

Flockemann, M. (2017). Complicit Refugees, cosmopolitans and xenophobia: Khaled Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner' and Romesh Gunesequera's 'Reef' in conversation with texts on xenophobia in South Africa. *International Journal of the Humanities*, 6(9): 71-78



Complicit refugees, cosmopolitans and xenophobia: Khaled Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner' and Romesh Gunesequera's 'Reef' in conversation with texts on xenophobia in South Africa

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the brutal xenophobic attacks in parts of South Africa against 'other' Africans between March and May this year, a fairly sustained (if repetitive) public debate has emerged in the local press. The aim is to extend this discussion to South African literary production and to stories from elsewhere - in this case, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The distinction between complicit refugees and cosmopolitans draws on some of the arguments of Mark Saunders and Anthony Appiah as a framework for comparing Hosseini's popular 'The Kite Runner' (2003) and Gunesequera's lyrical 'Reef' (1994). These will be read in relation to K. Sella Duiker's 'Thirteen Cents' (2000). Establishing a 'conversation' between these texts is associated (from Appiah) with calls/or re-thinking terms such as citizen and cosmopolitan. This, in turn, has implications for the current expressions of and about, xenophobia in South Africa.

Seeing the Foreigner in the Mirror

The xenophobia targeting foreign' fellow Africans between March and May this year has forever blighted South Africa's ideal of the 'Rainbow Nation'. Public responses to the attacks commonly express a sense of shame and complicity: as one commentator puts it, "these outrages call us all to account". He adds, "Like staring into a shattered mirror, we might not immediately recognize ourselves or approve of the images aimed at us. But that's us staring back at us" (Marais, 2008: 5). My aim is to establish a 'conversation' between such local responses and other stories from elsewhere which are also characterised by similarly traumatic political transitions resulting in enforced exile either within or outside the home or host country. While the literary texts selected for discussion do not necessarily address xenophobia directly, they do provide scope for engaging with some of the issues identified in recent local public discourses on the underlying causes for these attacks and the necessary self-reflection generated as a result. For instance, the same commentator referred to above claims "like it or not, this seethe of gory frustration and opportunism also involves statements of affirmation about who belongs, what identities constitute that status and who has legitimate claims to the state". In the language of ethical outrage that has characterised responses in the media, he concludes that these events "broadcast unpleasant truths about us and this grand experiment of ours" (Marais, 2008: 5).

The conversation that is the focus of this discussion involves two fictional narratives by adult refugees recalling how their worldviews and psyches have been shaped by their childhood experiences. Khaled Hosseini's hugely successful *The Kite Runner* (2003) is a coming of age narrative set against the political turmoil in Afghanistan, while Romesh Gunesekera's *Reef* (1994) tracks the young protagonist's development in tandem with the spiralling civil war in Sri Lanka. These are read in relation to a local text, K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000), which exposes the experiences of a street kid living like a refugee in his native Cape Town. Duiker's account serves as a searing indictment of post-apartheid South Africa and seems prophetic in view of recent events. The type of 'conversation' which is to be used here as a reading strategy is associated with calls for re-thinking concepts such as cosmopolitanism, citizen and nation, and this has implications for South African responses to the attacks, both in the public media, and in creative works. In other words, there is scope for reading local commentary on recent xenophobic attacks within the wider context of discussions on cosmopolitanism and difference, such as evident in the case of *The Kite Runner*, where recognition of complicity initially becomes both morally paralysing and self-destructive.

