DIS-LOCATION / RE-LOCATION: COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL NARRATIVES OF WHITE DISPLACEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

In this article, I propose correlations between my ambivalent position as a white, English speaking, second-generation Jewish female living in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa and debates within South African whiteness studies around what Melissa Steyn (2006) identifies as a post-1994 sense of psychological “dislocation” which certain white South Africans are experiencing. Underpinnings of white identity were and are being challenged through processes of redress; anchors which previously held whiteness in place are, arguably, shifting or have been removed, resulting in a sense of displacement for those “White Africans” who staked much of their identity on their privileged whiteness.

In proposing these correlations, I reference the artwork of my exhibition Dis-Location / Re-Location. The artwork draws analogies between the “immigrant” experiences of two Jewish protagonists - the colonial Englishwoman Bertha Marks, who immigrated to South Africa in 1885 to enter into an arranged marriage, and myself as post-colonial persona. Bertha’s experiences of dislocation and alienation from the colony are paralleled with my experiences of displacement from a society caught in the throes of reconstruction and redress. Selected synchronic linkages between Bertha’s and my subjectivities as Jewish South Africans are touched upon. Both experiences are considered as manifestations of the immigrant’s need to re-locate within their new environment, entailing re-evaluations of personal and collective ideologies of gendered and Jewish whiteness.

Introduction

In this article, I propose tentative correlations between my ambivalent position as a white, English speaking, second-generation Jewish female living in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa and debates within South African whiteness studies around what South African sociologist, Melissa Steyn (2006) identifies as a post-1994 sense of psychological “dislocation” which she proposes certain groups of white South Africans have and are currently experiencing. In proposing these correlations, I reference the artwork of my exhibition Dis-Location / Re-Location. The artwork draws analogies between the “immigrant” experiences of two Jewish protagonists - the colonial Englishwoman Bertha Marks, who immigrated to South Africa in 1885 from Sheffield at the age of 22 to enter into an arranged marriage with the entrepreneur Sammy Marks - and myself as post-colonial persona. Marks’ experiences of dislocation and alienation in the colony are paralleled with my experiences of displacement and alienation from a South African society caught in the throes of reconstruction and redress. Both experiences are considered as...
manifestations of the immigrant's need to re-locate within their new environment, entailing re-evaluations of personal and collective ideologies of gendered whiteness.

The exhibition, which takes the form of photographic, sculptural, installation, performance, video and sound art, travelled to seven national South African galleries and museums between June 2007 and September 2008. The methodology which underpins it was practice-led research. During the process of producing the creative work, certain theoretical positions which I touch on in this article informed the content of the work and, similarly, my theoretical research teases out content from the creative work, effecting a cyclic, reflective integration of theory and practice. I therefore write this paper as both artist – maker of the creative work – and academic – providing a reflective explication of the artwork in theoretical terms.

In the artwork, my lived experience of post-colonial hybridity is visually paralleled to the colonial persona and historical circumstances of Bertha Marks. Marks lived an insular life in which hierarchical colonial and Victorian conventions of class, language, race and gender differences were preserved and upheld, and within which whiteness was privileged as a product of race and social class. Whilst Marks' experience was quintessentially colonial in her attempts to retain Anglicised customs, morals, behaviours and values in an alien environment, and was combined with a secularised, acculturated practice of orthodox Judaism, I, as a South African-born, white, second-generation Jewish female, explore ambivalences of "dis-placement" and "belonging" within a rapidly transforming, post-apartheid environment. Within this post-colonial framework, identity is positioned as hybrid; polyglot, heterogeneous and diverse; an unstable construction which challenges and destabilises Enlightenment and Modernist conceptions of cultural purity and authenticity.

Although marked differences lie in the two personae's colonial and post-colonial contexts, underpinning both experiences are questions related to their positions as white South African subjects, and by extension, their subjectivities as Jewish South Africans. The various complex, multifaceted, and uniquely inflected positions that Jews have occupied in South African society, particularly during the apartheid era, have informed numerous historical and theoretical studies (see for e.g., Shimoni 2003; Shain 1994; Leveson 1996; Bethlehem 2004; Sherman 2000; Mendelsohn & Shain 2008) and constitutes a complex and broad area of investigation. Whilst an in-depth engagement with the formation and enactment of South African Jewish subjectivities is beyond the scope of this article, I provide glimpses of South African Jewish subjectivities as they are metonymically represented in the two personae featured in the exhibition. Given that there is no singular South African Jewish subjectivity and that all subjectivities are inextricably bound up in their own specific cultural-historical moments, I only propose certain synchronic linkages between Marks' and my subjectivities as Jewish South Africans in this article, in a similar manner to the way in which these are suggested in the artwork. However, these will always be rendered problematic by the diachronic specificities that they necessity elide.

