

NOT ALL CAMPS HAVE CAMOUFLAGE:

GAY WRITING AND THE GREAT SOUTH AFRICAN DREAM

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Abstract

I shall be addressing the question of the constitutive importance of sexuality, and specifically of articulations and representations of *homosexuality*, in the self-defining national imagination of post-apartheid South Africa. I shall be concerned with ways of thinking the representation of marginalised sexualities, as well as of the significance of the paradoxical or oxymoronic *centrality* of those marginalities within the project of fabricating a national identity. To this end, I shall consider the specific field of cultural production that might most conveniently bear the name "South African gay writing in English." I will, perhaps presumptuously, engage with the problematic of what an appropriate or productive political aesthetics of "gay writing" might be within our particular historical moment.

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INTRODUCTION

It is neither a wistful sentimentalism nor the oversimplification attendant to a crude periodising urge to suggest that the period of time since the unbanning of the liberation movements and the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 can be identified as marking a genuinely new era of South African political, cultural and intellectual life, an era in which the conditions and expectations informing the possibility of the emergence of a South African civil society have undergone a profound and radical transformation. This transformation is one characterised on the most fundamental level by the loosening - indeed, to a large extent, the abolition - of legal, political and discursive restraints on the private and public activities of groups and individuals within the (fragmented) body politic. This loosening, this unravelling of the knots of paternalistic and repressive state control, is clearly visible across a broad spectrum of social and political phenomena, from the relaxation of censorship and the scrapping of the Publications Control Board, to the inclusiveness of, firstly, the interim Bill of Rights, and now the Interim Constitution itself.

Certainly we are poised - cynics would say adrift - at an unique and unrepeatably moment in our national history, a moment of imminence, of pregnancy, in which - at least notionally - the past has been wiped away, eradicated, and the task remains to reinvent ourselves, to construct afresh a nation underwritten by new principles and premises, new ethics and ideals. The rubric of "The New South Africa", fatuous media catchphrase and rhetorical instrument of political opportunism though it may be, nevertheless finds sufficient resonance in the popular imagination to have some status - waning though that status may be - as signifier of a *real*, though not *actual*, entity: a nation qualitatively different to what existed before, a land not simply governed by a different ruling class, represented and symbolised by a new-look flag, coat-of-arms, motto, public profile, but somehow reinvented, forged afresh, reconstituted in its own image.

It would of course be a gesture of terrible naivete and tremendous insensitivity to suggest that such a New South Africa *actually* exists, that the legacies of decades of separate development and unequal policies and practices of education and health care and housing can be wiped away with a legislative gesture, that economic empowerment and an end to hunger, unemployment and ethnic conflict can be inaugurated with the ease of a new president. Such facets of everyday life as an escalating crime rate, accelerating

labour disputes and industrial actions and the seemingly insoluble squatter problem, are all highly visible reminders that a nation cannot *in reality* be new-born in a state of innocence and grace. This does not detract, however, from the imaginative force and the emotional appeal of this fantasied new beginning. Crucially, this myth of newness is an indispensable element, an enabling condition, in the fabrication of a necessary dream of nationhood.

Benedict Anderson has famously described the nation as an "imagined community" - *imagined* because

"the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1),

and *community* because

"regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail, the nation is always conceived of as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (2).

1) Anderson, 1983:15

2) Anderson, 1983:16

It is this second observation that interests me, for what is at stake in the current arduous trek towards finalising a permanent South African constitution and agreeing upon and entrenching a political dispensation that accommodates the aspirations of a multiplicity of self-identified ethnicities and interest groups, is precisely the imagining and willing into being of a new geopolitical entity, a new body politic that bestows a sense of belonging, of "comradeship" to those included within its embrace. Moreover, despite the presence and influence of cultural and political groupings that conceive of the emerging nation through the filter of an obsessive concern with difference and differentiation (3), the nascent South Africa, I will argue and would like to believe, is one irreducibly bound up with powerful principles of inclusiveness, is one constituted by an unprecedented "opening up" of the social and discursive terrain, and premised upon the unqualified incorporation of multiplicity and divergence. Such an incorporation, it hardly needs saying, entails and is founded upon the emergence of the previously silenced, marginalised and oppressed.

3) The insistence of the Inkatha Freedom Party, for instance, on the effective dismantling of central government, and their advocacy of a powerfully federalist strengthening of regional authority, are inseparable from an implicit and explicit IFP claim to the autonomy and independence of "the Zulu", themselves imagined as an impossible unity, a nation within a nation, in but not entirely of the broader ambit of a South African nationhood.

If this is so, if the new South Africa (4) is marked by an as-yet undefined openness, a dissolution of divisions, then the moment of its carnivalesque coming-out party must surely have been the 1994 elections themselves. The run-up to the elections was distinguished by the emergence of a bewildering range of interest groups and specialist concerns hitherto muted and marginalised in South Africa's over-regulated public sphere. These groups ranged from the legitimate (though frequently inept) activism of the Workers' List Party or the Women's Rights for Peace party, to the somewhat more esoteric agendas of, for instance, the KISS or Green parties (5). Moreover, and more critically, pressure from reproductive- and gay-rights activists in the run-up to the elections, primarily with an eye to the eventual drawing up of an interim constitution, led to a number of centrist and mainstream political organisations adopting draft bills of rights that had the effect of elevating these previously taboo - indeed, criminalised - issues to prominent positions within the field of legitimised and authorised public discourse (6).

4) For the time being I shall use the lower-case "new"; I shall use "new" as an adjective, rather than a noun.

5) The KISS party was in many ways a one-woman show, with the thrust of Claire Emary's campaign being an undertaking to limit all government taxation to a 10% Value Added Tax; the Green Party's *raison d'etre* was the decriminalisation of marijuana.

6) For instance, the ANC, the DP, the IFP and, to a more lukewarm degree, the NP all proposed bills of rights during the interim constitutional negotiating process that accepted and even advocated the principle that gays and lesbians should enjoy equal rights before the law, and should receive a measure of constitutional protection from discrimination.

That such interest groups have parleyed those initial strategic gains into significant material advances is significant (South Africa is, for instance, the only country in the world to constitutionally enshrine the rights of divergent sexual orientations; if the recommendations of a recent parliamentary working group are accepted, abortion on demand will soon be legally available to South African women), but what is of more importance to this paper is a consideration of the *manner* in which these advances were made. I would suggest that this historically unprecedented climate of comparative libertarianism, marked by an accelerated degree of real freedom experienced at the level of the personal and the pragmatic (7), was and is enabled by a radical transformation at the *discursive* level, in which new rhetorics and grammars of identity and interest are made public, are made visible and audible.

If, to take an obvious and simplistic example, the previous regime managed to validate and legitimate its banning of the liberation movements - most notably the ANC - and its incarceration of their leaders - most famously Nelson Mandela - by an effective control over the vocabulary and the discourses available for discussing or thinking about

7) There are, for instance, no longer arrests made or cases prosecuted for the common-law crime of sodomy, nor for the astonishing Section 20A of the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957 (the notorious 'men at a party' law).

those movements or those leaders, then the lifting of such proscriptions was most strikingly characterised by the sudden public availability of precisely those descriptive and conceptual terms. Moreover, the opening up of these previously closed and forbidden words was marked by their acquisition of a new and liberating multivalency.

To further my point: Under the previous dispensation, the names "ANC" or "Mandela", or the word "communist", for instance, were not merely carefully regulated as regards the contexts in which they may be used, but were furthermore officially coded with specific, unitary meanings - meanings forcibly determined by those in control of the public media. The effect of those words uttered in public discourse was a stilling of debate, the freezing of interrogation. Their effect was to generate an emotional *affect*. So regulated and determined were those words - a regulation frequently carried out with the weight of legislation or martial law behind it - that they ceased to function as signifiers of some tangible or empirical or even conceptual referent. They ceased even making the attempt to do so. They acquired instead an opacity that enabled a kind of mechanical functionalism, a specific rhetorical performativity. They no longer *meant*, they *were*. "Communism" didn't *mean* a political or economic ideology, say: it was hatred, fear, danger. "Mandela" didn't signify an individual, an historical

figure, a political prisoner; it triggered a conditioned response, triggered a recognition of the devil.

As the winds of political change began to stir in the late 1980s, however, those words began to undergo a curious process of semantic negotiation and gradual reclamation. It would be facile to observe that the signifier "Mandela" has undergone a process of revaluation and reinterpretation since 1990. To take an example on a more secular plane, a word such as "communist" has also become common coin, in the sense that it has become available for use and appropriation by any number of perspectives and from any number of points of articulation. Thus it is that at Chris Rani's funeral in 1993, -for example, Hani could be described as a freedom fighter, a lover of Shakespeare, a communist and a devoted father, without any one of those appellations outweighing or overshadowing or conditioning the others.

What I am meaning to suggest, in somewhat circuitous fashion, is that it is in this "liberated zone" of public discourse that the previously oppressed, the previously silenced stakes its claim, makes its bid to be seen and heard and recognised, and, in the case of the previously demonised, to be re-interpreted. If, as I have suggested, and will pursue at a later stage, the South Africa-in-process is and should be constituting itself by a principle of inclusiveness and accommodation, it becomes a matter of

some interest and importance to consider the ways in which the various fragmented and isolated subcultures and interest-groupings go about the business of claiming space for themselves within this new discursive arena, this discursive terrain coterminous with the fantasied boundaries of the new nation itself.

Crucially, unusually, liberation for the marginal and the silenced has become precisely a matter of discourse, a matter of seizing what Nina Romm, describing the almost carnivalesque ethos of pre-election South Africa, referred to as "a window of opportunity that most special-interest groups can only dream of" (8). Ignoring the obvious point that fundamental human rights and equality before the law should hardly be considered the particular province of "special-interest groups", the point remains that the social space has become a stage of almost ludic contestation, and a stage on which group identities and cultural profiles are being forged through the media of language and cultural dialogue and representation, an astonishing reversal in a state historically more accustomed to articulating itself in the timbre and cadences of iron and dust and smoke.

I shall be concerned in this paper with the emergence of a particular marginalised voice: the tentative articulations

8) "Braving the heat and dust of politics" Weekly Mail and Guardian, Jan 6 - 12, 1995

and self-representations of what I shall at this stage, for reasons of convenience and concision, refer to as "gay experience" and "gay identity". (Whether or not these are meaningful terms, with any identifiable referential value, is an issue that I shall for the moment avoid addressing.) If, as I shall argue, the particular prior nationalism of the South African state was one characterised by an implacably masculinist and patriarchal apportioning of identity, and by a related epistemology of power that drew a great deal of its force and potency from the construction and regulation of gendered and sexualised difference, then it would be appropriate to investigate the possibilities of a newly conceived nationalist urge from a perspective that foregrounds and problematises those very notions of gender and sexualised identity.

I shall be addressing this question of the constitutive importance of sexuality, and specifically of articulations and representations of *homosexuality*, in the self-defining national imagination. I shall be concerned with ways of thinking the representation of marginalised sexualities, as well as of the significance of the paradoxical or oxymoronic *centrality* of those marginalities within the project of fabricating a national identity. To this end, I shall consider the specific field of cultural production that might most conveniently bear the name "South African gay writing in English". I will, perhaps presumptuously, engage

with the problematic of what an appropriate or productive political aesthetics of "gay writing" might be within our particular historical moment.

It is unquestionably the case that there is no coherent or clearly identifiable tradition in South African letters of a gay aesthetic or thematic (however it is that such aesthetics or thematics may be defined). Although representations of homosexual desire have occurred in South African literature with greater frequency than one might suppose, as Hennie Aucamp's diverse anthology of Afrikaans writing, Wisselstroom (1990), demonstrates, such textual moments are understandably diffuse and evasive, frequently referentially elliptic and seemingly forced into circumspect strategies of transcoding and allusion. They occur largely in isolation from each other, and certainly not assimilable to any cohesive or self-identifying genre of writing.

Moreover, and quite remarkably, those texts and authors that do directly engage with homosexual desire - the Koos Prinsloos, the Hennie Aucamps, more recently the Danie Bothas - have tended to come from the world of Afrikaans literature. (9) Just why this should be, is a source of

9) An obvious exception to that loosely formulated rule would be Stephen Gray, particularly in his novels Time of Our Darkness (Arrow, 1988) and Born of Man (Justified, 1989). As Shaun de Waal observes in his "A Thousand Forms of Love - Homosexual Desire in South African Literature" (in Defiant Desire Ravan, 1994), by being quite frank - even off-hand - about the gay sexuality with which they deal, these two works participate in what has become an "international gay-literature industry - a genre in its own

heated academic debate in its own right, and falls outside the scope of this paper.

These problems notwithstanding, I shall specifically engage with three novels published since 1990, and examine the ways in which they interact with other distinctively post-1990 gay literary productions in order to generate a genre, or perhaps a cultural force-field, of "gay writing"¹¹ about which certain general observations can be made (10).

Specifically, I shall consider how Damon Galgut's The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs (Scribner, 1991) and Mark Behr's The Smell of Apples (Abacus, 1995) articulate with two recent compilations of fiction and non-fiction writing, The Invisible Ghetto - Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa (COSAW, 1993) and Defiant Desire - Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa (Ravan, 1994) to bring into being a distinctive and identifiable field of South African gay cultural production.

Bound up in my project, as I have mentioned, is a crude, insistent and at times contradictory periodising schema, the

right". Disappointingly, however, at precisely the cultural-historical moment at which one might expect a writer such as Gray to find his voice in its fullest range and richness, he has lapsed into novelistic silence.

