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***THE INVESTMENT IN WHITE BENEVOLENCE IN A SMALL KAROO
TOWN***

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FRXGIN001

A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters of Philosophy: Justice and Transformation (Social Transformation)

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: 10 February 2011

Abstract

This minor dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted for the Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies (iNCUDISA) at the University of Cape Town's Rural Transformation Project. The focus is on the investment in 'white benevolence' in a small Karoo (Northern Cape) town and in ways that white residents present themselves, and position themselves discursively, as benevolent whites. Loosely located in social constructionist and postmodernist paradigms, this piece of work also attempts to illustrate how lived experience and the situatedness of subjectivity impact on the research experience and the subjectivity of the 'researcher.' Ultimately, it is posited that if we are interested in the nature and extent of social transformation, the question of subjective transformation must be considered.

University of Cape Town

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	1
Note on the use of ‘race’ categories.....	2
<u>CHAPTER ONE: THE RESEARCH STORY</u>	4
Preface.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Why does a small town, without a big story, matter?.....	11
The town.....	15
Notes on Methodology and the Research Experience.....	19
- <i>Insider/Outsider</i>	19
- <i>‘Researching’ (in) a small town and the question of research ethics</i>	20
- <i>On translation and the implications for a social constructionist approach</i>	24
<u>CHAPTER TWO: LIVING THE ‘PROBLEM’</u>	28
Reclaiming the subject and subjective experience. And the value and limits of social constructionism.....	28
Lived experience.....	32
Gina.....	34

<u>CHAPTER THREE: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF WHITE BENEVOLENCE</u>	37
Listening to nostalgic accounts of the apartheid past.....	37
- <i>Sara</i>	40
The positive self-presentation of whiteness.....	43
Investing in the subject position of the ‘benevolent white’.....	47
- <i>Amanda and Gerda</i>	49
<u>CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS A NEW RELATIONALITY</u>	53
Baartman.....	53
- <i>On the poetic re-presentation of interview data</i>	54
- <i>Baartman’s Poem</i>	55
Concluding thoughts.....	60
<u>REFERENCES</u>	62
<u>APPENDIX</u>	67

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I would like to express my most ardent gratitude and love to my mother and grandmother, as well as: Ivonne and the Gentle family, Beverley, Didi, and the carers and patients at the Gentlecare care centre, and HESSIE and the Koopman family, and the children she cares for so selflessly and tirelessly.

Julle is die groot leermeesters van my lewe. Ek is oneindig dankbaar.

Note on the use of ‘race’ categories

Doing this kind of work entails classifying and categorising people on the basis of ‘race.’ This gives rise to a heightened ‘race’ consciousness – during the data collection as well as analysis phases – which I am not always comfortable with: “See the black woman shaking hands with the white man... See the white woman chatting to the black man in the line at the bank...” And so on.

We classify people, or ask them to classify themselves, on the basis of ‘race’ even as we concede that ‘race’ is not a biological fact but a social construction. The social, economic and political *effects* of this construction are, however, very real.

Although I recognise that for some the use of the term ‘coloured’ is contentious, the fact that many research participants strongly self-identified as either ‘coloured’ or ‘black’ – and drew distinctions between ‘black’ and ‘coloured’ people and their experiences – necessitates that I, too, make this distinction. It must be remembered, however, that ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ denote different things to different people, and represent many and varied experiences. While I do not honour such nuances here, they should not be forgotten.

It was while conducting the fieldwork on which this thesis is based, that I identified as ‘white’ and with whiteness more strongly than I ever have. This needs to be interrogated. In order to make whiteness strange – and it *must* be made strange – it must first be named.

I long for the day when we no longer need to make mention of this thing we call ‘race.’

die baas van die plaas

vir Mammie

ek het 'n ouma
wat net een taal praat
sy vertel my stories van baas Willem
en dr. Metzler

hoe goed baas Willem vir haar was
sy kon altyd eerste kies
watter ou klere sy wou hê
sy vertel van myle stap dorp toe
en hoe baas Willem haar voor
in die bakkie laat sit het
baas Willem het gesê haar kinders
hoef nie die standerd 10 te maak nie
hulle gaan mos op die plaas werk
en help met die kinders grootmaak

dr. Metzler het gesê
my ouma se kinders *confuse* hom
hulle't 'n *immorality* in hul oë
hy sê my ouma kan dankie sê
die laaste een is doodgebore

daai een se naam
sou Judas gewees het

- Ronelda S. Kamfer, *Noudat Slapende
Honde* (2008)

“En die ewige sê niks. Dis die verbygaande wat seermaak, die plaaslike.”

[And the eternal says nothing. It's that which passes that hurts, the local.]

Breyten Breytenbach (cited by Coetzee, 2009: 9)

CHAPTER ONE

THE RESEARCH STORY

Preface

As a child, I was terrified of the Karoo. I begin with this admission. I was terrified of its expansiveness, interrupted by the occasional little town.

My mother had grown up in the Karoo and during school holidays my family would make the long trek from Durban to the farm where her parents lived. In the days leading up to our departure, I would become increasingly apprehensive. I would imagine myself falling seriously ill at the farm. I would imagine myself lying on the backseat of the car as my parents sped along dirt roads to the town – and its doctor – approximately forty-five minutes away. I would imagine how they would fail to reach the town in time and how my lifeless body would be laid out on one of the creaky beds in the farmhouse.

This anxiety did not abate once we arrived at the farm. If anything, my fantasies became increasingly elaborate. But regardless of the details I would conjure up (the disease or accident that would befall me; the particulars of the deathbed scene) I would always attribute my tragic end to two primary causes: the distance from the farm to the town and, more generally, the rural setting and all I believed that to entail. Occasionally, in these conjurations, I would reach the town. But my fate would still be sealed. The doctor would not be knowledgeable enough to diagnose and treat me (the presumption being that doctors in small towns are somehow less qualified). Or his surgery would not have the necessary, life-saving medication in stock. Even as a child, these prejudices were in place.

There is another childhood story that needs telling.

In *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism* (2005), Karyn McKinney recounts the incident which made her question, for the first time, what being white means. During her sophomore year in college an African American friend asked her whether she was proud to be white. McKinney (2005: 1) writes: “I realized that not only did I not know if I was “proud” to be white, I didn’t even know what it was to be white – *how it felt, what it meant* – anything. The question was unanswerable in that the term “white,” for me, was empty of any meaning [emphasis added].”

I was about eight or nine years old, and on the farm. It was the last day of our holiday and everyone had to help carry bags to the car. I was walking along the long, wooden-floored corridor, struggling with the luggage. At the end of the corridor, Koos¹, a man who lived and worked on the farm, was standing in the door, luggage in hand. I could not pass. And in a stern, commanding tone I said: “*Loop!*” (“Go!”). Immediately an arm yanked me to the side and roughly pulled me into the nearest room. It was my mother. Her fingers pressed into my arm: “You WILL NOT speak to him like that! He is a GROWN MAN!” That a child would dare speak to an adult in such a way. But not only that: that a child who inhabited the world of *Oom* and the *Tannie* – “Uncle” and “Aunt”; designations used almost religiously – would dare speak to an adult in such a way. And still more: that a child who was at the time uncommonly shy and uncertain could be so audacious. And I knew, immediately, why I had spoken that “*Loop!*” as though it was the most commonplace thing to say: I was white and he was coloured. In my eyes, he was not really an adult. I, the white madam in the making. The “*Kleinnooi*” (Little Madam) who would one day become “*Nooi*” (Madam).

Introduction

This thesis is about the investment in what I call white benevolence in a small Karoo town in the Northern Cape. I do not name the town here. It is also about my own investment in the subject position of the benevolent white while I was conducting the fieldwork for this piece of work. Responding to charges of individualism, the feminist movement generated what Henriques et al (2002a: 428) call “a form of politics and analysis ... [which] demonstrated the necessity of personal change,” insisting that “subjective transformation was a major site of political change”

¹ ‘Koos’ is a pseudonym.

and perhaps even a *prerequisite* of political change. The question of subjective change and stasis, and how it might impact on social transformation, guides this work.

While I was born and grew up in the urban setting of Durban, I've always had a strong awareness of my maternal family's ties with the Karoo. My mother grew up in the Karoo, the daughter of white Afrikaner sheep farmers. It was during my late teenage years that I found myself becoming more and more aware of what the white Afrikaner farmer, as historical category, represented. Questions surrounding legacy and inheritance started to arise: what does it mean to one day inherit a piece of land obtained and clung to through conquest and exploitation? What questions does this knowledge – of the history of this continent, country and region – pose? What does this knowledge demand of me? How has the knowledge of my legacy shaped and how does it continue to shape what I experience to be this self – 'I'?

I approached Prof Don Foster with the idea of researching social transformation in a small Karoo town using Social Psychology paradigm. At the time I was especially interested in the concept of place identity as a means to “[attend] to the located nature of subjectivity” (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 27) and, more generally, the so-called discursive turn in social sciences. My thesis proposal stated admittedly broad aims. I would conduct interviews with residents of a Karoo town and surrounds, which would attempt to recognise senses or feelings about place, specifically perceptions of, and attitudes about, changes to these places/spaces (town, farm, landscape, etc.). I wrote: “It is expected that narratives of self and narratives of place will emerge, and that these narratives will likely be intertwined, thus pointing to the connection between senses of self, or identity, and place.”

When I told Don Foster of my intention to conduct my research in a Karoo town, he suggested that I approach the University of Cape Town's Institute for Intercultural and Diversity Studies (iNCUDISA). In 2008, the Institute had launched their Rural Transformation Project. Essentially, the project is concerned with the shifts and stases of identities in rural towns in post-apartheid South Africa and the possible links between identities and space/place in the context of small towns. There is a particular emphasis on the extent and effects spatial transformation since 1994 – questions surrounding the ‘opening up’ of the post-apartheid landscape – on different

'race' groups and 'raced' identities, and on and the discourses that sustain and/or challenge these identities. In short, the study investigates intersections of race, space, discourse and identity in the context of small South African towns. It was clear that there were many overlaps between my own proposed research and iNCUDISA's research agenda, and so I was fortunate to be able to join the project.²

Particulars of the research 'methodology' will be described in greater depth in a subsequent section, but it is perhaps useful to note at this point that the Rural Transformation Project's student researchers were provided with an interview schedule (see Appendix) to guide the in-depth, semi-structured interviews they would conduct, thus enabling iNCUDISA to do a comparative analysis of the various small towns. Student researchers could then supplement the interview schedule with additional questions, tailored to their own, specific theses.

Because I felt that my 'research question' was adequately addressed by the interview schedule, I saw no need to include additional questions and, indeed, I seldom veered from the original schedule. However, it was the 'interviews' that were more akin to conversations, and especially those during which participants spoke more about themselves – narrating their personal histories, situated in this town and other places – that made for the richer, more telling data. And it is also extracts from these interviews that dominate this thesis. I regret that this is something I only realised retrospectively: that it was the questions that elicited narrative responses, as opposed to explanatory ones (responses to the ubiquitous "why?") which spoke to the complexities and contradictions of place, subjectivity and relationships. Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 170-171) observe the tendency of interviewers to ask participants the questions posed by their research, thus possibly "[reproducing] subjects who position themselves in just those discourses which the researcher is deploying." In contrast, "the stories that people tell contain traces of their defences, and hence clues to their biographical meaning, whereas explanatory questions invite merely conventional discursive justifications" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 171).

² In addition to the town discussed in this thesis, I also conducted research in Trompsburg, Free State. Some of the other towns researched by iNCUDISA's student researchers are Poffadder, Prince Albert (see McEwen, 2009) and Cradock.

Reflecting on her PhD research on the reproduction of gender difference in adult relationships, Wendy Hollway (1994: 9) asks a simple yet significant question: “At what point can I say that I started doing research, as opposed to something which many other women were doing at the time?” Hollway (1994: 9) also observes that she was “*living the problem*” [my emphasis], and that “it was impossible to separate ‘me’ from ‘theoretical ideas’ from ‘field notes’” (Hollway, 1994: 9). I echo these questions. At what point can I say I started doing research or, for that matter, stopped doing research? Where are the boundaries between research and ‘living’? Was there ever a moment where I wasn’t a participant as well as an observer? Was there ever a moment after my arrival in this town, in January 2009, that I was not somehow *implicated, complicit*? I had planned on completing my fieldwork in approximately three weeks. The interview schedule was straightforward enough; the broad aims of the iNCUDISA project, which now informed my fieldwork, clear. But then, with the exception of a couple of short interludes spent in Cape Town, I ended up staying – *living* – in this small Karoo town until October. As time passed, the term ‘fieldwork’ began to feel like a misnomer and ultimately, it was the ‘more’ of everyday life, the demands, responsibilities and injuries that accompanied this ‘everyday living’, and, increasingly, inner rumblings – the eventual realisation that *my* experiences and behaviour in this town was somehow telling – which determined the focus and content of this thesis.

A thesis can of course be approached in a myriad of ways, and any number of theoretical allegiances can be taken up. I approach this research in an admittedly personal way. The experience of ‘doing research’ in the town affected me deeply. It gave rise to many questions concerning my own identity/subjectivity and called many previously held assumptions, of who and what I considered myself to be, into question. One might say the childhood stories narrated above, and reflections that will follow, are in some ways consistent with the recent trend in biographical writing and research and, specifically, auto-ethnography: “highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural” (Richardson, 2000: 931). No doubt my own heavy investment in

reflexivity³ can be criticised as little more than an exercise in self-indulgence. It might be suggested that the piece of work presented here hovers indecisively somewhere between self-promotion and self-flagellation. However, it is hoped that by initially positing my own experiences – of the research process, living in the town, interacting with residents and increased awareness of taking up a new subject position – at the forefront of the discussion, I will be able to illustrate how subjectivity is prodded and altered by context and how this applies not only to those we call “research subjects” but to the ‘researcher’ herself. She is subject and subjectivity too.