In the first section of this article, I outline certain key issues which directly and indirectly relate to both personae's South African Jewish subjectivities. These
hinge around questions which lie at the core of Gideon Shimoni’s text *Community and conscience: the Jews in apartheid South Africa* (2003). As both Marks’ and my subjectivities are inextricably linked to our respective socio-political contexts, brief contextualisation is provided for both cases in the two sections to follow. Finally, I examine how each persona’s subjectivity is articulated in the artwork.

**South African Jewish subjectivities**

Shimoni details the political behaviours of Jews as members of the dominant white minority, focussing his discussion on the period 1948-1994, during which time apartheid was the official political order. Underpinning his investigation is the observation that “the Jews in South Africa have shared in the status of the privileged society based upon a system of legalised racial discrimination” (2003: 1). It was of fundamental importance for the socio-economic prospects of Jewish immigrants to South Africa that they had the status of being Europeans or “whites” (3), despite the ironies and complexities of being “othered” and suffering periods of anti-Semitic discrimination. Shimoni (78) comments that although Jews were outsiders in relation to the vested interests of society’s state authorities, social classes, and dominant ethnic groups — and although the shadow of Afrikaner nationalist anti-Semitism was ever-present — this marginalisation differed from those contexts in which Jews were directly victimised, for instance, in czarist Russia. He argues that this kind of acute marginalisation is not applicable to South Africa, where Jews had full civic equality and enjoyed all the privileges of the dominant white population (78). From the outset, the Jewish immigrant entered into what Shimoni terms “the dominant, caste-like system” (2) in South Africa, as part of its white sector. It is from their privileged position of whiteness in a society which displayed rudiments of racial discrimination long before the official institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948, that Shimoni questions the multifaceted implications of South African Jewry’s moral heritage and historical experience.

In examining the complex and often contradictory relations between community and conscience in the modern South African Jewish experience between 1930 and 1994, Shimoni (2003: 73) draws a distinction between two facets of political behaviour which characterised Jewish experiences in South Africa. He points to the extraordinary prominence of Jewish individuals in the radical and liberal streams of political opposition to the apartheid system. The political and ethical commitment of a relatively large number of South African Jews to anti-apartheid campaigns are reiterated in Nelson Mandela’s words, inscribed as part of the display on contributions of South African Jewry to the apartheid struggle in the National South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. These read: “In my experience I have found Jews to be more broad-minded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice” (Fellner 2009). However, despite the salient presence of Jews within the various forms of opposition to the apartheid regime, Shimoni (2003: 73) highlights the avoidance of association with these “radical” streams on the part of the vast majority of Jews; their tendency to cluster around a position in the white political spectrum just left of centre, and most significantly to this article, their position as “silent bystanders”.

Shimoni (2003: 29) outlines how this position of “silent bystander” was
instituted and reinforced by the official representative organ of the Jewish community, the Jewish Board of Deputies, from 1933 onwards. The Board steered away from any engagement with the political struggle against the government’s apartheid regime, issuing policies throughout the 1950s and 1960s which stressed that “neither the Board of Deputies, as its representative organisation nor the Jewish community as a collective entity, can or should take up an explicit attitude in regard to specific policies in the political field” (Shimoni 2003: 30). By and large, the orthodox rabbinate adopted a similar attitude. Most orthodox rabbis took the view that Jews ought to recognise that they were no more than “guests” in the lands of galut (exile), and that they should remember that South Africa offered Jews economic freedom, as well as upward mobility and ultimate prosperity. As Shimoni observes (2003: 272), deep-seated fears of anti-Semitism underlay these attitudes and behaviours, as the Jewish community felt themselves to be hostage to Afrikaner nationalist goodwill. He sums this up as follows:

Because the Jews were part and parcel of the privileged white minority, their welfare was unmistakably dependent on conformity with the white consensus. Within the parameters of that consensus, they were more liberal than most other whites. But to challenge the parameters of that consensus which liberally allowed equal opportunities and rights for all whites but denied them to non-whites, was perceived by most Jews – including many who deplored apartheid – as courting a clear and present danger (2003: 76).

Marks and my South African Jewish subjectivities thus hinge around our positions as Jewesses who form part of the privileged “white” or “European” sector. Marks accepted and upheld colonial prejudices and behaviours, not so much for the sake of acceptance and integration but most likely because these were accepted conventions and norms of the colonial society of which she was an integral part. Her upper-class position allowed for this, for as Shimoni (2003: 6) observes, the “lower-class” Jewish immigrant generations were “too preoccupied with basic concerns of livelihood, social adjustment and coping with new languages to be concerned with rights and wrongs of the regnant system of race relations and exploitation in the country”.

My Jewish subjectivities relate to childhood experiences of growing up in apartheid South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. My parents were first-generation immigrants from Lithuania and Latvia. As immigrants who arrived in the anti-Semitic climate of the 1930s which preceded the Nationalist party’s rise to power, their modes of adaptation (and those of their parents) played out in the kinds of non-involvement with the injustices of apartheid which Shimoni points to. For them, the concerns of safety, security, family well-being and economic prosperity were paramount. They thus formed part of community of “silent bystanders” to whom Shimoni refers, whose silence might be read as tacit acceptance of the Nationalist party and its policies, yet could also be read as a mode of survival, for having fled Eastern Europe from the threat of Nazi power, they and their parents were no doubt well aware of the precarious position they occupied as immigrant Jews.

