

**“Lean[ing] into transcendence”: Transformations of the Sacred  
in South African, Zimbabwean and Nigerian Literatures**

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## Abstract

Enchantment is a defining feature of our postcolonial, globalised world and the literary is where much of this wonder is registered and celebrated. Thus this thesis attends to the postcolonial dynamic of sacred and secular experience as it is represented in contemporary African literatures. Debates around the secular and postsecular are long standing in the fields of religious studies, anthropology and philosophy, but as yet underappreciated in literary studies. I develop a hermeneutic of the *imminent sacred* as a way to read the constitutive and recuperative gestures subjects make as they assert a sense of belonging in spaces of globalised modernity. The texts are grouped thematically. In response to Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera's work I articulate how the ritual dimensions of lyrical prose and ritual attention to the corporeal form sacralises the body. Phaswane Mpe and Teju Cole incorporate African epistemologies into the resignification of their cities and with Ivan Vladislavić, the streets are sacralised. Marlene van Niekerk and J. M. Coetzee convey the anxieties of settler colonialism and a love of land reinscribed as sublime. Collectively, the novels I discuss reflect patterns of existential anxiety that emerge from difficulties of belonging, and I trace the ritualised and sacralising strategies of incorporation that seek to locate the subject. These novels radically disrupt the epistemological and ontological modalities of globalised 'secular' literary production and intervene in the recuperation of the sacred as a mode of incorporation and resistance. Recent scholarship in African literatures has overlooked these distinctly postsecular negotiations and the ways in which the sacred is reinvested in contemporary African fiction in order to instantiate intimate, local alternatives to the teleology of secular modernity. Thus I use the *imminent sacred* as a reading strategy that foregrounds these postsecular negotiations and the interrelations of care and vulnerability that motivate sacralisation.

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## **Author's Declaration**

Except where stated, all of the work contained within this thesis represents the original contribution of the author. This manuscript has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

## **An introduction: The imminent sacred**

*'These arguments construe the literary as the sanctioned space for enchantment in an otherwise disenchanted world.'* (Wenzel, *Bulletproof* 236)

From the transposition of Yoruba deities to the streets of New York in Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), to the centrality of ancestral narration in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), to the exquisite reverential language used to describe the delicate and violated female body in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002), and to the New York art gallery that trades in sacred statues of indigenous deities in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), this project builds a conceptual vocabulary with which to explore the ways select African authors and their characters manage the points where religion and the secular intersect, overlap or override. Positioning the sacred as an intermediary in this dynamic relationship is the beginning of such a vocabulary. My thesis demonstrates how, in contemporary African fiction, sacralisation becomes a way to read, develop and celebrate the agency of the subject. My analysis attunes the reader to the recuperative and reconstructive strategies of each novel – in ritual, in indigenous cosmologies, and through the sublime – indicating the entanglement of the sacred in these affirmative gestures of belonging and selfhood.

This project is premised on the multivalent properties of the concept “sacred,” which make it a profitable notion for thinking about the concatenations of religion and the secular in literature. African literatures, particularly, provide a fertile area for investigation, firstly, due to the creativity and diversity of Africa's literary production; secondly, due to the anthropomorphisation of deities which exposes them to human vulnerability; and thirdly, due to the syncretic nature of African religious and cultural practices that draw

from the past and present experiences of indigenous religions; oral and print traditions, Christianity, colonialism, postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, and globalisation. As Joan and John Comaroff argue in *Of Revelation and Revolution*, this dynamic of religious and secular presence and practice has been an aspect of African history since the moment of colonial administrative encounter that brought the organisation of secular power into contact with sub-Saharan communities, maintained primarily through religiously sanctioned and supported social structures. The co-existence of the sacred and the secular is a stubborn and persistent feature of indigenous sub-Saharan societies, one that the Christian and especially Nonconformist missions tried hard to break. As the Comaroffs explain, these missions

attempted to drive a wedge between the realm of the spirit and the temporal affairs of government, both indigenous and imperial. The object was to lay the ground for a new moral economy based on the clear separation of church and state, of sacred authority and secular power. (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Revelation* 11)

The Comaroffs go on to relate the distinctly postsecular negotiations that are inherent in the shifting power relations of the missionaries' colonial (secular bureaucratic and religious) enterprise, and the Tswanas' resistance in particular: a resistance fortified by its basis in the socio-religious organisation of the community. (I will return shortly to an explanation of the distinctions between 'secular,' 'secularism,' 'secularisation,' and 'postsecular'.)

The numerous forms of African literatures, past and present, draw from the extraordinary range of religious and cultural realities on the continent and further afield. They depend upon and deploy the syncretic, dynamic and heterogeneous nature of what it is to experience globalised modernity in Africa. To live in this reality is to feel and be familiar with the simultaneity, contradiction and comingling of different religious

subjectivities. It is to live in a postcolony ‘rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized’ (Mbembe 9). The threads, strands, and seams which trace these multiplicities are conceptualised by Achille Mbembe as an entanglement: ‘the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another’ (Mbembe 14). Entanglement gestures at once to the immense scope of all that the postcolony encompasses, and to the productive and creative potential of myriad confluences, discontinuities, multiplicities, and simultaneities. The instance of this I wish to explore is what I choose to call the postsecular sacred.

A study which considers the sacred as a dynamic point of mediation in relations of the religious and secular has not been attempted recently, since scholarship in African literatures has tended to address the religious, political, social, and the economic, overlooking the involvement of the sacred with the secular. With the exception of Mark Mathuray’s assessment of the sublime in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, and Alyda Faber’s reading of postsecular ethics in *Disgrace*, there is little or no work being done on the religio-secular negotiations in contemporary African literatures. These negotiations are the focus of John A. McClure’s *Partial Faiths*; however, with the exception of Michael Ondaatje, McClure’s analysis is concerned with US, African American, and Native American authors.<sup>1</sup> McClure argues that while ‘stylistically and thematically diverse,’ postsecular fictions do share a set of common features, some of which can also be found in the postsecular African fictions I discuss (McClure 3). In postsecular fictions, for example, ‘instability and incompleteness’ are common features of the representations of spiritual communities and narratives of partial conversion (McClure 4). While Mbembe’s metaphor

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<sup>1</sup> The authors McClure discusses are Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Michael Ondaatje. I offer my own brief analysis of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* in the following chapter; with that exception my analysis is limited to works by African authors.

