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COUNTERSPACE

Apartheid's paradox: Impossible borders, unspeakable intimacies

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Abstract Johannesburg, 1956. A photograph of a bench marked 'Europeans Only', a woman is seen with a child who is in her care, but beside whom she is forbidden to sit. The bench forms a hard border between them, transgressed by a tender gesture. In a meditation on this image, weaving together a number of theoretical threads, I reflect on the maniacal proliferation of 'borders' and boundaries under apartheid, and on their impossibility. This approach, using specific psychoanalytic concepts to address the complex intersection between the unconscious and the social world, opens up a space in which to begin to explore the habitually unspoken, troubled intimacy between such a woman and such a child; and, in alluding to my own experience as a Jewish child in South Africa at that time, contributes to the unsettling of notions of racial fixity.

Keywords race and abjection · intimate labour · colonial mothering · colonial intimacies · race and borders

Introduction

Two figures on a park bench, a surface serenity belies the violence the image represents (Fig. 1). Set in Johannesburg, in 1956 a woman who may have been Zulu or Xhosa, or have come from another of the many communities designated 'native', is seen caring for a child, not her own.[1] Wearing the uniform of a domestic worker, she sits on the other side of a bench marked 'Europeans only', behind the child. A

[1] Peter Magubane, the renowned South African photographer, recalls: 'I saw the girl on the bench and stopped. The woman worked for her parents, most likely a rich local family' (quoted in Cain, 2015).

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Fig. 1 Nanny and child. Photo: Peter Magubane.

common sight in a world in which I too was raised. The law forbids her to sit beside the child entrusted to her care. She is the 'domestic help', not to be trusted. The sign implies as much. And yet, in a tender gesture her hand reaches across the rigid boundary of the bench back to touch the soft nape of the child's neck. Her face is wistful. One cannot help but wonder what might have lain between these two, what quiet ties of affection, what secret bond. Or wonder at the way this simple, bodily contact transgressed if not the letter then the spirit of the law.

Perhaps her expression is one of melancholy, the gesture a proxy, directed elsewhere? Towards the children, absent from the image but crowding it all the same, that she had to leave in order to be here, looking after this child, not hers? Likely left for long weeks or months or even years, in someone else's care, children who may no longer even have recognised her as their mother? What would have been her legal status, as she sat there on the bench? Were her documents in order or was she afraid of being caught out by the police? What stories could she have told of her life, of the courage, resilience and the resistance that might have been companions to the suffering these questions, and the photograph, imply? What resentment or confusion or ambivalence might this early bond have later produced? Or, as in my case, what shock of delayed realisation might later have troubled the memory of a comfortable, privileged childhood?

Beyond a familiar sense of touch and smell and the sound of her voice, I knew as little about the woman who nurtured me, as I do the unknown woman in the photograph; of her history, affiliations or obligations; of the profound and damaging ways coloniality impacted her life. She left abruptly when I was five or six years

old. If I began by wondering what the sudden loss of a maternal figure meant for me, it is clearly far more pressing to ask what it was for her, what illness or accident or police incursion or other catastrophe, in a life rendered treacherous in so many ways, might have provoked her sudden, unexplained, never spoken, disappearance?

The slow forming of this question in my mind has been a kind of *nachträglichkeit*. This Freudian term, that translates as 'deferred action' (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967/1988, pp. 111–114), refers usually to a delayed revision of past events that invests them with a pathogenic or traumatic force. I use it here to describe a different kind of aftershock: belated awareness that unimaginable violence underlay my care. Very different kinds of trauma, then, rupture in completely different registers. How to understand the precarity, hers and that of others, caught between the interdictions of the apartheid regime and the demands of traditional laws and customs fractured and fragmented by coloniality? How to remember anew, to reconstruct, to right actually, the fabric of my childhood memories?

A different kind of delayed realisation was the shock of looking at a family tree, of noticing – hitherto unseen – 'Auschwitz' written beneath the name of a great aunt. My family's arrival in South Africa had preceded the First World War. Europe and the Holocaust seemed far away. Or did they? If we identified ourselves as 'White' and Anglophone, and if I considered myself a child of the British Empire, we were also the not quite 'White' descendants of Jewish immigrants from an anti-Semitic Europe. A heritage that resonated, as we gathered in the synagogue or for feasts on High Holy Days, a clandestine elsewhere from our daily lives, and in my father's eruptions into Yiddish to express friendship and pleasure, uncanny smiling sounds of a foreign intimacy. So, I wonder now, what ghostly figures there might have been, too, in the life of the child on the bench.