I often feel uncomfortable sitting at a seminar table. Those of us who discuss matters such as ‘race’, privilege and prejudice seldom make ourselves subject to the same critical analysis we wield against others. We remain peculiarly innocent. Or we silence our own voices, fearing our own sensibilities and personal experiences to be contaminants (Richardson, 2000: 925). No doubt, my sensibility and all that has shaped it, as well as my experiences, ‘contaminate’ this piece of writing. I have decided to be forthright about this. Significantly, my experiences as a ‘raced’ person – raced as white – is placed front and centre. This, too, is subject to criticism. However, I am inclined to agree with Faegin and Vera (cited in McKinney, 2005: 4-5):

Most research on whites’ racial attitudes is focused on how whites see the ‘others.’ The question of how whites see themselves as they participate in a racist society has been neglected...While we do not underestimate the value of learning about others, we believe that one way to begin to address white racism in this society is to reorient social science research to a thorough investigation of whites’ own self-definitions and self-concepts [emphasis added].

In the remainder of the thesis it will become clear that I do not have particularly strong theoretical allegiances, being wary of meta-theories and -narratives. On the whole, however, I operate in a broad postmodernist paradigm, which Layder (2006: 127) (perhaps a little too conveniently) describes as “[representing] a break with grand theory or ‘meta-narratives.’”

³ These days, it has become almost standard practice that social scientific work in the feminist, poststructuralist and/or social constructionist traditions contain a section devoted to reflexivity. However, here reflexivity runs throughout. It is not something that is dealt with once-off, and neatly cordoned off.

Richardson (2000: 928) calls this the “postmodernist context of *doubt*” which “distrusts all methods equally.” But this is not a debilitating doubt and it is not a doubt that leads to defeatist resignation or blind relativism. Rather, especially for the qualitative researcher and writer, this can be freeing. As Richardson (2000: 928) explains:

“a postmodernist position does allow us to know “something” without claiming to know everything. Having a partial, local, historical knowledge is still knowing. In some ways, “knowing” is easier, however, because postmodernism recognizes the situational limitations of the knower. Qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak. They don’t have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, atemporal general knowledge; they can eschew the questionable metanarrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it.”

It is not my aim to make an unassailable, consistent argument or champion a particular theory while discounting others. Rather, for all its meanderings (and there are many), it is my hope that this thesis will communicate something of the lives and relationships in a particular place which, for all its particularity (any claim to particularity is of course debatable) also throws some light on this country’s transition as well the persistent global investment in whiteness. This is my attempt to make sense, and provide something of an accounting, not only of the town and the nature of inter-group relations since the demise of apartheid, but also of my time in this town, the ‘I’ in this town; an illustration of how “culture ‘speaks itself’ through an individual’s story” (Authors of *Storied Lives*, cited in McKinney, 2005: 5).⁴

⁴ There are obvious correspondences with Tajfel’s (1981) concept of social identity, i.e. “that *part* of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981: 255). Tajfel’s perspective constitutes a response to the “individualistic tendencies” of much of the so-called “traditional” social psychology with its emphasis on the cognitive and motivational processes of an essentially autonomous individual (Tajfel, 1981: 13-15, 31). In contrast, Tajfel emphasizes the central place of the social setting in which the individual must relate to other individuals and groups (Tajfel, 1981: 31). This social setting “contributes to making the individuals what they are and they in turn produce the social setting; they and it develop and change symbiotically” (Tajfel, 1981: 31).

Why does a small town, without a big story, matter?

“Human experience is formed and gleaned, life-sharing managed, its meaning conceived, absorbed and negotiated, around places. And it is in places and of places that human urges and desires are gestated and incubated, live in hope of fulfilment, risk frustration and are, indeed, more often than not, frustrated.”

Zygmunt Bauman (2003: 102).

Among the case studies conducted for iNCUDISA’s Rural Transformation Project are studies of the towns Cradock and Swartruggens. Cradock has become almost synonymous with the anti-apartheid struggle, particularly the Cradock Four, while Swartruggens came to prominence when, in 2008, the 18-year-old white Afrikaner, Johann Nel, opened fire in the nearby informal settlement of Skierlik, killing four people. Other case studies include Prince Albert (see McEwen, 2009), which in recent years has become a popular tourist jaunt, and Poffadder, which, perhaps by virtue of its somewhat humorous name and geographical remoteness, is often represented as the quintessential back-of-beyond South African town. But among the case studies there are also examples of towns that hold no place in the national consciousness. The town where I conducted my fieldwork was among the lesser-known towns. In fact, the town was virtually unknown to those affiliated with the project.

Why then conduct social research in a place that is, arguably, rather unremarkable? One might point out that while a considerable amount of research which turns on questions of race, space and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa has been carried out in the country’s urban centres (see e.g. Ballard, 2004, Saff, 2001 and Popke & Ballard, 2004), relatively little attention has been paid to the ways and extent that intergroup relations have changed or stayed the same in smaller, rural towns. When potential research participants asked why I would conduct research in their town, I usually answered: “Because no one knows what’s going on in places like this.” One might also hold, like Foucault, that power is fragmented and plays out in even the smallest of local settings (Layder, 2006: 127) and that small places are thus manageable research sites where one can consider macro-dimensions of power playing out on a micro-level.

Is there something fundamentally different about life and relationships in a small town (as opposed to life and relationships in a large urban centre)? What struck me was the extent that people in the town of this thesis *professed* their dependence on each other; a type of dependence experienced as immediate and tangible. People seem to be more cognisant of the ways and extent that their survival is bound-up with those of others. One participant articulated it as follows:

NELIA: [...] The city folk have entirely different ideas. They're not used to what the Karoo actually asks of you. If here you don't live to share you're also not going to get anywhere. You must share. That I think that's the most important thing we must do here. Even for one's own self-preservation. As well as for the guy next door's...
[White woman, hotel owner]

I would also suggest there is perhaps a greater degree of awareness and familiarity between people of different 'race' and socio-economic groups in a small rural town than in a sprawling urban setting. But a point worth emphasising is that a greater degree of familiarity and the sometimes intimate and detailed knowledge of the other's life are by no means in and of themselves moral or ethical posturings. If anything it renders past and present exploitation and prejudices much more problematic. That said, what is still missing, I think, is an understanding of this and other characteristics of life in small towns that goes beyond commonly-held and largely unexamined assumptions about small towns' residents as 'backward' or blindly and uniformly conservative. Or they are re-presented anecdotally, as caricatures: quirky, humorous but, ultimately, crudely and as one-dimensional. In an article with the amusing title "Farming Made Her Stupid," Heldke (2006: 151) remarks on this tendency of metrocentric culture to label "marginalised groups of knowers" as "stupid." One group regularly defined as stupid (or simple), Heldke observes, is rural people. This can often be detected in representations of small towns and their residents, or in discussions of life in small towns. Also in academia. But, in my mind, small towns are rich and complicated spaces, and must be represented in a way that renders some of this complexity.

One needs to consider the possible meaning/s and incongruities of the refrain sounding across the interviews: "We all live together." This speaks to an experience, or perception, of a supposed – but definitely not straightforward or ubiquitous – 'togetherness' across and among different groups in a small town. But how brittle, how tentative, and how complicated this business of

“living together” can be; the entangling of lives. With this in mind, the trope of *entanglement* will be suggested as a backdrop to what follows; a kind of touchstone. While the condition of entanglement is everywhere to be found, it is in the small context of a small town or community that it comes into sharp relief.

In a recent work, literary and social theorist Sarah Nuttall (2009) proposes entanglement as a means to attend to the complexities and nuances of post-apartheid South Africa. Nuttall (2009: 1) explains:

“Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness... It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication... So often the story of post-apartheid has been told within the register of difference – frequently for good reasons, but often, too, ignoring the intricate overlaps that mark the present and, at time, and in important ways, the past, as well.”

The notion of entanglement serves as a counter to analyses that sometime erroneously stress purity, distance and separateness at the cost of impurity, proximity and, in Nuttall’s term, “foldedness.” It is an appreciation of the messiness (a term one increasingly stumbles upon in qualitative writings) and ironies of everyday life and indeed what we would often like to presume to be our fixed, stable, delineated identities.

An acknowledgment of entanglement problematizes drives towards purity, and attempts to enforce separation. Steyn (2004) reminds us of the attempts to extricate the Afrikaner nation from its historic, genetic and cultural *entanglements* with the country’s coloured community; something which, in some quarters, continues to this day. Steyn (2004: 148) explains: “White South Africans chose to attempt to fade these entanglements out of memory as racial boundaries became more rightly differentiated and hierarchical.” However, attempts at untangling are never complete, and never final, and breaches, to varying degrees, do occur. For me, entanglement is commensurate with what Sibley (1995: 32-33), working in the field of human geography, calls

“liminal zones or spaces of ambiguity or discontinuity,” insofar as entanglement might be regarded as producing such zones of ambiguity. Nuttall (2009: 12) writes:

“Entanglement ... enables us to work with the idea that the more racial boundaries are erected and legislated the more we have to look for the transgressions without which everyday life for oppressor and oppressed would have been impossible. It helps us, too, to find a method of reading which is about a set of relations, some of them conscious but many of them unconscious, which occur between people who most of the time try to define themselves as different.”

These liminal or marginal zones or states are sources of danger or uncertainty to those who press for purity and separation (Sibley, 1995: 33). However, regardless of efforts at untangling, individuals ultimately “lack the power to organize their world into crisp sets and so eliminate spaces of ambiguity” (Sibley, 1995: 33). Entanglement is tenacious.

The trope of entanglement is also evoked in the work of Jacob Dlamini who resists attempts to forge a meta-narrative of apartheid and draws our attention to the many shades of grey which coloured life under apartheid, the “zones of ambiguity that individuals traversed daily as they went about their lives” (Dlamini, 2009: 30). Entanglement also comes to mind when reading the work of Fiona Ross, whose study of a small informal community on the outskirts of Cape Town speaks to this messiness of life and the many contradictions and concessions emanating from “close associations and extended networks of support” (Ross, 2010: 161). Entanglement is also evoked when Judith Butler (2009: 61) writes of the bodies’ bounded-up-ness with other bodies:

...as bodies, we are exposed to others, and while this may be the condition of our desire, it also raises the possibility of subjugation and cruelty. This follows from the fact that bodies are bound up with others through material needs, through touch, through language, through a set of relations without which we cannot survive. To have one’s survival bound up in such a way is a constant risk of sociality – its promise and its threat. The very fact of being bound up with others establishes the possibility of being subjugated and exploited – though in no way does it determine what political form that will take. But it

also establishes the possibility of being relieved of suffering, of knowing justice and even love.

The above quotation reminds and warns that to draw the attention to entanglement does not mean negating the operations and effects of harming discourses. Neither does it mean negating nor obscuring the persistence of divisions and separations, and the destructiveness of such divisions and separations (it will later be suggested, appeals to entanglement can in fact be used defensively and apologetically, to obscure inequalities and injustices⁵). Entanglements are also subject to policing and can be governed by norms. I suppose one could say – and this will crystallise later – that there is something rather fixed about the nature of the entanglement of white and black and coloured residents in the town of this thesis, and that it serves to keep whiteness and power differentials intact. It is my contention that while entanglement is not ethical in and of itself (entanglements can be unethical), the failure to recognise the condition of entanglement forecloses any sort of ethics.

The town

The town I am writing about here has a population of approximately 6000-6500 and is situated in the in the Karoo region of the Northern Cape. The administrative locus of the local municipality is situated in the neighbouring town, roughly 50 kilometres away. The 2001 Census has the town's demographics as follows: a sizable coloured population of about 2500 people, followed by about 800 black residents and about 300 whites. While the accuracy of these numbers can be questioned, it gives some idea of the broad demographic patterns.

The town can more or less be divided into three main areas or neighbourhoods, remnants of the Group Areas Act: the historically white neighbourhood characterised by wide streets populated by large houses, where most of the businesses are located; the historically 'coloured'

⁵ During fieldwork conducted in Trompsburg (the other case study I conducted for iNCUDISA's Rural Transformation Project) one resident (a 'white' woman) told me during casual conversation that because people live so close to each other in a small town, people penetrate each other's lives more ("*Omdat ons so na aan mekaar leef, penetreer ons mekaar se lewens meer*"). She was referring specifically to the relations between different 'race' groups in the town. In Trompsburg, as in the town of this thesis, participants present this entanglement positively. It is not, however, unproblematic.

neighbourhood, adjacent to the old white neighbourhood; the historically black neighbourhood or “location,” separated from the rest of the town by a railway track. In addition, there is what locals call the “Skema”, an area adjacent to the coloured neighbourhood, a flat expanse consisting of informal dwellings occupied mostly by coloured but also some black residents; and a relatively newer area bordering the “Skema” and populated by government housing. Today, many of the houses in the historically white neighbourhood are owned by black or coloured families. A considerable number were allocated through the government housing project, meaning that richer and poorer residents are often neighbours.

Initially, the recognition of my own and others’ visceral experience of and attachment to the materiality of the town⁶ made me feel compelled to write the place ‘recognisably’ and to take residents’ investment in certain places/sites, and the materiality of these places/sites, seriously: houses, filling stations, the hotel, the town hall, the community hall, streets, schools, businesses, the empty swimming pool, the showground, cemeteries... Narratives and memories are weaved around these places or speak of these places, some of which are no longer there; the “ghosts of place”, in Michael Mayerfeld Bell’s (1997) turn of phrase.

Participants tell a story of an opening-up of space/s, greater freedom of movement, a contraction of the space/s between groups and individuals and of greater contact and connection in the post-apartheid period. At the same time, they tell a story of the diminishment of place, and of absences and disappearances. For many participants, to live in this town is to live in a town that’s in decline, that’s “going backwards”. References to dilapidation and deterioration abound; sometimes pointing to material decline (e.g. dilapidation of property), sometimes to what is perceived as a decline in values and “order” (the excessive use of alcohol and a waning of “discipline” are often mentioned). It is important to mention that these concerns are expressed

⁶ I find Hetherington’s (1997) focus on the materiality of ‘place’ – the objects which speak of place, for instance the “chairs and pictures, the wallpaper and ornaments” – fascinating. The author writes: “My aim is to bring materiality back in and to see places as generated by the placing, arranging and naming the spatial ordering of materials and the system of difference they perform. It is this threefold practice that constitutes a labour of division and the system of differences in which places are located as mobile effects. This does not mean that there is no space for the subject and subjective experiences and memories of a space; rather they become folded into the material world and each becomes imbricated in the agency of the other” (Hetherington, 1997: 184).

across 'race' and class groups, although one can certainly detect interesting inflections in how accounts of decline and loss are articulated, to who/what the perceived decline is attributed, and the ways and extent that these expressions are raced. Two examples from the interviews:

CHRISTO: ...The second thing is what I think that clouds relationships [between 'black' and 'white' residents a lot, em, is the high alcohol abuse, er, and now, I fight against it that guys take a standpoint and then I say you can't generalise, but it's my observation that guys say "But I don't want to come to close to them to the brown people because see how they drink, see how they drink, see how they behave themselves on the street, see how they throw the papers in the street, see how they do it, see how it." [...]

