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MA Coursework Research Report Proposal

Title

Mourning, linguistic improvisation and shared histories in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat.*

Aim

Deliberations over loss, trauma, mourning and memory dominate the South African post-apartheid literary landscape, most notably in Marlene van Niekerk's narrative wake for the pastoral, *Agaat*. Although this novel has enjoyed much critical acclaim locally and internationally, with suggestions that it is the quintessential post-apartheid novel and claims that it deserves the appellation of encyclopaedic novel in the hallowed company of Dante's *Inferno* and Joyce's *Ulysses,*[1] little academic study has focused in sufficient detail on the rituals of mourning and memory in the novel and on whether Van Niekerk's commemoration might offer, through the permeability of the co-constructed language of Milla and Agaat, the hint of a new dispensation, some creative potential, however distant, or a possible emancipation linked to an ability to encounter otherness.

It seems to be productive, then, to read the novel, which is centred around the bed/crypt of the dying Milla, as an examination of inheritance, haunting and mourning, both psychoanalytically, in the distorted relations between Milla and Agaat, and linguistically (and deconstructively) through the haunted language she and Agaat construct. Milla herself brings these strands together in her opening statement of chapter 1: "It'll be the end of me yet, getting communication going." (p.9)

Firstly, in my psychoanalytic investigation, I intend to consider the usefulness to a reading of *Agaat* of Freud's analysis of mourning and melancholia and of Abraham and Torok's extension of this, where the child (Agaat), internalises the secrets buried in discourses she hears, having a direct empathy with unconscious or denied material from the parental object (Milla). As such the child is the bearer of a phantom, a radically alien, uninvited other, buried within her unconscious. Agaat's task, might, from this perspective, be seen as putting unspeakable and silenced secrets into words (or perhaps other symbolic forms, like embroidery). This links to André Green's concept of the dead mother, which is "an imago in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate".[2] Consideration will also be given to Derrida's ghostly voices, the trans-generational spectres in every text that bear the undisclosed traumas of their predecessors. In this sense both Milla's diaries and the novel itself

[1] Rita Barnard, visiting Melon scholar to the University of the Witwatersrand, seminar on 10 August 2010
[2] Green in Kohon (1999: 2)

contain more than they know, the limitless traces of other words which lie beyond simple truth or falsehood.

Central to the task of understanding the process of mourning in the novel is close reading of the language Agaat and Milla invent to negotiate their histories through the re-iteration and appropriation of the diaries: a unique communication at once angry, vengeful, obsessive, compassionate and poignant. In the scholarly criticism on *Agaat* there appears to be a dearth of in-depth textual analysis on *Agaat.* This is understandable in a text that is both vast and many layered. My second broad aim is to offer such a reading of chapter 16, a seminal chapter where Agaat and Milla's attempts at communication are foregrounded.

In conclusion, or rather in speculation, I will attempt to unravel some of the implications of this interpersonal improvisation. Anticipatory areas of discussion include the question whether Milla's departure is the end of Agaat's trauma. With the loss of Agaat's internal support, is her mourning interminable? Is there a discovery of Levinas' proposition that love is as strong as death, that the discovery of the other's death matters more to one than one's own and that death is a relation with the other?[3] If Agaat and Milla's shared 'language' comes to terms with the past, is there a possibility of a new relationship, beyond the play of phantoms? Does the locus of power shift with Milla's death? Does the novel offer any kind of closure? Has Agaat 'written back' to Milla? Is there a Proustian sense of time regained as Agaat and Milla's experience is reworked and reworded? What spectres does the novel mourn? Is the psychoanalytic and deconstructive enquiry of chapter 16 enlightening in terms of the novel's preoccupations?

Rationale

"The beginning you never recorded...you forgot about it." (p.653) Memory and mourning are fundamental to *Agaat*, evidenced here in Milla's self-observation about the gaps in the diaries that are being read aloud. The importance of a thorough investigation of these tropes in the novel is overwhelming. That the history of apartheid South Africa is one scarred by trauma, inequality, brutal racism and abuse under the hegemony of the Afrikaner, speaks to the need for a revisiting of the past from diverse disciplines. That a writer of the eminence of Marlene van Niekerk writes partly from within the clan, as an Afrikaner, but an Afrikaner who explodes the abuse at the heart of Afrikanerdom, from within the pastoral novel, the 'plaasroman' itself, suggests that she is concerned with issues of commemoration and mourning that are central to an understanding of South Africa and its canon. The novel chronicles the intimate domestic narrative of the vicissitudes of power between Agaat, an abused child, once promised adoption into the white ruling family home, but later relegated to back-room servitude by the Afrikaner matriarch, Milla. It is staged at Milla's deathbed, in a slow, agonised and almost suspended wake-like recalling of the details of their relationship, in the form of Milla's diaries that Agaat exhumes and reads aloud. Van Niekerk positions the subaltern