10) The irony has not escaped my attention that even as I attempt to fabricate a periodised genre of "gay writing" for the rhetorical and analytical purposes of this paper, the logic and didactic thrust of my argument will move away from - indeed, actively decry - the taxonomic divisiveness of such an approach.

assertion of some impossible "new genre" as a way of reflecting the epistemological break represented by the discursive honeymoon-period in which we are still living. Both Gevisser and Cameron's and Krouse's collections of writing are unequivocal in their assertions that they are made possible, and are formally and materially determined, by the times in which they are produced. In the introduction to Defiant Desire, Edwin Cameron and Mark Gevisser observe that

"This book is being completed in 1993, at the time of South Africa's transition to democracy. For three years now, since the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, our identities and aspirations have been unshackled •• Defiant Desire is a product of these times: an attempt to engage in the current debate over what we want this land to be •• There is a moment to be seized. Defiant Desire reflects and attempts to make something of this moment." (p. 4-5) (10.5)

10.5) Perhaps the most apt marker of this new openness is the fact that Cameron himself, a committed gay activist, was recently appointed to the Appeal Court of South Africa, and has served as chair of the Cameron Commission - an extremely high-profile commission of enquiry into the South African armaments industry - an internationally unprecedented appointment for a man who is, legally, an habitual criminal according to the laws of his own land.

One might argue that in this new discursive dispensation, in which forums are opening up and being made available for the articulation of once marginalised and suppressed gay experiences, identities and desires (11), one might reasonably expect the production of discourse to undergo a qualitative as well as a quantitative transformation; one might expect the cultural productions of the previously silenced to reflect the forging and the crafting of new voices and new forms of self-articulation as they negotiate new ground for themselves within the unfolded, the *opened-up* social space (12).

11) This is not a difficult assertion to demonstrate. One need only think, for instance, of the proliferation and ready, across-the-corner-cafe-counter availability of gay soft-porn magazines and videos. Perhaps even more significant in terms of mainstream accessibility is the shift of attitude and focus in the general media, especially in that of the SABC. Following the 1992 Gay Pride march, for instance, both *Agenda* and *Newsline*, the news magazine programmes of TV1 and CCV respectively, broadcast thoughtful and serious documentaries on the issue of being homosexual in South Africa, with a respect and an integrity that had been previously been inconceivable. Indeed, Matthew Krouse writes in his introduction to The Invisible Ghetto that it is 'in this new climate that a hitherto forbidden area of our lives is being opened out, and thi book *has been able to grow*' (p. xi, my emphasis).

12) In a recent interview, Behr observed that: '[Now that the struggle is over] I feel freer to be selfish, whereas before I'd always been aware of certain expectations - self-imposed, imagined or real.'

Mike Nicol observed in the same interview that Galgut's post-1990 novels 'were departures from what had been current literature' and that in Behr's novel he sees signs of "this depth now appearing in our literature, more range of feeling and of relationships." (Interview with Gerry Bowes Taylor, *Sunday Life*, 3 September 1995)

This act of the periodising imagination - positing and investigating a formal and qualitative break from prior representations and articulations of "gay experience" - is made necessary by the particular difficulty of thinking about cultural forms and ongoing developments *within* the context of this unique period or moment in history, thinking about those cultural forms as being marked by, and understandable only in terms of, this moment with its unrepeatable demands and conditions and imperatives. It is a way of at least contingently fixing and bringing into focus what is otherwise a protean, shape-shifting, deliberately evasive field; the provisional assertion or proposition of a qualitatively new genre of gay writing in South Africa is an enabling mechanism that allows the clearer and swifter bringing to bear of certain tools of analytic focus. It is also, incidentally, a move encouraged and precipitated by the statements and sentiments of the writers themselves: Behr claims in a recent interview that to a degree the post-1990 era *enabled* his first novel:

"To some extent the transition meant I could write in a way that was more acceptable to me. Had I written prior to 1990 it would have been more agit-prop." (13)

13) Bowes Taylor, 1995: 16

Galgut also recognises the fact that the changed historical moment necessitates different responses and forms:

"The ground is not defined any more. The issues were clear before, whatever attitude you took, but that's not the case now. And suddenly you can see how limited how themes have been." (14)

Notwithstanding this strategic act of periodisation, however, it will become paradoxically clear that my argument rests on the demonstrable *unworkability* of such a schema, my argument will assert that the opportunity for this imaginative leap has not been taken and, within the terms and conditions under which gay writing is being produced in South Africa, sadly *cannot* be taken.

14) Bowes Taylor, 1995: 16

NOTIONS OF NATIONS

Benedict Anderson famously observed that "in the modern world everyone can, should, will 'have' a nationality, as he or she 'has' a gender" (1). His point - though underdeveloped in his analysis - is that, like gender, nationality is a relational term whose identity derives from its inherence in a system of differences, that in the same way that "man" and "woman" define themselves reciprocally (though never symmetrically), national identity is determined not on the basis of its own intrinsic properties but as a function of what it is not, or claims not to be (2). However the relationship between nationhood and gender (and, by extension, sexuality) is more than an illustratively allegorical one.

George L. Mosse's Nationalism and Sexuality (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) was one of the first sustained attempts to break with prevailing academic paradigms that treat nation and sexuality as discrete and autonomous constructs. His project was to sketch a double history of European nationalism on the one hand, and "respectable" sexuality on the other, as these emerged together at the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas before the tendency was

1) Anderson, 1983: 14

2) Parker, Russo, Sommer and Yaegar, 1992: 5

to a large extent to conflate the national with "public" identity and the sexual with "private" behaviour, Mosse described not only how the proliferation of modern European nationalisms influenced the middle-class construction of behavioural norms and codes of appropriate sexual conduct, but also how those codes of bourgeois morality in turn played a central part in facilitating the rise of fascist nation-states in the twentieth century (3).

It has long been a critical commonplace - and one given most impetus by the discipline of anthropology - that the functioning of patriarchal societies, or societies and communities in which economic, political and legislative power is invested in a system of male entitlement and male executive sovereignty, can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of traffic in women: that it is in such contexts the proper social function of women to be used as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing and sustaining the bonds of men with men. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her seminal Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (Columbia U. P., 1985), cites as an example Levi-Strauss's conclusion on the social dynamic informing and underwriting the institution of marriage:

3) Parker, Russo, Sommer and Yaegar, 1992: 2

"The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners." (4)

Sedgwick's phrase "male homosocial desire" enables an analysis of the continuum between, and the relative constitutive reciprocity of, the institutionalised and officially authorised social bonds between persons of the same sex (in this case, inevitably, men), and the phenomenon of homosexuality itself. Without suggesting that homosexuality is in some way at the centre of these bonds, or underwrites homosociality, the implications of Sedgwick's arguments are both that representations and culturally variable constructions of homosexuality are conditioned and informed by the particular nature of the homosocial circuit of power within that political and cultural context, and that such constructions and attributions of sexualised identity in some ways enable and accommodate the exertion of power and the functioning of certain nationalisms. She observes that:

"... in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures

4) Levi-Strauss, 1969 cited in Sedgwick, 1985: 26

for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power
..." (5)

In a circuit of power in which influence and control are transferred and maintained within the closed society of men, male identity and the acquisition of "male status" is properly constituted by such compulsory relationships as male friendship, mentorship, admiring identification, bureaucratic subordination and heterosexual rivalry (7). In "The Beast in the Closet", Sedgwick identifies what she calls "male homosexual panic" as being the off-shoot of the blurring of these paths of male entitlement, paths which require "certain intense male bonds that are not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds" (6). Thus it is that the very rituals and processes that define and empower the functioning male state or society are implicated in the obverse, the 'other' of heterosexual male identity. Typically represented as a passionate brotherhood (7), the nation finds itself compelled to distinguish its proper and legitimate homosociality from more explicitly sexualised male-male relationships, a compulsion that requires the

5) Sedgwick, 1985: 25

7) Sedgwick in Showalter, 1989: 246

6) Sedgwick in Showalter, 1989: 245

7) Anderson, for example, continues his observation that the nation is "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" by noting that "ultimately it is this *fraternity* that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (p. 16).

identification (effectively the ideological construction), isolation and containment of male homosexuality.

Directly proportionate to the hegemonic power of a patriarchal and masculinist nationalist epistemology, then, one would expect an insistent, indeed compulsive concern with delimiting and positioning homosexuality (or, more accurately, representations and understandings of homosexuality) within an authoritarian discourse of identity. Jonathan Dollimore, in Sexual Dissidence (Clarendon Press, 1991), has observed that:

"the construction of homo/sexuality emerges from a larger discriminatory formation of hetero/sexuality which it continues to be influenced by, but cannot be reduced to; on the contrary, hetero/sexuality is increasingly being problematised by homo/sexuality in its diverse identities" (8).

In a gendered, heterosexist epistemology of identity, then, one would expect a direct relation between the disapprobation and the attempted negation of homosexuality, and its symbolic centrality to that epistemology; one would expect its cultural marginality to be directly proportionate to the shadowed reflection of its cultural significance.

8) Dollimore, 1991: 32

It would not be too much to say that the South Africa constituted under the National Party government in the years between 1948 and roughly 1990 was characterised by a rigidly, rabidly patriarchal and masculinist self-conception, one propped up and ideologically underpinned by a prohibitive and authoritarian strand of Calvinist religious doctrine. The construction of South African identity, while drawing upon a number of claims to ethnic, linguistic, racial, cultural, historic and aspirational coherence, reached its most transparent apotheosis as the state entered its securocrat era in the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, and it is in this mode that one can most clearly see the operations of patriarchal self-identification in operation.

Under the new imperatives of the time, I would argue that the sense of nationhood was articulated principally through its *men*, articulated through the call to duty made upon each white, male South African. The system of army conscription - euphemistically and misleadingly referred to as "National Service" - and the field of discourse that surrounded it, made explicit use of a conflation of the rhetorics of masculinity and of nationalism.

Going to the army, young boys were told, will make a man of you, and indeed the rituals and symbolism of the

conscription system find deep resonances in the practices by which young males in a variety of ethnicities and cultures pass from boyhood into a socially or communally recognised status of manhood: in one's adolescence to leave the home and the maternal space, to be removed from the bounds and the limits of the community, taken into the bush, or into isolated collectives of male peers, and put through hardships and privations, tasks of courage and endurance, in order to return to the community strengthened and ready to take one's place as an entitled *male* member of the social hierarchy, is a symbolic trajectory which is replicated in the initiation and transition ceremonies of peoples and cultures throughout the breadth and history of the world. Of course, each culture's rituals are premised on a specific principle of cultural exclusiveness: these are rites of passage which lead not merely to the acquisition adult maleness, but of a specifically encoded adult maleness. To have completed the Xhosa initiation ceremony is to become a Xhosa male *and no other kind*. To have completed one's military service was to become, specifically, exclusively, constitutively, a *South African* adult male.

Unlike the case in many other cultural formations and groupings, there was no active space in this South African mythology for women, no equivalent path of initiation available, no clearly or positively defined identity as "female adult South African". To the extent that

expectations and ideological demands were made of women, their national duty was to provide comfort, solace and support to the brave boys, the menfolk, on the border. Women fulfilled the primarily structural role of being "back there", forming, along with one's house, car and sheltered way of life, the continuum of privilege which constituted the spoils of successful passage into South African manhood. Within this gendered schema of national identity, then, the spectre of homosexuality or homosexual desire was one of tremendous rhetorical force.

Glen Retief points out in his essay on the attempted subject-formation of the South African citizen that the imperatives of social and ethnic purity formed the principle polemic thrust underpinning the regulation of individual sexuality:

"In South Africa, government homophobia has historically been expressed in the context of an apartheid belief-system which holds that South Africa is a country under siege and can only survive if it maintains its sexual purity and moral solidarity" (9).

9) Retief, "Keeping Sodom Out of the Laager," in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 109

So, for instance, the then Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, reacting to a 1988 homosexual sex-ring scandal, articulated the strategic conflation of sexual probity and national stability and order in telling the Pretoria Members of the Order of Christ that:

"The young people of this country are not only being threatened by revolution. There is also the attempt to break down our moral standards and to destroy our future, our youth ..." (10)

As with any process of othering, as with the production of any external threat to the stability and the welfare of those falling within the bounds of the community - in this case the South African nation - there is a distinct dialectic of self-consolidation at work. I shall again use the example of the South African Defence Force, not only an exemplary and illuminating text in which the workings of a reactionary nationalism might clearly be seen at work, but also an institution which, as we shall see in due course, occupies an important place of centrality within the gay literary imagination.

In "The Arista Sisters, September 1984", Matthew Krouse quotes from Anchors for Servicemen, a book given to conscripts seeking emotional or psychiatric counselling: 10) reported in *Rapport*, 18 July 1988

"Be careful of the homosexual who interferes with you sexually. Avoid him. And if you are one yourself and you become aware of a specific attraction towards another troop, it is my good advice that you keep your teeth clenched and you keep well away from that troop." (11)

This advice speaks volumes for the official ambivalence regarding the issue of homosexuality in the army; unlike most other defence forces, notably that of the USA (even after Clinton's much-criticised "Don't-ask, Don't-tell" compromise), homosexuals will not be excluded from the SADF for reasons of sexual proclivity. Being homosexual was no grounds for exemption from National Service, even though within the SADF homosexuality is a chargeable offence and anti-gay discrimination is encouraged. As Krouse notes:

"We are not quite the enemy ... We will not be excluded simply because we sleep with other men. We will be included - and then censured ... And perhaps we are very important, for, in the eyes of the authorities, our supposed 'womanliness' can be used to reinforce what it means to be a real man" (12).

11) cited in Krouse, "The Arista Sisters: September 1984", in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 209

12) Krouse in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 209

Krouse goes on to discuss the ways in which the institutionalised tradition of drag shows, which are so intrinsic a part of army cultural activities, are used to reconstruct and reconsolidate gendered heterosexual identity through the mechanisms of caricature and parody.

