Bodies of Evidence: South African Gothic and the Terror of the "Twice-Told Tale"

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Abstract
In its figuration of white bodies as horrifically deficient, South African Gothic deconstructs apartheid's white supremacist assumption of comprehensive power and legitimate authority. Apartheid's toxic fixation on 'difference' and its disavowal of solidarity across communities produce a repressed kinship between whites and non-whites, which Nadime Gordimer, Alex La Guma and Marlene Van Niekerk render in tropes of topographical separation and the discursive fetishisation of race. In works that represent the anti-apartheid struggle as a foreordained "twice-told tale", these authors exhibit the many ways in which apparently discrete nationalist narratives interconnect, shaping both those in power and also those subjected by them. In disclosing white South African histories as spectral, these authors extend the frontiers of Gothic structure and its conventional tropes. Theirs is a Gothic as expansive as apartheid itself: revealing the widening of terror as it moved from law, to land, to body.

Keywords: *abjection, uncanny, spectral, body, race*

> […] bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialisation is impelled.
>
> Judith Butler,
> *Bodies that Matter:*
> *On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*

One paradoxical characteristic of South African Gothic is that its ghostly narratives have already been experienced bodily and 'told' psychically long before they are related orally or published as texts. This is because the tangible effects of apartheid capitalism – an ideology of white supremacy that produced legislated segregation,

material oppression, and incalculable suffering for non-whites – continue to haunt South Africans and the narratives they tell about themselves[1]. Invoking the contested nationalist narratives of the country's many peoples, South African Gothic mines the settler archive, in particular its excesses of heroic, idealised self-regard that created an overdetermined, exclusionary statement on the human. It recalls the specific histories of native-born Africans as they came in contact with European settlers, and it articulates the struggle for political and economic justice in narratives that represent white power as spectral and dehumanised.

Irony, power inversion, and ethical critique course through these texts, as South African novelists expose the legal machinations and cruelties of nearly a century of white rule. Drawing from work that ranges across ethnic communities and time periods, this essay considers the topographical surfaces and depths of South African Gothic, especially the ways in which the body, like land, is conceived as a site of struggle. White supremacist ideology, positioning the white body as normative, frames the black body as abject and threatening. White patriarchal power preys upon the female body and interpellates it as a degraded 'other.' Bodies are subject to the regime of visuality, which, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has recently argued, is a "practical strategy of imperial governance, concentrating on the separation and segregation of colonizer and colonized" (Mirzoeff 2011: 145). Visuality, he adds, understood as an imperious complex of ideas, images, and attitudes that go into the making of official history, "sutures authority to power and renders this association 'natural'" (Mirzoeff 2011: 6). South African Gothic explores what is repressed in its country's 'naturalised' version of history: especially the place of the non-white body as it is represented in white consciousness and as it asserts its right to self-determination and wholeness[2].

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[1] Legislated segregation and laws of economic exclusion in South Africa began as early as 1913 with the Natives Land Act, which prohibited Africans from owning property in their own land and which abolished the tenant farming system, effectively destroying the major source of African wealth and capital. Apartheid was institutionalised in 1948, when the Afrikaner majority Nationalist Party came to power.

[2] Can Themba, an apartheid-era writer who died tragically in his youth, wrote of the African quest for a recovery of wholeness: "The culture that we have shed may not be particularly valuable in a content sense, but it was something that the psyche

The three novels under discussion here foreground the country's contested histories or what Marlene Van Niekerk (2004: 7) has called its "subcutaneous refrains" : the material and ideological subjugation of the less powerful, coupled with their haunting return as they claim an embodied knowledge, integrity, and right to the land. Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1972), unfolding in the turmoil of late 1960s apartheid, culminates in the uncanny resurfacing of a black body that lies buried and 'forgotten' on a wealthy white industrialist's farm. Alex La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) represents the colonial incursion on South African soil as tantamount to monstrous predation. Marlene Van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994), set squarely on the eve of the first democratic elections in the post-apartheid era, narrates the history of an impoverished white Afrikaner family haunted by incest, subterranean rubble, and the psychic trapdoor of Sofiatown beneath them: a black community bulldozed in order to make way for their white town, "Triomf". Dark Gothic atmospheres suffuse all three novels, disturbing previously settled borders and "mapping […] the edge always illuminated by the shadow of night and the rays of the moon" (Bloom 2010: 79).