of entanglement has more to offer this discussion in African literatures, there are two aspects of McClure's argument that are salient here. First, that postsecular fictions can be characterised by a 'break with secular versions of reality,' where 'other realms become visible but either partially and fleetingly or in bizarre superabundance' (McClure 4). Second, while the concerns of some postsecular novels align with the project of reenchantment, McClure notes that 'this process' should be seen 'as fraught with risk and uncertainty,' with these texts 'emphasizing not only the false promise of secularism and religious fundamentalism but also the profound difficulties of any life, including that lived within the mysterious precincts of the spirit' (McClure 7). These two features of McClure's postsecular fiction, the break with the purely secular and the emphasis on existential uncertainty, can also be found in the work of Chris Abani, Yvonne Vera, Teju Cole, Phaswane Mpe, J. M. Coetzee, and Marlene van Niekerk discussed in this thesis. In my analysis of these novels, and of *Foreign Gods, Inc.* to be discussed shortly, I highlight the dimensions of postsecular negotiation particular to contemporary sub-Saharan African literatures. In these examples, neither McClure's north-Atlantic postsecular fiction nor indeed magical realism accounts sufficiently for the vibrant literary negotiations between sacred, spiritual, and mundane spheres of experience.<sup>2</sup>

I shall shortly develop the theoretical lens of the postsecular sacred that I term the *imminent sacred*. This particular theorisation draws current intellectual debates about the religious, the secular and the postsecular into a discussion of contemporary African literatures. The *imminent sacred* sits on the shifting axis between the sacred and secular, and seeks to account for authorial representations of the sacred motivated by the dynamic

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Warnes' *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel* details the complexity of this genre. For Warnes, magical realism in the postcolonial setting is a response to the cultural and epistemological violence of colonialism. He contends that 'its most characteristic feature is that it naturalises the supernatural, integrating fantastic or mythical features smoothly into the otherwise realistic momentum of the narrative. It does this in order either to expand existing categories of the real (processes often associated with faith in the possibilities of the unseen and of the novel to convey them) or in order to rupture them altogether (processes usually associated with varieties of epistemological irreverence)' (Warnes 151). In the novels I discuss the supernatural is not naturalised in the movement of the narrative, because it is already written as natural and the sacred elevates the mundane to the extraordinary.

co-implication of loss and care. I return presently to what I mean by imminent, not immanent, sacred.

### **“Secular,” “secularism,” “secularisation,” and “postsecular”**

This thesis holds that the sacred and the secular operate together in the constitution of contemporary politics, both its public and its private domains. The binary oppositions that are frequently staged between religious/secular and sacred/profane – as seen, for example, in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris – are an impediment to understanding the sacred and the secular as co-constituents of modern life, but especially in the postcolony. Substantial scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between the secular and religion.<sup>3</sup> Among these critical works, Talal Asad’s recent incisive questioning is remarkable in its commitment to understanding how ‘changes in concepts articulate changes in practices’ (Asad 27). He takes the view, as others have, that, ““religious” and the “secular” are not essentially fixed categories’; it is not enough to assert that they overlap in ‘certain respects’ nor that their interrelation is contingent rather than necessary. ‘The secular,’ he argues,

is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life. (Asad, *Formations* 26–27)

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the secular and secularism see William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; Jürgen Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’; Matthew Scherer, *Religion, Politics and Democracy*; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?*

Declining a teleological narrative, in other words, Asad argues that the secular is a concept that is useful in considerations of modern life. The sacred is neither excluded nor included from this concept, but seen as one of many possible aspects in a modern constellation of ideas, in Euro-America as in Africa.

While there has been significant scholarship produced on the emergence of secularism in Europe and North America, as well as secularism in relation to Islam, there has been comparatively little work done on secularism in the cultural production of sub-Saharan African countries. ‘Secular,’ ‘secularisation,’ and ‘secularism’ are evidently related terms; used differently in academic, socio-political and cultural contexts. José Casanova draws clear analytical distinctions between these terms. I quote at some length below since such a cogent discussion of these terms is difficult to come by; they are germane to the discussion that follows; mostly importantly, Casanova is attentive to the term’s historicity; he recognises that with ‘the world-historical process of globalization initiated by the European colonial expansion, all these processes everywhere are dynamically interrelated and mutually constituted’ (Casanova pag.). He writes:

a) “The secular” as a central modern category—theologico-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological—to construct, codify, grasp and experience a realm or reality differentiated from “the religious.” [...] Phenomenologically one can explore the different types of “securities” as they are codified, institutionalized, and experienced in various modern contexts and the parallel and correlated transformations of modern “religiosities” and “spiritualities.”

b) “Secularization” refers usually to supposedly actual empirical-historical patterns of transformation and differentiation of “the religious” (ecclesiastical institutions and churches) and “the secular”

(state, economy, science, art, entertainment, health and welfare, etc.)  
institutional spheres from early modern to contemporary societies.  
c) “Secularisms” refers more specifically to the kind of secular world-views (or “Weltanschauungen”) which may be either consciously held and explicitly elaborated into historico-philosophical and normative-ideological state projects, projects of modernity and cultural programs or as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be unreflexively held and phenomenologically assumed as the taken for granted normal structure of modern reality, as a modern *doxa* or as an “unthought.”

Secularism and processes of secularisation are intricately bound up with the history of European Christianity, which in turn, is bound up with the Enlightenment, the primacy of reason, and the developments of humanism and political liberalism – the configurations of these developments have particular local and global iterations. Secularism and secularisation are operative in every nation, in differentiated and varying degrees, owing to the expansive logics of (neo)colonialism, pluralist democratic statehood, human rights discourse, and (neo)liberal economic policies. It is beyond the scope of this project to attempt a full analysis of secularisation in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, and I do not wish to valorise the secularisation thesis, embedded as it is within a developmental discourse of modern liberalism. I am, however, concerned with African authors’ representations of the interrelation of the secular and religion; transnational and local religions; and the existential effects of globalised modernity on their protagonists. The sacred is operative throughout, as a sign of the overlaps between the secular and the religious, and indeed, as a salve for the vicissitudes and precariousness of human experience.

Neither the 1999 Nigerian constitution, nor the 2010 Kenyan constitution proclaim a secular state; however, they both prohibit the government and state from adopting a religion. Further, the Nigerian constitution guarantees ‘every person the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds [...] of religion,’ yet it also ‘enjoins the state to provide facilities for, among other things, religious life’ (Ogbu 1). Similarly, the 2010 Kenyan constitution guarantees religious freedom, prohibits a state religion (Article 8) and discrimination on religious grounds (Article 26, Section 4), and does not permit the formation of political parties on a religious basis (Article 91(2)(a)). It does, however, accommodate Muslim Kadhi courts, subordinate to Kenyan civil courts (Article 170). In Nigeria and Kenya the constitutional separation of church and state is entrenched precisely because of the pervasiveness, diversity and volatility of religious life.