The rigid bench back, with its sign, a physical border separating the two figures who are nevertheless intimately connected: the photograph thus captures a paradox at the heart of the regime. The place that became South Africa was (un)settled and dominated by 'Europeans' who believed their security and wellbeing depended upon the creation and protection of boundaries and borders segregating 'Europeans' or 'Whites' from 'non-Europeans', from 'Natives'. But the breaching of those borders was also essential to their lives. Here I examine some of the threads that constituted this paradox – laws that made 'Natives' visitors in their own country, signs that insisted on this irony; maps and the ways they were made to reconfigure 'home' as a remote elsewhere for those who had always lived there; racial typology with its liability to traduce the realities it claimed to represent; languages and tongues, oral and written and what they meant for the remembering, and forgetting of different histories; and the mesmerising resonance of a particular voice, a tongue from another place, in the early life of a 'European' child – to reflect on the many ways that borders were made to exist, the frenzied and often violent struggle to secure them, and on their impossibility, the seepage of bodies and affects that was equally vital to the regime and inevitable, despite the efforts made to prevent it.

Toxic Signs, Treacherous Signifiers

Johannesburg, 1956. Public space everywhere, like the bench in the photograph, was overtly segregated on the basis of racial classification. In bold, exaggerated fonts denoting 'Whites' or 'Non-Whites', ubiquitous signs permitted, and especially forbade, entry to buses and trains, banks and shops, beaches and washrooms. At the radio store in which the narrator of Miriam Thali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1987) worked, even the accounts of 'European' and 'non-European' customers were kept separate (p. 15). Racial difference – and prejudice and discrimination – was thus everywhere inscribed, in a superficial topography of spatial segregation, a means by which people who were 'non-White', especially those who were seen as 'black', could be controlled, relocated, relegated and punished. Here, as elsewhere, the totalising discourse of race, ablating subjectivity, rationalised the exercise of power and domination (Boyce Davies, 1994, p. 4).

The regime conjured a parochial version of crass, inapt categories to classify a cosmopolitan and diverse population. Each one represented a heterogenous, multi-faceted, and varied set of relations to the geographies, histories, languages, economies, and resources, of the country, the world, and one another. Amongst the peoples whose lands were colonised, the ethnicity that inhered by virtue of language group and tribal heritage was obscured by the labels 'non-European' or 'native', a population that came to be thought of, and reviled by 'Europeans', as 'black', a term that, until reclaimed and reinvented with pride by the Black Consciousness Movement, condensed antagonistic notions of primitiveness, ignorance, revulsion, dispensability. Peoples whose lands and communities were (un)settled, were misrepresented and maligned, their histories – my knowledge of which, as a foreigner, an outsider, necessarily remains limited in both scope and understanding – erased.

In the colonial imaginary 'Europe' was also a 'phantasmagoric collective identity' (Bhambra, 2014, p. 118), an alchemy of histories, geographies and also of a particular kind of society (Hall, 1992). In this context, 'Europeans' were a mix, predominantly the descendants of Dutch, English or French Huguenot settlers, but including Jewish immigrants and refugees, like my family. Some Jews arrived in the late nineteenth century from Western Europe to join the emerging capitalist class, educated, urban, fluent in one or another modern 'European' language. Others from Eastern Europe, especially Lithuania, more orthodox in their practice, using Hebrew for prayer but Yiddish, the less respectable vernacular of northern European Ashkenazi Jews, for daily conversation, came rather as refugees, and were regarded, here as elsewhere, as an embarrassment – too poor, too unmannered, and especially, too Jewish (Brown, 2004, p. 9).

Needing a safe harbour in South Africa, much of the Jewish community took to speaking English, identifying themselves, as we did, as 'British' South Africans, even though the Aliens Act 1905, designed to limit the entry of Jews into England, had rendered Britain itself less than welcoming (Krut, 2017, p. 140). The price of tolerance for many was conformity with the racism of British colonialist rule. Yet, they lived in fear of their vulnerability to anti-Semitism (Brown, 2004, p. 10).

During the Second World War and its aftermath, the aftermath that is to say of the Holocaust, some saw the link between anti-Semitism and racism more generally, and joined the struggle against it, but advocacy of racial justice, and opposition to the treatment of colonised South Africans, was considered by many to risk strengthening the frankly anti-Semitic forces within the government (Gilbert, 2010, p. 43). Not without cause, since three years after the end of the war, they found themselves on the other side of the globe with a government influenced by the German Reich, forged in the principles of Christian, 'White' supremacy and an ideal of anti-Semitic racial purity.

In the aftermath of their bloody encounter with the British, the scattered Boer communities, speaking a melange of Dutch intermixed with smatterings of African languages gleaned from house servants and slaves, were more divorced from their European country of origin than was usual amongst colonists. Having 'literally to invent themselves' as a people, Afrikaans was fashioned into an identifiable entity, legally recognised as a language only in 1918 (McClintock, 1995, p. 368). They made claim to a unique *Volk* heritage, and to a special relationship to the country (McClintock, 1995, p. 376). In this 'indigenization' of the colonist (Mbembe, 2013/2017, p. 57), it is difficult not to hear an echo of the Jewish idea of a chosen people, with a special claim to another place. These and other complexities were reduced to the two dimensions of poorly written, binary noticeboards and signs, usually in both English and in Afrikaans, thus announcing, all the same, the telling cleavage that marked how fractured was the supposedly pure and singular category 'White'.