For example, Amir's reaction to his sense of complicity in Hassan's rape does not lead to resistance or overcoming the "intimacy of psychic colonization"; if anything, it exacerbates this. The fear of exposure and retaliation which prevented him from speaking out or coming to Hassan's aid was understandable, and given the situation and his age, forgivable – even though they grew up together, suckled by the same wet-nurse. However, Amir's subsequent actions are of an altogether different order. At first he simply avoids Hassan, whose very presence reminds Amir of his own cowardice. Indeed, he attempts to excise Hassan from his life, even going as far as to betray his talented kite-runner companion by falsely accusing him of theft – a crime that his father Baba abhors above all others. Amir's motives are complex; apart from wishing to avoid being reminded of his own sense of guilt, he is also jealous of the place Hassan seems to hold in his father's heart. The childish cruelty of getting rid of Hassan is also an attempt to gain his father's love and establish a sense of his own place in the world, without the 'mirror' of Hassan to show him up, reminding him of his own failures. This pattern of scapegoating to avoid personal humiliation invites some disturbing parallels with speculations on the reasons behind attacks on foreigners in South Africa – particularly in view of the effects of humiliation referred to earlier by Pumla Godoba-Madikeze. She notes how, in addition to feelings of humiliation, the sense of displacement and a lack of capacity for self-reflection are significant factors in facilitating the xenophobic attacks. While Amir's behaviour inflicts deep internal pain, initially causing him to scapegoat Hassan, this is of course a fiction, and as Appiah reminds us, stories are a way of aligning our responses to the world and communicating with strangers. The international success of Hosseini's novel, which has also been turned into a film, could be attributed in no small measure to its comforting utopian aesthetic. In addition the novel has been praised for presenting a view of Afghanistan from the inside in the period following 9/11. *Time Magazine*, in May 2008 featured Hosseini as one of the 100 most influential people in the world and Hosseini was introduced by Laura Bush as 'humanitarian of the year' for

"shattering post 9/11 stereotypes" (Bush, *Time Magazine*. May 12, 2008: 72). However, a more significant reason for its success in my view is that it employs what can be termed a utopian aesthetic.

***The Kite Runner* and Utopian Aesthetics**

According to Terry Eagleton a utopian aesthetic offers "a generous utopian image" through "reconciling that which is currently divided or fragmented" (1990:9). This is seen in Hosseini's novel in the way abusive patterns are inverted, subverted and reconciled in a way that offers closure far more neatly than usually associated with the traditional confessional novel. As suggested earlier there is some strain in the unexpected reversals and discoveries. This is evident, for example, in the closure achieved through Amir's atonement when he is beaten by the paedophile/torturer Assef in return for Sohrab. Although so badly beaten that his face is unrecognizable, he feels strangely elated, experiencing flashes of the memory of cruelties he had inflicted on Hassan as a boy by way of penance. The injury to his lip, cut in two, "clean down the middle" (260), mirrors Hassan's harelip that Baba had paid a surgeon to repair. When the adult Amir finally discovers that Hassan is his own (illegitimate) half-brother - a truth Baba stole from him, this again introduces the trope of mirroring: Amir is told by Rahin Kahn that "[Amir's] father was a man torn between two halves". As Amir looks at the photograph of Hassan and his son, Sohrab, he reflects:

I had been the entitled half, the society-approved, legitimate half, the unwitting embodiment of Baba's guilt. I looked at Hassan, showing those two missing front teeth, sunlight slanting on his face. Baba's other half. The unentitled, unprivileged half. The half who had inherited what was pure and noble in Baba. The half, maybe, in the most secret recesses of his heart, Baba had thought of as his true son. (313)

Eagleton suggests that a utopian aesthetic, while important in allowing us to imagine glimpses of an alternative world, also runs the risk of mystifying the "real political movement" needed to move towards such a world. A text which in my view manages this difficulty well is Gunesequera's *Reef*. This is achieved mainly through the way the narrative shifts constantly between worlds situated across time and space.

Mirroring, Being and Becoming in *Reef*

The shift between worlds in *Reef* provides a perspective that is both synchronically and diachronically conceived. This extends from the almost obsessively treasured "small world", limited to Mr Salgado's gracious house in Colombo that the narrator Triton enters as young house servant, to the ever-encroaching larger political context of escalating civil war in Sri Lanka between the 1960s and 1980s. In addition, this perspective encompasses the world beyond where the reef cuts the island off from the abyss of submerged prehistoric mountains, and of course the world of the refugee in the UK, where Triton and his as Anthony Appiah's *Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006).

Cosmopolitanism, Conversations, and Stories as Communication of Value

Appiah argues that as human beings we communicate through stories, since "evaluating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And this alignment of response is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of relationships"(2006:29). In applying this claim about alignment of responses to the narratives to be discussed here one could say that the value of encountering stories situated 'else- where' is that they allow us to both de-and re-familiarize ourselves with the local and the particular. Appiah loops the concept of cosmopolitanism back to the simple notion of 'conversation', "in its older meaning, of living together, association" (2006: xvii). According to Appiah, "conversations between people from different ways of life "are useful for "exploring which values are common, and which are local and particular". The significance of this model is that "we enter into a conversation - whether with neighbours or with strangers – without a promise of final agreement" (2006: 44). The value of conversation can thus be read "as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others", and Appiah stresses the role of the imagination here "because, the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves" (2006:85). I take my cue from his model of an imaginary conversation to explore how local discussions on xenophobia, belonging and identity and more specifically 'seeing the foreigner in the mirror' set up a mode of conversation with texts from elsewhere like *The Kite Runner* and *Reef*. The purpose of establishing this conversation is to deepen and give substance to some of the speculation in public discourse in South Africa, when these are viewed through the imaginative lens.