Homosexuality is constructed as necessarily effeminate, limp-wristed, camp, *womanly* - all that is not masculine, all that is not the authorised version of a South African male citizen. Homosexuals are necessary in the army although, significantly, genuine homosexuality desire is *not*; hence the curious tone of that first sentence in the extract from Anchors for Servicemen: "Be careful of the homosexual who interferes with you *sexually*." What is being said is: Take note of the homosexual, watch him, know what he is, establish a cognitive relationship with him, but make sure that it is a relationship along the terms laid out for you. Do not let it be a sexual relationship. (One cannot help wondering, incidentally, at the nervousness and self-betrayal implicit in a guidebook feeling it *necessary* to warn a heterosexual serviceman not to become sexually involved with a homosexual soldier.)

The army, then, takes in sexual transgression, envelopes it, in order to allocate to it a negative term in its own relentless dialectic of identity, its rhetorical

subordination of that which the state itself produces and generates in the public realm. (13)

Sexuality is, in short, a powerful tool in the prescriptive and exclusionist construction of a national identity, a nationalist drive premised on fear, division and hatred. This is a species of nationalism enabled by a politics of identity underpinned by the necessary exclusion and suppression of that which is used to differentially define the self. Such a politics goes hand-in-hand with a contradictory epistemology of essentialism; the differential - and so always questionable, always tenuous - nature of such an identity, one which is derived and fabricated by being that which not the Other, is concealed, effaced by an insistence on its own naturalness. The contingency of such a nationalist identity is camouflaged by a virulent insistence on its immutability, its being irreducible beyond a core, an *essence* of unproblematic identity.

If, then, the projects of this particular strain of nationalism, which has quite rightly generated a Leftist critical-intellectual orthodoxy of disapprobation, are

13) By this statement I don't, obviously, mean to suggest that the state or any other institution of power literally constructs homosexual desire; rather I mean to suggest that the discursive hegemony of the state acts to determine how homosexual desire is identified, understood, thought about - effectively, how homosexual desire *means*. the ways in which behaviours are appropriated and represented have the effect of defining, reinventing those behaviours.

enabled by a disingenuously essentialist epistemology of identity, there has been a powerful demand for new modes of thinking about identity - a demand for anti-essentialist epistemologies, new discursive and representational forms which denaturalise and highlight the constructedness of all forms of identity, thus defusing traditional sites of authoritarian and oppressive power-exertion. These are demands, I would suggest, which give rise to a new set of problematics.

THINKING TRANSGRESSION

Jonathan Dollimore, examining the dialectic between dominant and subordinate cultures, groups and identities, has observed that conceptions of homosexuality

"have followed not one but two (contrasting) visions of transgression, one essentialist, the other anti-essentialist" (13).

The anti-essentialist ontology and epistemology of homosexuality, and of sexual transgression or dissidence, is supported by the bulk of leftist intellectual work performed in the twentieth century. Indeed, it is difficult to fault on a theoretical level the clearly and intelligently historicised assertion that:

"Sexual identity depends not on a deep-set selfhood (though it may feel otherwise), but on one's particular situation within the framework of understanding that makes certain, diverse possibilities available; which makes some ideas plausible and others not" (14).

13) Dollimore, 1991: 25

14) Sinfield, 1994: 11

Historical work by the likes of Michel Foucault, Sheila Rowbotham, Jeffery Weeks, Alan Bray, John Boswell, David Fernbach and K.J. Dover have revealed the remarkable relativism of different historical and cultural understandings and practices of homosexuality. Read separately or as a related body of research, such work suggests that among the things that have changed radically about men's genital activities with other men in Western culture over the centuries, and which vary widely across cultures, are its frequency, exclusivity, class associations, relation to dominant culture, ethical status, degree to which it is seen as defining non-genital aspects of the lives of those who practise it, and association with femininity and masculinity in societies where gender is a profound determinant of power (15). Certainly there can be no doubt that, as Sinfield concisely expresses it,

"We are, we have to be, the outcome of our ongoing negotiations with the cultural repertoire that we perceive as available to us; there are no selves without culture" (16).

But convincing though this constructionist stance is, it poses serious difficulties as regards aspirations to

15) Sedgwick, 1985: 26

16) Sinfield, 1994: 176

cultural-political praxis, *particularly* within the context a non-First World discursive politics. When Diana Fuss says:

"It is pointless to investigate the root causes of homosexuality if we realise that homosexuality is not a transhistorical, transcultural, eternal category but a socially contingent and variant construction" (17),

she is articulating a very sound and, from within her cultural and theoretical context and paradigm, a politically progressive and liberatory viewpoint. The terms of her critique, and the constructionist critique in general, are valid and unexceptionable, but, critically, they are dangerously susceptible to what Andrew Ross has identified as an informing condition of contemporary cultural politics:

"Terms are by no means guaranteed their meanings ... these meanings can be appropriated and redefined for different purposes, different contexts and, more importantly, different causes" (18).

This is the case anywhere and within any political or micropolitical context, but - for reasons which I shall

17) Fuss, 1989: 107-8

18) Ross, 1988: xi

shortly touch on - it is even more the case in the transplanted context of Africa, with its torn and troubled history of nationalist politics and the struggle for identity.

It would be difficult to live in Africa today and not have encountered the strain of so-called "Black Nationalism" which incorporates an explicit and rhetorically overstated homophobia within its terms of self-constitution. (19) President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe recently brought this phenomenon back into public focus with his declaration that homosexuals are not deserving of human rights, and his active encouragement of gay-bashing and violent intimidation of sexual deviance. Significantly, his rationale is that homosexuality is unknown in traditional black culture, that "there isn't even such a word for it". President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, for his part, stated recently that: "Words like lesbianism and homosexuality do not exist in African languages" (20). South Africa itself is far from immune from this line of ill-informed. In 1992, Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) Secretary-General Bennie Alexander (now notoriously

19) I use the apostrophised term "black nationalism", although it might, within the boundaries of South Africa at least, more accurately be diagnosed as a species of black culturalism. The same phenomenon is to be seen in the USA, in which black culturalist political movements (such as Louis Farrakhan's racist, sexist, anti-Semitic "Nation of Islam") appropriate the rhetoric and the emotive appeal of a discourse of populist nationalism.

20) Weekly Mail and Guardian vol 11, no 40, Sept 29 - Oct 5, p. 3

reinvented, to the delight of political columnists, as !Xhoisan X) made the announcement that

"homosexuality is un-African. It is part of the spin-off of the capitalist system. We should not take the European Leftist position on the matter. It should be looked at in its total perspective from our own Afrocentric position" (21).

Already we see a cunning rhetorical manoeuvre being enacted: not only is homosexuality a white, western condition (of illness), but just as bad, just as threatening, is the white, western way - the "European Leftist" position (which, of course, is representative of hegemonic white or western attitudes!) - of thinking about homosexuality. The most notorious manifestation of this rhetorical mythmaking occurred at Winnie Mandela's 1991 trial for kidnapping and assault. During her trial, a large part of Mandela's defence, orchestrated by the ubiquitous George Bizos, was predicated on the assertion that she was "saving" the black youths - Kenny Kgase (29), Thabiso Mono (18), Pelo Gabriel Mekgwe (19) and Stompie Moeketsi Seipei (14) - from the homosexual advances of white Methodist minister Paul Verryn. This defence was buttressed with the implication, made manifest in the infamous words of the banner held outside

21) Work in Progress (incorporating New Era), no 82, June 1992,
p. 13

the court, that "Homosex is not in Black Culture". Thus, as Mark Gevisser summarises the claims of this particular strain of nationalism,

"homosexuality has been imported into black communities by inhuman labour systems, perverse priests and white gay activists ... This ideology has its roots in the patriarchal notion that colonialism emasculated or feminised the black man, and therefore locates much of Black Power, quite bluntly, in the penis: in a remasculation or reassertion of black virility (22)" (23).

I would argue that this form of nationalism, while asserting an old-fashioned and exclusionist politics of essentialist identity - asserting the non-negotiable and irreducible meaning and essence of Africanness - nevertheless employs some of the terms and hard-won assertions of the relativising epistemology of constructionism. The Winnie Mandelas and !Xhoisan Xs (the ex-Alexanders) and Robert Mugabes are in full accord with sentiments and analyses that locate homosexuality as a "socially contingent and variant construction", for such a move enables the action of othering and exclusion precisely on the basis that it is

22) Again, there are resonances and echoes of this gendered reinvestment of identity in Farrakhan's recent "Million Man March" to the Capital Building in Washington D.C.

23) Gevisser, "A Different Fight for Freedom" in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 69

contingent and constructed and variant. While constructionists proudly proclaim the denaturalising of gay identity, the Arap Mois and Farrakhans applaud and agree. Homosexuality is not natural, they say, it is the twisted off-shoot of decadent, Western, Other lifestyles. This is precisely the problem with arguments that locate homosexuality as simply a "lifestyle choice" within a context of militant, exclusionist nationalism: the constructionist perspective, appropriated and malformed though it is, enables the discursive strategies of a divisive nationalism to claim a more powerful foothold. As Will Eaves asks in a recent review of Alan Sinfield's The Wilde Century,

"if our identity is merely 'performative', diffuse and paradoxical, how do we make it stick, in the wider political sense?" (23.5)

I would suggest, then, that a politics or a responsible aesthetic of sexual representation would have to find some way of escaping this invidious double-bind. The difficulties of this split between conceptualising epistemologies of homosexuality are further problematised by the literary-cultural debate regarding appropriate *modes* of representation, a debate inherited - and often clumsily transplanted wholesale - from the cosmopolitan centres.

23.5) Eaves, 1995: 25

Susan Sontag was being deliberately playful and provocative when she suggested that

"Jews and homosexuals are the outstanding creative minorities in contemporary urban culture ... the two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony" (24),

but the epigrammatic formulation serves to bring into focus one of the fundamental conceptual oppositions informing debate around the subject of a responsible or appropriate literary politics. Crudely put - as is so often the case - the argument is reducible to one opposing a postmodern aesthetic to a more traditionally realist ethic. Moreover, the tendency in this context is schematically to identify the former with traditional notions and perceptions of homosexual identity as parody and satire, veneers and surfaces, contingency and masquerade (a stereotype embodied in the image of the drag queen, or in the camp aesthetic, and given its perfect, glittering, canonised apotheosis in the iconic, mythologised figure of Oscar Wilde), and to identify the latter with issues of race or class or ethnicity, as is suggested by Sontag's stock evocation of "Jewish moral seriousness". (25) What is at stake,

24) Sontag, cited in Dollimore, 1991: 250

25) I am trying to allude to a conflation of matters of ethnicity or race - in this case "Jewishness" - with a sense

obviously, is not merely a question of stylistics, but is rather a refracted issue of epistemology, a matter of the relative assertion of some or other "authenticity".

Moreover, this is not a symmetrical schema. In the nature of all binary oppositions, there is a powerful and differential valorising of each of the terms. There is a weightiness about the realistic treatment and representation of race or class or ethnicity that attracts to it an aura of moral power, a seriousness. It is the implicit claim to authority of a discourse that claims unmediated communion with its unproblematic referent. This is an authority claimed both by the realist discourse itself, and by the categories of race and ethnicity and so on, which proclaim their own self-evident authenticity.

It is necessary, then, to be wary of this alignment of homosexual discourse with the strategies of a postmodern epistemology and stylistics of representation. This is a predicament particularly bedeviling the cause of gay writing and gay culture in South Africa, where the demand for gay rights, although ostensibly strategically aligned, is forced to jostle for position with other more "authentic" oppressed or marginalised groups. Gevisser and Cameron express the concern in their introduction to Defiant Desire that

of weighty moral seriousness, an attribution made in contrast to its paired binary opposite.

"for lesbian and gay South Africans, 'liberation' is a particularly loaded word. What role does sexual politics play in this time of transition? ... Does the call for equal rights for gays and lesbians detract from more urgent matters at hand - the righting of the wrongs of apartheid?" (25.5)

If postmodernity deals in the currency of the dissolution of the synthetic humanist subject, the implicit argument goes, then it is in the postmodern that the homosexual - who is, after all, nothing more or less than what he or she makes of himself or herself - should most comfortably find a home. This is itself a conceptual schema that allows homosexual demands and claims to be sidelined on the grounds of their lack of authentic referent.

This is an issue that requires some investigation and discussion. In order to address this question, it is worthwhile to gain some clarity on precisely what is meant by the term "postmodernism". Fredric Jameson is perhaps the foremost theorist of the postmodern; in his thinking of postmodernism as a cultural dominant, postmodern forms of architecture, literature, the fine and plastic arts, theory and so on, are expressions of a revolutionised cultural epistemology, one generated by the peculiar conditions and

25.5) Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 8

developments of what, following Ernest Mandel, he calls the Third Stage of Capital: multinational or late capitalism, in which reification and commodification has extended to every aspect of lived experience. According to this periodising hypothesis, late capitalist postmodernity, structured *inter alia* by the explosion in media technology and instant communication, has generated a pervasive cultural epistemology in which models of depth are abolished, in which the very notion of genuine historical thought is impossible, a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic.

I do not mean to engage in a detailed examination of the strengths and weaknesses of Jameson's theorising of the cultural dominant; what is important is the causal structure of his account of postmodernism as it is encountered in literature. Strongly grounded in historicist periodisation, his account explains postmodern phenomena as being *expressive of* a pervasive socioeconomic realignment; indeed, it would not be too much to say that for Jameson *any* contemporary cultural production is a postmodern artifact, in that it is born into and of a particular and historically unique system of commodity consumption, and the particular hegemonic epistemological conditions that such a system has effected, and that those texts which exemplify what we might mundanely identify as the characteristics of postmodernism are simply overtly postmodern in a more formal(ist) sense.