[3] Levinas in Davis, p.117

subversively above the prone, paralysed and voiceless matriarch, dying of Lou Gherig's disease. Agaat reads the diaries back to Milla, ruthlessly and often vindictively editing, annotating and paraphrasing Milla's version of Agaat's life. Yet at this very site of the reassessment of the past and its implications for memory and inheritance, Van Niekerk appears to effect a poignancy and intermittent affection in the improvised communication between master and servant. This intricate shadow play points to the location of a potential space of opportunity, begging the question Van Niekerk poses: "Can a person with the tools of the master, break the master's house down?"[4]

Although a fine body of scholarship is developing around the novel, the tropes of mourning and memory are under-researched. I wish to demonstrate that the works of Freud, Abraham and Torok, Derrida and André Green illuminate some of the intricacies of the dance of death and commemoration witnessed in the novel. The length of the novel and its encyclopaedic nature may explain why little of the available scholarly work delves into specific passages. A close reading of chapter 16 will allow more detailed commentary on the intricate workings of Van Niekerk's prose.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic theories of mourning and their deconstructive applications

There is a wealth of psychoanalytic material from which to formulate a layered response to mourning, memory and linguistic responses in the novel. My investigation begins historically, with the works of **Sigmund Freud**, where I focus primarily on his paper, "On Mourning and Melancholia" (in Strachey, 1957: 243-260). Freud considers mourning to be a comprehensible and conscious reaction to loss which loses its traumatic force over time. Melancholia, however, occurs when the normal process of mourning is blocked, affect remains attached to the dead and the passing of time does not alleviate suffering. In this case the reaction is that of dejection, cessation of interest and inhibition of activity. Freudian psychoanalysis provided a new framework in the early Twentieth century for understanding the return of the dead. Of interest to my reading of *Agaat* is Freud's argument that the uncanny (*das Unheimliche)* comes about through the awakening of something familiar which has been repressed, although he does not sanction a belief in ghosts per se. This is modified in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), which speculates on the death drives and suggests that every subject is already inhabited by death. In a sense this opens the way for deconstructive readings or the notion of haunted subjects whose identity is founded on the death of the Other.

A modern study of the relation to the dead, what may be called hauntology, has two sources. **Jacques Derrida** coined the French word *hantologie* in *Spectres de Marx* (1993), replacing the ontology of being and presence with the spectre which is neither absent nor present, neither dead nor alive. It occupies a place similar to the Levinasian Other and suggests the slipperiness of the living present (Davis, 2007: pp. 8-9).

[4] Paris 2008, p.48

"Derrida's spectre is a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate" (Davis, p.11).The spectre cannot be conversed with; rather, it may open us up to the experience of secrecy or unknowing which underlies and undermines our understanding. This secrecy is the "structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not-yet formulated possibilities of the future" (Davis, p.13). The ghost cannot be articulated in language available to us and is not about a secret to be uncovered but about secrecy, or the structural enigma of writing". In Hélène Cixous' words, such texts "teach us how to die" because they show that "each of us... must do the work that consists of rethinking what is your death and my death, which are inseparable" (in Castriciano, p.18).

Fundamental to my argument will be Derrida's contention that Freud's withdrawal of attachments, in the work of mourning, involves an interiorising idealisation of the other where the body and voice of the other are ideally and quasi-literally devoured (in Castriciano, p.37). The conclusion, the interiorising idealisation is an assimilation, an introjection which expands the self. This differs from an incorporation where the lost object is not assimilated but sustained in some way. This sustaining of the object is what Castriciano calls 'cryptomimesis' and what Derrida sees as the possibility of the subject in the spacing of the crypt. The ramifications of cryptomimesis and possibilities for *Agaat* are of considerable complexity and will be examined within my research report, but it is evident that a novel staged around a deathbed, in a crypt-like setting and formulated around the re-telling of histories offers much room for speculative interpretations. Suffice it to say that the work of mourning requires a space to be made within the self so that the Other can be assimilated.

