHER

Core rot MILLA/MAIDEN

MILLA/MOTHER  
O rose thou are sick. Where to start? An autobiography: the life and times of Milla de Wet, her place of origin, on Grootmoedersdrift, her hereditary home.

*(Milla/Mother and Milla/Maiden gather their will. Milla/Crone makes a guttural sound: “ggggggg”)*

I feel for the beginning. MILLA/MAIDEN

MILLA/MAIDEN  
Write!

MILLA/MOTHER  
Write!

*(The guttural sound crescendos. The splint falls to the floor with a crash. Agaat enters with breakfast and looks at the paper on the writing stand.)*

AGAAT  
Ai, ai! What monkey business is this now? *(Reading the paper. Milla was only able to write what looks like an ‘L.’)* L. L is for lie. *(She adjusts the bed so that Milla/Crone is sitting more upright.)* Lie lady lie. Lie lady lie. Are you more comfortable now, Ounooi?

MILLA/MAIDEN  
I’m lying more comfortably now, thank you. But you’re missing the point.

MILLA/MOTHER  
Use your intelligence! Say all the letters of the alphabet containing a down-stroke: p, h, f, m, n, l, t, i, j, k.

*(Agaat looks at Milla/Crone uncomprehendingly.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Take it away.

*(She does.)*

AGAAT

All right then, Ounooi. You've had your fun today. Time, now, for breakfast.

*(Agaat prepares to feed her. This is a difficult process. And dangerous: Milla/Crone might choke.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

I want to see the maps of my farm.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Of my region and place.

*(Agaat feeds her a spoonful.)*

AGAAT

That's it. Concentrate, Ounooi. There's another one coming.

*(She prepares the next spoonful of food.)*

MILLA/CRONE

*(Urgently.)*

M-m-m-m-m-m-m...

AGAAT

Are you choking Ounooi? Wait, wait, I'll help you. Calmly now. Just a small breath now and then. Swallow and breathe out.

*(Milla/Crone opens her eyes suddenly and stares at Agaat.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

I'm more than a rabbit in a cage! I want to see the maps of my farm!

AGAAT

What now? Is there something in your mouth that bothers you? Let me have a look.

*(Agaat opens Milla/Crone's mouth and peers in.)*

AGAAT

If you want a nice surprise, open your mouth and shut your eyes.

M-m-m-m-m-m-m.

MILLA/CRONE

*(She opens and shuts her mouth making an 'm-m-m' sound. Agaat mimics the sound.)*

AGAAT

*(Gently.)*

Don't go exciting yourself unnecessarily, now. Let's go through our list. Then we see what it is that you want.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I have a life beyond your lists!

AGAAT

What, Ounooi, do you want? Why those frantic eyes? Shall I draw the curtain a bit?

MILLA/MOTHER

*(Blink.)*

No.

AGAAT

Do you want to listen to the morning service?

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Blink.)*

No.

AGAAT

A tape?

MILLA/MOTHER

*(Blink.)*

No.

AGAAT

The pan for number one?

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Blink.)*

No.

AGAAT

The pan for number two?

(Blink.)  
No.

Too cold?

(Blink.)  
No.

Too hot?

(Blink.)  
No.

Sit up straighter?

(Blink.)  
No.

Lie down flatter?

(Blink.)  
No.

Eat a bit more porridge?

(Blink.)  
No.

Tea with honey and lemon?

*(Milla/Crone opens her eyes very wide.)*

No! No! And again no! I WANT TO SEE THE MAPS!

MILLA/MOTHER

AGAAT

MILLA/MAIDEN

AGAAT

MILLA/MOTHER

AGAAT

MILLA/MAIDEN

AGAAT

MILLA/MOTHER

AGAAT

MILLA/MAIDEN

AGAAT

MILLA/MOTHER

AGAAT

Must I set up the reading stand and page for you? Must I read to you? Genesis? Job? A psalm of David? Revelations?

*(Milla/Crone closes her eyes again.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

The Bible according to Agaat.

*(Milla/Crone opens her eyes once more.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Go away, you're irritating me!

AGAAT

Or something from your own pen? That always interests you doesn't it? *(She grabs a blue journal.)* The good old days: "Agaat and the garden of Grootmoedersdrift 1980." But this one is empty. It says 'paradise' at the top and then it's just a list of plants. Pity it's not the whole story. Just a skeleton. But the garden was quite pleasant, wasn't it?

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Desperately.)*

I want to see my ground. I want to see my land, even if only in outline.

AGAAT

Perhaps you feel like a video?

*(Milla/Crone begins to cry.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

How many syllables can you speak without saying an 'm'?

AGAAT

Stop blubbering. You'll choke.

MILLA/MOTHER

Get the hell out of my room!

AGAAT

Aitsa! How now?

*(She leaves the room and reenters with a bell.)*

AGAAT

Here. You remember this, don't you? "You ring your little bell and I'll ring mine." Remember?



*(Light shift. Milla/Mother and Child Agaat face each other at the foot of the bed. Milla/Mother rings the bell and then gestures for Child Agaat to do the same. She does. Then Milla/Mother rings her bell again. Child Agaat follows. Soon they are far apart, ringing their bells, laughing. It is a game from the past. A game they both remember.)*

## SCENE TWO

### 2.1

*(Projection: 1946.*

*Milla/Mother illuminated at Milla/Crone's bedside. Both women watch Milla/Maiden and Jak in the car. Maybe the passing landscape is projected over their bodies?)*

MILLA/MOTHER

The first time you slept with Jak was the day after he came to declare his intentions to your parents. He was eager to get away from under your mother's eyes, eager to get his hands on you. You knew it. And you played him.

JAK

*(Yelling out the car window.)*

Thanks for everything! *(Sotto voce.)* Old Sweet'n Sour.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak, please, she's my mother. Show some respect.

JAK

Respect's a two-way street. "I want to see your papers, young man."

MILLA/MAIDEN

She's just protective of me. And of the farm. It's...

JAK

...Been in the family for generations. After tonight I know all about it. "There's a great deal to be done. And it'll take hard work and a lot of focus and a clear head!" And I'm certainly not fit for the job because I'm no farm boy. *(Beat.)* What am I then, Milla? Huh?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I don't know.

JAK

Just a city boy. With soft hands.

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's not a bad idea for you to look into classes at Elsenburg. Learn a little about what makes a farm a farm.

JAK

Jesus Christ! How hard can it possibly be?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I wish you wouldn't swear like that.

JAK

I'm an educated man, Milla.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I know. *(Beat.)* We'll manage, the two of us. We'll farm it together. *(Beat.)* I love my ring. "Diamonds are forever." You're such a hopeless romantic, Jak de Wet.

JAK

I know *she* thought it was too expensive. Too showy.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Enough about ma, now! I'm trying to thank you. It's a beautiful ring. I love how it looks, in the moonlight outside. *(Flirtatious.)* But you're not scared of becoming my farm boy, are you Jak?

JAK

*Your* farm boy?

MILLA/MAIDEN

My farmer. With a capital F...

JAK

Ha! Well, I've got my own schemes for you.

MILLA/MAIDEN

What schemes?

JAK

Wild ones. You'll know when the time is ripe.

MILLA/MAIDEN

When the time is ripe. *(Beat.)* You want to tame me. If I understand rightly.

JAK

First you. Then the land. *(Beat.)* But come, tell me again everything we're going to farm with, you and I.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Well, Ma kept a couple of hundred merinos and a few Jersey cows on Grootmoedersdrift. She's worried about the farm being neglected, ever since Pa inherited his land and

they've been farming on Goedbegin. She and Pa would go nearly every week to make sure everything was running smoothly on Grootmoedersdrift. They'd take me along when I was little. Pa and I had the best times then. Arias and long walks in the veld. *(Beat.)* They're getting old and they can't manage like they used to. We're getting married at the right time. We can make Grdrift what it can be: a textbook example of mixed farming.

*(She slides her hand up his thigh. The car accelerates. Maybe the landscape rapidly flashes over their faces?)*

JAK

You're driving me mad.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Slow down!

JAK

Ah, but you're egging me on!

*(She moves her hand away.)*

MILLA

Keep your eyes on the road, de Wet.

*(She puts her hand on his crotch.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

That's what you said. But you thought: I'm the one who directs everything. The roughly ranked rock faces, the dark waterway far below, the curves in the road, the clouds far above.

JAK

So what're these problems your mother was going on about? On the farm?

MILLA/MAIDEN

There are wild tulips down by the river and if the cows eat them, and drink water afterward, it's like you fed them arsenic. They just die.

JAK

Must be something else.

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's too wet down there next to the river.

JAK

Better wet than dry, I always say.

MILLA/MAIDEN

The cows get sores and fungi and things on their hooves from the damp. The horses get mud-fever.

JAK

So, what can one do, my handy farm-wench?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Drain. Drain extensively. In any case...

JAK

Still doesn't sound like a disaster to me.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Well, then there are the slopes on the drylands. It's too steep to plow there. It washes away. We need contours there and terraces. And...

JAK

Too steep to plow.

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's a surveyor's job. It'll take months.

JAK

God, I can't hold out any longer!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak! Careful!

*(Jak pulls the car over and kisses Milla/Maiden hungrily, fondling her. The moonlight streams down on them.)*

JAK

What other problems?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Lynxes in the kloofs.

JAK

More.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Bearded vultures. They peck the eyes of the newborn lambs.

JAK

I will do everything to make it right. Plough and sow and shear and milk. I promise.

*(Milla/Maiden pulls away.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

And help me make a garden?

JAK

And help you make a garden.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Like paradise?

JAK

Like Paradise.

MILLA/MAIDEN

And never leave me?

JAK

And never leave you.

*(She kisses him. Lights down on the car.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Ownership and history and heritage. All finding their course with the brute energy of a good start. That was the day you crossed the Tradouw pass for the first time with Jak de Wet. The great Tradouw. “The way of the women” in the Hottentot language.

## 2.2

*(Lights up on Milla/Maiden in a wedding dress.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Mrs. Milla de Wet. The properly made-up wife. The squared-off, the-folded back, the freshly covered wife. A wife with inner springs and a solid headboard, a wife with copper mounting.

*(Jak emerges from the shadows in a tuxedo. He grasps her hand.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

I do.

I do. JAK

*(He rips her dress. Blackout. Live feed on Milla/Maiden's eyes. Sounds of panting and fumbling.)*

Wait. Wait a bit Jaklop. Slowly at first. MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Sound of Jak climaxing in the dark. Live feed out. Lights up on them.)*

So much blood on the sheets. MILLA/MAIDEN

JAK  
It's natural. You're a boer woman, aren't you? Now you're well broken-in. Don't be so namby-pamby. What did your mother say? An Afrikaner woman makes her way in silence and forbearance.

*(She grabs his hand, and leads him to another part of the stage. They both squint at the horizon.)*

I went to OuKarel today... MILLA/MAIDEN

Who? JAK

MILLA/MAIDEN  
The foreman. Listen, hey? Told him the sharing is over. That we're going to farm professionally. Tried to explain the idea of the soil blanket to him but he stood there gaping at me. *(Beat.)* What?

JAK  
This had better be something big. Dragging me out here. Just clods of dirt.

MILLA/MAIDEN  
It's the beginning and the end of everything.

JAK  
There it is. Mrs. Milla de Wet the poet. The beginning and the end.

MILLA/MAIDEN  
You have to help me think here, Jak. I can't tackle this thing without you.

JAK

It's late.

*(Milla/Maiden kisses him. He draws away.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

There're more where that came from.

*(She bends down and grasps a handful of the soil, letting it run through her fingers.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

This is one type of dryland you find here: shallow soil on shale. Tends toward acidic. Poor in phosphorous.

JAK

And?

MILLA/MAIDEN

And so: lime supplements and superphosphate. And a salt lick for the animals.

JAK

Sounds like you don't need me. Got it all figured out.

MILLA/MAIDEN

This is *our* land and we tend it together. You haven't touched any of the magazines I bought.

JAK

Cows udders give me the creeps.

*(Milla/Maiden gets close to Jak so their bodies are touching. During the next speech he positions himself behind her. They rock to the cadence of her speech.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

You get yellowish and reddish shallow soil along the hills. Sometimes it stretches down a bit deeper. Down below the slopes in the untilled veld it's different: medium-depth red and yellow solids that drain well. But up here where you can plough it erodes easily, here we have to make good contours and run-offs.

JAK

So here it's dry and down there it's wet.



MILLA/MAIDEN

Just so, Jakop. Along the river the water table is high in winter and there the soil puddles and becomes waterlogged. There we have to dig drain troughs.

JAK

Now tell me Mrs. Soil Expert, what do you call the resource down below?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Estcourt, Westleigh, Oakleaf, Longlands, Dundee, Avalon.

JAK

So how are we going to get rich on poor soil? Tell me that.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Slowly. Very slowly and gradually.

JAK

*(Undoing his belt.)*

No no. I'm a hasty hound. I need you right now, on the open land.

*(Lights Shift. Live feed on Milla/Maiden's eyes.  
Sounds of panting, fumbling.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN (V.O.)

Invade me. What are you without my surfaces to break? My surfaces are merely my surfaces. Underneath I am unfathomable and you are a splinter in the void.

*(Lights up on Milla/Mother.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Is that how it began? Or further back still? When did you—did we—begin?

### SCENE THREE

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Sunrise casts orange and yellow and red over the soil of Gdrift. Eventually the light discovers Afaat, sleeping on a cot. She wakes up and sits on the edge of the cot, rubbing her eyes. She looks out, stands and stretches. She puts on her black uniform and apron, and her white embroidered cap. She looks at the audience. Is this the first time she's acknowledged them? A small smile. It feels like she's going to say something and then she turns on her heel, collapses the cot with a flourish, and exits.)*

## SCENE FOUR

### 4.1

*(Projection: 1953.*

*Agaat sits by Milla/Crone's hospital bed. She reads from one of Milla's blue journals:)*

AGAAT

“December 16, 1953. The great cleanup has begun. Cut off Asgat's hair and washed with tar medicine and then with shampoo and applied ointment. Bad ringworm. Fiddled out the gouts of earwax and cut the nails. Gums inflamed, lots of rotten teeth. Disinfected the mouth. The whole body first rubbed with oils and then soaked in a hot bath for half an hour. Privates extremely tender and inflamed. God know what happened to the creature. Discarded, Forgotten. Eyes keep falling shut. ‘Look at me, Asgat,’ I say. ‘Everything will turn out all right.’”

*(Lights shift: down on adult Agaat and Milla/Crone and up on Milla/Maiden and Jak. Child Agaat sits a ways off, fist in mouth.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

The poor thing's been abused. She won't engage. But she must learn to talk.

JAK

For once I agree with your ma: this whole thing's ridiculous. You peer at her through that mail-slot like some bloody Communist spy.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I must see what she does when she's alone. She's much cleverer than she lets on.

JAK

I wouldn't be so sure. Generations of in-breeding. Who knows what kind of *kak* goes on in those huts.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I should take her to the doctor. Have her tested. Maybe she's deaf.

JAK

What a whopper of a Christmas present you've got! *(Sings.)* UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN, UNTO US A WOOLLY'S GIVEN.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Ai, Jak, bethink yourself. What if she can hear you?

JAK

So what if she can? Maybe she'll join in.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Singing might work, actually. And, God, I've got to find her a proper name. *(Beat.)* I know you don't support it all. But I will make it worthwhile. You'll see.

JAK

Just see to it that you know your story, Milla. The one you fobbed off on me didn't work so well.

*(He exits. Milla/Maiden approaches Child Agaat. She sits facing the child. Milla/Maiden looks over Child Agaat's shoulder, signaling with her eyes that there's something there. Child Agaat asks "what?" with her eyes. Milla/Maiden signals: "turn around and look." She signals again: "what is it?" Milla/Maiden pretends to be scared of the thing. Then she pretends that it's very beautiful, then ugly, then scary. Child Agaat turns around. Once she discovers there's nothing there she turns back to Milla/Maiden, who is avoiding eye contact. Then Milla/Maiden shuts her eyes, opens them, shuts them, to indicate that Child Agaat should do the same. Child Agaat closes her eyes and Milla/Maiden places a sweet behind her. When Child Agaat opens her eyes Milla/Maiden signals that there's something delicious behind her. Child Agaat looks back at the sweet and eats it quickly.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Let's play another game, now. You and I.