The postmodern, in short, is in Jameson's account a condition from which we have no distance and in which we already exist.

Against this powerful and persuasive account of postmodernity is a range of comparatively facile *descriptions* of this or that postmodernism. For the schematic purposes of illustration, I shall allow the theorising of Linda Hutcheon to stand as illustrative of this trend. Hers is a conceptualisation of postmodernism that makes no recourse to history or to any broader social or economic account, indeed that explicitly insists upon a separation of a Jamesonian postmodernity from her conception of postmodernism as simply "the name given to a set of identifiable cultural practices" (26). In this account, postmodernity is not at issue, other than as a general background of skepticism and cynicism, a cultural condition somehow free-floating and without historical grounding, and in which postmodernism is precisely one of a range of possible *styles* or modes of generic performance. Hutcheon's oft-repeated and constantly re-rehearsed project is to propose the postmodern style as a politically progressive entity, a form capable of engaging with the pressing issues of our time:

26) Hutcheon, 1989: 26

"... the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalise some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' ... are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees." (27)

This, at first glance, would appear to hold out a powerful appeal to those striving to forge an identity, whether personal or group-connoted, in opposition to, or at least differentiated from the iron-cast identity decreed by authoritarian social regulation. It would appear to make precisely the appeal to gay writing that I have sketched above. At a closer examination, however, a number of remarks are begged by what turns out to be an astonishing display of willful political and theoretical naivete.

Although this is not the place for a sustained critique of Hutcheon's effusive and celebratory stance, it is perhaps worthwhile briefly to observe two broad potential challenges: firstly that a practice - perfectly in synch with its contextual cultural *zeitgeist* - of 'de-naturalising' and demolishing social concepts and categories, epistemologies and bodies of belief with a kind of catholic appetite for destruction, without being informed

27) Hutcheon, 1989: 2

by any ethical or evaluative structure of analysis or commentary, any potentially substitutive values or insights, will leave in its wake a cultural and epistemological landscape emptied of propositional content, in which arguments and truths are abolished, in which entertainment and substanceless stimulation are the performative principles: a landscape in which political praxis is disabled, indeed, is literally inconceivable; hardly a landscape politically critical or constructive. I am suggesting that in Hutcheon's intellectual and cultural landscape, action, praxis, ethical choice is impossible, and all that remains as the ordering principle of behaviour is *fashion*, in Dario Fo's sense of the word:

"Fashion ... is what results when there is not a fundamental, real reason, ideology or morality behind a discourse. In other words, when discourse doesn't make an argument." (28)

The second broad potential objection implies one of the primary objections that have been levelled, ironically, at Jameson's theorising of postmodernity: Hutcheon's formulations presuppose a First-World urban environment, in which the crucial issues confronting the intellectual are ones of representation and cognition, in which questioning the constructedness of ideologies and epistemologies passes 28) quoted in Ross, 1988: vii

as the most radical political act available. In much the same way, Jameson's theorising of the "new global space of postmodernism" displays a remarkable and surprising lack of sensitivity to the differences between First-World urban (post)industrialism and (say) Third-World socioeconomic structures - his is a conception that seldom takes into account the struggles of marginalised communities *within* a First-World urban context, such as those striving for gay rights, much less marginalised (or Third-World) *societies*, for self-identity and autonomy.

The point I would like to make once more, which returns throughout this paper like a nagging refrain, is a consideration of positionality and context. In contradistinction to the party-line of postmodernism, a line to which even Jameson in the main accedes, I would like to assert that the "new global space" of the postmodern is precisely *not* a vast decentred network of simulacra and pseudo-events in which all models of depth and vertical hierarchy cannot be informative or enlightening, and have been abolished. Indeed, I would suggest that just such an hegemonic cultural epistemology, in which centrality and marginality become meaningless terms, is only current (to the extent that it *is* current) within just such a space or region of centrality.

I would suggest that, in considering the political viability of the practice of literary postmodernism, *context is all important*. Jonathan Dollimore, in Sexual Dissidence, correctly observes that:

"the postmodern repudiation of the unified subject seems to disempower the marginal, robbing it of that independence and autonomy which was the assumed precondition of its possessing any subversive agency of its own, or at least any independent cultural identity" (29).

I would suggest that the only conceivable way for postmodernism to make a progressive and constructive political intervention is as part of a synchronic and contingent strategy of identity; the *metier* of a political postmodernism lies in its being grounded in and explicitly attached to the micropolitical struggle for identity of marginalised and more-or-less dominated groups and communities. Certainly, as Andrew Ross has observed,

"[a postmodern politics] ought to recognise that moments of "identity" are historically (they are the result of a shared material and discursive history) and therefore have a concrete existence

29) Dollimore, 1991: 81

even when and where such moments may be theoretically untenable" (30).

It is this apostrophising of "identity", this awareness of the *strategic* contingency of the identity to which claim is being laid, that marks the progressive difference between a postmodern assertion of an autonomous authenticity and that of the more traditional models of essentialism.

Despite this careful revision, however, the forms and strategies of postmodernity must and will feature as necessary principles in the imagining of a gay literary aesthetic.

It is an unfortunate condition of any representation of gay identity or any gay cultural production that its very existence is demarcated in terms of its *transgression*, its determination as the negative of the law, of authority, of power. Shaun de Waal, in his examination of gay thematics in South African literature, articulates the characteristic stance that

"since homosexual desire is illicit in law and stigmatised in daily life, the representation of

30) Ross, 1988: xii

it in literature is *de facto* a transgression, the breaking of a silence" (30).

Whether or not this is actually the case, this is the way in which it is understood - crucially, in which it is understood by the writers of gay fiction themselves, who are, of course, as susceptible to the influence of discursive paradigms and models as any other citizen. It is a conception of the fictional project, or the project of representation, that partakes of a tired, sterile logic of confrontation and opposition, a schema of law and transgression, authority and resistance. The gay text is positioned before it is uttered, given form and status and meaning before it is given breath.

Now we are approaching the crux of my paper, and the analytic lever with which I shall pry into the texts under examination. If, as I have asserted as one of the premises of my argument, the new South African nation is and should be engaged in the task of imagining a new entity, wishing itself into fresh being, unscarred and unstricken by divisive categories of self-definition, then I would suggest that an aesthetic of representation should be one which obliterates the structures and oppositions of the past. If South African identity was constituted first by the

30) De Waal, "A Thousand Forms of Love", in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 234

separations and oppositions of a racist, sexist, homophobic nationalism, and then by the confrontational dialectic of the liberation struggle, it is my willfully naive contention that a proactive, productive, positive reconception of an inclusive national identity has to free itself of the constrictive ideological and conceptual baggage of the past. (31) This entails a dismissal of transgression, or - to be more precise - a dismissal of the *preawareness* of transgression which predetermines the paths and channels through which the literary text is constrained to signify.

Damon Galgut himself - ironically, as I shall argue - expresses his view of the fictional enterprise as follows:

"[The novel] is a way to look through the spaces between ideology, between laws, between systems. It is a way to rediscover our common humanity. It is a way, ultimately, to define our own perception of reality - one we have learnt for ourselves, not taught us in tired and brittle words" (32).

31) Perhaps this declaration of gung-ho' naivete is itself something of a rhetorical gesture. I am not concerned, as I have stated at a previous stage, with the degree to which this discourse corresponds with its referent, with the 'real' new South Africa as it is lived and experienced. The point of the imagined nation, the imagined community, is that such a constitutive, consensual imagination has the potential to *transform* the real. As Benedict Anderson observes: "Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1983: 15).

32) Galgut, "Reality and the Novel", 1990: 53

I shall ignore, conveniently, the contradictions and the impossibilities of a project of defining some "reality" acquired *ex nihilo* and beyond language, and rather draw attention to the impulse behind this assertion of the autonomy of the novelistic endeavour. Implicit is a desire to open up a space for new subject-formations, newly conceived possibilities and identities, and I would suggest that this desire - whether or not its goal may prove to be attainable - is a crucial one, an indispensable one. Jonathan Dollimore, in his analysis of the dialectic between dominant and subordinate cultures, invokes

"one kind of resistance, operating in terms of gender, [which] repeatedly unsettles this very opposition between the dominant and the subordinate. I call this sexual dissidence" (33).

Although I dislike the terms "resistance" and "dissidence", and reject them as being symptomatic of the very structural schemas of opposition which I would hope to see supplanted, it is this notion of evading, unsettling, operating outside of the dialectic of struggle and opposition - or, even better, as though such a dialectic *did not exist* - which I am seizing upon. What is required is a representational aesthetic which intrudes, disrupts, irrupts into these

33) Dollimore, 1991: 21

categories and binary discursive poles. Perhaps what I am grasping for approximates an exercise in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers as one set of meanings for the appellation "queer":

"The open mesh of possibilities, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of one's gender aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically." (34)

I am not, however, envisioning or proposing an aesthetics embodying some open-ended post-structuralist fantasy in which meanings are perpetually deferred, signifiers incessantly slip from their signifieds, and a thread of radical indeterminability runs merrily through the text. I simply mean to assert a fictional practice of queer representation which manages to slip the terms in which it is currently enmired, which offers itself without the baggage of explanation or justification, which conceives of itself outside of the metaphors, oppositions and alignments by which it is now imagined. It is, moreover, a conception of a politics of representation which asserts non-negotiable, indivisible (though abundantly multifarious) gay identity/s, embedded in a multiplicity of subject-positions and perspectives.

34) Sedgwick, 1994: 18

I would suggest, further, that a strategic principle of postmodern de-historicism be called into operation. It is my contention - a controversial one, no doubt - that at this precise moment of South Africa's historical-national evolution, it is necessary for its creative cultural products to be conceived and presented with a willful, determined and resolute lack of historicity. I am not, it need hardly be said, advocating that we stop thinking historically, nor that we refrain from developing as thorough and as historical an understanding of the forces and discourses at work in our society as we possibly can. I am certainly not suggesting that we stop thinking *about* our cultural productions in an historicising and dialectical fashion; rather I am suggesting that an appropriate and necessary strategy of aesthetic representation, one that has the best chance of empowering a dream of nationhood founded on non-differential identity and inclusivity, is one that generates cultural productions - in this case fiction and novels - *as though* they were not thought of in an historical way. This, I would propose, is crucial to the issue of self-representation in the still-questionable field of gay writing.

BOYS ON THE BORDER

I have suggested that, for the first time in our history, the space is open and available for the articulation of a gay profile, a homosexual existence that is *not* measured in terms of its transgression or its oppositionality, its otherness; for the first time there is the opportunity for gay theorists or activists or writers to articulate a positive assertion of identity; yet it is equally my contention that the bulk of the new wave of "gay writing" since 1990, despite its own best intentions, is crippled by a residual shackling to the dialectical terms generated and authorised by prior (and still current) hegemonic exertions and articulations of power, crippled by a theoretical inability to think homosexuality positively and constructively.

I will suggest that even where the fiction of Damon Galgut, say, or Brent Meersman, or Matthew Krouse, or any other of the anthologised and explicitly gay-identified writers with whom I shall be dealing, is trying to affirm itself as gay writing or as a peculiar kind of gay testimony, it is underpinned by a negative dialectic, trapped within an economy of opposition and negation within which it frames itself in terms of an absence, in terms of that which it is *not*, or that which attempts to negate *it*, to the extent that

this burgeoning body of fiction is unable to take up any meaningful place within the creative and positive field of an hypothesised new discursive dispensation.

Part of the problem, of course, is obvious in advance: as a result of the exclusion of "black experience" and black subjectivity/s from virtually all strands of public discourse, including, damningly, those of a loosely defined homosexual subculture, the emerging writing is exclusively white and, in the apparent absence of lesbian voices, male (1). As a consequence, this writing tends to partake of the particularly fraught neuroses and obsessions of a white bourgeois individualism caught up in the earnest business of fretting about its own legitimacy and its relevance in an African state in the process of social and political transition. This earnestness effectively banishes the opportunities for the formal playfulness and irreverence of a strategic postmodern literary strategy that might

1) The reasons for this lesbian silence are, of course, to be located in an institutional denial of lesbian legitimacy, both on the part of heterosexual and, shamefully, of male-dominated homosexual institutions and networks. In Shaun de Waal's essay "A Thousand forms of Love", subtitled "Representations of homosexuality in South African literature", the works of five white, male authors are examined. Only in a supplementary footnote tacked onto the end of the essay is any mention made at all of the fact that there are (some) women in South Africa producing work engaging with lesbian thematics or with lesbian experiences. The fact does remain, however, that aside from the literarily marginalised sphere of poetry, in which individuals such as Gerry Davidson, Tanya Chan Sam and Joan Hambidge make sporadic incursions, there are no literary voices operating in English which articulate a lesbian experience or asserting a lesbian identity.

effectively break the epistemological moulds of the stolid and humourless past; instead the writers retreat into a mode of biographical self-reflection and introspection that replicates the very insularity and isolation that so plagues them.

Mark Gevisser's and Edwin Cameron's Defiant Desire - Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa, an admirably clear-minded and comprehensive articulation of a broad variety of gay experiences in South Africa, from lesbian *sangomas* to gay miners in Welkom, coloured drag queens from the 1960s to gay prisoners of conscience in the anti-apartheid struggle, is structured around a desire to defuse precisely that notion of gay identity:

"This book takes as its starting that there is no single, essential 'gay identity' in South Africa. What has passed for 'the gay experience' in South Africa has often been that of white, middle-class men" (2).