The other source of hauntology is the work of psychoanalysts **Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok**, particularly in the essays from *The Shell and the Kernel*, first published in 1978. They investigated the phenomenon of trans-generational communication, where undisclosed traumas of previous generations disturbed their descendants, particularly when these were ignorant of the traumas. For them, *phantoms* are the presence of dead ancestors in the living Ego, intent on keeping their secret. They may thus be seen as lacunae left inside us by the secrets of others. A difference in approach is that where Derrida might wonder whether every text had phantoms, there is an assignation of determinate meanings to identifiable secrets for Abraham and Torok. Theirs are lying phantoms, predicated on the unspeakability of shameful and prohibited secrets, not that they cannot be spoken; in fact, the phantoms should be dispelled from the psyche. They maintain that "The 'shadow of the object' strays endlessly around the crypt, until it is finally reincarnated in the person of the subject...This kind of identification is destined to remain concealed...Accordingly it remains behind a mask...The mechanism consists of exchanging one's own identity for a fantasmic identification with 'life' – beyond the grave – of [a lost] object of love" (1994: 141-142). The return of the deeply repressed consists of the return of a "phantom", an entity that might be that of an unsayable Other. Interestingly, the trope of the crypt/phantom resembles very closely what Freud terms repressed mourning, or melancholia.

Torok suggests that the phantom calls into question the notion of the integrity of the "I" as it "is alien to the subject who harbours it" (1994:181) and is haunted by the "living-

dead knowledge of *someone else's secret*" (1994:188). In Castriciano's words, the concept of the crypt "designates an intrapsychic topography which inexpressible mourning erects inside the subject as a secret tomb which houses the idealised dead other as living" (p. 36). Where the loss is maintained, incorporation is seen as anti-metaphorical because it maintains the loss as radically unnameable. Where the loss is devoured, an empty space is established, literalised by the empty mouth, which becomes the condition of speech and signification, to Abraham and Torok. Seen differently, this is the space "where the displacement of the libido from the lost object is achieved through the formation of words which both signify and displace the object" (Judith Butler in Castriciano, p.37). In the case of introjection, speaking replaces unspeakability; once the loss is objectified in speech there is a separation. A question central to my discussion of the reading of the diaries by Agaat, is whether this process resembles the devouring (introjection) or ingestion (incorporation) of Milla. I suspect that I shall find evidence of both phenomena. A further question is where a displacement of the libido from the lost object is possible, or actually happens.

Of particular significance to an analysis of Agaat's childhood abandonment by Milla when she is relegated to the back room and superceded by Jakkie, is the work of **André Green** (1986). The mother who has a lessened interest in her infant creates a responsibility in the child for "resuscitating the depressed, bereft or absent mother" (Gail White in Willock, p. 71). Resuscitation becomes the child's mission in life, so that finally all the child has is what he is missing, which Green calls "the negative sublime" (1986:147). In this scenario the absent mother becomes the graveyard of the subject. The solution to catastrophic object loss is a kind of blank psychosis, according to Green, and the child introjects maternal depression, what he terms the 'dead mother' syndrome. The dead mother "remains alive but [ ] is, so to speak, psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care" (1986:142). The vitality of the mother disappears and the blankness comes from the loss of meaning that occurs (Willock: 2007, p. 112). Green describes the decathexis of the maternal object as an act of "murder" although the primary object is killed "without hatred" (1986:151).

In Gregorio Kohon's analysis of Green's position, instead of an object that has been destroyed, there is now a psychic hole (1999:3). He explains that as the infant needs to survive a life without meaning, he/she might develop a "frantic need for play" and/or a "compulsion to think". The hole in the child's psychic world might be covered by a so-called "patched breast" (1986:152), and as such sublimation might produce outcomes of artistic creativity or productive intellectualisation, although the child might remain vulnerable in terms of an incapacity for love as "the place is occupied, in its centre, by the dead mother" (1986:154). It might be possible, reading Abraham and Torok in tandem with Green, to speculate how Agaat may be haunted by the phantom of the dead mother. Certainly Jed Sekoff's analysis of the 'dead mother' herself (in Kohon, pp.109-147) describes the "a murderous envy that the dead mother holds for the living, and a killing rage that those held within her grasp hold within them" (Kohon, p.121). He calls the term 'dead mother' a misnomer, as she is more "compressing" or "entrapping" than lifeless, and he sums her up as an object that is "deadening". This might well describe Milla Redelinghuys.