*(Milla/Maiden stares at a flower nearby. Child Agaat catches her gaze and follows it to the flower. She points at the flower.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Flower!

*(This continues with 'stone,' 'water,' 'dirt.' At the mention of each thing Child Agaat goes to gingerly touch it.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

You must learn to speak now. You can't live by looking alone. And if you won't talk, you're going to get Japie the feather duster on the backside. Do you understand?

*(Child Agaat hugs her impulsively. Tight. Before running away. Lights shift back to Milla/Crone's bedside. Agaat continues to read from the journal.)*

AGAAT

"Have found a name: Agaat. Dominee van der Lught suggested it. Dutch for Agatha. It's from the Greek 'agathos' which means 'good.' And if your name is good it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Agaat. It's also a semi-precious stone. You only see the value of it if it's correctly polished."

*(Agaat closes the journal and grasps Milla/Crone's hand. Blackout.)*

#### 4.2

*(Darkness. Sparks. A small fire ignites on a piece of corrugated iron. Lights up. Milla/Maiden and Child Agaat are hunched around a burning pinecone. Child Agaat is fascinated. Milla/Maiden offers her the tinderbox.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Do you want it?

*(Child Agaat grabs the tinderbox.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Agaat. Look at me. Agaat. One doesn't play with fire. Only when I'm around are you allowed to strike the flintstone or light a match. *(Beat.)* Now, when you're given a present you must say 'thank you.' If you can't say it with your mouth, then you say it with your eyes. Slow blink with the eyes once, and a small bow of the head means 'thank you.' Thank you for jelly. Thank you for food and clothes and a house. Thank you for the tinderbox.

*(They thank each other.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Whispering.)*

I'm so hungry. I'm so thirsty. Because you don't want to talk to me. And I know you can talk, because I hear you, through the hole in the door. How you talk to yourself in bed. I

see your lips moving and I wonder what you're saying. *(Beat.)* Can you say your new name for me?

*(She puts her ear close to Child Agaat's mouth.)*

CHILD AGAAT

g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g

MILLA/MAIDEN

g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g

*(The g-g-g-g's crescendo. Then:)*

MILLA/MAIDEN  
AGAAT  
Agaat.

CHILD  
Agaat.

*(They breathe together. The pinecone burns.)*

### 4.3

*(Lights shift. Jak enters. Milla/Maiden runs to him, breathless.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak! You won't believe it!

JAK

Won't I?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I finally got her to talk on the outbreath.

JAK

Congratulations. Wooly's first words.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I showed her the bellows, how they push air in and out just like lungs. We made a great fire...

JAK

I know. Scared me half to death when I saw it from my room...

MILLA/MAIDEN

And we danced around the fire, squeezing the bellows. And she screamed her name. Sent chills down my spine, Jak. It feels so good to see the fruit of one's labors.

JAK

*(Wryly.)*

That's beautiful, Milla. But the only thing I see is the worst case of megalomania and control freakery south of the Sahara.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I'm not controlling her.

JAK

No?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I'm instructing her. You didn't see where she came from. She's much better off here with us.

JAK

I told you from the beginning I don't want anything...

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Interrupting.)*

If you were only to give her a little attention, and to take the time to get to know her you'd see that she's an extremely...interesting...little person.

JAK

What will you do with her when she's big?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I don't know. I haven't thought that far. Been too busy cleaning her up and teaching her.

JAK

Well she can't stay in the house with us forever.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I know that.

JAK

She's not our child. We don't have a child.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I know that.

JAK

You must make Agaat move in with Dawid and the others. The child will grow up messed-up, she's got no playmates.

MILLA/MAIDEN

As if you cared one scrap about that. *(Beat.)* Everything has a purpose, Jak. She's been given to me to learn something about myself. To learn what really matters in this life.

JAK

There's an easier way to find that out Milla. *(Beat.)* Accustom her to her own people. The sooner the better.

#### 4.4

*(Jak Exits. Child Agaat enters and sits with Milla/Maiden on the floor. There is an open photo album between them.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Now that you're nice and grown up and know your Bible stories and say your prayers you must be branded on the forehead as a child of the Lord.

CHILD AGAAT

Must I sit in a chair with my mouth wide open?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Heavens no! That's the dentist who made you do that. The Dominee will christen you.

CHILD AGAAT

Does the Dominee wear a coat like the doctor?

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Showing her an album.)*

No. Here, look at my own christening photos. See how little your Mème was? You'll wear a white dress like this.

*(She points to a photo in the album.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Old fashioned. But from my Ma's family.

CHILD AGAAT

Why a dress like that?



MILLA/MAIDEN

Christening-dress, confirmation dress, wedding dress, shroud. The four dresses in a woman's life in Christ.

CHILD AGAAT

What did M<sup>ê</sup>me's wedding dress look like?

MILLA/MAIDEN

It was white. Made of damask from my mother's trousseau. It had long voile sleeves. And a collar. Those I added.

CHILD AGAAT

Must I sit with my legs open before the font? Like at the doctor's?

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's not your legs you'll need to open, but your heart. The Dominee will heal your soul the way the doctor healed your body.

CHILD AGAAT

Why must my soul be healed? Is it sick?

MILLA/MAIDEN

All our souls are sick. With sin.

CHILD AGAAT

What's that? (*Trying out the word.*) Sin.

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's when you do something naughty. Something that makes God sad. We must admit these things and ask forgiveness if we are to get to heaven with the angels.

CHILD AGAAT

Are there going to be cold shiny things that they push into me?

MILLA/MAIDEN

No. There's only the service. And you must just answer yes to all the questions, so that the name you've been given can be written in the Great Book of Life.

CHILD AGAAT

Otherwise what?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Otherwise, Agaat Lourier will blow around without any purpose. A floating seed in the wind that will never fall to the ground and bear good fruit.

CHILD AGAAT

I don't want to be baptized.

MILLA/MAIDEN

What did I just tell you? You must, otherwise you'll burn in the devil's fiery hell.

CHILD AGAAT

Who's the devil?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Don't play stupid. The devil is a fallen angel. He looks for ways to bring lost souls down to hell.

CHILD AGAAT

Does he have a bellows? I know fire. I'd rather burn. I'm not scared.

MILLA/MAIDEN

If you're good we can make a fire the evening of the christening and dance. I'll even bake an orange cake. But *only* if you're good.

CHILD AGAAT

I want to take my bellows.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Good lord. All right.

CHILD AGAAT

I must polish them, so they shine for the Dominee in his doctor's coat! So the devil may see!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Agaat. Listen to me. Your name means Good. And at your christening you'll be given that name for ever and ever. So you must show that you can live up to your name. Do you understand?

CHILD AGAAT

What does M<sup>ê</sup>me's name mean?

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's the name of a white flower. My mother gave it to me.

CHILD AGAAT

Am I your child?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I don't have a child.

CHILD AGAAT

I'm not your child?

MILLA/MAIDEN

You're my little monkey.

CHILD AGAAT

They say I come from a drunkcunt on the other side of the mountain.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Sis, that's ugly. Who says that?

CHILD AGAAT

The other children. In the yard.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Whose? Saar's? Don't you listen to them! I found you on the Day of the Covenant, do you remember? That shows it's all in the Lord's plan.

CHILD AGAAT

But am I yours?

*(Milla/Maiden cannot answer. She hugs Agaat.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Do you know the Emperor butterfly?

CHILD AGAAT

No.

MILLA/MAIDEN

He's the king of the butterflies. He's all black as night on the outside. And when his wings are closed he's not much to look at. All the other butterflies laugh at him. But when he spreads his wings to fly, the insides are blue. Like an eye. Like the sky. And when he flies away all the other butterflies gasp. They realize that he was the emperor all along. The jewel of the forest. And do you know? His blue eye holds the secret of the soul. But only good people get to see it.

CHILD AGAAT

Has Mème seen it yet?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I hope to see it in my lifetime.

CHILD AGAAT

My name means Good. I will see it.

Maybe so.

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(They hold each other as blue light washes over them.)*

## SCENE FIVE

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Agaat washes Milla/Crone. This is a task she performs with practiced effortlessnes. Agaat is assured and graceful. The movements are as much attempts at understanding as they are at cleanliness.)*

**SCENE SIX**

**6.1**

*(Projection: 1959.*

*Jak is doing sit-ups. Milla/Maiden enters wearing work clothes covered in dirt.)*

JAK

The farmer herself. What was it today?

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Terse.)*

Walked the far slope with the surveyor. My calves ache.

JAK

Why do you drudge yourself like that? You're not a bloody slave.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Somebody's got to pay attention to the farm.

JAK

Why even bother with the *kak*. Fertilizer makes it easy.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Fertilizer. That's all you're ever on about, Jak de Wet. But working with nature...

JAK

Oh ho! Here we go! A lecture.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Working with nature is like playing a game. It's subtle and complex. Everything is important. The smallest insect, even the mouldering tree...

JAK

The mouldering tree? Christ, Milla, It's simple. Buy the fertilizer. Put it down. Plough the field. Reap the harvest. That's it. No mystical talk about bugs and soil. Put that energy into making us a child.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I'll go for tests. The doctor can prescribe me an aid. *(Beat.)* There's help for men, too.

JAK

Over my dead body! There's nothing wrong with me. Or with you, for that matter. It's all in your head. It's because you wear yourself out like this.

MILLA/MAIDEN

What else am I supposed to do? You offer no help.

JAK

Because you don't really want help! You love complaining!

MILLA/MAIDEN

I do not.

JAK

Get the bloody machines to do it and stop running yourself into the ground.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I was taught to farm the right way. The old way. The machines don't respect the land – they ruin it for a quick profit.

JAK

You don't complain about the money when there's food on the table.

MILLA/MAIDEN

We must be smart about this, Jak.

JAK

I am being smart.

MILLA/MAIDEN

We're a team, Jak. You and I.

JAK

Is *that* what I'm a part of? A team? What race, then, are we running, dear wife?

MILLA/MAIDEN

All I mean is that it takes the both of us to make the land work. And to make a child. (*Beat.*) I get such pressure from ma.

JAK

Don't listen to that mother of yours. A violent tea cosy if ever there was one.

MILLA/MAIDEN

She's never approved of me. Always under such scrutiny at her house. And then I come home, barely off the stoep and get an earful from Mr. Fertilizer.

JAK

Milla – get over yourself.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Am I never allowed to feel weak? To need you?

JAK

I hate it when you're in this state. Go wash yourself off. Have a cry in the tub. Then we can talk.

*(He exits.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak, wait! *(Beat. Calling out.)* Agaat?

## 6.2

*(Projection: 1960.*

*Milla/Maiden touches up her makeup. She massages her stomach.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Softly.)* January 1. *Gelukkige nuwe jaar.*

*(Lights shift: A party. Only Milla/Maiden and Jak can be seen clearly, each in their own pool of light. Maybe the other guests are obscured by projected cigarette smoke? Jazz beneath the chatter.)*

VOICE ONE (V.O.)

Two-stage! Two-stage! Wheat, fallow, wheat, fallow!

VOICE TWO (V.O.)

Or better still: wheat *on* wheat! With the new fertilizers they have now you can't go wrong. Bumper crops every single year I'm telling you.

VOICE ONE (V.O.)

An Overberg miracle!

VOICE TWO (V.O.)

That's right. And Jak de Wet over here's living proof.

JAK

That's the way of the future, man – science and farming. A match made in heaven.



MILLA/MAIDEN

Scientific or not I don't agree. Just look at the condition of the soil. Thinner and poorer by the year. Just look at the dust when the wind blows before sowing-time, look how it erodes in winter. From sowing wheat all the time. From greed. And from worry. Because the bought-on-credit fertilizer still has to be paid off. And the Land Bank is squeezing.

VOICE THREE (V.O.)

That's right! I owed them. Then they forced me to sell all my wheat to them, at cost. Their idea is, it's our fertilizer, so it's our wheat.

*(There is general commotion at this statement. Milla/Maiden taps her glass with her knife.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Listen! The real point is: the Overberg is the breadbasket of the whole country. Remember: good wheat and good bread, and the nation's well fed. You can't take out of the soil more than you put into it. And here we are now, a little group of people at the southern tip of Africa in the process of totally destroying this national asset within the space of a few decades.

*(Chorus of "Hear, hear!" from the gathered crowd.)*

JAK

Milla, please, stop, you're making a fool of yourself.

VOICE THREE (V.O.)

Give her a chance!

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's the rhythms of nature that you have to respect as the Creator determined them. That's what agriculture should be based on. This new greed is barbaric - it's a form of sacrilege. If a farmer clears and levels his land year after year it's as good as beating his wife every night!

*(Lights shift. Jak grabs Milla/Maiden roughly by the arm and shoves her. He is very drunk.)*

JAK

Good God! You think you know everything!

MILLA/MAIDEN

You're drunk.

JAK

Your mouth's too big!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak, I have something to tell you.

JAK

Christ, Milla, what gives you the idea that you can sit and preach to farmers on how to cultivate their lands? What must you think of *me*? (*Beat.*) How am I supposed to show my face ever again at the fertilizer company?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak, come here. I have something to tell you.

JAK

And that “soil is like a woman whose husband beats her”? What kind of crap is that, I ask you? You’re asking for it, you know?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Yes, *Baas*.

*(Jak slaps her.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

You can’t do that to me anymore.

JAK

If you want to be my soil, then I’ll do with you what I want.

*(Milla/Maiden places her hands on her stomach. An invitation.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak, won’t you please undo my zip?

JAK

What does one do with soil, eh? You drive a post into it. You quarry out a dam!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Come here. Help me.

JAK

Do it yourself.

*(Milla/Maiden removes her dress slowly. Jak lunges at her. Lights shift. The figures on the floor are in semi-darkness. Milla/Mother is suddenly illuminated.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

He was very rough. Tore your petticoat and gripped your wrists.

JAK

Look in front of you! Look in front of you!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Jak, you should be ashamed of yourself!

JAK

Whore! Whore!

MILLA/MOTHER

You thought you saw a movement in the mirror but there was nothing. Only the two of you.

JAK

What are you looking at?

MILLA/MOTHER

He grabbed a footstool with one hand and threw it.

*(The sound of a stool crashing into a mirror.  
Prismatic blue light washes over the stage and then  
is gone.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

But you dictated the rhythm. For yourself.

*(Lights down on Milla/Mother, up on Jak and  
Milla/Maiden)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

I'm pregnant, Jak.

JAK

A son.

MILLA/MAIDEN

And if you ever lift your hand against me again, I will sell the farm and leave you and take your child with me and you will never see him again.

## SCENE SEVEN

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Agaat is on the phone with Nooi Beatrice. The following is a sort of duet. Agaat's conversation on the phone is as much for Milla/Crone as it is for Beatrice. Milla/Crone's lines are an expression of her interior thoughts, Agaat cannot hear them. Maybe portions of them appear on the scrim?)*

AGAAT

Good Morning, Nooi Beatrice. How are you, Nooi?

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

Is everything in order, Agaat?

AGAAT

Nooi, I want to ask if you can help me, Nooi. I must get to town tomorrow to arrange things as the Ounooi want them all for the funeral. *(Beat.)* I want to ask if you could come and watch over Ounooi here for a few hours, please Nooi.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

I see you. You're standing in your room. You're standing and you can't stand any longer.

AGAAT

Yes, everything in order here, Nooi. *(Beat.)* How do you mean now, Nooi? *(Beat.)* No, the Ounooi's quite clear. Completely conscious still.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

You bend at the middle and your back hunches, you crawl forward over the linoleum.

AGAAT

No, doctor says you can't do more at home than I'm doing. He says otherwise she must go off to hospital. *(Beat.)* That really wouldn't work, Nooi. *(Beat.)* No, I just know, she doesn't want to. She signed the papers. She only wants me here.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

You take the poker, you pull out the grate. You crawl into your hearth, white cap first. You go and lie with your knees pulled up in the old black soot.

AGAAT

Yes, the coffin's here already, it's standing in the shed. They want to come and do it here. Yes, they say it's better at home when somebody has been lying for such a long time already.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

You make yourself heavy, and you make yourself dense, and you sink away with your fist in your mouth.