['White' man, church minister]

SUSAN: No, things were, things were, for me things were much better then. Because I don't want to be racist now, but that period when the white man still ruled and then things were much – how can I say now? – for me things were still er much in, in order. For me things are out of order now. Because now each one can just come and do and go and make and do as he wants to. Understand? [...]

['Coloured' woman, caregiver at hospice/care centre]

It is also a story of loss: of jobs and security and those things that anchor place and make it recognisable, and perhaps stave off a sense of precarity. Watkin (2004: 175), reflecting on mourning and its literary representations, notes the "taxonomy of things in the world [or, elsewhere, environment/s] of loss." He writes:

"... loss does not happen in a dialectic scene between subject and object in an artificial pastoral realm, but is what happens dynamically between subjects, other subject, lost objects and present objects in a living, metonymic environment of proximity and distance" (Watkin, 2004: 177).

Anxiety over this sense of the 'emptying out' of space, disappearances, absences and departures is expressed by most participants, albeit to varying degrees. At the outset of the interviews, when asking participants how the town had changed since 1994, I mistakenly anticipated that they would at once refer to altered relations between individuals and/or groups. But it soon became clear that the question would be answered – almost ubiquitously – in the following way: "The town used to have three garages / a chemist / doctors / a hospital / an operational railway station / a public swimming pool / more businesses / more or better shops / more gardens / a better high school / better municipal services [etc.]. Now it only has... [or now it doesn't have, not anymore]."

Material changes are front and centre in residents' consciousness and clearly matter a great deal. Ultimately, the participants communicate a kind of melancholia and what is, ostensibly, the difficulty, for many, of reconciling a conception of the democratic transition as intended progress ("voortgang": going forwards) and experiences of decline ("agteruitgang": going backwards). Interestingly, this corresponds to the findings of Popke and Ballard (2004: 103) who, in their study of Durban residents' reactions to urban change, observe a "spatial melancholia, an inability to acknowledge and mourn the loss of certainty brought on by South Africa's transition."

Significantly, there is a feeling that there used to be more job opportunities in the town. There is also a strong awareness of the departures of whites over the last two decades, a point raised in most interviews, regardless of participants' 'race.' Many participants point to a causal relationship between the former and the latter: there are fewer jobs (and therefore less security, fewer businesses, etc.) *because* the whites have left. To an extent then, the relative (and recent) absence of a specific group of people – the whites – is seen to manifest in certain material and spatial changes in the town, and also in the life-worlds of those that remain. While there is an almost unanimous sense that the departure of the whites *changed* the town, the absence plays out differently in people's lives and people have different affective responses to the departures. Some participants express indignation at what is seen as a shirking of responsibility, a desertion of the town as well those that remain. Others bemoan the departures because "life was better" when there were more whites in the town. Two examples:

ALBERTUS: Look, the *baas* [master] **gave** us **work** (GINA: Hm). Yes. He gave us work. We were **never** without work. (*pause*) If you just walk through **this** town (GINA: Hm), you will see you don't easily find white men anymore. **Your** race, it's **your** people right, you won't easily see them. Huh, they're gone now, they're gone, they moved away.
[*'Coloured' man, unemployed, receiving a disability grant*]

GINA: How do you feel about the fact that they [the whites] moved away?

MATTHEW: I actually feel, I, I actually feel er very sore because, because it is, it's true, those are the guys who kept the town alive. I can't, I can't run away from that. The town is made up of farmers, of farm people. Farmers always ruled this town of ours. Because why? Those were the guys who ran the economy of the town back then, because they had businesses, they had chemists, they had big shops. And **where** they got together now and decided they wanted to pull out of the town, I don't know [...] But **just** after that, everything also started to just stand still in the town.
[*'Black' man, general worker at the municipality*]

Notes on Methodology and the Research Experience

- *Insider/Outsider*

In retrospect, my fieldwork methodology can be likened to a kind of ethnography in which I straddled the uneasy divide between insider and outsider. Indeed, O'Reilly (2009: 111) observes that a neat distinction between insider and outsider ethnography is "naive" given the fact that the scientific ideal of 'distance' is, in fact, unattainable. I was enough of an insider – white, Afrikaans-speaker with prior knowledge of the place – to be a speaker, interpreter and conduit of the town's "unconscious grammar" (O'Reilly, 2009: 111) and enough of an outsider to be able to recognise that I was a speaker and conduit of this local grammar (specifically, as it will later be made clear, its moral logic).

Prior to my fieldwork, I deliberated whether or not to disclose to research participants my family's ties to the town. I feared that it would impact too much on what participants felt they could, or should, say. However, after a couple of days of fieldwork it became apparent that the benefits of disclosing my personal history outweighed its possible drawbacks. I soon became aware of the importance afforded to transparency and honesty in a small community. People who are seen as secretive or duplicitous are quickly exposed and genuine privacy is something that can only be attained if one seldom ventures outside of one's home (and even then people are prone to know, or at least speculate about, what is going on behind closed doors). Privacy and anonymity is what I would miss most about my life in the city. Fiona Ross (2010: 160) reflects on this characteristic of small communities in her ethnographic study of the community of The Park/The Village on the outskirts of Cape Town, where living in close proximity to others means that "secrets, rumour and gossip" play a part in regulating social life but also give rise to residents expressing a longing for privacy. In everyday life "where circumstances demand close associations and extended networks of support", the erroneously neat distinction between public and private is "undone" (Ross, 2010: 161).

Some of the town's older residents would sometimes reminisce about my late grandfather (especially those who had worked for him at some point, or whose families had worked for him)

or enquire after my grandmother's health. Often I would be surprised by reminders of my familial ties to the place. Once, walking in the "Skema", a coloured lady sitting outside her home preparing a meal, called me over and said I reminded her of someone. She asked who my mother was. I told her but added that she probably wouldn't know my mother. But she did know my mother: roughly the same age, they had played together as little girls on the farm where her father often worked as a sheep shearer: the often-repeated story of the lives of white, black and coloured people intersecting – entangling – in the context of the farm; that strange interplay and negotiation between intimacy and contact on the one hand, and distance and inequality on the other.

Ultimately, while I don't feel my particular ties to the town or my family played a too significant part in the research process, being a white Afrikaner – in the more general sense – certainly did. There was a period during my stay in the town where I felt my 'whiteness', the meaning – and sometimes promise (of possible patronage, and of assumed knowledge, especially with regards to medical questions) – it seemed to take on in the context of the town, acutely. Some of this discomfort, and at times underlying resentment, comes across in my field notes, and I will turn to this later.

My grandmother, relegated by severe asthma to the town's old-aged home, often voiced concern about my comings and goings and of what "people might think." It was clear that there was some awareness among many of the whites of my more liberal leaning, my friendships with black and coloured residents and the fact that I freely moved in all the neighbourhoods. There was undoubtedly some transgressing of conventions, sometimes even remarked on by 'black' and 'coloured' residents.

- *'Researching' (in) a small town and the question of research ethics*

This research had to adhere to the University of Cape Town's ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. As such, participants were informed about the broad aims of the iNCUDISA study and were asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview. When I addressed the question of anonymity and confidentiality, many respondents replied that it would

probably be futile to be given a pseudonym as their identities would be obvious to locals (the town has only one 'white' church minister, only one hotel owner, etc.). This is compounded by the fact that participants tended to communicate their feelings and observations about the town with very close references to their own lives or experiences, again rendering their identities quite obvious. Many of these participants subsequently said they did not require a guarantee of anonymity in order to participate in the study. Not knowing what to expect or what they would reveal, others asked whether they could first be interviewed after which they would decide whether they wanted a guarantee of anonymity. All of these participants felt afterwards that they did not feel they needed to remain anonymous. Other participants were quite adamant that I use their real names: they had nothing to hide and wanted their real names to accompany their views. It seems that for them, announcing their true identity amounts to an act and declaration of agency: *my thoughts, my life, matter*. Yet, in large part to enable myself to write in a critical manner of people I have come to care about, I have given every research participant mentioned or quoted in this thesis a pseudonym. And it is for this reason that the town, too, remains unnamed. Perhaps this is cowardliness on my part.

Sometimes participants specified certain conditions of anonymity and confidentiality. Cognisant of how transparent identity can be in a small town, one participant, a white policeman, said that, depending on the portion of the interview referred to or quoted from, he should be identified as *either* 'white' *or* a policeman but never, at once, as both (there being only one 'white' policeman in the town). In another instance, on the day following her interview, a participant asked if she could speak to me. She had been up the previous night, thinking of certain things she had said to me and, fearing that she would be identifiable, asked that I omit what she considered to be problematic sections of her interview.

The issue of anonymity and confidentiality, while presenting a genuine ethical challenge, does however communicate something fundamental about life in a small town as well as researching (in) a small town. As Gayle Letherby (2000: 91) points out as she reflects on the dangers inherent in autobiographical research writing, "the dangers involved [in the above discussion the dangers of breaking trust and other transgressions of research ethics] can contribute to greater

academic insight (both substantive and methodological) rather than just being obstacles to avoid and overcome”.

There seems to be an increasing awareness in social anthropology literature of the emotional, intellectual and ethical riskiness of ethnography and the different knowledge and understanding that such riskiness can generate.⁷ I have also been thinking about the meaning of encountering death in fieldwork. C.W. Watson reflects on the affect that the death of friends’ daughter in the field. Her death affected him as individual as well as heralding a slight shift in how he conceives of anthropology’s purpose. Watson (1999: 161) writes: “I was much affected by what happened and the way in which I subsequently perceived what was occurring in the stream of everyday life around me from then on took on a different hue, darker but also warmer.”

Six days after commencing my fieldwork, I was sitting in the town’s care centre, next to the deathbed of a young woman.⁸ It was the first time I would watch someone die, and the first time I would see a corpse. There were many deaths in the months that followed and I had come to know many of the people that passed away, or I knew their families. In 2008, 104 corpses passed through the town’s small funeral parlour, amounting to two deaths per week. This does not include those people whose funeral policies meant that their corpses were kept at funeral parlours in the larger neighbouring town. Saturday morning are often set aside for the attendance of funerals. This is not something explicitly mentioned in the interviews. Neither is the pervasiveness of illness in the town, although it is sometimes palpable beneath the surface of what is said and alluded to in references to the bad service delivery of the local clinic and the care centre’s work. In part, this is because many of those interviewed are comparatively better

⁷ The title of a recent volume speaks cogently to my overall experience of researching, and living in, the town: *The Shadow Side of Fieldwork: Exploring the Blurred Borders between Ethnography and Life* (2007).

⁸ Should I even write this? From J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*: ““What arrogance, to lay claim to [their] suffering and death..! Their last hours belong to them alone, they are not ours to enter and possess’... Hardly an outrageous position in a world where routinely the wounded and the dying have the lenses of camera poked into their faces.”” (p174). I had exited the hotel when, across the road, I noticed a protest action of some sort. People were waving placards, singing and toyi-toying. Intrigued, I strolled over. A group of residents were protesting against the intended closure of the town’s care centre (that day, and in subsequent meetings, the closure was averted). I was ushered in, and there I met, and sat next to the bed, of a young woman named Beauty. She passed away a couple of minutes later. In the months that followed, I became increasingly involved at the care centre and would live there the last two months of my stay in the town.

off than most of the town's residents. But it is also, I suspect, that illness and death is such a staple of life in the town: talk of it – and there's much talk of death and illness – takes place in casual, everyday conversations, as people cross paths. There, and I imagine in other small communities, death is experienced as both commonplace and singular, and both the commonplaceness and singularity of the it stems from the fact that, on the whole, residents know each other or at the very least, know *of* each other.

*There's no escaping after an interview or conversation. I bump into the person whose life I've become witness to, sometimes only a couple of hours after. "I've been looking for you all day. The doctor in ***** wrote something on my little girl's clinic card, and I can't make it out. You must come and see." It's Hester J, calling to me from opposite the street. – From Field Notes*

Back in Cape Town, as I read through the interview transcripts, I was struck by the ironies many of the interviews contained. Such ironies I could only apprehend because I had remained in the town for months after my initial rounds of interviews, unwittingly becoming privy to details of many respondents' lives, personal histories and social interactions. Even during the interview process I was astounded at the many intersections and points of connections in the interviews, and how soon these connections and cross-references became intelligible to me, an "in-comer". I witnessed both the significant and commonplace of everyday life in the town: small talk, laughter, revelry, illness, death beds, funerals, intoxication, violence. Increasingly, I became an active participant; in ways not always laudable. Over time, I accrued intimate knowledge of many of the town's people, their lives and relationships with other residents: the ostensibly 'private'. For that reason, this is an exercise in concealment as much as exposure, and the product of careful deliberation about the way and the extent that aspects of people's lives, not communicated in interviews, can or should be exposed; an awareness of an ethics of representation (Richardson, 2000: 932). I, too, benefit from this exercise in selective concealment. As Laurel Richardson (2001: 38) writes: "How different it feels when it is you and your world that you are writing about; how humbling and demanding. How up-front and personal in-your-face become the ethical questions, the most important of all the questions, I think." It is also Richardson (1991: 174) who writes that "[n]o textual staging, including this one, is ever innocent"

- *On translation and the implications for a social constructionist approach*

The translation of the interviews from Afrikaans to English was a frustrating process. I was again struck by how the idiosyncrasies of speech resist quick, straightforward translation. Not to mention the idiosyncrasies of particular languages. One example: during the transcription and translation stage I started noticing how regularly Afrikaans-speakers use the expression ‘*mos maar*’ and the way the words ‘*maar*’ and ‘*mos*’ are – inconspicuously, effortlessly – inserted into every other sentence. This is not easily translatable, I think. At least not when attempted by an inexperienced translator. Because even if you translate “*Ek het maar...*” into “I just...” or “I simply...” or “*Jy weet mos maar...*” into “You know how it is” or “You know of course”, something of the nuance is immediately lost. So what is lost? In some cases, I think, the suggestion of inevitability – ‘It just is’ – and, at the same time, the suggestion of an almost tired, quiet *resignation* in the face of this inevitability. There were times I wished I could transcribe some interviews into a sequence of sighs, and while I was transcribing the interviews, I wrote: “*There’s something about transcribing these Afrikaans interviews that leaves me with a feeling of depression. Does Afrikaans construct or maintain a distinctive world, a way of experiencing the world?*” (Not forgetting, of course, that Afrikaans has many tongues: its various dialects, each constructing and re-constructing their own distinct social realities). As Richardson (2000: 929) explains: “Different languages and different discourses within a given language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are not reducible to one another.”

