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SPECIAL ISSUE 2008



The Colonial Present
Australian Writing for the 21st Century

JASAL

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for the Study of
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The Colonial Present

Australian Writing for the 21st Century

Edited by
Gillian Whitlock and Victoria Kuttainen

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Editors' Note

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One of the first tasks for the organisers of the ASAL 07 conference in Brisbane was a meeting at the Liveworm Design Studio at Griffith University with students who would work on designs for the conference poster. This was an early and bracing confrontation with the question of what does The Colonial Present *mean*? The draft designs we received circled around various ideas, and all were prescient: they gestured to events in Iraq and Afghanistan; to the drought and other environmental issues; debates about Indigeneity; and graphic representations of Australia in comparative frameworks: across southern spaces, in relation to both Europe and the USA. The design we selected with its mutant flag and ornate traditional frame grasped the complex dynamics and contradictions of the concept “the colonial present” as it appears in Derek Gregory’s book of that title: an engagement with contemporary issues with a sense of how the legacies of the past continue to erupt and shape the present and produce engagements and relations beyond the nation. History, says Gregory, is always plural, always contested, and shot through with multiple temporalities and spatialities:

I speak about the colonial—rather than the imperial—present because I want to retain an active sense of the verb “to colonise”: the constellation of power, knowledge, and geography that . . . [continues] to colonise lives all over the world. (xv)

For ASAL 07, this title and concept indicated an interest in the ongoing preoccupation with the legacies of settler colonialism in Australian writing (as these affect all aspects of the environment and its creatures); the need to explore more comparative and cross-national perspectives and connections; and those anxieties that were the subject of much discussion at the conference itself in July 2007: the future of Australian literature itself in the academy. The subtitle of the conference and this issue: “Australian Writing in the 21st Century” indicates our interest in the distinctive articulations of these issues and debates at a precise point in time. The turn to Australian “writing” also

indicates our desire to open discussion to all kinds of contemporary work, including life narrative. Chris Masters's reading from his biography of Alan Jones, *Jonestown*, was a memorable highlight of the conference, and so too was David Malouf speaking autobiographically of the Brisbane River at the conference dinner, which was located as close as we could manage to 12 Edmondstone Street.

We begin this special issue of *JASAL* with an article derived from Mark Sanders's keynote address to the conference, with its first sentence that gestures to a comparative and expansive view of literature, history and race: "Facing each other across the Indian Ocean are two parallel histories of race, culture, and phantasy". Sanders's article draws representations of the Stolen Generations into a comparative perspective informed by the work of Melanie Klein; its focus—on the dynamics of paternalism, reparation and reconciliation—was discussed at ASAL 07 within a few weeks of the federal government's highly controversial intervention into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. This conjunction emphasises the resonance of the conference theme, and also the importance of framing our work on the legacies of colonialism in carefully contextualised studies that actively engage with the specific dynamics of history, colonialism and writing in this century.

These dynamics continue to emerge in Carole Ferrier's essay on Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria*, delivered to the conference as the Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture. Ferrier's article begins with Wright's own remarks: "I wanted to stare at difference right now, as it is happening, because I felt the urgency of its rule ticking in the heartbeat of the Gulf". The convenors of ASAL 07 could not have planned the magic of Alexis Wright's presence as one of the guest writers just a week after *Carpentaria* was awarded the Miles Franklin prize for 2007. Alexis Wright's readings from her work and her contribution to the conference amplified the concerns that energised the conference theme, and the engagements of both Sanders and Ferrier with the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, for the Miles Franklin announcement was made on the same day as the federal intervention was "rolled out" and Wright was required to respond to both in interviews. Such synchronicities are rapidly forgotten, and yet they are essential to grasping the complex dynamics of the colonial present, as Ferrier's article on contemporary Indigenous women's writing suggests. Similarly Anne Brewster's article on the poet Romaine Moreton takes up the issue of Indigenous protest writing in Australia. Specific attention to poetry was a theme of ASAL 07, and accordingly David Malouf, Dorothy Porter and

Peter Skrzynecki were featured writers. Brewster's study of reading and writing and the "private and intimate identifications of race and whiteness" explores complex mediations of race in contemporary writing. Like Ferrier, she is concerned to write about contemporary Indigenous writing with a sense of its precursors in a tradition of Black writing, and with attention to the agency of literary discourse in debates about contemporary race relations. These issues emerged in a special session at ASAL 07 to launch the Black Words initiative for the AustLit database. In his article on David Unaipon's life and writing, Benjamin Miller also takes up these issues in a comparative framework. Miller's discussion of Black dandyism and minstrelsy situates Unaipon's apparent contradictions and complicities in the complex space between Aboriginality and colonial modernity.

Several articles here take up issues about history, fiction and the legacies of colonialism that have been the subject of intense and very public debate in 2006–7. In his essay on Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* Adam Gall discusses the particular legacies of settler colonialism in contemporary writing, and questions how spaces for recognition might emerge within settler cultural texts. As Gall remarks, the very grounds for debate about benevolence and dispossession were uncertain as we met for conference sessions. In her discussion of historical fiction and *Gould's Book of Fish* Jo Jones examines Richard Flanagan's approach to representations of the past in contemporary fiction, in particular his critique of Enlightenment notions of a stable, unified history of the nation. Both of these articles respond to one of the major debates that suggested the conference theme: how can literary texts respond to the unfinished business of the past?

Mark Sanders's keynote anchors one major theme of "The Colonial Present": the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. Paul Eggert's article signals the second: a turn to new empiricism in textual and book history research in contemporary Australian criticism, which brings into this special issue of *JASAL* more by way of data and quantitative analysis than we may expect in an Australian literary journal. Eggert grasps the impetus of this research succinctly: certain empirical realities are relevant and important to understanding Australian literary culture. Furthermore he takes up the argument for expanded and comparative approaches to Australian literary culture: the Imperial book trade is an important cultural formation in his analysis of late nineteenth-century gender, writing and reading. Robert Dixon's response to "Australian Classics and the Price of Books" brings into this conference issue some of the dynamism produced by engagements with new empiricism and its "fact-driven questions" in conference sessions.

It also indicates other recent examples where the reading of Australian literature is enriched by this turn to reading *literature in Australia*.

The turn to new empiricism is taken up variously in the cluster of interrelated succeeding articles. In her study of The Carter Brown Mystery Series, Toni Johnson-Woods approaches the permutations of this “promiscuous global literary form” across different markets and languages. Over 300 books appeared in this series between 1951 and 1985, and the series was translated into nearly 30 languages. New technologies allow Johnson-Woods to begin to map this literary pandemic in mass market fiction, and to theorise about the international trade of generic fictions. Katherine Bode’s article is one of the first outcomes of ARC-funded research on new empiricism and Australian literature, also involving Robert Dixon, Leigh Dale and Gillian Whitlock, called the “Resourceful Reading” project. Bode argues for the importance of quantitative research and the use of eResearch resources and strategies (such as the AustLit database, for example) to further cultural materialist approaches to Australian literature. Like Johnson-Woods, Bode also suggests that quantitative research can open new perspectives on the national literature in the context of global literary culture, which responds to one of the key questions raised by the conference theme: how can comparative perspectives open new perspectives? In his article on new empiricism and Australian literature, Jason Ensor continues this theme and examines the publishing of Australian novels both locally and internationally using the AustLit database and statistical analysis, producing some new insights into publishing trends in Australian fiction.

Finally Laura Joseph considers the “queer, disturbing and sublime matter of contemporary Australian and New Zealand literature” in a comparative analysis of the fictions of the Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas and the New Zealand writer Elizabeth Knox. Joseph’s article questions how these two literatures might be read together, as the conference theme suggests we may well do. Her analysis of how *Dead Europe* and *The Vintner’s Luck* circle round impossible spaces of disintegrating subjectivity and questions of the human offers a highly original approach to transnational criticism.