AGAAT

Yes, it will be here on the farm. In the graveyard here. *(Beat.)* Yes, it's been dug for a long time. Next to her mother's.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

How can I blame you for wanting to vanish, Agaat? That you want to get away from me, away from the tyranny of me?

AGAAT

Jakkie? Last time he still said he was coming. Tomorrow I'm sending him a telegram so that he has it, black on white.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

I'm more inescapable than ever, now that I can say or do nothing, now that I myself am immovable as the stones.

AGAAT

No, everything's arranged. *(Beat.)* I beg your pardon, Nooi. *(Beat.)* No, doctor says he thinks less than a month, Nooi.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

I would want to open myself to you and take you up into myself and comfort you. But I cannot, because I am your adversary exactly because I am as I am, mute and dense.

AGAAT

Yes, Nooi, we can only hope for the best, Nooi. Well, that's fine then, Nooi. Till tomorrow, Nooi.

MILLA/CRONE (V.O.)

And you are looking for a safe refuge from me. Under your own stones.

AGAAT

Goodbye, Nooi.

*(Agaat keeps the phone to her ear for a moment, then she slams the receiver down. She crouches, making herself as small as possible, as if she were in a hearth.)*

## SCENE EIGHT

### 8.1

*(Projection: 1960.*

*Lights up on Agaat reading from a journal at Milla/Crone's bedside.)*

AGAAT

“21 April 1960. Had the outside room whitewashed in and out. Agaat is getting the idle storeroom. Now everything is as it should be. Will really not be able to manage without a good childminder. Agaat can write, and read, and cook well. Can trust her one hundred percent. She will have to be my eyes and ears here on Gdrift. Situation with Jak, God be thanked, better now that I'm doing something about Agaat. Her little room. What can she think of it all? Will just have to be good enough.

*(Lights shift: down on Agaat at the bedside and up on Jak and Milla/Maiden on the stoep. She is visibly pregnant.)*

JAK

I have to clean out my stuff all the time like it's a bunch of trash. *Your* books are everywhere!

MILLA/MAIDEN

You're still sore about having to move the rowing machine from the front room. Do you want me to have a fall and hurt the baby?

JAK

Always so dramatic. What's in these journals anyway? Secret writing without full stops and commas.

*(He grabs a journal from her.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Give it back! Why don't you rather go and read something to improve *yourself*? Your whiplash repartee no longer impresses me.

JAK

Have it your way, Milla. Blessed is the maker of lists. Creator of heaven and earth.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Blessed are the poor in spirit! Give me my journal. Please.

JAK

Maybe I'll read it on the radio so that the whole bloody nation can get to know the soul of the diva Boer of Gdrift and the distress of her dear handmaiden, Agaat!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Give it here!

*(He hands her back the journal.)*

JAK

There you go, *Mies*.

MILLA/MOTHER

With the farm work, and carrying the baby, and preparing the outer room for Agaat. Can you not give me this one thing, for my own?

JAK

That woolly was your project from the beginning. So don't go complaining about turning her into a skivvy now. And the farm – it's my domain. You have one job, my wife. One. And its there. In your belly.

## **8.2**

*(Lights up on Agaat at the bedside. She reads:)*

AGAAT

“July 12, 1960. Agaat must become the slaughter-hand on Gdrift. Sent message to the cottages last night. Dawid must teach her the basics and I'll stand by so that he can behave himself. It was a well-set whether from the little camp of *hanslammers* that we had to cull. A little orphan lamb.”

*(Lights down on Agaat at the bedside, up on Milla/Maiden and Child Agaat in the yard. They mime holding on to the lamb. Jak watches from a distance, amused.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Take it by the ear. Don't be timid.

*(Child Agaat takes the lamb's ear.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

And make sure to use your strong hand or else he'll jerk loose.

*(The lamb jerks back and Milla/Maiden helps subdue it. She hands Child Agaat a knife.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Now I count to three. One. Two. Three.

*(She jerks the knife over the lamb's "throat." The sound of a lamb dying. Child Agaat recoils in horror at the "blood." She drops the knife.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

No-no-no! You don't throw away your knife like that. Climb in there and take it out.

JAK

Now that looks prosperous to me, Milla. Butcher, baker, butler. Then you can make her head-girl over a hundred!

MILLA/MAIDEN

If only you'd rather attend to your own business, dear husband. *(To Child Agaat.)* And now we cut open from the throat. Here's the sternum. That shouldn't give us too much trouble. Now you must cut shallow and clean all a long the belly-line.

*(Child Agaat does, with great precision.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Really quite good, Agaat. Now we must pull the entrails out...

*(Milla/Maiden is nauseated by the entrails and vomits. She recovers.)*

CHILD AGAAT

Is même all right?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Yes, Agaat. Thank you. Now Dawid will cut off the head. You did very well. Slaughtering's no easy business, but everyone must go through it the first time. *(Referring to Child Agaat's bloody jersey.)* Now go take off that blood-soaked thing. Wash it at the tap with this soap. You can wear my old red jersey in the meantime.

CHILD AGAAT

Where's *my* jersey? I want my jersey with the right sleeve.

*(Milla/Maiden begins to take the jersey off Child Agaat. She notices something in the pocket.)*



MILLA/MAIDEN

What's this? The sheep's ear. What's it doing here, huh? I don't want to see any superstitions in you. *(She throws the ear away.)* You were very good about learning to slaughter. We all have to do things in this life we don't like. *(She puts the new jersey on Aagaat.)* Come see here in the outside room. I have a surprise for you.

### 8.3

*(Milla/Maiden brings Child Aagaat to her new room. Milla/Maiden turns on the light.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

So this is now your room Aagaat. Yours alone, for your convenience. It's for your own good. You're a big girl now, aren't you? *(referring to the clothes in the closet.)* This is all you'll wear six days a week. They've got nice long sleeves. Just the way you like it. And here are your aprons. One for every day of the week. Make sure they're always clean and stiffly starched and ironed. And here are all your laundry and cleaning materials. I don't ever want to see stains and creases on your uniform when you're working in the house. Do you understand?

*(Child Aagaat has not moved from the doorway.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

And here, I've bought you these caps, to wear with the apron. Now I know you don't like things on your head but you'll just have to like it or lump it. You must put on a clean one every day – just like the aprons. And pin it up nicely. I don't want to see any hair out of place. *(Beat.)* Do you understand?

*(Still no response from Child Aagaat.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's nothing to be ashamed of. Or scared. It's as it should be. You'll be my special help here on Grootmoedersdrift. My right hand. Or in your case, my left hand. Close your eyes.

*(She presses a bank note into Child Aagaat's hand.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

This will be your daily wage. It's more than the other servants together earn in a month. And if all goes well I'll increase it every six months. A penny saved is a penny earned. *(Beat.)* Don't be ungrateful. If you have something to say, say it now. Don't nurse grievances. *(Beat.)* You won't say thank you, then? What kind manners are these? *(Beat.)* All right then. You must be at your post in the kitchen at six o'clock in the morning to make me a nice cup of coffee in the blue coffee pot. And a cup for the *Baas* in his room

on the stoep. With milk. And sugar. And rusks on the tray. And I don't want to see a long face.

CHILD AGAAT

What happened to my things?

MILLA/MAIDEN

I put them here in this suitcase for you. Everything is there. *(Beat.)* Now didn't we learn how to say "thank you?" Just with the eyes?

CHILD AGAAT

I want to stay in the house! With Mème!

MILLA/MAIDEN

*This* is your new room. No more complaining.

*(Milla/Maiden exits. Child Agaat stands in the new room. Lights up on Milla/Mother.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

When did you—did we—begin?

*(Agaat turns out to the audience as if to speak. But then she grabs the suitcase and exits.)*

#### **8.4**

*(Moonlight. Child Agaat dances to an unheard song. Her movements are solemn and calculated – a dance she has done many times before. Milla/Maiden enters and observes the dance.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

*(Singing.)*

HANSIE SLIM, BERG WIL KLIM  
IN DIE WYE WÊRELD IN  
STOK EN HOED, PAS HOM GOED  
HY IS VOL VAN MOED.  
MAAR DIE MOEDER HART VOEL SEER  
HANS IS IN DIE HUIS NIE MEER  
HOOR NOU NET  
MOEDER SUG  
HARDLOOP GOU GOU TERUG

*(Milla/Maiden watches child Agaat dance. The sound of wings flapping.)*

**SCENE NINE**

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Evening on Gdrift. Milla/Crone's room is filled with the orange of the setting sun and the blue of the garden. Milla/Crone's eyes are projected via live-feed on the scrim. Milla/Maiden and Milla/Mother stand at the head of the bed.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Agaat, if I were to suddenly recover my speech, could we, in these last days, find a language to understand each other?

MILLA/MOTHER

A language...

MILLA/MAIDEN

In which to make last jokes.

MILLA/MOTHER

Or first jokes.

MILLA/MAIDEN

First smile.

MILLA/MOTHER

First word.

MILLA/MAIDEN

But perhaps a lot of jabbering would have prevented us from getting to where we are now.

MILLA/MOTHER

Where that is I don't know.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Where are we, Agaat?

*(The following thoughts cascade over one another, reaching a climax with Agaat's entrance.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Perhaps I'm reading too much into everything.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Perhaps I'm imagining her evil.

MILLA/MOTHER

Perhaps I'm imagining her goodness.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Perhaps I've been delirious this whole time.

MILLA/MOTHER

Perhaps I'm more clear-minded than I've ever been.

*(Agaat enters with dinner.)*

AGAAT

*(Ta da!)*

For supper there's spinach, for dessert, stewed prunes. Green food and black food. To get you moving down below, Ounooi.

*(She sets the tray down and exits.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

What must she be getting from the sideboard? I mustn't hope for it.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Fantastic thing it would be.

*(Agaat brings the maps of Gdrift into the room.  
Maybe they appear projected on the scrim?)*

AGAAT

The maps, Ounooi. Of Gdrift.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Right, Agaat! An evacuation for an exposition! Fair enough!

MILLA/MOTHER

A poop for a peep!

AGAAT

First the Pink Lady. Then the spinach. Then the maps.

MILLA/MOTHER

Mrs. de Wet understands the trade-off!

*(Agaat administers the Pink Lady.)*

AGAAT

Yuck. I don't know how you get it down.

MILLA/MOTHER

Nevermind, Agaat. I know.

AGAAT

(Singing.)

JUST A SPOONFUL OF SPINACH  
MAKES THE MEDICINE GO DOWN,  
THE MEDICINE GO DOWN,  
THE MEDICINE GO DOWN.  
JUST A SPOONFUL OF SPINACH  
MAKES THE MEDICINE GO DOWN,  
IN THE MOST DELIGHTFUL WAY!

*(As she sings Agaat feeds Milla/Crone three spoonfuls of spinach. Then she moves on to the prunes.)*

AGAAT

Tasty, the little prunes.

*(A low rumbling from Milla/Crone's stomach.)*

AGAAT

Strike up the band.

*(Agaat efficiently puts on rubber gloves and retrieves a suppository. She swiftly puts her hand between Milla/Crone's legs to insert the pill.)*

AGAAT

Nothing wrong with the arse. Old nag's arse. *(Her hand is still between Milla/Crone's legs.)* Take it. Swallow it. Otherwise I'm taking the horse's pill-gun. *(Beat.)* There we go.

*(Agaat replaces her gloves. Milla/Crone continues to rumble away on the bed.)*

AGAAT

Hold on. I'm just returning the tray.

*(Agaat exits singing "Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer." The sounds from the Milla/Crone's stomach get louder, more urgent.)*

AGAAT (O.S.)

Are you still holding on? I'm just putting the spinach in the fridge quickly.

MILLA/MAIDEN

As if I can call back!

AGAAT (O.S.)

Just don't go squitter all over your bed, I put on clean sheets this morning.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I'm trying!

*(Agaat enters.)*

AGAAT

Aitsa! Look at the old mare sweating. No we've really got you going!

MILLA/MOTHER

Thunder and lightning! Bring the pan!

AGAAT

Don't rush me now. You make me wait for hours every morning.

MILLA/MOTHER

Bring the pan the pan!

AGAAT

*(Holding the pan above the bed.)*

So, Ounooi, you've seen what I brought you this evening? A surprise. All this time I've been thinking there's something that you want to see and I keep missing it. Am I right? Yes or no, Ounooi? There I go adjusting the mirror so you can see the blue garden, or carrying up all those dusty things from the cellar, and all this time it's just down the passage in the sitting room.

MILLA/MOTHER

Yes, Agaat, you're right. So put the maps under my arse instead of your holy of holiest pan.

AGAAT

Hay hey hey! What a convulsion-kick! When the lamb's just about had it, it's the last kick that hurts the most!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Stick the pan up your arse! Rather give me the Republic and its provinces—the whole south—then I'll darken for you the *Light of the World* that the Dutch supposedly brought here.

MILLA/MOTHER

You're excellent proof of what a bad idea it was. Your name may be holy, but your soul, Agaat, is at times as black as the hearth you crawled out of! *(Beat.)* Here it comes!

AGAAT

Don't carry on so, Ounooi. You're not a child, good heavens.

*(Agaat puts the pan under Milla/Crone, who loudly shits into it. Agaat moves to the maps.)*

AGAAT

Right. How shall we go about it?

MILLA/MOTHER

Leave me in peace! Get out! Out!

AGAAT

No, come on now! Since when can you do only one thing at a time? The way you're carrying on, you'll need a second pan at any moment in any case.

*(Agaat grabs Japie the feather duster.)*

AGAAT

Here is Japie to help. Remember him? Every time I didn't speak on the out-breath – WHAP – with Japie.

MILLA/MAIDEN

I can smell myself! Please, help!

*(Milla/Crone closes her eyes.)*

AGAAT

Come now, open your eyes and look where I'm pointing. If you knew how many sleepless nights I had because I couldn't figure out what on God's earth you wanted from me!

*(Milla/Crone opens her eyes wide.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

MILLA/MAIDEN

Please!

Please!

AGAAT

What's all this please about now? Enough of please, thank you! Blink your eyes when I press on the right place. I suspect somewhere on these maps is a spot you want to visit again. Do your bit.

*(Milla/Crone closes her eyes.)*

AGAAT

Perhaps you'd like to inform me as well what we're looking for here on these maps? You can rest assured I won't give up. I don't give up and *you* don't give up. That's our problem, the two of us! Got, but what a stink you can crap!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Please, Agaat! I need another pan! Clean me!

AGAAT

Blink one eye if I'm getting warm. Blink both eyes quickly if I'm cold. Do you understand me?

*(Milla/Crone keeps her eyes closed.)*

AGAAT

Open your eyes Ounooi or I'll stick your four lids up and down with plasters before you can blink an eye. Look!

*(Milla/Crone does.)*

AGAAT

*(Pointing to places on the map.)*

Have you been here? Have I? What would we have wanted there? We know our place don't we? *(Beat.)* Have you finished shitting now? Why are you looking at me like that? Are you dumb? *(Beat.)* Right. Where were we?

*(She returns to the maps with feather duster in hand. The following is delivered as a spirited call and response.)*

AGAAT

We stayed over here.

Visited there.

We went to fetch this.

And sold something else.

Here was a farmer's day.

Here was a sheep on the spit.

There a circus

*(Beat.)*

Everything you forgot and never ever noted in your little notebooks! A neck, a head, a ridge, a corner. A kloof, a bush, a well. Spanned out, turned back, rested, trekked, stayed.

MILLA/MOTHER

Please come and clean me. I'm finished now! I surrender!



Surrender? That'll be the day!

AGAAT

*(She continues the litany. Things are a bit out of control.)*

Back room! Green door!  
Mailslot! Lowroof!  
Lockupchild! Without Pot!  
Shatincorner!  
Shatupon!  
Dusterstruck on Agaatsarse!  
Au-Au-Au! Ai-Ai-Ai!  
Neversaysorry!  
Sevenyearschild.  
And then?  
Can-you-believe-it?  
Backyard!  
Skivvy-room!  
Brownsuticase!  
Whitecap!  
Heartburried!  
Nevertold! Unlamented!  
Good-my-arse!  
Now-my-arse! Now's-the-time!