The photograph is surely a testament to the power of signs and labels, of their effects, raced and sexed, economic and political. From her position it is clear that the woman understood only too well that she was, by law, not permitted to sit with the child. Her legal subordination to the child is evident, but what was *her* history or that of her people? And what does this word 'European' actually signify here, apart from her ignominy? What kind of European, what shade of 'White' is the child? In the woman's posture, there is something of what Tina Campt (2017, p. 4) refers to as 'refusal', not as opposition or resistance, but of the abdication of subjectivity demanded by colonial rule (Mbembe, 2013/2017, p. 48). There is a quiet dignity in her bearing, so that she seems to occupy space differently from the way intended for her by the sign. Then there is something else, so powerful and so touching at the same time, that defies these brutal categories. Just look at them, the touch that draws the two of them together, notwithstanding the bench back with its inscription that holds them apart, the gesture the woman makes indicating an attachment so particular, so singular, yet so central to colonialist domestic life. Even if it was never spoken as such. Even if it was impossible to speak.[2]

[2] I have drawn on texts and histories relating to multiple themes (race and borders; race and abjection; women under apartheid; Jewish identity in South Africa; colonial mothering; and language and *lalangue*) each of which warrants elaboration in its own right. My focus here, though, is not on exploring or elaborating these issues in themselves, but rather on the need to draw on all of these threads in order to open up a space in which to think about the little spoken but ubiquitous relation of intimacy the photograph depicts, between a colonised woman and a settler/colonial child, the manifold ways in which racialised borders designed to keep them apart are constructed, and the slippage of bodies and affects and tongues that render those boundaries porous. One kind of boundary is what has become a common-sense use of 'black' and 'white' to make racialised distinctions between people. Against this, I have used my

A Question of Belonging, a Place to Call Home

How best to think about the porosity of the borders the regime erected? Psychoanalysis is undoubtedly a parochial, Eurocentric discipline. Its deep roots in coloniality/modernity are reflected in the Oedipal theory which grounds it and which reduces 'the multiplicity of family economies … to an economy of one, naturalized and privatized as the universal unit of the monogamous family' (McClintock, 1995, p. 93), so very different from the African notion of 'family' comprising a close knit but extended community of relatives, living and dead (MKhizi, 2004, p. 48).

At the same time, psychoanalysis affords a unique set of theoretical tools for thinking, albeit critically, about the psychical operation of racism, without which its 'infamous tenacity' is inexplicable (Hook, 2012). 'Abjection' is one such, a term that encapsulates the affirmation of subjectivity in ambivalent relation to a boundary, the idea more specifically here that the 'White', the 'European' sense of self as good, as superior, relies on the expulsion, the abjection of the contaminated, 'not White', 'black' body, which can, however, never be fully repudiated. It leaves the remnant of a libidinal attraction, disavowed by endless insistence on repulsion (Young, 1995, p. 149). The bench back, with its signage, visibly effects just such a radical expulsion, incorporating skin colour into the signifying chain of unclean bodily elements that begins with excrement (Kristeva, 1980/1982). Abjection thus links the body with culturally specific meanings, the way in which a culture – or a political regime – intervenes to constitute the value of the body and its parts, somatic and symbolic (Hook, 2012, p. 71). It is a defence against the disturbing sense that corporeal boundaries are neither sacrosanct nor impermeable, against the threat of their violation (Hook, 2012, p. 69). The ubiquity of the signs reflected the pervasiveness of this anxiety. Yet, however solid the physical barrier, the image seems to say, it cannot be made impermeable to what it is that seems to connect these two bodies, to the seepage that escapes the borders that racism erects.[3]

The regime imagined, mapped and policed an array of borders that created everywhere an inside and an outside, a place for '*us*' and an elsewhere for '*them*', coloniality's 'impossible edges of modernity' (McClintock, 1995, p. 72), even on a park bench. The arrangement of space, and the control, restriction and movement of bodies within and between spaces, 'the processes of circulation and capture', was central to its operation (Mbembe, 2017, p. 36). Borders circumscribed *their* miserable arid 'homelands' so unlike the generous, fertile territories that were *ours*

Footnote 2 continued
own history as a Jew in South Africa under apartheid to destabilise the fixity of raced identities. For further reading on these questions see Grand (2016) on the complexities of racial identifications and inter-relations; Smith (2014) on racial formation across the putative colour line in children.

