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REPRESENTATIONS OF REVISED WHITE MALE SUBJECTIVITY IN *NO MAN'S LAND* AND *PLOT-LOSS.*

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.
Johannesburg, 2008

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Jessica van Onselen

30th day of June, 2008

ABSTRACT

This research report examines two novels, Carel van der Merwe's *No Man's Land* (2007) and Heinrich Troost's *Plot Loss* (2007) as examples of what can be thought of as a 'new wave' of white writing in South African fiction. The protagonists' journeys serve to help readers deepen our understanding of white identity in contemporary South Africa, and what the past and the present signify for these white men, by resisting oversimplified or 'bleached' representations of whiteness.

Recent critical writing has chosen to view emerging texts such as these in a celebratory light. For these critics, the psychological journeys of the characters and shifts in consciousness represented are hopeful, and indicative of a new complexity in writing white male experience in South Africa. The theme of transformation through revisiting the past certainly runs clearly through both texts, but the conclusions of these novels, I will argue, exemplify the paucity of representation that still plagues white male writing in South Africa.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The question is: is the writing of the two novels at hand, *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*, a cause for celebration?

Do these two brave debut novels from first-time writers complicate, deepen, layer, texture, flesh out and nuance representations of white identity in the world of South African post-apartheid fiction? Do they serve to deepen literary audience's understanding of what it is to be white in South Africa in 2008, and beyond? Do they actively resist those portrayals of whiteness that would have us believe that to be a white South African is to be nothing more than an unrepentant racist, alienated and disinvested in post apartheid South Africa, living an existence defined by an all-consuming cultural amnesia that denies apartheid ever happened?

Do these novels and the representations of white male subjectivity they explore signal the beginning of a new wave of white writing in South Africa? Not just post *apartheid* white writing, but post-*JM Coetzee* white writing, now that the master - whose novel *Disgrace* has dominated the genre so powerfully - has left South Africa to forge a new life in Australia.

Outline of the structure of this research report

This research report examines the representations of white male subjectivity presented in two novels published in 2007: Carel van der Merwe's *No Man's Land*, and Heinrich Troost's *Plot Loss*. Both novels chart the transformation of their white, male, South African protagonists - transformations that are prompted by their encounters with history, although each journey is explored in a very different manner and in very different literary styles.

This chapter (Chapter One) offers an overview of existing 'whiteness studies' - a sadly under-researched and under-developed area of identity theory - which will provide historical and intellectual context for my study. Having traced significant critical works in this field, I will examine these representations in light of the recent assertion by literary critics Titlestad and Kissack, that *Plot Loss* and *No Man's Land* mark an exciting moment in the self representation of South Africa white maleness. Is this true? To what extent? Are there, in fact, still limitations in place regarding white male self representations? If so, what are they and why do they persist?

Chapter Two will begin with, arguably, the defining moment of post-apartheid 'white writing' – the publication of JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* in 1999, and examine its implications both politically and for the "white novel". *Disgrace* remains a towering achievement, not just in literary terms, but in terms of giving expression to a complex and nuanced understanding of contemporary South African whiteness. The emergence of alternative white male voices to Coetzee in the landscape of South African writing has taken a while, and is only tentative at this stage, but Troost and van der Merwe do signify the arrival of different and new perspectives on the literary scene, with different understandings of whiteness to convey.

Chapter Three examines van der Merwe's *No Man's Land*, in light of how the subjectivity of its protagonist, Paul du Toit, changes and transforms through his encounters – some voluntary, some involuntary - with history. What are the implications of this transformation for literary representations of South African white masculinity? The novel, structured in three parts, raises important questions about white identity in relation to apartheid, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the present reality of post apartheid life for white South African men.

Chapter Four turns to Heinrich Troost's postmodern novel *Plot Loss*. Written in the form of a comatose dream shortly preceding the subject's death, *Plot Loss* offers an hallucinatory portrait of its protagonist Harry van As's past and present, as he makes his way around the city of Pretoria. In this novel, the white male subject is presented in an entirely different

context – a world in which the anxieties, concerns and hopes surrounding the reality of white male South Africans are deliberately represented in a more global context, perhaps as part of the broader global dialogue on identity crises that has coincided with postmodernist movement. Unlike in *No Man's Land*, history is not a place Harry must deliberately 'journey to' in order to visit. Rather, history is all around; history is inside Harry; history is written into the city; history pops up unexpectedly in a thousand mundane places.

Chapter Five is dedicated to examining the conclusions of these two novels, which are worthy of a discussion in their own right. How do these novels fit into the tradition of the conclusion of the white novel in South Africa? Have their representations of white male subjectivity led to a different end result for their narratives? Why not? In an exploration of the limits of the imagination for the white male subject (often, interestingly, at odds with the choices of the characters' authors themselves), this chapter seeks to understand the boundaries still governing much of contemporary white writing.

A note on gender

Before proceeding to a literature review, a note is necessary on the scope of this thesis. The novels I have chosen to examine, and my research question, focus exclusively on the white male subject. To separate out the 'white South African female' experience from the 'white South African male' experience may seem artificial to those who would argue that South Africans live in a society where so much of one's existence is understood, judged and legislated for in terms of race. Many of the observations or assertions presented in this paper might, in fact, hold as true for the white female subject as for white male one. This is certainly a possibility.

But it would be disingenuous and presumptuous to assume that the anxieties and experiences articulated in these novels regarding white male identity are the same as those of a white female character, or writer for that matter. White female perspectives on post-apartheid South Africa in the area of fiction still remain few, unfortunately – even more so than fiction about and by white male writers. White women are experiencing post apartheid

in a different way to white men, and this would require its own study and examination, dedicated to answering questions particular to that experience.

I am adopting, then, a *via negative* of sorts: clarifying my area of interest for this research primarily by stating what it is not. It does not address the experience of the white female subject. It does not make any attempt to ask how white female subjectivity might correspond, correlate or contrast with that of the white male subjectivity being discussed. Its focus remains exclusively and solely on the representations of the white male protagonists in these two novels.

Literature review: whiteness studies

It is a jarring realisation for any student embarking on research about white identity that there exists very little substantive work in this particular academic area. It seems impossible to believe that, in an age in which there has never been more dialogue about the implications of race, identity and culture at all strata of international society - from the United Nations Human Rights Commission right down to Facebook - there is such a dearth of authoritative studies on what it is to be white.

This absence of research might well be explained by the idea that whiteness likes to present itself as *invisible*. It's harder to write a sustained academic thesis on an identity that defines itself as 'everyday'. The idea that whiteness sets itself up as 'normal' and 'just the way things are' has gained increasing attention from black scholars and intellectuals since the 1960s, and was one of the assumptions challenged by Steve Biko and the black consciousness movement in South Africa. The basic presumption that whiteness - and particularly masculine whiteness - was the centre and all other identities were peripheral has been rigorously interrogated in academic circles for several decades now. Whether or not those debates have truly managed to enter the popular consciousness, certainly in the West, is another question.

But from the perspective of undertaking a literary review on whiteness, it certainly does appear that all other races must define themselves *in relation* to whiteness. Shelves and shelves of studies on black Southern African identity, black West African identity, African American identity, black British identity and Asian American identity adorn any library. But studies which formally interrogate or document what it means to be white - what constitutes 'white' values, standards, anxieties and experiences - are harder to find.

That said, they do exist, and this literature review will examine some of the key texts in this area of research. I have restricted my reading mainly to South African writing on the question of whiteness, which has been increasing in recent years, as - with the exception of Toni Morrison's work on literature and whiteness (discussed below) - the specificity of the historical experience of whites in South Africa, and Africa more generally, renders most international writings on whiteness inapplicable.

No scholar has challenged more directly the historical *literary* depiction of whiteness as "normative, unbiased, undifferentiated, always already legitimate, and thereby transcendent and timeless," as Toni Morrison in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [1992: 2]. Morrison meticulously deconstructs the American literary canon, exposing "a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary critics and historians and circulated as 'knowledge' " surrounding white identity and the identity of any Other in relation to that whiteness. Morrison's focus is, understandably, American literature, particularly representations of slaves in relation to white slave owners in American fiction.

Morrison's work was ground-breaking in whiteness studies in that it was one of the first sustained studies of how white authors, and the fictional characters they create on paper, served to perpetuate the notion of whiteness as normal, rendering anyone else as Other. Morrison discusses how whiteness is portrayed in relation to the Other, and how precisely the Other is rendered in literary terms. It is because of this focus on the relationship *between* the two (the white subject and the Other) that specific application of Morrison's study is limited for this report, which does not really explore whiteness in relation to a

specific Other, although the observations Morrison makes about how whiteness positions itself within literature would obviously inform any work concerning representations of white identity in literature.

Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark*, that for too long in the academic discussion on racism, the emphasis has been exclusively on those on the receiving end of racism, in all its forms. Morrison calls for "a study on the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it. It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalysed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject" [1992: 11]. I would argue that Carel van der Merwe and Heinrich Troost have taken up Morrison's call and begun their own, literary, exploration of precisely this question.

We then turn to literature on 'whiteness' coming out of the South African context.

Much of apartheid's legislative and social insanity was carried out precisely because of the assumption that whiteness, as invisible, was the standard by which everything was to be measured. But post-apartheid, white identity in South Africa now finds itself in a position that, while not unprecedented, is certainly rare - whiteness is exposed and made visible. The protagonists of the two novels this report is examining, *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*, have lived through the extraordinary historical transition from whiteness-as-invisible to whiteness-on-display in South Africa, and in many ways the novels document and describe the resulting anxiety, confusion and resentment that result in having the very fundamental assumptions of one's identity rigorously interrogated - and possibly judged - by a society.

It would not be possible to consider a literature review of South African writing on whiteness complete without acknowledging Melissa Steyn's book *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be: White identity in a Changing South Africa* [2001]. It is the only full-length book published that deals exclusively with South African whiteness post apartheid, which - if not just because of the lack of critical writing on the subject - makes it an important text to discuss.

Steyn's book concerns itself primarily with identifying five 'narrative strategies' for post-apartheid whiteness. These guiding grand narratives, Steyn argues, have been adopted by white South Africans in order to assist them in 'coping' with the new world order of post-apartheid South Africa [Steyn, 2001]. These are:

- Still Colonial After All these Years
- This Shouldn't Happen to a White
- Don't Think White, It's All Right
- A Whiter Shade of Pale
- Under African Skies (or White, but Not Quite)

Steyn's book acknowledges the process of identity transformation which is clearly taking place for white South Africans, and - being sociological and anthropological in its approach - her study is supported by extensive fieldwork (using surveys and questionnaires) and thorough methodology. These all make it a noteworthy and worthy contribution to the field of white identity theory.

For the literary scholar, however, *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be* does present problems. The five narratives which Steyn identifies cannot be easily applied to the novel, an art form dedicated to the exploration of individual subjectivity. Steyn's thesis does not allow for the possibility that the white South African subject might well vacillate between each of the narratives, experience two or more at once, or have feelings and views that are not captured by the five categories at all. Simply put, Steyn's five narratives do not allow for ambiguity, for change and transformation, for nuance, or for the individual. (Steyn's conclusions have been questioned specifically by Leon de Kock, whose work will be discussed later)

Aside from Steyn, other recent work from South Africa has approached questions of contemporary white identity from the understanding that whiteness is not only a skin colour, but denotes a discourse in and of itself.

Rejecting some recent European and American academic understandings of whiteness, Sarah Nuttall makes this very observation in her 2001 article, "Subjectivities of Whiteness." Whiteness in the South African context is more than a set of people: it is a discourse with a set of social, economic, cultural and political meanings [2001: 118]. As Nuttall notes, both a past and a present of racism are imbricated in South African white identity, but that cannot and should not prevent investigations of how whiteness works as a discursive construction. Racism informs identity, but it does not demonstrate how that identity might work or represent itself.

> In most South African studies to date, the question of racial identity is conflated with the question of racism, which is rightfully cast in a moral language of condemnation. The emphasis, in other words, has been more on racism than on race, and this has tended to foreclose a complex investigation into how race works. Moreover, there has been a tendency not to attend to those amplifications of whiteness that may have been at odds with official and critical orthodoxies. [Nuttall, 2001: 118 -119]

This "tendency not to attend to those amplifications of whiteness that may have been at odds with official and critical orthodoxies" [2001:118] that Nuttall identifies in her paper, is a key concept which not only informs critic Leon de Kock's writings on the matter - discussed below - but underpins this report's thesis: to what extent do *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss* resist orthodox representations of whiteness?

Leon de Kock's essay "Blanc de Blanc: Whiteness Studies - A South African Connection?" [2006] develops Nuttall's idea about whiteness as a discourse. De Kock locates this debate about representations of white identity clearly within the context of South African literature by laying out a proposed curriculum for South African whiteness studies. Like Nuttall, De Kock identifies and outlines some of the 'differences within' - arguing that white identity is not uniform, and cannot be essentialised. He outlines some of the seminal texts that have been produced on the subject of white identity in Africa, and places them in a broader historical context.