Originally such responses (especially from official sources) blamed 'criminal elements', or a faceless 'third force' apparently orchestrating the attacks. It was also noted that xenophobia here is a misnomer for scapegoating foreign nationals and indicative of misdirected frustration at government for failing to provide basic services to the poorest of the poor. At the same time, it has also been read as a manifestation of hopelessness and the brutalizing legacy of apartheid. Solutions were suggested, ranging from tighter migration policies, workshops on tolerance, reintegration banning the word 'foreigner', and making the boundaries of South Africa more, rather than less, porous in order to foster a greater sense of belonging to the rest of the continent.¹ Of interest here is the way a number of these observations have a direct bearing on the 'conversation' established by the imaginative stories that are the focus of this discussion. These include contributions by academics such as Achille Mbembe, who claims that the phenomenon should not be referred to as xenophobia, but rather as "a combination of self-hate among many of (South Africa's] black citizens and the persistent legacy of racism",² and this view is reiterated

¹ See "Eight steps to healing the wounds: Attempts to get to the roots of the violence must enlist a broad range of people- including victims", co-authored by a group of academics and researchers working for the Crime, Violence and Injury Presidential Lead Programme of the Medical Research Council at the University of South Africa (Kopano Ratele, Sandy Lazarus, Ashley Van Niekerk, Shahnaaz Suffia and Mohamed Seedat, *Cape Argus*, Monday June 9, 2008: 13).

² In a piece titled "South Africa needs to open, not reinforce, its borders" Achille Mbembe notes that as the circulation and capital intensifies around the globe, "the liberty of circulation for certain categories of individual and racial groups has been made extremely selective if not impossible" (*The Sunday Independent*, 15 June: 8).

in references to 'seeing the foreigner in the mirror' referred to earlier. On the other hand, Zimitri Erasmus stresses that there is nothing new or surprising about the attacks, as there has been strong evidence of these attitudes for more than a decade; she and other commentators urge a re-thinking of the exclusionary discourse of a uniquely South African nation, as it were, isolated from the rest of Africa.³

Others have urged the need to consider how young people imagine identity and selfhood, since many of the attacks and looting sprees were conducted by disillusioned young men. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikezela, a former member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, cautions, we also need to recognize that a substantial proportion of South African citizens feel themselves to be refugees in their own country, deprived of a sense of belonging in the face of the apparently unbridgeable gulf splitting the poor from the rest of the citizenry. She claims that young people living within a world of poverty and deprivation "feel a deep sense of humiliation"⁴. When reading these observations in relation to imagined coming of age stories from elsewhere, a number of connections can be drawn which give content to Gobodo-Madikezela's claim, particularly in terms of the emphasis on shared complicity and the formative experience of boyhood. One such connection is the suggestion that a significant facilitating factor for the xenophobic attacks is that the young men responsible are both poorly educated and even more importantly, poorly parented, and as a consequence have limited ability for self-reflection (Ashton et al, 2008: 15).⁵ The consequences of the lack of self-reflection and self-awareness provide scope for a productive conversation with literary texts, especially in relation to the confessional novel which is characterised by intense self-reflection.

***The Kite Runner* as Confessional Novel: Mirroring Selves, Not-quite the same, Not-quite other**

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is as much a 'confession' as a coming of age narrative. As identified by Peter Axthelm (1967) the confessional hero epitomized in the writing of Dostoevsky, for example, is "afflicted and unbalanced, disillusioned and groping for meaning" and suffering "deep internal pain", originating "not in the chaos of the world but in the chaos within the self, and for him the only possible order or value must be found in self-understanding" (1967:9). There are certainly synergies here with Hosseini's novel, which begins with the ubiquitous self-introduction common to the genre: "I became what I am today at the age of twelve. On a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975" (2003: 1). However, in a striking analogy Hosseini insists on the inseparability of 'world' and 'self',

³ Sociologist Zimitri Erasmus refers to Said's view that the concept of national identity needs to be revised, particularly as "the figure of the refugee is slowly becoming the norm rather than the exception (*Cape Times*, Wed 18 June. 18).