Two articles in this special issue of *JASAL* are joint winners of the A. D. Hope prize, which is awarded annually for the best paper delivered at the ASAL conference by a postgraduate student. Paul Genoni and Peter Kirkpatrick were the judges this year, offering detailed and insightful referees’ reports on every submission for this award. One of the features of ASAL 07 was a clear sense of a generational change; many young scholars and postgraduates were energised by the topical conference theme, “The

Colonial Present”, and the submissions for this postgraduate award were many, and of a very high quality which made judging the prize a particular challenge. This year the prize is shared between two excellent papers that address the conference theme: Benjamin Miller’s article on David Unaipon and Jo Jones’s article on *Gould’s Book of Fish*. We congratulate them both and take great pleasure in publishing their work here in *JASAL*. The publication of articles by postgraduate students is a priority for the ASAL organisation and as such, ASAL 07 hosted a special postgraduate lunch seminar, featuring Drusilla Modjeska, who discussed her ARC-funded “From Thesis to Book Project”. Modjeska shared her practical tips and considerable wisdom gained from this manuscript-development partnership between the University of Sydney and Pan Macmillan Australia, as well as from her own career as a writer and academic. Rowanne Couch, recipient of the project-funded 2005 scholarship, also shared with postgraduate students her insights into the changing book market for literary non-fiction in Australia. Her talk raised the issue of publishing opportunities outside traditional academic outlets which postgraduates at ASAL were encouraged to explore.

ASAL 07 The Colonial Present occurred in uncertain times for our discipline, and turbulent passages in what we now know to be the last days of a long federal government administration. The conference theme turned out to have a resonance we could not have anticipated when planning began in 2006. The co-convenor of ASAL 07 was Dr Chris Tiffin, and the conference brought to an end his long career as an academic in English at the University of Queensland. The gathering of so many researchers and fine writers engaging in debate and conviviality was a fine tribute to Chris’s dedication to Australian literature. We would also like to acknowledge the constant support of the ASAL Executive in all things pertaining to the conference, including the preparation of this special edition of *JASAL*, and to thank Dr Kylie Cardell and Mr Matthew Willmott for their assistance in bringing this issue to press.

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Miscegenations: Race, Culture, Phantasy

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Facing each other across the Indian Ocean are two parallel histories of race, culture, and phantasy.¹ In the era of state racism that spanned the long middle of the twentieth century, South Africa and Australia produced two contrasting responses to miscegenation. In South Africa the ideologues of apartheid professed to ward off the spectre of mixing White and Black, European and African, through separation. In Australia, where, against the background of strict racial separation and laws against interracial sex, a certain strand of eugenicist thinking and policy recognised the history and inevitability of continued mixing between Whites and Aborigines, a policy of selective assimilation was pursued. When assimilation turned for a time into “absorption”,² until World War Two put paid to overt eugenics, it is safe to say that miscegenation was actively sanctioned and promoted by the authorities.

The contrast I am drawing is broad and open to qualification.³ Historiography of apartheid has attended less than it might have to assimilationist ideas, some of which, despite their limited political influence during the apartheid era, have re-emerged in different guises in recent South African literature and cultural criticism. At the same time, it may be that Australian racial assimilation and “absorption” would not have drawn the public emphasis they have, if the relatively obscure archive relating to these policies had not been repeatedly brought to light in activism, official discourse, memoir, fiction and film, by representations of the forced removal from their families and communities of the thousands of Aboriginal children known as the “stolen generations”.

1

My first encounter with the imaginative representation of the stolen generations was, as may be the case for many outside Australia, Philip Noyce’s film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), the story of three girls who escaped from the Moore River Aboriginal Settlement in 1930 and journeyed 1600

kilometres on foot back to their home in the north of Western Australia by following one of the state's rabbit-proof fences. Already familiar with the history of forced removal, fostering out, and adoption from conversations with Australian legal scholars, I had read sections of *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997), which gave official imprimatur to the history and included the testimony of many of the removed.⁴ But as the first work of the narrative imagination I encountered on removal, Noyce's film impressed a cognitive surface not yet informed by the series of memoirs and other works, or by the wealth of historical and critical material, that had appeared on the subject in the two decades before *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.⁵

Noyce's film continues to orient my analysis of writing and film on the "stolen generations". As I understand it, this is because melodrama, like the other popular narrative genres with which it combines in the film, will parade on its surface phantasies that, elsewhere, tend to be less overtly displayed—for example, in official discourse, political debates, protest literature, and even in serious narrative fiction. Although I think it is a necessary first step, as will become clear, I do not think that diagnosing a given act of government or of meaning-making as phantasy is the end point of critical analysis. My guiding question has instead become: how much explanatory authority does one grant the interpretation of a given policy or narrative morphology as the setting to work of phantasy?

A comparison of Noyce's film with the book on which it was based demonstrates how genre film draws phantasy to the surface. Whereas Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996) is quite emphatic about how the policy of removal in 1930s Western Australia was based on the selective assimilation of lighter-skinned Aboriginal children of white paternity (a use of racial markers to dictate selective cultural investment through schooling and training in certain spheres of labour),⁶ and shows how the state saw itself as acting in place of delinquent white fathers,⁷ it stops short of analysing the ideological inconsistencies, contradictions and painful broken promises of the policy as pathological. It reveals, as do other texts, how the promise of education, a key alibi for removal from their mothers and from Aboriginal communities, became a false one when girls were taken out of school and pressed into domestic service in white households (Pilkington 59–60).

Where limited assimilation is advocated, race is displaced by culture, and cultural similarity or affinity displaces racial difference. But the displacement, as displacements are, is incomplete. The removed child continues to find herself on the wrong side of the racial division that, supposedly overcome

through cultural assimilation, informed her removal in the first place.⁸ As the penny-pinching evident in official correspondence quoted by Pilkington suggests, the policy of assimilation was pursued only as far as the limited resources of the administration could permit (Pilkington 128–129).⁹ Removal would thus inevitably have constituted a limited form of welfare; the wards of the state would sooner or later have had to earn their keep. They would thus, in a kind of primitive accumulation through abduction, have become part of the colonial labour pool. Does that mean that one can fully explain the system of removal, as some scholars have persuasively attempted, in terms of economic motives dressed up in the ideological language of paternalism?

Noyce's film adaptation adds another dimension to the materialist critique of the contradictions of selective assimilation and eugenicist "absorption"—which Pilkington does not emphasise—by bringing to centre stage A. O. Neville (1875–1954), Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia.¹⁰ A relatively though not completely marginal figure in Pilkington's book,¹¹ Neville, who is played by Kenneth Branagh, is magnified as a figure of diabolical paternalism in the film. Opposite the sisters Molly and Daisy Craig and their cousin Gracie Fields trekking against the odds across the vast Australian landscape, he is the malign, scheming antagonist required by melodrama. If in Pilkington's book actual white fathers can be portrayed as relatively benign and well-meaning, albeit ineffectual against the state's removal of their children (48–49), in Noyce's film white Australian paternalism is represented by the hyperbolic Father of phantasy. This portrayal of Neville is not altogether surprising. On the one hand, Neville, who presided over his department almost single-handedly for twenty-five years, and as Chief Protector eventually became legal guardian of *all* Aboriginal children in Western Australia (Haebich, *For Their Own Good* 278), personifies for Indigenous writers such as Doris Pilkington, Jack Davis, Stephen Kinnane, and Kim Scott a detested system of interference and control. Questions about the system are always already questions about Neville, his motives and psychopathology. On the other hand, Neville's own discourse, particularly in the major statement of his thought, *Australia's Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community* (1947), is so lofty and unquestioning in its assumption of a racial-historical mission that, as in the case of Geoffrey Cronjé's apartheid writings in South Africa,¹² one automatically suspects the operation of less easily acknowledged wishes. Through the magnification of the father into the Father, the drama of the broken family becomes national allegory.

When the political dimension of the story is amplified in this way, we see how phantasy operates as much in official discourse as in Noyce's film. In

Bringing Them Home we read of a historical rivalry between state-sponsored race engineering and Indigenous family life. At another level, in *Bringing Them Home*, where detailed measures for material and symbolic reparations are tabled (*Bringing* 249–313), we also bear witness to a history in which the mother (“Mum”) to be repaired is the central figure. “Why was my Mum meant to suffer?” asks one deponent (*Bringing* 277). When the testimony in *Bringing Them Home* is supplemented by the melodrama of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, however, a pathological phantasy of colonial fathering emerges as uncanny counterpart to this reparation of the mother.