De Kock succinctly sums up how white identity is too often viewed, both by fellow South Africans and by 'outsiders' in the present moment:

> … in post-apartheid South Africa, whiteness has become 'bleached' – largely delegitimised, held accountable, seen as, for the most part, uniformly complicit for the sins of racial discrimination, and in that process, to a very great extent homogenised…. [De Kock, 2006: 178]

De Kock has thrown out the challenge to re-examine white identity more closely, more carefully, more rigorously, in response to this 'bleaching' which characterises the doxa of South Africa at present. De Kock argues that "there [is] a space to rediscover whiteness as a site of difference and as a site of interest to scholarship" [2006: 178]. Some of that interest will no doubt arise from the pain and difficulty associated with the identity reformation we are seeing in South African whiteness-as-discourse, and some from the literary attempts to represent and portray the crisis of the subject this so often prompts. To reconstitute the self is no small task and from a literary perspective, but it certainly does seem generative. It is precisely because of this risk of presenting white identity as uniform and bleached that De Kock criticises Steyn's five narratives in *Whiteness Just Isn't What It Used To Be*.

Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack use De Kock's call for texts which might resist 'bleaching' and 'uniformity' as the premise for their reading of *Plot Loss* by Heinrich Troost, *No Man's Land* by Carel van der Merwe and *The Good Doctor* by Damon Galgut, in their 2008 paper entitled "No Man's Land: white men in three post-apartheid novels". Titlestad and Kissack's view of these three novels is generally celebratory, seeing them as indicative of a new wave of white writing which:

> […] reclaim[s] the private in the face of an overwhelming inclination to write all South African stories back to predictable versions of the public and the political. They also endorse, in defiance of the expectations of the politically righteous, irresponsible, open-ended and eccentric ways of knowing what it means to be an

> individual South African […] They make, we would conclude, a strong case against the assured uniformity of South African whiteness. [Titlestad & Kissack 2008: 6 and 26]

For Titlestad and Kissack, these novels complicate the sorts of representations of whiteness that dominate much public discourse, and also challenge some of the stereotypical narratives for post colonial whiteness argued for by Steyn. Through sustained portraits of individual subjectivity in the three novels, whiteness is a site of difference and of multiple truths.

Whether these texts are as open-ended as Titlestad and Kissack conclude, is the subject of Chapter Five of this report, addressing the narrative conclusions, and possible futures that can be imagined for the white male subjects in *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss.*

This paper is thus concentrated on the most recent debates surrounding representations of white subjectivity, picking up and continuing particularly Titlestad and Kissack's argument around the novels.

Literature review: other texts

There are several other key texts which this literature review needs to touch on, falling outside the specific area of 'whiteness studies', but which inform and shape a research report such as this.

The definitive text on modern masculinity is still RW Connell's 1995 book *Masculinities*. In this seminal work, Connell argued that the idea of one, hegemonic 'masculinity' could not hold true - rather, there are multiple 'masculinities' in existence at any one time, and sometimes within the same man. Connell's book traces the history of approaches towards masculinity, moving from the idea that there is one, true 'essence' of a man, to a more fluid, flexible understanding of masculinities and the expectations of being male in any given society. The idea that masculinity cannot change or alter in society is also challenged

by Connell, an assertion that would speak directly to my work on white South African masculinity, and the state of transformation it finds itself in at present.

In the South African context, Robert Morrell's *Changing Men in Southern Africa* [2001] presents a series of short essays examining multiple contemporary masculinities; a cross section of men making meaning of their realities, taking cognisance of factors such as race, class, location and culture. Morrell is explicit in his use of Connell's idea of multiple and adaptive masculinities, and applies this to the collection he has assembled in the book. Recent research is emerging out of the South African academy regarding white masculinity, with several journal articles focussing on white maleness and its representations in post apartheid literature, as well as more sociological and historical investigations in modern South African masculinity. A research report looking at new fiction would need to build on and extend this recent work. These include Michael Titlestad's "Apathy and agency in Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor*" and "Hospitality in Karel Schoeman's *Promised Land* and Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull.*"

Mark Sanders, a South African academic based in the United States, has published two books in recent years on apartheid and some of its implications for South African identity. *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* [2002] and *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* [2008] both centre around questions of complicity, knowledge, testimony and ethics in the wake of apartheid.

Of these two, *Ambiguities of Witnessing* informs this report more substantially, particularly in my examination of Carel van der Merwe's novel *No Man's Land*, which is structured around the Truth Commission, and whose protagonist, Paul du Toit, is an apartheid perpetrator. Sanders' book explores the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the complex dynamics of testimony. Sanders documents the way in which victims' testimony influenced and altered the Commission itself, and how the TRC's unofficial mandate of negotiating forgiveness raised debates about forgiveness itself and its meaning, both for ordinary South Africans and for philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, who visited South Africa during the Truth Commission hearings and delivered a key lecture on this question.

Sanders also offers a discussion on JM Coetzee's seminal text, *Disgrace*, which I touch on in Chapter Two, and discusses it in the context of the Commission and its limits, and some of the contemporary debates surrounding complicity, responsibility and apartheid.

Finally, much of my analysis of these two novels addresses the role that the past, present and future play in the protagonists' journeys. Time and multiple temporalities, and the effect these have on revisions of the self, are central to this research report. There are two very different approaches to history in *No Man's Land* and in *Plot Loss*, but time as concept, construct and convention is not given a traditional or realist treatment in either text. In order to illustrate this postmodern/postcolonial approach to time that we see in the novels, I have drawn on the work of Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth and her writing on the subject. Ermarth's book, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time,* [1992] outlines the traditional, linear representation of time in western culture and literature - what she terms Historical time - and then the postmodern approach to time, which she describes as 'swinging'. A brief outline of these key ideas follows.

The Kantian view of time, which this report will use as its premise, stands in opposition to the physicists' view of time. Kant argued that time does not exist objectively, but is rather a human construct used to measure the space between events and to structure experience. Einstein's acknowledgement in his Special Theory of Relativity that time does in fact appear relative to the observer (two minutes with a lover can fly by, whereas two minutes holding one's hand on a hot stove can feel like a lifetime) did complicate the scientific community's view that time is objective, but the fundamental nature of time remains unchallenged. Time is one directional. Time flows unstoppably forward. The past is unreachable and unchangeable; the future remains indeterminate and can be influenced.

This understanding that time is essentially linear has powerfully shaped Western culture and, by extension, its literature. Ermarth discusses the way in which realist literature, since the Renaissance period, has represented and reinforced this one-way property of time. A story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Events unfold logically one after the other, and

reach a conclusion, and the narrative traces that process. Narrators in classic realist texts also reconfirmed this understanding of time. They convey events as they occur, and perhaps shared a bit of history if it was known, and adhered strictly to the teleology of western culture and time - much of Dickens's work, for example. Ermarth labels this traditional understanding and representation of time 'Historical Time'.

Ermarth then turns to the emergence of postmodern literature and the 'reformation of time.' All art forms, including literature, began to conduct experiments with time and challenging of the construction of temporality - suddenly time was being shown as multivalent and non-linear. Time could work backwards as well as forwards, or be fractured, or be circular. Time could even be 'swinging', Ermarth's term for an understanding of time which implies movement back and forth - potentially even wild and erratic - but with clear parameters and restrictions. Swinging time makes an appearance in both *No Man's Land* and *Plot-Loss*.

> Because the individual subject is largely a construct of historical conventions, the revision of historical temporality necessarily involves, among other things, the replacement of the Cartesian cogito ergo sum, with a new formulation, "I swing, therefore I am." [Ermarth, 1992: 21]

Time has implications for individual subjectivity, and disruptions and distortions of time and history impact directly on questions of identity. These themes will all be explored in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five of this report.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXTUALSING WHITE WRITING POST-*DISGRACE*

The emergence of post-apartheid white writing in South Africa

The formal end of that much presented and re-presented institution - apartheid - had much the same effect on white male South African fiction writers as stepping through the looking glass which has suddenly "got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through" had on Alice in *Through The Looking Glass* [Carrol, 1960; 181]. A surprisingly painless transition of wonder and magic, leading to a world which superficially looked the same, but which operated by entirely different rules, and where, in fact, nothing made much sense upon arrival.

While adjusting to Looking Glass Land, relative silence characterised the white South African fiction scene in the early years of democracy. The reasons for this are no doubt manifold and too complex to discuss in any detail here, but could include the difficulties white writers had in trying to absorb and understand the nature of their society in transition; fear; uncertainty and guilt, all resulting in creative paralysis. This relative silence extended across most original art forms - dance, film-making, theatre, photography - as white artists grappled with the new world order.

One of South Africa's most well-known 'white writers', JM Coetzee, also fell silent in the early years of post-apartheid. He published a collection of essays and the retrospective and autobiographical *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* during those years, but this prolific writer did not publish fiction again – perhaps pondering Looking Glass Land from his study in Cape Town - until the blistering arrival of his 1999 novel *Disgrace.*

The impact of *Disgrace* was unusual, not only because of the waves it made in literary and academic circles, but because of the impact it made outside of those subcultures. For a novel to provoke public debate as *Disgrace* did, and even public outrage in some quarters, is rare and noteworthy in this day and age. *Disgrace* is a defining text, and a watershed text, and therefore merits some discussion.

Some extraordinary events lead to *Disgrace* entering the popular consciousness as a book in which 'the truth' about how 'the white male mind works' was 'exposed' and how, following these events, an absence of sustained and meaningful debate on the issue has allowed *Disgrace* to assume the uncomfortable and somewhat ridiculous position of 'the book which describes the authoritative response by white men to the new political order in South Africa'.

In 1999, as part of a series of hearings into racism in the media, the ANC presented several examples of, in their view, racism. To illustrate what they term 'white fears', the party illustrated a statement on 5 April 2000 on the racism inherent in *Disgrace* and its portrayal of black South Africans. The observation made in the ANC submission that whites often hold the perception of black men as primitive 'savages' is neither groundless nor ridiculous, and certainly not to be dismissed out of hand. But the question here is about the effect that this statement had on how Coetzee's fiction was contextualised and labelled by a large audience of South Africans who had possibly not even read or grappled with *Disgrace,* or with the themes and issues Coetzee is raising in his work. *Disgrace* - or rather, a media simulacrum of *Disgrace* - became the bible of white maleness and David Lurie, complex and nuanced as his world view was, came to represent white maleness in the new South Africa as racist, fear-driven and essentialised.[1]

Disgrace was a watershed moment in South African fiction, and in South African identity politics too. The events of 1999 inescapably inform and influence any meaningful discussion in the present about white writing in contemporary South African fiction,

Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission [2008], Mark Sanders' book on the some of effects of testimony at the TRC on witnesses, perpetrators, the law itself and literature, dedicates a significant chunk of his chapter on 'Literature and Testimony' to *Disgrace*. Sanders's chapter departs from the premise that there has been what he terms an 'engagement' with the TRC's testimony and its final report

[1] It is hard to imagine that Coetzee was not somewhat brutalised by the Human Rights Commission episode. Upon emigrating to Australia a few years later, he observing that "Leaving a country is, in some respects, like the break-up of a marriage. It is an intimate matter."

'by literature' [2008: 148]. Sanders points to one of the first - and certainly one of the defining - texts regarding the Truth Commission, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull:*

> Written from a position of acknowledged and troubling historical complicity – its dedication reads "for every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips – Krog's book does not claim any facile identification with victims who testify. By discreetly mining exchanges before the commission, *Country of My Skull* measures the bearing of the commission on literature after apartheid by setting to work, in its own textual conduct, the basic structures that emerge between questioner and witness … *Country of My Skull* demonstrates how the literary abides upon the same basic structures as the hearings, and thus how, in the final analysis, the report, as it writes what it terms "the South African story" shares such structures, as conditions of possibility, not just with the hearings but also with literature. [Sanders, 2008: 149-150]

Sanders argues that *Disgrace* is a much more oblique response to the Truth Commission than *Country of My Skull*, but a response nonetheless, in which all actions in the present are presented as historical, often oppressively so. David Lurie's testimony before a university disciplinary panel about his affair with a student (Melanie Isaacs, who has subsequently pressed a charge of sexual harassment against him) is a powerful meditation on testimony, political correctness, the societal need for 'confession', and the writing of all individual actions back to the historical no matter what the cost. "His [Lurie's] resistance to making things past, if such a resistance is in play, may, in the narrow sense, be pathological" suggests Sanders, which is what makes Lurie's 'testimony' before the disciplinary panel so problematic and ultimately disastrous [Sanders, 2008: 181]. *Disgrace* can be understood to rigorously interrogate both the understanding that can be gained *and* the many problems that are encountered when the personal is written back to the historical

Sanders also offers an analysis of the ANC response to *Disgrace* in *Ambiguities of Witnessing.* Sanders rightly points out that the ANC submission's argument about the

presentation of negative and racist stereotypes fails to recognise the complex questions Coetzee is asking about stereotypes.

> With a little more reflection, it would have been possible for the authors of the submission to have read Coetzee's novel as exploring racism in a way that is not simply accusatory - not only of one's stereotypes but ultimately of oneself, since one's negation of negative stereotypes can imply feelings of guilt, and, in any case, will not supply one with an unambiguously positive "self image." What *Disgrace* exposes, and what the ANC response does not wish to discuss openly, is the violence that connects South Africans and divides them racially. [Sanders, 2008: 143]

For Sanders, the "generalised denial of violence" which characterises the ANC's submission is compounded by a misunderstanding that "white fears" (as the ANC terms it) are often rooted in the fear that retributive violence which will be meted out as punishment for historical wrongs perpetuated by one's forefathers,' and thus those fears can never really ever be addressed or allayed [2001: 143]. They are defining, structural and inescapable.