Charles Taylor sees the confinement of religious belief and practice to private domains as a fundamental shift in North Atlantic secular societies (Taylor 2). This does not, however, have the same valence in societies where relations between public and private, religious and secular are determined by the legacies of colonialism and postcolonial nationalisms – in substantial ways references to divine reality and God have not been removed from African public spheres. Take, for example, the National Church and the National Mosque which dominate the skyline of Abuja, Nigeria’s capital city. For Rudolf P. Gaudio, writing about Nigerian publics and their religions, ‘these impressive architectural monuments symbolize the crucial place of organized religion in the postcolonial Nigerian state’s efforts at forging a unified national public’ (Gaudio pag.). A vastly heterogeneous population, Nigeria’s public discourse is dominated by Christian/Islamic oppositions, yet Gaudio goes on to assert that negotiating the tensions between these transnational, but locally embedded religions offers ‘many Nigerians a kind of transnational citizenship that complements and even reinforces national belonging – a

sense of oneself as Nigerian.’ While pluralism is a founding principle of the kind of political secularism evinced in the constitution, religious beliefs and affiliations are a powerful source of identification that can either bolster or undermine national belonging. The conditions of belief are altered and administrated by the state in Nigeria and Kenya, as they are elsewhere in the world; and it is the subject-citizen who has to find creative ways to navigate these religio-secular conditions.

The postsecular critique, famously articulated by Jürgen Habermas in ‘Religion in the Public Sphere,’ attacks the simplest form of the secularisation thesis which posits the falling off of religious belief and practice, and the privatisation of religion. Habermas observes the emergence of ‘new’ spiritual movements, the increase in global migration bringing religions into contact, and although changing, ‘traditional’ religions are very much present in the public sphere, and in many peoples’ private lives (Habermas 1).

Contemporary debates about the word postsecular and what it is meant to denote vary (Asad 2009; Caputo 2001, 2013; Mahmood 2005; Mufti 2013), but the notion that there has ever been, or will be an entirely secular society has been refuted. These debates are often focused on a resurgence of religious fundamentalism, especially Islamic, and the threat this poses to the pluralist toleration of Euro-American liberal democracies.

Nevertheless, what postsecular questions bring to the fore is a realisation that, yes, religious and secular beliefs and practices are challenging the boundaries set by the private and public spheres. In a later dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger, Habermas argues for an ethical duty of religious and non-religious citizens to determine together the boundaries and functions of the religious and secular, suggesting that this is possible through translation (Ratzinger and Habermas 47). Thus, like Asad’s more expansive explanation of the secular as a concept that helps to explain behaviours and ideologies in modern society, the postsecular is useful as a tool for considering the intersections between the key

concepts and how in late capitalist society the subject experiences their environment as an entanglement of these confluences.

### **Enchantment, magic and the literary**

In *Fiction Beyond Secularism*, an intellectual project akin to McClure's, Justin Neuman argues against the assertion that the novel is a secular form. Instead, he proposes that the contemporary novel offers 'some of the most trenchant and far reaching critique of secularist ideologies, as well as the most exciting and rigorous inquiries into the legacies of the religious imagination' (Neuman xi). His transnational comparative approach includes J. M. Coetzee, but does not engage with other African authors. Indeed, I argue that contemporary African fiction offers a space where the cross-pressures of secular and sacred can be negotiated, where it is possible to imagine, even if one does not believe, a world in which enchantment and disenchantment operate together in a relation always in flux.<sup>4</sup> As stated in the epigraph, Jennifer Wenzel construes 'the literary as a sanctioned space for enchantment in an otherwise disenchanted world' (Wenzel, *Bulletproof* 236). In her analysis of the anticolonial afterlives of the Xhosa cattle-killing prophecy in South Africa, Wenzel traces the interrelation of modernity, metaphor, and magic. She argues that magic 'as an expansive term for the supernatural, mysterious, or wondrous that crosses temporal, colonial, and theological,' is not a response to colonialism and Enlightenment modernity, but rather predates and figures this interaction (Wenzel, *Bulletproof* 2). 'Fictional narratives,' Wenzel further argues, 'offer alternatives to the foreclosures inherent in reading the South African democratic transition in terms of a narrative closure

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<sup>4</sup> Max Weber first uses the term disenchantment to describe conditions of modern European secular society which privileges the rationalisation of the cultural sphere and the valorisation of science over the mystical, which he argues can still be found in "traditional societies" where 'the world remains a great enchanted garden' (Weber 270). While Sung Ho Kim argues for a more nuanced reading of Weber's theory of rationalisation and disenchantment, not as a linear, unidirectional trajectory towards secularism, but rather as a dialectic between disenchantment and reenchantment, others such as Jane Bennet, attend to the linear reading (Kim pag.). Bennet relates Weber's theory as an explanation of how the world became 'calculable' (Bennet 14). Bennet goes on to argue that we need not be nostalgic for religion because the modern world we inhabit is itself enchanted.

that assumes a single, inevitable trajectory to the postapartheid present' (Wenzel, *Bulletproof* 162). I want to echo and extend Wenzel's assessment of fictional narratives, beyond South Africa's postapartheid present. Fictional narratives from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and indeed, South Africa, offer alternatives to the progressive histories of secularism and modernity, by playing with novelistic content and form, metaphor and magic, in their representations of the many, multi-directional movements between secular and sacred in modern sub-Saharan Africa.

The novels I consider each contribute to this imagining in different ways. Okey Ndibe's novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, is a paradigmatic example, since it represents a world in which the enchanted and disenchanted converge, and indeed, inhabit the same sphere. Ikechukwu Uzundu, or Ike, the novel's protagonist, first came to US as a student from Nigeria. Despite his excellent academic record (*cum laude* in Economics from Emory), Ike is unable to find a job in his field because of his Nigerian accent. He becomes a taxi driver, has debts he cannot pay and a sense of arrogant, resentful self-entitlement: 'the streets of Manhattan had already pronounced his own terrible smallness, his anonymity' (Ndibe 31). Not an easily likeable character, Ike intends to improve his lot by selling the statue of Ngene, the chief god of his people, to the gallery from which the novel takes its title. Ike's travels between New York and Utonki do not map onto a singular, linear revelation of the enchantment of the world from a secular to religious experience; it is rather, a meditation on the convergences of the seemingly discreet parts of Ike's life, as he realises Ngene's, power, especially over him. In Igbo, Ike's full name Ikechukwu, means God's power.

The gallery, Foreign Gods, Inc. exhibits and sells deities from previously colonised and still economically peripheral areas around the globe: 'a mountain deity from one of the indigenous peoples of the Philippines,' 'a god of the cross roads, originally from Papua New Guinea,' and a selection of African gods, although they 'are no longer in vogue' (Ndibe 314, 3, 320). The most valuable statues in the gallery are housed upstairs in a

section ironically called, 'Heaven' (Ndibe 2). The name of the gallery (and novel) gesture to the economic reification of religious statuary seemingly emptied of any spiritual purpose or potency by its sanitised secular, commercial context. Despite this, when Ike enters the gallery for the first time, hoping to negotiate a good price for the promised statue, he experiences a 'spectral atmosphere,' 'an otherworldly chill in the air,' and a smell 'unsettling and hard to name' (Ndibe 2). Ike is already attuned to the 'multicultural' deific energies of the gallery. This awareness is heightened when he returns with Ngene in hand, having accepted his role as chief priest, and the gallery's smell has become a 'more pungent' 'stink' (Ndibe 307).