Cathy Caruth (1996) writes eloquently about the dual impossibility and necessity of

confronting death in her examination of trauma, narrative and history. She reminds us that the originary meaning of 'trauma' was wound to the body; it was later related to mental wounding (1996:3) and as such refers to the uncanny way catastrophic events repeat themselves for their victims, as if there were a re-enactment of an event that could not be left behind. She cites Freud's theory that mental wounds are experienced too soon and unexpectedly to be fully known and are not available to consciousness until repeatedly imposed via nightmares and repetitive actions (1996:4). This is more than pathological: the wound cries out in an attempt to tell of a truth otherwise unavailable, an aspect pertinent to Agaat's insistence that she be heard, known and represented but that that should often be in a trope defying our understanding (1996:5). Caruth speculates on trauma's endless impact upon life (1996:7) and whether it might be through forgetting that trauma is experienced. As such the novel may be seen as a wake at the site of death, an issued command to be heard and an exchange of histories. Caruth also examines the intricate relationship between trauma and survival: if trauma is not directly available to memory, does Agaat's consciousness survive through her embroidery and dancing?

Freud points to a threat or break occurring in trauma that is outside the mind's experience of time (in Caruth 1996:60). The repetition compulsion is an attempt to master what was never fully grasped and survival becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of confronting death directly (1996:62). Caruth uses Freud's rendition of a dream experienced by a father of his newly deceased child as a metaphor for the impossibility of living with trauma. The child's body is laid out, surrounded by candles and the father sleeps in the adjacent room. In the dream the child reproaches the father with the words, "Father don't you see I'm burning?" and the father wakes to find that the wrapping around the child has caught alight, burning one of the arms of the child (1996:93). Speculations around the father's continued dreaming include his wish to see the child alive, the knowledge that the child could only live in his dream, and, among multiple interpretations, the father's consciousness desiring its own suspension. For Lacan, the father's awakening to the child's death within the dream, signals the paradox about the necessity and impossibility of confronting death (in Caruth 1996:100). On waking, the father repeats the experience of his previous failure of saving the child in time. Awakening is itself the site of trauma, so that awakening is both about the responsibility of the survivor and the impossible demand at the heart of human consciousness. To awaken is to bear the imperative to survive, to hear the unthinkable words of the dying child and thus the dream is an act of homage to missed reality (in Caruth 1996:104). Lacan insists that only a rite can commemorate this. The father must receive the dead child's words, the gap between the child's death and his own life. Awakening carries the child's Otherness and the father can now say what the death of the chid is in an act of transmission, passing on the awakening to others (1996:106). This act of transmission seems to be crucial to what Van Niekerk is commemorating in *Agaat*, and the impossibility of confronting death central to the communication between Milla and Agaat.

In considering the nature of mourning, **Jacqueline Rose** (2003) makes the link between shame - involving self-reproach, physical pain and feelings of being harmed so that one would like to die rather than remember it - and mourning, where the melancholic flays and abuses himself, as death is too hard to contemplate (2003:7), both concepts begging consideration in the novel. In her discussion of apathy and accountability and the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission, she defines apathy as the dissociation caused by the unconscious or conscious willed refusal to connect with horrors (2003:233), a trait discernible in Milla's treatment of Agaat. Her observations question what communication may be achieved if Milla is without pathos and insensible to suffering.

Mourning, memory, trauma and the Holocaust

I have found it useful to incorporate the analyses of Holocaust scholars into my understanding of the relationship between mourning, memory and trauma in *Agaat*, given some of the ghosts they share and given the intersubjective and dialogical nature of memory and its struggle over truth, history and representation. Agaat experiences deep trauma at the hands of Milla and her henchmen, so that the "lexicon of disruption, absence and irreversible loss" that **Lawrence Langer** observes in Holocaust victims (1991: p. xi) and Agaat's desire for testimony might be seen as instructive in an exploration of the novel. A question to consider is whether van Niekerk arrives at a "healing-mourning process", the model that **Richard Kearney** suggests for commemorating the trauma of the Holocaust without betraying it (2002: 53). His is a call for transformative mimesis, where the writer respects the differend of trauma and at the same time uses narrative imagination to revisit the trauma and allow for an experience of catharsis. To Kearney, metaphor can hold substantial emotional affect and he deems it possible to dramatise silence without filling the silence, which can be configured in fiction to hold meaning.