AGAAT

*(Lights down on them as Agaat continues to march around the room.)*

## SCENE TEN

### 10.1

*(Projection: 1960.*

*Milla/Maiden—visibly pregnant—approaches Child Agaat, who is playing in the yard.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Bring along your embroidery book and come sit here with me on the stoep. And your needlework basket.

*(She stares.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Stop these airs. All I'm saying is that you must bring along your needlework basket.

*(She doesn't move.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Now! That will be all. Thank you.

*(Child Agaat reluctantly gets her materials and stands by Milla/Maiden)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Now, Sheep-slaughtering is not the beginning and the end of the world. Or stoep-polishing. Or onion-plaiting. Or pumpkin-stacking. Farming is only one half of a housekeeper's work. Embroidery is the other half: fine, decorative needlework, knitting, and crocheting. They belong to the finer things in life. They are age-old arts and rich traditions from the domain of woman. Look at me. I want you to be knowledgeable and I want you to teach yourself and make it your own. That will be the proof that I haven't wasted my time with you.

*(She opens the embroidery book to the first page and reads the inscription there. Maybe this epigraph is projected in Afrikaans on the scrim?)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Listen: "That is the beauty, the value of this book: that it was born out of love and inspires to love, that nobody can doubt. 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 uncivilized.”

*(Milla/Maiden lets that sink in for a moment before continuing. She is moved by the inscription in spite of herself)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Embroidery is a good discipline. It keeps you out of idleness and creates a homey atmosphere. It focuses the attention on something useful and distracts from negative thoughts and feelings. Practice and you’ll never be sorry you learnt it. At the end of this week I want to see your first three practice strips completed. If, in a few months, you feel secure with the principles of drawn fabric-work then we can start on your first adult effort. With a prettier cloth. *(Beat.)* Here are the very prettiest cloths that I have. There’s enough here for a tablecloth. Come, help me fold it.

*(They fold the cloth together.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Feel such cloth. You won’t get your hands on that nowadays. It’s from my mother’s trousseau. I know it will find a good home with you. It may seem complicated. Overwhelming. But its like that with every art form: You start with the simple and then you practice faithfully every day until you’re ready one day to tackle the scenes from history. And then: heaven.

CHILD AGAAT

Heaven.

*(They place the folded cloth on Milla/Crone’s hospital bed.)*

## **10.2**

*(Milla/Maiden’s water breaks. Child Agaat rushes to her.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

You have ten minutes. Pack for a week. We’re going to Ma’s. The child is coming – he’s early – you’ll have to help...if necessary. *(Beat.)* Pull yourself together, Agaat, we don’t have time to waste. Pack your suitcase.

CHILD AGAAT

I don’t have a suitcase.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Where's your brown suitcase that I gave you?

CHILD AGAAT

I don't know.

MILLA/MAIDEN

If you can't look after the small things, how can I ever count on you in important matters? Hurry up!

*(Milla/Maiden writes a note to Jak.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

"Dear Jak..."

*(She tears it up.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

"Jakobus Christiaan de Wet: your child is being born. You know where you can look for the mother."

*(She crumples the letter. She and Child Agaat get into the car, which can be two chairs placed side-by-side. Maybe the landscape is projected over them as they drive?)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

What did you bring, then?

CHILD AGAAT

Sharp scissors. Sharp meat knife. I singed the blade in fire like you told me. Clean cloths. Enamel basin. Dettol. Newspaper. Cotton wool and gauze. Matches.

MILLA/MAIDEN

Don't worry. It's just in case. We have to get to the pass in twenty minutes. Then we'll stop for a while for the next contraction and in another twenty minutes we'll be on the other side.

CHILD AGAAT

The other side.

MILLA/MAIDEN

We've caught lots of calves—you and I—haven't we? Everything works in exactly the same way. *(Beat.)* Don't be so pale. And don't even think about puking. Just pray that there isn't something slow in front of us in the road. Now listen carefully. If you must deliver the baby here in the car...

*(Lights up on Milla/Mother and Milla/Crone. They watch Milla/Maiden and Child Agaat.)*

You talked fast. Emphasized the main points.	MILLA/MOTHER
Water.	MILLA/MAIDEN
Breath.	MILLA/MOTHER
Push.	MILLA/MAIDEN
Head.	MILLA/MOTHER
Out.	MILLA/MAIDEN
Blood.	MILLA/MOTHER
Slippery.	MILLA/MAIDEN
Careful.	MILLA/MOTHER
Slap.	MILLA/MAIDEN
Yowl.	MILLA/MOTHER
Bind.	MILLA/MAIDEN
Cut.	MILLA/MOTHER
Wrap.	MILLA/MAIDEN

Bring to. MILLA/MOTHER

Wash. MILLA/MAIDEN

Hitch-hike. MILLA/MOTHER

MILLA/MAIDEN  
Now that's the easy scenario. If the little head can't get out you must take the scissors and cut. Toward the shitter. So that he can get out. Do you understand? If he's blue, you must clean his nose and wipe out his drool from the back of his throat and tongue. Then blow breath into him over his nose and mouth until he makes a sound, just like we do with the calves when they're struggling. You must leave me. Even if I am bleeding something terrible. Do you understand?

*(Child Agaat nods. Contractions overcome Milla/Maiden and she pulls the car roughly off the road.)*

Is it very sore? CHILD AGAAT

What does the river look like? MILLA/MAIDEN

There is nothing to cry about. CHILD AGAAT

What does the river look like? MILLA/MAIDEN

Full. CHILD AGAAT

What else? MILLA/MAIDEN

Shiny. CHILD AGAAT

Is it far down? MILLA/MAIDEN

CHILD AGAAT

Far. And near.

MILLA/MOTHER

Suddenly it was lukewarm between your legs. Inside you something dropped and heaved and pushed. It would be Agaat's baby, you knew.

*(Milla/Maiden stops the car and Child Agaat puts blanket down on the dirt. Milla lies down.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Sing! Sing me something!

CHILD AGAAT

Breathe. You said I had to tell you to breathe, breathe, and blow.

MILLA/MAIDEN

There'll be a lot of blood. Don't get a fright, just do everything you'd do with a cow. And sing. Carry on singing here for me, so that I can get hold of a rhythm. Sing something fast.

CHILD AGAAT

*(Singing.)*

THE BOYS ARE CUTTING THE CORN TONIGHT,  
THE CORN TONIGHT.  
MY LOVE'S HANGING IN THE BERRY-BUSH,  
BERRY-BUSH.

...Now push!

*(Singing.)*

MY LOVE'S HANGING IN THE BERRY-BUSH,  
BERRY-BUSH.

...Breathe! Push! Blow! Breathe, breathe, breathe. PUSH! He's lying right. His head's in the hole. I can feel him. Breathe in, push, blow, blow, blow! Now you must push! He's coming. I feel him. He's hanging in the bush, he's hanging nicely, he's hanging like a berry, head first. Now you must...now you must! *(Beat.)* He's stuck! His head is stuck in the hole!

MILLA/MAIDEN

Take the scissors! Cut, God! Cut open all the way to the hole!

*(The stage is illuminated in a harsh white light. Milla/Maiden, Milla/Mother, and Milla/Crone all scream. When the lights come back to normal Child Agaat is crouched near Milla/Mother who has replaced Milla/Maiden. Child Agaat hands her a bloody little bundle.)*

CHILD AGAAT

It's a boy. He has all his fingers and toes.

MILLA/MOTHER

Jakkie.

CHILD AGAAT

Jakkie. *(Beat.)* Everything's fine my mème. I've got him with me. He's safe. I'm holding him for you. We'll be there now-now! We'll drive like the wind with you and your child. We ride. We ride. Round curves wild and wide. Snip-snip went the scissors, snip-snip, and my cap, my cap, how red is its tip.

### 10.3

*(Night falls. Agaat is illuminated at Milla/Crone's bedside. She reads from a journal.)*

AGAAT

"23 September 1960. Jakkie's christening in a week's time. Agaat called me to come and see if everything's right for the Dominee & his elder who are visiting soon."

*(Lights shift. Milla/Mother surveys Child Agaat's work.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

The flowers are really something, Agaat. And these cakes have risen beautifully. Chocolate *and* orange. The best cups. You thought of everything. They'll be very impressed.

CHILD AGAAT

Mème.

MILLA/MOTHER

Yes?

CHILD AGAAT

Mème. May I carry Jakkie. Into the church. For the confirmation?

MILLA/MOTHER

I don't know if that's the kind of job for you, Agaat.

CHILD AGAAT

I want to hold him for the sprinkling.



MILLA/MOTHER  
The baptism. Not the sprinkling.

CHILD AGAAT  
Will you *please* get the Dominee's permission?

MILLA/MOTHER  
It's just not done.

CHILD AGAAT  
Aren't I a child of the Lord?

MILLA/MOTHER  
Of course you are. But...

AGAAT  
He won't cry. If I hold him.

MILLA/MOTHER  
You have a point.

CHILD AGAAT  
And I made this.

*(She shows Milla/Mother the christening gown she's made for Jakkie.)*

MILLA/MOTHER  
But this must have taken you a great deal of work.

CHILD AGAAT  
Yes. Môme. I work at night-time.

MILLA/MOTHER  
The pomegranates and flowers are beautiful. You've certainly come a long way in your embroidery.

CHILD AGAAT  
So will Môme please ask the Dominee?

MILLA/MOTHER  
I'll ask.

*(Lights up on Agaat reading aloud at the bedside.)*

AGAAT

“Too upset really to write. Perhaps I should really have asked the Dominee if Agaat could carry Jakkie into the church. When at last he left I rushed out of there and I walked off in some direction with Jakkie in his pram sick of all the cake and when I got to the dam there was the white parcel; the christening robe.”

*(Lights up on Milla/Mother at the dam.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

*(Yelling.)*

Come out! Agaat. I know you're hiding there in the reeds. Come! Out! What could I have done? I couldn't just ask the Dominee. There are rules. You must understand. Now come out here and talk to me!

*(Lights down on Milla/Mother.)*

AGAAT

“Last Sunday of September 1960. Agaat in a mighty huff. As good as her baking was for Dominee's visit so disastrous was everything for the christening tea. Deliberately upset a jug of milk on the tray and the guests' shoes were full of dogshit because she hadn't swept the garden path.

*(Lights up on Milla/Mother scolding Child Agaat. Jak is nearby.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

I will bloody well not let myself be bugged around by you. I'm going to make you work till you're tractable so you can see what it costs. The faith and sweat and blood of generations that went into this land. And you sit there plucking its fruit through no effort of your own. What do you have to say for yourself? *(Agaat is silent.)* Don't you just want to leave off your quirks and become good again?

CHILD AGAAT

Conceived and born in sin.

MILLA/MOTHER

Take down the hornet's nest on the stoep. Just now one will sting Jakkie. Now.

CHILD AGAAT

I can't reach.

MILLA/MOTHER

Very well then, you'll plough an acre with a handspring and mule.

*(Child Afaat exits to plow the field. Maybe images of her struggling with the equipment are projected somewhere on stage?)*

JAK

What's happened to your wonderful house slave? She can't even iron a shirt properly. I've had to throw away three this week with scorch marks on the collar.

MILLA/MOTHER

We must teach her the virtue of hard work. That nothing comes for free in this world.

JAK

But why must she struggle with this plowing nonsense?

MILLA/MOTHER

If I can't break her with sweating blood, I'll get into her mind. Then we can see at the same time if she's really as clever as she thinks.

JAK

Can't you just fire her? Next thing you know she'll drop dead with exhaustion. Just remember: I'm not erecting the monument.

MILLA/MOTHER

She must know her place. You don't see the way she looks at me.

JAK

God above I've had a bellyful of being an extra in your concentration camp movie.

MILLA/MOTHER

I feel terrible. But I can't stop.

JAK

Who's taking care of Jakkie now that your wooly is out ploughing? He's full of colic.

MILLA/MOTHER

From drinking cow's milk.

JAK

Why isn't he drinking his mother's milk? *(Beat.)* Milla?

MILLA/MOTHER

I've dried up completely now.

JAK

Unbelievable.

*(Jak exits in disgust.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Jak? *(Beat.)* God in heaven.

*(Lights down on Milla/Mother. Agaat puts down the journal.)*

AGAAT

That's enough for this evening, Ounooi. Sweet dreams

#### **10.4**

*(Lights shift. Child Agaat enters, exhausted. Agaat rises from the bedside and goes to her. They dance together, the same strange, solemn dance as before. The sound of wings flapping.)*

MILLA/MOTHER (V.O.)

Where did we begin, you and I? What was the start of it all?

#### **10.5**

*(Projection: 1964.*

*Morning in the Gdrift kitchen. Agaat silently fills a small bottle with rum from the pantry. Milla/Mother enters unseen. Agaat puts two bananas in her bag.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Good morning, Agaat.

AGAAT

*(Whipping around.)*  
Nooi. Good morning.

MILLA/MOTHER

Going out?

AGAAT

No, nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

What're the bananas for?

AGAAT

The children. Down by the drift.

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat. No need to tell stories. I remember. (*Beat.*) Looking for the emperor? Is that what you're doing?

AGAAT

Bananas for the children by the drift, nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

All right then, look. I can't have you disappearing with Jakkie any more. From now on you must tell me exactly where you are going and what time you'll be back. Do you understand?

AGAAT

Yes.

MILLA/MOTHER

It makes me terribly anxious not knowing where you are.

AGAAT

Yes.

MILLA/MOTHER

You spend so much time down at the dam. What if he falls in, hey? You can't swim with that fin. So. Where are you going?

AGAAT

We're going to the Keurtjiekloof.

MILLA/MOTHER

When will you be back?

AGAAT

We'll be back just before lunch.

MILLA/MOTHER

At what time, exactly?

AGAAT

I don't know, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

What happened to that watch I gave you for your last birthday?

AGAAT

*(Quietly.)*

I'd rather read time from the sun.

MILLA/MOTHER

Speak up.

AGAAT

*(Louder.)*

I'd rather read time from the sun.

MILLA/MOTHER

Here, you'll take my watch. I don't want hassles.

*(She hands her watch to Agaat.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Have you finished with the washing?

AGAAT

And the ironing. And the vegetables have been peeled and the beetroot is cooked.

MILLA/MOTHER

Good. *(Softer.)* So you're going to try and see the Emperor this morning?

AGAAT

*(Ignoring her.)*

And the meat is in the pot. Just add the water at eleven.

MILLA/MOTHER

Have a good time.

AGAAT

Thank you Nooi.

*(Agaat exits. Jak enters with a mug of coffee.)*

JAK

Have you seen Jakkie this morning?

MILLA/MOTHER

He's off with Agaat.

JAK

Where are they going now?

MILLA/MOTHER

Past the dam. To try and see an Emperor butterfly.

JAK

I don't trust her that far out with him.

MILLA/MOTHER

She's just taking him to the places I showed her when she was his age.

JAK

Still don't think its safe.

MILLA/MOTHER

I know she would protect him with her life.

JAK

You're abandoning your child to the wrong influences.

MILLA/MOTHER

He's yours, too.

JAK

No he's not, Milla. He's hers.

MILLA/MOTHER

At least I have indirect influence.

JAK

*(Exiting.)*

Might be time for him to go to school. He's becoming far too smart here under Gaat.

*(Agaat and Child Jakkie prepare the Emperor Butterfly trap under the following. Milla/Mother exits the house and crouches down to observe them. Milla/Maiden appears.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

They disappear like mice nowadays. Wind and cloud they are together. Fern and water.

AGAAT

*(r.e. the bananas.)*

Mash them well. He likes little goblins like you to mash his food.

*(Child Jakkie mashes the bananas and Agaat puts a few drops of rum on the mush.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Long hours together and full of secrets. But something about it made me anxious.

AGAAT

Here. Taste.

CHILD JAKKIE

Sis yuck!

AGAAT

I'm glad he's not here yet to hear you spitting because for him it's food for a king. The more stinky the better. And he's the emperor.

*(They place the paint lids of mush out in the sun and wait.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Dreamt that she suffocates him and bashes his head to pulp with a brick.

*(Lights out on Milla/Maiden.)*

CHILD JAKKIE

But when is he coming?

AGAAT

Be quiet! You'll hear him approaching up high there in the leaves. *(Pause.)* What do you think we're waiting for?

CHILD JAKKIE

For the Emperor, of course. What does he look like?