Thus, despite the differences in our socio-political contexts, and differences in the way our experiences play out in relation to these, both my and Marks’ South African Jewish subjectivities are underpinned by the privileges and benefits of having been part of the
dominant white population. In certain respects, our responses to this "silent complicity" (which Marks herself enacted), are a form of my grappling with the necessity of coming to terms with my South African Jewish whiteness and the multiple racial, historical and cultural privileges that this embodies.

Alienation and displacement; integration and acculturation

In order to contextualise Marks' position as an upper-class Jewess of English origin in fin-de-siècle South Africa, I begin this section with a cursory sketch of selected racial positionings in South Africa at the time. Despite some fluidity in identity constructions, fundamental colonial attitudes towards race, as an ascriptive attribute signified by skin colour, were firmly in place. Those classified as "white" were dominant over the various other social groups, collectively designated as "non-Europeans". The latter groupings comprised Africans, Asiatics and mixed-race persons, termed "Coloureds" (Shimoni 2003: 2). These "caste-like" classifications were made despite the fact that economically, there was already an inextricable interdependence between whites and the other racial groups. The white racial group was further segmented into an institutionalised duality of Afrikaans and English cultures, and further sub-divisions emerged within the immigrant Jewish community.

These subdivisions were notable at the outset of the third major wave of Jewish immigration, roughly between 1890 and 1910, which brought the most impoverished Eastern European Jews to South Africa. Unlike the already assimilated Anglo-German Jewish community, these "greenhorns" were regarded by the urban gentile population as "other" - alien, impoverished, unkempt; as representing the "dirty proletariat from the Polish Russian border" (Leveson 2001: 15). Further to this discrimination by the gentle populace, their arrival caused divisiveness within the already established Jewish community. The "Litvaks", or "Peruvians" as they were disparagingly termed, were viewed as embarrassments by the established Jewish communities, as they posed a threat to their already precarious social position by inviting anti-Semitic sentiments (Leveson 2001: 18). However, Leveson (2001: 18) notes that this negative image of the Jew was counterbalanced by the many immigrant Jews such as Sammy Marks, who earned reputations for their business ingenuity and upward mobility.iii

As Sherman (2000: 505) notes, these Yiddish-speaking "Peruvian" Jews who came to South Africa from Eastern Europe moved from one discriminatory society to another. Sherman describes how the most contorted of all accommodations to racist norms by immigrant Jews was to be found amongst those Peruvian Jews who worked in the "eating houses" which flourished from 1903 to the 1940s. These catered to blacks along the gold-mining reef of the Transvaal and were unashamedly known as "kaffir-eating houses" or "kafferitas". Even though they were socially and politically privileged over black workers, as whites who served blacks food these Jews were doubly discriminated against - both by the white ruling classes, and by more well-established Jews who owned the eating houses and employed the socially despised "Peruvians" for exploitatively low-wages. Being anxious to become acculturated to their adoptive country, the "Kaffireatniks", as the Peruvian Jews working in the eating houses were termed, steadily developed racist attitudes (Sherman 2000: 511). This
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is borne out in the Yiddish language which, as Sherman (2000: 511) points out, absorbed the country's all-pervasive racist discourse. As Sherman notes in relation to these "Kaffireatniks", "their own empowerment along a number of shifting socio-political frontiers demanded that they construct for themselves an identity exclusively defined by the parameters of racism" (2000: 507). White supremacy, racial discrimination, and social separation of the races were thus not the sole domain of the Afrikaner – these were also rooted in British colonial policies and in the practices of English-speaking South Africans, and played themselves out in perverse ways amongst the burgeoning Jewish community (Shimoni 2003: 18). It was into this "caste-like", divisive society that Marks entered in 1885.

Although her father, Tobias Guttmann, had been president and treasurer of the Sheffield Hebrew congregation, Richard Mendelsohn (1991: 197) notes that Marks' orthodoxy was an acculturated, secular one of the "lukewarm, Anglicised variety so characteristic of the Jewish elite in Victorian England". Jewish dietary laws were loosely observed in her kitchen, with grocery lists including a variety of shellfish such as lobster and crayfish, which are forbidden by Jewish law, and regular deliveries from the Connaught butchery in Pretoria, which supplied only non-kosher meat (Mendelsohn 1991: 198). Like many of her Anglo-Jewish contemporaries, Marks celebrated Christmas, hosting large annual Christmas parties and concerts at the mansion, called Zwartkoppies, which Bertha's husband Sammy built for her and their eight children. The Marks family did however celebrate Passover and the High Festivals. These festivals, together with the rites of passage (such as male circumcision and bar-mitzvahs) were the most enduring of their Jewish observances. As Mendelsohn (1991: 198) observes: "When all else was left behind, these were retained, even if only in a modified form, perhaps more symbols of Jewish identity than for religious content. For Marks and many other Anglicised Jews, Judaism had become more a matter of personal integrity than of religious conviction".