This has a parallel with Arnold Schoenberg's opera, *Moses und Aaron*, written in the early 1930's, amidst the rise of Nazism. **George Steiner** (1979: 174) suggests that the opera questions the adequacy of modes of communication, "a demonstration of the impossibility of finding an exhaustive accord between language and music". He makes the dramatic conflict one between a man who speaks, Moses and a man who sings, Aaron, arguing to the limit, according to Steiner, "the paradoxical convention, the compromise with the unreal, inherent in all opera." Steiner describes the opera as "a radical consideration of silence, an inquiry into the ultimately tragic gap between what is apprehended and that which can be said. Words distort; eloquent words distort absolutely." (pp.176-177) As such, Moses' collapse into silence and looming Nazism, accompanied by the fact that the opera was never completed, suggest, for Steiner, the recognition by Schoenberg that "words have failed us, that art can neither stem barbarism nor convey experience when experience grows unspeakable." (p.182)

Lawrence Langer's classification of memories provides insight, in limited respects, into what Agaat grapples with. Langer explores the "limited power of words to release the specific kinds of physical distress haunting the caverns of deep memory" (1991:8) and his concept of anguished memory refers to a memory which divides and erodes the stability of the self (1991:49). He quotes Blanchot: "When a subject becomes absence then the absence of a subject, or dying as a subject, subverts the whole sequence of existence" (1991:69). Humiliated memory speaks of uncompensating recall, unilluminable by ethical insight (1991:95) and tainted memory speaks of the dilemmas between the trauma of violation and the need for future love and hope, leading to a

discontinuous self, where the self is permanently provisional (1991: 169).

Sue Vice (2000) makes an analogy between the fictional representation of the Holocaust and of trauma in novels as a genre, begging the question of how Van Niekerk's fiction is able to register the shocking and unassimilable nature of its subject (2000:4). Theodor Adorno's contention that "After Auschwitz to write a poem is barbaric" might register with Agaat, as she orchestrates the re-reading of the diaries, and experiences the squeezing, according to Adorno, of "aesthetic pleasure out of artistic representation of the naked bodily pain of those who have been knocked down by rifle butts" (2000: 5). Vice also points to the disruption of chronology in Holocaust fiction, as described by Freud in the Wolf Man case, where early significance is only revivified later. (2000:47). In *Agaat* one waits until the book's conclusion for Agaat's own tale and version of history, giving the reader the ability to circle the novel and causing time to be both future and past concurrently.

The question of the structural unspeakability of the Holocaust (specifically Auschwitz) is raised by **Jean-François Lyotard** in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute.* "You are informed that human beings endowed with language are placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell about it" (1988: xi). He contends that Auschwitz provides an impasse to language: witnessing killing in a gas chamber means dying in one, and if dead, one cannot testify to the existence of the chamber. (1988:3). Hannah Arendt (1966) illustrates a similar dilemma in that some death camp survivors claimed literally not to be able to remember what happened to them. Van Niekerk, too, investigates the structural unspeakability at the heart of trauma and the subject's relation with the Other. **Saul Friedlander** (1993) refers to the excess the Holocaust carries. This excess cannot be defined except by some sort of general statement about something "which must be able to be put into phrases [but] cannot yet be" (1992: 20). One avenue for gaining entry into the trauma is the indirect kind of narration that **Tadeusz Borowski** (1992) employs in his description of his incarceration in Auschwitz-Birkenu, a behaviourist rendition, resorting to little reflection or moral judgment. However the narration of trauma is accessed, it is qualified by and riddled with gaps, holes and absences, lacunae within family histories. Agaat's problem becomes the issue of creating continuity and identity from an obliterated history.

Laurence Kirmayer (in Paul Antze & Michael Lambeck, 1996) provides useful perspectives on Agaat's memory of trauma as he contrasts two types of narrative, that of the Holocaust survivor who suffers "from excess of memory and is driven by the need to commemorate collective history" and that of the victim of childhood abuse who "suffers from amnesia and must regain contested memory to reclaim and rebuild an uncertain self" (1996:190). He distinguishes between memories that can either be dissociated, repressed or intrusive and explores how methods of registration, rehearsal and recall are socially and culturally governed (1996:191). So too are distinctions between forgetting, repressing, ignoring and dissociating both politically and socially influenced. He insists that the moral order requires memory and that memory in turn requires certain narrative forms (1996:192). Of particular appropriateness to the place of mourning and memory in *Agaat* is Kirmayer's statement that "The moral function of memory is to compel us to confront what we - and all around us – wish to leave behind" (1996:193).