AGAAT

Black like the dark moon from outside. But all blue November-sky from the inside. Not powder-blue, rather wet-blue. Silvery. And when he unfolds himself you look into the eye.

CHILD JAKKIE

What eye?

*(He blinks his eyes at Agaat. She laughs.)*

AGAAT

No. Not like that! He folds open his wings...and it's the Eye of Everything. But when they're closed, there's nothing. It's all and it's nothing. But the story is told from generation to generation. *(Beat.)* Shhhh! I can hear him. He's coming! Close your eyes. Bring him nearer with your will.



*(Agaat, Child Jakkie, and Milla/Mother all close their eyes and try to will the Emperor to appear. Suddenly a brilliant blue washes over the stage. All three open their eyes in wonder. A sudden intake of breath. They are suspended in the blue. Then: Blackout).*

## **10.6**

*(Projection: 1967.*

*Agaat is measuring Jakkie against a door frame in the farmhouse. Milla/Mother observes some distance away.)*

AGAAT

All right. We must keep up-to-date with Jakkie's "growth rate."

CHILD JAKKIE

I feel taller than last week. I grow fast, don't I, Agaat?

AGAAT

We'll just have to see. Now, take off your shoes.

*(He does.)*

AGAAT

Stand with your heels against the skirting board, and your back up straight. Exhale.

*(She pushes his shoulders back. She puts her hand around his neck to adjust his head.)*

AGAAT

Soon you're going to get an Adam's apple just like your father. Just feel this thick gullet! Now stand to attention for me so we can get a good measurement here. *(She makes a mark on the wall.)* But you're growing past me now!

*(Jakkie eagerly turns around to look at the mark.)*

CHILD JAKKIE

What are these other lines?

AGAAT

What do you think?

I don't know. CHILD JAKKIE

Low-tide marks? AGAAT

No. CHILD JAKKIE

The depth of the drift? AGAAT

No. CHILD JAKKIE

They mark the height of the time then? AGAAT

No, no Agaat. Tell me true. CHILD JAKKIE

Who *can* tell? AGAAT

Are they your marks? CHILD JAKKIE

It's an old house, maybe it's your mother who was measured there. Or perhaps your grandmother. AGAAT

Pa told me about you. CHILD JAKKIE

About me? AGAAT

About where you came from. CHILD JAKKIE

Well don't you listen to a word he says. AGAAT

But isn't it true? CHILD JAKKIE

AGAAT

You know where I come from!

CHILD JAKKIE

But what does your name mean? Who gave it to you? I'm named after my Pa.

AGAAT

That's right. *(Beat.)* I crawled out of the fire.

CHILD JAKKIE

Isn't true! You're lying!

AGAAT

It true too! I was dug out of the ash. Stolen out of the hearth! I fell out of a cloud and came up with the fennel. Was mowed with the sickle and threshed with the wheat. Baked in the bread. Yum!

CHILD JAKKIE

No seriously. What kind of name is Agaat? Nobody else has a name like that.

AGAAT

It's A-g-g-g-gaat that goes g-g-g-g like a house snake behind the skirting board.

CHILD JAKKIE

*(Trying it out.)* Gaat. Gaat. *(Beat.)* It's a name of nothing.

AGAAT

That's right. It's a name of everything that's good. It's six of one, half a dozen of the other.

CHILD JAKKIE

But Agaat you didn't come from bread. Who is your ma? Who is your pa?

AGAAT

You already know the answer. Remember the story?

CHILD JAKKIE

Tell it to me again!

AGAAT

Agh, not right now, Boetie. We've got other things to do now, hey?

CHILD JAKKIE

Right now! Right now!

AGAAT

Ok. But only the first sentence I'll tell you. The rest will have to wait for bedtime. In front of the fire.

*(Agaat leans in and whispers the first sentence of the story. Milla/Mother tries to listen in.)*

CHILD JAKKIE

Agaat, did I come from the fennel, too? From the ash?

AGAAT

No, no, no! Don't you know? I changed into the noonday witch and caught you on the pass, you little lamb. I stuck your tail into a pillowslip and chopped it off with an axe before I sheared you completely.

*(She tickles him and he laughs uproariously.)*

AGAAT

My little lamb!

*(Child Jakkie makes lamb sounds as Agaat chases him off stage.)*

## SCENE ELEVEN

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Milla/Crone in the hospital bed. Milla/Maiden and Milla/Mother stand at the head of the bed. Agaat stands by a large poster of the alphabet and a chalkboard, Japie the feather duster in her hand. They're in the middle of a conversation. The method is as follows: Agaat starts tapping down the alphabet, "A-B-C-D..." When she lands on the right letter, Milla/Crone blinks and Agaat writes the letter on the board. Agaat then returns to 'A' and begins to tap down the letters until Milla/Crone blinks again. The two follow this method letter-by-letter, word-by-word, until Agaat is able to interpret a sentence. It's laborious. They've been at it for what feels like hours.)*

AGAAT

A-B-C-D-...

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes.')*

AGAAT

D. *(She writes it down on the board.)* A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I...

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes.')*

AGAAT

I. *(She writes it on the board.)* A-B-C-D...

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes.')*

AGAAT

D. *(She writes it down.)* Did. (Beat.) A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P-Q-R-S-T-U-V-W-X-Y...

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes.')*

AGAAT

Ai, almost to the end. Y. *(Writes it down.)* A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O ...

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes.')*

You?

AGAAT

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes.')*

*(Writing it down.)* Did you. Did I what?

AGAAT

*(Now Agaat moves Japie along the list without calling out the letters and Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' when the feather duster passes over the correct letter. The letters are projected on the scrim as they form words.)*

*(Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'S'.)*

S. Sssssss like a snake in the grass.

AGAAT

*(Agaat moves Japie along the chart Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'T'.)*

T.

AGAAT

*(Agaat moves Japie along the chart. Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'A')*

A.

AGAAT

*(Agaat moves Japie along the chart. Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'R')*

R. *(Beat.)* Start. Did I start what. Ounooi? Did I start the fire? What is this fire you go on and on about, hey? The one at Jakkie's party?

AGAAT

Perhaps it will never come out, the truth.

MILLA/MAIDEN

How could I have started that?

AGAAT

MILLA/MAIDEN

You and the fires of Grootmoedersdrift, Agaat. The fire on the mountain. The fire in the hayloft, was that you?

MILLA/MOTHER

Who's the arsonist here on the farm?

AGAAT

I won't keep doing this if you insist on asking such silly questions.

MILLA/MOTHER

All right! I'll behave myself.

AGAAT

Well then, Ounooi? Looks like you've more to say.

*(Agaat moves Japie along the chart. Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'H')*

AGAAT

H.

*(Agaat moves Japie along the chart. Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'A')*

AGAAT

A. Ha. Ha, ha, ha!

*(Agaat moves Japie along the chart. Milla/Crone blinks 'yes' on 'G')*

AGAAT

G! Hag. Hey now! That's enough for tonight!!

**SCENE TWELVE**

**12.1**

*(Projection: 1968.*

*Milla/Mother, Jak, and Agaat are all gathered in the sitting room for Child Jakkie's birthday celebration. He sings "Heimwee" by S. le Roux Marais.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Absolutely lovely! Doesn't he have good tone, Jak?

JAK

The boy's eight years old for Christ sake.

MILLA/MOTHER

And?

JAK

His voice'll change in a few years time.

MILLA/MOTHER

Well you sound wonderful now, Jakkie. Shall we sing another?

JAK

He shouldn't be cooped up here all day singing.

MILLA/MOTHER

He's not cooped up.

AGAAT

Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

You like to sing, don't you Jakkie.

CHILD JAKKIE

Not really, ma.

JAK

Ha – there! You see!



AGAAT  
Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER  
What is it, Agaat?

AGAAT  
My present?

MILLA/MOTHER  
Oh, yes! Jakkie, Agaat has bought something for you.

CHILD JAKKIE  
What is it?

MILLA/MOTHER  
Well you'll just have to wait and see what it is, won't you? Agaat?  
*(Agaat gives Child Jakkie a small wrapped package.)*

AGAAT  
For your eighth birthday. You're getting to be a big man now. You'll need this soon.

JAK  
Oh Christ.

*(Child Jakkie opens the package. It is a pen knife.)*

CHILD JAKKIE  
A knife.

AGAAT  
A real Rodgers penknife from England.

CHILD JAKKIE  
England?

AGAAT  
Yes. From a place called Sheffield.

CHILD JAKKIE  
Sheffield.

AGAAT  
It's got two blades. *(Beat.)* But you must use it responsibly, hey?

MILLA/MOTHER

What a beautiful gift. Jakkie what do you say?

CHILD JAKKIE

*Dankie, Agaat.*

AGAAT

*Jy is welkom, Jakkie.*

JAK

Heartwarming.

MILLA/MOTHER

Jakkie you may go and play now.

JAK

A boy who wants a knife must be able to dock a sheep's tail.

MILLA/MOTHER

Ag, not now. It'll ruin the party.

JAK

Agaat said it herself - he's getting to be quite the big man now.

MILLA/MOTHER

You'll show Jakkie how to use the knife, Agaat, wont you? Later?

JAK

No hotnots going to teach my son how to dock a sheep.

*(He reaches for Child Jakkie but the boy gets loose and runs away.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Jakkie, get back here!

JAK

Save your breath. Agaat, go and look for your little *baas* and bring him here, on the spot.

*(Milla/Mother and Agaat share a glance. Agaat stalks over to Child Jakkie and grabs him by the arm.)*

AGAAT

My goodness but will you walk up straight and behave yourself on your birthday.

MILLA/MOTHER

Is this really necessary?

JAK

We've got to make sure this so-called English coolie knife really works.

MILLA/MOTHER

He's a child! Let him be. He's still collecting bird's eggs. He swims in the river, plays hide-and-seek with Agaat.

JAK

That's just the kind of nonsense I'm putting a stop to.

MILLA/MOTHER

Why must you spoil him with dangerous things?

JAK

I'm not spoiling him Milla. Little miss Agaat has already done that. I'm saving him.

MILLA/MOTHER

If you're mad at me, take it out on me.

JAK

You'll know when I'm mad at you, dear wife.

MILLA/MOTHER

Don't I know that, Jak de Wet.

JAK

When he goes into the army he'll need to know how to use a knife properly.

MILLA/MOTHER

He's eight!

JAK

He must learn how to use a knife, and to use it properly.

MILLA/MOTHER

Might be good for him to learn a few other things, too, don't you think? How to sing? How to care for animals, not hurt them?

JAK

You and your skivvy –you talk your women's twaddle into his head. I can't get close to him or you surround him.

MILLA/MOTHER

You just wish *you'd* given him the knife.

JAK

Reading my mind. Praise the Lord I have you around to explain my actions to me. Shut up or come help.

*(Child Jakkie bites Agaat on the arm as she drags him in front of Milla/Mother and Jak.)*

AGAAT

Ai, but that hurts!

JAK

Where was the little blighter?

AGAAT

In the lucerne shed, right on top of all the bales. I had to drag him down there. Then he bit me, look.

MILLA/MOTHER

Jakkie!

JAK

If the choirboy can bite a coon, he can dock a sheep as well! Bring the little bugger round the back, not through the sitting room. Look how dirty he is. Where's his knife? Don't forget his knife!

*(They walk toward the sheep pens.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat, are you all right?

AGAAT

I'm fine, nooi.

JAK

Milla, come help wrestle this little hanslammer into place.

MILLA/MOTHER

Wait.

*(Milla/Mother and Jak mime getting the sheep into place. She straddles its neck while he holds its flank. This takes a lot of effort. They're both breathless. Milla/Maiden is illuminated.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

The lamb, Jakkie's hanslam. Rejected by the ewe. Raised by Jakkie's hand.

JAK

Open it! Come on, open the blade. The big one!

*(Jakkie fumbles with the knife.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

Was that the moment you felt something turning? Or before that already?

JAK

Have you got porridge in your little hands then, my poor lad!

MILLA/MAIDEN

You were under the eyes of Jak. Under the eyes of Agaat.

AGAAT

Come, Boetie.

MILLA/MAIDEN

The beginning of a new alliance. If not the beginning, then a discovery of the possibilities.

CHILD JAKKIE

*(Wailing.)* Mamma, no. Please Gaat!

*(Agaat comes up behind Jakkie and grabs his hand to steady it.)*

AGAAT

You can, Boetie.

MILLA/MAIDEN

She was pretending to speak for both of you. And there was a splinter's worth of space between her words.

AGAAT

You're Gaat's big boy, aren't you? Your môme is here. She's holding him nicely, and I'm here too.

CHILD JAKKIE

Please! I can't!

JAK

Come on, boy! Sheep can't walk around with such a long tail. They get worms! Move!

CHILD JAKKIE

Gaat!

AGAAT

Shut your eyes tight and make limp your elbow. Then I'll help you.

*(Agaat suddenly moves Child Jakkie's hand and cuts off the sheep's tail. Jak applauds.)*

CHILD JAKKIE

Take your bloody knife! Take it, I don't want it!

*(He runs off. Milla/Maiden disappears.)*

JAK

Jakkie come back here! Do you hear me?

MILLA/MOTHER

Let him go.

JAK

Straight to bed without supper. For bad behavior. Unbelievable.

*(He exits.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

*(Calling after him.)*

Hope you're happy. *(To Agaat.)* Rinse the blood from the cement this instant. And see to it that the sheep is given wound ointment.

AGAAT

"This instant."

MILLA/MOTHER

You know it stains.

AGAAT

There's nothing that you can't get out with cold water and Sunlight soap and a bit of Jik.

## **12.2**

*(Night falls. Jakkie and Agaat huddle before a roaring fire. Orange light and deep shadows. It is warm and intimate. Hushed. A little sacred. Like a chiaroscuro painting of Madonna and child.)*

*Milla/Mother watches the two figures through a window. Agaat hands the penknife back to Jakkie. He encloses his hand around hers. Jakkie points at her forearm and she rolls up her sleeve. She lets him put gauze over the bite wound. Suddenly Jakkie presses his head against Agaat's body, and she hugs him tightly. They stay like that for some time, lit by the fire. Milla/Mother wrenches her eyes from the scene. Sobbing she puts her fist in her mouth and looks out to the audience.)*

### **12.3**

*(Projection: 1969)*

*Milla/Mother stands on the stoep. She looks out over Gdrift and at the setting sun.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Stop feeling so sorry for yourself and *do something* about it. Make an extra effort.

AGAAT

*(From inside.)* Nooi! Dinner is ready!

MILLA/MOTHER

Thank you, Agaat.

*(Milla/Mother joins Jak, and Child Jakkie at the dinner table. Agaat serves the food, then waits in the shadows.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Thank you, again, Agaat. It looks delicious.

*(The family eats in silence for a moment.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

God, I'm tired. All that spraying against fruit flies in the orchard. *(Beat.)* Essential maintenance.

JAK

Work, work, work as if you're being driven by the devil. All the time with your melancholy mug. And when midnight strikes, then you're transfigured into the great seductress, half-naked, tarted up with your wine and your candles and your stupid music. What's the matter with you, hey?

MILLA/MOTHER

Please. Not in front of Jakkie.

JAK

Do you think you're Marilyn Monroe on a Texas ranch?

MILLA/MOTHER

I was nearly hallucinating from exhaustion. Please leave it alone.

JAK

It's because there's always too much happening on the farm.

MILLA/MOTHER

Do you really want to have this conversation now, then, Jak?

JAK

All I'm saying is that this isn't a damned experimental farm.

MILLA/MOTHER

We're wasting so much money. Through sheer neglect, wrong purchases, cattle diseases that could have been prevented.

JAK

The same old story.

MILLA/MOTHER

It's serious, Jak.

JAK

I bloody well know.

MILLA/MOTHER

Then do something about it. (*Beat.*) The seeder, for example. The one with discs instead of teeth? It doesn't work on shale. The stones get stuck in them and then the disks drag and wear away and before you know it the whole thing's gone to glory!

JAK

All right. That's one machine.

MILLA/MOTHER

Then there's the mastitis problem with the Jerseys. Even Dawid knows what to do. Why didn't you isolate the sick animals?

JAK

Why didn't you? You seem to know how to do everything bloody well without me.



MILLA/MOTHER

Or strain the first milk from every cow for heavens sake?