The psychoanalytic ideas of Melanie Klein allow us to reflect further on Branagh’s performance of A. O. Neville as wifeless Devil-Father.¹³ Elaborating her concept of reparation in the 1930s, Klein wrote about how the infant attempts to make good symbolically (for) the damage that it has done in phantasy to the mother’s breast (“Love, Guilt and Reparation” 307–308). This dynamic, which is repeated throughout life in different situations, may be regarded as the basis for the emergence of a subject of ethics or responsibility.¹⁴ In these later situations damage may be actual, even if, for Klein, the subject’s response to inflicting damage derives its conditions of possibility from infantile phantasies of damage that does not need to have been actual. Applying her idea of reparation to history, Klein writes about the repopulation through settler-colonial societies that follows “ruthless cruelty against native populations” (“Love, Guilt and Reparation” 334). In terms of Klein’s subsequent elaboration of her theory, the infant’s reparation, which she terms “depressive”, may become “manic” when, beset by persecutory paranoid phantasies, it continues, despite a profession of the omnipotence of its wishes to make the object good, to inflict damage on it, or to punish it. The “manic” making-good by the infant and the adult it becomes thereby turns into a doing of harm, which may, of course, be a repetition of harm already done.¹⁵

The forced-removal policy may be interpreted as a peculiar historical variant of this dynamic. In *Australia’s Coloured Minority*, Neville tells a story of violent colonial beginnings, and of a corresponding moral imperative. “The causes of their condition are many”, Neville writes, “[m]ainly it is not their fault, it is ours, just as it lies with us to put the matter right” (21). It is up to white Australians to “do the right thing” (22). For Neville, Aborigines are “the real owners of the land [. . .] We are all newcomers to them, dispossessors, despoilers” (23). Neville makes no bones about where he thinks historical responsibility lies: “Miscegenation which produced the grandparents and parents of the existing coloured people of Australia has

been going on for over a hundred years, and this compels us to-day to seek means of adjusting some of its distressing results. Our men appropriated full-blood women from the earliest days of settlement” (43). Continuing in an at times colloquial register, Neville observes that “if white men had been made responsible for their coloured offspring from the earliest days, we should have a different story to tell and have been saved much costly effort” (51). Hence, “The State then becomes the only guardian these poor kids know, because few white fathers of the type mentioned can be made to accept their responsibilities” (53).

This assumption of guardianship is allied, I would suggest, with the phantasy of repopulation described by Klein. In the name of making good and of accepting responsibility as the better father, then, the State-Father claims “half-caste” or “coloured” children as white—and therefore *his*. Or, perhaps more perverse, it conducts a manic reparation—*after* the effective colonial genocide, in the name of doing-good by *her*—of the mother through the stealing, abuse, exploitation and humiliation of her children. Perceived another way, the forced removal of children is *their* manic reparation: the father (re)gains the children that he never acknowledged. He makes them good, makes them whole, as *his* children, yet they are continually punished: the institutions, the foster and adoption systems, will always fall short of the good mother—of “Mum”. It will, in many respects, be exploitative. And because it aims to separate children from their cultural heritage, its methods of acculturation—or “deculturation” (Frow 358)—will, for commentators dating back at least to the 1960s,¹⁶ and including the authors of *Bringing Them Home* (270–275), have amounted to *genocide*. And because Neville’s advocated policy in its late form, articulated in his text and photographs of successive generations (58–63), travels from cultural assimilation toward racial “absorption”, emphasising the progressive becoming-white of the “coloured minority”, and the rarity of “atavism” to the black, it will have threatened to *repeat* in more ways than one an earlier, less openly acknowledged, genocide.¹⁷

Such a reading complicates “intention” whenever clear, unambiguous intent—What were their reasons? What were their motives?—is seen as necessary for making a political case (see *Bringing* 277). It also identifies a deeper current beneath what Noel Pearson refers to as the “moral vanity” of the Australian left (“White Guilt” 30–31). An attention to the dynamics of paternalist manic reparation are, I hold, a necessary complement, in history-writing and cultural critique, to the massive filial reparation of “Mum” in so many of the testimonies of those removed. If, as Klein writes,

the reparative dynamics of infancy are repeated in later life, it would follow that, in acts of the State-Father, we may also observe the agency of the son. When reparative initiatives are, for agents as well as their critics, a mute but active infantile remnant in the State-Father, then there may exist an unexamined complicity of the depressive symbolic reparation of “Mum” by the deponents of *Bringing Them Home* and their advocates, and her manic reparation by the state through its laws and policies. Each subject of reparation professes a wish to do good, and to do the right thing, by “Mum”. The meaning of the respective wishes, although quite different in context, is in terms of underlying dynamics so close as to make them at times well-nigh indistinguishable.

In an illuminating essay on the “White Father”, Fiona Probyn powerfully draws our attention to the dynamics of paternalist manic reparation latent in recent Australian politics of reconciliation. Analysing John Howard’s 1999 “Motion for Reconciliation” speech, Probyn argues that

[his] paternalistic position in regards to “fellow Australians who are indigenous” is predicated on the exclusion of the “real” white fathers from his “good” white community; they are repressed/dissociated in order that they may return in the form of the “good” white paternal figure of his imaginary “Australian community” [. . .] [Historically,] [t]he “bad white father” trope [. . .] introduced the “good white father” government into the lives of *all* Aboriginal people”. (Probyn 61, 70)

The continuities of Howard’s paternalism with that of A. O. Neville, which splits off from state benevolence “white fathers of the type mentioned” (53), are clear.¹⁸ Probyn refers in passing to Kim Scott’s novel, *Benang: From the Heart* (1999). It is a “story of men” (398). In Scott’s novel, set in the southwest of Western Australia, Neville is a central figure. As in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, he is a sinister puppet-master dictating the destinies of Aboriginal children and adults from his office in Perth. He is, as in Noyce’s film, the “devil Neville” (122-123). But the central antagonist is the narrator’s grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat, a country building contractor who, when he first came from Scotland, worked in the office of Neville, who was his distant relative. Ern Scat’s project, which parallels Neville’s social engineering on a small scale, is to produce, through breeding and husbandry, the first white man (25-28). In a nod toward magical realism, Harley, the narrator, literalises and parodies Scat’s project of racial “upliftment” by his tendency to levitate and float in the air. When Harley discovers his grandfather’s archive, he sets out to make his project fail by refusing to be white. He writes the history of his family, as far as it can be reconstructed from and imagined beyond Scat’s genealogies, photographs, and other sources. In this history of racial mixing,

rape, massacre, police surveillance, removal, and fostering out, he discovers no white (great grand-)father at the beginning, and will not be the white son at the end: “Sandy One was no white man. Just as I am no white man” (492, 494). This discovery and negation are, for Harley, a kind of survival of genocide (446; see also 449). In this “story of men”—this story of fathers rather than mothers—the politics of social engineering are represented as obscene. As a boy Harley is raped by his grandfather, as his own father had been raped by a man who took him out for the day from Sister Kate’s foster home (386–387). Visiting family, Harley learns of Ern Scat’s dubious sexual reputation among Aborigines (435). In an aside, Harley remembers that, during the time when he lived with his father and his uncle as a boy: “[Uncle Jack] helped arrange that my mother take in very young children for a while, when their own mothers got into some difficulty or other. Sometimes, these children were related to my father through Ern’s persistent efforts to breed us out, fill us with shame; all that rationalising to disguise his own desires” (416). Politics and history are driven by the desire of the (grand)father.¹⁹ The burden of shame falls on the ones who bear traces of their Indigenous ancestry. The desire of the white father is unquestioned and unchallenged as, in a phantasmatic frenzy of manic reparation, it threatens to repeat the earlier murderous genocide through racial absorption and cultural and social assimilation. In the figure of Ernest Solomon Scat, doing-good through making-white is exposed as the acting out of a violent and exploitative sexual phantasy.