Ike first reads about the gallery in a magazine, where the owner, Mark Gruels explains its premise: 'in a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund' (Ndibe 62). Ike lets himself be comforted by Gruels's 'meaningless' argument, and despite his feelings of 'shame and guilt,' decides to proceed with his plan. Gruels's proclamation that an indigenous deity would be on the point of death unless it became an object of financial value within the capitalist world system speaks to the problems of artistic production and sale on the one hand, and to the devaluation of indigenous religious, cosmological and epistemological systems on the other. Under the arrogance and privilege of Gruels's US American position, a thing cannot have value unless it is mobile and can be sold. While this view is certainly criticised in the novel, mostly humorously in Gruels's name (connoting both an unpalatable mixture of oats and water, and to exhaust something), it is shown to be incorrect and untenable by the power Ngene wields over Ike, an influence, the reader learns, that has been a part of Ike's life since childhood.

'Ike feared storms': Confined to the driver's seat of his taxi, with a passenger in the back, Ike fights against his body's response to the rain beating down on the taxi's roof

(Ndibe 16). The burden of this connection between the rain storm and Ike's mind and body are referred to by the narrator as 'assault[s]' and 'raptures' (Ndibe 16, 17). His 'heart beat violently. His hands shook. Sweat pooled in his armpits' (Ndibe 19). 'He heard his passenger ask if he was alright. But the storm's wild, whirring music was already sweeping him up to that terrain of enchantment, up in the cloud, way beyond the wet, weeping skies' (Ndibe 21). Elevated to the 'terrain of enchantment' inside his taxi on the streets of New York, Ike is susceptible to the force of Ngene in the storm, even in this modern, globalised city. The first attack happens when Ike was in secondary school in Utonki, where he:

remembered the sensation of absolute calm. That, and a feeling of being carried on something soft like a cloud, calm as a lake's surface on a windless day. And he remembered seeing many things that shimmered with such heartbreaking beauty there was no language to describe them. (Ndibe 16)

Ike's explanation of what he felt and saw describes a moment of transcendence, of enchantment, that his grandmother is able to make sense of because the same things had happened to his uncle, Osuakwu, Ngene's current chief priest. Osuakwu was called to serve Ngene, when, he says, 'I started fainting when the sky opened up and wept its waters,' although he was reluctant, Osuakwu knew he could not refuse (Ndibe 196). Ike has not yet been chosen as Ngene's next chief priest, but he has been 'favoured' by him, as his grandmother explains when he is only a child (Ndibe 17). Ike seems to forget or suppress the significance of his fainting spells during his adult years in the US, and it is only when he returns home to steal the statue of the deity that he relearns the importance and power of Ngene.

Ellah Allfrey, who reviewed Ndibe's novel for *The Guardian*, overlooks an inherent tension in the novel when she writes: 'The planned theft makes perfect sense on a continent where diamonds, coltan and oil are routinely extracted and shipped away, with

no real concern for the local custodians of the land' (Allfrey, 'Review' pag.). What Allfrey appears to miss is the way Igbo cosmologies operate in the novel and in Ike's life, that quite literally transcend the transnational materialism that the novel cautions against. The novel appears to be deeply concerned with the reader and Ike's education: Osuakwu speaks so eloquently to his audience, in language laden with proverbs and metaphors, of Ngene and the relationship between gods and men: 'Ngene is a mystery deeper than what any man can understand. That mystery lives in the river itself that coils around Utonki. It is a river that provided our ancestors with both life and protection' (Ndibe 199). Referring to the money-hungry Pentecostal preacher who has Ike's mother in his thrall, Osuakwu remarks: 'That madman thinks that Ngene is a carving from a tree.' There is a great deal of animosity between the Pentecostal congregation and Ngene's attendants, since the Pentecostal preacher uses Ngene as a scapegoat for his congregants' problems. In another story Osuakwu explains why the ancestors insisted that the gods have wooden bodies, housed in shrines. The material anthropomorphisation of the gods means that they could be held in check, unlike the invisible god of the Pentecostals. If a deity should abandon its duties, turn against the community it is meant to protect, or 'when it begins to thirst for too much human blood' then Osuakwu explains, 'the people snatch up its body – its wooden body – and set it afire at the boundary of the clan. That's one way of killing a god' (Ndibe 200). The other way of killing a god is to starve it by denying it the sustenance of ritual sacrifices and offerings. The animist complexity of Ngene is evident in Osuakwu's explanations personify the deity in the novel.

For Osuakwu there is no distinction between the world he inhabits and the realm of Ngene's influence. He is the chief priest who serves Ngene and the community. In Ike's fainting spells, precipitated by rain storms, he has been favoured by Ngene, and there is also the suggestion that Ngene will choose him next, whether he is in Nigeria or the US. While Osuakwu might be said to live in an enchanted world, Ike has established himself as

a hardened New York cabdriver and modern urbanite, so detached from his early cultural education that he is able to convince himself that stealing the statue is acceptable. The novel's didacticism works harmoniously with Ike's re-education, as he becomes aware of the magic, the presence and power of Ngene, which is already a force in his life, and has been since his first fainting spell. Ike's narrative is in part a cautionary tale, detailing the consequences of knowing but ignoring the will of Ngene, of forgetting an education that is foundational to Ike's experience of the world.

In the final scenes of the novel Ngene punishes Ike for his transgressions. His apartment is filled with an unwavering and overpowering stench, a growing infestation of maggots, and he feels a presence in the apartment he cannot see. Ike tries to appease the deity: accepting the role he has usurped as chief priest he buys food and libations for himself and the deity. Days after finally selling the statue, Ike regrets the sale and calls Gruels to get Ngene back, but the statue has already been sold to a collector in Japan. The novel ends in Ike's rank and maggot infested apartment, with his debtors banging on the door – his enchanted punishment colliding with the consequences of his financial missteps. The overlapping tensions the novel narrates, between enchanted and disenchanted, religious and secular worldviews are all played out in Ike's relation to the sacred, the deity Ngene and its wooden statue. Ngene is the sacred centre of the novel, the plot device which undermines any simplistic oppositions between religious and secular, enchanted and disenchanted, urban and rural. Ike, a well-educated, modern Nigerian man, is forced to accept the influence of his people's indigenous cosmology; that this finally happens in his New York apartment further destabilises easy identifications of a 'secular Western' experience.