⁴ Pumla Gobodo-Madikezela co-author of *Narrating Our Healing: Perspectives in Healing Trauma* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) adopts the personal tone that has characterised many responses. "My heart aches for all our ravaged and ravaging people. Sometimes I feel I am wailing like a mourner with grief for the crushed hopes and desecrated dreams of just 14 years ago. Economic injustice is indeed right at the bowels of the problem in our country" (*Cape Times*, Friday June 13: 9).

⁵ A group of analytical psychologists have attempted to explain the individual and collective psychic activation that led to the attacks, and particularly why they were so brutal; they link this to the deeply ingrained wounds of a collectively damaged psyche. This is exacerbated by the lack of leadership, and especially parenting, given the disruption to family structures caused by HIV and Aids, "which has left millions of children and adolescents without parents or parental guidance" (Paul Ashton et al, *Cape Argus*, Monday June 23, 2008: 15).

claiming in an interview that the "intimate" stories he is concerned with and the bigger story of the political turbulence of Afghanistan are "twisted around each other like a DNA strand",⁶ and this is also true of the texts by Gunesequera and Duiker -though these are not written in the same confessional mode.

In Hosseini's novel the incident which haunts the narrator Amir into adulthood, shaping his past and his future, is his guilt at his cowardly silence after witnessing the rape of his servant-companion Hassan. Hassan is an easy target -he is a Hazara, a marginalized caste considered inferior to Afghan Pashtuns like Amir and the adolescent rapist, Assef. The rape aims to humiliate and punish the outsider Hassan for his stubborn loyalty to his 'boy-master' and foreshadows the excesses of the Taliban regime to come. Indeed Assef reappears later in the novel as one of the regime's most vigilant executioners. Twenty years on, Amir, now a novelist living in the US, reflects on his childhood in Kabul during the 1970s, up until he and his father are forced to flee during the Soviet takeover in 1979. Responding to a call from his father's friend Rahim Khan, Amir, now married but childless, returns to Afghanistan to rescue Hassan's orphaned son, Sohrab, in an attempt at 'atonement'. This is because, as Rahim Kahn suggests, his return could provide "a way to be good again" (2). The novel is characterized by occasionally formulaic parallels and inversions in the relationships between Amir, Hassan and his son, Sohrab (as other-self, master-servant, half-brothers, betrayer-betrayed, uncle-nephew and finally, father-son). According to Axthelm, one of the common tropes in the confessional novel is use of the double, which he claims "has been equated with that of the mirror, reflecting certain facets of the hero's existence and thereby accelerating his self-examination" (1967: 44). The preoccupation with 'mirroring' or 'doubling' also raises the issue of complicity, indicated earlier in the references to "us looking at us" in terms of the 'foreigner in the mirror', and extends to the painful complicities and self-understanding that are at the heart of Amir's narrative. This preoccupation with complicity is a major concern in Hosseini's novel, and provides a key point of comparison with the other texts to be discussed.

The Ethics of Complicity

In his study *Complicities: the intellectual and apartheid* (2002), Mark Sanders distinguishes between an active complicity which entails collaboration and alternatively, an awareness of and accepting "responsibility in complicity" (2002:9). He claims that "responsibility in complicity" requires recognizing our shared humanity, or as he puts it, the "foldedness of human-being" (2002: 9). According to Sanders, while collaboration and complicity are interrelated, it is this recognition of "responsibility in complicity" that can become the basis for resistance. In other words, as a pre-requisite for resistance, one first has to recognize one's responsibility in complicity: "in order to resist, victims need to be aware of and overcome an intimacy of psychic colonization that led them to collaborate with the oppressor" (2002: x). Imaginative literature, claims Sanders, is an ideal vehicle for "representing the complexity of complicity" (2002: 1 13). In this case, the tropes of mirroring in *The Kite Runner* and *Reef* illustrate the complexity of complicit

⁶ Interview by Alden Mudge (<http://www.bookpage.com/0706bp/khaled.>)

situations in different contexts. However, although Sanders' point about recognition of complicity being necessary for resistance are valid, this does not necessarily follow, master/mentor Salgado are (like Amir and his father) forced to go into exile. What distinguishes these two retrospective accounts is evident in the epigraphs above.