As an Anglo-Jewish immigrant to South Africa, Marks' sense of displacement, or dislocation from her new environment, was physical, social and psychological. Like the seedling roses she imported weekly from Kent to plant in her recreated Victorian English rose garden on the South African "veld", she herself was "transplanted" onto African soil, coming from an upper-middle class Anglo-Jewish family in Sheffield, where she had enjoyed an active social life and community support. As Mendelsohn (1991: 187) notes, Zwartkoppies was a 12-mile carriage ride away from the developing urban centre of Pretoria, and therefore trips into town were limited to special occasions. Mendelsohn elaborates on her loneliness at Zwartkoppies and homesickness for England, noting that despite the luxurious comforts of her surroundings, Zwartkoppies remained a place of emotional, intellectual and physical restriction and isolation for Marks. This sense of physical isolation and separation from her family and "home" was coupled with the intellectual, emotional, creative and psychological constraints of the patriarchal social constructs which dictated her life as a (Jewish) Victorian wife, mother and woman.

However, although physically isolated and barred from formal power, colonial women like Marks were, as Anne McClintock observes, "not the hapless onlookers of empire, but were ambiguously complicit both as colonisers and colonized, privileged and
restricted, acted upon and acting” (1995: 6) Bertha’s social position as an upper-class, white, Jewish Victorian woman was not neutral, and her loneliness and isolation might have been exacerbated by her intellectual and emotional attempts to retain her Anglo-Saxon customs, morals, behaviours and values her new environment. For instance, her relations with “non-Europeans” were limited to employer-employee or domestic mistress-servant spheres. For her, blacks were invisible in social terms, and thus, her upholding the Victorian convention which dictated that it would not be “right and proper” for her to converse with the servants might have intensified her loneliness, resulting in the mansion over which she presided becoming her “gilded cage” (Mendelsohn 1991: 187).

Milton Shain observes that in mid-Victorian England perceptions of Jews did have some negatively charged dimensions, but were mostly relatively benign (1994: 11). Nevertheless, the ironies of being a Jewess who might have encountered anti-Semitism in England upholding the colonial position of presumed innate, white superiority in South Africa seems to have been lost on Marks, as they were to many of her generation, position and class. Thus, it might be argued that the loneliness and isolation which she experienced as an immigrant was exacerbated by her Jewishness, which set her culturally apart from neighbouring communities, as well as by her attempts to retain the colonial avoidance of “others” of different race, ethnicity, class, language and religion.

**White dislocation in post-Apartheid South Africa**

My sense of displacement in post-colonial, post-apartheid South Africa is characterised by a sense of psychological dislocation, coupled with a need to relocate myself within this rapidly transforming environment. This process of "relocation" entails a re-evaluation of both personal and collective naturalised westernised and Eurocentric values, morals, ideologies and beliefs, embedded in South Africa’s colonial past and within my consciousness. Shaping a sense of self-identity within the emerging society seems to necessitate a process of discarding and/or re-evaluating these ingrained attitudes, whilst retaining those which seem to still hold currency and value. Steyn poignantly describes this as a need to “know one’s whiteness, reach into it, feel its texture, before it will let one go” – or perhaps, before one will let it go (Steyn 2001: 133). Whilst this re-evaluation is a personal process, it is also public, as post-1994 redefinitive changes in South African society have prompted a need for the reframing of cultural, racial, and political identities on new and contested political and psychological terms.

Melissa Steyn (2001) and South African historian Gerald L’Ange (2005) discuss ambivalence as a psychological state which currently informs part of the larger South African public consciousness. Both note how the demise of apartheid and its accompanying white majority rule in South Africa has prompted a need for redefinition of diverse South African cultural identities. For some South Africans, the need comes as a result of tensions between traditional customs and the influences of globalisation, westernisation, capitalist consumer culture; for others, such as white, English speaking cultural groups whose ancestry can be traced back along differing time-lines to European lineage, conception of themselves as “African” is a contested point of ambivalence, debate and/or negotiation. Although all Europeans in South Africa can trace their lineages back to European origin,
Steyn argues that it is particularly so for English-speaking South Africans who have historically tended to retain a largely Eurocentric worldview, and thus have had a more obviously bifurcated relationship to the African continent. In contrast, as Steyn points out, Afrikaner identity is predicated on being “of Africa” – a premise based on dissociation with their earliest European roots and on a long established sense of self-identification with the land (2001: 103).