Indeed, in their case, this action of pluralising the notion of gay experience meant

2) Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 3

"compiling a book that registers an enormous range of voices, styles and attitudes ... a consistent style is neither possible nor desirable" (3).

Within its ambit of quasi-historical, quasi-sociological reclamation, then, Defiant Desire makes an invaluable contribution to the emergence of a genre or a field of explicitly gay representation. Rightly dismissing internal contradictions between the various contributors and testaments as being irrelevant, it points towards an unbroken and open-ended continuum of gay experiences and identities, in a gesture that both insists on and simultaneously transcends the differences between the gay lives documented and celebrated between its pages.

It has proven more difficult, I would suggest, for gay writers of *fiction* to try to imagine an articulation or representation of homosexuality that breaks with their own tired self-identifications and definitions. When I identify one common, and extremely illuminating, thematic emerging in the gay fiction of the post-1990 period, it is not a coincidence that the thematic is specific to the experience of being a white South African male. With an obsessive and relentless insistence, the South African Defence Force and, more specifically, the figure of "The Border" returns over

3) Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 5

and over again in the short stories, personal accounts and novels under discussion.

It is not surprising, on the most prosaic level, that serving in the army should occupy a powerful place in the gay imagination as a place of trauma and ambivalence. The army, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, is a place

"where both men's manipulability and their potential for violence are at the highest possible premium, the prescription of the most intimate male bonding and the proscription of (the remarkably cognate) "homosexuality" are both stronger than in civilian society - are, in fact, close to absolute" (4).

Whether or not they are actually set in an explicitly military context, the stories circle insistently around, and insistently figure and refigure, the trope of being a soldier, being a conscript in the SADF, and especially of being on, or being afraid of being on, *The Border*.

In Matthew Krouse's "The Barracks are Crying" (The Invisible Ghetto) and "The Arista Sisters: September 1984" (Defiant Desire) - the first a fictionalised memoir of being part of a designated "queer regiment" while doing basic training in

4) Sedgwick in Showalter, 1989: 246

the SADF, the second subtitled "A personal account of army drag" - the spectre of The Border lurks in the subtext of the words and of the story, both explicitly and as a perpetual condition of possibility; in Koos Prinsloo's "Border Story" (translated from the Afrikaans, in The Invisible Ghetto), it is while on The Border that the narrator learns of the death of his ostensible girlfriend back home, breaking the thread of heterosexual pretence and concealment; in Brent Meersman's "Fear Comes to the Door" (The Invisible Ghetto), the "fear" is of a sexual attraction to and physical encounter with an unknown man, a criminal who enters the house in which the narrator is alone in the middle of the night. Not explicitly an army story (although the dangerous and mysterious stranger is himself AWOL from the SADF), the isolation of the farmhouse, its distance from suburbia and white society, and the curious erotic ambivalence this evokes in the narrator, mark the account as a displaced Border story. In Galgut's and Behr's novels, as I shall argue in greater detail, the trope of The Border is the single central ordering logic of their narratives.

The Border, as I have suggested earlier in this paper, is a powerful and evocative symbolic force in the white male national imagination. Damon Galgut observes:

"The border had history. For the rest of the country it was a mythical site, where men did

battle with guns. It had been for too long the edge of the world. Beyond it, as in maps of old, was where monstrous and unknown things dwelled."

(5)

I will suggest that The Border is more than the margins of political and geographic South Africa - it is a sexual margin as well: the liminal zone, in which sexual roles and identities are thrown into question. The Border is, in these stories, the real place of transgression. However if, as I shall assert, these writers show an overwhelming tendency to accept and make use of the trope of The Border as a useful and suggestive symbolic or discursive mechanism for expressing their own confusions and anxieties about their positions within an imagined national myth of identity, we should recognise that this is, in a sense, an acquiescence to the discursive power-strategies of a prior South African militarist authority. If The Border was as much a mythical zone, a concept, an imaginative realm as it was a physical location of heat and dust and boredom and death, then that mythos and evocative symbolism is inseparable from the strategies embodied in the Total Onslaught discourse formulated in the 1970s and perfected in 1980s.

5) Galgut, 1991: 47

Michel Foucault, many of whose arguments and insights invisibly inform the evolution of this paper, famously made the point that

"where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (6).

The workings of Total Onslaught ideology were relatively simple: repressive state control, oppressive state mechanisms were necessary in order to safeguard the nation from the communist threat across the border - the Angolans, the Cubans, the Russians, SWAPO, the pillaging, plundering, white-woman-raping hordes of faceless, black, communist evil that threatened at any moment to sweep into the country and eradicate the white apartheid state and the way of life of its citizens. In order to legitimate its own draconian measures of internal control, the state *needed* The Border, *needed* it to be perpetually under threat, *needed* the black communist menace, the barbarians at the gate. The Border existed to ensure the otherness of those without; those without were needed in order to maintain the existence of The Border (and when they did not exist they were invented, produced by those within). The threat from without, then, the existence of which was guaranteed by the existence of

6) Foucault, 1976: 95

The Border, was necessary for the maintenance of the state within. The Border, literally and in all its figurative incarnations, represented both the limits *and the centre* of the exertion of official control and discursive authority.

As an aside, it is an illuminating marker of the shifting strategies of national definition, that the official conception of the geo-political borders of South Africa have undergone a remarkable qualitative change. Far from the impermeable cordon of steel envisioned in the past to ensure the purity and integrity of the tender, embattled body politic, in which South Africa was quarantined in an attempt to achieve some measure of isolation from the plagues and viruses of communism and black nationalism, such a conception has been supplanted by that of a porous or semi-permeable membrane separating the organ of South Africa from the larger body of the African continent. The Angolan and Namibian borders have obviously lost their militarist symbolic potency, and it has been the semi-official policy of the Government of National Unity to allow the inflow of refugees from such countries as Mozambique and Zaire, as a means of expressing humanitarian solidarity with the other nations and peoples of Africa. Such high-profile figures as Tokyo Sexwale, Thabo Mbeki and Nelson Mandela have all in the past year issued well-reported public statements decrying xenophobia and urging tolerance and support for the

streams of foreigners entering the country. (7) Only under the force of public pressure have the government taken steps - still half-hearted and unconvincing - to stem the inflow of immigrants and refugees, and to accelerate the repatriation of illegal residents. Most recently, the government issued citizenship to nearly 90 000 cross-border migrant labourers who had been working in the Gauteng mines for a period of five years or more, a stretching and elasticising of existing notions and understandings of the function of a national boundary. The border, such as it is, is invested with little or nothing of its prior mythic and symbolic weight.

Be that as it may, The Border, within the signifying economy of these works under discussion, is invested with a tremendous intensity of imaginative signification. More specifically, it is overcoded with a particular and uncomfortable homosexual erotics, or at least an erotic ambivalence. This occurs not only because the army is the site of an intensive concentration of males and simultaneously the place of the incessant exertion of power differentials and hierarchies, but because the historical marginality of the border, its proximity to the illegal, the feared, the alien, the other, appears to open a zone of possibility within the imaginative ambit of these writers.

7) The one notable exception, predictably, given his own agenda of divisive nationalism, has been the Minister of Internal Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

It is, however, a carefully determined and constrained zone. What is alarming, I shall argue, is that in struggling to free themselves from a society and an authority that seeks to define and determine them, these writers locate themselves precisely within the paradigmatic space that was the cornerstone of precisely that ideological network of discursive positioning. The characters in these stories, in other words, are fulfilling precisely the dialectic roles required of them by the authority against which they rebel.

Perhaps the reason for this is to be found, at least symptomatically, in the formal qualities of the writing being produced. Gevisser best describes the writing in Defiant Desire and to a large extent The Invisible Ghetto with the phrase: "memoirs that flirt with fiction" (8). Defiant Desire makes no attempt to be anything other than an effort of reclamative documentary sociology, and indeed it is very successful as such. The Invisible Ghetto, on the hand, which is subtitled "Lesbian and Gay Writing from South Africa", and released under the imprint of COSAW, the Congress of South African Writers, makes a conspicuous effort to advertise itself as a broader collection of gay cultural productions (9), and more clearly demonstrates the formal tendencies that I mean. Krouse notes in his rather stodgy introduction that

8) Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 4

9) in the everyday sense of that word "cultural".

"this book comprises accounts, biographies and episodes, interviews, poetry and short stories" (10).

The literal precedence given the non-fictional discursive forms ("accounts, biographies, episodes, interviews"), is a telling one. Although the contents of the book are shuffled and interspersed with each other, the contents page lists them in their separate, non-sequential categories - the clear and quite accurate implication being that if they were not folded under the rubric of "Accounts, biographies, episodes", say, or "short stories", the reader would be unable to determine which piece of writing is fiction and which not. If this is so, it is not because the documentary writing bears any resemblance to practices of fiction - quite the contrary. Rather it is the case that in very few of the fictional or semi-fictional pieces is there any attempt to move away from a personal confessional mode of first-person narration-through-recollection; the fiction itself has the savour of a memoir. Stories such as Stephen Gray's "The Building-Site" (The Invisible Ghetto, listed under the category of "Short Stories") are so self-consciously autobiographical, so devoid of any sense of a specifically *fictive* purpose, as to make its listing quite puzzling.

10) Krouse, 1993: xi

While there are certainly sound theoretical points to be made regarding this generic blurring of the boundaries of fact and fiction, I am more interesting in the idea that it bespeaks a particular mindset at work in the writers of gay fiction. The writing, I would suggest, is characterised by an obsession with personal history - an obsession reminiscent of the strategy popularised with the rise of Western (and specifically American) feminism in the 1960s. This obsession has the result, however, of enmiring the writing within the cliches and dogma within which the writers' own intellectual and imaginative developments were implicated. There is a critical lack of a genuine imaginative effort to think creatively, in the sense of giving rise to something new and of thinking their way out of the conceptual traps of the past. Caught between the two camps of on the one hand asserting an essential and valorised gay identity, and on the other engaging in a postmodern dissembling and dissociating of identity which might open up a discursive space to new formations, and unable to reach an effective hybrid of the two, the writing is underwritten by the dark and destructive polarities of an oppressive semiotics.

Matthew Krouse's "The Barracks are Crying" is something of a paradigmatic example. Structured and presented as an autobiographical account of his experiences of basic

training in the SADF - although again collected under the rubric of "Short Stories" - Krouse addresses the critical issue of gay sexual identity. His experience of being drawn out of the ranks of the other soldiers and banished to the "queer platoon" is articulated in the terms of an inchoate longing for community, for a community that attributes identity:

"The queers were being singled out ... It was then that I began to feel a sense of envy, and through that sense I grew to understand that many of those there must have been feeling the same way. Feeling that one wanted to be with the queers, on the periphery, on the outside of the madness looking at the madness within. Of course, rare people volunteered themselves out of a sense of solidarity, and out of a yearning for what they already began to perceive as a lack of responsibility. Young men are like that. They will opt out if things get too tough." (11)

Astonishingly, Krouse encodes this desire for solidarity, for community, as a *desire to be marginalised*, to be "on the outside", looking in. It is not a community, or an identity, conceived in positive terms, but in terms of being elsewhere, in terms of "a lack of responsibility", of

11) Krouse, in Krouse, 1993: 126

65

"opting out". Indeed, when Krouse volunteers himself for this queer platoon, he does so by identifying himself as an actor, knowing that, as the Captain declares: " 'All actors are queers!' " (12). Krouse explicitly identifies himself in the terms of a logic of absence: actors are characters performing roles, mouthing other people's words, fulfilling positions and parts scripted for them. Krouse's status, and those of his comrades - as queers in the queer platoon, as womanly men - is one forced upon them, determined by the organising and categorising force of an authoritarian discourse. There is no sense of an identity being forged, or even considered, on the basis of an autonomous and self-consolidating presence.

Indeed, Krouse goes on to describe how the queer squad took on a particular structural function within the camp, a function that is nothing other than a replication of the oppressive gendered stereotypes by which the patriarchal, sexualised system of meaning and identity constituted itself:

"The boys used to come to come us, in their sleep they used to tap on the tent-flap and they used to beg us for a little comfort and warmth saying that, yes, you girls of the queer platoon sure know how to invent a genius in your song and your

12) Krouse, in Krouse, 1993: 126

dance, you know how to make a guy feel that home is just a walk away" (13).

Alarminglly, this status as woman-substitute, as surrogate for the affirming and assuring other, is presented in the text in a triumphant, self-approving way, claiming that in such a way, by representing a principle of tenderness, warmth and clearly encoded femininity, they

"served to remind those that might have forgotten that we were perpetrating an essentially rotten and misguided, lonely war" (14).

There is a perplexing failure to recognise that in his uncritical self-representation, Krouse is performing the very function that he identifies in "The Arista Sisters" (in Defiant Desire) - he is buying into a discursive paradigm in which he confirms and consolidates that which by the very terms of its presence works to negate *him*. In the closing pages of the story, Krouse demonstrates the difficulties of imagining a positively conceived gay identity. At the funeral of Jacob - a fellow soldier, a friend and, like Krouse, Jewish - Krouse stares at the body and reflects on the sense of belonging and community to which Jacob is entitled:

13) Krouse, in Krouse, 1993: 130, italicised in the text.
14) Krouse, in Krouse, 1993: 130, italicised in the text.

"I thought of Jacob arriving in heaven and seeing all of the people he was buried alongside, greeting him, saying: 'Welcome Jacob, Jacob, our son, whose child are you?'

"I'm the Metzinger boy,' he would reply, ...
'My father is Metzinger, Metzinger the builder.'

'Ah, you are Jacob the Metzinger boy!'

'Oh how terrible for the Metzinger family!'