It is my sense that while the pertinent discourses are intelligible, something of the finer nuances and meanings and something of the subjectivities constructed by virtue of being situated in these discourses, are lost in translation and, even prior to translation, through the adjustment and indeed adaptation from audible (oral) to visible (written) language. What am I suggesting by referring to that which is lost in the concretised, transcribed interview? I’m suggesting that while robust discourses might very well be rendered more visible on the typed page, and are often able to withstand translation, the complexity and nuances of *subjectivity* is perhaps best apprehended through the act of listening.

Among scholars and practitioners of translation, there is much discord over what constitutes a ‘good’ translation, and how this may be achieved. Translation is an interpretative act, beholden to the choices the translator makes and his or her ability to ‘read’ and then convey the intentions of a speaker. While the question of translation is taken seriously by the literary and linguistic disciplines, the translation of interviews is seldom adequately problematized by social scientists making use of translated interviews for discourse or narrative analysis (i.e. social scientists adhering to a discursive or social constructionist paradigm). Or the problem of translation is only briefly acknowledged but then promptly and understandably dismissed as an unfortunate but unavoidable obstacle. In a sense, the challenges presented by translation confirm what proponents of the so-called linguistic turn argue: that language is central in the construction of social reality and subjectivities “in ways that are historically and locally specific” (Richardson, 2000: 929). But this also suggests limits to what a social constructionist method making use of translated interview data might realistically hope to achieve.

In a later chapter, I will analyse a portion of an interview I conducted with two elderly, white sisters in the town, Gerda and Amanda. The following short extract from the sisters’ interview illustrates some of the points raised above, as well as conveying something of this thesis’ focus: the self-presentation of and investment in white benevolence.

GINA: But now that we’re on the on the, em, topic of the town here [*unclear*], what can you tell me about [the town]?

AMANDA: For **me** it’s nice [*lekker*] in [this town], because everyone knows almost everyone else. When here, when I visit my children in Paarl [...] I am a little anxious when there is a knock at the front door (GINA: Hm). But when one [knocks] at my front door – **many** come and knock here for things, for a little money or for a little food or whatever – then I almost **know** the person, because everyone knows everyone. And it is, it isn’t, I am never afraid or anything, I am at ease, I sleep alone, and it is nothing for me, it won’t bother me. But perhaps when I’m in another place, even [the neighbouring town], I won’t feel like I feel [here]. **I** don’t think so [...]

As most of the study’s participants, Amanda describes the town as a place where most residents know each other, and evaluates this as something positive. This familiarity is a source of comfort and she juxtaposes the town to other places, such as Paarl, where, not knowing the people who might possibly “come to her door,” she feels anxious. It is interesting, however, how her account is *raced* even though she never makes an explicit reference to ‘race.’ It is implied that the

acquaintances and strangers being referred to, and who are the respective sources of comfort or anxiety, are either black or coloured.

In a characteristic way (this being a register I'm well acquainted with, and often heard in conversations with white, especially older Afrikaners), she resorts to a kind of code-talk: "when *one* [knocks] at my door – *many* come and knock here for things..." In Afrikaans, the sentence reads: "*Maar as as een [one] aan my voordeur – hier kom baie [many] by my klop vir goeters, vir 'n geldjie of vir 'n kossie of wat ookal – dan kén ek amper die mens, want almal ken vir almal.*"

The "one" here is not used here in the general, ubiquitous sense. It is more particular. As used here, the *implied* meaning is one of *them*. This evasiveness is echoed in the word "many." "One" and "many" are sufficient and there is no need for me to ask that she clarifies who or what she is referring to (*they* are the "many"). Her ability to speak in this coded way relies heavily on my ability to 'read' her intended meaning. On her part, it is assumed that I am versed in this local but also, more generally, cultural grammar of the Afrikaner. I might add that even for Afrikaans speakers these cues might not be easily comprehended on page, but when *heard*, their meanings are clear. One might say they are most intelligible in the inter-subjective space of face-to-face interaction, or recognised in a certain inflection of the voice.

Amanda also communicates something about the nature of her relation to the black and coloured people who knock on her door: she positions herself as a likely benefactor in relation to people in need of her beneficence. In Afrikaans, Amanda says people knock on her door for "*'n geldjie of vir 'n kossie of wat ookal.*" She speaks of money and food in the diminutive, and while it is accurate to translate this as "a little money or a little food or whatever," the use of the diminutive form in Afrikaans lends a certain nuance to what is being said. This is not a mere observation of the amount of money or food, as it would have been had she said "'n bietjie geld of 'n bietjie kos" – *now* literally "a little money or a little food." Rather, in Afrikaans the use of the diminutive form often also communicates something of the speaker's intentions. In using the diminutive, Amanda presents herself as maternal, compassionate. The words "*geldjie*" and "*kossie*" are imbued with a kind of warmth. Amanda's self-presentation does not, of course,

foreclose alternative readings which may read her use of “*geldjie*” and “*kossie*” as patronising, for example. This may indeed be the case but what is important here is that Amanda does not recognise it as such.

If I only had the translated, English version of this extract at my disposal, the degree to which Amanda posits and presents herself as someone who is compassionate and maternal towards the black and coloured people she knows – the familiar faces who knock on her door – would have been lost on me. The signifier “one” differentiates and distances while the diminutives attempt to draw closer, make familiar and communicate warmth and sympathy. This interplay of words mirrors to a large extent the interplay of proximity and distance in a town where, because of its size, residents of different ‘race’ and class groups tend to be geographically proximate but socially distant, and where intergroup contact is largely mediated through charity and benefaction.

For the sake of thoroughness, I will see the analysis of the extract through and suggest that Amanda is implying that the inter-group familiarity which characterises the town renders unnecessary what which would *otherwise*, in other contexts or places, have been the appropriate course of action for an elderly, white lady: not to live on her own out of fear of black or coloured intruders. As such, her account is firmly rooted in universal discourses of whiteness even as she draws attention to the particularity and context-specificity of her experience as white resident.

Davies (2003: 281) notes that to “[take] up a language, or a particular way of speaking within a language, does not necessarily induct the speaker into the assumptions and beliefs of that language, let alone fix the speaker in them.” However, at the same time, “the possibilities of being one or another person may open up and shut down as we speak now one language or another, or move from one discursive landscape to another” (Davies, 2003: 281).

CHAPTER TWO

LIVING THE 'PROBLEM'

"This is why I never ask myself "who am I?" (qui suis-je?) I ask myself "who are I?" (qui sont-je?) – an untranslatable phrase. Who can say who I are, how many I are, which I is the most I of my I's?"

Hélène Cixous (1994: xvii)

Reclaiming the subject and subjective experience. And the value and limits of social constructionism

"Who are I?," Cixous asks. There is at once a distinguishable, and sufficiently coherent, recognisable "I", recognisable to myself as to others, and an "I" which is not one "I" – an "I" which finds itself porous, fluid, adaptable; an "I" which contains many "I's." Van Langenhove and Harré (1993: 82) observe that "[s]omehow psychological theory of the self must encompass both stability and uniqueness and variability and multiplicity." At least some allowance needs to be made for the stability of the self – for an "I" who is able to narrate her life because she recognises past experiences as her own, and is able, sometimes called upon, to account for past selves, however dissimilar they may be to what is experienced as the present self. Much of this thesis turns on my own subjective experience, and of the self experiencing, and trying to account for, subjective change(s). But how does the subjective experience of the self – the individual - fit into a social constructionist framework? And what are some of the caveats of relying solely on social constructionism?

In much of his work, Foucault challenges the humanist assumption of the individual human subject as originator or font of meaning (Layder, 2006: 116), instead conceiving of the individual as the product of – constructed by – discourses. For Foucault, this realisation necessitates a kind of social analysis which "decentres" the individual subject, in other words, shifts the attention

from the individual to “the objective social forms which constitute society and ‘construct’ the subjectivities of individuals,” as opposed to analyses which proceed from subjective understanding or motivations (Layder, 2006: 118 & 120). However, subjectivities are not the products of single discourses but are sites of a multitude concurrent, overlapping and often conflicting discourses. Hence the notion of the subject as multifarious, changeable and open.

While one may acknowledge the discursive construction of subjectivity, there are a number of qualms about social constructionism and post-structuralism that should be kept in mind. My own use of social constructionist assumptions, theories and methods is somewhat tempered, and I regard the discursive turn, in general, with some reservation. Cromby and Standen (1999), for instance, are correct in drawing our attention to all which may be lost by a focus on language and discourse. Extra- or non-discursive practices may be rendered invisible by such a narrow focus, the implication being that such experiences and practices are “somehow less than human” (Cromby & Standen, 1999: 148). The authors also suggest that social constructionism needs to make allowances for embodiment, “the material factors and personal-social histories that constrain the identities and subject positions which individuals might plausibly take up,” while *critical* constructivism especially must take into account individual, subjective experiences – people’s “*awareness of their own* oppression or exploitation [emphasis added]” (Cromby and Standen, 1999: 141 & 144). Layder (2006: 135-136), in turn, appeals for the recognition of the interactive or situated dimension of meaning: meaning that is created – creatively – inter-subjectively, in the face-to-face situation.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000), meanwhile, advocate the reclamation of the psychoanalytic subject. This, the authors contend, makes it “possible not only to work with a theory of the subject that is not reducible to discourse, but also one that, to a greater and lesser extent, posits a coherent, agentic ‘I’” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 168). Theirs, however, is not the psychoanalytic subjects of Freud or Lacan but, drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, a “defended subject” turning on anxiety and efforts to contend with anxiety (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 168). The authors qualify, however, that while a psychological characteristic, anxiety “is not reducible to psychology: anxiety and the defences which it precipitates are complex and

mediated responses to events in the real world, both present and past” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 168).

The phenomenological tradition, too, has potentially useful insights to impart. Young (1984: 47) explains that existential phenomenology “locates consciousness and subjectivity in the body itself,” and I would argue that there is some truth in that. The focus of this thesis sprung from my own, embodied experience of white benevolence; the awareness how my body comportment changed in the town when I spoke to especially poor black and coloured residents. Before I became consciously aware of the subjective shift that was taking place, my body was acting accordingly – acting in a manner appropriate to the local setting. Note that I do not disregard the effects of discourse on embodiment. However, I am suggesting that my awareness of how I was affected by and complicit in the town’s discourses of whiteness, was registered on an embodied level – perhaps even before I was entirely conscious of it; alerting me to the fact that I was not, am not, “self-contained” (Cromby & Standen, 1999: 143, citing Sampson, 1983). My body was ‘doing’ whiteness (c.f. Young, 1980) and at some point I became consciously aware of what, at the time, I imagined to be its waywardness: “*Who are I?*” But even as the body is governed, shaped and disciplined by discourses, it seems to me that there always remains an element of the unpredictable in the way the body may interact with other bodies, its surroundings and even the discursive realm. Grosz (1994: xi) agrees: “Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable...” As such, they are vessels of hope.

Phenomenology also throws light on the nature and centrality of subjective experience. What the phenomenological tradition does, by means of so-called phenomenological reduction (where all that can be doubted is cancelled or excluded; *existence* is ultimately placed in doubt), is place subjective experience at the centre of enquiry. As Stein (1964: 4) explains: “But what I cannot exclude, what is not subject to doubt, is *my experience of the thing* (the perception, memory, or other kind of grasping) together with its correlate, the full “phenomenon of the thing” (the object given as the same in series of diverse perceptions or memories [emphasis added].”

For me, the appeal of at least a cursory nod to approaches in addition to social constructionism, such as phenomenology and the psycho-social approach (which, incidentally, can be viewed as being situated within the social constructionist paradigm), is that they acknowledge that despite powerful prevailing discourses, people within given contexts can, and often do, act in unanticipated ways. Even Foucault considers the question of the individual as “creative agent” in his later work (Layder, 2006: 125). Actions and narratives are also saturated with inconsistencies and ironies that can seldom be satisfactorily be accounted for by merely appealing to *Discourse*. The question of individual human agency remains; the challenge of making allowance for the *constituted* as well as the *constituting* self (Layder, 2006: 135). If subjective change is in fact necessary for political change, how is such change possible? Does it entail substituting discourses with other, more desirable discourses? But then, where do discourses come from? Are they not generated, reiterated, cemented, but also challenged and disrupted by human beings? Henriques et al (2002a: 431) are adamant that subjective transformation (or what they call “consciousness-changing”)

is not accomplished by new discourses replacing old ones. It is accomplished as a result of the contradictions in our positioning, desires and practices – and thus in our subjectivities – which result from the coexistence of the old and the new. Every relation and every practice to some extent articulates such contradictions and therefore is a site of potential change as much as it is a site of reproduction.

So in what ways are the concerns of social constructionism, specifically the emphasis on discourse, useful? For Henriques and colleagues (2002a: 429), discourses “make available positions for subjects to take up” while Layder (2006: 135) explains that a Foucaultian approach allows for the establishment of “the general social parameters of meaning.” In other words, while discourses constructs “general social parameters of meaning” (Layder, 2006: 135) in which subjectivities are situated, a nuanced understanding of subjectivity will not be gained by appealing purely to ‘discourse’. Subjectivity is not reducible to discourse(s).