In light of the aforementioned ANC submission to the Human Rights Commission, and his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, many would argue that Coetzee has been the defining voice of white post-apartheid South African fiction. Both its literary accomplishments and the political-philosophical debate it prompted within South Africa certainly mark *Disgrace* as a defining - if not *the* defining – post-apartheid novel.

Possibilities for a new generation of white writing, post-*Disgrace*

JM Coetzee looms so large on the landscape of contemporary South African fiction that it is difficult even to think of it without him. His reach is vast; his impact profound. Of course, other writers have always existed alongside Coetzee's work, contributing to white writing - Brink, Gordimer, Vladislavic, van Heerden, and others - but Coetzee has dominated both the local and international understanding of South African white writing with his complex narratives, knowing narrators and sophisticated ethical dilemmas.

I would argue that a new 'moment' is beginning in white writing, however. Coetzee's recent fiction has shifted in accordance with his new Australian citizenship (taken up in 2006), and other voices are emerging, 'writing into the gap', so to speak. The writing of white male identity beyond the formal collapse of apartheid is not a *fait accompli*. It remains a process – painful, intricate, and incomplete. This idea of the subject-in-process (to borrow Julia Kristeva's term) is one that offers fiction writers vast opportunities for exploration and creativity.

The focus of this report, and the two novels it examines, is thus probably best described as 'post-*Disgrace'*, an admittedly awkward term designed to demarcate the tentative, delicate, imperfect work that has begun to emerge in spite of - or as a result of - the giant shadow cast by Coetzee's fiction. A series of white male writers have begun to emerge to articulate other observations and responses to their new position in South African society, and to represent a 'new' and altered subjectivity to a wider audience. Troost and van der Merwe's literary responses to their present circumstances and the eruption of the past into their protagonists' present, are distinct. Theirs are not as measured, as knowing, or as stylised as Coetzee's responses, but therein lies their virtue. The male protagonists presented in *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss* are not David Lurie's successors, nor his foils. They are something else entirely.

A wealth of fiction, poetry and literary criticism (and *Disgrace* itself) reflect that South Africans are a people haunted by history. The absence of History - in the sense of an

overarching metanarrative that can provide comfort and a sense of shared experience to a nation - remains a defining feature of public discourse in the country. Apartheid, by definition divisive, created so many histories, both personal and political, that these stories have only recently begun to be told; or attempts made to fit them into a broader national narrative. South African History remains fraught, contested, unresolved. While perhaps difficult for politicians or educators, who rely on the grand narrative of History more than most, it offers up endless possibilities for writers wishing to add to the struggle to find and understand one another's experiences.

It would seem that South African history does not exist in the past, or not yet. Borges's observation in his short essay "The Modesty of History" that the significance of an historical date does not lie in the day of action, but rather in its perpetuation and commemoration through time [Borges quoted in Ermarth, 1992: 24] points to the continuing presence of the past, and this understanding of the historical event and its relation to the two novels will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five of this report.

No Man's Land and *Plot Loss* offer us the stories of Paul du Toit and Harry van As, two white South African men of Afrikaner descent, who find themselves in a difficult present. Both protagonists are negotiating their subjectivity in response to their experiences and memories of the past. History is haunting these characters, but it is not simply a haunting without effect or meaning - theirs is a haunting in pursuit of growth and change, of transformation. A haunting that has a direct and distinct impact on identity politics.

As touched upon in my literature review, recent critical writing has viewed this emergence of a 'new wave' of white writing in a celebratory light, signalling the arrival of new fictional representations and understandings of what it is to be white in South Africa. There does indeed seem to be a myriad of new voices being published, and established ones who are continuing with exciting and insightful work. The possibility exists, of course, that they are receiving greater critical and popular attention now that JM Coetzee is writing with greater distance from South Africa, creating psychological space for others in the mind of

both readers and writers. Or it could be that white subjects are finally maturing in the post-apartheid reality, to a stage where they feel they can begin to articulate their experiences. Whatever the reasons might be, *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss* are born out of this new wave, and their contribution to the post-*Disgrace* body of white writing is worthy of discussion.

CHAPTER THREE: *NO MAN'S LAND*

Carel van der Merwe's 2007 novel *No Man's Land* presents the reader with the tale of Paul du Toit, implicated in apartheid-era crimes when he served as a police informer, and now forced to testify before the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and seek amnesty, or face prosecution for the crimes he has done his best to conceal until now. Profoundly isolated in the present, first in Johannesburg and then in London, history and History keep returning to haunt Paul and force an identity transformation to begin. It is Paul's transformation in the novel, through his encounters with, and deepened understanding of, history, that I will be examining in light of Titlestad and Kissack's assertion that *No Man's Land* is a text involved in the complicating and texturing of 'bleached' post-apartheid understandings of whiteness.

This chapter will outline how van der Merwe's novel structures Paul's encounters with history through multiple temporalities; how these encounters prompt personal transformation in Paul, and ultimately how this transformation does, or does not, contribute to Titlestad and Kissack's project of resisting the uniformity of whiteness.

Paul's personal journey and transformation take him, and the reader, to a final meditation on forgiveness. When Paul returns to Mitchell's Plain, to face the mother whose son he unintentionally murdered, profound questions surrounding forgiveness are raised. Why should one ask forgiveness? Is true forgiveness indeed even possible? What are the power dynamics involved in the act of forgiveness? And what, ultimately, happens if forgiveness is not granted? *No Man's Land*, at the time of writing, is one of the only fictional texts in contemporary South African writing that deals with apartheid crimes from the dedicated perspective of a perpetrator, requiring forgiveness. Using Mark Sanders's work on perpetrators and forgiveness in *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of the Truth Commission* [2008] as a guide, this chapter will examine the implications of forgiveness for Paul du Toit, and whether van der Merwe's conclusion for Paul is indeed as hopeful as critics such as Titlestad and Kissack would suggest.

No Man's Land's structure: the triptych

No Man's Land is a triptych of sorts - it consists of three panels, each titled according to the location in which it takes place: South Africa; London; South Africa. I use the term 'panel' rather than 'section' because, somewhat like a triptych painting, each panel makes up part of a whole picture which is best viewed together rather than in isolation. Each panel contains elements which are repeated or reflected in others, and the motif of relinquishment and the inescapability of history run through all three. Despite differing geographical locations, van der Merwe ensures that all three panels feature regular returns to the past, either in the form of the thread of TRC hearing transcripts from Paul's case which are woven through the novel, or Paul's own memories, revealed as flashbacks.

Of interest is the distinct focus that each of these panels has. Each panel presents Paul grappling with a certain time in his life. The first panel (set in South Africa) focuses primarily on Paul's *immediate present* and his attempts to deal with the here and now, which is being destabilised by the eruption of the repressed past. The second panel (set in London) focuses on Paul's disproportionate obsession with *the recent past* (his estranged wife's decision to leave him and divorce him), arguably as a distraction from the more pressing issues of his complicity in an apartheid-era bombing. The third panel portrays Paul's return to South Africa to deal, at last, with the unfinished business of more *distant History*: his father's death and a visit to the mothers of the men who were killed in the bombing with which he assisted.

If we chart the change in Paul's subjectivity through the structure of the novel, we can see a pattern of denial, distraction, confrontation, acceptance and in the final lines the text - certainly not resolution or absolution - but a firm decision to opt out of History.

Panel One: the present

The power and discourse of the meta-narrative of History cannot be underestimated, and the grand narrative of Afrikaner history has determined much of protagonist Paul du Toit's life and identity in *No Man's Land*. The Afrikaner worldview of estranged European heritage, a unique and privileged relationship with the African land, and the vital importance of the preservation of Afrikaner heritage and identity, were powerfully instilled in Afrikaners during the apartheid years. It provided white male Afrikaners such as Paul du Toit with a formula for their lives - a guide to successful living. All aspects of someone like Paul's life were overseen and influenced by the Afrikaner Nationalist state, from schools to church to military service to universities to the workplace. Afrikaner heritage was something sacred, but fragile. Powerful, but in need of constant protection particularly from its menfolk, whose primary responsibility it was to remain vigilant against threat. Paul lays out precisely this meta-narrative for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

> My paternal great grandfather fought in the war against the British. He was captured and imprisoned for two years in Ceylon. His daughter, my grandmother, survived the deaths of her mother and younger brother in a concentration camp. Aftewards, she, and those of her generation, worked tirelessly to restore power to the Afrikaner nation. From childhood it was instilled in me that, having regained our country, we had to defend it at all costs, so as never again to end up in a similar situation. [Van der Merwe, 2007: 22]

Paul du Toit's childhood and early adulthood thus located him firmly inside this line of Afrikaner History. Paul "had gone to school, played rugby, attended church, reported for his National Service, enrolled at university, found a job, married, lived in the suburbs: he was the same as everybody else." [2007: 18] This is an historical narrative that most certainly flows in one direction - from a clear past to a clear future. The construction of temporality contained in this worldview served to maintain the status quo of Afrikaner identity, providing comfort and familiarity and an unspoken guarantee to those who adhered to its guidelines. As a text, *No Man's Land* demonstrates how this linear

understanding of the world and of time has been fundamentally disrupted in post-apartheid South Africa.

Living out this narrative to its logical end in apartheid South Africa, Paul du Toit completed his national service: "I wanted to fight the enemy." [2007: 23]. But his service to the cause of the Afrikaner state did not conclude there, arguably precisely because of his conviction that there was an enemy that needed to be fought. We learn that Paul was a volunteer in the Special Forces of the apartheid military, and later in the Military Intelligence wing, doing his part to combat the "grave threat" South Africa faced from Communist forces, a cause he sincerely believed in at the time [2007: 23]. Paul becomes involved in an intelligence operation to frighten those of his fellow University of Cape Town students involved in a political organisation called the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), headed up by his friend and rival Andre Pretorius. Paul learns that Andre and a fellow activist Ebrahim Peters have been killed by the limpet mines he himself planted there. Paul's understanding was the mines would be detonated when the chosen target of a community hall was empty, to frighten people, but we later learn that the timing of the detonation was purposeful, with the aim of murdering the two young men.

> Mr du Toit: The project was not aimed at specific individuals [Andre and Ebrahim], but at disrupting the subversive activities of the ECC …
>
> Mr van Vuuren: To be more specific - there was no order that the project should result in the death of anyone?
>
> Mr du Toit: No, nothing like that. I would not have taken part in such a thing. [2007: 50]

As we learn much later, however, this was very much the intention of Paul's superiors. As the agent who planted the bombs that killed Andre and Ebrahim, but without being told that this was the objective of the mission, Paul is both puppet and puppet master in this horrific event.

His role in the planting of the bomb never having been revealed to anyone (including family, friends, his girlfriend and later wife Louise, or the authorities), and his time with the military as an informer over, Paul has consigned this traumatic event to his past, and chosen to pretend it never happened.

But as Paul discovers at the outset of *No Man's Land*, "… the past had not died. It had only been in hibernation. And now it had tracked him down." [2007: 12]

The first panel of the novel is dominated by Paul's appearance before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: he must disclose his role in the apartheid-era bombing. Titlestad and Kissack make a note of the *reasons* that this unpleasant and painful transformative process is set into motion:

> Du Toit *does not seek amnesty out of regret*. His confession is motivated by circumstance: because his erstwhile commanding officer, Captain Harris is seeking amnesty (because his superior officer is applying to the TRC), du Toit is informed that he will be implicated and prosecuted unless he too petitions the Commission. [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008: 15 - italics my own]

I will return to a discussion of the implications of a perpetrator even wanting forgiveness at the end of this chapter, but right from the start of the novel, the idea that the past had returned to find Paul, against his will and certainly contrary to his desire to forget and bury the past: Paul's appearance before the TRC alienates him from his friends, co-workers and – most importantly – his wife: "It is the new South Africa, and he is an unwelcome reminder of the past, a past that most whites want to forget or ignore." [Van der Merwe, 2007: 25]

Van der Merwe uses the TRC as a narrative conceit to great effect. An institution dedicated to challenging precisely the project that Paul (and other apartheid perpetrators) have dedicated their lives to – pretending it didn't happen. Burying, and forgetting. In literary terms, the TRC offers van der Merwe the perfect vehicle to challenge and destabilise the

grand narrative of History that has shaped the Afrikaner ideology to which Paul subscribed as a young man. In the novel, Paul's testimony before the TRC is set apart from the rest of the text by a different font and typeset. The flow of time is not just chronologically disrupted by these episodic returns to the past, but the actual reading experience is interrupted. The reader experiences the past being shaken just as Paul does.

Before disclosing his role in the murder of Andre and Ebrahim to the TRC at a hearing, Paul finally tells his wife, Louise, his portion of the truth about the events surrounding the bombing. Louise leaves him immediately and initiates divorce proceedings with startling speed. Her complete refusal to speak to or see Paul is arguably the most intimate form of censure which Paul experiences over the course of the novel; the most powerful ostracism for his past actions. (It emerges much later in the text that Louise had, in fact, planned to leave Paul for a long while, and that his confession about his past only provided the final catalyst to escape the marriage). Paul eventually learns that Louise has left South Africa to go to London, to build a new life without him.