JAK

Dairy cows are a bloody nuisance. Slaughter-cattle are far less trouble. And maintenance.

MILLA/MOTHER

Your beloved Simmentals fair no better, always getting eye cancer. The vet bill is crippling.

JAK

Fine. Then we sell the cattle herds before they put us even more out of pocket. The market's good now. We'll concentrate more on sheep and wheat. It's lunacy to want this farm to look like a picture in a children's book!

MILLA/MOTHER

It's because you don't study all sides of a matter before you make an investment. That's where the trouble starts. If you want to buy Simmentals, then you select them by hand. They don't belong here anyway. The sun scorches the poor animals to a frazzle, seven, eight months of the year. They've got be cared for, Jak.

CHILD JAKKIE

Pa says that when he gets a lot of money from the big cows he's going to buy a hang-glider and then we can see the farm from way, way up above.

AGAAT

Come, Jakkie, I'll clear the plates later. Let's take a lantern and go to the damn.

*(They exit.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Sell the bull if you must sell something. *(She could stop here, but she doesn't.)* Year after year, Jak, you put the almighty Hamburg with the young heifers. And year after year the calves are too big to be born independently. And year after year I ask nicely: "Please, get rid of the bull." It's never you who has to deal with the consequences.

JAK

That bull is worth its weight in gold to me.

MILLA/MOTHER

You just don't know what you're doing. The cows suffer unnecessarily. But what do you do? You always just walk away so you don't see how we have to damage them to deliver the almighty calves. We should have respect for the animals...

JAK

For God's sake just don't start that again.

MILLA/MOTHER

You're imagining things, Jak. I'm not starting anything.

JAK

No, of course not, Milla. Nothing said, nothing meant. I'm imagining things again – the old story. But I know what you think. You always want to get back to that. That I left you in the lurch with Jakkie's birth. That you were unnecessarily damaged in the process.

MILLA/MOTHER

We're talking about the cows, not me. Please don't be ridiculous now.

JAK

But these are always your *exact* words when you talk about it, so don't think I don't know what you're insinuating.

MILLA/MOTHER

I'm talking about how to get right with the farm.

JAK

He was ten days early! How was I supposed to guess it? I wanted to help you with it. It's my son after all! But you decided long ago that Jak de Wet is the villain of this story and he'll remain the villain.

MILLA/MOTHER

It's not true. I don't...

JAK

*(Interrupting her.)*

But do you know, Milla, what it's like to spend your days next to a woman who always knows better? In whose eyes you can't do anything right? What it's like to live with someone who's forever hinting that you don't love her enough? Who only cherishes her own little needs, no matter who you are, what you are, the whole you, that feels and thinks...

MILLA/MOTHER

Don't you see, then? That's what I've always wanted – that you should talk to me like that, so that I could know what you're about.

JAK

But I don't buy your story any longer. Your tale that you spin everyone. The fine, intelligent Milla de Wet! How sensitive! How hard-working! Lonely! Long-suffering! It's a lie, an infamous lie.

MILLA/MOTHER

God Jak, that hurts me.

JAK

Nobody would believe me. Nobody. Everybody would think I'm mad if I told them the truth about you. But I know I'm right!

MILLA/MOTHER

I've never been false to you. That you must know.

*(She approaches him again and he pushes her away. Harder than either of them expected.)*

JAK

Why would any self-respecting woman put up with it?

MILLA/MOTHER

With what?

JAK

Why would she allow herself to be shoved around without phoning the dominee? Without telling a single mortal? Why? Why does she stay? Why does she have a child by such a man?

MILLA/MOTHER

Please stop.

JAK

No, Milla! I'm asking you: why would such a woman have a child with such a man.

MILLA/MOTHER

I don't have to answer such a question.

JAK

And here's another riddle: why does nothing of the fuck-up at home ever show to other people? Always only excuses!

MILLA/MOTHER

Calm down.

JAK

Shall I tell you why you stay with me?

MILLA/MOTHER

Do I have a choice?

JAK

You need me to mistreat you. Do you know why? That's how your mother taught you. And her mother before her taught her, all the way to Eve, to the tree in paradise.

MILLA/MOTHER

Keep your voice down. Jakkie mustn't hear you.

JAK

Let him hear. About time he knew the whole drama into which he was born! *(Beat.)* Look at me, Milla! Look. Here is your accomplice. Do you think it's possible to become like me all on one's own? *(Beat.)* And you can't tell anyone about it, can you? "I the precious, I the victim." How would you ever get something like that past your lips at your sanctified tea-drinking at a church bazaar? No, oh no, there you also have a substitute, there you prefer to worship your b'loved Jesus nailed to his cross. A pity the pictures always show him with his bloody little feet already nailed together. Otherwise you could dream with your mouth full of cake that Pilate was sticking a stick up his holy hole.

MILLA/MOTHER

You'll burn in hell, Jak! Stop it!

JAK

No, Milla. I've been there for a long time. You're the one pretending to be in heaven. Little woman whines for attention until she gets the kind that she most appreciates. Tell me: how do you rape somebody who wants to be raped?

MILLA/MOTHER

Fuck you, Jak.

*(She pushes Jak. Agaat enters with Child Jakkie, unseen.)*

JAK

Ah! Now I've got a rise out of you! Papa's little princess. So scared of the wolf in the dark! That's the beginning of it all. That's what you did with Jakkie when he was small. What will you say when your hair turns out a bloody faggot one day?

CHILD JAKKIE

Mama?

MILLA/MOTHER

Jakkie? Agaat – get him out of here!

JAK

Agaat. As if on cue. *(To Agaat.)* Welcome to the party. *(To Milla/Mother.)* What must she think of you when she hears you allow yourself to be shouted at and beaten up like this? Every day at her post. Starched and ironed. A masterly maid! She plays you much better than I do, doesn't twitch a muscle when you find fault.

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat. Leave us.

AGAAT

Yes, Nooi.

CHILD JAKKIE

*(Wailing.)* What's happening? Ma?

*(Agaat and Child Jakkie exit.)*

JAK

She learns from it, Milla, I'm telling you today, and don't forget it, all the time she's learning from us.

MILLA/MOTHER

Why don't you go away then? Why do you stay with me if I'm so dreadful?

JAK

I can't go away, Milla, even if I wanted to. I'm stuck here! But I'm almost done. Then you can advance again. You've provided a reserve, after all. Agaat Lourier. Pre-raped. She's ready for you! To the bitter end! Because that much I can tell you now, I'm not going to make it all the way with you, Milla, that I know in my bones!

MILLA/MOTHER

Jak, you must get help.

JAK

Help! What help! I'm not the one who was sick here first. It's you, you're the one who's sick here. I'll get well. I'll get myself away from here, even if I have to do away with myself.

*(He moves to exit.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Jak. Wait! It's not true! All that you're saying. There has been love between us.

JAK

You, Milla, are a leech. You suck me dry, you worm my guts out of me, that's what you do! Nobody knows it, nobody can guess it, nobody can read between the lines, but don't think I don't see through you.

MILLA/MOTHER

Why do you make me suffer like this?

*(He laughs – it's a cold bark. Something has come undone.)*

JAK

You don't suffer, you flourish! You're in your element here! A sow is what you are, an eternally ravenous sow with teeth like that! With wings! You're in the trough with your snout in the swill! That's where you are! You batten on me!

*(She goes to him and he runs from her. They chase each other around the room. He hides beneath the table. Silence. The sound of their panting.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

I'll go. I'll leave the room. Just calm yourself. Rather, go and lie down. *(Beat.)* Should I phone a doctor?

*(Jak does not respond. Milla/Mother moves to the stoep. The two are framed for a moment, she sitting on the stoep and he beneath the table.)*

JAK (V.O.)

I will do everything. Plough and sow and shear and milk, I promise.

MILLA /MAIDEN (V.O.)

And help me make a garden?

JAK (V.O.)

And help you make a garden.

MILLA /MAIDEN (V.O.)

Like paradise?

JAK

Like Paradise.

MILLA/MAIDEN (V.O.)

And never leave me?

JAK

And never leave you.

*(Agaat and Child Jakkie pass downstage, on their way to the dam. Their yellow lanterns bob up and down. Adult Jakkie passes by them. A transition.)*

**12.4**

*(Projection: 1976.*

*Milla/Mother and Agaat put away the lunch dishes.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

I think Jakkie brought that Isabelle here to satisfy his Pa. but he doesn't seem very excited, hey?

AGAAT

No. But such a gentleman.

MILLA/MOTHER

God, but that poor thing talks nineteen to the dozen from nervousness. And then Jak grabbing that book of poetry and making her declaim? Embarrassing.

AGAAT

He won't fall for her type. She's too light.

MILLA/MOTHER

Well what's his type, then?

AGAAT

The fynbos and cave type. Or spring type.

MILLA/MOTHER

Whatever could that mean?

AGAAT

You'll see.

MILLA/MOTHER

She seems nice enough. *(Beat.)* It was quite a good lunch. You out-do yourself every time he comes back.

AGAAT

I'm glad you liked it.

MILLA/MOTHER

And the whole house is sparkling. You work to a standstill before he comes home from school. I don't know why you do it.

AGAAT

I like to.

MILLA/MOTHER

You wear yourself out, Agaat. Really.

AGAAT

It's not much. *(Beat.)* I miss him. When he's gone.

MILLA/MOTHER

We all do.

AGAAT

It's difficult to get over.

MILLA/MOTHER

Well its something you'll need to get over. Soon he'll be old enough for army.

AGAAT

I know. *(Beat.)* I want him to come home to a ship-shape place.

MILLA/MOTHER

Well, he's not a king. No need to wear yourself out. *(Beat.)* It's a nice apron you're wearing. Is it new?

AGAAT

Yes.

MILLA/MOTHER

I love the color. It's so dramatic. Where did you get the fabric?

AGAAT

Nowhere.

MILLA/MOTHER

What, nowhere?

AGAAT

It's from Jakkie. For my birthday.

*(Jak and Jakkie enter.)*

JAKKIE

They're posted in January.

JAK

Well, if you're not worried, I'm not worried.



MILLA/MOTHER

Worried about what?

JAKKIE

Marks.

MILLA/MOTHER

Ah. They've never been a problem before – won't be a problem now, I'm sure!

JAKKIE

Agaat, those rusks you made were really quite stupendous. Really, really good. I'd forgotten how delicious your sweets were.

AGAAT

I'm glad you like them, Boetie.

MILLA/MOTHER

*(Moving to the piano.)*

Jakkie, come. Agaat can deal with the lunch dishes. Come sing something.

JAKKIE

I'm no good anymore.

MILLA/MOTHER

Nonsense. A voice like yours never just goes away. How about *Der Musensohn*? You loved that one when I first taught it to you.

JAK

Ai, Milla do we really need to hear one of those bloody songs now?

JAKKIE

Ma, Isabelle's taking a nap. I don't want to wake her.

MILLA/MOTHER

We'll be quiet. Here, come sit next to me.

*(She plays the first few bars of the song. Mother and son sing, beautifully.)*

AGAAT

Bravo! Such a good, strong voice my Boetie.

MILLA/MOTHER

Really extraordinary.

JAKKIE

It's nothing, Ma. *(Beat.)* I'm going to go check on Isabelle. I wanted to show her the dam this afternoon. It's always best in the afternoon.

AGAAT

That's right.

JAK

And after you're done the outside barns need some work.

JAKKIE

I was going to go for a run after the dam.

JAK

It's got to be done today.

MILLA/MOTHER

Jak, he's on holiday. Can't Dawid do it?

JAK

You've got to make yourself useful if you're to stay with us. Is that understood? *(Jakkie doesn't answer.)* Is that understood?

JAKKIE

Ja, pop.

MILLA/MOTHER

Thank you, Jakkie. For singing with me.

JAKKIE

Of course ma *(He kisses her on the head.)* Gaat, I'll see you too, later this evening.

AGAAT

Of course, my Boetie.

*(Jakkie exits. All three watch him go.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

I can't believe how handsome he is.

JAK

What do you expect? He's our child.

AGAAT

Will that be all, nooi? I must go get supper ready next.

MILLA/MOTHER

Yes Agaat. Thank you.

*(Agaat exits.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

He's so far away. Spends all his time reading in his room or running.

JAK

It's because he thinks he's better than us since he's been to Paul Roos. Cape Town's given him a swollen head. Whole town of snobs.

MILLA/MOTHER

He's looking for himself. I just wish I could help.

JAK

Looking? What looking? His country is looking for him! Let him go and put some hair on his chest in the Defense Force. The enemy is bloody well ready to take over the country.

MILLA/MOTHER

For somebody who can think up such outlandish theories about his own wife, your political pronouncements are extremely simple minded.

JAK

That's because it *is* simple. The leftists just want to confuse us so that the *terrs* can slip in unnoticed.

MILLA/MOTHER

So much paranoia. Makes a country sick.

JAK

You'll be thankful our leaders had the foresight they did once all the birds come home to roost.

MILLA/MOTHER

Home to roost.

JAK

We were talking it through. He and I just now.

MILLA/MOTHER

What through?

JAK

Army.

MILLA/MOTHER

He's still too young to be having this talk.

JAK

We already made the plan. He'll join the Air Force permanently after basic training.

MILLA/MOTHER

What about university?

JAK

Plenty of time after.

MILLA/MOTHER

Is this what *he* wants?

JAK

The plan kills two birds with one stone. He won't have to interrupt his studies later for national service.

MILLA/MOTHER

This plan kills more than birds.

JAK

He earns a salary *while* he's studying! And with every exam he passes he earns more stripes. Then promotion's guaranteed. (*Beat.*) Captain Jakkie de Wet.

MILLA/MOTHER

I don't care about promotion or stripes. I care about him.

JAK

I do too, Milla. This is the most honorable career for a young man in South Africa today. I wish they'd take *me!*

MILLA/MOTHER

That's just the problem.

JAK

Is it then too much to want my son to do the thing I never could?

MILLA/MOTHER

I don't know.

JAK

You're just being disagreeable.

MILLA/MOTHER

Suit yourself.

*(She's about to leave. Lights up on Jakkie teaching Agaat to dance.)*

JAK

They're too close.

MILLA/MOTHER

Excuse me?

JAK

My son and your skivvy. I saw the two of them in her room last night. The door was open and the moving shadows caught my eye across the lawn. It's not natural, Milla, them being so close.

*(She exits leaving Jak alone. Jakkie and Agaat dance on.)*

## SCENE THIRTEEN

*(Projection: 1996.*

*(Agaat in front of the alphabet chart with Japie the feather duster in hand. Milla/Crone's sentences are spelled, letter-by-letter on the scrim. Agaat reads them out loud.*

*Projection: Y-O-U ! N-O-O-N-D-A-Y W-I-T-C-H.)*

AGAAT

“You! Noonday witch!” How’s that for a parting shot. What else now?

*(Projection: B-R-O-W-N S-U-I-T-C-A-S-E. W-H-E-R-E. W-H-E-N. W-H-Y.)*

AGAAT

One minute, Ounooi. I’ll translate it all for you. *(Impersonating Milla.)* “What, I ask you for the how-manieth time, happened to your brown suitcase that I put on the half-shelf of the washstand in the outside room, on the day of your birthday, twelfth July in the year of our lord nineteen sixty, when you moved in there?”

*(Projection: R-I-G-H-T Y-O-U-R R-E-P-L-Y ?)*

AGAAT

“Absolutely right. How excellently you can guess at the senile thoughts of an old woman. What’s your reply to this?” *(She recites):* “Sirloin of lamb, cut into flat slices and fried in a pan. Wing rib, suitable for pot-roasting. Thick flank, may be salted and boiled or stewed. Neck, collarbone, tail, for soup and stew. Bones are generally sold to kaffirs.” Do you want to hear about the cuts of the birthday hanslam as well? The nice fresh braai chops for the nice fresh kitchen skivvy? The two of them, skivvy and lamb, both cut up much better than an old tough cow, let me tell you that! Next?

*(Projection: V-E-R-Y F-U-N-N-Y.)*

AGAAT

Thank you. Next?

*(Projection: W-H-A-T W-E-R-E Y-O-U D-O-I-N-G F-I-R-S-T N-I-G-H-T O-N M-O-U-N-T-A-I-N I-N Y-O-U-R U-N-I-F-O-R-M. Question Mark.)*

AGAAT

“What were you doing that first night on the mountain in your uniform?”