Steyn and L’Ange discuss how the fall of colonialism and apartheid has left many English-speaking whites feeling severed from their European roots. Steyn (2006) comments that, post-1994, she perceives a “crumbling of the old certainties of what it meant to be white in South Africa”, noting that many whites seemed to feel “dislocated” from the new dispensation. Certain underpinnings of white identity were and are still being challenged through processes of transformation and redress; anchors that previously held whiteness in place are, arguably, shifting or have been removed. The ideological thrust of apartheid denied pride in black identity, giving rise to a post-1994 societal challenge of defining what a Pan-African identity might constitute. This has lead to various post-apartheid discourses, an example of which is former South African President Thabo Mbeki’s concept of an African Renaissance. The latter validates local ethnic signifiers, working to “reframe and interpret these signifiers through the example of a broader African experience” (Klopper 2000: 217). These may be located against the backdrop of global (Dyer 1997, 1998; Frankenenburg 1993, 1997; Nakayama & Martin 1999; Vron & Back 2002), as well as within the emerging field of South African (Steyn 1999, 2001, 2006; Distiller & Steyn 2004; van der Watt 2003) whiteness studies.

Themes of white alienation and displacement have been explored in South African literature, for instance in JM Coetzee’s Diary of a Bad Year (1997) and Disgrace (2000), and in Antjie Krog’s Country of my Skull (1997), wherein she confronts her position as a white Afrikaans woman acting as a journalist at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Krog’s position is particularly fraught, as her personal intimacies with Afrikaners, the Afrikaans language, and apartheid, are also her terms of “belonging” as a South African. Theoretical work in the terrain of South African whiteness studies has been done by sociologists such as Steyn and Natasha Distiller and in the visual arts by Liese by van der Watt. However, local whiteness studies is relatively new research terrain within South Africa. It is highly pertinent at this time, for, as Steyn observes,

This is one of those moments in a historical process where change is so far-reaching, but also so accelerated that one may catch the process of social construction ‘in the act,’ as South Africans shape narratives of social identity that will provide bearings in previously uncharted waters (2001: xxii).

L’Ange (2005) controversially uses the term “White Africans” to describe those people who staked much of their identity on their privileged whiteness and who are now positioned in a country which is in the process of redefining itself as African, within the context of the African continent. This term is contested; problematics around whether some South Africans are more “authentic” South African citizens than others, who has the right to consider themselves members of the South African nation, and whether white South Africans need to “earn the right to call themselves African” – or can even call themselves “African” – constitute some aspects of
this debate. For some Jewish South Africans, these questions surrounding conceptions of South Africa as “home” and of themselves as “African” are further complicated by their Zionist affiliations. As Shimoni (2003: 5) states, settling in Israel – an act termed *aliya*, the Hebrew word for ascent – was always integral to the Zionist programme, which had its roots in interwar independent Lithuania; it is generally perceived as an act of altruistic service to the cause, or as an idealistic act of personal self-fulfilment. The concept of Israel as a secular or religious Jewish “homeland” has prompted a sense of dual loyalties for many South African Jews. Yet as Shimoni comments, “In general for Jews in South Africa, confidence in the continued viability of Jewish life in the new world lands of the Diaspora imparted a vicarious quality that enabled them to identify with the idea of a return to Zion without necessarily regarding it as applicable to themselves” (2003: 4). Thus, for many white South Africans and particularly for those Jewish South Africans with Zionist affiliations, “belonging” and “home” still seem to be contested terms.

The second-generation exploration of immigrant identity investigates how conceptions of contemporary South African cultural identities might be renegotiated in terms of hybridity. Stuart Hall’s (1994) theorisation of identity as a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being” is pertinent here:

> Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (1994: 23).

Halls’ conception of identity as a matter of “becoming” resonates with the phrase “we are in a process of becoming”, currently used by certain South African cultural theorists to describe emergent South African identities. This phrase implies that stable or concretised “South African identities” are, and might indefinitely be, “in process”. South African artist and academicThembinkosi Goniwe points out that “Black people are always performing, adjusting to the system, speaking the foreign language. Black people are always ‘becoming’”. Goniwe suggests that these processes of becoming could, in tandem, affect white South Africans, as he urges: “Let’s all become part of this process of becoming” (quoted in Kasibe 2006: 25). Within this “process of becoming”, new speaking trajectories, relationships between home and elsewhere, global and local, tradition and modernity are in a state of fluidity, transforming ways in which we approach questions of subjectivity, identity and creative agency.

**The Dis-Location / Re-Location exhibition: hybridity; grafting; cutting and hysteria**

In the artwork on the Dis-Location / Re-Location exhibition, hybridity is considered as a product of grafting. In each of the three core narratives of the exhibition, *(Alourosa; Ties that Bind Her; A Room of Her Own, 2006-2007)* the first incision or cut inevitably leads to a grafting of organic or inorganic materials into the protagonist’s flesh. My use of the term “graft” is influenced by Colin Richards’ definition of the term which, he argues, involves both contact and exchange – interactions that commonly intersect across difference.
When a graft takes place the boundaries crossed can be traumatically transgressive — signifying a deep incision that wounds and can leave permanent scars, even though it may also lead to productive and successful fusion.