Gordimer, La Guma, and Van Niekerk, speaking from their various communities (white-Jewish, 'coloured'[3], and Afrikaner, respectively), conceptualise the effects of apartheid as inscribed *on* and continuing to operate *under* the very earth itself. While the South African Nationalist Party government altered the cultural topography of the land by moving millions of blacks to 'Homelands' between the 1960s and 1980s, Africans' natal rootedness to the land remained their indelible claim to ownership. The prevalent Gothic trope of civilisation's "dark threat [that] comes from inside" (Riquelme 2008: 4) and from within illegitimate power (Botting 1996: 125) maps directly onto South Africa's apartheid era. South African

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could attach itself to, and its absence is painfully felt in this whiteman's world where everything significant is forbidden, or 'Not for thee!' Not only the refusal to let us enter so many fields of human experience, but the sheer negation that our spirits should ever assume to themselves identity. Crushing" (Themba 1972: 8).

[3] In using the term "coloured", I am adhering to the designation used in 1970s South Africa for persons of mixed race. La Guma himself identified as both "coloured" and "black" as a matter of political pride. See "The Real Picture" (La Guma 1991b: 24) and "Memories of Home" (La Guma 1991b: 36).

Gothic reveals the terror wrought by the apartheid state on non-white peoples. Indeed, all three novelists explore white power as an oppressive force that 'buries' claims to African self-determination even as it meets countervailing non-white resistance troped as political, bodily, and natal authority. At stake in this discussion is a more nuanced understanding of nationalist narratives and their material instantiation in the body, and here I argue that all bodies are affected: both those upholding political hegemony and those subject to it.

1. *The Conservationist's* settler Gothic: the black body ascendant

Apartheid's rhetoric of racial hierarchy and rigid social order is fiercely upheld by Mehring, a pig-iron dealer and weekend farmer. Strongly identifying with the conventional settler narrative that privileges white male leadership and self-constituted knowledge, Mehring cannot see those around him without interpellating them as deficient or 'other'[4]. He accuses the black farm workers' children of stealing the guinea fowl eggs on the farm, and he claims that their actions disrupt the farm's ecosystem. He reflects: "[s]oon there will be nothing left. In the country. The continent. The oceans, the sky" (Gordimer 1974: 11). His orientation toward those working for him consists primarily of what he sees as their bodily alterity: the workers' ill-clad children; the "dirty horse-teeth" and "particular stiff-hipped hobble" (Gordimer 1974: 16, 11) of his black foreman, Jacobus. Because ideology is always implicit in description (Ahmad 1994: 99), Mehring's judgments reveal how white supremacist ideology first defines and then consigns the powerless to marginalised positions. What Mehring fails to comprehend is that it is he himself who is responsible for the children's poverty and for his foreman's weakened health: a failure that points metonymically to how racist thought constitutes the non-white body as abject within the self-justifying system of apartheid.

At the centre of *The Conservationist* lies an unidentified corpse found on Mehring's farm and, uncannily, 'conserved' – or ignored –

[4] Similarly, Tamlyn Monson has suggested that *The Conservationist* discloses "the structuring of the subject by language and the relationship between symbolic order and the violence of the cogito" (Monson 2004: 38).

in a shallow grave throughout the novel. Because this black body's 'narrative' remains unknown, at odds with a system that does not know how to account for it, it bears a mysterious authority that, metaphorically, threatens to undermine white stature in South Africa. The fact that the body was deposited on Mehring's property points to an ethical complicity that allegorises the ruinous effects of white power in South Africa. The decomposing body functions as a metonymy for the collective repressed guilt that haunts the psyches of those who benefit from the apartheid system. But there is more: Mehring's complex relationship to the dead body – both cavalierly dismissive of it and uncannily intimate with it – underscores this Gothic trope's function as the trauma at the heart of white political hegemony[5].