Panel one leaves Paul with what feels like a destroyed present.

With Louise gone and the social ostracism by his friends and colleagues being felt, Panel one is a meditation on isolation, and on a failure to understand. Paul is left abandoned in his present, alone and incapable of understanding anyone else, including Louise his wife, properly. Paul does not understand the TRC's perceived lack of sympathy towards his beliefs about Afrikaner self determination, the logical result of his upbringing. Quite simply, he cannot understand why this is happening to him. This sense of alienation and isolation in the text is heightened by the nature of Paul's narrative. Paul is in no way a traditional realist narrator, as might be found in the world of George Eliot's fiction: omniscient and confiding. In *No Man's Land*, the reader can never know what other characters are thinking. We have no access to the psychological world of anyone but Paul. Louise's lightning decision to leave is as baffling to the reader as it is to Paul. The attitudes of the TRC examiners and the peripheral people he encounters in his life remain

impenetrable. Paul's limits of understanding and knowledge are the reader's too. Paul is not History in this text; Paul is merely and only Paul.

By restricting the ontological scope of the book simply to that of Paul du Toit's, van der Merwe is resisting the possibility of writing Paul's experience back to whiteness as nothing more than a "taken for granted negative essence, a place less-looked into, a site of unredeemed racism and assured uniformity," as warned against by Leon de Kock [De Kock, 2006: 187]. Paul du Toit was indeed complicit in apartheid - about as directly as a person could be. He was a perpetrator of apartheid crimes; we know this as a fact from the outset of the book. On top of that, he does not seem to feel guilt or remorse for his involvement, and expects a certain level of understanding from the TRC for his motives. If ever there was a protagonist for the potential to be nothing more than a 'negative essence' of whiteness, Paul du Toit is probably it.

But Paul is also an individual psyche. He is a rounded human being, with vulnerabilities, nuance and complexities. He is also capable of embarking on a journey of transformation and personal change. If the first panel of the novel is about Paul trying to understand what has happened to him in the present – in terms of his marriage, his job, and the unwelcome arrival of the past - then it is also about being feeling to be without agency. The present has paralysed him. Paul's whole conception of time as being something that flows unstoppably from past to present to future, without disruption, has been challenged, leaving him uncertain.

Paul's lack of agency in Panel One stems from the sudden change effected on his present, and his sense that the past is essentially inaccessible. His past cannot be changed or altered - causes are assumed to precede effects, and as he cannot alter the cause, he cannot control the effects in his present. He has become merely a passive observer in his own life. Time moves slowly, his days are too long and too directionless to fill meaningfully. The true horror of his current existence in the present sets in when he finds himself going to buy a movie ticket:

> He decides not to: to sit alone in a cinema on a Monday morning surrounded by pensioners - for that he is not yet ready. [Van der Merwe, 2007: 42]

Panel One concludes with Paul deciding to end his paralysis; to choose agency. A friend of Louise's, with a soft spot for Paul, reveals that she is living and working in London, which informs Paul's decision - as we see in Panel Two - to fly to London to find her and win her back, or at very least to gain some insight into her abrupt decision to leave him and to leave her life in South Africa. If he cannot change the past, he can certainly change his present, and possibly even his future too.

The meta-narrative of History, which Paul has always accepted as being bigger and more powerful than him, can in fact be altered and controlled. Time does not just flow in one direction, unstoppably, as he is discovering. There are opportunities and possibilities for himself and his own transformation in accepting the movement of time is not always in one direction.

Panel Two: the recent past

Having arrived in London to win back Louise, Paul sets about industriously creating a new, modest life for himself in London, while trying to locate his estranged wife. But the past - both recent and distant - continues to reappear, with increasing force and momentum. Paul prefers to dwell on the recent past; the past over which he still might be able to exert some control. He recalls the circumstances in which he met and fell in love with Louise. But lurking in dreams and the subconscious is also the more distant past - the details of his decision to become a police informer and spy for the apartheid government during his student years.

In his quieter moments, Paul allows himself to feel the discomfort of creating a new present in the attempt to avoid the effects of the past.

> … he knew people who for a thousand pounds could get him a British passport. In fact, the passport would be issued by their contact at the Home Office. But then again, what difference would a new identity make? A familiar dread comes over him, the knowledge that he has lost his way, that his life has *derailed*. Louise is a way back, a bridge to the past and the future. [Van der Merwe, 2007: 119 - italics my own]

The word 'derailed' could not describe more accurately the effect of van der Merwe's portrayal of time in *No Man's Land*. To derail something is to knock it off a straight line, to obstruct a clear course which moves unstoppably in one direction. Time, and the continuing refusal of history to remain in the past, has derailed Paul from the narrative of his life, and from his understanding of himself.[2] Paul's identity has become fragile. His very concept of self seems threatened by this destabilisation. The profound anxiety Paul feels at being derailed largely explains his extraordinary investment of time, money and self in locating his wife, who quite clearly has no desire to see or contact him.

Initially, Paul's burning desire to locate and win back Louise might strike the reader as teetering on the edge of obsession. The memory of Louise is, for Paul, the 'bridge' he so desperately needs in his life. But it is Louise's quitting of their marriage, without explanation or discussion, which drives Paul in his relentless pursuit of answers.

It is only after he finally has two of his own 'Truth and Reconciliation' encounters with Louise, in London, that Paul's own personal transformation can begin in earnest, for it is through these encounters that Paul first understands that there are multiple histories within History. The grand narrative of Time and History, flowing inexorably forward is further textured and layered for Paul and for the reader. Listening to Louise's side of the story, so

[2] It is no coincidence that he goes with Monica, the Czech au pair he saved from attack and has since befriended, to see the movie *Memento,* the most successful film of recent years to experiment with the convention of time and its construction. The 2000 film, directed by Christopher Nolan is a murder thriller in which the protagonist must solve the mystery of who murdered his wife, but one of the film's narrative's is shown in reverse order: in other words, scenes are scheduled chronologically back through time. To add to these time games, the lead character suffers from a (slightly fantastical) form of amnesia which prohibits him from remembering the past, thus heightening the importance of the present. Past, present and future all become destabilised through these techniques, throwing the protagonists, and indeed everyone else's, identity into question too.

to speak, Paul begins to grasp that there is no authoritative History. It does not exist. It never has.

His first encounter with Louise is very much on his terms; an ambush rather than a meeting. Having tracked down Louise at last to an apartment she is sharing with her boyfriend, Adrian, Paul presents himself to Louise outside her door. When alone at last, Paul confronts Louise about her reasons for leaving. In this first encounter, she attributes her leaving to his confession at the Truth Commission hearing, which she cannot believe to be anything other than a cynical and opportunistic defence on Paul's part:

> 'You mean that wonderful tale about the Voortrekkers and the Boer War and how you wanted to fight Communism and how it was all for your country and the volk [people] – yes, I heard all that.'
> 'That was true.'
> She laughs harshly. 'Come off it. Leave that for the judges and lawyers. Since when have you been interested in all that?'
> 'Just because I didn't talk about those things doesn't mean I didn't believe in them.' [Van der Merwe, 2007: 134]

Louise also reveals that on the night of the bombing, when Paul claims he was in his room in Rondebosch, she called him several times on the telephone, although he never answered, throwing his story into a suspicious light. They part ways, without resolving why he did not answer the phone that night and - consequently - without telling each other 'the truth'.

The multiple histories that make up Louise and Paul's history, and their marriage, are finally laid bare for Paul to see after their first encounter. With this realisation, his personal transformation begins.

Paul's second encounter with Louise is in an entirely different setting. Paul has been hospitalised after he is attacked by a bouncer and the would-be rapist of his lover Monica. Vulnerable and hurting, literally this time, Paul wonders when - and if - his estranged wife

will make an appearance to see him in hospital. ('Where is Louise? Does she really care so little?' [2007:147])

Louise does materialise at his bedside in the end, but just to ask for an uncontested divorce, it would seem. In his first sincere effort at full disclosure (in return for some sort of 'amnesty' from Louise, perhaps?], Paul discloses that he wasn't in his room on that fateful night, but driving around Mitchell's Plain, looking for 'Tommy', the unfortunate Mandrax addict charged with detonating the bomb. Paul has concealed the truth from everyone then – he was in the close vicinity of the community hall when the bombs were detonated, implicating him even further.

> She shakes her head. 'How many versions of the truth are there?'
> 'This is the truth.' [Van der Merwe, 2007: 156-157]

But there are, of course, many versions of the truth. Each individual - Paul, Louise - can only offer theirs. Paul having revealed his to Louise in this second encounter, he also learns the truth about Louise's departure from their marriage.

> ' … You didn't just leave because of what came out of that hearing, did you? You had this whole London thing planned before that… I thought you, we, were reasonably happy.'
>
> … 'Did you really think so? I don't think so. Weren't we just going through the motions?"…'
>
> 'What were you so unhappy about?'
>
> 'Please! Everything about that life. Johannesburg, the crime, South Africa, you drinking yourself into a stupor two or three times a week … And over here I don't have to read every day how guilty I should feel about the past, for being white. I'm sick and tired of all that. I just want to live my life.' [Van der Merwe, 2007: 157]

It becomes clear that Paul and Louise's truths about their shared history were very different. Entirely different, apparently. Paul's failure to understand his wife was complete. Louise used his TRC hearing and confessions – incomplete as they were - as an excuse to end the marriage. Her decision predated the eruption of Paul's past into the present, and the cause-and-effect relationship Paul had presumed between his past actions and present pain in Panel One is proven to be significantly more complex and layered than he initially understood.

This is simultaneously a terrible realisation for Paul, and a liberating one. The answers he has got from his second encounter with Louise (as well as the answers he has given), while perhaps heartbreaking, are also freeing. There are multiple histories, and multiple truths. There is no grand narrative of History for people, only individual histories, each complex and unique.

Panel Two concludes with Paul having addressed and begun the process of transformation through confronting his *recent past*. Arguably, because he could not begin to tackle the distant past without having addressed the recent past, Paul as narrator is not suitably resolved - and transformed through knowledge and understanding - about his recent past and present, to begin to look into questions about his distant, and significantly darker, past.

Panel Three: the distant past

The death of Paul's father prompts his return to South Africa at the start of the third panel of the triptych. Paul then makes a journey three-times over, as such: back to South Africa, back to his parents' farm outside Warmbaths, and back to his own personal history.

Paul's father was a farmer. The farm as a symbol of patriarchal power and of belonging, and in relation to the idea of a future for the white male in Africa, specifically Paul's personal transformation, is discussed in Chapter Six of this report ("The conclusions of *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*: manifestations of how the future remains unimaginable and possible reasons why"). But the news that Paul and his brother, who have now inherited the

farm from his father, will need to be around to see through the process of a land claim which has been filed by a local tribe against his father and the farm, brings home the legacy of apartheid. The land was originally bought by Paul's grandfather in the 1920s, who understood – mistakenly or not - that no-one lived on it and that the land was unused. But it is Paul, and not his father or grandfather - the third generation - who will need to debate and defend the question of their farm land and the legitimacy of their right to be there.

Paul's final choices in the face of this particular consequence of History are discussed in detail in Chapter Six, but there can be no doubt that van der Merwe chooses the third panel of his triptych to tackle deep History. In order for Paul's personal transformation from not understanding and not wanting to understand, to knowledge and - possibly - acceptance through the acknowledgement of multiple histories, he must face this past.

At last willing to acknowledge histories other than his own, Paul finally makes the journey to see the mothers of the young men who died in the bombing he orchestrated.

> "It is becoming a journey to his past, he thinks. But in South Africa the past is everywhere. It cannot be evaded." [Van der Merwe, 2007: 193]

Firstly, he travels to Mitchell's Plain outside Cape Town, together with the appropriately named Grace Motsepe from the Cape Town TRC office. There he meets with Mrs Peters, the mother of Ebrahim Peters, the young man killed in a bombing he was part of organising. Of significance is that this is a journey undertaken willingly by Paul, and perhaps therein lies the weight of responsibility that Paul feels. But upon arrival at the Peters' home in Mitchell's Plain, the true complexity of this encounter becomes apparent to Paul. Unable to enjoy the 'new' South Africa, Mrs Peters prefers to draw curtains against the sunshine and remain in the darkness. She meets Paul's apology with cynicism and barely concealed rage. She instantly identifies and challenges Paul's possibly selfish desire for some sort of atonement from the act of coming to ask for her forgiveness:

> "So, Mr du Toit, why do you think it necessary to tell me that you're sorry? Do you think it will help you sleep better at night?" [Van der Merwe, 2007: 194]

And as he leaves Mrs Peters' house:

> "But when he gets to the doorway, Mrs Peters speaks again: "Mr du Toit.."
>
> He turns around hopefully.
>
> "I, we, just want to…" She closes her eyes, then shakes her head, turns away. He waits for a few moments, but she does not look at him again." [Van der Merwe, 2007: 195]

The true difficulty of the project of Truth and Reconciliation is evident in this encounter then. The TRC's aim was to bring together victims of apartheid-era violence and the perpetrators of those crimes together in an 'encounter', in which the actions and consequences of apartheid are finally brought together. Victim and perpetrator are finally linked. The sense that perpetrators more often that not walked away from the crimes they had committed without guilt, any sense of responsibility or true comprehension of what they had done, had left the families of victims' with unanswered questions and no sense of closure, and the TRC's objective was to create that opportunity for closure. In these final stages of *No Man's Land*, history is indeed revisited and the truth attempted, but reconciliation and forgiveness remain elusive, if not entirely impossible. What is evident, for the second time in Paul du Toit's character arc, is a forced acknowledgement of another person's history, with all its implications.