In Hosseini's narrative, the over-determined subjecthood seems to originate from the trauma of a single incident which informs and ripples throughout Amir's life, only resolved by the utopian aesthetic which achieves some sort of absolution. In *Reef*, however, Triton is a young house servant, situated, like the marginalized Hassan, both inside and outside the home of the genteelly intellectual Salgado, a dreamy marine biologist – described as a left-over of Sinhala feudal privilege. Triton claims agency by perversely refusing Salgado's suggestion that the clearly intelligent eleven year *old* return to school to continue his education. Interestingly, Triton is here like Hassan, the "unentitled, unprivileged" one, but he nevertheless opts to stay with Salgado as house-keeper and cook, in order to 'watch' and 'learn' from Salgado. In the process he discovers his own creativity as an innovative chef, while assiduously studying Salgado's habits of living, reading, conversation and ever-broadening social intercourse. But unlike the kind of doubling or mirroring discussed above in relation to 'seeing the foreigner in the mirror', or the split selves of *The Kite Runner*, Triton does not simply want to 'be', mirror, or mimic Salgado, to become his other 'half'. Instead, as he claims, "I learned to become who I am" by "watching him, unendingly, all the time" (43). Salgado serves as it were as a window rather than a mirror to Triton, who is clearly no 'nervous native'.⁷

The 'mirrorings' and complicities explored in Gunsekera's novel are more nuanced than in *The Kite Runner*. For instance, early in novel Triton eludes his intended rapist, the despised head servant Joseph, by playing at being dead during the attack. Violent sexual episodes like this have been seen as typical rites of passage in the coming of age story, serving as a form of Lacanian "'oedipal moment' that propels the child into the world of the 'law of the father'".⁸ This is of course also the direction taken in *The Kite Runner*. In *Reef* however such episodes are more complexly layered. For instance, during the bungled rape, Triton, who is afraid of the spiteful Joseph after being left alone with him while Salgado is away, roams the house protectively. At this stage of his life he is focussed on maintaining the boundaries of that safe domestic world, seemingly isolated from the violent political instability which followed the attempted coup of 1963 that led to Triton being sent away from his jungle village for his own protection. On entering "my mister Salgado's bedroom" he discovers his nemesis Joseph in front of Salgado's mirror, shirt unbuttoned, rubbing Salgado's cologne over his chest in a gesture that suggests Joseph's resentment at his exclusions from Salgado's class and Sinhala caste-based entitlement. The scene is wonderfully suggestive as Triton and the

⁷ This is a reference from Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "the status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their own consent" (Sartre's emphasis, in Fanon, 1961 : 17)

⁸ See, for example, Lacan's description (via Freud) of the Oedipal crisis in early childhood: "The Oedipal crisis represents the entry into the symbolic order...the phallus, representing the law of the father (or the threat of castration), thus comes to signify separation and loss to the child" (in Moi, 1985: 99).

mendacious Joseph lock eyes in the mirror. Triton's sense of the violation of appropriate order in his own carefully maintained 'small world' ("talcum powder had settled on the tabletop") is captured in the reflection of Joseph's drunken leer in Salgado's mirror, offering a visual image of the triptych of power relationships between them (35). Although Joseph is 'in charge' of Triton (who is also Sinhala like Salgado), it is suggested that Joseph hails from the aboriginal Veddahs who are regarded as having a lower social standing. At the same time, this also represents the complicities of their relationships, though at this stage Triton is not conscious of his own acquiescence to his class-bound relationship to Salgado. The absent Salgado's literal effacement from the encounter between Joseph and Triton, and Triton's instinctively resourceful ploy in evading rape prepares for the way events will play out in the larger political arena later. This is seen when Salgado goes into exile after finally recognizing that liberals like himself and people of his class can no longer live in Sri Lanka without compromising both their principles and their personal safety. Like Amir, Triton does not tell Salgado about Joseph's abuse. But this is not because of fear or shame; instead, he is naively confident that things will take their appropriate course, which they do when Salgado dismisses Joseph for being drunk on duty. However, Joseph's departing threat, "he spat at my feet. You bastards, you are going to eat shit one day, shit" (42), appears prophetic in view of the political violence that later forces Salgado and Triton into exile where they witness the violent excesses via flickering images on their London television.