[3] There has been a burgeoning, if belated, interest in the application of psychoanalytic theory to questions of race and settler/colonial societies. While some psychoanalytic notions are enormously useful to interrogating and theorising this terrain, to the extent that psychoanalysis is itself a colonial discipline, this is also riddled with difficulty. I have made use of specific terms in thinking about unconscious processes, but have not taken up any particular psychoanalytic theory. Both the treachery and the usefulness of psychoanalysis are wonderfully elucidated in Boni and Mendelsohn (2021). See also Wapeemukwa (2022).

(Posel, 1991, p. 27). In cities, marginal, squalid 'townships' for *them* were created away from the opulent suburbs in which *we* lived. Borders everywhere, in the construction of physical walls and barricades and fences and paths and corridors, all with signs designating who could be where or use what, who could be in, and who must remain outside – the frenzy and excess of it, a measure of the tenuousness of the separation, its liability always to be breached. Like the conjuring of a nightmare in which the principal protagonists, people deemed 'black', were feared, reviled, made monstrous, and became thereby impossible to keep away. Or as Prime Minister Jan Smuts had put it in a speech in 1942, in a reference to increasing African urbanisation: 'You might as well try to sweep the ocean back with a broom' (cited in Savage, 1986, p. 194).

Within the grounds of the large family home, in which the woman will have worked and the child would have lived, there will have been, required by law, a small meagrely furnished 'back room' for her, separate from the main residence. 'House rules', explicit or implied, will have dictated that while she cooked for and cleaned up after them, an essential prop to their lives, she could use or touch the objects furnishing their rooms only to clean or replenish them for their use. She would have served them plentiful meals on china plates, while eating only leftovers or bread with jam or mealie pap, the peculiar taste and smell of which, eaten by hand from a tin plate, was a secret pleasure I still remember. Each of these separations, differences – and indignities – will have constituted a border as surely as did the actual walls of the two dwellings. Did the child ever venture into the elsewhere of the woman's room, in which she would have slept and kept her belongings and might have had clandestine meetings with friends or lovers? I never did.

The 'back room' was not a place to live, as such. Where, if anywhere, might this woman have thought of as home? A township, perhaps, whose peripheral location made travel to work in the suburbs, 'crossing over the border', as Mark Gevisser (2015) put it, arduous and hazardous, not least because of capricious official surveillance (Gordon, 1985, p. xv). A township where dwellings were small, flimsy and overcrowded, electricity and running water scarce, not wholly unlike the ghettoes in European towns to which Jews were once confined with such maniacal intent that the border forming the Warsaw ghetto, for instance, was a wall of live electricity (Arieli, 2019, p. 12). Sindiwe Magona (1991) describes walking to the township in which her family lived, 'along the banks of Boundary Road', the road itself actually called by that name, with 'progress' on one side, the suburbs, and on the other 'deliberate and designed retardation'. Yet, Magona writes, if 'each humble structure of wood, zinc, cardboard and paper artistically held together by nail, starch, rope, wire and determination, bespoke poverty', it also 'proclaimed the will to be' (1991, p. 38).

Or maybe she lived in one of the so-called 'homelands', conjured into being under the Bantu Authorities Act, 1951, a parody of tribal government by which chiefs and headmen were made instruments of the regime. Those consigned to live in them, roughly according to language group but bearing little relation to the lived histories or geographies of communities, were accorded a mock 'citizenship' that came with no actual rights or entitlements but rendered them 'aliens' everywhere

else (Gordon, 1985, p. xvii). It was a means to keep those whose country had been stolen – over half of whom were forcibly removed to the 'homelands' over time – subdued, available for work, and 'away' (Schmidt, 1983, p. 27). If this was home, it was a marginal, empty belonging, a form of exile. As had been confinement to the so-called Pale of Settlement, an area to the west of the Russian Empire, in which Jews were permitted to live, and outside of which Jewish residency was largely forbidden. Life there had also been bleak, houses squalid and overcrowded, streets lacking pavements or drainage, stores lacking merchandise. Everything bore witness to the pauperisation of the Jewish population (Pinchuk, 2000, p. 500). Which nevertheless did not protect them from the violence of intermittent pogroms over succeeding decades.

What could it have meant to be 'home', for lives thus cast asunder? Magona suggests that it was 'less a geographical locality and more a group of people with whom I am connected and to whom I belong', noting that as long as she could remember, including childhood in a small rural village, 'there has always been a place to which I belonged with a certainty that nothing has been able to take from me' (1991, p. 2). This 'belonging' reflects the centrality of community to a sense of self in African worldviews, the 'special commitment to one another and a developed sense of their common life', a network of participation and correspondence that binds the subject to the group and to the cosmos (Mkhize, 2004, p. 80). Perhaps some of the ghostly presence in the photograph, absent but not fully erased, is a community like Magona's, a more expansive version of family and of belonging than is implied in the fiction – the fantasy, perhaps – of the Oedipal, European family taken in Western discourse to be universal.