It is with this manner of realisation in mind that Jennifer Rutherford writes in *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy* of the dangers of identifying with the agency of good-making:

This identification with the power to do good underpins the numerous attempts at social engineering that have characterised Australia’s shady history of black/white relations: relations that have deprived Aboriginal Australians, at every turn, of their good. The intent to do good is the alibi that is called upon whenever this history of deprivation momentarily registers in the national conscience. (27; see also 80–81)

As Rutherford elegantly shows by analysing a childhood memory of her own, “[the] discourse of the unconscious interrupted the fantasy of a good that could speak its truth, unframed by collective fantasy [. . .] national fantasies are inscribed in the memory of the child, who, unable to make sense of a trauma, fabulates; but fabulates according to a logic that is collectively driven” (22). This fabulating may extend also to the work of the progressive feminist cultural critic when she figures women and Indigenous people as

victims (Rutherford 22, 70–71). Rutherford accordingly relinquishes both the autobiographical gesture and the project of writing the history of the other (81). For those who do not—for some because the history of the “other” is also the history of the “self” (in a history of mixing, where is the line to be drawn?)—the question becomes how to inscribe the limits or borders, or what Derrida called the “scene of writing”,²⁰ even as one writes the history. For even identifying phantasy at the nub of history may be to enact a manic-reparative phantasy of making- and doing-good. It may itself, in other words, secretly satisfy its own desire for mastery.

2

Although in Australian texts relating to the stolen generations, a relentless emphasis falls on the mother as the figure for the reparative and manic reparative efforts of the “child” (lest we restrict it to the children themselves in the narrow sense, let us remember that the law-giving Father-State is also always already the reparative or manic-reparative son), and the mother thus figures as the recipient of measures of making-good ranging from the nostalgic to the sadistic, the mother remains in shadow. If writers from A. O. Neville to Sally Morgan are confident in their ability to be able to assign a “place” to the other or self in a community, *Benang* struggles, as do the deponents in *Bringing Them Home*, to approach the place of the mother’s desire. In this history of mixing, the desire of the Indigenous mother can be a blank.²¹ And, correspondingly, when the “white mother” appears as a subject of desire, it is only occasionally—as, for example, an outraged Mrs. Chellow in a letter reproduced by Pilkington, who reports to Chief Protector Neville that Molly Craig and Gracie Fields “are running wild with the whites” (41).

This mother predates the empathetic white maternal listener said by Probyn to characterise the reconciliation era of the 1990s (61–62). Ann Curthoys notes that white women in a Western Australian country town in the 1920s, who were particularly hostile in their racism, explained their feelings to Nugget Coombs by asking him the rhetorical question: “If you were a woman and you went down the street on shopping night and you saw children whom you knew were your husband’s children, how would you feel?” (Curthoys 18–19). What *is* the feeling in question? Is it a jealousy of sexual rivalry? If it is, the dynamic has also been explored or simply taken for granted in colonial- and apartheid-era fiction in South Africa by, *inter alia*, Olive Schreiner in *From Man to Man* (1926) and Daphne Rooke in *Mittee* (1951). On reflection, however, one cannot help suspecting that the rhetorical question asked of Coombs conceals as much as it reveals.

Coombs is asked to identify—“[i]f you were a woman”—but in that act of identifying, if it leads him and the audience for his anecdote to the idea of rivalrous jealousy, perhaps there is a cancelling of desire, or, alternately, a mimetic identification by the woman with the (desire of the) man.²²

Is there a way out of this circle of desire? I do not know. There are, however, works that, in the context of ideas of assimilation and phantasies associated with those ideas, endeavour to explore the desire of the woman, and the desire of the mother, in other ways. Or at least they endeavour to put that other desire, or *an* other desire for the woman, on stage. In doing so, they inevitably confront the complicitous dynamics of reparation and manic reparation. For, if the Father is also the son, the Mother is also the daughter—of her father, but also of her mother.

The most comprehensive staging of assimilationist phantasy in recent South African writing is Marlene van Niekerk's darkly comic novel, *Agaat* (2004). An extended fable on the violence of adoption, assimilation and acculturation, the novel, Van Niekerk's second,²³ is the story of two women on the farm Grootmoedersdrift, in the Overberg in the Southern Cape. The farm belongs to Milla, who is on her deathbed, three years into a slow and isolated death from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease—a neurodegenerative condition that destroys the ability to control movement and to speak, but leaves the mind intact. She is nursed by Agaat, who was adopted by Milla in childhood and brought up by her, only to be moved out of the farmhouse seven years later and made her servant. Because Agaat was the daughter of Coloured farm workers, her adoption did not enjoy the support of Milla's husband Jak, and drew the disapproval of the white Afrikaans community. And, having been childless through nearly twelve years of miserable marriage, Milla was at last expecting a child. In a kind of reckoning,²⁴ Agaat reads or recites aloud to her as she is dying from the diaries in which Milla recorded these and other events.

The novel is made up of the entries from Milla's journals—most of its chapters follow episodes from her deathbed in the first-person narrated by Milla, an account to herself by Milla of past events in the second-person, and telegraphic italicised fragments, apparently also by Milla, dating from the time when she initially began to succumb to the disease. The novel is framed at beginning and end by the return of Jakkie, Milla's son, to attend his mother's funeral, and by his subsequent departure. After a brief career as an airforce pilot, in which he was decorated for combat in Angola, Jakkie abruptly deserted and left South Africa for Canada, where, abandoning his training as an aeronautical engineer, he studied to become an ethnomusicologist.

It is through Jakkie, who from childhood was very close to Agaat, that the consequences of past deeds play out.

Eavesdropping on a conversation that Agaat is having with Jakkie on the telephone, Milla reflects:

My child the great absence.

What he inherited from me and Jak is certainly recognisable. Slightly melancholy, sometimes quite sharp with his tongue. Agaat one hears the clearest in him. The sayings, the songs, the rhymes, in which he has an obsessive interest. Sometimes she sings something on the phone for him if he can't remember the words any more. (242/252–253; translation modified)²⁵

Jakkie, as the novel often reminds us, has made an academic career out of his early life. He sees coming home as an opportunity to take notes on music and nationalism (675/701). But Milla's observation that "Agaat one hears the clearest in him" registers something else. If the sharpness of his tongue comes from them, Jakkie has received his language, in its sound and its idiom, from Agaat. She "*taught him to talk*" (691/717). A transmission of *cultural* patrimony has taken place by a *racially* displaced relay. Transmission is always already a mixing. It is not simply that Jakkie has been taught his Afrikaans by someone who, because she is not white, is not an Afrikaner according to Afrikaner-nationalist ideology. When the events are analysed in terms of literary history and the phantasies that it reveals and sets to work, things are more involved than that.

Viewed as part of an intellectual and literary history, the story of assimilation runs against the grain of dominant apartheid thinking. If the rage against "blood-mixing" of Geoffrey Cronjé, as analysed by J. M. Coetzee in "The Mind of Apartheid", shows one effect of desire encoded into legislation (*Giving Offense* 178), assimilationist discourse, which represents a "liberal" strand of the same racial paternalism (as A. O. Neville surely must have in his Australia), shows another. The phantasmatic dimension of *Agaat*, which is in some sense the self-reflexive post-apartheid culmination of the tradition, prompts us to reread all of the "liberal" and left white Afrikaner discourse on assimilation: from N. P. van Wyk Louw's famous "[*d*]ie bruinmense is óns mense, hóórt by ons" (the brown people are *our* people, *belong* with us) (1960) (623) to Breyten Breytenbach's appeals over more than twenty-five years for Afrikaans to become "one of the many languages of Africa" (1973) (*Season* 160) or for a "groot andersmaak" (1998) (*Dog Heart* 69), a great other-making, in which the Afrikaner would become African. I read this discourse as relaying a wish that is at least double. In it the South African White,

“no longer European, not yet African”, in Coetzee’s formulation in *White Writing* (11), wishes to become African yet also wishes the African to become Afrikaner (or White). It is telling that Breytenbach’s term “andersmaak”, which is borrowed from a novel by Jan Rabie, alludes to an eighteenth-century KhoiKhoi (Hottentot) leader’s decision to throw the lot of his people in with the Dutch frontier farmers. Assimilation, as servants, is viewed by him as the only means of survival.²⁶

When Agaat’s casting out of the house is viewed as the story’s pivotal event, as it is once the cumulative force of its repeated representation in the novel has registered, we see how the reparative phantasy of making- and doing-good that appears to have guided Milla in her adoption of Agaat turns into a persecutory phantasy of retribution through dispossession—the dispossession of her child, of the child that will never have been *her* child. Reparation and manic reparation alternate. The persecutory phantasy, in turn, allows the retrospective justification for Agaat’s initial dispossession by displacement from the house: Agaat is wicked, and will thus have deserved to be cast out. Alternately, the dispossession of Milla of her son also functions as part of a reparative phantasy that makes of Agaat a mother. This mother will, in a displacement, have been made into Jakkie’s mother by Jakkie’s mother. Jakkie himself recognises this maternal doubling when, after Milla’s funeral, he departs again for Canada: “Mourn my mother, my mothers, the white one and the brown one” (683/709).