The body on Mehring's farm literally putrefies throughout the entire narrative until the end, when the corpse is properly buried by Jacobus and the members of his community (Gordimer 1974: 266-7). Until that time, this unruly body-from-the-depths that Mehring comes physically close to (separated only by a thin membrane of earth) speaks to the unacknowledged bodily kinship with black South Africans that he has repressed. The dead black body is for Mehring both a haunting figure and an object of desire. After a long plane flight, Mehring seeks a place on his farm to rest; but, out of all 400 acres on his farm, he finds himself conducted to precisely the spot where the body is buried[6]. He "[…] does not know where he is – or rather who he is; but this situation in which he finds himself, staring into the eye of the earth with earth at his mouth, is strongly familiar to him. *It seems to be something already inhabited in imagination*" (Gordimer 1974: 41; emphasis added).

This uncanny return to the scene of abandonment deserves close attention. Mehring has apparently either forgotten about the body

[5] In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva, following Jacques Lacan, characterises trauma as involving a phobic object that leads "on the one hand, to the borders of psychosis and, on the other, to the strongly structuring power of symbolicity. In either case, we are confronted with a limit that turns the speaking being into *a separate being who utters only by separating-from within the discreteness of the phonemic chain up to and including logical and ideological constructs*" (Kristeva 1982: 46; emphasis added). Mehring's authoritarian structuring of his world into racialised categories is an index of his separation.

[6] On the phenomenon of "uncanny return", see Freud ([1919] 2003: 144).

needing a proper burial or he has forcibly ignored it due to the repressed trauma of the body being found on his land[7]. Yet, this is a body that lures. The position of Mehring on top of the dead man, something "strongly familiar to him" (41), suggests not only a liminal recognition that this is the locus of the corpse, but also a homoerotic intimacy with the dead man[8]. For Mehring, such a transgressive posture is enough to shock him into the sensation that he is falling into an abyss: *a hole* beneath the heteronormative, elite world that he inhabits and believes he controls.

Later in the text, Mehring is again physically and psychically drawn to the dead black body as he experiences the uncanny sensation of being pulled down by "a soft cold black hand" when his boots become stuck in the mud after the flood: "[it is] as if someone has both arms tightly round the leg […] it feels as if part of him is still buried" (Gordimer 1974: 228). In the course of the flood, an event that threatens to breech the legal (and symbolic) boundaries of the farm, Mehring is pulled downwards in an inverted image of the corpse, which itself has become dislodged from the earth and has washed upwards. Mehring confronts the feared, and yet already anticipated, "twice-told tale" of black ascendancy and liberation. While he is conscious, at some level, of the possibility of black liberation, his "conservationist" orientation has repressed it: "[t]o keep anything the way you like it for yourself you have to have the stomach to ignore – dead and hidden – whatever intrudes" (79)[9]. The coherence of Mehring's own idealised identity as a powerful white male is "produced through the production, exclusion and

[7] Rita Barnard rightly asserts that the dead black body in *The Conservationist* repeatedly surfaces in Mehring's consciousness because it is "allegorizing the idea of the return of the repressed and reasserting the long-denied claim of dispossessed South Africans to the land of their birth" (Barnard 2007: 76).

[8] Alan Lawson, writing on the doubled relationship between colonials and indigenes, has suggested that colonials live within the two states of repulsion and desire. They vigorously insist upon their superiority to native peoples, but they are also ineluctably drawn to them, so that the taboo of "miscegenation […] contains the tension between anxiety and desire for absorption, consumption, sameness" (Lawson 2004: 1220).

[9] Clive Bloom reminds us that ghosts have a particular "home" in Gothic tales, "[bringing with them] the demonic presence of past lives and past sins" (Bloom 2010: 143).

repudiation of abjected spectres that threaten [his] very [subject-position]" (Butler 1993: 113). But while Mehring has abjected or "thrown" (*jeter*) the black body out of his consciousness, he cannot escape its legitimacy and its voice (the Zulu cosmology Gordimer interpolates throughout Mehring's narrative). Indeed, in Mehring's consciousness, the black body reveals itself as a material and political force capable of pulling him down, towards it, into an indeterminate relation of kinship, submission, or death.