Lived experience

Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself – must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know...In like manner, all public facts are to be individualized, all private facts are to be generalized.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (cited in McKinney, 2005: 5)

In the previous chapter I cited Wendy Hollway (1994: 9), who speaks to the entanglement(s) of living and researching when she writes that, in addition to the more standard practices associated with the research process (e.g. surveying possibly relevant literature) she was, by virtue of being a woman who found herself in a heterosexual relationship, “also living the problem.” What this suggests is a possible conception and application – not fledged out here – of lived experience as both theory and method. What follows is a brief attempt to make retrospective sense of what, in academic parlance, one would call questions of methodology and epistemology. For what I was not conscious of at the time, was that my own experience of living in the town and my felt awareness of undergoing what I imagined at the time to be a felt subjective shift to benevolent whiteness (whiteness as goodness), would come to guide the particular focus of this thesis. In attempting to convey here something of lived experience (perhaps more accurately and problematically, *memories* and *evaluations* of lived experience; *a* staging of lived experience) while trying to adhere to some of the technical requirements of an academic thesis. A central requirement is that one takes theory into account; whether by submitting to some theoretical paradigm or other, or formulating new or revised theoretical proposition. Bauman (2003: 99-100) calls this “the ethereal world of theory, in which the tangled and intertwined contents of human lifeworlds are first ‘straightened up’ and then filed and boxed, for the sake of clarity, each in its own compartment.” Again, the trope of entanglement, and efforts at disentanglement, comes to mind.

Looking back, I can identify two experiences that alerted me to the *investment* in a notion of whiteness as goodness or benevolence, as well as my own investment in the subject position of the ‘good, benevolent white’. One was an encounter with a poem (one of the epigraphs to this

thesis), and the poet Ronelda Kamfer's powerful and critical voice. The other was a sudden, embodied *awareness* of 'white benevolence'; my own investment in white benevolence crystallising into consciousness through being *felt*. I cannot recall which came first, and I do not know the extent that the encounter with the counter-discourse located in the poem and the embodied experiences informed each other. The question of causality would be relevant had I more theoretical objectives, but my aim here is to illustrate ways in which subjectivity can be said to be relational and situated. In writing about this aspect of my research – the manner in which the focus of this thesis became intelligible in and through my own lived experience – I also hope to illustrate that academic research and writing is “grounded, contextual, and rhizomatic” (Richardson, 2000: 931).

In the first chapter I recount the moment in childhood where I performed the “white madam in the making.” Writing about white identity, McKinney (2005: 9-10) speculates that young people might be more awake to shifts in white identity, being “more exposed to different societal events and discourses than their parents and grandparents were” and that, subsequently, “they have different resources for the construction of everyday whiteness.” To this I might add that in the years since that incident from my childhood, I have laboured to achieve a liberal, critical, non-racist politics. Aspects of my life started to reflect this. I had come a long way from the “white madam in the making.”

In the previous chapter I also mentioned how in my field notes I expressed both discomfort and resentment over what I experienced as expectations of beneficence, and how this drew attention to my own whiteness: it made me *feel* white. An example from the field notes:

“Hoe lyk dit met ‘n five bop [fifty cents]?” The distance (what and where are the contours of this distance?). Reasserted. There again. Still. But this experience of this distance is mine. The irritation and resentment often felt when I feel I’m being cast in the role of the benefactor before all else; by those that ask, by history, by the present, by convention, by this place: I am white. But the undeniable fact: I have a “five bop” to spare. I have many “five bops” to spare. And not forgetting the extent and ways that I cast myself as benefactor; how I imagine myself as benefactor (again perhaps, before all else).

I am relieved to detect some traces of a critical orientation in the above: I recognise the extent that I cast myself as benefactor, suggesting that there is perhaps something to be gained from this role or, as I will later term it, position. But this isn't the whole story. And this was still at the beginning of my stay.

Gina

This is what happened as I started settling into life in the town.

Sometimes my voice changed, as did my physical bearing.

These changes would be most noticeable when I spoke with poorer, coloured or black residents of the town. This might not have been noticeable to anyone but me. I do not know.

I could feel my voice taking on a different colour. Perhaps a little warmer. I could hear an unfamiliar confidence and authority. How does one explain how it feels when, talking to or listening to someone, one feels one's inner posture shifting, upwards, outwards? A calm certainty. I imagine a confident mother would feel like this. I imagine I would feel like this if I were to become a mother.

In *The End of the Affair*, Graham Greene writes: "If one could believe in God, would he fill the desert?" I wrote this in my field notes.

In this town, I could and would believe in God. My belief was fervent. I would be virtuous. I would believe in God.

No more cursing. No more drinking. I would set an example.

One morning, at a funeral, a coloured woman I barely knew came up to me. She was whimpering and clinging to my arm. There was alcohol on her breath. She kept apologising, and promised she would try to quit the bottle. “*My liewe mens...* My dear person,” I said.

How I felt.

How *it* felt.

Confidence... self-control... concern: characteristics all of a sudden experienced as somehow connected to (my) whiteness.

How does whiteness feel? I am unable to capture these sensations in words but sitting here, writing, I can recall the feeling. It is a feeling that overflows performance and discursive practices. Performances and discursive practices can be seen, heard and read. They can be subjected to analysis. No doubt I’ve been performing and speaking whiteness to varying degrees my entire life. But in this town, for the first time, I recognised it as such. For the first time, I felt the *sensation* of it. Or more accurately: for the first time I was able to name this sensation.

How does it feel to be the white madam?

Nooi. Kleinnooi.

I struggle to find the words to capture the sensation but I am able to compile an inventory of what a person who feels herself to be a *nooi/kleinnooi* might do. Such a person might, for instance, suppose herself to enjoy an unchallenged right of way; the right and ability to enter black and coloured people’s homes unannounced even as she exhibits a deep deference when visiting the homes of white people, being careful to follow the social etiquette of making appointments and such. I am writing of myself here, but, echoing this, one participant, a middle-aged white woman, said the following during her interview:

NELIA: “Em, no I don’t know of a place where I wouldn’t want to come at all. No! I, I come a lot in the, in Mziwabantu and in the coloured location. I’m completely at ease and everyone let’s me you know, everyone lets me feel comfortable and I go and visit my *ousie* [maid] who worked for me for years here, go and say hello to her in her house, then she gets mad at me because I should have phoned first so she’d be able to clean [i.e. tidy her house] (*laughs*), but I don’t phone so that she can be happy...”

There are other examples too.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER THREE

A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF WHITE BENEVOLENCE/BENEVOLENT WHITENESS

“Expressions of maternalism that were related to me included giving gifts, the loaning of money, explaining bills, demanding to meet and approve friends, making business calls for the employee, making travel arrangements for her and (in the South) interceding on her behalf with the legal system. Because the giving of gifts – especially old clothes – has been an integral part of the domestic service experience all over the world and because it persists today as one of the unique “benefits” of household work, a closer examination of this phenomenon, this ubiquitous expression of maternalism, is considered appropriate.”

(Rollins, 1993: 343)

Listening to nostalgic accounts of the apartheid past

I have attempted to convey something of my own increased investment in what I call ‘white benevolence’ while I was living in the town. No doubt, listening to accounts by black and coloured residents which positioned whites as benefactors, for instance, or spoke nostalgically of the past, had an uncomfortable effect on me. On the one hand, I was deeply unsettled by what I heard: I had not heard such favourable evaluations of the past from people other than whites. On the other hand, I now see that it must have had an effect on my own subjectivity and self-perception: I, too, am white. So what does it mean when I hear this? And what would the appropriate response to such accounts be? And how should I re-present such accounts? Which gives rise to a broader question: how are whites in general, and more particularly, in this town, affected by such accounts; do they play a part in eliciting and encouraging such accounts; and, ultimately, what should *they* make of them?

To illustrate the kind of nostalgic account of the past I frequently heard, I re-produce a portion of the interview of Sara. Sara is a middle-aged Afrikaans-speaking woman who works in the town's library. Her father was Griqua, and she was classified as 'African' by the apartheid's notoriously arbitrary racial classification system. For Sara, this meant that she had to be sent away to Kimberley in order to attend school. However, throughout her interview it is clear that she identifies herself more as a coloured person, frequently talking about "ons bruin mense" (we, the coloured people). Sara spoke of her exhaustion and longing for early retirement, and reminded me that she had been working ever since she was 11 years old. She grew up on a farm, where, as child she worked in the kitchen and looked after the white farmer's children.

At the time of the interview she could boast that she was the only woman in the town who owned land and was also the chairperson of the local emerging farmer association. At one point, she also held a senior position in the local, ruling ANC. But at one point during her interview, Sara provided a startlingly nostalgic account of the apartheid past, and especially of the white "nooi" or madam on the farm. Hers was not the only nostalgic account of apartheid by black and coloured participants. Positive evaluations of the past were also often communicated to me in casual conversations. This was especially true for the town's older, coloured residents.⁹ But I chose to re-produce the relevant portion of Sara's interview because it reads especially perplexing in light of her many personal successes under the new, democratic dispensation. It also speaks cogently to the subject of this thesis.

I thought long and hard about re-producing this portion of Sara's narrative. It was difficult to listen to, and at the back of my mind I imagined a long line of older, white female relatives nodding in agreement: "See, we told you that's how it was." One could certainly argue that I am re-presenting a distorted view of the past that cast white South Africans in a more favourable light; a kind of absolution or defence. The possibility of my own complicity in eliciting this kind of narrative should also not be overlooked. Was there perhaps a sense that there was an expectation on my part to hear more positive evaluations of white people and the past? Are more honest, and more critical, evaluations uttered quietly, in private? Was I told what, on some level,

⁹ I do not interrogate the reasons for this here.

I perhaps wanted to hear? Goffman (cited in Rollins, 1993: 336) defines deference as a ceremonial activity “which functions as a symbolic means by which appreciation is regularly conveyed to a recipient.” While deference can be enacted symmetrically, i.e. between status equals, it is more often than not at play between non-equals, “[confirming] the inequality and each party’s position in the relationship to the other” (Rollins, 1993: 336). Rollins (1993: 336) found in her interviews with domestic workers that it was “fully understood that the deferential performance was an integral part of the job expectations of their work.” There is no way for me to know whether Sara’s narrative perhaps a calculated, conscious expression of deference to the white madam; or whether it was perhaps deference expressed unconsciously, habitually. Perhaps it was neither.

I thought of Sara and other residents’ positive evaluations of the apartheid past by black and coloured residents as I read Jacob Dlamini’s *Native Nostalgia* (2009). Dlamini (2009: 6) writes that “it is both illuminating and unsettling to hear ordinary South Africans cast their memories of the past in such a nostalgic frame.” It is unsettling, he claims, because it undercuts attempts to construct a master narrative of apartheid and shows that there is no single, agreed-upon meaning and evaluation of the past. Admittedly, I did not come across an account in Dlamini’s book that read quite as startlingly for me as Sara’s. But it is clear that black people’s experiences of their towns or townships, of relationships forged, of their lives, were marked by ambiguities and contradictions that resist straight-jacketing. Dlamini (2009: 12) suggests that these narratives be taken seriously “as one possible way through which we can understand the past and contemporary South Africa. The sentiments confirm that people’s lives have changed – though not in the way often imagined.” Dlamini (2009: 13) also stresses that to raise the question of what it means “for a black South African to remember life under apartheid with fondness” is not to be an apartheid apologist: “Only lazy thinkers would take these questions to mean support for apartheid. Apartheid was without virtue.”

However, as I’ve already mentioned, Sara’s account raises additional questions. For one thing, she presents an account of white benevolence quite similar to what one might here from especially older whites in South Africa (read, for instance, against the extract from Gerda and Amanda’s interview which follow). What are some of the possible implications of whites like

myself hearing accounts such as this, which seem to confirm our self-perception as good, benevolent whites? Writing of “White Talk” in the New South Africa, Steyn and Foster (2008: 33) observe that a distortion of the past is a characteristic of White Talk: “The words give away the covert belief that things were actually more ‘normal’, perhaps even better, in the old white dispensation.” But what does it mean when that which would otherwise be labelled as an example of White Talk, is uttered by a black or coloured person? And this, in turn, elicits more questions. Is Sara an example of what Fanon (2004) called the “colonised mind”? Does she exhibit white ignorance which, Mills (2007) posits, can be manifested by “blacks...also”? And even if so, can she, should she, be reduced to such a reading? Or is there something else that might be gleaned from accounts such as Sara’s?

- *Sara*

SARA: Yes I often cry, as I’ve said, over those things that I [...] in those days... but a white person hasn’t done anything like that to me yet, that I can say was wrong, or that we – we always lived as a family. During apartheid white and brown [coloured] were like family. Now that family-ness is, is being taken out ... I now look at those years my late mother spoke of, when she was a child. They had the measles. My mother said when they were so sick, the *nooi* came all the way from her house, then she came, then she came and helped here, INTO the brown [coloured] house. Then she came and helped there, the little children who were sick... she comes and gives medicine, she comes and gives... What white woman still comes in a brown woman’s house?