Ndibe's novel, like the others discussed in the chapters to follow, offers a sanctioned space for enchantment, but also contributes to imagining a world in which magic, enchantment and wonder operate in the same realm as modernity, scepticism and

secularism. Gauri Viswanathan critiques Matthew Arnold's assessment that 'secularism is conceived to be the inaugural moment of literature's formation' (Viswanathan 466). In her examination of the 'evolution of the literary field,' Viswanathan notes 'that the primary ruptures are not between reason and religion but, rather, between belief and imagination, pointing to a development in which religious belief is contested by the alternative (even heterodox) knowledge systems it had suppressed or marginalized' (Viswanathan 468). Further, Viswanathan enquires how a study of the development of 'literary forms' might produce 'alternative descriptions that will help clarify the dynamics of transition from a religious to a secular order?' (Viswanathan 468). If one considers African religions in all their variety and complexity as heterodoxies to secular modernity and Euro-American Christianity, then their representations in African literatures are eminently useful for thinking about African alternatives to the dominant conceptions of a postsecular world.

### **Towards a genealogy of the sacred**

While the sacred is almost exclusively thought of in religious or theological terms, the term reaches beyond the history of religion and theology to anthropology, geography, philosophy, literature and psychoanalysis. A cross-disciplinary curiosity like this alludes to the pervasive influence of religious ideas and practices even in 'secular' disciplines, and further to the unique intermediary manifestations of the sacred which both create and maintain the threshold between what we might call mundane space and sacred space. It is necessary to explain the differences between these terms, and to establish a definition of the sacred which will lead us to consider the possibility of a particular version of postsecularity that I call the *imminent sacred*.

Similar genealogies of the sacred can be found in works of literary criticism such as Bill Ashcroft's (et al.) *Intimate Horizons: The Post-colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* and Mathuray's *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New*

*Worlds*, both of which I return to in subsequent chapters. I draw attention to these texts here, firstly to indicate an existing contemporary concern with the sacred in literature, and secondly to offer other, complementary expositions of the sacred which have informed the genealogy I propose. I begin with Emile Durkheim and his elegant though insufficient definition, and move chronologically through the scholars who take up this issue.

Durkheim's interest in religion, and the definition he provides in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, are sociological rather than theological. He states: 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community [...] all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim 47). The understanding here is that the practices and beliefs which constitute religion, do so only in relation to the sacred. It is the sacred which charges otherwise ordinary behaviours with religious significance. Durkheim grounds this definition on the distinction between the sacred and profane. He suggests that the singular characteristic common to all forms of religious belief is a separation and classification of what is 'real and ideal,' that is, profane and sacred (Durkheim 37). This classification is employed to divide the world into two distinct and opposed domains; one which holds the sacred and the other, the profane. Clearly the sheer variety of religiously and locally specific permutations of the sacred makes it difficult to define in clear terms, but Durkheim attempts to resolve the murkiness of this problem by using the profane to establish the conceptual bounds of the sacred. He explains that,

Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things, those to which these interdicts are applied and which must remain at a distance from the first. Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relation which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things. (Durkheim 40–41)

The definition arrived at is that the sacred refers to things which are set apart from the profane through the doctrines and rituals of the religion they originate from. There is no inherent moral value in either term; the threat of contamination the profane poses is to the conceptual boundaries of the sacred, and yet it is necessary to their delineation. The sacred is mobilised in the process of creating a united ‘moral community’ which constructs, meets and operates within the domain of the sacred. The profane is characterised as that which operates outside of this sphere, what we might call the mundane or quotidian. The profane is not, in itself, a negative category; it merely denotes a socialised sphere that operates outside of, distinct from, and in opposition to the sacred.

Durkheim’s definition has been criticised for its primarily ‘Eurocentric’ view of religion but its more pressing limitation is the strict separation and differentiation between the sacred and the profane. He states that not only are the sacred and profane differentiated, but they are also categorically opposed to one another: ‘The two classes cannot even approach each other and keep their own nature at the same time’ (Durkheim 40). The stark dichotomy between the sacred and profane that Durkheim proposes fails to consider the constant negotiation that takes place between these two forces.

Rudolf Otto, a Lutheran theologian and scholar of comparative religion, takes a different approach when conceptualising the sacred, though he too admits the near impossibility of concretising a definition. Thus in *The Idea of the Holy* Otto is concerned less with a definition of the sacred,<sup>5</sup> and more with the *experience* of the sacred which is the experience of God that he terms, the ‘*numinous*’.<sup>6</sup> This notion is further comprised of separate but related aspects: ‘*mysterium tremendum*,’ and ‘*fascinans*’ (Otto 13, 35). *Mysterium* ‘stands as form’ for the mysterious, ‘extraordinary and unfamiliar’; *tremendum* for the dreadful, fear, ‘awefulness’ and terror one feels before the magnitude of God; and

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<sup>5</sup> The original German title of the publication, *Das Heilige*, can be translated as either the sacred or the holy. The translator has opted for ‘holy’, though I shall use sacred in keeping with the current terms of discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Otto’s *numinous*, derived from the Latin *numen*, is etymologically distinct from the Kantian *noumenon*, which is derived from the Greek.

*fascinans*, which accounts for the ‘uniquely attractive and fascinating’ characteristics of the sacred (Otto 31, 13, 31).

Mircea Eliade begins his own discussion of *The Sacred and the Profane* with an examination of Otto’s text. For Otto, Eliade notes, ‘The numinous presents itself as something wholly other’ (Eliade 9). While Eliade is influenced by Otto’s explanation, his own initial formulation appears to be sympathetic to Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and the profane. He writes: ‘The first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is the *opposite of the profane*’ (Eliade 10). With this as a point of departure, the value of Eliade’s conception is that the sacred does not necessitate a connection with God. Its forms are various: objects, bodies, or spaces can become sacred (if they contain value) to the extent that they are permitted to participate in the sacred.

Eliade’s argument centres on the idea of *hierophany*: the manifestations of the sacred. Hierophanies allow ‘*homo religiosus*’ to structure the world by orientating himself in relation to the sacred, and this is where Eliade begins to distinguish between the sacred and the profane. He explains:

When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a centre. (Eliade 21)

The sacred is the ‘absolute reality’ while the profane is nonreality. Like Durkheim’s definition, this too rests on the binary opposition of the terms. When the sacred is manifest the unity of space is interrupted and it is the identification of one domain as absolutely real,

and the other as nonreal, and the creation of a fixed point, which makes possible religious humanity's orientation in the otherwise homogeneous expanse.

On the one hand, profane space can only be differentiated geometrically. It has no inherent value: 'For profane experience [...] space is homogenous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass' (Eliade 22). On the other hand, because sacred space implies the presence of a hierophany it is necessarily differentiated from the mass and disorder of profane space: 'Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different' (Eliade 26).