'Natives', 'Visitors', and a Lack of Hospitality

Pervasive signage, and the creation and mapping of borders, did more than control the placing and movement of bodies. They proclaimed the sovereignty of the 'White' race, in particular at this moment of the Afrikaner *Volk*, ascendant over the British for the first time in the elections of 1948. The National Party blatantly adopted the politics of 'White' supremacy borrowed from Nazi Germany, in 1933 forming a paramilitary group known as the Greyshirts (Arieli, 2019, p. 6; Gilbert, 2010, p. 37). In 1937 Jewish membership of the Transvaal branch was proscribed, while the Aliens Bill aimed to stem the recent influx of German-Jewish refugees. It was thus dedicated to the exclusion of the 'non-White' from sovereignty, especially and most stridently of 'natives', but also of Jews.

The image of a woman forbidden by law to sit on a bench that welcomes the 'European' child for whom she is responsible, elucidates the relation between sovereign power, who it is that the political body incorporates, and *bare life*, that which it excludes but on which, all the same, sovereignty depends (Agamben, 1995/1998). As a pamphlet distributed by the National Party in the late 1940s put it: 'The Native … must be regarded as a "visitor" who will never have the right to claim any political rights.' Thus designating as 'outlawed' the original inhabitants of the country who might, by virtue of this very fact, have been considered to belong to it.

This use of 'visitor', to describe the country's first inhabitants, turned the word 'native' into a derogatory term connoting exclusion, so that it came to mean that precisely by reason of their birth in that place, they did not belong. Where 'visitor' might carry the expectation of hospitality, here the reverse was intended. In order 'to preserve the European character of our towns', the towns with their signs of exclusion everywhere were rendered deeply inhospitable; in order 'for the … peaceful life of all urban residents … all Natives must be placed in separate residential areas' (cited in Ginsburg, 2011, p. 37). Bodies, as objects, to be moved, removed, most inhospitably, to where they would be most useful, least troubling. Although excluded from political rights, they remained nevertheless 'subject to the penalty of death and therefore … still included, in the very act of exclusion, within the law', even necessary to it (Cooper-Knock, 2018, p. 24).

Four years before the photograph was taken, the Native Laws Amendment Act and the Natives (Abolition and Co-ordination of Documents) Act, together introduced more stringent controls than had previously been in place. These mechanisms aimed both to 'channel' (principally male) labour to farms, mines and industries, and to remove the 'surplus' – women, children, the old, the unfit – to the 'homelands' (Savage, 1986, p. 195). It was made illegal for anyone classified as 'native' to be in an urban area for more than three days, unless they could demonstrate a stability and continuity of work and residency that was actively denied them. The 'pass legislation', as it came to be known, that put these requirements into effect, regulated just who could *not* pass, with an interpenetrating web of discriminatory laws and regulations that were both coercive and exclusive. They made all but impossible, and impassable, every aspect of *bare life,* asserting power over the terms and conditions under which wholly confected boundaries could, and could not, be traversed: where, how and with whom 'non-Whites' could live or more importantly not live; for whom they could work, and where; who they could love, and most particularly who was forbidden them.

Every 'non-White' subject of the state was required to carry a reference or passbook, which distilled the bearer's interaction with the authorities in a kind of panoptic visibility. In a charade of orderly record-keeping, this document produced an excess of surveillance imposing violent disorder on the lives it governed (Breckenridge, 2005, p. 85) through complex, arcane and changeable regulations that rendered its maintenance arduous, if not impossible. Unlike a passport, which, while also portable, signifies belonging *qua* citizen, the passbook was the emblem precisely of *not* belonging to the nation as citizen. If it was the mechanism of incorporation into the jurisdiction of state surveillance, then it was also the instrument of exclusion from political rights (Robinson, 1991, p. 8).

Surveillance – 'pass checks' – frequently transgressed the boundary between private and public. The intrusion of aggressive, armed bodies of the state into the private space of flimsy, overcrowded dwellings, the herding of people into police vans, in whatever state they were found, such terrifying scenarios were rehearsed repeatedly in biographical writing from the time (Saint, 2012). If the laws themselves were aimed at ensuring segregation, the degrading manner of their enforcement also had the effect of augmenting the repulsion felt by the 'European'

population towards those designated 'black', as though no degree of wretchedness could be enough absolutely to exclude them from 'White' society.

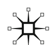
Women were more adversely affected than men by these laws (Posel, 1991, pp. 102–103). If born in an urban area they would lose their entitlement to a pass if they married someone not permitted to be there or if, as was customary, they left to stay with relatives in the 'homelands' to give birth. Those children would likewise fail to qualify. Many women, therefore, were forced to work unlicensed, on the fringes of the wage economy, as street hawkers, seamstresses, laundresses, or most often in poorly paid domestic service. Jobs were easily lost for some actual or suspected misdemeanour, or in the unlikely event of a better opportunity (Schmidt, 1983).