'I knew your grandmother!' " (15)

Krouse, both Jewish and homosexual, is excluded from the pleasures of this vision of community, of ethnically - and culturally-guaranteed identity. It is not sufficient to enfold him; his sense of self is constructed along other lines and vectors: sexualised ones. His desire rises for a similar sense of solidarity, a similar sense of self-sufficient belonging and being, yet he is unable to conceive of a conception of self, or of his own gay identity, that is not infected with the signification of death and sterility:

"Standing there like that, amidst all the components that made up my life, I could think only of Jacob ... I focussed my attention on his genitals. I couldn't help myself. I thought of them in decay ... For me, I was getting to the

15) Krouse, in Krouse, 1993: 132

essence of life. It was the purest vision of two round testicles, Jacob's testicles, lying side by side in the abundant earth. *Like stones that could be picked up, weapons that could break windows.*"

(16)

This complex of associations is particularly telling. A powerful weapon wielded in hegemonic representations of homosexuality is the opposition between a "fecund" and "life-giving" (and therefore natural) heterosexuality, and a "sterile" and "life-denying" (and thus unnatural, monstrous) homosexuality. In these works the writers, virtually without exception, align the homosexual experience, or the articulation of homosexuality, with thematics of death, of decay, with the cutting short of youth. In "A Fear Comes to the Door" (The Invisible Ghetto), Brent Meersman describes his (or his narrator's) reactions in encountering an escaped convict in an isolated farmhouse:

"It occurred to me that the situation was no more dangerous than if I had picked up some stranger in a bar. And had we been in such a place I would certainly have made a pass at him. For something of the proximity of death in him, that sadness,

16) Krouse, in Krouse, 1993: 132-3, my emphasis

passing pleasure, heightened my every homosexual desire and fantasy." (17)

Indeed, there is something of the presence or the experience of death that seems to *enable* the expression and actualisation of homosexual desire. In Koos Prinsloo's "Border Story", the narrator attends to the funeral of his 'girlfriend', a funeral which marks the end of his public pretence of heterosexuality, and immediately goes to "a Turkish steam-bath and health clinic in the city centre where I picked up a man" (18). In Galgut's The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs, the narrator, Patrick Winter, kills a SWAPO soldier during a patrol-skirmish and the next night (but effectively the same textual moment - there is no space between the description of the one and the other) has his first homosexual encounter while on guard duty. It is not enough that homosexual sex or gay eroticism is enabled only by death; what is worse is the cold, bitter, alienated quality of this eroticism, the isolation inherent in each moment of sexual contact:

"He had prominent eye-teeth, acne and a short chin. When he penetrated me, with my knees bent over his shoulders, I cried for the first time";

(19)

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- 17) Meersman in Krouse, 1993: 147
18) Prinsloo in Krouse, 1993: 139
19) Prinsloo in Krouse, 1993: 139

"It was an act of revenge, undertaken in pain ... then we buttoned ourselves and went on our way, not able to look at each other"; (20)

"When the guard had changed, and he was alone, he took me to the coal-shed, stuck out at the far corner of the camp ... And yes, I had to suck him. It was an experience of intense blindness." (21)

There is something clumsy and annoying about the ease with which these writers replicate the stereotypes and constraining discursive tropes of a patriarchal and homophobic system of representation, but it is in the novels - both of Galgut and of Behr - that the full extent of this imaginative incapacitation is most comprehensively on display. It is particularly in Galgut's writing - ironically so, in the light of his programmatic statements on the function and the nature of novelistic discourse - that the limitations and the problems besetting the cultural project of gay South African writing are most disturbingly in evidence.

20) Galgut, 1991: 53

21) Krouse in Krouse, 1993: 129

THE BEAUTIFUL SCREAMING OF PIGS

Damon Galgut's fourth book, The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs, won the 1991 CNA Literary Award, and has received a great deal of critical acclaim and professional admiration; it was described most recently by Mike Nicol as being an important marker in South African literary development, "a departure from what had been current literature" (1). It is the explicit account of a young man (and, as doubled variant of his own trajectory of desire, his mother) struggling to come to terms with their own accelerating feelings of marginalisation, seeking "some kind of wholeness, or some assuagement of an alienation they both feel in different ways" (2). The narrator, Patrick Winter, dimly apprehends his alienation as a function of, and refracted through, his oblique apprehension of his own divergent sexual proclivities. This incipient gayness is allowed to irrupt at stages throughout the text as a signifier of the destabilisation of his socially-determined identity - indeed it precludes the success of such a determination - and is allowed at various moments almost to hold out the tentative possibility, the promise of some 'other way', some 'new beginning' for Winter and so for a white liberal South Africa seeking absolution for its complicit past, and remedy

1) Bowes Taylor, 1995: 16

2) De Waal in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 237

for the psychic damage that that past has wrought upon its own head.

To that extent, the immediate temptation is to offer an affirmative reading of The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs as making some recourse to an essentialist gay identity as a *deconstructive tool* for destabilising hegemonic epistemologies and subject-formations and for making some active and positive contribution to the formulation of new images, new social possibilities in which the nominal 'gay sensibility' can have a participatory role. That is not a reading, alas, that can be sustained upon a closer reading of the text.

The obsessive concern in The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs, as one might expect, is with the vexed question of identity, and specifically with the various subject-positions available to white South Africans. The whites who are treated with any depth fall into one of two categories: they are either unquestioning dupes of the ideological system, like Patrick's father and brother, who enjoy hunting, rugby and the army, and who are lumped together with racist Afrikaans farmers who cheer the assassination of SWAPO members by the shadowy South African forces; or they are anguished white liberals or progressives desperately trying to carve for themselves a new identity, trying to fabricate

ex nihilo a sense of purpose and of belonging in a land and amongst people from whom they feel hopelessly alienated.

Patrick's mother belongs to the latter group. Her life is a tissue of performances and accommodations - a long, variable effort to forge (in both senses of that word) an identity - any identity - with which she might be comfortable. Denied an acting career by her marriage to Patrick's father,

"resolutely, with wordless determination, she had constructed herself along different lines.

Practising English, practising style, she had gradually acquired values that weren't truly her own. She was a housewife, a mother, a maker of homes. In a way, I suppose, she was an actress after all." (3)

This notion of the social actor or actress is one we might remember from Matthew Krouse's self-identification as homosexual on the army parade ground ("The Barracks are Crying", The Invisible Ghetto). It bespeaks a condition of absence, a feeling of original loss (a loss that exists before there is anything to lose), and it marks a desire to attain that elusive wholeness and plenitude. Patrick's mother's reinvention of herself is not simply a response to the chauvinistic and patriarchal demands of her husband - it

3) Galgut, 1991: 6

arises from a genuine drive to make something of herself from the indeterminacy of her prior existence. Following her divorce, she undertakes a quest of sorts, "seeking for Africa", "digging for roots", yearning for some sort of communion with the land, the people, the amorously conceived continent. It is here that her fumbblings for identity become explicitly congruent with Patrick's own disquiet and unease:

"There was, in her mumblings surrounding this theme, a truth that encompassed my life. Displaced, lacking past, she was nevertheless African: a creation of this misshapen continent. Though she longed to belong, she had no idea of where. She dug for her roots in the rock." (4)

This is one level - probably the primary level, within the signifying economy of the text - of alienation that afflicts Patrick and his mother: their existential isolation, their lack of purpose and lack of community on a continent they are told is not their own. This condition of existential abandonment, however, is soon recast and refigured in sexualised terms. Seeking a way out of her state of painful irrelevance and immateriality, Patrick's mother seizes upon a black Namibian named Godfrey:

4) Galgut, 1991: 32

"Till he had arrived, she was doomed to her whiteness ... She could never be African, except by imitation, and for years she beat against that fact, a fist on the membrane of a drum ... [but] if she could not be a black woman, she could be a black man's woman. The attraction he felt for her was larger than lust: it acquired the proportions of the continent. It was not simply Godfrey who wanted my mother; it was, at last, Africa." (5)

Two important things are happening in this passage: firstly, in a loose and nebulous way, sexuality is introduced as a means of securing, or at least of negotiating, a sense of identity, no matter how contingent. Secondly, in opposition or contradistinction to the insubstantial and indeterminate, untethered white liberal identity, is established a mythic plenitude, a vast, unutterable sense of wholeness and unproblematic, self-present *being*. While the tone of this passage and of the writing surrounding it appears to have a mocking or ironic flavour, it becomes clear as the text unfolds that that mockery is aimed at the figure of Patrick's mother - a silly, shallow, *careless* person - rather than at the highly questionable impulse that drives her. The movement of the novel will be for Patrick to follow a course of (spurious) self-realisation that leads him towards precisely this desire of his mother's - to become

5) Galgut, 1991; 32-3

one with a broader community, to attain some sense of belonging and of identity through passionate union with Godfrey. As the novel draws to a close Patrick finds himself at a political rally, arm in arm with Godfrey and his mother:

"For a second I saw how things could be: part of a mass, of a singing congregation, the family to which I'd never belonged. I stamped hard on the ground, treading my past." (6)

I shall return to the figuring of this desire in due course. It is a structure or a pattern of desire which becomes overcoded, overdetermined on top of Patrick's primal scene of alienation and isolation: his inability to find access to the signifying world of his father and his brother - the masculinist world of a powerfully gendered patriarchy. If the possibilities of identity-formation and subject-construction in this text are really limited to either the accession to the fabrications of a patriarchal white nationalism on the one hand, and the hazy apprehension of a mythologised black or African plenitude on the other, then it is Patrick's failure to achieve the first which marks the pattern of his psychic development, and provides the impetus to the narrative, driving him towards a muffled, fumbling yearning for the second.

6) Galgut, 1991: 106

On the most simplistic and fundamental level, Patrick's inability to be assimilated into the masculinist values and norms of his society is figured in his inability to play sport. His father takes him outside to teach him to catch:

"And he would hurl the ball: round, dark, a dangerous shape of leather. It hissed towards me through the late afternoon, an embodiment of all that was most frightening to me, and all I could never do: I dropped the ball. I turned my head in fright and it would glance off my blunt hands, spinning into the flowers. 'Sorry,' I cried.

'Sorry, sorry ...' " (7)

Later, in the army, Patrick achieves a measure of identification with Lappies, the soldier with whom he has his first homosexual experience, on the basis of their shared inability to play the informal games of rugby that are organised in their leisure hours:

"This, more than anything, brought us together ... We suffered our isolation without much complaint. We had always contained it within us. There was, you see, a brotherhood of men to which we could never belong. My father, my brother, the boys at

7) Galgut, 1991: 8-9

my school: they knew things that I didn't know. There was that in their hands that helped them catch balls; that helped them see objects in flight. Lacking this vision, I felt myself blind ... I would never be part of their club. Excluded forever from their strange fraternity, I watched from outside in my shame." (8)

This passage to a large extent encapsulates the conceptual problems underwriting and undermining Galgut's representation and conception of homosexual desire and identity in this text. Lappies and Patrick are brought together, "*more than anything*", by the inability to play sports, the inability to catch a ball. Forming a community of two in the camp, forming between them what should be a space of comfort and of rest, they are brought together not by any sense of positive shared experience, not by the mutual recognition of an active principle of similarity, not because they see something in each other that they recognise and like - they are brought together by their inability to match the gendered stereotype of what it is to be a man.

All they have in common is their exclusion; all they have in common is their common failing. Moreover, it is not an exclusion of the grounds of their sexuality - it is an exclusion on the grounds of *gender incompatibility*. This is

8) Galgut, 1991: 49-50

the crucial moment in Galgut's construction of sexuality - it is founded, in this text, not only upon a principle of absence and exclusion, but on exclusion from such a patently artificial cognitive schema, such a blatantly man-made (in the truest sense of the term) conceptual framework. *Yet it is a framework which is presented with the force of the natural, and the proper.*

Patrick frames his exclusion from this "brotherhood of men" in terms of some essential, biological disqualification: "We had always contained [our isolation] within us". Patrick's sexuality - which is inseparable from his exile from the "strange fraternity" - is not only coded as isolation, as lack, but is identified as an inevitable part of him, arising from some indeterminable, pre-social source. His isolation is rendered in biological or physiological terms: a "lack of vision", something he doesn't have "in his hands"; this is the language of a crude biological determinism. Crucially, it is not his sexuality which is biologically determined, but his status as gender misfit, and it is *that* which is made to determine his sexual identity.

This is a reactionary perspective indeed: a construction of sexuality owing everything to the stigmatising and othering discourse of masculinity and patriarchy. Patrick's "lack of [masculine] vision" is because "I had my mother's eyes.

Large, dark and tragic, they stared out of my face at all that took place" (9). When Lappies is killed on the border, and Patrick is given the task of loading corpses onto the helicopter, "I turned to the next one, my chest feeling hollow; and choked down the girl I was" (10); when his brother Malcolm is infuriated by Patrick's insistent rejection of sports and his excessive attachment to his mother, he snarls:

" '... he sits there, giggling like a girl ...
It's a man's world, Patrick, it's a man's world
...'

I have never forgotten that. The terrible truth of that statement struck me as a warning. I remembered it that night, and every night after as I lay in the tepid warmth of my bed. *A man's world. Oh yes. It's a man's world, my masters.*"

(11)

His reaction is not merely that of a sexual dissident, or an individual male feeling excluded from the behaviours and rituals of manhood; it is the fear and dread of one who connotes himself as *female*. Talking about the war to Lappies, Patrick makes the observation that

9) Galgut, 1991: 9
10) Galgut, 1991: 78
11) Galgut, 1991: 13

" 'I can't help feeling as if ... as if men were responsible for this. I mean,' I ended lamely, 'women couldn't have made things like this.' "

(12)

Just before he suffers his first nervous breakdown, Patrick is confronted by his commanding officer, Schutte:

" 'Are you all right? You're behaving in quite a strange way.'