What Mehring once 'heard' as his social circle's admiring voices turns into an acute paranoia in which he imagines himself in the position of a dead character in his black farm workers' narration: "[c]ome. Come and look, they're all saying. What is it? Who is it? It's Mehring. It's Mehring, down there" (265). Mehring's terror is that he has been physically relocated to the very abject terrain ("down there") that he has struggled to stay above. Even though, as Alan Lawson reminds us, "the settler is [...] above all a teller of tales, or more crucially a self-narrating subject" (2004: 1216), at this final point in Mehring's expansive, self-narrated tale of white dominance, the political story shifts, and he himself becomes a mere *object* of African-narrated history.

2. *Time of the Butcherbird*: decomposing whiteness

Like *The Conservationist*, Alex La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) concerns the African struggle for political rights in the 1970s. The novel's central character is Shilling Murile, an African workman who avenges the death of his brother Timi by killing the Afrikaner politician Hannes Meulen. The novel recounts the increasingly sophisticated apartheid resistance during this era and depicts "the 'schizophrenic' attitude of white people" (La Guma 1991: 26). Written during La Guma's exile from South Africa, *Time of the Butcherbird* erupts out of a Gothic landscape of material and moral decay. Prolonged drought, white cruelty and duplicity, and black indignation at the forced removals initiated by the National Party government create an atmosphere of desperation and looming cataclysm. La Guma sets community narratives in ironic counterpoint: an overdetermined white narrative of bourgeois success versus a black narrative confident of its collective victory over the apartheid regime.

After serving a prison term for attacking Meulen's foreman, Shilling Murile, "perhaps really a ghost of the past" (La Guma [1979] 1987: 42), leaves jail resolved to be "finished with white people" (19). Two other plot lines take shape: the crumbling relationship of a married white couple, Edgar and Maisie, and Meulen's pursuit of political office. These strands converge in Murile's killing of Meulen and Edgar, after which the winds begin to shift, hinting at both an end to the drought and an imminent African victory over apartheid.

In the first scene of the novel, members of an African community sit on the dusty ground after having been forcibly relocated to one of the 'Homelands'. La Guma depicts the locale through their eyes. Far from passive resignation colouring the scene, we see black resistance. A newly installed government water tank is troped as "an iron glove clenched against the flat and empty sky" (1): in effect, a feature of the apartheid landscape reclaimed from the regime and refashioned into a gesture of iconic power and defiant political action. Here, an African community's nationalist narrative is inscribed in the raised fist: an index of the fighting body itself.

La Guma hints at both the present and future power of black resistance. The local Commissioner presents himself as culturally and sartorially superior to Kobe and his fellow emissary: the "poorly dressed" (10) and travel sore Africans who visit him to protest over the forced removal of their community. In this exchange, Kobe asserts that, even if the forced removals do take place over the black community's protestations, "the roots remain and are very hard to dig up" (12). At this assertion of the physical staying power of Africans, the Commissioner finds himself haunted by the prospect of an uprising already foretold: "'What are you talking about?' the Commissioner had asked, his eyes turning suspicious" (13).

Throughout the novel, La Guma tropes white power as the embodiment of monstrous cruelty, pointing to the hollowness of its 'civilising' narratives and to the white supremacist underpinnings of Afrikaner culture's religious mission. Gothic tropes of disintegration – dilapidated domestic interiors, crumbling relationships, and surrealistic body parts – represent white culture as *decomposing*. The local Afrikaner inn is a relic of better days, with its rusty water (22), photographs of Boer War heroes "that had the look of dressed-

up ghosts" (23), cracked mirrors (8) and the "dark skeletons of disused mineheads" strewn across the surrounding land (29-30). These uncanny images of dismemberment foreground the waning strength of British and Afrikaner narratives in South Africa.