There are moments when Triton does fleetingly recognise his own "responsibility in complicity". This is tied up with growing disillusionment at Salgado's blindness to the political discontent and the unravelling of Salgado's relationship with the delectable Miss Nili, who tells the talented young man, "You don't really belong here, Triton" (158). Even at this stage, he does not understand what she means, "It was not what I felt. There was nowhere else I belonged." But according to Nili, "We've all been put in the wrong place. We will never produce anything here", she said and touched my face with her hand, '*Only* our grotesque selves'" (158). Triton becomes aware that by opting to stay with Salgado rather than complete his education, he put himself in a position where Salgado's cronies can still call him *kol/a* (boy). Even with this hindsight, Triton nevertheless chooses to remain with his employer, accompanying him into exile, where, liberated from traditional caste taboos, they become companions of sorts. It is Salgado who eventually returns to Sri Lanka to look after Nili who has become a victim of the civil war. Triton however remains in the UK, recognizing, belatedly, that maybe leaving Salgado was "what I had always wanted"(180). Salgado's legacy nevertheless remains part of who Triton has become: when a woman in a London pub asks him (assuming all Asians are the same), whether he is a refugee from Africa, fleeing from that "wicked Amin", Triton responds, "as I imagined my Mister Salgado would have replied: No, I am an explorer on a voyage of discovery" (174). This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, despite being a refugee, Triton still attempts to claim agency, and secondly, he refuses the mirror she holds up to him. This is in keeping with the way the novel

explores the possibility of self-fashioning, or as Stuart Hall puts it, "becoming, as well as being" as a consequence of the diasporic experience.⁹

At one level it seems Triton develops the kind of "partial cosmopolitanism" advocated by Appiah, where "connection is not through identity, but despite difference" (2006: 135). During his exile Triton says, "I was learning that human history is always the story of someone's diaspora: a struggle between those who expel, repel or curtail – possess, divide and rule – and those who keep the flame alive from night to night, mouth to mouth, enlarging the world with each flick of a tongue" (174). This again points to the imaginative transformation made possible through storytelling. In the case of *Reef* it seems this involves a painful process of forgetting, and there are no neat solutions. Triton concludes: "It was the only way I could succeed: without a past, without a name, without Ranjan Salgado standing by my side" (180). This comment is however counter-balanced by the novel's prelude, "The Breach", where the now forty-odd year old Triton, a successful restaurateur in London, encounters a young Tamil refugee staring at him from a cashier's window in a London parking lot. This encounter with the Tamil stranger "whose face reflected my own" plunges Triton back into the world of the past he feels has to forget: this recollection is what shapes *Reef* as novel, its very title suggesting the co-existence of diverse worlds of experience. The usefulness of fictions like *The Kite Runner*, *Reef* as well as K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*, as Appiah has put it, is that these stories can "align our responses to the world" (2006: 44). This is illustrated in the way Duiker uses the story of the street child, Azure, to present a critique of the on-going brutality of the social order experienced by those on the margins of the 'new' South Africa.

Thirteen Cents: The Local in Conversation with the Worlds of Strangers

Duiker's description of what he wanted to achieve in *Thirteen Cents* throws some light on the uncompromising starkness of the insider perspective of the street child's apparent complicity in his own physical and sexual abuse.¹⁰ At the same time, Duiker's comments also anticipate attempts to analyze the so-called 'outbreak' of xenophobia, as well as pointing to the "pervasive rhetoric of amnesia" about South Africa's "bloody road to democracy" (Hlongwane, 2006), which is in danger of being prematurely forgotten:

In *Thirteen Cents* I wanted to explore how violence is not only a way of dominating people, but I also wanted to show that violence is used by people to communicate with each other to convey a message. The way this happens is deplorable. But we are part of a violent culture, and we never knew a day of rest, nor did we receive help to enter into a process of healing after apartheid. That is our fate, and the cause of our psychosis that we carry around with us. (in De Vries, 2004: 23)

⁹ Hall notes that cultural identity is as much a process of "becoming" as of "being", belonging to the future as well as to the past and located historically: but, "like everything else that is historical they [cultural identities] undergo constant transformation" (1996: 112).