Therefore it is not merely the hierophany which orientates the world; it is also the dichotomy of sacred and profane space. Eliade uses the example of the threshold of a church to explain the difference between the two spaces, but also to explore the point at which they meet.

The door that opens on the interior of the church actually signifies a solution of continuity. The threshold that separates the two spaces also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and religious. The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes the two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.

(Eliade 25)

Unlike the strict opposition that Durkheim proposes, Eliade is concerned with the proximity between the two: the carefully protected and strongly contested boundary, threshold and meeting point between the sacred and profane. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* is a further means of critiquing the stark opposition between sacred and profane, and indeed of finding a vocabulary with which to write about contamination and

contestation. Although uncomfortably outdated in some ways, Douglas uses her anthropological research of 'primitive religions' to argue that dirt and the containment of dirt can be a useful way of understanding hygiene laws, boundaries and taboos in a study of comparative religion, the sacred, and the anxiety of precariousness. By using hygiene as an entry point, Douglas seems to avoid the stark opposition between sacred and profane; instead she employs dirt (impurity that can move across thresholds) as a means of discussing both the setting out of the boundaries of purity, and the terms in which they can be defiled.

She states that, 'Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment' (Douglas 2). And further that, 'There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience' (Douglas 4). In this way the elimination of dirt can be read metaphorically and symbolically as part of the process of making a space pure and sacred. If dirt is eliminated from a space, in an act of cleansing or purification, then that space, now free from dirt, is differentiated from the space around it. Locating this process within the broader function of religious experience, Douglas explains that,

ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (Douglas 5)

Thus the elimination of dirt is an attempt to create order in one space by opposing it with another. The metaphor allows us to consider the construction and containment of order and disorder as it relates to the organisation of religious, public and social life. Douglas states, 'Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-

being, form to formlessness, life to death' (Douglas 7). Instead of relying on the terms sacred and profane as the previous theorists have done, Douglas expands the discussion by entering into it through ideas of dirt and purity. While these ideas certainly resonate with and allude to the ideas of sacred and profane, they offer a unique entry point that enables a clearer view of how the sacred and profane might function as spaces that are ritually clean or left impure. The ever-present danger of contamination necessitates the creation of boundaries between the ritually clean and unclean spaces, or as Eliade phrases it, between the absolutely real and the nonreal. Instead of the discrete opposition of sacred and profane that Durkheim and Eliade propose, Douglas's notion of the danger of dirt highlights the porousness and vulnerability of such boundaries. Thus it is the threat of a transgressed boundary and of possible pollution that contributes to the full demarcation of a ritually pure space.

The proximity between the clean and unclean is an important step in better understanding the richly interlinked and highly performative aspect of the sacred and the profane. Stepping into the space created by this argument, two more contemporary theorists of religion offer their conception of the sacred and how it functions.

David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, professors of comparative religious studies and history respectively, begin *American Sacred Space* with an extremely useful tutorial on existing definitions of the sacred, which can be broadly differentiated into two categories. The substantial definition is represented here by Rudolf Otto's 'holy' and Mircea Eliade's 'real' which seek to account for 'certain experiential qualities' of the sacred, 'identified as uncanny [...] powerful manifestations of reality, full of ultimate significance' (Chidester and Linenthal 5). Meanwhile Durkheim espouses a situational definition that locates the sacred 'at the nexus of human practices and social projects' (Chidester and Linenthal 5). Following a situational analysis, 'nothing is inherently sacred' and the sacred is instead 'an empty signifier [...] better regarded as an adjectival or verbal

form, a sign of difference that can be assigned to virtually anything through the human labour of consecration' (Chidester and Linenthal 6). This situational strand of analysis opens up the possibility of enquiring whether the sacred can have meaning or use outside of a religious context.

The editors of *American Sacred Space* avoid the problem of definition by focusing their analysis on the production of sacred space. Nonetheless, their work, and Chidester's later work are important to this discussion. Subverting Eliade's claim that the sacred is separate and opposed to the profane, Chidester and Linenthal argue, as I have above, that the problem with Eliade's thesis is that although sacred space is 'set apart' it is not set apart in 'the absolute, heterogeneous sense that Eliade insisted upon' (Chidester and Linenthal 17). Rather they argue that despite the effort made by 'religious actors' to maintain this clear separation, sacred space and the sacred are inexorably interwoven with the profane (Chidester and Linenthal 17).

In a more recent publication, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, Chidester offers a useful definition of the sacred which is closer to the provenance of this thesis. He writes:

The sacred [...] is produced through the labour of intensive interpretation and regular ritualization, which generates a surplus of meaning that is immediately available for appropriation, as people make the sacred their own, but is also vulnerable to contestation over who legitimately owns and operates the sacred. (Chidester ix)

For Chidester then, the sacred is not merely space or objects that have been set apart and placed in constant opposition with the profane. Rather, the sacred is something that is produced by two complementary processes. The first is the interpretive work needed to conceptualise a space as set apart and as something which might possibly be sacred, and the second is the ritualised performance or act of demarcating that space as something

particularly significant. It is these two processes which combine to produce a ‘surplus of meaning’ that makes possible an ordering of the chaos of heterogeneous space.

The openness of this definition is also its weakness, since ‘the “pivoting of the sacred” that occurs through the work of ritualization and interpretation allows virtually any place to become sacred’ (Chidester and Linenthal 14). The possibilities of what can be sacred and what not, are expanded almost exponentially: ‘sacred meaning and significance, holy awe and desire, can coalesce in any place that becomes, even if only temporarily, a site for intensive interpretation.’ However, while Durkheim and Eliade argue for a closed definition of the sacred, Chidester and Linenthal argue for a definition of the sacred that takes its proximity to the profane and the secular into consideration, and further seeks to explain and explore all the labour that goes into constructing the sacred such as ‘choosing, setting aside, consecrating, venerating, protecting, defending, and redefining sacred places’ (Chidester and Linenthal 17). Chidester and Linenthal are not blind to the expansiveness of their conception:

Although “the sacred” might be regarded as an empty signifier, a sign that by virtue of its emptiness could mean anything or nothing, its emptiness is filled with meaningful content as a result of specific strategies of symbolic engagement. Not merely interpretive, these symbolic strategies are powerful, practical manoeuvres in the field of sacred symbols. [...] Characteristic modes of symbolic engagement in the production of sacred space include strategies of appropriation, exclusion, inversion, and hybridisation. (Chidester and Linenthal 18–19)

I find this definition of the sacred particularly useful, because founded as it is on the interpretive and ritual labour necessary in the construction of the sacred, it strikes a chord with the literary. The sacred is not simply a symbolic or metaphorical opposition to the

profane; it is an enacted process that is performed to bring order and therefore meaning into focus.