*(Projection: S-A-W Y-O-U W-I-T-H B-I-N-O-C-S.  
Full stop.)*

AGAAT

“I saw you through my binoculars.”

*(Projection: F-U-N-N-Y S-T-E-P-S. Full stop. S-A-  
T-A-N-I-C R-I-T-E-S. Exclamation point.)*

AGAAT

“Funny steps. Satanic rites.” *(Beat.)* Conceived in sin.

*(Projection: N-O-T T-A-K-E-N I-N B-Y Y-O-U-R  
I-N-N-O-C-E-N-C-E. Comma. W-I-T-C-H.  
Exclamation point.)*

AGAAT

“I’m not taken in by your innocence, witch!” *(Beat.)* Now we’re getting somewhere, hey?

*(Projection: M-Y D-E-A-T-H N-O-T  
E-N-O-U-G-H F-O-R Y-O-U. Question mark.)*

AGAAT

“Isn’t my death enough for you?”

*(Projection: O-N W-H-A-T C-L-I-M-A-X A-R-E  
Y-O-U S-E-T. Question mark. Swear word!)*

AGAAT

“On what climax am I set?” *(Agaat again assumes her declamatory position.)* “Shadow work is a form of white embroidery that is within the reach of all because its technique is very simple. It is suitable for table linen, bedspreads, pillow covers for babies, bridal veils, blouses, christening robes, children’s clothes, shroud.” Next?

*(Projection: M-O-C-K-I-N-G M-E.)*

AGAAT

“Mocking me.” *(Beat.)* Never. Next?

*(Projection: W-H-Y D-I-D Y-O-U D-I-G U-P T-  
H-E L-A-M-B E-A-R F-R-O-M T-H-E B-I-N.  
Full stop. W-I-T-H  
W-H-A-T S-U-P-E-R-S-T-I-T-I-O-N-S D-I-D Y-O-  
U I-N-F-E-C-T J-A-K-K-I-E. Question mark.)*

AGAAT

“Why did you dig up the lamb ear from the bin? With what superstitions did you infect Jakkie?” It was my own hanslam. Sweetflour. She was five months old and she came when I called her. I fed her milk from the bottle with extra cream and a teaspoon of slaked lime.

*(Projection: Y-O-U L-I-E.)*

AGAAT

And, on top of that, it was my birthday. The twelfth of July. You’d very kindly taught me that that was the day on which the Lord gave myself to me as a present. So then you forgot it in your hurry to get me out of the house. Then you pretended the outside room was heaven.

*(Agaat stuffs her fist in her mouth. She is afraid to say more. She turns to Milla/Crone, ready for the next onslaught.)*

*Projection: H-Y-P-O-C-R-I-T-E. Exclamation point. D-O-N-T M-A-K-E T-H-O-S-E S-O-P-P-Y E-Y-E-S A-T M-E. EXCLAMATION POINT.)*

AGAAT

Here we go! *(Beat.)* “Hypocrite! Don’t make those sappy eyes at me!”

*(Projection: W-H-Y D-I-D Y-O-U N-E-V-E-R T-E-L-L M-E T-H-A-T Y-O-U S-A-W E-M-P-E-R-O-R. Question mark.)*

AGAAT

“Why didn’t you tell me that you saw the Blue Emperor butterfly?” *(Beat.)* With Jakkie, you mean?

*(Projection: I S-P-I-E-D O-N Y-O-U S-A-W E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G. Exclamation mark.)*

AGAAT

“I spied on you. I saw everything!” *(Beat.)* Next.

*(Projection: S-T-O-L-E H-I-M F-R-O-M M-E. Exclamation Point.)*

AGAAT

“You stole him from me!”



*(Projection: Y-O-U-R F-A-U-L-T H-E L-E-F-T  
L-I-K-E T-H-A-T. W-H-A-T D-I-D Y-O-U T-E-L-  
L H-I-M I-N T-H-A-T P-L-A-N-E T-H-A-T N-I-  
G-H-T. Question mark.)*

AGAAT

“It’s your fault that he left like that. What did you tell him in that plane, on the night of his birthday?” Any more questions, Ounooi?

*(Projection: A-N-S-W-E-R M-E. Exclamation  
point.)*

AGAAT

You’re losing me, Ounooi. Keep the thoughts nice and clear now, hey?

*(Projection: M-Y O-N-L-Y C-H-I-L-D.  
Exclamation. D-O-E-S H-E K-N-O-W I A-M D-  
Y-I-N-G H-E-R-E. Question mark. W-H-Y D-O Y-  
O-U K-E-E-P M-E I-N T-H-E D-A-R-K. Swear  
word. A-B-O-U-T H-I-S P-L-A-N-S. Exclamation.  
Question mark.)*

AGAAT

“My only child! Does he know I’m dying here? Why do you keep me in the dark about his plans?” *(Beat.)* I think that’s enough for now, Ounooi. We’re both getting tired.

*(She pulls the sheets up over Milla/Crone.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

You think you can wrap me up here? You think you can tidy up and finish off this whole story as you do with everything. But you can’t. It’s not in your sovereign power. You *need* me for it!

AGAAT

*(r.e. the sheet.)* Whiter than snow!

*(Milla/Crone moves her eyes frantically toward the  
journals. Agaat presses her forehead to  
Milla/Crone’s.)*

AGAAT

“What do you think you’re going to achieve by rubbing my nose in what I’ve written in my diaries?”

MILLA/MAIDEN

Softly she interprets my thoughts for me. I listen. To myself.

AGAAT

“It’s your story, it’s for your sake, so that you may have something in your old age to remember how you were rescued from destruction. How I made a human being out of you. You were nothing, you’d have stayed nothing, if I hadn’t taken a chance with you.”

MILLA/MOTHER

Her lips are near my ear. I feel the moist air from her mouth.

AGAAT

“I’m not saying I did everything right – I constantly made mistakes. I hurt you. I humiliated you. But by what example was I to measure myself? You know what it was like in those days. Your case was highly exceptional. But I tried, under the circumstances and by the light that was available to me. I tried. Now you’re making a circus of it. A C-I-R-C-U-S. Full Stop.” *(She straightens up.)* I didn’t know you were so interested in the little old books, Ounooi. But not now. I’ll read to you again tonight. Useful bits and pieces of all kinds. *(Beat.)* Close your eyes now. Think of other things. I’m staying with you. I’m not going away. Here I am – right here. Rest. It won’t be long now. We’re almost there.

MILLA/MAIDEN

But how did it begin, Agaat? Where did we start?

*(The sound of wings flapping.)*

**SCENE FOURTEEN**

**14.1**

*(Projection: 1982.*

*The sound of wings merges with the sound of a plane taking off. Adult Agaat and Milla/Mother write letters to Jakkie in the Air Force.)*

AGAAT

Dear Airman Captain de Wet.

MILLA/MOTHER

Dear Jakkie.

AGAAT

So much happening here on the farm while you've been away.

MILLA/MOTHER

Where to start?

AGAAT

Last night I saw a Jackal in the yard delicately sniffing a twig.

MILLA/MOTHER

Thank you for the record of the Air Force choir.

AGAAT

It heard me and whipped its head around. I saw its wide green eyes in the night.

MILLA/MOTHER

I'm so glad you joined the choir.

AGAAT

I wasn't afraid. He was in the yard with plans of his own.

MILLA/MOTHER

I hope you are staying safe. And enjoying flying planes.

AGAAT

It has been grey here on Grootmoedersdrift.

MILLA/MOTHER

Be safe, my son. You must know how proud we are.

AGAAT

But look – I've already filled nearly thirty pages with my words.

*(Milla/Mother cannot think of anything else to write.)*

AGAAT

But now you must tell me of yourself. What do they give you to eat there in the mess? Do you see meat in those army stews? Do you sleep warm enough? Are your superiors well disposed to you? I understand if you're too busy to write back, captain. In that case just send a card to say that you're still alive. Or make the phone ring three times to say you're thinking of me. Your mother and I will know it's you.

MILLA/MOTHER

*(Frustrated.)*  
Nothing more.

AGAAT

I pray for your blessed and kept return from the distant skies.

MILLA/MOTHER

Love, Ma.

AGAAT

Agaat Lourier.

*(Agaat gives Milla/Mother the letter. She reads it then shreds it. The phone rings three times.)*

## **14.2**

*(Projection: 1985.*

*Agaat on the phone with Jakkie. Milla/Mother eavesdrops.)*

AGAAT

Never mind you now, Boetie, why are you so obstreperous this morning? *(Beat.)* Of course I want you to stay! You're my brother. You're the only little brother I have. *(Beat.)* I'll miss you, yes, more than I miss you already. *(Beat.)* Of course I'll write. I'll write even more. *(Beat.)* You're my child too, you know that, don't you? But first come to have your birthday with Gaat. I'm making everything that you like. For one last time. *(Beat.)* No, you can't possibly want to pull out now. *(Beat.)* No, it's all been arranged, Jakkie! It would break my heart! *(Beat.)* And your father's even rented an airplane for you. *(Beat.)* Never! Oh no! Just forget it! *(Beat.)* No, I'd be far too scared to go in a

plane. *(Beat.)* Never mind now. No, Jakkie, don't carry on like that. So what do you want me to do then? *(Beat.)* I'll never leave her alone. She needs me. I have an obligation. *(Beat.)* Where would I have to go? Who would want me...as...I am? *(Beat.)* No, Boetie, not yet now, perhaps one day. I will, I promise. Everything I'll tell you, one day. *(Beat.)* Jakkie, that's right, you must do as your heart tells you to. *(Beat.)* I'll take care, whatever happens. You know I will. *(Beat.)* So then they have only me. It's better than nothing. And so then I have only them. That's also better than nothing. *(Beat.)* Yes, you will be happy, of course you will. *(Beat.)* Yes, I will. I always think of you. I pray for you. *(Beat.)* No, Jakkie, you mustn't talk like that. *(Beat.)* No, go and read your Bible like a good boy. To every thing there's a season, a time to stay and a time to go. In Ecclesiastes, you go and read it, it will comfort you.

*(Milla/Mother grabs the phone from Agaat.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Jakkie? It's just the dial tone. Were you even talking to him?

AGAAT

I must go make sure Dawid knows the plan for the party.

MILLA/MOTHER

Answer me! Was he even there?

AGAAT

Does the nooi need any thing else this morning?

MILLA/MOTHER

Who are you?

AGAAT

I beg your pardon, Nooi?

MILLA/MOTHER

Who *are* you?

AGAAT

Is Nooi feeling all right?

MILLA/MOTHER

How many thousands of devils are you? Who are you trying to fool? It's my child. And why such secretive talk? You say one thing to him and another to me. A different story for each of us. You're witching us!

AGAAT

Nooi, let me make you some tea. Please calm down.

MILLA/MOTHER

I know you're lying!

AGAAT

I was talking to Jakkie. About the party. Nooi was eavesdropping.

MILLA/MOTHER

If only I'd known what I was doing the day I took you in here.

AGAAT

Please don't jump to conclusions now.

MILLA/MOTHER

Stealing him from me! Your name means good but you are far from it! A curse you are!  
A witch! Stealing him from me!

*(Agaat turns on her heel and exits, leaving Milla/Mother alone.)*

### 14.3

*(Jakkie and Agaat in the orchard. They dangle their feet into an irrigation ditch. Milla/Mother lies on the ground nearby, listening.)*

JAKKIE

So that's the story. There's no turning back any more and I don't know what lies ahead.  
*(Beat.)* What does the water sound like when the sluice opens in the irrigation furrow?  
*(Beat.)* G-g-g-g-g-a-a-a-t. *(Beat.)* Do you remember? The sound of the sea in a shell?  
The sound of the wind in the wheat? Do you remember how you made me listen? And  
everything sounded like your name. Ggggggg-aaaat, says the black pine tree in the rain,  
the drift when it's in flood from far away. Do you remember?

AGAAT

*Ja*, you were still very small.

JAKKIE

I always wanted to know where you came from. What your name means.

AGAAT

Yes, you were an inquisitive one, you.

JAKKIE

I still am. *(Beat.)* You said you'd tell.

AGAAT

One day. Not yet.

JAKKIE

One day when? I'm leaving now.

AGAAT

One day when the time is ripe.

JAKKIE

It's time. The oranges are rotten! *(Beat.)* Do you remember the knife?

AGAAT

Do you still have it?

JAKKIE

I never throw away anything you've given me. Do you remember when you gave it to me?

AGAAT

Of course. it was when you turned eight, on your birthday. I had to ask nicely. Your father said you'd just get up to no good with it.

JAKKIE

He said if I wanted a knife I had to be a man, and a man can dock a tail. He forced me. You too. Ma too. My own hanslam you selected for it, would you believe. *(Beat.)* I'm no longer scared of him, Gaat, for that I've almost seen my arse too many times in the service of his pathetic National Party. Mirages that fuck out, missiles around my ears. Killed hundreds of people, more than I'll ever know. Jesus, what a disgrace. How must I live with it for the rest of my life? I'm ashamed of it, that it happened to me, that I didn't see it sooner. Always just: You'll do what I tell you, chappie. Salute, general! I puke of it, of this pathetic lot who tell themselves they've been placed here on the southernmost tip with a purpose and they represent something grandiose in the procession of nations. O wide and sorrowful land blah blah blah with flag and Word and trumpet. It's sick! It's better that I go away before I do something rash. He's pathetic, my father. My mother, too. She's pathetic. They keep each other pathetic, the two of them, with all their wealth and wisdom. The whole community here intoning their anthem, they with their stud farms breeding bulls for the abattoir and babies for the army, they with their church steeples and iron fists towering toward heaven. Who do they think they are? Blind and deaf against the whole world? How long must...

AGAAT

*(Interrupting him.)*

Jakkie. The orchard has ears.

*(Milla/Mother gets up and exits, unseen.)*

#### 14.4

*(Jak, Milla/Mother, and Jakkie and the dinner table. Agaat stands in the shadows.)*

JAK

I'm asking, what do my son's politics look like these days?

MILLA/MOTHER

Jak. Let's talk politics later.

JAK

He's in the Air Force. Surely he must know more than the man in the street.

*(Jakkie does not respond.)*

JAK

Are you all going to ignore me now? Have you swallowed your tongue, Jakkie? Then answer me when I'm speaking to you, chappie. Kleinbaas Jakkie here, it seems he wants away, a little birdie told me, away from his beloved nursemaid with whom he speaks in secret on the telephone.

JAKKIE

Pa.

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat. I think we're finished now.

*(Agaat moves to clear the plates.)*

JAK

Agaat, put down the dishes. You'll just have to hear as well what your pet says to us. *(To Jakkie.)* Have you heard about this *Poppie Nongena*. By Mrs. Elsa Joubert? Everyone's up in arms, hey? Your mother bought it but never finished it of course. Too sad for her. As if your mother's ever had a problem with sadness. But no, I've read the letters in the paper and everyone's on about "structural violence." It's all over the place. So, Jakkie, you must explain to your ignorant pa what structural violence is. Come, Gaat, your kleinbaas Captain de Wet here is going to give us an exposition. I don't see any structural violence or any other violence against you except that little half-way arm of yours. Fucked crooked or kicked crooked, doesn't matter. No long journeys for you, only a nice servant's room with a fireplace, settled for life here on Grootmoedersdrift. Structural *advantages* I'd say. White people's food, white people's language, a white apron, and here's your little white pet who shares his little secrets with you that his own mother and father aren't allowed to hear. They hear only the little white lies. Come now, Jakkie, tell us: what is structural violence?



MILLA/MOTHER

You're drunk, Jak.

JAK

Should your father tell you what he thinks, Jakkie? He thinks the world finds us whites in this country interesting only for what we're supposed to have done to the hotnots and the kaffirs. And then they're going to hold it against us all over again because we dare write down on behalf of the so-called victims what we did to them. No, we should rather kindly teach the poor devils to write their own stories and package it for them. First-class export produce. *(Beat.)* How about it, Agaat? You're the exception here, after all. Your nooi has already taught you nicely how to write, hasn't she? You after all write long letters to dear gracious Captain de Wet here.

MILLA/MOTHER

Leave Agaat out of it.