Memory, language and non-verbal gesture as mimesis in *Agaat*

I am indebted to **Willie Burger's** discussion of the mimetic possibilities of language in Van Niekerk's novels in the *Journal of Literary Studies Special Issue* on Marlene van Niekerk, September 2009. He discusses language's restrictiveness, given our limited communication, self-knowledge and understanding of the other. Language is the only possible space for Milla and Agaat to know each other, but it needs to be shared and worked out together before communication is achieved (JLS p.6). The fact that Milla has foisted her language on Agaat makes it impossible for her to hear Agaat (p.8). Milla resists the image of herself she evokes in the language of her diaries, finding her 'self' outside the boundaries of language, unsatisfactorily reflected in the mirror of language (p.9) because to Milla, language is unmediated. Burger quotes De Martelaere who posits that the social, external nature of language cannot reach individual consciousness, particularly when consciousness is not concrete, but is mental or emotional as in instances of pain, sorrow or longing (p.11). In this view, language is about something impossible as it can only use collective, social conventions to approximate unique sensory experiences and we are thus unable to speak about our mental images. Burger suggests that in her novels, Van Niekerk explores what is inexpressible in language, so that Milla's attempts to 'rethink' her life story from her deathbed, differently to her version in the diaries is an attempt to use language, however inaccessible, to make sense of her life. He suggests that the italicised passages use language but with added syntactical experimentation as a means to express the Other and Death (p.14), to express what is outside of language through the medium of language. This attempt for Milla is futile, however, although the reader experiences something inexpressible in language, through reading the book. Burger's thesis is that this occurs through Van Niekerk's use of the aesthetic, where sounds and rhythms are more important than representation (p.15). In his insistence that Agaat only echoes Milla's words and doesn't really say anything about herself, I suggest that he misses the nuances of Agaat's subversion of her adopted language. "Sy eggo dus Milla se eie woorde aan haar terug en sê nie regtig iets oor haarself nie." (p.16). His view is that Agaat abandons the oppressor's language for another of dance and embroidery, but he pays scant attention to Agaat's verbal acrobatics.

Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren, in the same edition of JLS, offer an incisive, detailed and fascinating analysis of Agaat's essentially undermining mimetic gestures in their article, by exploring rhymes, fairy tales, songs and allegorical citations as well as performative gestures such as dance, inscriptions on the walls of her quarters and embroidery projects (p.40). Agaat's tale has to reside "within the fissures of the white woman's narration" (p.41). Mimicry is evident in "Agaat's power to ease or hinder Milla's narrative", seen in the alphabet chart power play where Agaat literally spells out Milla's narrative, "assisting its intonation, the very modulation of its meaning" (p.43). Agaat appropriates traditional Afrikaner songs and improvises their tunes, which both Jakkie and Milla find ominous. She also narrates her life-story in a tragic-comic goosestep, from her initial incarceration on Milla's farm to Milla's corporal punishment and her banishment to the servants' quarters: a rare exposition of Agaat's anger, grief and resentment from her perspective (p.45). In addition, her "last story" (p.313) or fairy tale,

which Milla never hears, allows an expression of Agaat's deepest feelings of abandonment, anger and hurt, though masked as a bed-time story. The authors also examine Agaat's quoted answers to Milla's questions, answers out of context usually quoted verbatim from farmers' handbooks. They suggest that the recitations exaggerate Spivak's notion of the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern (p.46): in every instance, though they might detail slaughtering an ox or separating ewes from lambs, Agaat's quotes reinforce her own rejection by and separation from Milla.

The authors examine various non-verbal practices. They suggest that Agaat's dancing has a narrative function that highlights differences in power relations. In her dancing over the site of the buried suitcase, ostensibly rejecting her own cultural heritage, she actually challenges Milla's "attempts to tamper with her cultural identity" (p.49). They focus on Agaat's embroidery as her means of story-making: her hat, on which she subtly writes and rewrites her story and which is a sign of subservience and of creativity (p.51), a written narrative or elegy on death, in which the confusion of Agaat's death is rendered manageable through precise depictions. The article concludes that Milla's narrative authority over Agaat is never actually collapsed and that Agaat's individuality is ultimately "paranarratable" as Milla's stream of consciousness disallows Agaat the space to narrate her story, concerned as it is with her own psyche (p.52). It contends that Milla is unable to interpret Agaat, who is obscured from her due to her subjectivity being created chiefly non-verbally and thus defying linguistic representation, positioning Agaat moreover as "supranarratable" (p.53). The lexicon available to Milla is inadequate to the task of her 'reading' Agaat. The authors issue the invitation that these examinations of communication in the novel offer scope for investigation, a line of enquiry I intend to pursue.