It is through a process of enculturative *Bildung*, which is also a mother-making, that Agaat eventually becomes the inheritor or proprietor of the farm, Grootmoedersdrift. Michiel Heyns, who translated the novel with Van Niekerk’s collaboration (see De Kock), aids the reader by having Jakkie speculate further than in the Afrikaans—and perhaps further than Jakkie really comprehends—on how to translate the farm’s name: “Translate Grootmoedersdrift. Try it. Granny’s Ford? Granny’s Passion? What does that say?” (6/6).²⁷ The word “drift”, or “drif” in modern Afrikaans orthography—of which “ford” is the obvious translation in the context of farm names, which are often topographical—can also mean “drive” in a psychological sense. It is cognate with the German *Trieb*. If the grand- or great-mother’s drive or passion is what gives the farm its name, then there is a complicated relay to the displacement of mother to mother, and mother by mother, which is also the path of inheritance by the female line.

The making of this ambivalent mother—repaired and retributive, good and bad—is what the novel is about. It is about how the drive of the mother and her mother before her, in its complex workings, produces history. Race

and culture, and their mixings—these are elements for one kind of story when the desire of the father (or son) is moving them. Without trying to hear the unfathomed, and perhaps unfathomable, desire of the mother, and of the grandmother—Milla’s mother may, for motives of her own, have ambivalently wished the adoption of Agaat (655/679–680)—this will remain the only story. It will be the old story of miscegenation told in terms of male sexual desire—and, as its muted complement, of the repeated manic reparation of the mother by the errant father (son). The female counterpart in this story is, as Zoë Wicomb points out, the shamed mother, daughter, or wife. These are the standard *dramatis personae* in South African as well as Australian discourse. Even Neville’s “different story” of beginnings, in which the fathers accept responsibility, is a variant of the same tale.

In South African literature, the *plaasroman* (farm novel), the genealogical genre par excellence in Afrikaans, has been critically reworked by Etienne van Heerden, J. M. Coetzee, and others.²⁸ Continuing this project of rewriting, Van Niekerk is notable for staging the desire of the *mother*—in ways that make it less easily reducible to a mimetic relay of the desire of the father or father-son.

In order to follow the phantasmatic relay that distinguishes *Agaat*, it is necessary to understand how the novel plays with genre. Like Noyce’s adaptation of Pilkington, it reveals how desire and phantasy also animate non-fiction (racial polemic, memoir, among other forms) and film, both fictional and non-fictional. We will begin with the casting out of Agaat—which is actually the repetition of an original casting-out. For it is that event, in its repetition, that gives meaning retrospectively and prospectively to Agaat’s enculturation and the subsequent mother-making in all its reparative-retributive ambivalence. Without making sense of this event in its repetition, and the desire evidently linked to it, we will not understand how Agaat will have come to be the source of Jakkie’s language, the racially different transmitter of his cultural heritage. Or if we understand how, we will not have understood why. That mixing in transmission, although it may be *described* in terms of an ideological contradiction of race and culture, cannot be *explained* as ideological contradiction.

When Agaat is adopted she is given a back room inside the farmhouse. When Milla is expecting Jakkie, Agaat is moved into a converted storeroom in the backyard, and her room is converted into a nursery for the boy. This displacement imposes a separation that conforms to the norms of the community and allegorises architecturally the delayed effects of apartheid on Coloured people (although she may have been born in 1947 [561/581],

Agaat is believed by Milla to have been born in 1948, and her adoption takes place in 1953, an election year in which the National Party intensified its efforts to remove Coloured voters from the electoral roll).²⁹ When Milla records her decision and its consequences in her diary on 21 April 1960, the entry, the first that the reader of the novel encounters, couches the matter in moral and religious abstraction:

Off to a good start today with the fixing up of the rooms the outside room and the nursery. Understand for the first time why everything had to happen the way it did God's great Providence [. . .] Now everything is as it should be suppose it's the right thing to do for everyone's sake. It's not as if there was any other way out. Phoned Beatrice to tell her of my decision & she's now considerably relieved & full of sweet talk & wants to propose me for chairlady of the WAU. Imagine! I could slap the woman, really. Situation with J. God be thanked better now that I'm doing something about the matter. That it should cost so much but I'd rather not think about it. (36/39)

Wishes or wishful thinking, what Milla writes in her journal establishes a pattern of imperatives noted down as facts. One must start well, make a "good start" (*goeie begin*). What one does must be "the right thing" (*die regte ding*). Even the "fixing up" of the two rooms—their *regmaak*—conveys this. Things must be right and good, good and right, so, in the journal, they *are* good and right. Even when, as the keeper of the diary acknowledges, the immediate consequences of her decision are a gain in the form of eased social and marital relations, the decision is drawn in transcendent terms (see also 681/707–708). When Milla reflects that "[i]t's not as if there was any other way out", the Afrikaans expression, although it says more or less the same thing, shades her decision into the domain of mercy or grace: *Daar was tog nie ander genade nie* (literally: no other mercy, no other grace). It is consistent with her wish for God's imprimatur to turn deed into duty: "everything had to happen the way it did God's great Providence". In spite of her wishes, and facts turned into imperatives, Milla perceives that what she has done will be entered or reentered into an economy. Her gain in social acceptance and domestic peace (see also 633/656) will mean also a loss. The high "cost" of her doing-good and doing-right to which she alludes will, must, also involve retribution—a paying back then and in the future that is going to exceed what Milla can bear to think about.

But it is important to see that the event is actually a repetition of an earlier set of events—which Milla did not write down in her diary: "The beginning you never recorded" (653/677). In Milla's mind, Agaat is, in the years before Jakkie is born, the "[f]irst child" (653/677). "Oh, my little Agaat", Milla

sighs to herself on her deathbed, “my child that I pushed away from me, my child that I forsook after I’d made her my own” (540/560; translation modified). There is an enduring textual silence in Milla’s diaries as to the precise circumstances of Agaat’s adoption—which, among other things, means that, to the extent that her narration depends on citing what Milla has written, Agaat cannot *narrate* a crucial part of her story, although, throughout her life, she has *symbolised* it in a number of ways. If Agaat cannot properly have known Milla’s motivations and intentions, she cannot fully measure Milla’s culpability. The dynamics of reparation and retribution that involve the two women give rise to an aporia.³⁰ Agaat’s symbolic repetition nevertheless magnifies the sense—for the reader at least—that in seeking to do good and do right Milla did the opposite, doing exactly what she sought to undo in the first place.

In Van Niekerk, as in Noyce, genre plays an important part in generating meaning. In fairy tales the omnipotence of wishes is instrumental, and retributive punishment, which may stem from a wish, is frequent. This brings the genre into proximity with dynamics of reparation and manic reparation. Allusions in *Agaat* to the tale of Cinderella, as to fairy tales in general, are powerful and pervasive. When Milla first finds Agaat, she is “crouched in the corner of the blackened hearth with the knuckles of one hand crammed into her mouth” (656/680). Which, of course, is also where Cinderella is found, and from where she takes her name. Here is the version from the brothers Grimm: “In the evening, when she had worked herself to exhaustion, she did not get into bed but had to lay herself down in the ash beside the hearth. And because this made her always look dusty and dirty, they called her Aschenputtel” (Grimm 116). When Milla asks the little girl her name, this is what happens:

Then you heard it, from the cavern of the child’s body where she’d stowed her head, a guttural sound.

Say again, I couldn’t hear so well, say?

You went still closer . . .

Again all you could make out was a scraping sound.

Ggggg-what? you asked, that’s not a name, say it again for the kleinnooi so that I can hear nicely, come. Gogga? Grieta? Gesiena? Genys?