JAK

I'm sure you are aware, dear Captain de Wet, that your esteemed mother opens all her servant's letters to her son here. *(Beat.)* Don't you people have anything to say? What does one have to do to make you wake up? Spineless! That's why the enemy is sharpening its teeth on our borders! The Afrikaner women, they who should be carrying the torch, they're useless, the Afrikaner youth, characterless, without ideals, even the Afrikaner skivvies are struck dumb! Is this what our ancestors tamed this land for? *(To Agaat.)* Come, Agaat, where are the days when your kind cut the throats of their masters in their sleep? *(Beat.)* All struck dumb. But Jakkie my boy you never answered my question. What *is* structural violence. Huh? Enlighten your Pa. SPEAK!! SPEAK FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.

*(Jak grabs Jakkie violently.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat! Help!

AGAAT

Boetie!

*(The women separate father and son. Jakkie hugs Agaat tight.)*

JAK

Fucking disgusting. The lot of you.

*(He exits. Milla/Mother goes to Jakkie.)*

JAKKIE

Don't touch me.

*(He exits.)*

AGAAT

Jakkie must promise me that he will not drink tomorrow.

MILLA/MOTHER

He won't like that.

AGAAT

He must. No choice. He musn't ruin his own party.

MILLA/MOTHER

I'm sorry. For calling you a witch. I was out of my mind.

*(Agaat does not answer.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat?

AGAAT

He mustn't say something he regrets because of drink.

MILLA/MOTHER

Agaat? Do you forgive me?

AGAAT

Everything must be perfect.

## **14.5**

*(Jakkie's party: a full moon. Music and chatter and laughter. Jakkie is in the middle of giving a speech to gathered crowd. He's beautiful – charming, charismatic, drunk.)*

JAKKIE

Of course, I'd like to thank my dear mother, for the hours of piano lessons and all those the old German *lieder*. And to my pa, my mainstay of a father, I'll raise a glass. Thank you both. How much I learned from both of you here on Grootmoedersdrift. And how beautiful this party tonight. But none of this would be possible without Agaat Lourier. Gaat. Who we can all agree is the real *Baas* of Gdrift. Agaat! Come here so we can all thank you for the food and the garden and this whole feast!

*(Agaat sheepishly comes forward.)*

JAKKIE

Agaat. Agaat is someone who reaches great heights. Who spreads her wings wide. She showed me as a child how the blue crane becomes airborne, she named the clouds for me, and taught me to read the currents in the air.

VOICE (V.O.)

Ai! Smear that mouth with jam! Poet of Gdrift!

*(Laughter.)*

JAKKIE

And! It will be an honor and a privilege for me to take her as my first passenger on a special birthday flight!

*(Applause and cheers.)*

JAKKIE

It was also her birthday recently, and I've got her something she'll need for her first flight.

*(Shouts of "Open it! Open it!" Agaat opens the package. Inside is a bright red silk scarf. She gives Jakkie a chaste hug and exits to applause. Milla/Mother approaches.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

You just want to make a spectacle of her.

JAKKIE

Ma, what happens now, is between me and Agaat. *(Beat.)* She'll get into that Cessna with me and feel how it feels to be as free as a bird. Because that's what she scared of. That's what you're all scared of. You're more scared of freedom than you are of the communists. Even if it fell into your laps you wouldn't recognize it or know what to do with it. *(Beat.)* So I'm not permitted to say what I want to say. Agaat's orders. Better then that we go up in the air together. Perhaps she'll be able to tell me at last where she came from and how she ended up here, in her stupid cap there in the back in the outside room. So prematurely aged. So set in her ways. *(Beat.)* They hate her, ma. They mock her. It's you who made her like that. You and Pa.

*(Milla/Mother cannot respond.)*

JAKKIE

Agaat? Agaat!? Grab you're scarf. It's time to fly!

*(The sound of a propeller. Agaat and Jakkie in the plane, high above Grootmoedersdrift. Two chairs or a bench.)*

JAKKIE

Do you remember the game we played when I was small? I'd stand on a bucket. Pretend I was flying. And you'd ask...

AGAAT

How high are you now?

JAKKIE

And I'd say: as high as the mountains!

AGAAT

And I'd say: do tell me everything you see.

*(They replay the childhood game.)*

JAKKIE

I see a bird!

AGAAT

What kind of bird is it?

JAKKIE

I don't know!

AGAAT

Well then, ask him what kind of bird is he.

JAKKIE

I can't!

AGAAT

Put your hand out and catch him and bring him home. Then I'll ask him what kind of bird he is.

JAKKIE

Then he'll fly away!

AGAAT

Then I know what his name is!

JAKKIE

What?

AGAAT  
I must whisper it in your ear.

JAKKIE  
But I'm up here!

AGAAT  
Well then come down again.

JAKKIE  
I'm coming! I see you. Here I am! *(Beat.)* And then I'd jump in your arms. I'll miss you, Agaat. I will terribly. But I must go.

AGAAT  
I know, Boetie.

JAKKIE  
I wish you would go with me.

AGAAT  
Nooi needs me.

JAKKIE  
You could find a job in Toronto, I'm sure of it.

AGAAT  
No one would want me, Boetie. My place is here.

JAKKIE  
When things die down...after the...Gaat?

AGAAT  
Fire.

JAKKIE  
What?

AGAAT  
I see it. There below by the barns. A fire's started.

JAKKIE  
Shit.

*(The crackle of flames merges with the sound of the propeller. Lights shift. Sounds of general commotion. The stage is engulfed in a delicate,*

*embroidered pattern of red, orange, and yellow. Suddenly, a tight spot on Agaat and Jakkie, with a duffle bag. He hugs her tightly and then exits. Sound of a car door slamming. Headlights pass over Agaat as she stands on the stoep. Milla/Mother enters, bleary eyed.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Did I just hear the car?

AGAAT

Go back to sleep, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

What would I do without you, Agaat?

AGAAT

Go get some rest Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

I just had a dream. You were...I was chasing after you. I ran and ran and ran. And I finally caught you. But your body was so small. And I worried I'd broken you...

AGAAT

It's been a long day...

MILLA/MOTHER

You are a piece. A piece of me.

AGAAT

Good night, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

Good night, Agaat.

*(Milla/Mother exits. Agaat takes off her cap and weeps.)*

**SCENE FIFTEEN**

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Agaat moves to the foot of the hospital bed. She unfurls the large piece of cloth sitting at the foot of the bed: embroidered white on white. Milla/Maiden and Milla/Mother stand nearby.)*

AGAAT

It is finished.

MILLA/MAIDEN

The big cloth. The one at which you've been laboring all this time.

AGAAT

It will just have to be finished now. I can't do more than this. But before I wash it and starch it, I must first put it on and go lie in your grave with it. This very night is the trial.

MILLA/MOTHER

My shroud.

*(Agaat puts the shroud over her head.)*

AGAAT

The four dresses of a woman's life in Christ. Christening-dress, confirmation dress, wedding dress

AGAAT

MILLA/MOTHER

MILLA/MAIDEN

Shroud.

Shroud.

Shroud.

MILLA/MOTHER

It's all there. In fine white embroidery. The same at your cap.

AGAAT

It's the fire.

MILLA/MAIDEN

It's the flood.

AGAAT

It's the feast.

MILLA/ MOTHER

The shearing.

AGAAT  
The calving.

MILLA/MAIDEN  
The Hanslammer.

AGAAT  
A blue emperor in the forest.

MILLA/MOTHER  
All the scenes of Grootmoedersdrift. From the land that was always yours.

AGAAT  
It's the best I could do. Do you remember the cloth? The linen from your Ma's trousseau? For one day when I'm master, you said.

*(Agaat climbs into bed with Milla/Crone.)*

AGAAT  
First the history of South Africa, you said. And then heaven.

*(Agaat holds Milla/Crone. They breathe together.)*



**SCENE SIXTEEN**

*(Projection: 1985.*

*Milla/Mother and Jak are in the sitting room. Agaat holds out a letter.)*

AGAAT

Read.

*(Milla/Mother grabs the letter.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

“Dear Gaat, by the time you get this letter I’ll have left the country. I asked somebody to post it for me in town once I’d gone. I hope it doesn’t get intercepted.” This isn’t his handwriting.

AGAAT

He must have written it quickly.

JAK

Give it here.

*(When Jak’s done reading he crumples the letter in his pocket and exits.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Jak! Where are you going? Jak?

*(Sound of a car starting and screeching away.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

What does he write, Agaat? Please?

AGAAT

I don’t know, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

Yes you do.

AGAAT

You must get the letter from the *Baas*.

MILLA/MOTHER

You and I both know that isn’t Jakkie’s handwriting.

I didn't get a proper look. AGAAT

Did you write that letter? MILLA/MOTHER

No. AGAAT

Where is he? MILLA/MOTHER

He's safe Nooi. AGAAT

Don't play games now. Where is he? MILLA/MOTHER

I tell you, Nooi, he's safe. AGAAT

Why would he leave? MILLA/MOTHER

He was unhappy, Nooi. AGAAT

We're all unhappy. That doesn't mean you just vanish. MILLA/MOTHER

I can tell you, Nooi, that he's better off where he is. AGAAT

And *where* is that? MILLA/MOTHER

Far away from here. AGAAT

Was this your idea? MILLA/MOTHER

No. AGAAT

MILLA/MOTHER

What did you tell him in the plane?

AGAAT

We didn't speak. It was too noisy.

MILLA/MOTHER

His whole life's been a conversation I can't hear. *(Beat.)* I'll miss him, Agaat. He's my child.

AGAAT

We both love him, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

But he doesn't love me. Only loves his Gaat.

AGAAT

That's not true, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER

Don't play dumb. You used to do that all the time when you were little – pretend not to understand. But you always understand perfectly.

AGAAT

He didn't mean to hurt you. By leaving.

MILLA/MOTHER

I'm sure that's what he told you.

AGAAT

He was being honest. It was because...

*(She stops herself.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Because why?

AGAAT

No.

MILLA/MOTHER

Because of me? Because of Jak? What?

AGAAT

I promised, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER  
Is he never coming back, then?

AGAAT  
I don't know.

MILLA/MOTHER  
But you do! Tell me where my son is. Tell me where he's gone.

AGAAT  
Away, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER  
It's because I was a terrible mother.

AGAAT  
You were not.

MILLA/MOTHER  
Wasn't even his mother. You were.

AGAAT  
He's my Boetie, Nooi. My brother.

MILLA/MOTHER  
But you were always so close. Sun and cloud. Rock and water. Inseparable. I always spied on you, you must know. Those evenings in front of the fire. What did you whisper to him there? I tried to hard to hear but I never could.

AGAAT  
A story.

MILLA/MOTHER  
What story?

AGAAT  
My story.

MILLA/MOTHER  
Can you tell it to me now, Agaat?

AGGAT  
No, Nooi.

MILLA/MOTHER  
Please?

*(Agaat bends down to whisper into Milla/Mother's ear. Suddenly the sound of a car screeching and crashing. Jak is illuminated, impaled by a tree branch.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

What was that?

AGAAT

*(At the window.)*

Down by the drift. An accident. The Baas.

SCENE SEVENTEEN

*(Projection: 1954.*

*Darkness.)*

MILLA/MOTHER (V.O.)

So many endings. But where did we begin?

*(Milla/maiden strikes a match and lights a lamp. Child Agaat is illuminated crouched with her fist in her mouth. She's filthy and trembling. Milla/Maiden hunches down with her.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

I won't do anything to you.

*(Child Agaat retreats even further.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

What's your name? Tell the kleinnooi what your name is, won't you? Tell me, then I'll stop them hurting you. The oumies says they do bad things to you. Must I ask your father, hmmm?

CHILD AGAAT

(Faint.)  
g-g-g-g-g-g...

MILLA/MAIDEN

Say again. I couldn't hear so well, say?

CHILD AGAAT

g-g-g-g-g-g...

MILLA/MAIDEN

Gggggg-what? That's not a name. Say it again for the kleinnooi so that I can hear nicely. Come. (She repeats the sound.) g-g-g-g-g-g.

AGAAT

g-g-g-g-g-g

*(Milla/Mother is illuminated.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

That was the beginning. That sound. You felt empty and full at the same time.

MILLA/MAIDEN

g-g-g-g-g

MILLA/MOTHER

As if it were a sound that belonged to yourself.

*(Lights down on Milla/Mother.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

g-g-g-g-g

CHILD AGAAT

g-g-g-g-g

MILLA/MAIDEN

I talked to your mother and she will let me take you with me. To get you cleaned up and fed properly. So that you may have a good life. So let's walk to the dam, then, you and I. Then we can look at the ducklings. At my farm—where I'm taking you—there's also a dam with ducks, with little green heads, where you can swim. I'll teach you, first with a little tube around you. Then I'll hold my hands under you so that you can feel you're floating. And then I'll show you how one does like a little dog. And then one day you'll swim, all on your own. Come let me carry you.

*(Milla/Maiden bends down and Child Agaat darts away off stage. Milla chases her – a stylized movement that feels like a memory. Maybe the landscape is projected over her as she runs? She tackles Child Agaat to the ground. They're close now, panting.)*

MILLA/MAIDEN

You're mine now! And now you open your ears and you listen to me well: I'll thrash your backside blood-red for you if you don't behave yourself now. (Beat.) No. That's not true. I don't mean it. I'm stupid, stupid, stupid. Forgive me. I promise you never ever again will any body hurt you. And you're not naughty, you're just scared. Because you have to go away and because you don't know what's going to happen. Don't be scared, just don't be scared. Nobody will hurt you. Everything will be fine. I promise. (Beat.) Now why don't we take a bath, you and I. Let's get cleaned up.

*(Milla/Maiden lifts up Child Agaat and suddenly the stage is flooded with blue light. She cleans Child Agaat, moving her hands over her body, attempting to understand it, to clean it, to possess it.)*

CHILD AGAAT (V.O.)

What is holy?

MILLA/MAIDEN (V.O.)

Everything that's wild. Everything that's free. Everything that we didn't make ourselves.  
Everything that we can't cling to or tie down. Your soul is holy.

CHILD AGAAT (V.O.)

But you caught me. And you tamed me. Am I holy?



**SCENE EIGHTEEN**

*(Projection: 1996.*

*Milla/Maiden continues to wash Child/Agaat.  
Milla/Mother stands over Milla/Crone's hospital  
bed. Agaat hugs Milla/Crone, breathing with her.)*

MILLA/MOTHER

Where are you agaat?

MILLA/MAIDEN

Here I am

MILLA/MOTHER

A voice speaking for me

MILLA/MAIDEN

A candle lit for me

MILLA/MOTHER

My rod and my staff

MILLA/MAIDEN

Where you go there I shall go

MILLA/MOTHER

Your house is my house

MILLA/MAIDEN

Your land is my land

MILLA/MOTHER

The land that the Lord thy God giveth you

MILLA/MAIDEN

Is this the beginning now, this lightness? The end my beginning? Can I venture it on my own?

MILLA/MOTHER

Yes without lamentation, without sighing. A permeable world without end, this rustling region.

MILLA/MAIDEN

The blue crane rises clamouring about the ripples. Her call returns to her for a last time from the valley, in canon-thunder.

MILLA/MOTHER

In my Overberg

MILLA/MAIDEN

Over the bent world brooding

MILLA/MOTHER

In my hand the hand of the small

MILLA/CRONE

Agaat.

*(Milla dies. The sun rises on Gdrift. Yellow, orange, pink. Agaat stands and takes off her apron, her cap, and her shoes. She stands with both feet planted firmly in the soil.)*

## **EPILOGUE**

*(Projection: Cape Town → Toronto)*

*Jakkie in a plane. Low humming. Darkness.)*

JAKKIE

What remains? *(Beat.)* I just want to cauterize it all neatly now. A dry white scar. *(Beat.)* Gaat's story, the last story that she always had to tell me before I'd go to sleep, the one she never wanted Ma to hear. Her voice close to me, her forehead bent over me, the embroidery on her cap very close, white sheep, white flowers, white mountains and trees. *(Beat.)* Once upon a time, long, long ago...

*(Agaat opens her mouth wide, as if to speak. A white light. Bright. Overwhelming. Then: Blackout. Silence.)*

**END OF PLAY.**

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