'I'm fine, Commandant.'

'I'm glad to hear it. It's tough, *ne?* We mustn't give in to ourselves. We're men here, not girls.'

" (13)

Patrick's crisis of identity is precisely that he is girlish, womanly, feminine, according to the terms and paradigms by which a patriarchal society has imagined and constructed those traits and artificial attributes. Astounding is Galgut's conflation of an *essential* state of being out-of-order, on the peripheries, with the oppressive conceptual schema and categories of hegemonic masculinist discourse. He buys into a tired and sterile opposition of masculinity and femininity, and allows his own sexuality to be understood in that way.

12) Galgut, 1991: 51

13) Galgut, 1991: 77

His sexuality, then, is conceived of as a function only of transgression - transgression against the naturalised notions of gender. This idea of transgression in turn takes over the active principle of sexual signification. Patrick describes his sexual encounter with Lappies:

"It was an act of revenge, undertaken in pain: against men, who made the world flat. 'Leave me,' I gasped in pain, but it wasn't to him: I was speaking to Malcolm, my father, to Schutte. 'Leave me,' I called down the well of my past, to those who'd colluded against me." (14)

This is a deeply uncomfortable conception of homosexual desire: as Shaun de Waal has characterised it,

"Here desire is an instinctive challenge to the patriarchal law; the transgression is enacted out of a traumatised state as an act of rebellion against the violent heterosexual male order" (15).

In addition to this stunted, negative conception of gay desire, one which allows no space for an identity based on positive principles, on *presence*, rather than an

14) Galgut, 1991: 53

15) De Waal in Gevisser and Cameron, 1994: 239

oppositional absence, there is a darker dialectic at work in Galgut's text - precisely the dialectic of death of which I have already made mention. Sexual desire in Galgut's writing is not and cannot be a productive, positive force, cannot be something around which a subject-position might fruitfully be constructed, for it is the site and zone of death, suffering, darkness and pain. The "beautiful screaming" of the title both refers to the death-cries of slaughtered swine, and evokes Patrick's associations of carnal grunting. Patrick watches a labourer slaughter a pig:

"Pigs are rolled on their backs. Four legs raised in the air, a rod of iron is inserted ... [Jonas] would come from his shack, stooped over with age, carrying his thin length of iron. With its infinite point he would prod at the pig, finding the delicate spot. Then, like a bull-fighter wielding his sword, he drove it in with his weight ... Pigs bellow, they squeal ..." (16)

This figuring of slaughter is rendered in unequivocally sexual terms (the pig held horizontally, its legs splayed, penetrated by a man leaning his weight into a long, carefully inserted rod). Moreover, on the facing page, Patrick describes being made privy to his mother's sexual activities:

16) Galgut, 1991: 19

"My mother did have lovers. A succession of young men ... The walls of our cottage, poorly made, were thin; and I was treated at night to the sounds of their union. I sat up in bed, *hearing her squeal*; and thought how I'd been conceived."

(17) (my emphasis)

Patrick's understanding of sexuality is quite unequivocal in this respect: "Rutting made life, and life led to death: as children we knew this was true" (18). Sexuality, then, is connoted with death; homosexuality, moreover, takes these connotations and overcodes them with a desperate stance of opposition and illegality, of blindness and despair.

Ultimately, what damns the text is not the hopelessness and the emptiness of Galgut's conception of sexuality - whether heterosexual or homosexual. What disappoints is the terms by which Galgut attempts to examine the potentialities of acquiring an identity, sufficient in itself, as member of a newly conceived South African nation. It is, in effect, the textual inability to imagine wholeness, community, inclusiveness, identity. It is an inability inescapably infected by the divisions and oppositional cliches through which the text articulates an understanding of sexuality.

17) Galgut, 1991: 18

18) Galgut, 1991: 24

Driven in a pursuit of this dimly apprehended notion of identity and belonging, Patrick and his mother go in search of Godfrey. Critically, Patrick informs us that:

"Despite her revolutionary utterances, it was no simple act on the part of my mother to take on a black man as a lover. Her parents, her upbringing, her marriage to my father - these counted against such a union." (19)

To this extent, it is as much an act of sexual dissidence as is Patrick's homosexuality. Consequently, such a relationship can be actualised only in the liminal border-space of Namibia, where Patrick himself first gave expression to his incipient homosexual desire. It is only on the margins, only at the edges, only as questioning and transgressive, that Patrick or his mother (or the author himself) can conceive of the project of formulating a sense of identity. Driving up both to meet Godfrey and to be present at Namibia's historic freedom celebrations, this conflation of political and sexual marginality is given figurative corporeality:

"I felt the land taking me in. Like a gentle black maw, it opened its gullet to me ... A white fist

19) Galgut, 1991: 35

of heat had enclosed the car and bore us along in its palm ... The road to the north lay straight as a shaft: we penetrated its quiet." (20)

In the light of the formal linking of Patrick's and his mother's joint sexual dissidence with the opening up of the horizons of genuine political and sexual equality, and the winking of the possibility of genuine integration into a mutualistic civil society in which their white bourgeois alienation and isolation can be assuaged and abolished, it is unpleasant to think what the intended message is when Patrick's mother finally tires of Godfrey and turns towards the Afrikaans farmer who so clearly represents the figure of patriarchal, unreconstructed white South Africa.

Perhaps most disappointing is the figuring of Patrick's struggle to attain an autonomous identity in tired, hackneyed and ideologically loaded terms that faintly and from a distance resemble the classic Oedipal trajectory.

While his father is on the one hand associated with all that Patrick (and the writer, one suspects) despises about masculinist South African culture - the trophies on the wall; the games of rugby and cricket in the backyard - he is also Patrick's nominal rival for the affections of his mother. In the absence of his father at business meetings,

20) Galgut, 1991: 28

the young Patrick would escort his mother to dinner and to movies,

"as though I was the one she'd married ... I courted my mother at times like these, whispering my wishes across the white table-top, the tall candle flickering at my breath ..." (21)

It is the classic attempt, then, to project himself into the identity of his father, to replace him and to assimilate his values. Yet, for reasons figured in the text as somehow biological, somehow genetically encoded, Patrick fails in the necessary passionate identification with his father that will enable him to accede to the position and social identity scripted for him. Yet even as his aspirations and quest for personal identity change, Patrick follows precisely the same quasi-Oedipal trajectory of attempted self-constitution, fixing next on Godfrey himself:

"And yes, I was a little in love as I sat in that sun-stricken office. My father, for all the heads on his wall, had never exuded such heat ... He was ... all that I wanted to be" (22),

21) Galgut, 1991: 11
22) Galgut, 1991: 93

as well as on the figure of Andrew Lovell, the assassinated freedom fighter based on the historical personality of Anton Lubowski.

These passionate identifications fail, of course - they *have* to fail since according to Galgut's stunted logic the very condition of Patrick's sexuality is its condition of lack, its condition of an originary loss or absence. His attempted identifications are based on his perception of some impossible authenticity or some imaginary plenitude from which he is *necessarily, always* barred. His trajectory of identification is itself an imaginatively and politically bankrupt wriggle beneath the yoke of discursive authoritarianism, rather than a genuinely productive attempt to mark out a new space of self-articulation and self-identification. Patrick's breakdowns, characterised by a dissociation of self from the object world,

"an intense dislocation, from which, it felt, I could not return ... When I spoke, my language defeated me: I forgot common words, couldn't finish sentences. I was witnessing the world from a terrible distance" (23),

lead to nothing; there is no basis for building, no substance beneath the imperfectly constructed identity but a
23) Galgut, 1991: 80

sterile dialectic of death, desolation, imaginative poverty. The writing falls away into stereotypes that simply replicate the unproductive and dead-ended conceptual terms of an alienating and isolating hegemonic discourse.

THE SMELL OF APPLES

Mark Behr's The Smell of Apples is a much praised and highly acclaimed novel, having won the CNA Literary Debut Award, the Eugene Marais prize and becoming the first South African novel to win the Betty Trask award for debut literature. It is also a finely crafted text - subtler, more nuanced and with an infinitely richer texture than Galgut's The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs. Comparisons are generally unjust, and if this one can be made at all, it is because both novels share in common at least one explicit thematic concern - the identity-constituting relationship between the young male protagonist and his father. Yet whereas Patrick Winter's is a tale of alienation, isolation, the impossibility of being incorporated or welcomed into different versions of male society, The Smell of Apples has a first-person narrator, Marnus, in whose boyhood can be observed a diametrical opposed trajectory of social acceptance and formation.

It is the story - to some extent the detailed account - of Marnus's coming-into-being as a perfectly integrated member of patriarchal white society, his almost ideal formation at the nexus of intersecting lines of the subject-forming discourses of a self-consolidating nationalism. The bulk of the narrative is distinguished by its familiarity, by its

almost mundane representation of an unexceptional boyhood following precisely the paths necessary for its passage to a state of successfully integrated white South African manhood.

To that extent, there is nothing self-evidently "gay" about this novel; Marnus is not demonstrably gay (nor even, I would argue, likely to be), nor does homosexual desire as it is conventionally conceived feature as an overt thematic of the narrative. Yet I would ascribe to this novel a queer status, and not simply because the author's repeated declarations, in a variety of printed interviews, of his own bisexuality has the effect of catapulting the text into that particular discursive force-field. Rather, what is queer about this novel is the peculiar and persistent homoerotics that underlie and inform the affective dynamics of the text, a homoerotics which not only conditions the coming-into-being of Marnus's fledgling sense of social being, but which, it is implied, underwrites the entire patriarchal nationalist project that forms the discursive framework of the narrative. It is, moreover, a systematic homoerotics which disrupts and problematises the very familiarity of each and every represented aspect of boyhood - indeed, of society itself.

Marnus is, in every respect, precisely what Patrick Winter failed to be. He is good at sports (vice-captain of his

school rugby team), he has a close male friend, he is popular and well-adjusted and, most importantly, he has a perfectly modelled and modulated relationship with his father, a relationship which is as constitutive of Marnus's sense of self as was Patrick's *lack* of an effective filial relationship. The novel's ostensible principle concern is with detailing the layering and the texturing of the homosocial bonding that marks and initiates a young boy's projected passage into full sexual and gendered citizenship, but what it accomplishes is a provocative *eroticising* of that passage, and powerfully suggests a society structured around and enabled by the workings of passionate male-male love.

There is a powerful erotics at work in the relationships between Marnus and his father, his best friend Frikkie, and with the mysterious Mr Smith, the general, who visits his father from Chile. It is an erotics which recasts Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's continuum of male homosexual bonding, which stretches *from* homosexuality to the properly legitimate relationships necessary to entitlement, suggesting instead (for rhetorical purposes which I hope will become clearer in the course of this discussion) a more thoroughgoing, fundamental sexual charging of the masculinist networks of power. Yet this is again not an erotics of pleasure, or rather, it is not one which is allowed to manifest itself in unmediated pleasure.

Perpetually the erotic desire insinuated in the text, figured almost in the spaces *between* the words, in the pores of the writing itself, is pushing up against the law and the control which holds it in place, which harnesses it to its own ends. This is, as I shall argue, a law and a structuring principle equatable with, and indeed conceptually coextensive with, the law of the land. Since Marnus's Dad is a Major-General in the SADF, tipped for a cabinet position in the Nationalist government, it is not too much to say that on a number of textual levels, desire, the erotic, is perpetually in tension with the literal law of the father.

This dynamic tension, which to a large extent powers the text, animates the narrative, enacts itself textually through the peculiar narrative chafing of an almost obsessive detailing of the *minutiae* of a childhood recollected, with an insistent and accelerating thematics of silence and secrecy. The grown-up Marnus writes:

"Perhaps that summer ultimately decided it. Possibly not even the whole summer - just that one week in December. Yet, by now, I know full well that you cannot satisfactorily understand an event unless you have a picture of everything that accompanies it: the arrival of the visitor cannot be divorced from what preceded his coming. To

understand my own choice, I need to muster as much of the detail as possible" (1).

The "choice" referred to is one of the ambiguities and indeterminacies that permeate the text. It is perhaps both easiest and closest to the truth to schematically observe that the novel is arranged around this textual moment, in which an adult Marnus (fighting for the SADF Permanent Force on the border, and soon to be killed in battle) looks back at a moment in childhood at which his future self-definition, his subject-position was decided, determined, fixed, and tries to make some sense of that moment. To this end he piles accumulating mounds of detail and minute recollection one upon the other. Popular music, scraps of news headlines, the sporting stars of the moment, hairstyles and clothing, attitudes and catch phrases, all stack up both to recreate that individualised moment in Marnus's development, and finely to evoke the feel and texture of South Africa in the economically booming 1970s, before the Soweto riots, before the recession, before the economic sanctions took hold.

Yet despite this relentless, occasionally wearying accretion of facts and detailed memory, the story is increasingly characterised by silences and holes of signification, a secretive ethos which finds perfect resonance in the hushed

1) Behr, 1995: 31

and muted governmental and military operations of the time. On the most prosaic level, the thematic of secrecy is an important structuring principle of the narrative: the arrival of "Mr Smith" (really a general from the Chilean military junta, presumably visiting South Africa for purposes of organising covert military aid) is a sworn and cardinal secret, and becomes the event, shrouded in silence and mystery, which dominates the day-to-day lives of the family; Frikkie and Marnus first firm their friendship with the shared secret that Marnus does Frikkie's maths homework for him; they consolidate it when coming across a coloured couple making love in the sand dunes near Macassar and deciding afterwards that "it's our secret and no one must ever know" (2); and they cement that friendship with the signing of a blood-oath, a ritual concluding with the wish that

" 'May God strike us dead if we ever tell someone else about things that are our secret.' " (3)

Even Marnus's mother becomes associated with the catch phrase, "We all have our little secrets" (4). As the narrative moves towards its startling conclusion, however, the motif of silence becomes less an explicitly stated thematic and more of a condition of the writing itself. It

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- 2) Behr, 1995: 75
 - 3) Behr, 1995: 77
 - 4) Behr, 1995: 102

is manifest in the gaps between Marnus's innocent, childlike observations and the unsaid conclusions at which our adult reading minds arrive; it inheres in the scattered elements of a broader pattern, textual clues which are not authorially connected or recognised by the narrator. It is a gradual gathering of silence which reaches its acme in the radical indeterminacy of the narrative climax and conclusion, paradoxically at precisely the moment at which revelations are being made, secrets are being exposed. As with the majority of the literal secrets and silences, these gaps in the text, these holes where signification should be, become increasingly connoted with a vague and uncertain apprehension of sexuality.