Although **Mark Sanders'** eloquent article in the same journal focuses on mimesis and memory in Van Niekerk's work *Memorandum* specifically, it is highly relevant to my study of *Agaat.* Sanders traces the writing of the terminally ill J. F. Wiid's memorandum (van Niekerk's text) offered in tandem with Adriaan van Zyl's paintings. Sanders shows that like Milla, who is forced into recollection through her recitation of her written record, the diaries, Wiid has to reinvent himself in order to write. Sanders suggests that Agaat's coersion "discloses an operative silence in the story of lives intertwined. The process may not make what is operative speak, or bring it into presence, but it may reveal how the story is being told, with the events it brings to memory, covers for another story or set of events, which resists a coming into speech or writing" (p.104). Similarly Wiid realises that although previously his model for understanding was a conduit, "a conveying emptiness of which one must keep the interior as open and smooth as possible" (*Memorandum*, p. 96), he now sees that "the art lies in impediment" and that "everything must be mediated, the great by the small, by participation and by mirroring and by translation" (*Memorandum*, pp. 96-97).

To Sanders, the memorandum Wiid types determines "what is to be remembered", so that "writing produces both a record of things and the imperative that produces the things themselves" (p.106). In fact, Wiid's postscript states that "one has to write in order to discover what has to be written" (*Memorandum* p. 120). In this regard Sanders refers both to Plato's idea that language alters the language that it imitates and to Bakhtin's analysis of social heteroglossia, where words address their objects in dialogue with other words

(p.107). Sanders unpacks Bakhtin's understanding of heteroglossia within the novel, stressing that there can be no fictional narration without a narrator or implied author, so that "the act of imitation produces the thing", Bakhtin's notion of double-voiced discourse (p.108). He shows how Derrida arrives at a similar analysis of the complexity of the relation of mimesis to memory, which "lies in conceiving that what is imitated could be still to come with respect to what it imitates" (p.108). This is the link between Milla's diaries and Wiid's memorandum, which both come before the story they tell, before the things that are to be remembered: they "mime[-] reference and imitation" (p.109). In others words, the Platonic endeavour to free diegesis from mimesis is doomed to failure. Sanders' final link between the two texts refers to silences and secrets. Wiid's memorandum, apart from producing things to be remembered or only recording them, also generates a silence or secret. In Agaat, in his opinion, the silence or secret is not "strictly speaking, what the narrative *represents*. Rather it is what *authors* it" (p.117). In my examination, I wish to expand on the space this double-voicedness might produce in *Agaat*.

Van Niekerk on Van Niekerk

As becomes evident upon researching Van Niekerk's work, some of the most generative ideas emanate from her analysis of her own oeuvre. In the September 2009 edition of the JLS, with **Michiel Heyns**, in conversation with **Leon de Kock**, **Van Niekerk** says that part of the driving force of the novel is how an oppressed person "can take aspects of that power, and mime them back, and make themselves stronger in the process; not entirely free" (p.139). She mentions her attempts to hide Milla's badness "under a rule of rhetoric and a rule of order" and De Kock observes in Milla's second person narration a technique that creates interesting moments of self-ironising in the text (p.141). Van Niekerk draws attention to the importance of water, the reflective surface, at the end of the novel. Milla muses on whether she is "at last membrane between a willow and its reflection," and ruminates that "the smallest circling water-creature zealously writing everything reflects" (*Agaat,* pp.673-674). Van Niekerk suggests that Milla's epiphany at her death is of a permeable world that is not simply a matter of reflection and she refers to Gyrinus Natans who has an eye above and an eye below the water level. "And it means that somehow, only just, some kind of communication has been established, maybe, between Milla and Agaat in those dying moments," and that the writer might have got "beyond describing reality in an external way only...[and] put it into operation in the novel" (p.148). It is this 'only just – maybe' communication that I wish to interrogate.

In conversation with **Willie Burger** in the same journal, Van Niekerk describes how she methodically misleads the reader into trusting a seemingly chronological story, only to frustrate them with flashbacks and perspective shifts ("terugvouings en vlakverskuiwings") and an ending enmeshed in the beginning, so that the reader never escapes the labyrinth and discovers the multiple permutations of the self in language (p.153).'