GINA: Why do you think that is? That it has cha-

SARA: [interrupts] They’ve been... people who, the people who, look the elections and stuff and those decisions were made in the cities. Do you see? That’s where it was decided that apartheid must out ... THERE in the big towns. And they don’t KNOW what goes on HERE. HERE we lived very close [to each other]. NOW the people are rather like enemies. When you listen you hear a murder has been committed on a farm... Now THOSE things ... The white woman isn’t free anymore to just come and walk in the location and to ask, or to walk up to the *stroom*s on the farm. He’s [she’s] too UNCERTAIN. As soon as I tell her I’m an ANC, then she knows of course: Here’s danger now. ALL he [she] sees and hears on the television, she knows it’s going to happen on his [her] farm too because I’m also one. See? Now it takes him [her] out. And he [she] has a reason to be scared. The days when there weren’t these names – when we didn’t have that the one is a NP, the other one is a that – in those days, when it was the NP and the whites alone voted, you didn’t hear these things in the street. We didn’t even KNOW of a Mandela. Do you know when I heard of Mandela when he had to get out: Who’s this Mandela? From where...? That’s the way we didn’t know of politics on the farm. But do you know it is said these things were hidden from us and that it [wasn’t] right. But to me it was right. Because for the sake of our souls – where would we have been today? How would we have been able to believe in the Lord if we had to sit with that fear on a farm of a Mandela and we had to hear he is that type of person and when we came and heard of him in the town. From one you hear he’s a communist. Now how should I know what’s a communist? For me it’s a thing that hurts, it’s a killing-, a person who kills. Perhaps I didn’t understand the word correctly; I don’t know what it means you know ... You know, we are so scared. We want to be here among the farmers, among the white people, because those are the people who protected us all those years and now you hear no, you must [...] black... We didn’t even know what colour we were because THAT’s the way we were there. When we went to work

tomorrow we could go and say “*Kleinnooi*, my child is sick...” “Let me give him this little disprin” or “let me give him this” or “let me give him this” – THAT’s how we lived. Now a thing has come between us which stands like a WEAPON. ANC. Now we have been separated from each other. THAT *lekker* life, THAT praying together...¹⁰

Sara evokes the trope of the family to describe relations between white and coloured people during apartheid. Crucially, she draws a distinction between what she regards as the familial warmth and closeness – the proximity – which characterised white-coloured relations in the past, and what, in the post-apartheid present, she experiences as distance and fear-induced aloofness. The stories she tells to support her evaluation of past and present, are ones I am well-acquainted with (I have been told these stories throughout my life): of the white woman entering the black or coloured workers home with medicine; of the morning or evening Bible study and prayers in the ‘white’ drawing room or kitchen. In contrast to more conventional apartheid narratives’ accounts of the racialization and segregation of space, for Sara ‘black’ or ‘coloured’ spaces were accessible to whites: the white woman was “free” to walk in the “location” or to the homes of coloured and black workers on the farm [the “*stroom*”].¹¹ “What white woman still comes in a brown woman’s house?” she asks.

For Sara, a prior intimacy has been lost. This intimacy, Sara implies, is the province of small towns: it was in the big cities that the terms of democracy were decided and it was democracy

¹⁰ Sara continues: “I can still remember nine o’clock, the whites loved it a lot, at about ten o’ clock we are all called together – the house servants – and then the *nooi* sits there and she reads from the Bible and she asks us to pray. So we just say the Lord’s Prayer and the *nooi* prays. Now I know those days we didn’t really know how to talk to the Lord, you just hear from the *nooi*: “Hey, this is what the Lord is like” and yes it’s the same thing I heard from Mother, because Mother also heard from the *kleinnooi*. The men are working – it’s sheep-work and it’s [unclear] – but the *nooi* taught us. Mother was taught how to read and write. Who taught me mother how to read? Mother didn’t attend school. The *nooi* taught me, old Lisa, to read and write.

GINA: You’re talking now of “*nooi*” and “*kleinnooi*”... the other day we sort of talked about that a little [**SARA** laughs]

SARA: Yes well, you don’t understand it but still it’s, those days he [she] was called “*nooi*.” And it is because of THIS *nooi* that today we are what we are. He [she] also just told us what the Lord says: what are you supposed to do? What shouldn’t you be like? And we could also, those years you could also still take your mug and she gave you coffee, she gives you something, if there’s something that is nice... those years we could get a little piece of cheese while these days you don’t even have money to buy cheese. But THOSE years we could know you could get a bit of jam on your bread, butter on your bread, and cheese.”

¹¹ Here it is very important to point out that Sara’s evaluation of past and present is by no means shared by all residents. In a complete reversal, James, a black man and the town’s police inspector, said the following in answer to the question about post-apartheid changes in the town: “Many many many things have changed. We have better, we can now have houses in the town. You [i.e. Gina, a white person] can come and live here. Or you can go and live in M***** [the historically black neighbourhood] if you feel like it... You can walk free- freely in M*****. You can walk freely here in the in the here at the pumpkins [the “*Skema*”], which wasn’t the case in the past.”

and the resulting shift in power – the assumption of the ANC – which has brought division, standing between people “like a weapon.” The image could not be more powerful. Even imposed ignorance, compounded by the remoteness of the rural setting, is viewed favourably: Sara might not have known about Mandela, but this ignorance is construed as having been for “the sake of [their] souls.” So for Sara then, democracy (specifically, her conception of democracy) is as antithetical to what is regarded as a superior concern: the affective bonds between people. In significant ways, there are echoes of what has been termed the feminist ethics of care. At the very least, Sara’s account requires a brief consideration of the implications of an ethics of care.

Elizabeth Spelman is correct in warning that an ethics of care runs the risk of overlooking and failing to address women’s mistreatment of women. She explains: “the effort by some feminists to delineate an “ethics of care,” as well as the struggle to get the role of emotions in human life taken seriously, paradoxically (but perhaps not so accidentally) has diverted our attention from the history of the lack of care of women for women and has almost precluded the possibility of our looking at anything but love and friendship in women’s emotional responses to one another.”

What I find interesting is the extent that women outside feminist academia – certainly those I interviewed, including Sara and, in the next section, the sisters Amanda and Gerda – also focus on, indeed *appeal* to, “love and friendship” in accounts of their relationships with other women, significantly with women of other ‘race’ groups. Proponents of an ethics of care might argue that a so-called ethics of justice fails to adequately take into account the nuances and complexities of relations between real people in real contexts, and the affective dimension of these relations. However, as Spelman (1991: 211) explains, “that some women in reflecting on their moral problems show care and a fine sense of complexity appreciative of context tells us nothing about who they think worthy of their care nor whose situation demands attention to details and whose does not.” Crucially, Spelman (1991: 211) notes that “there are forms of care that not only compatible with but in some contexts crucial to the maintenance of systematic inequalities among women.” Judith Rollins, author of *Between Women: Domestic and their Employers* (1985), addresses this in her work on the maternalism of white female employers towards black female domestic workers:

The maternalism dynamic is based on the assumption of a superordinate-subordinate relationship. While maternalism may protect and nurture, it also degrades and insults. The “caring” that is expressed in maternalism might range from an adult-to-child to a human-to-pet kind of caring but, by definition (and by the evidence presented by my data), it is not human-to-equal-human caring. The female employer, with her motherliness and protectiveness and generosity, is expressing in a distinctly feminine way her lack of respect for the domestic as an autonomous, adult employee.¹² While the female employer typically creates a more intimate relationship with a domestic than her male counterpart does, this should not be interpreted as meaning she values the human worth of the domestic any more highly than does the more impersonal male employer (Judith Rollins, 1993: 342; also cited by Spelman, 1991: 211).

Rollins’ central thesis is that it is precisely the very *personal* nature of the relationship between employer and domestic worker which allows for a particularly severe form of exploitation: exploitation “disguised as maternalism.” In fact, Rollins (1993: 335) calls the occupation of domestic work “more profoundly exploitive than other comparable occupations.” Rollins had found in her research of domestic work in the United States that employers consistently regarded the personalities of domestic workers and “the kinds of relationships the employers were able to establish with them [domestic workers]” to be central considerations in evaluations of work performance (Rollins, 1993: 335). She subsequently argues that employers derive ego and system-supporting psychological benefits from their relationships with domestic workers.

The positive self-representation of whiteness

Steyn (2004) calls whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa a “whiteness disgraced.” It was particularly the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which placed front and centre many uncomfortable truths about the Afrikaner people. Steyn (2004: 154) writes:

There is a strong need to preserve something of value, rehabilitate some element of Afrikaner idealism, rescue some aspect of the old faith in Afrikaner righteousness, not to

¹² I do not discuss the question of gender here. I suspect, however, that it is pertinent.

see everything that the Afrikaner stood for dismantled. The process of reconstructing a sense of self is therefore deeply bound up in the politics of memory and forgetting.

But while there “is certainly an element of shame and guilt – of disgrace – that attaches to the social positioning of the Afrikaner” (Steyn, 2004: 150) and, arguably to a lesser extent, other white South Afrikaners, it is often remarked – especially by authors reflecting on the question of apology, forgiveness and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa – that white South Africans tend to deny charges of culpability for apartheid and seldom express any kind of remorse. McPhail (2004: 395), for instance, writes of an “ideology of innocence among white South Africans.” Other authors have also remarked on this professed innocence and moral evasiveness of white South Africans. Here it is interesting to take note of five white South African narratives – “a range of *petit* narratives” (Steyn, 2001: 151) – at play alongside the master narrative of whiteness. Among them is the narrative Steyn calls “*A Whiter Shade of White*,” told by whites who present themselves as un-raced or raceless, and who attempt to disengage themselves discursively from purported group membership (Steyn 2001: 153). Steyn (2001: 153) calls this “a tale of evasion.”

There are obvious pay-offs in positioning oneself in relation to whiteness in this manner: by denying one’s whiteness, one presents oneself as innocent of the misdeeds, atrocities and exploitation carried out in the group’s name or in the group’s interest, even as one profits from one’s repudiated whiteness. This “tale of evasion” is ultimately an evasion of accountability and self-censure. Interestingly, the “tale of evasion” overlaps with Frankenberg’s (1993: 14) identification of a dominant discourse in the United States which propounds “sameness” or “colour-blindness”, a discourse she calls “colour evasiveness” and, accordingly, “power evasiveness.” That there would be intersections between South African and American formations of whiteness is hardly surprising. Indeed, Steyn and Foster (2008: 28) posit that with the demise of apartheid, “the local formation of whiteness has been reconnection to mainstream whitenesses” and, as such, “has to conform to the international injunction against openly prejudiced discourse.”

However, what I am interested in is a particular inflection of whiteness, one which equates whiteness with goodness and, specifically, benevolence. While this sense of whiteness dominated in the town I write about here, it is by no means unique to this town or even South Africa (see for instance Reid, no date) who examines the equation of whiteness with goodness in the Australian context). Among white research participants interviewed for this study, there was a particular effort to present themselves as good and benevolent, and to show demonstrate that they were not “racist” because they “looked after” their black and coloured employees. This is in line with a long history of white paternalism and maternalism in South Africa.¹³ Giliomee (2003: 49) makes an interesting, and I think accurate, observation when, describing the nature of paternalism in the old Cape Colony, he writes that paternalism functioned to justify slavery not to the slave but to the master “and to boost the master’s own self-respect.” By perceiving and presenting themselves as caring, virtuous and benevolent and of acting in the best interest of the slave (even the severest punishment and restrictions could be construed as being in the supposed interest of slaves), the white masters and madams of the Colony were able to maintain a comfortable and relatively stable positive self-image which, in turn, allowed for the continued, unchallenged exploitation on a systemic scale. Giliomee (2003: 49) also observes that the notion of an “extended ‘family’” was cemented in the ritual of joint worship (see the extract from Sara’s interview): “In the master’s mind the action of inviting the slave briefly into the inner sanctum of his family demonstrated his benign and moral intent. This ‘benevolence’ was a counterpoint to the violence inflicted on erring servants, and it boosted the burgers’ belief in themselves as Christian colonisers of the land.”

What interests me, then, is the extent that this investment in a certain conception of whiteness – in line with what Dyer (1997) calls the “moral symbolism” of whiteness – as goodness and benevolence in relation to especially black and coloured workers or employees, *persists* in certain pockets of the country, and the extent that such an investment has taken on a new impetus and logic in the new South Africa: it has become a means of defending an anxious, uncertain

¹³ Rollins makes what I think is an important and useful conceptual distinction between paternalism and maternalism, pointing out that the two terms connote different meanings which reflect the persistent differentiation of gender roles in the West (Rollins, 1993: 340). While paternalism is suggestive of “the exchange of patriarchal protections for service and loyalty,” maternalism is suggestive of “women’s supportive intrafamilial roles of nurturing, loving, and attending to affective needs” (Rollins, 1993: 340).

white subject from allegations of racism and the moral depravity associated with apartheid. Working in a psycho-social paradigm, Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 169) write that “subjects are motivated *not* to know certain aspects of themselves and that they *produce* biographical accounts which avoid such knowledge.” It is useful to consider this observation alongside Charles Mills’ notion of the ‘racial contract’ and the ignorance it produces among its adherents. Mills (1997: 93 & 94) argues that the racial contract constructs “a *racialized* moral psychology” or “racialized ethic” where whites “act in racist ways *while* thinking of themselves as acting morally.” [emphasis in original] Mills (1997: 93) continues: “In other words, they will experience genuine cognitive difficulties in recognizing certain behaviour patterns *as* racist...” For Mills (cited in McPhail, 2004: 397),

“white misunderstandings, misrepresentations, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonisation, and enslavement.”

A psychoanalytical perspective supports this in a more general sense, holding that we are motivated to be ignorant about aspects of ourselves which undermine the subject positions we are invested in, and that we will undertake to defend and preserve these subject positions. Here it is also useful to make brief mention of Rom Harré’s view of the place of norms and conventions in managing social action (Burkitt, 1999: 73). Harré posits that people live in two orders: the practical (“causal forces of nature and the more mundane aspects of work”) and the expressive, which he regards as the more dominant of the two (Burkitt, 1993: 73). Burkitt (1993: 73) explains that the “expressive order is a conventional rather than a causal one, meaning that it is governed by social conventions and moral rules through which individuals present themselves as the kind of people worthy of respect within that local moral order.” May (2003: 300), meanwhile, writes that people do not provide accounts of their actions for merely descriptive purposes, but also to justify their position within a given moral order. “Accounts need to have a legitimacy among an audience” (May, 2003: 300).

Accounts which hold that post-apartheid intergroup relations are in a good state and appeal to examples of white benevolence to support such a position, has a particular traction or “legitimacy” among the local audience. In what is today called the Northern Cape, as in other agricultural regions of the country, there is a long history of white paternalism and maternalism, where the boundaries between subjugation and exploitation on the one hand, and the (momentary) relief of want, and expressions of love and care on the other, are seldom clear-cut. This is the stuff of entanglement. Of the history of paternalism in the Western Cape, Du Toit (2004: 993) writes that the mutual dependence between the white landed elite and black labourers shaped the identities of both groups; subjectivities produced by a particular kind of relationality. What if the kind of white subjectivity or identity produced in the context of paternalism and maternalism is one in which the white subject is heavily invested?

Investing in the subject position of the ‘benevolent white’

In the Social Sciences and the Humanities, there has been a growing emphasis on the significance of how people narrate their lives. Rosenwald and Ochberg (cited in McKinney, 2005: 6) explains:

How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience – all shape what individuals can claim of their lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned.