I use the term "hybridity" with specific reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary model of "organic hybridisation" and Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) post-colonial model which allows for the emergence of a "Third Space". Mikhail Bakhtin’s linguistic model of hybridity differentiates between "organic" (unconscious) and "intentional" hybridisation. Within the artwork, his concept of organic hybridisation, which produces fusion but "the mixture remains mute and opaque, never making use of conscious contrasts and oppositions" (Bakhtin 1981: 360), is operationalised. Unconscious hybridity gives rise to amalgamation rather than contestation which, like creolisation, is an imperceptible process, whereby two or more cultures merge to produce a new mode, language, world view or object [Young 1995: 21]. Intentional hybridity sets different points of view against each other in a conflictual structure, which retains an elemental organic energy and open-endedness (Bakhtin cited in Young 1995: 22).

Given its correlations with the creative work, in which organic species of plants and human skin are shown to conjoin through grafting, the term "hybridity" has been chosen to refer to processes of cultural fusion. Hybridity, like the term "grafting", has a biological etymology — it was originally used to describe the outcomes of crossing two plants or animals of different species, possibly as the result of grafting. In terms of horticulture, a graft’s purpose is to cultivate new orders, through actions of cutting, severing, transplanting and attaching different species to and from each other. Commonly used in post-colonial discourse to describe a range of social and cultural borrowings, exchanges and intersections across ethnic boundaries and the emergence of new cultural forms that might ensue from such mixes, hybridity and grafting refer to both biological and cultural "merging".

In the work on the exhibition, the two women’s narratives are visually and phonetically grafted throughout the work, in ways that are part-fictionalised, part-autobiographic and part-historically factual. The imagery slips between the factual Bertha Marks, whose performance is based on first and
second-hand research, and her fictionalised persona, whose thoughts, emotions and actions are based on imaginative projection. South African Victorian colonialism is referenced through the period settings and Victorian styling, yet this referent is simultaneously located within the present, signified by the plastic fabric of each skirt worn, and the protagonist's short, boyish haircut. Using my body as metonym for myself and Bertha Marks – the combination of whom I shall hereafter refer to as “the protagonist” – I perform our identities as post-colonial and colonial white Jewish women in three core narratives, presented as a series of staged photographs. In certain works, the images more obviously address Bertha's experience; in others it more openly addresses mine. In these images, the protagonist is represented as dressed in contemporary forms of hybridised, Victorian/African-style clothing and often appears in the Victorian setting of the Sammy Marks Museum, Pretoria, the former home of Bertha and Sammy Marks.\textsuperscript{vii}

The protagonist is represented as engaged in needlework activities, typically considered as “women's work” in the Victorian era and as a signifier of “femininity” through docility and labour (Parker 1984: 4, 5). Representation of this activity is given a subversive twist in that she appears to be working on her skin as opposed to fabric. This subverted needlework activity becomes a metaphor for an Anglo-Jewish (white) woman trying to negotiate a sense of being “African” within a (post)colonial environment.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.jpg}
\caption{Figure 2: Farber, L. 2004-7 Aloerosa: Induction Image size: 65 x 65 cm Archival pigment printing on Soft Textured Fine Art paper, 315 g Editioned 1/9 Photograph by Hannelie Coetzee}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{Figure 3: Farber, L. 2006 A Room of her Own Performance still Photograph by Michael Meyerfeld}
\end{figure}

This conception of women's work, and the claustrophobic passivity associated with domestic labour in Victorian England, is subverted through the implication that the act of sewing can be redefined into a form of agency. Needlework becomes a means through which Marks unsuccessfully struggles to reaffirm – and I ambivalently manage to renegotiate – a sense of identity as a white Jewish woman living in (post)colonial Africa. Albeit reluctantly in Marks' case, these intimate acts of cutting and conjoining of white flesh and indigenous South African aloes, pearls and white African beads suggest
the creation of new subjectivities: grey, hybrid identities that are the product of grafting signifiers of Europe and Africa. Her various insertions into the body are shown to “take” and transform into new hybrid plants, beaded flowers or scarification markings. In the Aloeosca and A Room of Her Own series, the protagonist’s pale white skin becomes a site of disfiguration — the violence of the plant’s simulated growth is the outcome of a self-initiated, genteely delicate, yet violent action of cutting and insertion. Although these actions arise from a desire to integrate or “belong”, they might be read as metaphors for cultural contestation. As foreign to the body, the aloe plant signifies insertion of an indigenous, alien culture, which takes root and disfigures the body through its forceful growth under the skin. Emphasis is on contact and subsequent combination of difference through processes that imply bodily violation, abjection, disfiguration and pain. By deliberately inserting the “other” into my body, I, more so than Marks, actively invite and embrace the “stranger/other” within.