Van Niekerk's essay which explores the potential that *Triomf's* Lambert Benade and Agaat Lourier are shamanistic figures in their respective novels, is entitled "Die kind in

die agterkamer as die sjamaan van die familie' (Amsterdam, 2008). Shamans play integrative roles in their societies, attributing animism to every object. They are inspired prophets and healers, with power over the spiritual world to possess or exorcise spirits. They possess theatrical techniques of breathing, movement and access to hallucinations. Often bedecked in feathers and furs, bones and seeds, they are clairvoyant, with power over animals, the weather and guides to the underworld (p.115). Van Niekerk postulates that although Lambert and Agaat have some of the characteristics of shamans, they are ultimately only pseudo-shamans, operating powerlessly in dysfunctional families where they are robbed of their potential. She suggests contentiously that Agaat merely ends up with an unresolved melancholic fixation for her dead mistress who still rules from the grave (p.116). Nevertheless, her discussion suggests that Agaat's powers, though severely restricted, have considerable potential.

Agaat is an alienated figure within the family, living in semi-isolation, at once constructive and destructive, the guardian of family traditions (pp.104-105). Her power is creative in the instance of her embroidery, but this is a compromised power of the reduced autonomy of the subaltern (p.106), apprentice to the powerful sorcerer ("meestertowenaar") who literally remakes Agaat in her image, and virtually hexes her with Afrikaner language and culture (p.107). Van Niekerk explores whether the sacrificial identification of the apprentice with the might of the oppressor, the assumption and internalisation of the oppressor's methods, could be transcended (p.108). Her suggestion is that Agaat's isolation offers her a particular freedom and space that subverts Milla's power. Agaat uses her back room as a space of intimacy and comfort, she indulges in a type of enjoyable creative play involving ecstasy, visions and trances or altered consciousness and she practices nightly rituals of wandering which lead to a sense of spirituality and liberation (p.108-109). Van Niekerk suggests how disruptive Agaat manages to be in the altar/theatre/workshop of her room through shadow games, collections of bones and stones, the sculpting of the hearth, the séance-like moments at her fireplace and the visionary nature of her embroidery (p.109-110). Agaat elevates the learnt techniques of embroidery to the status of the spiritual and aesthetic. Her cap becomes a ceremonial covering: its patterns are mystical and are evidence of an imagination released from the constraints of Milla's teachings. Van Niekerk stresses the pleasure Agaat finds in these works, calling it an almost rhythmical trance-inducing *jouissance* (p.110).

It is particularly in her nocturnal wanderings that Agaat's shamanic aspect is heightened. She returns from her ritual dances and sun salutations with increased potency. The symbiotic butterfly dance she shares with Milla in a spirit of communion before her banishment to the back room, morphs into a furious dance of exorcism, accompanied by droning and chanting and arm movements that seem to part the night skies. This becomes a private ritual in which Agaat reaches a kind of transcendence (p.113). Van Niekerk adds to this list Agaat's ritual sowing of wild seeds as she walks, spreading her magic wherever she walks. There is a scene of heightened intimacy that van Niekerk likens to a séance, where Agaat sings her autobiographical song to Jakkie in a bathroom filled with steam (p.114). Despite these attributes, Van Niekerk conflates her argument with the conclusion that Agaat is at best a pseudo-shaman, perpetually confined by her powerlessness.

Methodology

1. Explore Derrida's concept of cryptomimesis / hauntology.
2. Apply Derrida's spectral theory to *Agaat's* tropes of mourning and death.
3. Explore André Green's concept of the dead mother complex in terms of trauma and the crypt of the living-dead, of incorporation and of a refusal to mourn.
4. Apply Green's concept to *Agaat*, in terms of the quasi-maternal bonds between Agaat and Milla, and the possibility of trans-generational haunting.
5. Relate Derrida's cryptomimesis to textuality and subjectivity in general and within the novel, and to the conception of a self that is constituted by writing, by the other.
6. Draw conclusions about a deconstructive and haunted text, a model of writing from the unconscious, the relevance of cross-generational haunting and the text's encouragement of the reader to do memory work. Suggest that new contexts proliferate across a traditional genre, through spectral writing practice.
7. Conduct a close reading of Chapter 16 to trace the interplay between Milla and Agaat, paying attention to linguistic and non-verbal communication and improvisation.
8. Evaluate whether there is any breaking down of the Master's House or shift in relations to offer a productive interpersonal and critical space.

Chapters

1. Theoretical examination of mourning and memory using Freud, Abraham and Torok, Derrida's cryptomimesis and André Green's concept of the dead mother.
2. Close reading of Chapter 16.
3. Implications for mourning, language and history.

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