What is especially promising about Chidester and Linenthal's analysis of the sacred, from a literary point of view, is that it highlights the narratological aspects of the sacred-making process. In the literary realm sacralisation operates on a number of levels. First and foremost, writing creates a self-sufficient site of meaning; the writer produces a language through which the reader might experience a surplus of meaning. Sacralisation is also operative in the ritualised performance of characters as they categorise and organise space. Thus the dual process of sacralisation is articulated through the stages of writing and reading, and present in the text itself. Moreover there is vital interpretive work that is required to symbolically appropriate a space and delineate boundaries between it and unordered, profane space in what Chidester calls strategies of exclusion. On the one hand, this is an interpretive process that requires an imaginative engagement to create a story or narrative that explains or justifies the separation of that space; on the other hand, and happening simultaneously, is the process of demarcating physical boundaries, often through a cleaning and ordering of space.

Each theorist mentioned above has been forthright about the Daedalian nature of the term 'sacred.' The threat of contamination, always already present in the idea of the sacred, helps to define itself and the profane, but we again fall into the binary trap. The sacred cannot be conceptualised without the contrast with and danger of the profane and mundane. The multiplicity of its forms, manifestations and conceptions makes it challenging to define, yet captivating to explore. In my opinion, it is difficult to define the 'sacred' by what it *is*, or by its characteristics alone – and perhaps, circumscribing it within the confines of a succinct definition pays a disservice to the concept. Consequently, I believe we should conceptualise the sacred as a result; as the 'effect' or *consequence* of a

sustained hermeneutic and performative engagement which separates the ‘thing’ from the mundane world which surrounds it.

Drawing from Chidester, I believe that this construction of the sacred involves a simultaneous process of two parts. The first instance is an extended interpretive engagement which employs narrative or myth-making strategies to conceptually distinguish the object from its surroundings. The second instance, overlapping and fused with the first, is a performative engagement where the ‘thing’ is physically touched, moved, cleaned, or organised in accordance with the principles of the first. The combinatory process of these two interrelated elements is what we call ‘ritual.’ Importantly, conceptualisation is the necessary and antecedent ground that makes possible the performative aspect. Thus, I define the sacred as that space or object which is set apart from the mundane by ritualised strategies of hermeneutic and performative engagement. Ritual is a basic feature of sacralisation: similarly motivated by the threat of forgetting and loss, the repetition of performance and investment are activities which seek to recuperate or bolster that which is vulnerable. I return to a further discussion of ritual in the following chapter.

The sacred usually connotes a religious experience or idea; that is, an experience tied to a particular religious world-view. My conceptualisation of the sacred does not necessitate this connection, and so expands the possibilities of reading the sacred. In order to develop this theory, and to attempt to answer the question of whether the sacred can have meaning distinct from its religious conceptual and practical moorings, I turn to Martin Hägglund’s theorisation of a secular faith.

## Thinking secular faith: Martin Hägglund

A distinct intellectual trajectory on these themes can be discerned in the work of Hägglund. This trajectory begins in his English publications with *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*; is refined, extended and applied in *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*; and is currently the basis for his new, yet unpublished book *This Life: On Secular Faith*. This trajectory seeks to ground deconstruction in a materialist reading deeply concerned with our finite and precarious existence, the vulnerability of which, he argues, makes faith, care and value possible. From the titles of the publications alone it is clear that the co-implication of life and time is central to his work. The questions that found this work might read: How do we think the time of life? How do we think desire in a temporal, finite life, without recourse to a psychoanalytic lack? How do we think a faith without God, the 'Good,' or eternity?

Since the work and theory of *Radical Atheism* and *Dying for Time* set up the argument for secular faith, I briefly present their main arguments before discussing *This Life*. In *Radical Atheism* Hägglund proposes that there was no religious 'turn' in Derrida's work. Rather, within the context of his writings as a whole, Hägglund shows how Derrida read the concepts of 'faith, messianicity, and God [...] against themselves in accordance with a radically atheist conception of desire' (Hägglund, 'Radical' 116). Simultaneously, Hägglund formulates his theory of radical atheism, which not only deconstructs the idea of God, but also denies that immortality is desirable in the first place. He writes:

Radical atheism proceeds from the argument that everything that can be desired is mortal in its essence [...] [O]ne cannot love without the experience of finitude. This is the premise from which radical atheism necessarily follows. If one cannot love anything except the mortal, it follows that one cannot love God, since God does not

exhibit the mortality that makes something desirable. (Hägglund, *Atheism* 111)

For Derrida, all religious systems are based on the idea of the ‘The unscathed’: that there is some aspect which is holy, pure, untouched and immune to all contamination.<sup>7</sup> However nothing is unscathed: ‘The deconstruction of God is the deconstruction of the very idea of absolute immunity, which is the foundation of religion. There is nothing safe and sound, nothing holy and sacred, and the name of God is no exception’ (Hägglund, *Atheism* 145). Derrida deconstructs the notion of absolute immunity, showing that everything is actually autoimmune. Through this logic Derrida asserts that a constitutive requirement for everything is that it is ‘threatened from within.’ Thus the notion of good must necessarily contain within itself the threat of the ‘unbearably bad.’ This is not a negative condition, but rather the positive possibility of any term:

Derrida makes clear that whatever is desired is finite in its essence.  
[...] There is thus an incurable autoimmunity at the heart of every experience, since whatever one wants to affirm is constituted by the fact that it will be negated. There is no way out of this double bind because the threat of loss is not extrinsic to what is desired; it is intrinsic to its being as such. (Hägglund, *Atheism* 34)

A finite experience of time, understood only by virtue of the tracing of time, is essential to this argument for autoimmunity. Spacing or *espacement* is Derrida’s abbreviation for the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space that is the definition of the trace, arche-writing and of *différance* (Hägglund, *Atheism* 18). Elaborating on this definition, Hägglund uses the structure of the trace to articulate the co-implication of time and space: since the present can only appear by passing away, ‘it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. This is the *becoming-space of time*. The trace is necessarily spatial, since

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<sup>7</sup> It is not clear which religious conception of God Hägglund is referring to. It accords with Judaic and Islamic understandings, more closely than it does with Christian, and yet ‘The unscathed’ is applied as a normative religious claim.

spatiality is characterised by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession' (Hägglund, *Atheism* 18). The spatiality of the trace makes it possible to apprehend the 'relations between past and future.' This is why Hägglund states that the trace is the 'minimal condition for life to resist death,' since it is this which makes possible an apprehension of temporal finitude, mortality and the passing away of the present.

What is desired then is to live on in a life that you know will end, and the trace allows you to recall this life: the now that passes away and an awareness of the movement towards a future which is not yet. This is living on, or survival. As William Egginton succinctly puts it: 'Desire for survival is another name, in the realm of human life, for *spacing*,' and what Hägglund seeks to show is that 'there is nothing we can sense or imagine, think or desire, that does not require the basic structure of spacing for us to sense, imagine, think, or desire it' (Egginton 204, 205).