It is entirely mistaken, though, to imagine, as I always had, that they were not defiant in opposition. Excluded from the African National Congress (ANC) when it was founded in 1912, women nevertheless worked together actively to resist the regime, beginning with a march on the town of Bloemfontein in 1913. Over succeeding decades, through formal organisations (trade unions, the Communist Party, the ANC Women's League once formed, and the Federation of South African Women), and less formal means including mass meetings, deputations to local authorities, and local acts of protest such as the burning of passbooks, women fought against the worsening encroachment of the state on their lives, and those of their families and communities (Gqola, 2011, p. 79; Ngcobo, 1990, p. 33). The famous march on the government in Pretoria in 1956, the year in which the photograph was taken, was less an exception than a culmination of decades of resistance (Gqola, 2011, p. 72). African women's political engagement and protest has not gone unnoticed (see, for example, Walker, 1982), but it cannot be retold often enough, so much has it remained, nevertheless, 'invisibilised' (Gqola, 2011, p. 68), so at odds is it with the more widely accepted view of them still as passive, hapless victims of the state.

By the same token, what is striking in this photograph and in other images from the time, in the light of all this, is the position of the woman, central to the frame. That may be, of course, a matter of pictorial composition, but it also seems to speak to her prominence in the life of the child, of the 'European' family. The abject worker, deemed unfit to occupy the house in which she was employed, essential to it all the same, indispensable. Perhaps it was this, the abject 'that coloniality rejects but cannot do without' (McClintock, 1995, p. 72), underscoring the very permeability of the borders, that drove the maniacal effort to protect them.

Exiled in Language, Language in Exile

If laws and maps created borders that overwrote people's historical relation to place, an equally brutal instrument in this bloody venture was the imposition, over time, of the coloniser's language that, across the continent, turned ancient African languages 'into ghosts from graveyards over which now lie European linguistic plantations' (Ngũgĩ, 2009, p. 18). It dismantled the people's relationship to their world, further disconnecting them from the land, from tradition, and from memory.



Language was also used to belittle and efface. The woman on the bench might have been called 'the girl' by her employers, implying the status of child in perpetuity (Hickson & Strous, 1993, p. 113), or by some serviceable English name. Like Cynthia, perhaps, the baptismal name given to Magona, this inscription of Christian conversion marking the African body, like a branding (Ngũgĩ, 2009, p. 15): 'it didn't matter if the names were right or wrong, one kaffir maid was no different from another' (Ngcobo, 1990, p. 97). Unnecessary, then, for the families for whom they worked to pronounce their eloquent, unfamiliar sounding Zulu or Xhosa or Swahili names. *Nobantu* meaning 'Mother of the People', perhaps, or *Ndiliswa*, 'Respected One', unnoticed, unheard. Names that might also have been overwritten following marriage, from which time women would be known by their father's name, until the birth of a child would signal a change for them to become known as mother of that child (Ngcobo, 1990, p. 56). For women, layer upon layer of erasure.

Though barred from classrooms and elsewhere, African languages were sustained – if 'forced to whisper like hungry ghosts' (Ngũgĩ, 2009, p. 49) – in the everyday conduct of lives and in the tradition of orature, storytelling that was deeply interwoven into the fabric of their lives. As a means of education and of socialisation, as well as a form of theatrical performance, language was thus itself a medium of transmission of culture and history, ethics and aesthetics (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 10). The stories enshrined a code of traditional moral values, *ubuntu,* a philosophy based on the notion that human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations – a kinship group, a tribe, a nation – a world of mutual obligation (Cornell & van Marle, 2015). Participation, whether as storyteller or as listener, conferred a sense of belonging to an expansive, hospitable tradition in which everyone had a share (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 34).

Storytelling, like so much else, was thoroughly gendered. Women's stories, told by older women to children and to other women within the homestead, were often belittled. They nevertheless conveyed both a community's history and a guide to conduct, so that just as women's agricultural labour was undervalued but essential, so their storytelling was disdained but intrinsic to the community's social organisation (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 37). Moreover, an inadvertent result of the destruction of communities was that the more intimate venues for women's storytelling were better able to adapt and survive chaos and disruption. Households persisted in one form or another, despite the disorder, whereas the more public forums, in which men's storytelling had traditionally been staged, were obliterated (Hofmeyr, 1993, p. 9).

Even the tradition of women's storytelling was, though, threatened over time. Against that threat and against women's absence from the historical record more generally, there emerged under the apartheid regime a defiant writing of life stories which has itself been described as a form of border crossing (Boswell, 2020, p. 4). Enabled by whatever limited education they were able to obtain, it could be seen as another way in which the traditional storytelling of women was made to survive, and to evolve. Recalling the AmaXhosa tales that filled the evenings of her rural childhood, Magona begins her autobiography by addressing the grandchildren for whom she wrote it:

> Generations no longer set eyes on one another … therefore, I fear I may not live long enough to do my duty to you, to let you know who you are and whence you are. So, I will keep for you, my words in this manner. (Magona, 1991, p. 1)

The stories she heard as a child depicted lives 'full of cause and effect, predictability and order, connectedness and oneness', so unlike the turmoil to which they later were subjected (Magona, 1991, p. 6).