The many histories and multiple experiences that Ermarth identifies as one of the great opportunities presented by postmodern representations of time, is made real to Paul du Toit for the second time in this final section of the novel. The effect this time is powerful, both in the moment ("He feels his heart beating, and the back of his shirt is sticky") and in

retrospect ("And suddenly he knows, and the realisation is overwhelming, that he cannot expect, does not deserve, anything.") [2007: 195-196]

Van der Merwe contrasts the intense present-mindedness and engagement of Paul's encounter with Mrs Peters, and the personal horror that accompanies it, with his second visit, this one to the mother of Andries Pretorius, his university friend (and romantic rival) also killed in the bombing. Lydia Pretorius is deep in the grip of Alzheimer's Disease, and is unable to recognise Paul, nor speak to him about the past or present. She cannot present Paul with her version of history or her truth. Her experience at losing a son to a political bombing remains unexpressed. Her affectionate blankness and complete innocence about his role in Andre's murder prove to be a tipping point for Paul, and he weeps while sitting with her.

> Something had been stripped from him, a membrane of sorts, an excision that has left his nerve-endings exposed and raw... [Van der Merwe, 2007: 198]

The question posed by van der Merwe could well be: which is worse? Never to forget, or to forget entirely? Both possibilities do not offer peace or freedom. Perhaps the possibility for peace and freedom in Paul's consciousness has been foreclosed in the past, which will shape and mould the future always.

Forgiveness and absolution

Paul returns from these important and voluntary pilgrimages to face the past in Panel Three with the overwhelming realisation that the journey itself is not a guarantee of absolution. Absolution, in fact, does not exist; or not in his case anyway. He finds himself changed, through acknowledgement and connection, and brings to an end his personal denial, removing his protective 'membrane', such a central part of his subjectivity until now. Paul enters into comprehension, for the first time, of the full spectrum of consequences to his actions in the past. The present can now be understood more fully as ''overwhelmingly'' complex, and possibly the future too. [2007: 196]

Let me return, for a moment, to my thesis for this paper, which is to explore the ways in which *No Man's Land* resists and complicates the 'bleached' and 'homogenised' representations of whiteness, as identified by De Kock and argued by Titlestad and Kissack, that are so common, but also to understand the limitations and boundaries of these texts to lead a meaningful change in representations.

Academic Mark Sanders's recent work on forgiveness and the TRC, with a special focus on literature, has particular relevance to a novel such as *No Man's Land*, given Paul's specific encounter with that institution, as well as his journey to apologise to Mrs Peters. In his chapter entitled 'Forgiveness' in *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of the TRC,* Sanders outlines some of the recent debates surrounding the philosophical implications of forgiveness. He traces Jacques Derrida's (b.1930 d.2004) 'conversation' on forgiveness in response to the work of Vladimir Jankelevitch (b.1903 d.1985).

Sanders presents Jankelevitch's argument to the reader:

> "In order to lay claim to forgiveness, one must admit one's guilt, without reservations or adducing attenuating circumstances." (Jankelevitch, "Should We" 567, translation modified] It thus appears that, for Jankelevitch, even radical evil - the unforgivable - can be forgiven if the culprit asks forgiveness. [Sanders, 2008: 90-91]

Derrida, on the other hand, contests Jankelevitch's stipulation that the culprit must show repentence, and *request* forgiveness. For how can forgiveness truly be exactly that, an act of true forgiveness, if it is conditional? If we are to think of forgiveness as a gift that is given, the recipient cannot be asked to pay anything for the gift:

> […] there is a forgiveness, in the meaning of forgiveness a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal (call it what you will) that demands that forgiveness be granted, if it can be, even to someone who does not ask for it, who

> does not repent or confess or improve or redeem himself […] [Derrida, as quoted in Sanders, 2008: 91]

To complicate matters, however, in his typical playful style, Derrida does acknowledge later that if certain acts are truly 'unforgivable', then they simply cannot be forgiven – leading to the aporia of forgiveness, which could only exist in its most pure form if it was given, but is precluded from being given for certain acts. A paradox, indeed.

Sanders's chapter highlights the extreme fragility of the moment when victims encounter their persecutors at the Truth Commission, a reality which has often been overlooked by commentators. Rather than always being an opportunity for victims to 'turn the tables' and to get answers from offenders, Sanders presents examples of cases where that space returns the victim to the time of the offence, allowing the perpetrator to be in a position of power and control once again, reliving the ugly events a second time at the expense of the victim. The vulnerability of the victim, in choosing to be present and choosing to have a face-to-face encounter with a perpetrator, is open to abuse and manipulation, as Sanders notes. The victim may leave feeling violated for a second time [Sanders, 2008: 113]

But Sanders also acknowledges the possibility of freedom that asking forgiveness offers an offender - while discussing it in another context, it must be noted.

> There is another element, where this 'return' [to the crime or offence in question] must be provisional – so that the offender is not locked forever in that time and identity. [Sanders, 2008: 113]

It is this desire not to be locked into his 'former self' that has informed many of Paul's decisions throughout *No Man's Land.* In his own face-to-face encounter with the victim of his actions, Paul is not granted forgiveness by Mrs Peters. According to Jankelevitch's argument, Paul has met the ethical criterion for being granted forgiveness, by showing repentance and accepting whole-heartedly his portion of guilt and his role in Ebrahim's death, "without reservations or adducing attenuating circumstances."

> "Mrs Peters, please. I was wrong, we were wrong. It was wrong of us to fight like that. *And I know Ebrahim would be alive today if it hadn't been for me*. I am sorry, truly sorry." [Van der Merwe, 2007: 195 - italics my own]

But for Mrs Peters, perhaps Paul's actions constitute an unforgivable act. He leaves her house without any reconciliation or forgiveness granted.

It is Mrs Peters' refusal to forget, and Mrs Pretorius's inability to remember, which seem to complete Paul's character arc through the narrative. His transformation is complete. The overwhelming realisation of what he has done, and the change that it forces within him are in stark contrast to his testimony presented to the Truth Commission months earlier.

> Mr Maubane: Your attitude is most unhelpful. You are expected to disclose all relevant facts, which include your activities as a Military Intelligence agent during the period leading up to the killing of Mr Peters and Mr Pretorius.
>
> Mr du Toit: That is your opinion, you are entitled to it, I disagree.
>
> Mr Maubane: I see. Mr du Toit, you seem quite proud of your services in the Special Forces. Am I correct?
>
> Mr du Toit: I have nothing to be ashamed of, if that's what you're getting at. [van der Merwe, 2007: 109]

Paul's defiance has disappeared. There is not just one history, but many, all intertwined. Complicity is complex and nuanced, and no-one can avoid it entirely.

Altered by this painfully gained knowledge and his revised subjectivity, what, then, lies ahead for Paul? Without his membrane to buffer his experience of South Africa, and with

acknowledgement of his role in some of the pain and suffering that makes up the present, what does he do?

Van der Merwe chooses relinquishment and departure for his character. Paul leaves South Africa to continue forging a new life for himself in London, a city where so many other people have a past to be ashamed of, or are running away from something. For Paul, the only solution which appears to offer the possibility of a meaningful future is self-imposed exile, an escape from Africa.

Paul's decision to move to London signals a desire for a rebirth. An abrupt discontinuation of the flow of time, and the South African identity that is so inextricably linked to it, in his former life. It is, in many ways, a decision to exit History altogether. London offers a chance to start again, to reboot, to let go not only of South Africa as his country and home, but of the loss and anguish that is so bound up in it. History is so powerful, it would seem, that despite no legal or formal consequences to Paul's actions under apartheid, Paul makes the deliberate choice to opt out of it entirely.

CHAPTER FOUR: *PLOT LOSS*

Harry van As from Heinrich Troost's *Plot Loss* shares with Paul du Toit from *No Man's Land* the quest to be released from the haunting of history. Like Paul, Harry must revisit the past in order to end his present paralysis and move forward. But this is an entirely different novel, adopting particular literary repertoire to convey the subjectivity of its central character.

As its title knowingly acknowledges, *Plot Loss* presents a chaotic narrative, not simply refusing a traditional structure but forcing the reader to engage rigorously with the text to follow the action and plot. This is Barthes's notion of the demanding, 'writerly' text in action. We jump from location to location, place to place. The text will seemingly unfold in a conventional manner for pages, even chapters, before 'starting again' with an entirely new situation, introducing a new characters and a different authorial style and tone to match. Large chunks of text are inserted without context or reference points. The voice of our guide through the text, the narrator Harry van As, frequently doubts himself, or admits he cannot remember things. Characters often speak using the lyrics of popular songs or catch-phrases from movies. In one particular episode towards the end of the novel, Harry's narrative disintegrates into stream of consciousness writing, where the signposts of punctuation and phrasing are abandoned entirely.

Plot Loss is characterised by uncertainty and confusion, and a low-level anxiety seems to pervade Harry's entire narrative.

Troost does ultimately offer his reader something of an explanation. At the end of the text, we leave the free and direct discourse of Harry van As to learn that he has been lying in a coma for a month. Having sustained head injuries in a head-on collision with a delivery truck on the N2 outside Grabouw, in which both his children were instantly killed but his wife survived, Harry's last month is spent unconscious in a hospital bed, before succumbing to his injuries and dying. *Plot Loss*, then, is an account of Harry's dreams

during that month - an insight into his mind's adventures as he revisits his life and some of its key players (although noticeably, his children never feature in the narrative). [3]

Plot Loss as dream novel: postmodern representations for the death of the (white male) subject

Troost has chosen a very particular form for his study of Harry van As to take, and this merits a short discussion. Dreams and their strange power have been included in the Western canon for almost as long as literature itself - from the Pharaoh's terrifying vision dreams in the Old Testament through to modern classics such as Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. So while the dream as literary device is not new in literature, in the South African context it remains somewhat unusual: South Africa is a country understandably fixated on the idea of its past, the difficulty of its present and control of its future, and its fiction generally reflects this strong anchoring in the factual and historical. Dream novels in South African fiction are rare, as is the experimental style that often accompanies them too. Why then has Troost chosen to write a dream novel as his first foray into fiction, particularly in contrast to *No Man's Land*, which remains rooted by its 'language of reality', despite its games with time and narrative?

This question can only be answered by examining what it is the dream, as opposed to the waking state, might offer the writer to assist him in his project.

Troost's attraction to the dream as a literary strategy in *Plot Loss* can be understood if one sees that his project is, in many ways, a postmodern one. Literary postmodernism, characterised by its interest in multiple perspectives, multiple truths, the sense of a globalised and interconnected world, droll irony, occasional cynicism, and even ethical relativism, offers Troost an understanding of the world which offers legitimacy to the feelings of alienation and meaninglessness that seem to define Harry van As's existence in the text.

[3] In 2005 a book was published by Donna Chavez entitled "A Guide to pre-death dreams and visions", in which the author suggests that dreaming before finally passing away provides an opportunity to mend fences, revisit past experiences and come to some sort sense of serenity before death.

The ‘social death’ (or ‘social demotion’ as Titlestad and Kissack refer to it) experienced in white male identity in contemporary South Africa has resulted in feelings of profound discombobulation. This then raises questions of representation - how does one give meaningful voice in fiction to a subject that feels bereft, defeated, aimless? Any official Truths that might once have held true have now been challenged and even destroyed. The subject is in crisis, and this crisis translates directly into a crisis of representation. In their paper, “Apathy and agency in Damon Galgut’s *The Good Doctor*”, Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack discuss the theme of social demotion and its effect on white South African men in recent South African fiction. Titlestad and Kissack consider how the “fundamental reversal of fortune” [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008:16] they have experienced by South African white men since the demise of formal apartheid has triggered a torrent of new writing, including *No Man’s Land* and *Plot Loss,* all grappling with “the dynamics of demotion and its consequences.” [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008: 17]

> White South African men… have been cut loose from their historical moorings (to privilege and hegemony) and cast adrift in a new postcolonial order. They are… disoriented, nostalgic, and alienated … [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008: 17]

Troost’s decision to seek expression through a postmodern style of writing then is entirely logical. Indeed, what better form of literature to give creative expression to that crisis of meaning than postmodernism? Postmodernism allows the author, and his protagonist, space for pastiche and homage, to reference a global lexicon of signs and symbols, to embrace ‘plot loss’ and to accept that profound meaninglessness as not only ‘normal’, but to be expected in a postmodern world.

Unlike the chaotic worlds of protagonists in other postmodern fictional worlds, also searching for meaning (Mark Renton in Irvin Welsh’s *Trainspotting* or Oedipa Maas from Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* come to mind), Troost opts to step clean out of reality in *Plot Loss*. Harry van As is in a coma, dreaming. None of this is ‘real’. This choice, in turn, presents its own set of problems, which I shall discuss at the conclusion of this chapter.

Let us then examine some of the opportunities that dreams can provide in a text, in a Freudian interpretation, and how the dream-as-literary-mode might give expression to Troost's subject in crisis.