Africans struggling to survive under apartheid frequently come face to face with predatory white power. Hannes Meulen, a rising political star in the Afrikaner community, turns as vicious as a mad dog when he learns Shilling and his brother Timi have let his sheep out of the kraal, and he orders that his foreman tie the two men to a fence and leave them overnight in the freezing cold (75). The "she-lion" and African community leader Mma-Tau asserts that the white man's brutality in forcing them off of their land can only be explained by the assumption that he is missing a heart and lacks brotherhood (46). As a counter-discourse to apartheid's white supremacist ideology, white power is troped as the *absence* of the human.

The suspicion that whites are governed by inhuman impulses permeates the novel. Maisie contemplates killing her husband Edgar so she can be free of him (55). Maisie's lover Wally conceives a plan to prostitute her so he can live off of her earnings (54). Policemen look like aliens (52), and the innkeeper Missus Kroner shrieks like a jaybird (7). The novel's image landscape is darkly atmospheric with disarray and decay: the graveyard where Timi is buried appears filled with "shadows among the crumbling graves and the rusting crockery of death" (65). The white body is figured as mere parts, marking it as spectral: "dentures like miniature tombstones" (36), "clashing teeth of a movie dinosaur" (39), skeleton-like limbs (17, 67), the separation of Maisie's chin and jaw presaging old age as "Dracula lurked" (56)[10].

But set against the decomposition of white bodies and their culture is the bodily strength of black resistance and black knowledge. Mma-Tau, powerfully built and charismatic, successfully rallies her people to erect roadblocks against the farmers' trucks coming to remove them (111); the shepherd Madonele, ancient, rail-thin and

[10] As Sigmund Freud famously posits in "The Uncanny", "[s]evered limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm" ([1919] 2003: 152) reflect the haunting threat of metaphoric castration, a haunting that La Guma (1991a: 49) suggests is similar to white South Africans' "paranoia of perpetual siege".

tough as jerky, is a hardy survivor (17); and Shilling Murile, after we have understood the ample justifications for the avenging of his brother's death, completes his mission and effectively truncates Afrikaner power in the region.

3. Postcolonial Gothic: *Triomf* as white abjection

Marlene Van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994 Afrikaans; 1999 English translation) relates the saga of the Benades, an Afrikaner family. Most of the novel's action takes place in the Benades' Gothic ruin of a house in Triomf, a town built atop black Sofiatown, which was bulldozed in the 1950s to construct housing for poor whites. The plot is driven forward by preparations for Lambert's fortieth birthday gift (one night with a "naked blonde" prostitute [Van Niekerk 1999: 166]), for South Africa's first multiracial election, and for the predicted post-election phase "when the shit starts flying after the election" (Van Niekerk 1999: 2) and the African National Congress might not be able to hold the country together. As in *The Conservationist* and in *Time of the Butcherbird*, *Triomf* foregrounds the Afrikaner reluctance to accept that new narratives will now be told with the coming of a new, multiracial democracy.

Like other Afrikaners depicted in this text, the Benade family is invested in notions of racial alterity. Mol, Lambert's mother, reacts with disgust at the empty jars Lambert unearths in his excavations of black Sophiatown detritus. Her expletive "Sies, ga!" at the sight of the jars (1) puts distance between herself and Sophiatown. However, throughout the text, Mol (short for Molletjie and resonating semantically with 'mole') remains preternaturally aware that the ground beneath her is unstable and about to give way, threatening a mingling of the two towns and a breach of the boundaries of the abject (195; 269-70; 347; 442).

Kristeva theorises the abject as that which lies 'alongside' us: it is the material and metaphoric waste that must be evacuated so that our sense of ourselves remains intact. But, tellingly, it is this very abjection or *throwing* that contributes to our identity, that allows our (always contingent) sense of self to take shape: "[…] as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 1982: 3; emphasis in the original). We would do well to note the purposeful

ambiguity in the phrase "refuse and corpses *show me*". Kristeva's italics indicate that refuse and corpses also *show us who we are*: part refuse, part future corpse. In all three of the novels we have examined, the violence of white characters' reading of Africans as "abject" ironically constitutes their *own* moral abjection.