Many stories mobilise around their writer's identity as mothers, as often did women's political activity, but it is an identity that defies any straightforward understanding. Ngcobo's searing novel *And They Didn't Die* (1990) offers a powerful account of women's predicament caught between 'the impositions of customary law, state law and migratory practices' (p. 40). If it was a primary expectation, for women everywhere, to bear and to raise children, under the impact of coloniality and the capture of their menfolk for labour, African women were obliged to assume greater responsibility and authority for their households (Walker, 1982, p. 13), 'to mind the young and elderly, to till the land and raise flocks, as well as administer the neighbourhood and larger communities' (Kuzwayo, 1985, p. 259). These responsibilities frequently necessitated leaving their own children to find work, which often involved care of someone else's. 'Motherhood' was thus a complex, troubled, focal point of political mobilisation, but also a fulcrum by which women moved beyond family and domesticity to take up a place and to find a voice in public political life (Gqola, 2011, p. 68).

The perspectives and theoretical frameworks of African writers and academics, the experiences and worldviews of which they write, contest the Eurocentric perspective and conceptual framework that are so casually, so erroneously, taken to be 'universal'. Their work also lays bare the multiple intersecting axes that impact upon the making of African women's lives. The work of women writers especially reveals their determination both to resist oppression and to record their experience. Their strength, their anger, their determination, forms the very warp into which is woven the suffering, poverty, surveillance and starvation that form the narrative and texture of Ngcobo's remarkable novel.

It was a form of ancient storytelling, through written rather than oral language, that also sustained Jewish communities wherever they found themselves. Perhaps their being written, their being therefore not just similar, from community to community, but precisely the same, helped to sustain a sense of identity and belonging. Indeed, it has been said that Jews were mistaken to imagine 'home' to be a piece of land, when, for them, it was really a book (Steiner, 1975). Hebrew, the 'secret language' of the Jews, was once thought to have a certain magical quality, where 'magical' combined the idea of mystery with the suggestion of something sinister (Gilman, 1986, p. 18). Over time, this mantle passed to Yiddish, more spoken than written, its origin uncertain, its status as a language disputed, comprising as it does a melange of German, Hebrew and other languages through migration. Not unlike Afrikaans in this regard.

I have drawn here on the thread of 'Jewishness' to put in question what is meant by 'race', as such, by asking what place Jews occupy in relation to the idea of

'Whiteness'. Jews both are, and are not, the other of 'White', they both do and do not belong, some of them take up the position of defending the state, wherever that may be, while others identify with the 'non-White', whatever particular form that might take. If some aspects of what colonised South Africans suffered was not unlike what Jews have experienced elsewhere, it is also true that they, that we, have been able to benefit from the spoils of, and have sometimes been protected by, the colonial project. To that extent the 'Jewish question' problematises the idea of race, as it does the idea of a border circumscribed by a notion of racial difference. It underscores the arbitrariness, the inconsistency, the contingency of such terms.

Under apartheid, English and Afrikaans were both official languages. They usually both appeared in public signage. Afrikaans was now the language of the party in power, though, and therefore the more dominant. The bench in the photograph is, rather surprisingly then, inscribed just in English, suggesting that this was probably an Anglophone quarter of the city. English will likely have been the language in which they communicated to one another, the woman and child, but not the only language in circulation in either of their lives. The woman will likely have used her mother tongue, whichever of the many possibilities it might have been, with her family and in her community. Some of those words or expressions may have found their way into her speech with the child, like the exotic sounds I recall from my childhood, sounds that meant I knew not what and that came from I knew not where.

Racist Alienation, Unspeakable Intimacy

This something half remembered, the sound of a voice that lulls a child to sleep or quiets it in song, is what Lacan called *lalangue* (Dolar, 1996). The term refers neither to language as such, nor to the voice as sound alone, but rather to a dimension where the sound of the voice in the signifier reverberates, forming the texture of the unconscious, a remembering that is tied to a voice, beyond words. It theorises the intimacy between a carer and a child, mediated through the voice, that persists notwithstanding the boundary that separates them. Carrying and eluding language at the same time, the unique patterns of rhythm and intonation that index a voice. Listening, now, to the photograph, as Tina Campt (2017) enjoins, paying attention to a resonance that can be heard and felt as well as seen, I wonder whether some of what I can hear is the quiet, secret resonance of the woman's voice in the life and mind of the child.