Firstly, the dream allows for uncensored play. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud argues that as we fall asleep, so the 'guarding' functions of the psyche are relaxed. There is less self-censorship in the sleep state, and the mind is allowed to experiment, play and fantasise with less restriction from the super-ego, particularly.

This absence of traditional boundaries and expectations in the dream provides Troost as author, and his characters, a space to play that could perhaps not be afforded in a more traditional exploration of a white male protagonist in contemporary South Africa. This seems to manifest itself most specifically in Troost's text as his staging of Afrikaner identity in a global context, where Harry is as likely to quote the lyrics of a 1980s pop song as he is Eugene Marais's most heartfelt poetry. This postmodern play resists the arguably more traditional approach of locating Afrikaner identity primarily in relation to Afrikaner history and ideology, a powerful meta-narrative of surviving and preserving identity against all odds. Troost instead commits himself as an author to portraying Harry as a citizen of the world, with global influences and interests. Rather than being obsessed with his 'South African-ness', Harry's self-conceived identity is really as a child of the world - the postmodern world - in which nationalism is passé and one's only sense of 'belonging' is with kindred spirits, rather than with other nationalities, classes, races or language groups. Harry does not discriminate in his friendships in *Plot Loss.* Rather, he surrounds himself with people who interest and stimulate him. Harry's relationships with his past lover (Jeanne), young black colleague (Vusi) and mystic gurus of sorts (Reiner) are all playful and easygoing. Unguarded. While these may at times seem fantastic, and even occasionally difficult to accept for the reader, they are understandable and possible in the world of the dream.

Secondly, dreams allow a space for wish fulfilment, as Freud famously asserted in *The Interpretation of Dreams.* In the case of *Plot Loss*, one last chance at wish fulfilment

presents itself to Harry in his dreams, allowing for the chance to revisit, make peace with, comprehend and possibly accept the events of his life before he dies.

A third function of dreaming identified by Freud, and of particular relevance to *Plot Loss*, is the idea that dreams allow a space for a temporary escape from the tyranny of rational and logical, which structure and influence waking thought, and control our responses:

> We have seen that the very fact of falling asleep involves a renunciation of one of the psychic activities - namely, the voluntary guidance of the flow of ideas. [Freud, 1999: 157]

This third function of the dream could have been of such interest to Troost because the dream, and the dream novel, offer the opportunity to reflect the crisis of subjectivity being experienced by Harry van As - the white, middle-aged, Afrikaner male whose interior life and private thoughts the novel maps. It is only at the end of the text that we learn from Rainer, as he talks to his partner Cirkene, what his impression was of Harry on meeting him the day before the car accident:

> "…. He seemed a bit…."
> "What?"
> "Can't say. As if something was missing. I told you…"
> "Not really," she says, "Unhappy?"
> "Well . …. Ja… He seemed to be looking for something, something he had lost." [Troost, 2007: 190 and 192]

Harry was, it would seem, experiencing loss and sadness even before his car accident. His crisis predates, and perhaps informs, his dreams while in his final coma.

This is as close as Troost comes in *Plot Loss* to taking questions of a white male identity crisis out of the dreamlike, and into the non-dream realm of societal reality. While the reader is never told explicitly what might be the source of Harry's personal crisis, the themes, concerns and worries that preoccupied Harry's consciousness before his car

accident are not hard to imagine. By linking Harry's pre-car accident concerns with the generalised anxiety Harry exudes throughout the text, Troost is perhaps gesturing towards the idea that these questions do have roots in the 'real world'. Titlestad and Kissack's contention that without the "hermeneutic hooks from which to hang an interpretation of the world" which came ready-made in the previous world order of white male privilege, the world has become significantly more difficult to represent, understand or relate to. *Plot Loss* is a direct result of that crisis of representation and crisis of subjectivity. There is no better way to demonstrate Harry as adrift in a sea of memories and experiences which he does not know how to interpret than to use the *traumnovel*. The world of the dream is irrational, ungovernable, full of simultaneously knowing and not knowing things and people, full of the familiar and the strange, the uncanny; Troost has employed the ideal literary device to give expression to the subject in crisis.

Reclaiming individual identity from the group

Chapter 10 of *Plot Loss* describes Harry's workplace, where a group of consultants have been brought into his nameless and vague company to "enhance their soft skills" [Troost, 2007: 63]. What follows is not just a satire on the intellectual mumbo-jumbo that so often surrounds the modern corporation's attempts at improvement, but a revealing discussion about the idea of 'the group'. The idea of the group being used to define and understand people reveals that Troost perhaps shares de Kock's concerns about white South Africans being presented and understood as an undifferentiated, homogenised group.

Troost describes how the group (of employees) is treated by the consultants, and how supposed theories about group identity govern the consultants' approach to the group. The frustrations and restrictions - as well as sheer silliness - that go with treating people as 'a group' soon become apparent:

> It [the consultant exercise] takes the premise that a group, like an individual, has a subconscious mind .. [This] cause[s] the group to function in a particular way; something the individual members of the group are not aware of. […] Accordingly, a group will often make the assumption that they are dependent. They will rely

> heavily on one person to lead. The other members will shy away from any responsibility, just to see the leader come to a fall. Naughty of them. […] Or the group can assume that they have a fictitious enemy they have to fight or flee from. They do this in a subconscious attempt to bind themselves tighter together as a group." [Troost, 2007: 63]

The reader watches this exercise through Harry's eyes, who is distanced and faintly disgusted ("Many people sell snake oil as corporate spirituality. Or corporate spirituality as snake oil. They repulse him" [Troost, 2007: 65]) by this crude attempt at communication. To try to relate to people simply as a group is no way to attempt to understand or reflect individual's experiences.

The theme of Harry's distrust and distance from 'the group' is threaded through the entire text of *Plot Loss*. This is a postmodern narrative of the individual who questions any historically pre-determined understanding of his identity as being part of a 'group', be that group whites, Afrikaners, South Africans or males. Harry's identity has been shaped and informed by the broadest spectrum of influences imaginable: pop music, poetry, Afrikaner history, American history, philosophy, literature, global politics, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Egyptology, New Age theory, psychoanalysis. The list goes on. If Harry's 'externally imposed' identity is that of an Afrikaner, white, South African male, Troost has ensured that it is staged on a global platform, and located in the broadest possible postmodern context for the reader. The individual is not the group, and to write back Harry's individual experience to the group that is 'white men' is precisely to fall into the trap that Titlestad and Kissack identify as "the inclination to write all South African stories back to predictable versions of the public and the political." [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008: 6] Troosts resists this at every turn, constantly returning to the theme of the individual, and Harry's refusal to belong to any group prescribed for him by society, and his deep distrust of the group and its supposed benefits of belonging and protection:

> He had a complex about groups […] He proferred in his defence that he grew up in conservative suburbia. What group was there to oversee his rites of passage: the

> Dutch Reformed Church, his apartheid flagship of a school, his university hostel, or the SA Defence Force? Barbarians, cannibals, even snakes show more concern for their own sort. He loves his family, sure, but not as a clan. [Troost, 2007: 64]

The double helix in *Plot Loss*: revisiting personal history and national History

If we return briefly to Ermarth's idea that postmodern fiction has rejected Historical time and the linear narrative in favour of 'swinging' time and the multivalent narrative, we see that *Plot Loss* exemplifies this. Harry's narrative takes us into the country's past, into his distant past, his recent past, into the 'present' - which seems to comprise dreams which are an amalgamation of the actual events of Harry's life. He even dreams of a possible future, in which he has survived the accident but his wife and children have died. [Troost, 2007: 85]

Time as a convention is refused any opportunity to offer comfort to the reader - or to Harry - through structure or logic in this text. Time betrays Harry and the reader constantly, causing anxiety and contributing to the mounting uncertainty the reader might well feel as the text marches on. History could crop up at any moment, or could alter the present drastically. History has no sense of its rightful place in this text.

Plot Loss sees a detailed and intricate blending of Harry's personal history, and History - the grand South African metanarrative of our national political history. The one is never far from the other, and rather than trying to deal with the personal and the political as separate stories or narratives, Troost binds them tightly together: an inextricable double helix running through the text. This is not dissimilar from van der Merwe's approach in *No Man's Land*, but the use of language and style here sets *Plot Loss* apart.

Harry and friends find themselves at the house of the architect Marko, when Harry, prompted by Jeanne, reveals a great deal of interest in and knowledge about the renegade Afrikaner intellectual, Eugene Marais. Marais was, amongst other things, a poet and a scientist, with a keen hatred for the British colonial powers, despite having studied law at Temple in London. He was famous for a rather serious morphine addiction and for shooting

himself in the chin to commit suicide. He is, to many Afrikaners, a symbol of an alternative history and identity – here was an Afrikaner who was dark and brooding, alienated but fiercely proud of his language, troubled but brilliant. He is a symbol of a rebellion on the part of those who identify with him against the grand Afrikaner narrative that stresses an upstanding, God-fearing existence, family and community above all else. As Troost points out, Marais's poetry is shot through with a profound "longing for oblivion and death" [Troost, 2007: 52], which will have special meaning for Harry. But Marais and his 'darkness' do not exist far off in the distant past, without connection or meaning in Harry's present:

> 'Well it is uncanny that you mention him, Jeanne,' Marko says… 'Because they say that he spent a year of his life in this very house.'
> He [Harry] eyes Marko with scepticism. 'In this house?' he asks.
> 'Yes, in this house.' [Troost, 2007: 52]

History is part of Harry's present, haunting the house Marko currently lives in.

The *language* of personal and national history are wound together tightly by Troost, too.

By way of illustration, let us examine one of the 'sites' of one of Harry's dream visits. During his dreams, Harry revisits his relationship with Jeanne; briefly a flame of his at Stellenbosch university. He had ended his relationship with her abruptly, leaving her for another girl. We learn that, in the waking world, Harry and Jeanne have seen each other recently, as friends, in the weeks before his death because Harry has been seconded to the city of his childhood, Pretoria, where Jeanne lives. But in Harry's dream he begins a second relationship with Jeanne. He apologises and attempts to explain why he didn't call her or pursue the relationship while they were at university, ultimately suggesting that he was just "too cooked" for her. ("Or too raw," he adds). [Troost, 2007: 70-71] Jeanne - in his dream - is curiously without notable anger or resentment about their previous relationship, and Harry is able to re-experience the pleasure of sexual re-connection with

her. But even in the safe pleasure of their lovemaking, the backdrop of national history is ever-present. The text of the political is embedded right inside the text of the personal:

> They spend the rest of the sweaty afternoon in an entanglement of limbs, a combined insect that refuses to sever the yin from the yang. If they had cared to look, they would have seen the Union Buildings where their president was working.
>
> *He raised his hand up and said,*
> *'Viva, viva, my people.'*
>
> They were taking a break from the blood, dust and longing of a country they had inherited, the sins of their fathers. Later, he is playing with her hair. [Troost, 2007: 73- italics from the original]

It's important to point out that Harry's dream is just that - a dream, which offers him the opportunity to amplify desires and wishes he might have in his conscious life but could not acknowledge or act upon. While he did have a relationship with Jeanne, briefly, all those years ago, he has now created in his mind a second relationship between the two of them, as adults. We can see here again the freedom of the dream to indulge and play out fantasies that may not have been possible or acceptable in the 'real world' of Harry's life. Harry is experiencing through his dreams a sort of wish-fulfilment 'alternative' personal history; the road not taken as such.

As the novel progresses, the double helix of personal and political are wound even more tightly together, until eventually we reach the episode in the crater, where Harry's narrative strays into stream of consciousness. The crater, a natural feature just outside of Pretoria which the friends have all decided to visit in honour of the summer solstice (in Harry's dream of course, although this does mirror his actual experience before the car accident when he went to visit the crater). The confluence of the supposed magical properties of the place, the alignment of the solstice and Rainer's mysterious death at the bottom of the crater all trigger in Harry an experience of almost Dionysian hyper-reality.

As Harry's head begins to hurt again (perhaps the head injuries he has sustained from the accident are worsening in the waking world) (pg 156) he and his friends make their way to the crater. Here they learn from Max, their guide, about the significance of the crater as a spiritual place of meaning for all South Africans, no matter what race or religious background they come from.

> "…. The crater is the place of the spirits, the bad ones and the good ones too. Also of the sangomas, the priests, the people who make the rain and those who heal others... It goes funny in there and many things it can happen, the good luck or not." [Troost, 2007:158]

The scene is set then as Harry enters into a place which, even within his dream world, is a place of culmination and magic, of extraordinary experiences and - possibly - of connection with another world. Troost is bringing Harry's narrative, and his concomitant crisis of subjectivity, to a climax.

Harry's headache worsens as the group of friends descend into the crater under the powerfully hot South African sun. He hears powerful snapping sounds twice, and sees a mysterious black fox following them [Troost, 2007: 160 and 163]. Blood starts to drip out of the nearby acacia tree [2007: 63]. From this point on, Troost abandons any sort of gesture towards realistic language and narrative. Up until now the reader may have been forgiven for believing that this was a realist novel with only a slightly strange style, but as Harry approaches the death and possible resolution with history/History, the dream-like quality of the text becomes undeniable, creating a sense of confusion and disorientation for both Harry and the reader. As Cirkene shouts that it is twelve noon, the exact moment of the solstice which they have come to witness, Harry's hallucinations-within-a-dream can only be conveyed through stream of consciousness writing. He describes falling into cold water, saying farewell to his mother and then ultimately appearing in what seems to be a South American temple where he is worshipped by locals before being shaken back into the 'reality' (of his dream of being in the crater) by Johnson.