You turned your head with your ear against the child’s face and imitated the ggggg-sound. You could feel her breath on your face. This time you heard the ggggg clearly, like a sigh it sounded, like a rill in the fynbos, very soft, and distant, like the sound you hear before you’ve even realised what you’re hearing.

That was the beginning. That sound. (657/681–682)

Milla is told by the little girl's older sister that "[s]he doesn't really have a name, we call her Gat, Asgat, because she sits with her arse in the ash in the fireplace all the time. She won't wear a panty" (666/691). Whereas "Asgat" ("Ash-arse", with *gat* literally meaning "hole") brings the fairytale down to earth, in Afrikaans, the proper name for Cinderella (which never actually appears in *Agaat*) is close to the German *Aschenputtel*: *Aspoestertjie*. As in the German, the diminutive personifies the labour of a domestic menial: *putteln* in German and *poets* in Afrikaans mean to dust or polish. If the *poester* is a transposition of letters in *poetser*, in the word we also hear *poes*, vulgar Afrikaans for vagina. Encrypted in the little girl's name in Afrikaans, then, is the other *gat*, the one that marks her as female, and as a potential mother, the one that "Asgat" only slightly displaces. Where she sits and the name she gets materialise a rejection by her mother and father, who are repelled by her congenitally malformed arm: "Ma [. . .] [d]idn't want to give the child tit [. . .] Pa Joppies said give here, let me go and get rid of that, it's not my child" (664/689). By the time that Milla finds her, she has also been raped and abused, which has evidently rendered her incapable of having children of her own (166/174). Milla makes it her business to turn the name of rejection and abjection into something good. The adoption takes place on, of all days in the Afrikaner-nationalist calendar, the Day of the Covenant, 16 December (654/679), the holiday commemorating the Voortrekkers' vow to God in 1838 made in return for victory over the Zulus, and thus, for later ideology, a key moment in the divinely ordained civilising mission of the *volk*. Hence, after trying out other names (470/486, 481/497), with the help of the Mission Church dominee she chooses the name *Agaat*:

"Agaat" he suggested then. Odd name, don't know it at all, but then he explained, it's Dutch for Agatha, it's close to the sound of Asgat with the guttural "g", it's a semi-precious stone, I say, quite, he says, you only see the value of it if it's correctly polished, but that's not all, look with me in the book here, it's from the Greek "agathos" which means "good". And if your name is good, he says, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like a holy brand it will be, like an immanent destiny, the name on the brow, to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself. (487/504)

Within a religious framework (in which, if *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is accurate, the believed omnipotence of wishes operates in displaced form), the name may be understood to work in its immanence. The text of the diary entry is, however, telegraphic enough to register an ambiguity when it records what the dominee said. The interpretation of the name as a brand "to do good, to want to be good, goodness itself" begins to be detached from the dominee as interpreter, and from any person at all. It could therefore be the immanent destiny of *Milla* to do good, to want to be good, to make *Agaat* good, into

goodness itself. Agaat will absorb and inherit this imperfectly acknowledged wish or desire. This is also the exhortation that Aschenputtel's dying mother bequeathes her: "liebes Kind, bleib fromm und gut" (beloved child, be pious and good) (Grimm 116). In becoming Agaat, Asgat is to become precious or noble (*edel*), or at least semi-precious or semi-noble (*halfedel*), yet still valuable, through the polishing of her adoptive mother who herself wishes to do and be good. As *halfedel* implies, the spoils of goodness are divided from the start; Agaat will have to share in a nobility secretly desired by Milla. But, like the "gat" in "Asgat", the hole that is not only anus but gap, an absence, a zero, the "ggggg-sound" preserved by her with the help of the dominee is, as Milla registers (657/682), a sonic remainder at and from the beginning that is not reducible to a name. Even the name of the farm, Goedbegin, with its double guttural, suggests that the beneficent or benign beginning bears within it the trace of something equivocal and not reducible to that name if it names a wish for doing or being good. That sound is something that the name will not reduce or erase. It is the spacing of the hearing-something that comes before the hearing-what. The remainder will be a reminder.

The irony that the farm from which Agaat comes is called Goedbegin, and that the "goeie begin" Milla writes of in her 1960 diary when renovating the yard room is neither good nor properly the beginning, is one way in which the novel tells us that the dynamics of making "Agaat" (as Good) and of making-good are complicated and equivocal. "What exactly is it that's driving me?" Milla asks herself on 6 January 1954, a few weeks after she adopts Agaat (482/498). What is the relevant drive? This never ceases to be *the* question. As Milla's disease advances, and she is no longer able to speak, Agaat devises a system of communication whereby Milla may gesture to letters and commonly used words stuck on a board and in so doing form full sentences. These sentences Agaat spells out and repeats for Milla aloud: "*I was alone, I felt useless, I wanted to do something for my fellow humans*" (437/452). The writing-down system allows repressed alternatives to surface simply by making it possible to substitute words for those that Milla is likely to have intended to say (but which Agaat, strictly speaking, cannot *know* for certain to have been applicable). When the substituted words are prepositions, other, perhaps equally plausible logics surface. If there is anywhere in the novel that Agaat emerges as a focaliser, it is here, with her mimetic citation of Milla's words:³¹

She can't always keep her voice neutral. She charges my sentences with her own resonances. Disbelief, emphasis, mockery. She adds on and improvises. To my own ears I sound like a running commentary rather than original intention.

Do something for your fellow humans? Or do something with your fellow humans or to your fellow humans? Fellow human or sub- or súperhuman? Or half human? Less human than yourself?

Sometimes when we've completed a sentence, she doesn't repeat it at all, so that I lose my thread amongst stray words. (437–438/452–453; translation modified)

When the prepositions shift from dative to accusative, making the recipient a direct object of the deed, the effects may be equivocal. This may be the only way that the novel actually allows Agaat to narrate. Milla realises that “I can't tell her story on her behalf” (439/454). But when the novel has Jakkie remember “Gaat's story” (683/710)—the chilling bedtime fairy story of how he became hers that ends the novel—the account of Milla's motives it gives also involves Milla's mother's desire—or, shall we say, *Agaat's grootmoeder's* drive, a drive that remains as opaque as it is determining: “*And when twelve o'clock struck, her mother said to her: Go and see there in the labourers' cottages, there's a girl who's been cast off, perhaps you can help her*” (684/711). The memory of her mother's off-stage role also comes back to Milla from time to time. But here the grandmother is brought on stage and given a speaking part, the untranslatable words of racial differentiation and superiority that she might have uttered cast back at her by being cast at her grandson: “*Gaan kyk daar by die volk se huisies [. . .]*”.

Whatever the drive was, as in the history of Australian state paternalism, it does not prevent the initial casting out from being repeated. “*Out she said to Good. Out of my house, from now on you live in a little room outside in the backyard*” (689/715), is how it appears in Agaat's story as Jakkie remembers it. Agaat, who appears to be the only one who perceives—because she experiences—the casting out *as a repetition* of wrong, symbolises it when she goes on strike, burning food, in the summer heat of October 1961 to demand a fireplace for her room. There is, associated with this symbolic repetition, an element of making-good: “*What must I do to get you good? I want a fireplace, she says. I ask you!*” (265/276). One day Milla spies on her, and sees her withdraw into the firegrate: “*You take the poker, you pull out the grate. You crawl into your hearth, white cap first. You go and lie with your knees pulled up in the old black soot*” (249/259). Agaat's burial of the colourful dresses that she wore as a child, her irrevocable assumption of the black and white raiment of a servant, also allude to Cinderella (see Grimm 116). Milla, however, does not appear to comprehend the symbolism. And Jakkie, who is told as a boy that the letter slot in the door of his room through which Milla spied on Agaat dates from when the sick were quarantined, never grasps the irony of the notion of the child's “*being chosen*” in Milla's dedication to Agaat

of her diary, which Agaat leaves open for Jakkie to find (681/707). And, although he can remember it word for word, it remains an open question as to whether he genuinely grasps “Gaat’s story” in its application.