What is particularly uncanny in *Triomf* is the extent to which the Benades have turned abjection inward, upon themselves. "Uncle" Treppie's fierce verbal abuse of Lambert (215-6, *passim*) reflects the perverse cruelty that the suffering can inflict on others. Mol is defined by her abasement, forced repeatedly to go to the *back room* (displaced, thrown) to serve as a sexual slave for both Treppie and Lambert. Initially complying with these arrangements in order to keep the family peace and to calm Lambert after his epileptic fits, Mol comes to see sexual predation as inevitable: her body becomes a site of silence and shame, and, indeed, the only one in whom she can confide (in a sort of oblique code she wants her family to overhear) is her dog.

Lambert, the product of an incestuous coupling between Mol and either Pop or Treppie, occupies a place of relative privilege in the family as a large and powerful male. His position is compromised, however, by his physical debility as an epileptic who suffers from frequent, explosive fits that render him helpless, incontinent, and, often, unconscious. Lambert regards his body with anger and disgust: "his knobbly, swollen, monster-ankles, his skew, monster-feet, and his monster-toes" (463). He flirts dangerously close to self-harm and self-immolation, setting the car and assorted old machinery on fire (155, 235), and accidentally burning his fingers with acid as he tries to "repair" a refrigerator in his room (359).

Lambert's monstrosity reflects other grotesque bodily images of the rest of the family: Pop's fragile, ageing body with its blue and white skin recalling Afrikaner political colours; Treppie's deeply scarred back, the result of a violent beating delivered by his father; and Mol's repeatedly raped and injured body with its shins "that are full of dents and cuts" (265). Prideful, but damaging Afrikaner nationalist narratives have been inscribed materially, producing dissolving white bodies metonymic of a dissolving Afrikaner history.

Throughout the novel lurks the dark threat that the family's story is about to come to an end. As Lambert is a severe epileptic – a

"genetic cul-de-sac" (65) who will probably not father a child – no one will be left to tell or to hear the family's story. Indeed, he severs part of the family lineage when he accidentally kills Pop after learning the twisted truth about his own parentage (463).

Mol's sudden authority and candour at the novel's end come as something of a surprise development after a lifetime of abjection and resigned accommodation to the men of her family: "[…] the Benades were crocks from the moment they first saw the light of day. Pieced together and panel-beaten, not to mention screwed together, from scrap. Throw-away pieces, leftover rags, waste wool, old wives' tales, hearsay […]" (467). In their poverty and suffering, the Benades are plagued by a prideful insularity that only further deepens their isolation and abjection. Van Niekerk, in repeatedly troping the Benades' familial abuse and self-inflicted harm, recalls aspects of the history of the Afrikaner community in South Africa – its restless migrations into isolated places, its cultural rigidity, and its patriarchy – and she limns an uncertain future where cultural pride may devolve into suffocating homogeneity.

4. Conclusion

In its figuration of white bodies as horrifically deficient, South African Gothic deconstructs apartheid's white supremacist assumption of comprehensive power and legitimate authority. Apartheid's toxic fixation on difference and its disavowal of solidarity across communities produce a repressed kinship between whites and non-whites, which these authors render in tropes of topographical separation and the discursive fetishisation of race.

Representing the anti-apartheid struggle as a foreordained "twice-told tale", Gordimer, Las Guma and Van Niekerk exhibit the many ways in which apparently discrete nationalist narratives interconnect, shaping both those in power and also those subjected by them. While Gordimer in *The Conservationist* explores the conditions under which the black body decomposes, but ultimately *rises*, La Guma in *Time of the Butcherbird* reveals that it is *white bodies* that are decomposing, along with their untenable political order. In *Triomf*, Van Niekerk renders the white Afrikaner body – isolated in its politically and culturally incestuous community – as

degraded through self-harm and threatened by self-immolation. In disclosing white South African histories as spectral, these authors extend the frontiers of Gothic structure and its conventional tropes. Theirs is a Gothic as expansive as apartheid itself: revealing the widening of terror as it moved from law, to land, to body.

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