Lying in the sweltering sun, Harry revisits his sexual experiences with Jeanne when they were at university. A slow, sexual energy begins to pervade the entire scene, as Harry feels erotically connected to all his friends. His thoughts and the flow of ideas become increasingly illogical and rambling, his consciousness patchy. With the discovery of Rainer's dead body, Harry finally accepts his death as he touches Rainer's peaceful body.

> He knows that he is the dead one, the one dying. He is being blown to dust, atoms. It's something he is sure of, but wants to forget. Alas! He thinks. I am dead! … He realises he has been gliding down a river for some time without realising it. …It's as if my gaze is fixed on a big screen while I raft along, he thinks. I am watching movies *and* I am the star, projecting the images of my life. Something leaves him no choice but to raft along his inner world. [Troost, 2007: 186]

As Harry moves through his final dying moments, he must try to make sense of his subjectivity: what it was to be Harry van As, what his memories and his history all mean. But Troost does not offer up any resolution or reconciliation with history.

> He has a sense that it does not matter anymore, a sense that many things he thought important did not matter anymore. Other things he regarded as trivial, or with time came to regard as trivial, seem important again. … *He tries to make a sum, to tally the credits, but gives it up as futile.* The sum has already been made. [Troost, 2007: 187 - italics my own]

What is history then? As discussed in the introduction to this paper, it plays a determining role in constructing the individual subject, and as explored in both *Plot Loss* and *No Man's Land*, it continues to define and shape these men in the present, in an ongoing process. Is the individual's battle to understand and reconcile himself (in this case) with the double helix of History/history, a pointless battle then? Is the sum, the tally of one's experiences, made by someone other than the subject? By History itself? *Plot Loss* certainly seems to end on this somewhat sombre note. Harry's personal crisis of subjectivity, a crisis of meaning, his difficulty in making meaning of the world he finds himself in as a middle-

aged, middle-class Afrikaner comes to nothing then. His death arrives without ever finding the clarity, the 'overwhelming realisation' where it all makes sense, which Paul du Toit finds at the conclusion of *No Man's Land*.

The dream, even as a strategy to give expression to the idea of the white male subject in crisis, has its limitations though. Long held up in English classrooms across the world as an idea of how *not* to end a creative writing piece, the 'it was all a dream' revelation to the reader poses two risks, both of which readers might experience in reading *Plot Loss*. The first is the risk of staging subjectivity in such a personal manner that the reader can feel precluded and shut out of the text, limiting even white male readers' (arguably the most likely to identify with Harry and his experiences) ability to connect with the text. The second risk is that any narrative weaknesses, character issues or unconvincing dialogue can simply be explained away as being a feature of the irrational nature of dreams.

The 'it was all a dream' conclusion can also leave the reader feeling betrayed: cheated by the author in his or her efforts to understand and connect with protagonists and their worlds. As Harry van As finally crosses over from life into death, in the final pages of the book, Troost denies the reader any satisfaction of resolution or penetrating realisation. Rather, Harry (as the white male subject) remains, to the very end, unsettled and discombobulated. 'Knowledge' is never really attained in *Plot Loss* - rather, it remains impossible to achieve in an ever more complex world of contradictions, of signs that are difficult to read and interpret … and finally revealed as an almost impossibly personal lexicon, of black foxes and bleeding acacia trees.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CONCLUSIONS OF *NO MAN'S LAND* AND *PLOT LOSS*

Manifestations of how the future remains unimaginable

Chapter Two of this report ("Contextualising white writing post *Disgrace*") outlined some of the main shifts evident in South African white writing post-apartheid, in order to establish the context out of which *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss* were born. There are two general observations to be made about postcolonial 'white writing' in Africa which can also help to frame and understand the conclusions that van der Merwe and Troost have chosen, as first-time published writers, to give to their novels.

The first is that with the transition of most African countries to independent rule from their colonial rulers, so the white 'settler' communities of these countries dwindled to insignificance, or disappeared entirely. The romantic ideals surrounding the colonial project were now coming to somewhat bitter end, and the idea of 'writing back' to the centre with exciting tales of survival in 'uncivilised Africa' was becoming increasingly problematised by the rise of the media and the development of a sophisticated global awareness of human rights. There does not really exist a substantial body of work that constitutes 'white writing in Africa', and certainly not white fiction writing, after black independent governments came to power. Quite simply, white settler populations just about disappeared from Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Algeria and Malawi from that point on.

The exceptions are, of course, in Southern Africa - Zimbabwe and South Africa specifically. There, the colonial tale did not play out the way most others had. As Zimbabwe endured a civil war and then the transition to black majority rule, and South Africa went through the rise and fall of Apartheid, white settler populations no longer came to think of themselves as being British, but rather as South African or Zimbabwean. And Afrikaners, as the name 'Afrikaner' would suggest, have arguably never seen themselves as anything other than African. White identities began to view themselves as something closer to African-European, as opposed to simply European.

The observation is then that the existence of a body of 'white writing' in the *postcolonial* African context really only applies to Southern Africa. Across the African continent, there does not exist a broad range of critical discourse on white identity expressed through fiction, and even less in academic writing. The fact then that the very genre itself is small goes a long way to explaining the limited number of conclusions that seem to be imaginable to white male writers in Africa. Rather than a full orchestra playing, a symphony of ideas and conversations, there are merely a few players, vulnerable and over-exposed.

The limited size and scope of 'white writing', as a genre, will therefore automatically restrict the availability of plausible conclusions which can be presented to the reader.

The second observation is that there exists a long and formidable tradition in white writing of avoiding any commitment to imagining a future in the South African context for one's protagonist by having him either die, or flee Africa entirely. The moribund narrator is regularly part and parcel of white male South African fiction. This has been well documented in literary criticism on liberal writing in South Africa, starting with Stephen Gray. Titlestad and Kissack also provide, as an example, that the conclusion of Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* is a continuation of this familiar tradition:

> [T]he settler experience routinely culminates in a confrontation with alterity, commonly expressed as a deep sense of alienation in the African landscape. This fear, that whiteness is fundamentally at odds with its colonial context, is evident, Gray argues, in Schreiner, Plomer, Pauline Smith, Lessing, Paton and Gordimer. [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008: 5]

With this realisation, that "whiteness is fundamentally at odds with its colonial context," the options available to the white male protagonist (as textual surrogate to the white male author) appear to be limited: emigrate, or die. Either way, a future in Africa remains unimagined and unimaginable, both for reader and for writer.

The number of texts which play out this conclusion is disproportionate, and startling: Lyndall and Waldo are both dead by the end of *The Story of an African Farm*; Magda is dead at the end of *In The Heart of the Country*; Mrs Curran dies at the end of *Age of Iron*; Turbott Wolfe returns to England at the conclusion of that novel, to name but a few. This tradition lays bare the problem presented to the reader yet again in *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*: the inability to imagine any sort of perpetuation for white identity in South Africa. The authorial decision for the characters to die or to leave Africa to start a new life somewhere else might well rapidly be becoming literary cliché, but it is also indicative of something deeper - it speaks to the very heart of the difficulty of representation that is the white condition in South Africa.

Plot Loss and *No Man's Land*, as two pieces of new writing emerging in 2007, and as new voices articulating different experiences and viewpoints, do nothing to break this tradition. Paul du Toit flees South Africa to start a new life in London with his Czech lover Monica in the last lines of *No Man's Land.* Harry van As dies without resolution in *Plot Loss*. Both van der Merwe and Troost therefore preclude themselves from the task of imagining a future in South Africa for their respective protagonists, as white South African males, and fail to break with the tradition identified by Stephen Gray. If anything, these two novels serve to reinforce the dominant theme in white writing that no future for whiteness in Africa can be imagined.

Can this refusal - or inability? - to conceive the future on the part of such a startling number of white male South African fiction writers be put down to a lack of imagination, or does one need to truly *believe* in a future in order to articulate it, even in fictional terms? And, if that is the case, why do so few of these authors, apparently, believe?

A harsher critic might be tempted to make an argument for a certain conceptual laziness in the conclusion of texts such as Troost's and van der Merwe's, and indeed white writing generally. The emergence of these new young voices in the form of these debut novels is an exciting moment in the development of South African fiction, and a development to be encouraged and nurtured. But this New Wave, as such, will never be able to usher in a new

era of postcolonial white writing without being able to reject the implicit – but strongly-held - belief that the only satisfactory narrative conclusion is death or flight.

I shall then choose the more forgiving argument that this "conclusion formula" is really a structural symptom of a far deeper historical problem.

What are some of the possible factors contributing to the "aporia" of white male identity in these novels?

I would like to frame the problem of why these novels both choose somewhat clichéd conclusions as what can be thought of as the aporia of contemporary white male identity in South Africa. A simple phrase for a complex reality. I borrow the term aporia here from Jacques Derrida, to refer to a bind, a paradox, 'a final impasse', as this seems to best describe the contradictory impulses and strong oppositional feelings that characterise much of the white male experience in South Africa today.

The aporia that *is* to be white and male today is informed by several factors which are present and pressing in these two texts, as I shall demonstrate. These include rivalling patriarchies in post-apartheid South Africa; the loss of privilege and status; the emotive issue of land and land ownership; alienation in the workplace; the presence of inadequate or collapsing family units; and the absence/ presence of other race groups. As I will illustrate, all of these factors come together to contribute to a narrative in which death or flight might well appear to an author to be the only satisfactory conclusions from a narrative perspective. Let us examine some of these factors in relation to the texts themselves.

Much of the sense of paralysis of white male identity stems from separate and distinct patriarchies rivalling for the position of primary power and influence in South Africa. If apartheid was the narrative of enforced white patriarchy, then the rise and establishment of the ANC post-apartheid has seen the unfolding of a narrative of black patriarchy. While not to diminish the significant advances that democracy and freedom have represented for

women and women's rights in South Africa (creating a dramatically more accessible and participative society) the top echelons of the public sector (particularly government) and the private sector (particularly big business) remain a battleground, sometimes almost literally, between key black male figures and key white male figures for power, control, influence and authority - the fundamental prerogatives of patriarchy.

To complicate and deny access to power, control, influence and authority is to rip the heart out of any modern male identity with its rootings in patriarchy. To cut that identity adrift is to leave it without the "hermeneutic hooks from which to hang an interpretation of the world" as Titlestad and Kissack refer to it. A slew of legislation in the South African context designed to address past imbalances, and a public discourse which has critically examined in exacting detail the privileges and excesses of white patriarchy under apartheid, have created a climate in which white maleness consigns one, in many real ways, to the form of social (but not necessarily economic) death described in Chapter Five ("The conclusions of *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*").

This aspect of the aporia of South African white male identity (the notion of access to power and the limitations suddenly placed on it post-apartheid) is not dealt with explicitly in either *No Man's Land* or *Plot Loss*. Possibly, this could be because of the heavy societal taboo which presumably limits an author's - or character's - willingness to express a longing for the privileges and ease created by the apartheid state if you were white and male. Both texts steer clear of any such explicit suggestion of nostalgia on the part of their protagonists.

But there is textual evidence of how the effects of this loss of access to power, control, influence and authority are being felt.

Both novels reference land ownership, a powerfully emotive issue in the Southern African region. Without digressing into a discussion of the politics of farming land, the ownership of almost all commercial farms and arable land in the South African context is in white hands aided largely by racist apartheid policies. White commercial farmers are, on the

whole, highly efficient and experienced, contributing massively to South Africa (and Zimbabwe)'s Gross Domestic Product and feeding the region. The virtual complete exclusion of black farmers, however, is both economically unhealthy and morally unsustainable, and the transfer of land ownership into black hands remains a high priority in the region, while concerns about maintaining productivity and food supplies simultaneously remains an anxiety, real or imagined. Farms in South Africa are surrounded by emotive issues such as controversial government policies for transferring ownership, the frequent murder of farmers, the ongoing economic or physical abuse of rural farm workers and the - again, real or imagined - fear that farms will be violently expropriated as in Zimbabwe.

I would argue than that the farm is a rich symbol of the aporia of white male identity in Southern Africa. The farm as a physical and psychological space seems to represent a passport of sorts, an evidence of belonging and of being 'part of' South Africa. The farm often seems to represent the white male figure's right be in South Africa, and to participate in its economy and society. But farms also denote ill-gotten gains and illegitimate ownership. They represent a violent history. They are symbols of guilt, and shame. The farm is a paradox, an aporia. Both novels draw on this fraught symbolism, and the many unspoken fears about being disempowered, emasculated and even punished that surround land and who owns it.

In *No Man's Land*, Paul returns to his parents' farm upon the news of his father's death. He learns that his father, a farmer, died suddenly and unexpectedly, with his mother explaining, "It was… this land claim thing that caused it [pg 183]". A late claim has been put in by local tribe, claiming Paul's father took over their land, from which they were forcibly removed in the 1920s. The onus would have fallen onto Paul's father to prove the farm was his.

> "But how do you prove something like that? We're talking about things that happened more than eighty years ago. Who's to say what happened? Are there records?"