The “opportunities” and “privileges” and “*great task of education*” (681/707) to which the dedication also alludes materialise in the form of an acculturation or enculturation. Central to Agaat’s curriculum are the three books from which the novel draws its epigraphs: the *FAK-Volksangbundel*, the standard musical anthology of Afrikaans songs; *Borduur só*, a women’s guide to embroidery; and *Hulpboek vir boere in Suid-Afrika*, a manual for farmers. These are also the books that, along with the Bible and *Kook en geniet*, a popular Afrikaans cookbook, appear on the list of necessities that Milla compiles for Agaat when she is expelled from the house into the room in the yard (52/55). Just before comes the list for Jakkie, and what will be needed for his nursery. The making of a white child is mirrored by the making of a Coloured servant. There is indeed the transmission of a cultural legacy, as Agaat is given an old copy of the *Hulpboek vir boere* that belonged to Milla’s father. But this legation takes place across the backyard, across an abyss of racial separation represented typographically by the discrete lists.³²

Agaat’s destiny is, as the novel keeps reminding us, to become more Afrikaans than her mistress and master. “She’s made great strides with the embroidery, Agaat”, Milla observes from her deathbed, “she’d by now be able to add a few chapters to the embroidery book” (78/82). When Agaat passes the test set as punishment of correctly calculating the settings for the wheat-seeder’s gears, Milla notes in her diary, “There’s not a single farmer of my acquaintance who could do that sum. How can I do it to her?” (227/236). And at Milla’s funeral, Jakkie recalls, in a cliché of how to expose the hypocrisy of Afrikaner nationalists who never sing their entire national anthem, “Gaat making people by the graveside sing the third verse of *Die Stem* [. . .] Trust Agaat. She would have no truck with the new anthem” (675/701). How to read this destiny? The path of adoption, acculturation, inheritance by the female line—the making-good that is the making of “Agaat”—can be read as a phantasy of the making of a super-Afrikaner: the Afrikaner who is more than the Afrikaner, but also the Afrikaner who survives the demise of the Afrikaner.

As Johann Rossouw acutely observes, even when Agaat proves to be a “better Afrikaner than the Afrikaners of Afrikaner nationalism”, the possibility “that there was or might still be an Afrikaner other than that of nationalism is never contemplated in *Agaat*” (4, 6). With its assembling of doing good and right and surviving, *Agaat* is, perhaps, a manic (or manic-depressive) retextualising of N. P. van Wyk Louw’s *voortbestaan in geregtigheid* (existing-

forth or survival in justice).³³ The verbal capaciousness of the novel itself, its encyclopedic grasp and extravagant performance of the Afrikaans language right down to its specialised vocabularies of farming and embroidery and botany, and its idioms and songs, is itself an (untranslatable) gesture toward survival in disappearance. It is this performative survival that Rossouw underplays when he associates *Agaat* with a tendency to “selfopheffing” (self-abolition) he detects in contemporary Afrikaans discourse—when he might have exploited the play of abolition and lifting up in “opheffing” as in *Aufhebung* in Hegel’s German, to which his term surely alludes.³⁴ In terms of this phantasy of surviving through passing away it is, I believe, impossible to decide whether, through Milla’s education of *Agaat*, the African becomes (super-)Afrikaner, or, through *Agaat*’s part in the formation of Jakkie, the Afrikaner becomes African (although, of course, he leaves for the Americas, for life as an insufferably glib scholar of his homeland—as of the “polyphonic wailings of Australian aboriginal women” [15/17]). Both of these eventualities, though, must be in play if either is to be possible. The path leads by and by to a miscegenation *by the maternal line* that is always disavowed, always apprehended under the sign of something else. In *Agaat*, it is apprehended under the sign of retribution—sometimes as a scene for the jealous eye of Milla, in other instances putatively in the imagination of *Agaat* herself.³⁵ Racial and cultural, this maternal miscegenation is, as Van Niekerk stages it, driven at every step by phantasy.

Retribution occurs in the novel in different ways. Perhaps the most interesting is how the hearth that symbolises *Agaat*’s repeated casting out changes in its symbolism. Initially a sign of exile, it becomes the centre, if not of the household, then of Jakkie’s world. A year before the fireplace is built in *Agaat*’s room, Milla, who suspects that *Agaat* may be breastfeeding the infant Jakkie, spies on them: “& I look & I see & I can’t believe what I see perhaps I dreamed it the apron’s shoulder band is off & the sleeve of the dress hangs empty & her head is bent to the child on her lap [. . .] I stand in the drizzle [. . .] with my forehead pressed against the window sill & I listen to the little sounds it sucks & sighs it’s a whole language out there in the outside room I can almost not bring myself to write it” (206/215). Milla unwittingly bears the white smudge of the lime from the windowsill as a sign of jealousy on her forehead (see also 299/310, 313/325). She can still write in her diary, apparently without irony, that “the servant’s quarters is not a place for *my child*” (206/215; my emphasis). At *Agaat*’s breast, and before her hearth, is where Jakkie is raised, and learns how to speak. For Milla, *Agaat*, who also helped deliver him, has become Jakkie’s mother (295/306). It is the way that, after being cast out, *Agaat* has become good again. Jakkie

has become the price that Milla has had to pay: “You used the child,” she reflects, “Only through him would she become good again” (289/301). And the last words of the fairy story of “Good” that Agaat tells Jakkie countersign this construction: “*And her bile subsided because he was the light of her life*” (691/717). In the story that she tells, Good’s wrath toward the woman who cast her out has been appeased by Good’s retributive appropriation of the woman’s child, whom she “gave [. . .] a name that only she knew about. *You-are-mine she called him*” (690/717). Thus, any reading emphasising the redeeming goodness of Agaat (for instance, as Milla’s nurse and companion to the end) without attending to her retribution may unwittingly participate in the manic-reparative phantasy of making Agaat good by which Milla seeks to dispel fear of retribution—generalisable to the post-apartheid transition in South Africa, in Robert Meister’s brilliant analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as the psychic appeasement by the perpetrator or beneficiary of fears of the “unreconciled victim”.³⁶

Whose phantasy is it? Jakkie’s? Milla’s? Agaat is a figure of phantasy—and of Jakkie’s flippant English-language mental captions (“Apartheid Cyborg” is the one that damns him most [677/703]). Such questions are, of course, unanswerable. When fiction is singular and unverifiable, there is no way of finally attributing it. Yet the final words of Agaat’s story, as remembered by Jakkie, appear to declare the complicity of the implied author of *Agaat* in a phantasy of good-making that the novel as a whole interrogates. A comment on the narration of events in the genre of fairy tale, they and the entire story that Jakkie recalls as “Grimm meets Goth in the Overberg” (692/718) are metafictional. In this regard, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s comments on Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast-Giver”, another story of mothering, remain instructive: “The end of the story undoes [the] careful distancing of the author from the gender-ideological interpellation of the protagonist [. . .] It [. . .] call[s] into question the strategically well-advertised ironic stance of the author-function” (*In Other Worlds* 266). If in Devi’s story, for Spivak, this closing of distance represents a lapse in the implied author’s critical stance in relation to the voice-consciousness of her subaltern character, in Van Niekerk’s novel, the “truth” of the entire work is brought into question by “Gaat’s story”. The very fact that the voice of the subaltern countersigns the phantasies of Milla must place in doubt the idea that the “truth” of the events in the novel is to be derived any more from the “analysis” of Milla’s acts as driven by phantasies of reparation than from the structure of fairy tale—in which things good and bad take place because a character wishes them.

The great strength of *Agaat* is that it does not profess to be a work of fictional realism through and through.³⁷ By elevating the explanatory power of fairy tale, Van Niekerk questions the explanatory power of the work as a whole—and perhaps of narrative fiction (and non-fiction) in general. If it shows how phantasy can make history, *Agaat* also suggests that the idea that phantasy makes history, to the extent that it implies that the motives of the protagonists are fully present to themselves, may itself be a phantasy—if, for example, as in a fairy story, the idea of history as the operation of phantasy produces the narrative and ideological closure implied by the final sentence of “Gaat’s story”.