The authors cited above use the term “stance” but, drawing on positioning theory, I opt for the term “position.” We position ourselves in narratives and, in doing so, also position others. In fact, a position is intelligible only by virtue of being positioned *in relation to* some other thing (or some other ‘one’). The concept of positioning is thus also useful insofar as it points to a fundamental relationality which is central to the formation of our subjectivities and the ability of our actions to be meaningful. Gergen (1987: 62) simply, but lucidly, illustrate how meaning or intelligibility is produced in relation:

“We speak of persons as having motives, beliefs, understandings, plans and so on, as if these are properties of individual selves. However, if my arm is positioned above my head there is little that may be said about me as an individual. I am merely a spatio-temporal configuration. In contrast, if another person were before me, crouching and grimacing, suddenly it is possible to speak of me aggressive, oppressive, or ruthless. In contrast, if the other person were a child standing on tiptoes, arms outstretched, his ball lodged in a tree above my head, it would be possible to characterize me as helpful or paternal....there is little that may be said of me – to characterize myself – until the relational context is articulated. Similarly, the other person’s movements have little bearing on our language of understanding until they are seen within the context of my own. In effect, what we acquire as individualized characteristics – our aggressiveness, playfulness, altruism and the like – are primarily products of the joint configuration. They are derivatives of the whole.”

May (2003: 301) echoes something of this when he writes that while identities may be stabilised in a host of ways (the example he uses is slavery’s violence and exclusion), identities are constructed dialogically, “within dialogic conditions.”

Wendy Hollway is generally credited with introducing the concepts of ‘position’ and ‘positioning’ in the way employed here (see e.g. Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999: 16). In her work on the construction of gendered subjectivities in the context of heterosexual relations, Hollway (1998[1984]: 228) observes that men and women take up different positions in discourses on sexuality, and that gendered subjectivities are “[products] of [men and women’s] history of positioning in discourses.” ‘Positioning’ denotes greater fluidity than the comparable, but more fixed, concept of ‘role’ (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999: 14 & 17). There *can* in other words be inconsistencies and contradictions in our narratives, because we are able to position ourselves in a myriad of ways, even within single storylines. In fact, inconsistencies and contradictions become very likely. Crucially, Hollway makes the observation that subjectivities are not static but continually re-produced. This continual practice of subjective re-production also allows for subjective shifts and changes, because to re-produce is not necessarily only to re-iterate but also to potentially re-make, or to make different.

I am not interested in the finer, more technical aspects of positioning theory (for an explanation of, for instance, the ‘mutually determining triad’ of position/act-action/storyline, see Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Rather, using the interview of the sisters Amanda and Gerda as an example, I hope to illustrate how an appreciation of the way people position themselves and others in narratives may suggest the nature of the subjectivities people are invested in, and the motivations behind such investments.

- *Amanda and Gerda*

Amanda and Gerda are two elderly sisters who live in the town. Amanda is a widow whose late husband farmed close to the town. When he retired, and one of their sons took over the farming, they moved to the town. At the time of the interview, Gerda was married and the secretary of the town’s Dutch Reformed Church. The interview was conducted at Amanda’s home, in her living room over tea. I had only approached Amanda for an interview but she invited her sister to join the conversation. Theirs is a fascinating interview. They spoke in detail about their lives and personal histories, and from their interview one is able to gauge something of the networks, friendships and connections – the entanglements – on which the town turns. I am only reproducing a small portion of their interview here.

Although Amanda is the elder sister, Gerda was the more dominant during the conversation: she spoke with a great force and assuredness while and Amanda was more hesitant and soft-spoken and often turned to Gerda for affirmation or confirmation. There were few interventions on my part during the conversation and the sisters required little prompting. The question of whether relationship between groups had changed in the years since apartheid’s demise gave rise to a telling anecdote.

GINA: [...] how have relationships between people changed since 1994? Have they changed at all?

AMANDA: I would say they have changed. People’s feelings for each other (*pause*) I think they’re better. (*To Gerda*) I don’t know if you think so? People (*pause*) try (*pause*) to understand and try, em, (*pause*) I also don’t know if I’m perhaps speaking only for myself. I would say, I feel more patient, and I feel more em er sort of sorry and I feel, more tolerant and so on but it probably differs from person to person. (*pause*) I don’t know what you say [i.e. think]?

GERDA: Yes ag I think one (*pause*) I mean the word “apartheid” [*unclear*] is past although I always say I never saw apartheid as that I treated any one as if he, not we, no, the one who works for me is in Canaan (**AMANDA:** No, no me too) I have never, in fact I almost want to say my house people...

AMANDA: We’re **very** proud of our work-people and we, from both sides, we sacrifice, we do things for each other, we live together, we **share** together (**GINA:** Ja). I also see on the farm they have many privileges, they, they em, no it’s true.

GERDA: No oh I also think so. [...]

AMANDA: (*interrupts*) There are people who [...] maintain that graph on an equal level but there are people who perhaps **don’t** do it. One can’t [...] for everyone, speak for everyone but as far as I’m concerned we do what we can for our work-people and more than we can. Definitely.

GINA: Hm.

GERDA: No I think now [*unclear*]. We all went to Angus Buchan¹⁴ in Kimberley (**GINA:** Oh is it) and Tertius¹⁵ and I drove with Deon’s¹⁶ people. They were eight, nine. And we didn’t [...] a step without them, when we got there I wanted [...] them, I said “You sit here on the little pavilion”.... we had gotten there early. I thought the best place, you know, because we had taken *lekker* chairs. All the while the ministers and those things were sitting there, so (*laughingly*) they chased us away (*everyone laughs*). Then we left.

GINA: Did a lot of like minister also go?

GERDA: There was, there [...] a little pavilion

AMANDA: Probably the prominent, probably the prominent, Kimberley’s prominent people.

GERDA: Yes and mayor, no there were a couple of ministers and the may- he er they spoke there, you know, also welcomed them there but I made a fool of myself there (*everyone laughs*) and then I wanted to give them the best place and here sits the mayor, but at that stage it was still **empty** there. And er, no *ag* no we [...] them and Deon taps his blood for his people. We took them and afterwards we went to the Spar¹⁷ for them and they bought themselves a little food and er [*unclear*]. No he does for them he and there **were** actually farmers here er I told more than one person we’re going to drive with Deon’s *volk* [workers]. “And what will they understand? They can’t even speak English” – you know? – some of the people said. But I said, Deon said his people are going and er I mean they have an advantage over the others who weren’t there. Because those people, spiritually I think they, you just see from a person’s attitude, his conduct, you know [...]

Like Sara, Amanda evaluates post-apartheid intergroup relationships on affective grounds. The word ‘feel’ is used repeatedly and the ability to *feel for* the other is used as yardstick. Gerda then continues by shifting the attention to the domestic sphere. Apartheid (and its aftermath) is evaluated on the scale of domestic interactions: the nature of the relationship between white employer and black or coloured employees and, specifically, the *treatment of* black or coloured employees *by* white employers. Past and persistent structural violence, systemic racism and class

¹⁴ Angus Buchan is a Christian evangelist.

¹⁵ “Tertius” is a pseudonym.

¹⁶ “Deon” is a pseudonym.

¹⁷ The supermarket franchise.

inequality, which, to a large extent, continue to be raced, is not taken into account. Gerda remarks that her employees are “in Canaan,” the Biblical Promised Land, thus positioning herself as the ‘good madam’ who provides for her employees.

Amanda takes up the trope of the good madam, saying: “We’re very proud of our work-people...” This emphasises the maternal qualities of the good madam. Again, as in many of the interviews conducted in this town, the trope of togetherness is heard: “from both sides, we sacrifice, we do things for each other, we live together, we share together,” suggesting a possible re-positioning which is suggestive of interdependence rather than benefaction. However, this is immediately followed by the statement that on the farm “*they* [black and coloured workers] have many privileges.” This reasserts the hierarchical nature of the relationship: privileges are, after all, conferred, bestowed, awarded.

The subject position of the good – now also motherly – madam is fledged out in the narrative of the visit to the Angus Buchan gathering in Kimberley. Like a mother who would guide her children, Gerda recounts how she guided the group of farm workers when they had arrived at the stadium: “we didn’t [go] a step without them...I said “You sit here on the little pavilion...”” She then tells of the humorous moment when the pavilion where she had *told* the workers to sit, was in fact meant for dignitaries. This is meant to communicate that she “wanted the best” for the workers; again, like any mother would.

The workers are people who are *done to* and *done for*: they are taken to the Angus Buchan gathering, they are told where to sit, they are taken to the Spar so they can do shopping, it is decided that it would be in their interest to go to the gathering, that they “would have an advantage over the others who weren’t there” (the civilising mission of whiteness is, of course, evoked here). As positioned and represented in this narrative, the workers are people devoid of agency. They are the wards of others who know what is best for them, who have their best interests at heart, and who will take care of them.

What interests me here is not so much the contents of the story which, read against the backdrop of the town I am writing about, does not read all that surprising. Rather, I am interested in the

reasons why the initial question of how relationships between people in the town have changed since 1994 should elicit responses which, contrary to what Amanda and Gerda had perhaps intended, suggest that very little have in fact changed. White maternalism and paternalism, or white benevolence, continue to inform relations between white, black and coloured residents in the town; it continues to shape subjectivities. What is clear is that there is a heavy investment in the subject position of the benevolent white, that there is among whites in the town both a tendency and a need to present themselves as benevolent whites, in accordance with the moral logic and racialised ethic of the town. This subject position must be upheld – reiterated – for who are we if we are not the good, gentle, benevolent folk we believe ourselves to be?

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CHAPTER FOUR

TOWARDS A NEW RELATIONALITY

“We do not move from the pressure of engagement to freedom, but from one set of relational requirements to another.”

Kenneth Gergen (1997:216)

Baartman

There is a need on my part to conclude this thesis with a gesture towards a new kind of relationality, as suggested by one of the research participants: a relationality not held in place by a notion of benevolence, but by the recognition of mutuality; of interdependence; the recognition of the need to move “from one set of relational requirements to another.” A new kind of entanglement.

In doing this, I shift the focus from the domestic space of the kitchen, to the open spaces of the veldt, and the account given by the black emerging farmer, Baartman, about his relationship with the white commercial farmers of the district. Read in its totality, his account is not without inconsistencies and messiness: this is not a philosophical treatise. Fundamentally, it is a statement of the relationship between self and others, of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, within a context of historical inequality and exploitation, and efforts to attain equality and a better life. It is also about how we, as readers, may position Baartman, and how this may differ from the ways he positions and represents himself.

- *On the poetic re-presentation of interview data*

Chadwick and Foster (2005: 116) rightly point out that the poem “draws explicit attention to itself as a form that it necessarily and unavoidably selective and partial, which most other forms hide, conceal and obfuscate.” Richardson (2000: 933) makes a similar point, observing that because poetry draws the reader or listener into a realisation of the construction of the text, “poetry helps problematize reliability, validity, transparency and “truth”” as *all* texts – certainly not only poetry and definitely also the representation and writing-up of “data” – are constructed. Also, the poem “does not foreclose further readings” (Chadwick & Foster, 2005: 116). As such, the poetic representation of interview data is situated in a postmodernist paradigm.

While transcribing the Baartman’s interview, it struck me, towards the end, that he had begun speaking in a poetic cadence.¹⁸ So while it was not at the outset my intention to employ an alternative mode of representation, such as the poem, it felt almost *necessary* that I do so.

Baartman is a big man with a big, commanding voice. His talking is interspersed with bouts of laughter. The day following our interview, he drove me out to the veldt where he spoke at length about farming. He spoke about the challenges faced by emerging farmers but also of their many successes. He taught me about the soil (“die grond”) and about goats. He also imparted to me a new appreciation of the unremitting dedication which farming requires.

But first there was the interview, conducted in a room at the town’s library. Significantly, I did not consult the interview schedule during our conversation. For the most part, I remained a silent but attentive listener. At the outset of the interview I asked a couple of general questions about his personal history. He then proceeded to speak at length about his life. Towards the end of the conversation, as he discussed the relationship between himself as emerging farmer and the town’s (white) “commercial” farmers, it became evident that in order to re-present his voice (more) accurately, it would have to be represented poetically. The typology emerged without much deliberation: I followed his emphases and pauses, and, importantly, what follows is a

¹⁸ I’ve since been in agreement with Richardson (2000: 933) and Tedlock (1983), whom she cites, that when people talk “their speech is closer to poetry than it is to sociological prose.”

verbatim and unedited re-presentation of his words. Thus, unlike poetic re-presentations of interview data which aim to communicate the arc of an entire interview or narrative (see e.g. Chadwick 2001: 52), only the final portion of his interview (brought to a halt by a telephone call from a “commercial farmer”¹⁹) is re-presented here. But it is re-presented in its entirety with no deletions or additions on my part. I endeavoured to render visible – or render more visible – his ‘voice’, the rhythms of his speech, indeed the musicality of speech; his repetitions; perhaps not so much compelled to re-present interview data as re-present the research participant. This – nevertheless and necessarily – meant I had to take some interpretative liberties, for instance by emphasising certain words (either through italicisation or placement). So perhaps it is more accurate to then say that I felt compelled and attempted to make visible – readable – his voice *as I heard it*. This should be kept in mind. My ‘hearing’ is subject to criticism. As mentioned above, poetic modes of representation are “no more ‘selective’ or ‘partial’” than more traditional conventions (Chadwick & Foster, 2005: 116). This selectivity and partiality extends to *form* as much as to content.

- *Baartman’s Poem*

Baartman’s poem	Baartman’s poem
<p>Ons kommersiële boere hier... Hulle’t al vir my baie gehelp, hoor. Maar ons kan dit nog verbeter.</p>	<p>Our commercial farmers here... They’ve helped me a lot, you know. But we can still improve it.</p>
<p>Ek wil nie bakhand staan by hulle nie. Want ek <i>moenie</i>.</p>	<p>I don’t want to stand in front of them, hands cupped. Because I <i>mustn’t</i>.</p>
<p>Ek <i>moenie</i>.</p>	<p>I <i>mustn’t</i>.</p>
<p>Ek het die ander slag vir hulle gesê, vir hulle voorsitter, toe sê ek:</p>	<p>Once I told them, their chairperson, I said:</p>
<p>As julle wil skeer, julle wil julle wolklasse sort... Maak gebruik van ons opkomende boere. Wanneer daar gedose word, dat dit moet mos vinnig gaan...</p>	<p>When you want to shear, when you want your wool classed... Make use of us, the emerging farmers. When you’re dosing, and it has to go quickly...</p>

¹⁹ “*Baas* [Master] J****,” he said to the caller, “I’ve just been gossiping about you wonderful people here.” Listening to Baartman’s side of the exchange, I was by the odd interplay between the casual familiarity and parity suggested by his tone of voice, and that word – “*Baas*” – and all it denotes.