Sexuality, the erotic, as I have suggested, manifests itself throughout the text. It is initially most strikingly and unexpectedly evident in its insistent emergence in Marnus's admiration of his father. It inheres in the fascination with which he watches his father shaving, in the meticulous care with which he recounts the colour of the hairs on his father's wrists, it emerges in the tiny sensual details that he observes and recounts:

"His dark moustache was trimmed and his mouth stood out more clearly ... 'Ja,' I added, feeling so proud because Dad was becoming a general, 'Dad looks just as pretty as Mom.'

'Handsome is probably a better word,' he said, and smiled at me, and tapped lightly with his fist against my chin. I could smell the Old Spice aftershave he always wore for special occasions." (4.5)

This erotic association is consolidated by the cluster of semantic associations that Marnus makes between his father and a particularly phallic or male genital sexuality. Frikkie is telling him, for instance, about the size of a whale's penis:

"He patted the front of his trousers where his John Thomas is. 'His bloody cock is over eight feet long. Did you know?' I looked up to see whether anyone had heard what he said.

'You're mad, man. Eight feet is taller than Dad.'" (6)

They are a series of associations which take on a meaning and significance informed by Marnus's regular showers with his father:

4.5) Behr, 1995: 17

6) Behr, 1995: 10

"Dad's whole chest and stomach are covered with hair and his John Thomas hangs out from a bushy black forest ...

Between soaping and washing our hair, Dad asks: 'So tell Dad, does that little man of yours stand up yet sometimes in the mornings?'

Whenever Dad asks me that I get all shy, so I just laugh up into his face without really answering. I saw Frikkie's standing right out of his pyjama pants one morning, but mine doesn't really do it yet ...

When we've finished drying ourselves off, we tie the towels around our waists and I comb my hair in a side parting just like Dad's. (5)

It is an erotics, then, deeply invested with powerful urges of emulation and identification. It is, in fact, an erotics heavily involved with elements of male communion and bonding; as such it is a pattern that is replicated in Marnus's friendship with Frikkie. Yet even at this early textual stage, there is an implication of these male erotics with an element of danger, of distance, of discomfort. Marnus's father, while undoubtedly loving and even affectionate, is a man of war, a soldier, and he is a bearer of discipline and denial. There is a rigidity to him, an unswerving set of iron expectations: when Marnus is

5) Behr, 1995: 62-3

struggling to land a fish he has hooked on the beach, it is with dread that he realises that his father is watching him. When the fish escapes his hook, his father is unforgiving:

" 'He beat you,' Dad says.

For the first time since he came and stood with me in the water, I look at him. But he turns and walks away. He's standing against the sun that's climbed higher into the sky. I try to make out his face, but the light's too sharp for my eyes. For a while I'm blinded ..." (7)

It is a relationship premised upon an uncomfortable threat; the guarantee, the certainty of split and separation. Marnus's attachment to his father promises no comfort. Similarly, in a powerfully sexually coded first encounter with Frikkie, an encounter upon which their relationship is formed, Frikkie is made to embody the threat of pain and of violence that is bound up in homoerotic attachment:

" 'You're holding your top wrong,' I said ...
Before he could say anything, I took the top from him and showed him how to curl his finger around it before he throws. After a few tries he got it and soon he was trying to kiss everyone else's tops. We called it kissing when you managed to

spin your top on top of one that was already spinning ...

Frikkie broke quite a few tops in half with his deadly kisses. If he couldn't manage to split them in half, he cracked or chipped them so badly that they were out of balance and useless anyway ..." (8)

Yet despite these disturbing textual significations and pointers (Frikkie will, after all, be the site at which the one true moment of homosexual desire is enacted), the narrative is charting a quite unexceptionable, and socially legitimated progression of male identification - passionate identification with the father, the authoritarian role model, which will in turn translate into the desire to be that role model - when the schema is complicated and thrown out of kilter by the arrival of "Mr Smith", the general from Chile.

There is a duality to Smith, and it is this duality which problematises the easy and naturalised passage of identification. On the one hand, Smith might almost be the doubled figure of Marnus's father himself: from the moment he arrives, Marnus is comparing them and finding the similarities between them: they are nearly the same height, they have a similar build, he wears a moustache like

8) Behr, 1995: 3

Marnus's father's, they are almost the same age. Both are men of war. Smith even takes Marnus aside and tells him that, "You remind me so much of my own son" (8.5). In keeping with this doubling, this production of a second modelled ideal of masculine identification, Marnus transfers his erotic attachment to the figure of the general.

Their relationship is characterised by a structure of eroticised spectacle: when the general arrives Marnus peers down at him from his upstairs window, and watches him as he enters the house; he and Frikkie crouch down over a chink in the floorboards which allows them to see into his bedroom at night, and stare admiringly at his naked body:

" 'Can you see his muscles?' Frikkie whispers ...
'Did' you see those arms?'
'Ja,' I whisper, feeling more tired than I've ever felt in my life, 'but Dad's are much bigger.'
" (9)

Later there is an even more theatrically staged moment as Marnus again spies on the general, unseen, from above:

"Where the carpet is rolled back, two small patches of lamplight shine up through the holes in

8.5) Behr, 1995; 82
9) Behr, 1995: 99

the floorboards ... The general is standing in front of Ouma's dressing table, looking at himself in the big oval mirror ... I look at his face in the mirror and my heart starts beating like mad."

(10)

Yet the moment in which Marnus experiences most clearly this evident homoerotic desire comes when the general kneels before him in the bathroom, cleaning the cuts and scrapes he suffered after a fall:

"He squats down in front of me and looks at my knees sticking out from beneath the towel. His hair is wet and combed back, and he smells of soap ... He smiles at me and opens his eyes wide ... he presses gently against the grazes, so the red comes through the cottonwool and stains his fingertips. His hands are brown with little black hairs running from his arms right down to his little fingers." (11)

And yet - and this is the crucial point - General Smith is *not* an identical doubling of Marnus's father. He is slightly exotic, slightly Other; a swarthy skinned visitor from a faintly mysterious South American country, he carries with

10) Behr, 1995: 155

11) Behr, 1995: 132

him an aura of indeterminacy, of something exceeding easy signification. Frikkie and Marnus are fascinated by the scar that Marnus sees one night by chance:

"Running across his brown back is the mark of what must have been a terrible wound. It's almost as thick as my arm, and it looks new, because it's still pink." (12)

This mark, this scar is the embodiment of Smith's unreadability: it stands as signifier of experience, of meaning, beyond their capacity to know or to understand. Smith disrupts, or at least signifies the potential disruption of, the controlled circuit of desire, the regulated economy of homosocial bonding that is in place. He is that unplaceable intrusion, that irruption that *might* disturb Marnus's smooth and untroubled acquisition of his ordained social role and identity. The fact that Marnus's sister Ilse is reading *Moby Dick* offers an opportunity to figure Smith and Marnus's father in relation to each other. The general asks Ilse:

" 'And you, do you have someone like Queequeg, a dark, mysterious stranger?'

Ilse laughs shyly and says no.

12) Behr, 1995: 81-2

'But why not? A beautiful girl your age ...
Surely?'

' ... I'm not allowed to see strangers ...'

He smiles and says: 'Well, here I am ... and
I'm a stranger?' " (13)

Thus Smith casts himself as the Queequeg figure - dark, mysterious, connoting, within the insinuations of his address, an exotic otherness which translates into unfamiliar sexual desire or sexual threat. It is framed, moreover, in adjacency to the declaration of strictures and prohibitions ("I'm not allowed to see strangers"), being precisely that which those strictures and structures are in place to hold back. Queequeg would appear to be an apt figuring of the general: within the textual logic of *Moby Dick* he is encoded with a blank, foreign, mysterious power, emblematically inscribed with an extensive patterning of ritual scars and tattoos, just as Smith is marked, unreadable and unsettling to the easy arrangements, hierarchies and economies of power constituting the Western civilisation in which he finds himself. Yet, and this is the crucial moment in the sequence, *this* Queequeg is subsumed under the ordering principle of the textual Captain Ahab:

"Ilse shakes her head and says: 'No, not really.

You're not a stranger ...'

13) Behr, 1995: 151

'But I come from a faraway country. One with many mysteries.'

Ilse is quiet for a while. Then she says:
'That's true, but you're still ... a general ... like my father ... You're like my father, like Captain Ahab.' " (14)

Ahab is the embodiment of the law gone mad, deformed and turned against itself. Ahab is the figure of a principle of blind, destructive, *self-destructive* obsession, with the will to power which expresses itself in a particular language of discipline and violence. Ilse, then, (who follows in this text an unspoken trajectory of her own towards a certain rejection of the values and norms of her father and his conception of nation and society) has forcibly and willfully obliterated the misleading differences which place Smith nominally outside of the signifying circuit of patriarchal entitlement, recognising rather the structural and performative principles which mark him irrevocably as a bearer of male culture.

Smith's irruption into the family, then, despite what the dust-jacket synopsis of the book might say, is not a disruptive force. It is one that is carefully contained and managed, indeed incorporated into the rituals of self-consolidation. The fact that he complicates the triangulated

14) Behr, 1995: 151

patterns of desire is not important, is made negligible; even when he is identified as a rival for the sexual attentions of Marnus's mother, this is disregarded, and is certainly no jolt to Marnus's nascent coalescing of a socially-operative subject-position. She is marginal, with no inherent meaning of her own, a bit player on the peripheries of the principle drama of male entitlement. In this text, vividly, the currency of power, of signification, is trafficked exclusively through men.

Despite this extended domestic saga of identification and cross-identification, it is the familiar figure of The Border that is the true condition of this text's possibility. The Border, so crucial to the self-conception of the South African state in the 1970s, enfolds and infects each moment of this narrative. Not only, in a prosaic sense, is it literally the cause and the enforcement of the specific nature of the homosexual bonding through which Marnus must pass, but it is the outer edge, the terminal point, in every sense, of Marnus's trajectory towards manhood; it is the necessary shadow cast over the sun-splashed days fishing with Dad on the beach, it is both price that must be paid and reward in itself for the boyhood that has formed him. It is, simply, the place that Marnus must go in order to complete his emulation of his father, in order to close the circle of passionate identification. It is on the border that Marnus must find himself, and come

into himself. It is also the place where he dies, ingloriously, yet finding in that absurd and incongruous final moment the insistent and comforting replication of that moment of genuine oneness with his father:

"The black section leader's face is beside me. He asks me whether I have any feeling in my legs ...

But I am dumb.

I feel Dad's face against my chest and my arms around his head, and I feel safe. But now it is a different safety. Death brings its own freedom, and it is for the living that the dead should mourn, for in life there is no escape from history." (15)

The contradictory centrality of The Border in the project of constructing and defining of authorised identity is enacted in the textual strategy of disrupting the linearity of the child-Marnus's narrative with the repeated intrusions of the adult Marnus's italicised and disembodied voice, speaking from The Border. They ensure that there is no textual hope that Marnus will resist the cultural and national determinations placed upon him: Marnus *does* join the army; Marnus *does* go to the border; Marnus *does*, we know already, die in meaningless combat.

15) Galgut, 1995: 198

Thus it is, ultimately, that the remorseless logic of a conceptually loaded semiotics of homosexual desire is put to rhetorical use in The Smell of Apples. Behr uses the trope of eroticised bonding to deconstruct the passages and patterns of illogical desire by which the nation, the society, the family produce and condition their subjects, their children.

In a recent interview Behr offered the observation that The Smell of Apples "is perhaps about how totalitarian systems reproduce themselves" (15), and this neat formulation encaptures the semiotic and semantic principle at work in Behr's representation or figuring of homosexual desire: the "reproduction" of the totalitarian system is understood not in the mammalian sense, say, not in a *productive* sense, but as the sterile and lifeless splitting and redoubling of itself, giving rise to a bitter, self-sustaining genealogy of death and pain. In order to animate this relentless procession, to figure the affective spark by which it makes its appeal, by which it wins the devotion of its subjects, Behr makes use a conception of homosexual or homoerotic desire that is marked by its barrenness, its failure to produce life, its inexorable and inextricable association with death.

15) Bowes Taylor, 1995: 16

The Smell of Apples, fine accomplishment in many ways though it may be, is conceptually and imaginatively trapped in the decade in which it is set. It is a replaying of old obsessions, personal traumas, specific cultural anxieties, and despite its denaturalising and deconstructive impulses, it does so in a way which reinscribes many of the discursive oppositions and conceptual formations that it is implicitly trying to dismantle. In a mode of discursive introspection and navel-contemplating which, despite the protestations and the declarations of its practitioners, is characteristic of gay cultural production in South Africa at the moment, it offers no vision of a positively conceived South Africa identity recast along new definitional and affiliative lines. It cannot, in any symbolically significant way, participate in the as-yet still-born project of creatively and imaginatively redreaming a South Africa state, and a truly civil society.

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