> Peet nods. "You've hit the nail on the head. Of course not. And some believe that the government is behind all these new claims which are now suddenly popping up. They want the white farmers off the land." [Van der Merwe, 2007: 184]

The possibility of having his farm taken away from him seems to have killed Paul's father, or at least in his wife's mind. Van der Merwe's text chooses not to examine this particular avenue too thoroughly, or in too much detail, but the farm as aporia is starkly present in the closing chapters of the novel. The farm's ownership was a source of anxiety and worry for his father, and it threatens to become a similar albatross around Paul's neck too. Paul is being asked grapple with the farm and all its meanings for white male identity in South Africa.

While in literary terms, the death of Paul's father may be a useful plot device - it forces Paul's return to South Africa and to make his final decisions - it also illustrates the preclusion of any meaningful 'playing out' of a future in South Africa, pleasant or unpleasant, for the white males in the narrative. A future in which one's farm may be taken away is unimaginable for Paul's father (he dies), and taking over the farm and seeing that story to its conclusion is unimaginable for Paul (he then makes his decision to return to England permanently). Paul chooses to reject having to confront the farm as aporia altogether.

Plot Loss also references the rich symbol of farms, most obviously in its title. The play on the idea of a Loss of Plot, as discussed in Chapter 5, is two fold – the loss of meaning in a postmodern world on the one hand has, luckily for Troost, coincided with the loss of a "meaningful hook onto which to hang an interpretation of the world" for white men, on the other. But to that can be added a third, more literal meaning, of course, which is the loss of the [land] plot - the farmer's plot.

The only time the words 'plot loss' are stated in the text itself are in the context of Harry's final, somewhat hallucinogenic, dream as he has just crossed over into death. South African farmers and their contemporary situation pop into his conversation with Clara:

> ‘What will we call this church?’ he asks [Clara] when he has regained his breath.
> ‘Oh, easy, the Church of Plot Loss.’
> ‘Plot Loss?’
> ‘Yeah, then we can rope in all the farmers who have received pay-outs from the state. They’ll be loaded. Loaded and gullible.’
> ‘Flock without shepherd or pasture.’
> “Exactly.” [Troost, 2007: 202]

A flock without shepherd or pasture is a powerfully accurate description for not just Harry van As in *Plot Loss,* but for the state of white males generally in these two novels. Sheep, without any power or influence - dim animals without respect or independence. (Animals which are also, interestingly, generally destined for the abattoir, another abrupt ending). No shepherd to provide them with direction or leadership, or to watch out for their welfare. No pasture, or land, from which they can eat and grow big and strong. And there can be few sights as jarring as a flock of sheep, standing aimlessly, without a pasture to graze on – a strong metaphor for the loss of power, access and control in society.

This reference in *Plot Loss* to farmers and farm-land may be fleeting, but it is not insignificant and re-enforces explicitly, at the conclusion of the novel, many previous examples that Troost has embedded in the text dealing with a bubbling sense of crisis underpinning white male identity. *No Man’s Land* opens with Paul losing his job. His boss says, “Paul, I’m sure you’ll understand. The firm’s reputation, our empowerment shareholders and the new chairman, you know what I mean?” [Van der Merwe, 2007: 10] In *Plot Loss*, Harry has a job, but is bored and alienated by it, and is constantly aware of the tenuous position in which white men find themselves. A workplace consultant observes of one of Harry’s colleagues:

> “The fact that Roets is sitting closest to the door […] could be indicative that he is on his way out, soon to be made redundant.” He has touched a sore point. “One often finds, he adds in an impersonal tone, “that in these sessions a white male sits closest to the door.” [Troost, 2007: 67]

The world of work, and of working identity, is precarious in both these novels. Work is important for these men, but they don't feel welcome or that they will be accommodated in the long term in any meaningful way.

The role of these men inside their families also undergoes forcible destruction during the course of the novels. Paul's wife leaves him, ostensibly as a result of his past actions. Harry is also presented with various scenarios of loss and bereavement, although *Plot Loss* does not offer the same strictly causal relationship between past actions and present loss that we see in *No Man's Land*. Initially we 'learn' that Harry's wife and family were killed in a car accident, leaving him alone in the world, but later it becomes clear that it was Harry who has died as a result of the accident, along with his two children - perhaps the most common symbol of faith in the future - while his wife remains behind. Both men are left without the anchor of their family units to define and support them. They are profoundly isolated human subjects.

Both Harry van As and Paul du Toit have undergone transformations through their encounters with History and history, as detailed in Chapters Four and Five, and achieved greater understanding of themselves and their actions. But these personal transformations and the knowledge gained do not seem to provide enough impetus for either Troost or van der Merwe to be able to reconcile their protoganists with a future in South Africa. The questions being asked of Harry and Paul remain too much, too overwhelming, to see a way past.

The reality facing contemporary white male identity for these two characters, then, proves to be an impasse. No way forward can be imagined. The paralysis that seems to define this state of being precludes narrative conclusions in which Paul might remain in South Africa to assist with his father's farm - and to see through the land claim case - and contribute to the 'new' South Africa while building a new life for himself. Harry does not recover to carry on living his life in South Africa.

In a passage that comes as close as possible to an outright declaration of nostalgia for apartheid, van der Merwe writes about Paul:

> And everywhere would be signs of a way of life that was over, that could never be again. Suddenly he knows what he must do. The realisation has been a while in coming, but it arrives fully formed […] 'Are you coming back [to London]?' Monica asks. 'Yes, I'm coming back.' [Van der Merwe, 2007: 206]

Harry's conclusion is more dispersed and prolonged, as Harry fades in and out of 'dream–consciousness' and moves towards death. The only thing we can know 'objectively' (reported by Troost as coming from outside the realm of Harry's hallucinations), is Reiner's observation, on seeing Harry shortly before the car accident:

> 'I had the impression that he needed to talk to someone that night; […] He seemed to be looking for something, something he had lost.' [Troost, 2007: 193]

The structural limitations of the white liberal novel - if such a term is even a helpful description anymore - have, sadly, not been challenged or rejected by these two novels, but there is an observation to be made about the curious disjuncture between the choices Carel van der Merwe and Heinrich Troost have made, and those of their fictional creations. Van der Merwe, like a great many young white South Africans, has spent time in the United Kingdom, but returned to South Africa. Heinrich Troost lives in Cape Town where he practises as a lawyer. The lack of alignment then between the world of the novel and reality for the novel's creators seems marked. This is not to make the error of collapsing the writer into his creation, which is obviously fictitious, with a life and a past possibly worlds apart from the author. The need to interpret a writer and his protagonist as one and the same is obviously unhelpful, and an act lacking in imagination in and of itself. Rather, it is to make the observation that the tradition of 'the future as unimaginable' in white writing is quite at odds with the actual lived experience of white South African men across the country. It would seem that the extra-textual cannot – yet? - be translated into the textual.

A note on race in *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*

In trying to understand the factors that contribute to the complexity of being white and male in South Africa, and thus inform Paul du Toit in *No Man's Land* and Harry van As in *Plot Loss*, it must be noted that these novels contain only limited interaction between the different race groups of South Africa. The world of the protagonists is a predominantly 'white' world. Paul's contact with the examiner, Mr Maubane, from his Truth Commission hearing; with Grace Motsepe (his TRC facilitator) and his visit to Mrs Peters, who is coloured, are the only examples of engagement with other race groups in *No Man's Land,* and these are fleeting at most. Despite the novel's preoccupation with apartheid and its consequences, these consequences are restricted to Paul's personal journey and to their effect on his unique psyche. Interracial dynamics, the effect of race on interpersonal relationships, and any questions of white identity *in relation* to other races do not form part of *No Man's Land* project.

Plot Loss features more developed black characters, in the form of Johnson, Harry's Nigerian buddy, and Vusi, his colleague. Along the way, we also meet Vusi's mother Paulina, and his girlfriend, Sweetness. These interactions are defined, however, by a remarkable non-racialism. Race and 'History' do not appear to inform or affect any of these relationships. Harry's friends, colleagues and acquaintances seem as preoccupied with the esoteric and eclectic as he is, and demonstrate no real acknowledgement of race and its implications in the South African context.

While this may well be in keeping with Troost's postmodern approach to identity, and his refusal to ascribe identity to any of the grand narratives we have come to expect (such as nationality or race), it does also create in the novel a sort of tyranny of the immediate present, in which the past is never discussed, or simply does not exist. Set in South Africa, a country which is so drenched in the consequences of its own history, this could strike the reader as a slightly bizarre representation of race and interracial dynamics; or imposing a 'sameness' onto the characters, regardless of their race, which is only possible if there is a complete denial of History.

No Man's Land and *Plot Loss* are not novels which investigate whiteness in relation to other racial identities - that is not the focus of their narratives. But this choice could, arguably, inform their authors' difficulty in imagining a future for their protagonists where they remain and live out their lives in South Africa. Until there is a more stable sense, and a more thorough understanding, of white identity's position in relation to other race groups in South Africa, perhaps a future remains problematic and difficult to conceive.

The complexities of white male identity in relation to the state, to the land, to work, to the family unit and, implicitly, to other race groups, are apparent in both *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss.* Both characters experience very real moments of the pain of the often painful questions that are posed by contemporary white male identity in South Africa. And whatever journeys and transformations are undertaken in the texts, Paul and Harry ultimately leave their lives in South Africa.

Perhaps for Paul to return to South Africa to rebuild his life, or for Harry to recover from the car accident and rebuild *his* life, does not make for a pleasing, satisfying conclusion to these stories. For the implications of both Harry and Paul's narratives are that it would require a great deal of time, effort, healing and perseverance to create a new life, without their wives (and, in Harry's case, his children). It would require a process, possibly without an ending or defining action, and drawn-out processes do not generally satiate the reader's desire for resolution. Perhaps that is the paradox of writing a novel about white South African identity: that this literary form demands some sort of resolution, while in reality there is no such resolution, only an ongoing journey with no destination in sight.

Van der Merwe and Troost have not reached a space in which their white male characters can live out the rest of its days in South Africa in any real or conceivable way. And, in the broader context of white writing, the implication is that white male identity is not yet reconciled to a new world order, and in which a future seems feasible and worth exploring through fiction.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack conclude their paper on *The Good Doctor, Plot Loss* and *No Man's Land* on a hopeful note. For them, these novels are exciting texts which reclaim the white subject's individuality from the "supra-narrativity" (De Kock, 2006: 185] that too often governs understandings of post-apartheid white identity. They are invigorating demonstrations of the richness of experience the novel can represent, by complicating and layering the reader's understanding of some of the complexities informing white male identity at present.

This research report has taken Titlestad and Kissack's assertion that white identity is being represented as capable of transformation, contemplation and complexity by van der Merwe and Troost, and returned to the texts to support and develop this argument further. Both Paul du Toit and Harry van As's narrative journeys present to the reader rich encounters with time and history, which alter the respective protagonists fundamentally. These encounters with time and history also open up a set of important questions about the tyranny of group identity, the impact of the historical on present subjectivity, and the role the (im)possibility of forgiveness continues to play in contemporary white maleness in South Africa.

They are two very different novels. *No Man's Land* is a more traditional novel in form and content, committed to a sustained exploration of its protagonist's subjectivity. *Plot Loss* is a postmodern novel which resists expectations and refuses any attempt to write back identity to the grand narratives of race, nationality or History. But both of these fiction projects are committed to challenging the oversimplified or crude understandings of what it is to be white which are so often present in public discourse. If De Kock has identified a 'bleaching' in representations of South African whiteness, then novels such as these are committed to presenting a hundred shades of grey.

They are also novels of fragility. White men, so long the very definition of power and authority in South Africa, and the norm by which all else was measured, find themselves

adrift. *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss* are some of the first novels to begin to articulate the fraught position white men find themselves in. In this regard they are *zeitgeist* texts too, reflecting a particular historical moment in which a myriad of questions have presented themselves to white male identity, without any real answers being yet evident.

These texts, however, do have their limitations, and perhaps Titlestad and Kissack's optimism about their "open-ended"ness [Titlestad & Kissack, 2008: 6] does not extend to take into account the novels' conclusions. These endings, as I have shown, very clearly demonstrate the boundaries that still exist for so-called 'white writing', new voices or not. Neither *No Man's Land* nor *Plot Loss* manage to overcome the powerful tradition of white characters either dying or emigrating rather than building a future in the South African context. The day-to-day reality of white men (including, interestingly, the reality of authors of these novels themselves) in South Africa has yet to be translated into a future in the novel. For now, that remains impossible. I have argued in Chapter Five that these conclusions are not simply a symptom of a lack of imagination on the part of white writers, but rather the inevitable result of the novel's demand for some sort of narrative resolution – a resolution which remains elusive in the actual lived experience of most white South Africans.

Are *Plot Loss* and *No Man's Land* a reason for celebration? I would conclude that they are. They are a sign of two new contributors to white writing, and to South African fiction more broadly. They bring their own understanding of the world and of white male identity to the table, which can only serve to deepen and enrich our understanding of white subjectivity. But that celebration must be tempered by an awareness that some of the deepest structural restrictions - self imposed or otherwise - that exist for the 'white novel' remain very much present and definitive in *No Man's Land* and *Plot Loss*.

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