<p>Maak gebruik van ons opkomende boere. As daar windpompe is wat stukkend is vir julle... Maak gebruik van ons opkomende boere As daar bosse is wat julle wil laat steek in die veld, op 'n hoop gooi en uitbrand... Maak gebruik van ons opkomende boere. As daar drade is wat moet reggemaak word... Maak gebruik van ons opkomende boere. Watervalletjies in die sloot is waar die grond die veld spoel, wat moet gekeer word... Maak gebruik van ons opkomende boere.</p> <p>Ons sal nie julle geld vra (al die geld wat 'n gewone ou sal vra nie).</p> <p>En wat <i>ons</i> vir julle vra, is:</p> <p>As julle bemark... Dink aan ons. Want die lewe en al is nog altyd by julle. Nog altyd daar.</p> <p>Stelselmatig. Stelselmatig sal ons vorentoe kom.</p> <p>En <i>praat</i> met ons.</p> <p>Die kommersiële boere is ons <i>ver</i> voor. Baie baie baie baie ver.</p> <p>Ek het nou eendag gesê, toe sê ek: Met <i>my</i> twee hande kan ek <i>soveel</i> doen vir daai kommersiële boer.</p> <p>Maar hy kan ook net vir my soveel doen, met sy kennis.</p> <p>Maar <i>Ek</i> kan dit met my hande doen. Ek het die ervaring met my <i>hande</i>. Ek kan daai <i>grond</i> werk. Ek kan met daai <i>draad</i> werk. As sy bees, daai bees kan nie kalf voortbring nie... Ek kan hom help. Ek sien dit sommer met my oog. Hy't nie nodig om 'n veearts te gaan haal nie. Ek help hom. Ek help daai dier. Ek kan daai dier dose sonder dat hy so verstik. Inent. Noem op, wat alles.</p>	<p>Make use of us, the emerging farmers. When some of your windmills are broken... Make use of us, the emerging farmers. When there are bushes in the veldt that need to be thrown in a pile and burnt... Make use of us, the emerging farmers. When there are fences that need to be fixed... Make use of us, the emerging farmers. Little waterfalls in the furrow, flooding the veldt, which must be stopped... Make use of us, the emerging farmers.</p> <p>We won't ask money of you (all the money a regular guy would ask).</p> <p>And what <i>we</i> ask of you, is:</p> <p>When you're marketing... Think of us. Because the life and all is still over there with you. Still over there.</p> <p>Gradually. Gradually we will come forward.</p> <p>And <i>talk</i> to us.</p> <p>The commercial farmers are <i>far</i> ahead of us. Far far far far ahead.</p> <p>Just the other day I said: With <i>my</i> two hands I am able to do <i>so</i> much for that commercial farmer.</p> <p>But he is able to do just as much for me, with his knowledge.</p> <p>But <i>I</i> can do it with my hands. I have the experience with my <i>hands</i>. I can work that <i>land</i>. I can work with that <i>wire</i>. When his cow can't birth her calf... I can help her. My eyes are quick to see it. There is no need for him to go and fetch a vet. I help her. I help that animal. When I dose that animal, it doesn't choke. Inoculation. Name it, anything.</p>
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<p>Hier's 'n paar kommersiële boere hier om die dorp, wat ons begrens. Meneer R****, hier. B****, Meneer B****. Jissie! Oe! Ek is <i>mal</i> oor hom. Ek is mal oor hom.</p> <p>Meneer R**** van Rooidam... Hy't vir ons hier 'n stuk grond omgeploeg al. Kom daai man met sy trekter, en sy ploeg, en sy diesel, en sy man wat vir hom ploeg, en hy kom ploeg vir ons daai grond. Sonder aarsel.</p> <p>Ek het net die Here gevra om hom, vir hy en sy gesin, wonderlik te seën met alles alles alles wat hulle wil doen, en wat hulle moet doen.</p> <p>Hy't vir ons gehelp. Ons het nie daai goed nie.</p> <p>Hier's 'ok een wat 'n mentor is vir 'n ander groepietjie mense hier.. S*****. Ons het baie gestry en gebaklei, ek en hy. Maar o hene. Ons is. (<i>Ek praat van My</i>) Ek praat met hom soos ek vanmôre hier met jou praat. Dis vir my <i>lekker</i> om met hom te praat. En ek <i>weet</i> as ek met hom praat: hy luister. Al sê hy ook niks en daar gaan hy... Ek weet hy't <i>gehoor</i>.</p> <p><i>Daai</i> manne, as ek daar op De Aar kom – waarokal – dan bel hulle vir my: “Baartman, hier's so 'n probleem wat ons sien hier in jou veld in.”</p> <p>Die kommersiële boere. Die kommersiële boere.</p> <p>En wat doen dit aan my,</p>	<p>There are a couple of commercial farmers in the vicinity of the town bordering us. Mister R**** here. B****, Mister B****. Jissie! Oe! I am <i>crazy</i> about him. I am crazy about him.</p> <p>Mister R**** of Rooidam... Once he ploughed a piece of land for us. That man came with his tractor, and his plough, and his diesel, and the man who ploughs for him, and he came and ploughed that land for us. Without hesitation.</p> <p>I just asked the Lord to bless him, him and his family, wonderfully, with everything everything everything they want to do, and must do.</p> <p>He helped us. We don't have those things.</p> <p>There's also one who mentors another little group of people here... S*****. We argued a lot, and fought, him and I. But oh man. We are. (<i>I'm talking of myself</i>) I talk to him as I'm talking to you here this morning. I <i>enjoy</i> talking to him. And I know that when I talk to him, he listens. Even if he says nothing and off he goes... I know he's <i>heard</i>.</p> <p><i>Those</i> men, when I'm in De Aar – wherever – they phone me: “Baartman, we see a problem here in your veldt.”</p> <p>The commercial farmers. The commercial farmers.</p> <p>And what does it do to me,</p>
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as opkomende boer?	as emerging farmer?
Dit help my. Dit help my. Nie min nie. Bitter bitter baie.	It helps me. It helps me. Not a little. Very very much

I am tempted to leave Baartman’s words as they are; not to clutter them with clumsy attempts at analysis. However, I remember showing his poem to someone – a middle-aged, white woman – and being struck by how differently we read it. Where I read a declaration of agency and an appeal for white and black farmers to do the work of transformation together, she was saddened by the poem, expressed pity for Baartman, and was troubled by his repeated expressions of gratitude. Read in this manner it is a narrative of a black man’s dependence on white benevolence. Which leads me to ask: why do we sometimes position people as vulnerable and dependent even as they present themselves as agentic subjects? Even among those on the Left, I think, there is a tendency to want to position the subjects of our research as victims – as people worthy of our efforts and concern. In light of this, I want to draw the attention to some aspects of the poem.

Despite the fact that almost 17 years have passed since the advent of democracy in South Africa, stark inequalities remain in the agricultural sector and the pace of land reform has been disappointingly slow. Of all people, Baartman knows this: “...the life and all is still over there with you [the white farmers]” and the commercial farmers are “far ahead of us.” However, he positions himself and other emerging farmers not as stationary, but as steadily approaching: “Gradually, we will come forward” (it is interesting to listen to his voice as he says this: it is said almost reassuringly). He evokes the sensation of motion, the contraction of space, and eventual parity.

Throughout, emphasis is placed on joint effort and interdependence. While the poem starts with the acknowledgment of the help received from commercial farmers, he is quick to add a qualification: more can be done, and, importantly, he uses the plural “we.” Not only does he not *want* to engage with the commercial farmers with hands cupped (the Afrikaans expression *bakhand*, more suggestive than its English counterpart, generally has a negative connotation and

is suggestive of the action of a beggar) but he is insistent that he “*mustn’t*,” repeating this twice. As such, he positions himself in a way which runs counter to any efforts (whether wilful or not) to position him as dependent on and at the behest of the benevolence of the commercial farmers.

It is *he* who addresses the chairperson of the commercial farmers’ association, and asks of the farmers to “make use of” the services of the emerging farmers – mentioning that their services would be offered free of charge. As envisaged by Baartman, this does not constitute an exploitative relation. Rather, by suggesting that the emerging farmers would not ask for the money “a regular guy would ask” (note: the onus is on the emerging farmer to set, or wave, the fee). Baartman is envisaging a privileged relationship between the emerging and commercial farmers, the aim being to foster a relationship of greater interdependence, cooperation and exchange which will eventually see parity between the two groups of farmers.

The whole poem speaks to agency, movement and action, and is replete with verbs. In the stanza containing the poignant repetition of the phrase “Make use of us, the emerging farmers,” Baartman extols the knowledge and experience of the emerging farmers. In a later stanza, he speaks of his own knowledge and experience, which he locates in his hands and eyes and which makes even a veterinarian redundant. Again, however, there is a qualification: he is able to do a lot for the commercial farmer but, in return, he anticipates an exchange: the sharing of knowledge and experience. Importantly, Baartman does not privilege one kind of knowledge or expertise over the other. These are different but equitable epistemologies, and both are essential.

Perhaps Baartman’s expressions of affection and gratitude can be read as a kind of problematic deference. This might be true (see e.g. footnote 19). However, in failing to appreciate his expressions of agency and calls for a more equitable relationality based on interdependence rather than dependence, we position him – and, at the same time, ourselves – in a manner which keep past subjectivities in place. We fail to read the openings and cracks, new movements, and new potentialities.

Concluding thoughts

“The private kindness of one individual towards another; a petty, thoughtless kindness; an unwitnessed kindness.

Something we could call senseless kindness. A kindness outside any system or religious good...

Kindness is powerful only while it is powerless.”

Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate* (2006: 407-9)

A character in Vasily’s Grossman’s *Life and Fate* writes about being moved by, and longing for, expressions of human kindness which cannot be explained by appealing to “any system or religious good.” In the small Karoo town which was my home for almost eight months, great value is placed on actions and gestures which one might call “acts of kindness.” In the town, such “acts of kindness” are ubiquitous and the vigour of relationships (significantly, the nature of relationships between people from different ‘race’ groups) is often measured by people’s willingness to give to someone in need, to share and to make allowances. An example from the interviews:

GINA: Em, I asked if relationships between [unclear]

SUSAN: (interrupts) Yes, that’s why the relationships, yes. That’s why I will say there is a relationship and er **even** the black man too. The black man also gives. The black man also gives, when I’m embarrassed, then I go to the black man. I say to him “Man, help me with this. Tomorrow you’ll get your money.” And all the black man does, he helps me. Tomorrow I go again and give him his money back and so we build an understanding with each other and that’s how we get along with each other then.

[Woman who identifies as coloured (her father is black), caregiver at palliative care centre

The above quotation is from the interview of a woman who self-identifies as coloured. Yet, my focus here has been on what the self-representation of and investment in what I call *white* benevolence. What does white benevolence do? It confirms whiteness’ conviction in its own righteousness and generosity. It presents itself as a defence against charges of racist practices and prejudices. And, crucially, it keeps whiteness and white subjectivities in place. But Spelman (1991: 212) enjoins us to question “the contours and quality of our care for one another.” It is a reminder that an “ethics of care” should never be disentangled from an “ethics of justice,” that the one should not be privileged over the other; that they should keep each other in check.

Henriques et al (2002b: 464) write that “it is crucial to unpack the narratives and discourses that fuel our desire and anxiety to be the subjects that we are continually demanded to be; that we desire to be enjoined to choose to be.” In this thesis, I have tried to come to terms with my own investment in white benevolence. I have also pointed to the situatedness of subjectivity; how it was while living in a particular place, at a particular time, and among particular people that this investment came to light, and how it informed both the research process and what is written here.

In concluding, I return to Ronelda Kamfer’s poem...

dr. Metzler het gesê
my ouma se kinders *confuse* hom
hulle’t ’n *immorality* in hul oë
hy sê my ouma kan dankie sê
die laaste een is doodgebore

daai een se naam
sou Judas gewees het

University of Cape Town

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APPENDIX

Rural Transformation Project Interview Schedule

Interview guideline

Aims:

- How do people talk about their town? What is the story of the town?
- What are the burning/underlying/repressed issues on the town?
- How have these issues been racialized, if they have?

Suggested questions

Conduct a 5-10 minute **‘warm up’ discussion** with each person about their **biographical background**.

- Where were you born and raised?
 - Did you move away at any point?
 - What do you do for a living and how did that come about?
1. Tell me about this town. What is happening here?
 - What is it like to live here?
 - What do you like about living here?
 - What are the things that people complain about here?
 - What are the major problems here?
 2. Has anything changed in this town since 1994? If so, what has changed?
 - Do people like these changes?
 - How is this town coping with this change?
 3. Would you describe this town as a single community?
 - What are the groups in this town?

- Does everybody know each other here?
 - Who are the ones everybody knows?
 - Are some groups associated with certain parts of the town?
4. Have relationships between groups in this town changed in the last 15 years? If so, how?
5. Are you aware of groups in this town that dislike each other?
- Is there conflict in this town?
 - Are there friendships across different communities in this town?
6. Are things better or worse in this town than it was prior to 1994?
- In what ways?
 - Is this true for all parts of the town?
 - What is the most changed or transformed place in the town?
7. Can you tell me one or two stories that would illustrate some of the things we have spoken about transformation in XXXX?
8. What areas are included in your town? Please draw a red line around the town.
- Provide interviewees with a **local municipality map** and **red koki**
9. Mention 3 or 4 places in your town that you feel most /least comfortable in?
- Ask interviewees to mark these places with an X on the map provided. Allow them to label the map as they see fit.
 - Why do you feel comfortable/uncomfortable here?
 - Where do you never go? Why?
 - If you could change something about this place what would it be?
10. How town is connected to other places?

- What do you know about folks from places further down the road (coast, whatever is suitable).
- Do people visit those places?
- Is this small/rural town different to cities? In what way(s)?
- Do you think this is a small town? How would you define it?

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