Although the “taking” of the graft is imaged as physical in the work, metaphorically this insertion of the “other” and its “taking root” is also a psychological process. My choice of the aloe plant relates to the healing properties attributed to the aloe-vera leaf. Whilst the aloe vera leaf is said to have soothing qualities, bitter-aloe leaves are used to make a purgative, which cathartically cleanses the body of toxins. Thus, the act of stitching aloe leaves into her body may be seen to suggest processes of physical healing and purging which in turn might evoke the sense of psychological trauma inherent in acculturation processes. As Steyn notes, willingness to take on the implications of one’s racialisation into “whiteness” and to cooperate in dismantling the structural privilege it entails, can be a painful, lonely and alienating growth process, as she poignantly states in relation to her own experience:

I continue to struggle through the multiple fences of white identity that my heritage constructed to define me. But bits of flesh remain caught in the barbs. A white skin is not skin that can be shed without losing some blood (Steyn 2001: xvii).

Figure 4:
Farber, L. 2006
A Room of her Own
Performance still
Photograph by Michael Meyerfeld

Berthas’ bedroom in the Sammy Marks Museum forms the context for the key video work, and the subsequent photographic prints and stage set installation, A Room of Her Own (2006-2007). The bedroom becomes a metaphorical “transitional space” wherein the protagonist performs a series of physically and psychologically transformative acts of grafting on her body. These grafts of diverse materials and cultures are shown to give rise to new identity formations. In this series, Victorian constructs of femininity such as needlework and historically gendered psycho-logical/somatic “disorders” such as hysteria, sexual fetishisation and the
sublimation of desire, are imaged as means by which Marks and I deal with transformative physical and psychological changes in response to our respective alien/alienating environments. These "disorders", particularly hysteria, represent ways in which, historically, women feigned disease in an attempt to bring unspoken traumas into words or to draw attention to their social, intellectual, creative and emotional constraints under patriarchy. Correlations between hysteria and self-mutilation or cutting as forms of agency are suggested.

Cutting the skin to the point of releasing blood is a contemporary practice common amongst westernised teenage girls, used as a means of inflicting pain on oneself. The relief provided by the endorphins released into the body "anesthetises" the person's emotional pain. Psychologists note that cutting is a way of "speaking" when one is unable, verbally, to express overwhelming emotions or unfulfilled emotional needs: a desperate cry for help in the face of a devastating sense of alienation, lack of belonging, powerlessness, and abandonment (D'Arcy 2007; Ellis 2002: 12).

Feminist writers like Rose Ellis (2002) propose that cutting is a response to certain expectations embedded in patriarchal ideologies, rather than a symptom of individual psychopathology. From this perspective, cutting, like hysteria, might be seen as a way in which women choose to (re)negotiate patriarchal regulation over the boundaries of femininity. The protagonist's cutting is suggested as a way of voicing her anger in the face of situations in which she felt/feels powerless. For Marks, this anger might have been as a result of her being "silenced" by her position as a woman in a rigidly patriarchal society, or, speculatively, as a result of having to conform to strict colonial conventions regarding race and class. In my case, this enactment of speech might be read as compensatory for the years of generational "silences" which were part of my parents' and grandparents' survival strategies as immigrant Jews in South Africa. From this perspective, cutting, or self-mutilation, as it is used in the work, has transgressive potential - through its evocation of abjection and through its potential as an act of self-directed rebellion and anger. It could lead to liberation not only from entrenched gender roles, but also from conventional or accepted racial or religious categorisations and to reconceptualisations of identity. The representation of hysteria and the sublimation of desire associated with it, as well as the protagonist's cutting, might therefore be considered as historical and contemporary forms of agency.

In the work, analogies between these historical and contemporary psychological/somatic states and those of abjection, liminality, rapture and the sublime are thus suggested. Although these states are clearly differentiated, they are commonly underpinned by a loss of ego boundaries, resulting in dissolution of clear distinctions between "self" and "other"; an ambiguous state of "in-betweenness". In the artwork, this is shown to be achieved through confrontation with and acceptance of the "other" within, in accordance with French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's conception of the "stranger/other/foreigner" as being positioned as within the self. As she states:

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time when understanding and affinity flounder. By recognising him within
ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself (Kristeva 1991: 1).

For both Marks and I, this closeness to the "other" is threatening, albeit in different ways. It necessitates a coming to terms with our whiteness(es), and the multiple racial, historical and cultural privileges that this implies. For Marks, this process was fraught with fear and anxiety, given that she lived in an era in which colonial communities regarded themselves as superior to the indigenous populations they encountered in the colonies. Convinced that these indigenous groups were uncivilised, and therefore fundamentally different and inferior to themselves, they avoided any form of cultural contact and exchange. Therefore, for Marks, any contact with the "other" would have been so threatening that, if she had initiated any processes of transformation, these would have only been cautious and tentative. In my case, where physical contact with the "other" has lost some of the transgressive significance it once had, (given that "the other" has now assumed a name/identity), this struggle is symbolic and, ultimately, psychological.