The first experience of a boundary that impinges on the infant's sense of its being in the world is in the separation of self from (m)other, the child's arriving at an idea of itself, an imaginary ego identification. This is accompanied by a set of symbolic coordinates, a proper name, and a position in the family constellation, with its associated entitlements and interdictions. The underlying, rarely spoken, assumption here is one of 'likeness', the identification with 'like others' who generate the material for imaginary subjectivity (Hook, 2012, p. 66). In this psychoanalytic framing, there is no colour (Khanna, 2003, p. 171).

It is against this unstated, underlying assumption of 'White' likeness, that Fanon's (1952/1967) account of the violent becoming raced of his body, draws its power: the 'White' child's gaze, his being seen, and named, as 'black'. This is an account of an identificatory schism, felt as a mutilation, a subjective split produced neither through language nor repression, as psychoanalysis would usually have it, but instead along the discomposing and destabilising lines of supposed racial difference. A 'White' child channels the fearful, abjecting gaze of the Other and, in so doing, undermines and disorients the identity of the adult subject, seen and named as 'black'. It is against this convention, too, that Gail Lewis's (2009) searing account of alienation must be read. She was the child, seen as 'black', and so made to be not seen, not by a stranger, but by her own 'White' mother. Each account reflects the corporeal violence effected by racism, the way in which racist objectification disrupts the integrity of the body image, the dehumanising way it has of 'separating people from their essence' (Mbembe, 2017, p. 33), an effect beyond discourse, inexpressible.

For the child in the photograph, its place in the family will have been conditioned upon her learning to join in their renunciation of the woman who cared for her, of the woman's being utterly *not* like them, as they will have sought constantly to remind themselves, and her. She will have been charged with the child's nourishment and comfort, its solace and pleasure, while at the same time, she will have been abjected from family life. The demand, to provide the child with security and comfort, will have been made heedless of the anxiety and uncertainty that will have encumbered every moment of her life, as to her own security and comfort. Her position as 'the girl' will have marked her place outside the child's symbolic network, beyond the imaginary boundary of the 'European' family, even as she was essential to it. Inevitably, there will have been a rupture to come, the child's renunciation, the woman's departure, a rupture that will all the same have been the condition of possibility of the relation.

In defiance of the bench back, the bodies are so close, almost touching. The woman's hand seems to be, so gently, touching the soft nape of the child's neck, that hand that will have felt so familiar to the child, that will have fed and held and comforted her, that body on which she likely will have been carried about in a blanket, held so close that its contours will have been as familiar to her as her own. How will it have been possible for her to say, and to whom, who and what this woman will have been in her life? The sound and texture of an intimacy that will have been remembered through loss, that it will never have been possible to speak or explain or understand, and that it will never have been possible to mourn.

The image also gives rise to sounds emanating from the figures that haunt it. Perhaps they come from the children the woman has had to leave to be here? What language might theirs have been, in which she likely would have spoken to them? Or perhaps there is some Hebrew chanting, backdrop to the life of that child perhaps, as it was to mine? Or Yiddish that might have been spoken by some of her forbears, as it was by some of mine, some of whom might have escaped the charnel house, others that did not? The photograph seems to fill with ghostly others, the extended network, living and dead, that might have made up the woman's community, the lingering presence of those, living and dead, that might have made

up the extended family of the child, some of whom might never have been mentioned to her, what became of them might never have been spoken.

Looking closely, the hand that touches the child is made darker by the shadow the child's head casts on it, while the side of the child's face, like her hair, are in a shaft of bright sunlight exaggerating their lightness. The paradox of the embodied intimacy of this relation, in this pervasively boundaried, racist environment, is captured in this *punctum* of the image, the gentle, tender gesture of the black hand, rendered preternaturally dark in the shadow of the child's lighter than white, sunlit skin and hair. This paradox problematises any attempt to theorise their relation as an attachment in conventional psychoanalytic terms. It is, necessarily, against the vectors of racist alienation that the intimacy between these two will have taken place. It is because of those vectors that it will have fallen in a different register, that it will have been, that it must always remain, impossible to speak. A closeness, a tenderness, the sound of the woman's voice in speech and likely also song, resonating in the child's body, an intimacy that can only have taken place in an unrepresentable, unspeakable elsewhere of the 'European' socio-political world, a place where skin will have mattered more as touch than as alienating gaze.

What this gesture represents, then, is the knotting that underpinned the borders and boundaries that were mapped, erected, created and imagined by the apartheid regime, borders and boundaries intended to segregate people by a notion of race but that ultimately relied on their intimate imbrication. If the photograph speaks to the construction of borders, through signs and laws, through the organisation and segregation of space, from the drawing of boundaries on maps to the designation of who could sit where on a park bench, then the gesture it captures marks the unsettling of those borders, the unspeakable relation between a woman and a child that transgresses the boundaries the regime created, and the way in which the regime relied on this transgression and this breaching of the borders on which it also depended. Untying the knot would disrupt, disorganise the entire enterprise.

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