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"TO SEE ANOTHER PERSON'S FACE … TO TOUCH ANOTHER PERSON'S HAND": BODIES AND INTIMATE RELATIONS IN THE FICTION OF MARLENE VAN NIEKERK.

Lara Buxbaum

Abstract

Marlene van Niekerk is an original and virtuouso writer who has been lauded both locally and internationally. Although Van Niekerk's works have aroused considerable critical attention, analysis has thus far focused mainly on the individual novels. Furthermore, the importance of bodies in her writing has been neglected. In this thesis I attempt to correct that critical occlusion by analysing bodies and intimate relations in Van Niekerk's three novels, *Triomf* (1994/1999), *Agaat* (2004/2006) and *Memorandum* (2006). Corporeality is emphasized in the interactions between characters; in fact it seems that any kind of understanding is mediated, facilitated or impeded through the body. I adopt Elizabeth Grosz's explanation of embodied subjectivity which avoids what she might term the Cartesian, monist or essentialist fallacy of embodiment (1994). The first chapter presents an overview of the existing literature on Van Niekerk and theories of bodies. In Chapter Two I propose that any consideration of spatiality in the novel must also take into account corporeality. With reference to apartheid spatial discourse and the recurring cartographic motifs, I argue that all of the protagonists articulate the desire for a nurturing environment. Chapter Three explores the relationship between narrative and body fragments in order to determine whether remembering (or re-membering) can prove salutary. I consider how intimate relationships are implicated in working through the embodied experience of trauma and whether recognition might provide an alternative narrative of healing to the confessional mode. I inquire whether, in the absence of a coherent narrative and healed body, there might prove something liberating in celebrating the potential of the fragment. Relations of looking are the focus of Chapter Four where I investigate whether reciprocity is possible. Chapter Five objects to allegorical readings of the incest and sexual relations which forecloses more nuanced readings. Furthermore I maintain that some of these encounters be read as rape. *Triomf* and *Agaat* subvert "the rape script" thus raising difficult questions about the nature of complicity, intimacy and power. The final chapter illustrates the manner in which intimacy is affected by the imminence of

death. I consider the extent to which the bodywork entailed in caring for a dying person alters relationships and explore the changes in metaphors of embodiment employed by the dying person. In this manner I hope to illuminate hitherto unexplored similarities in these three novels which make for a richer appreciation of Van Niekerk's oeuvre as well as encourage new ways of reading embodiment and intimacy .

Key Words:

Marlene van Niekerk, Bodies, Intimacy, *Triomf*, *Agaat*, *Memorandum*, Embodied Subjectivity, Spatiality, Rape, Dying, Voyeurism, Fragments, Trauma.