Comparing works in South African and Australian literature and film, I have explored the extent to which the concepts of race and culture that justify theories and policies of social engineering, and in turn motivate their reform and retrospective condemnation, may be underwritten both by overt ideological commitments and by powerful unspoken paranoid and reparative phantasies. My analysis of *Agaat* over against the Australian works shows how that very diagnosis—Phantasy!—may reproduce or elaborate the phantasy in question, or at least a part of it. If genre fiction and film—melodrama, fairy tale, and so forth—bring phantasy on stage, the metafictional manipulation of genre affords ways of demonstrating how that rendering visible may itself be complicit in an unacknowledged phantasy of mastery. The debate for critics such as Jennifer Rutherford appears to be: does that complicity so compromise political and cultural analysis, that it reproduces exactly what it analyses and is thus not worth pursuing at all? The answer must be that, yes, sometimes it does. The trouble is that one cannot know, or begin to find, an answer to that question until one has “experienced”—in Derrida’s special sense of traversing or experiencing an aporia, experiencing the impossible (“Force of Law” 963)—the effects of having engaged in the analysis in question.

NOTES

¹ This essay was first presented as the keynote address at the annual Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference “The Colonial Present: Australian Writing for the 21st Century”, held at the University of Queensland in Brisbane from 1–4 July 2007, and subsequently at the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) annual meeting, “Worlds, Texts, Critics”, which took place at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in Durban from 8–11 July 2007.

² See *Bringing Them Home* (29–33), as well as Haebich, *Broken Circles* (454–455).

- ³ The histories are not cross-referenced as much as one might expect. In Australian sources see, however, Neville (202) and Haebich, *For Their Own Good* (141).
- ⁴ A penetrating critical account of the report is provided by Frow. For an interesting comparison of the Australian Inquiry to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see Whitlock.
- ⁵ In this regard I thank Rosanne Kennedy, Catriona Elder, Kay Schaffer, and Gillian Whitlock for their comments on an earlier version of this section of my essay, presented at the conference "Testimony and Witness: From the Local to the Transnational", held at the Australian National University in Canberra in February 2006.
- ⁶ Pilkington's text quotes the report of A. J. Keeling, writing of Molly, Gracie and Daisy, the protagonists of the book, that "these children lean more towards the black than white" (Pilkington 61). Although race was an unstable index of differentiation, in the context of removal being designated as black or white could depend on whether an official thought that a given child looked white or black, or did not. Thus, as Pilkington records, although lighter-skinned children were sometimes persecuted in Aboriginal communities, attempts were sometimes made by Aborigines to make the skins of half-caste children look darker not only to relieve this persecution but also in order to help them evade their removal (38–42). This is also described by Neville (46).
- ⁷ See Pilkington (47–49, 129.)
- ⁸ See Frow, "Politics of Stolen Time" (358) for more commentary on this question, in *Bringing Them Home*. See also Probyn (67).
- ⁹ On the limited budget of Neville's office, see Haebich, *For Their Own Good* (258–259).
- ¹⁰ For a useful commentary on the film, in particular its portrayal of Neville, see Birch.
- ¹¹ See Pilkington (41, 61, 102, 124–129).
- ¹² See Coetzee, *Giving Offense* (163–184), as well as Sanders, "Undesirable Publications".
- ¹³ The historical Neville was married to Maryon Florence ("Gypsy") Sutherland Low for more than fifty years. They had four children, one of whom died in infancy. For details of Neville's biography, see Jacobs.
- ¹⁴ See Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (14); Alford (38–40).
- ¹⁵ See Klein, "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" (350–352). Also see Segal (95–96). My discussion of manic reparation is indebted to Robert Meister's "Ways of Winning".
- ¹⁶ See Haebich, *Broken Circles* (425, 437).
- ¹⁷ The applicability of the term "genocide" to the "stolen generations", and to Australian colonial history more broadly, is a contested one. For an astute discussion of the debate on the subject, see Levi (especially 140–149).

- ¹⁸ The events of late June and early July 2007 added another episode to the exploits of this particular “white father”—who, having sent the army and police into the Northern Territory in response to allegations that children were being abused in Aboriginal communities, proclaimed: “We are not trying to steal a generation. We are trying to save a generation” (quoted in “We Have Crossed”). During this time the qualified support for Howard’s intervention from Noel Pearson was notable, and interesting in its formulation in the name of a good that may be complicit with the bad: “We have to deal with the Government and the politics of the day and devote our maximum energies and talents towards making good things that otherwise seem bad” (Pearson, “Action Only Way”). Elsewhere Pearson has cannily written of his conviction “that the distance between good and bad policies is most often very fine—not poles apart” (“White Guilt” 45). For a useful commentary on Pearson’s position in historical context, see Manne.
- ¹⁹ This point is well made by Newman, who presents an interesting comparison of *Benang* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (Chapter 5).
- ²⁰ See Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing” and “Le facteur de la vérité”.
- ²¹ This is readily apparent in *My Place*, in which Sally Morgan’s work of genealogical exploration is stymied by the secrecy of her maternal grandmother—regarding, for instance, the identity and fate of her other daughter. And because of the grandmother’s reticence, even the identity of Morgan’s mother’s father remains veiled by suggestion and supposition. Stephen Muecke provocatively suggests that Morgan’s grandmother’s silence in the face of her questions may be interpreted over against a longer history of resistance of Indigenous Australians to the inquiries of white investigators: “a possible Aboriginal discursive strategy which would take the form of *non-disclosure* in the face of the demand to speak” (128).
- ²² I allude to Coetzee’s use of René Girard in *Giving Offense*. Also see Coetzee’s reading of Rooke (*Stranger Shores* 208–218).
- ²³ Van Niekerk is also the author of the novel *Triomf* (1994), the novella with paintings by Adriaan van Zyl *Memorandum: ’n verhaal met skilderye* (2006), a collection of stories *Die vrou wat haar verkyker vergeet het* (1992), and the collections of poetry *Sprokkelster* (1977) and *Groenstaar* (1983).
- ²⁴ Michiel Heyns emphasises this by introducing five lines from T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding” as an epigraph to his 2006 English translation of *Agaat*.
- ²⁵ Parenthetical page references to the original Afrikaans edition follow those to the English translation. Any modifications by me of Heyns’s translation are indicated in the text.
- ²⁶ For more on Breytenbach and Rabie, see Sanders, *Complicities* (145–146).
- ²⁷ The Afrikaans reads: “Vertaal Grootmoedersdrift. Probeer dit. Granny’s Ford? Wat sê dit?”

- ²⁸ In the initial reception of the novel, nearly every reviewer and critic has commented on Van Niekerk's adaptation of the *plaasroman* (see, for example, Van der Merwe, Rossouw). The novel itself signals its critical affiliation, for instance in the titles of books in Milla's personal library (14/16).
- ²⁹ For a detailed catalogue of the novel's symbolic dates, see Rossouw.
- ³⁰ On the aporia of reparation, see Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing* (114–146).
- ³¹ There is also Agaat's "mimesis" of Milla's diaries through reading and recitation—her parody, for example, of words abbreviated by Milla by pronouncing them without their vowels—"undrprvlgd" (79/83) is the most hurtful—or her making of Milla's telegraphic sentences into full, correctly punctuated ones.
- ³² Agaat's early learning, which is not always reducible to Afrikaner(-nationalist) enculturation, is another reminder and remainder, when conveyed to Jakkie, of a promise always already broken (see, for instance, 295/307).
- ³³ For more on this subject, see Sanders, *Complicities* (72–92).
- ³⁴ Rossouw's association of Van Niekerk with "selfopheffing" is challenged by Visagie.
- ³⁵ The casting out does emerge as the crux for Milla (215/224, also 540/560).
- ³⁶ "Justice-as-reconciliation replaces the unreconciled victim of revolutionary theory with the victim who was morally undamaged by past oppression[. . .]. This splitting of the victim of systemic injustice into an object to be loved and an object to be feared is a way of ensuring that guilt and loss are not directly experienced by the beneficiaries of past evil, because they never recognise the objects of that guilt as having been damaged by themselves [. . .] ['Justice-as-reconciliation'] is [. . .] a form of what some psychoanalysts call 'mock' or 'manic' reparation, which is also based on a splitting-off of truth and justice" (Meister 85–98).
- ³⁷ Van der Merwe, who takes Jakkie to be the "creator of the story" as a whole, but also finds an intertwining of points of view, comments: "What the novel wants to represent is not 'reality,' but reflection on reflection on reflection of reality—or, put in another way, the 'reality' of relationships" (4–5).

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