¹⁰ *Thirteen Cents* was Duiker's first novel. In preparing for the novel he lived with a group of children on the streets of Cape Town for a while in order to understand their experiences. His second novel was *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. This talented writer took his life in 2005. His third novel was published posthumously

At the end of his narrative the boy Azure in *Thirteen Cent* envisions a purging torrent of water rolling in over Cape Town to cleanse the afflicted land, in effect destroying it. While one should avoid an unproblematically symptomatic reading of Duiker's text in terms of the pathologies ("our psychosis") referred to above, Duiker's apparently bleak vision does not simply contradict the stories from elsewhere which offer alternative possibilities of self-fashioning or redress. As Appiah reminds us, the model of a conversation as a form of communication, "whether with neighbours or with strangers – does not entail a promise of final agreement" (2006: 44). As evinced above, it has been claimed that xenophobic attacks in South Africa should be seen in the light of separatist or exclusionary discourses of nation-building, economic injustice and deprivation, which lead to feelings of hopelessness and humiliation, as well as limited capacity for self-reflection. Such self-reflection is necessary to understand the frustration and rage projected at the nearest 'self-other', in this case Azure. Azure is targeted by the community of street dwellers for having the startling combination of blue eyes set within a dark-skinned face – dark enough to be associated with the *makwerekwere*, a derogatory term for 'foreigners'. The rage projected (too repetitively and relentlessly, according to some reviewers) onto the boy is because he embodies an ambivalent or hybrid identity which unsettles and apparently threatens the familiar colour-based power hierarchy amongst the street-gangsters he is victimised by. In fact, he is advised that in order to survive on the streets he should model himself on the *makwerekwere*, and avoid situations where the 'difference' his appearance signifies can be interpreted as a threat to the racial stratifications still intact in the newly democratic city. It has been suggested that Duiker "wants Azure to symbolically represent difference itself" (Alexander, 2000: 4). This is an interesting insight in that it speaks to the reasons posited for the xenophobic attacks. Like the local 'foreigners', Azure becomes a "target of suspicion, exploitative sexual desire and racist hatred from people across the racial spectrum" (Alexander, 2000: 4). At the same time, the way Azure, as embodying 'difference' is targeted here, is in keeping with the mirroring or doubling which is a recurring motif in all three texts discussed.

The way feelings of humiliation, rage and frustration are projected onto the nearest self-other is also essentially what is explored in *The Kite Runner*; however, Hosseini's fiction (unlike Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*) also offers the imagined possibility of atonement, or, "a way to be good again", and this is one of the primary reasons for the popularity of the novel. On the other hand, the painful struggle between the pull of the tide of the remembered past and the desire to live for the future, as represented in Gunesekera's *Reef* points to the transformative potential of creativity, since Triton identifies himself not as what he 'is', but what he can 'make' and become. In addition, the novel explores the similarly transformative potential of empathy. This is illustrated in the prelude to the novel when the older Triton recognizes in the young Tamil refugee a reflection of himself. This empathy with a stranger, and more broadly, the connection "despite difference", is as Appiah argues, required to be a full citizen - not only of the world, but especially of one's homeland. As I have argued here, establishing an imaginary conversation between stories and the complicities they explore could thus assist us to see ourselves more

clearly and also to imagine other possibilities, without compromising the integrity of specific and historically located perceptions.

In this case a conversation between these three texts suggests that, paradoxically, the very fact that South Africa negotiated a non-violent settlement which resulted in the first democratic elections in 1994, also accounts for the extremely bleak vision of the new social order depicted in Duiker's novel. Bleak because Duiker insists on the need to recognize how the lingering legacy of apartheid and its older slave and colonial history is literally embedded in the city of Cape Town itself, as well as being physically embodied by Azure who appears to signify the slave and colonial heritage. This is an insight that the child begins to articulate in a conversation with another stroller: initially the boys blame the recurring violence meted out to Azure on the fact that "Grown-ups are fucked up". However, his companion corrects him, "No, Cape Town is fucked up. Really", to which Azure replies, "You're right, it's Cape Town, not the people" (37), though eventually they agree that it is both. On the other hand, one could speculate that the comforting closure offered in Hosseini's novel, as well as the other worlds posited as being in balance with Triton's immediate reality in *Reef* are the product of an urgent need to imagine potential alternatives in the face of the yet unresolved, un-negotiated war-ravaged contexts of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

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