However, before the protagonist can cross threatening cultural or psychological boundaries, she has to enter a liminal space of "in-betweenness" between "self" and "other". Upon entering this space, her growing closeness to the other is not only uncomfortable and unnerving, but also threatening. Yuri Lotman speaks about the criss-crossing of boundaries which leads to "a constant state of hybridity ... always oscillat[ing] between identity and alterity", which in turn results in a tension that is most evident at its boundaries (Lotman cited in Papastergiadis 1995: 14). Certain correlations between Kristeva's conception of abjection and Bhabha's "third space" might be proposed. Firstly, I draw an analogy between my, and to some extent Bertha Marks', imagined habitation of this "transitional space" and Bhabha's conception of the "third space", which "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (1990: 221). Implicit in my use of the term is the emergence or "coming into being" of unscripted formations of expressions, positions and production. Bhabha's description of the interface between cultures as "those 'in-between' spaces that provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" seems to encapsulate the possibilities in hybrid, transforming conceptions of contemporary South African identities (1994: 1, 2). According to Bhabha, entering this space encourages a perception of difference as "neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between" (1990: 219).

Secondly, this in-betweenness might be linked to Kristevian abjection wherein the "unclean threat" of the abject puts the subject in a state of in-betweenness; a person's sense of self – the idea of having a unified, separate and distinct identity – is disrupted through the loss of ego boundaries between self and other (Kristeva 1982). As Kristeva notes, whilst "the vulnerability of the borderline is a threat to the integrity of the 'own and clean self' it can also offer a liminal space where self and other may intermingle" (53). This intermingling engenders a terror or rapture in the subject, which gives rise to and perpetuates a sense of ego dissolution. This correlation between Bhabha and Kristeva suggests that what is potentially productive can also be terrifyingly
disruptive, for, as Lynda Nead (1997) notes, in "[a]ll transitional states ... it is the margins, the very edges of categories, that are most critical in the construction of ... meaning" (6).

In what I consider to be the final image of the exhibition, A Room of Her Own: Redemption, the protagonist is represented as being in such a transformative, liminal state of rapture. The blood-red embroidery cotton which she used to stitch the leaves into her skin has grown within her flesh, forming both roots and veins in her calf. The aloe leaves which she stitched into her thigh have withered, and at their central core, replacing the petit-point rose which appeared to have been stitched onto her thigh, a new, succulent hybrid aloe has emerged. It is on this endnote of deep ambivalence that the exhibition is inconclusively suspended, hovering in that liminal, hybrid space of becoming which leaves no option but to acknowledge that one has lost one's home, the place of a "safe" homogenous identity to which one can return. (Steyn 2001: 145).

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References


Frankenberg, R. 1998. 'White', Screen, 29(4), 44-64.


Notes

i With acknowledgement that the text I am referring to was written in 2001, and that marked changes might have taken place since then.
ii For biographic details on Sammy Marks, see Mendelsohn 1991.
iii Jewish prosperity was ambivalently regarded by the general population, and, as Milton Shain (1994: 17) notes, by the 1880s, two embryonic stereotypes of the Jew in South Africa had emerged, namely “the gentleman – characterised by sobriety, enterprise and loyalty, and the knife – characterised by dishonesty and cunning”.

The image of the knave correlates with the image of the avaricious Jew – the filthy immigrant who deprived the locally born colonial of employment and exploited the local population” (Leveson 2003: 18).
iv Yiddish words such as ‘shiksas’ (Jewish women who marry gentile men), ‘chazars’ (literally translated as pigs, usually used in relation to non-Jews) and ‘goyim’ (usually used in a derogatory sense to describe non-Jews) are characteristic examples of such racist parlance. The word ‘kaffir’ also featured strongly; serving the same derogatory function it performed in English and Afrikaans.

v This view of Judaism as a matter of personal integrity is borne out in Marks’ concern for the difficulties of finding suitable Jewish accommodation for her daughters who were boarding in London. See Mendelsohn 1991: 200 for details.

vi South African colloquial term for the bush. This term, which is Afrikaans in origin, is used to describe the dry, uninhabited, uncultivated yellow-brown grasslands, common to the Gauteng province in which Johannesburg and Pretoria are located. This contrasts with the rose-garden, which represents a colonial formalising and cultivation of nature.

vii This site has conceptual links to the research, as Sammy Marks’ background as an immigrant/diasporic Jew from Lithuania correlates with my life-history. His humble beginnings as a peddler and subsequent rise to prosperity may be likened to those of my maternal and paternal grandparents, who, as Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, were forced to start a “new life” as general dealers in South Africa. Both generations of diasporic Jews saw South Africa as the “New World”, a place of “better prospects” in the form of economic and educational opportunities.

viii To suggest this loss of dignity I looked at the third stage of a full hysterical attack photographically documented by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893). Charcot recorded these images while working at the S hôpetitère Hospital in Paris from 1862-1893.