Hägglund's explanation of survival, of living on, means to never be 'absolutely present': 'it is to remain after a past that is no longer and to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet' (Hägglund, *Atheism* 1). Thus the trace is the 'minimal condition' of living: it 'enables the past to be retained, since it is characterised by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession' (Hägglund, *Atheism* 1).

The trace is also a necessary condition for desire, a topic which Hägglund addresses in his second book. Here he explains survival as to 'live on in a temporal process of alteration,' and addresses what he terms the 'investment in survival' that 'animates and inspires all [...] forms of care' (Hägglund, *Dying* 8). The attachment to temporal life and the investment in survival generates 'what one desires and what one fears, both the desirable and the undesirable.' Building on the concerns of *Radical Atheism*, Hägglund employs the logic of what he terms 'chronolibido' 'to read the desire for immortality against itself from within' (Hägglund, *Dying* 9). What motivates us to care and act then is the co-implication of chronophobia and chronophilia. The source of chronophobia, the

‘fear of time and death,’ is ‘generated by the investment in a life that can be lost. It is because one is attached to a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia). Care in general [...] depends on such a double bind’ (Hägglund, *Dying* 9). What is pertinent here is the source of care, which is based on the ever-shifting balance between what we fear and desire, an unsteadiness that speaks to the vulnerability of a finite, human life.

In the introduction of his yet unpublished book, *This Life: On Secular Faith*, Hägglund builds again on the outcomes of the arguments of his previous work. For the moment if we accept his claims that there is no God; that immortality is undesirable; and that our temporal lives are experienced as an investment in survival, that our fear of time and death, and our hopes for the future are all a necessary consequence of our exposure to time, then how do we approach the loss of the beloved? How do we mourn what was loved, cherished and lost without recourse to God or an afterlife?

Hägglund’s answer is that in actuality, the notions of a desired afterlife, eternity, or heaven, undermine the experience of mourning by making temporal life subordinate to an eternal repose. Through a close analysis of texts by respected Christian thinkers, C. S. Lewis, Martin Luther and Saint Augustine, Hägglund draws out the contradictions of religious mourning. In each of the three cases, these religious men castigate themselves for their sorrow at the death of a loved one, believing that they should not mourn as they do because it is a sin to love another as an end in themselves. Instead they should rejoice that their loved ones now sit eternally in the presence of God. Hägglund proposes that what we mourn is the loss of a temporal life, and even defines *religious* as ‘any ideal of being absolved from the pain of loss’ (Hägglund, *Life* 7). This bold definition emerges from Derrida’s identification of the ‘*unscathed*’ as the foundation of religion, which Hägglund extends to an ideal of immunity to the ‘pain of loss.’ In its truest sense such an ideal would mean a complete disinvestment in temporal being, a detachment from the alteration and

suffering of time represented by the attainment of Nirvana, for example. The ultimate spiritual ideal for religious sages and mystics is to unite with the eternal by relinquishing investment and care in finite existence. As in *Radical Atheism*, Hägglund shows that in mourning we lament the loss of the temporal experience of the beloved. We wish to be with the beloved again, to touch, talk and hear them, what we desire is for them to live on in time not in eternity. Hägglund explains,

The relation to loss is inscribed in the very experience of living on.

To live on is never to repose in a timeless presence. [...] The experience of living on is thus always haunted by loss, both in relation to what has ceased to be in the past and what may cease to be in the future. As a consequence, you have to take your experience on *faith*, relying on memories of a past that you cannot know with certainty and on expectations of a future that you cannot predict.

(Hägglund, *Life* 5)

Thus Hägglund articulates a secular faith that emerges from the validation of the ‘*intrinsic* value of temporal lives’ (Hägglund, *Life* 10). His central aim is to demonstrate that ‘*faith in the value of what can be lost* is a condition of care. This secular faith – which the religious aspiration to eternity seeks to leave behind – is the faith that makes us care that someone or something lives on’ (Hägglund, *Life* 7). Without the threat of loss and death, investment in survival would be unnecessary.

Instead, Hägglund describes three interrelated aspects which operate in the ‘dynamic phenomenon of faith’ (Hägglund, *Life* 8). ‘First, faith is a *structural* condition of living on. As a temporal being, you must have faith in what will happen and in those on whom you depend’ (8). In order to proceed, to move forward with the moment we must have faith in those we depend on, and on what will happen in the succession of moments. Thus faith is the basis of interaction with others, and an acceptance of the future that is yet

to be. There are positive and negative outcomes of this faith that is a faith in the beloved and in the future, but '[t]he structural condition of faith marks the very possibility of having a future – of living on – but it also entails the peril of having faith in a future that may shatter your hopes and lay to waste what you desire' (8).

'Second, faith is an *evaluative* commitment to living on' (Hägglund, *Life* 8). Care presupposes that you believe something is important enough to live on and be 'maintained across time' (8). If you care for something or someone, you have evaluated their importance and decided that the relationship is worth sustaining over time. Evaluation is an important aspect in the dynamic of faith since it enables one to restrict what is cared about, and invested in. In Hägglund's terminology to be invested in survival is the impossibility of being indifferent to survival. This leads to the third aspect of secular faith,

Faith is a *motivational* force in living on. While this motivational force depends on the belief in the value of something living on, it also depends on *the belief that what you value is precarious*: that it may be lost or destroyed, that it may fail to take place or cease to be. Thus, faith is animated not only by a commitment to something living on, but also by a sense of its precarious existence. (Hägglund, *Life* 8)

The final line of this quotation cuts to the heart of Hägglund's definition of secular faith, but it also addresses the essential nature of the sacred, and what motivates one to demarcate something as sacred. The motivation to sacralise originates from the finitude of living on. We care enough to make something sacred because it might be lost, and we certainly will die. We evaluate it as important and worth attention, and this too is founded on faith in the future, and in those we care about. The constant counterbalancing of care for what is valued and the 'sense of its precarious existence' – the co-implication of value and loss – is the basis of sacralisation, and the experience of the sacred. Thus, while the

discussions of the sacred above are primarily concerned with how sacred spaces are constructed and understood, via Derrida, Hägglund shows that this process is dependent on a finite experience of time.

### **Reading the *imminent sacred* in African literatures**

The sacred is therefore an aspect of the everyday; sacralisation, the impetus to make sacred, is motivated by the finitude and vulnerability of the subject. The central aspect of the sacred, the point around which all others orbit, is the intrinsic constitutive tension between precarity and value, between the promise of an end to life and the sense of care this imparts. In its simplest terms the sacred is the careful, precarious investment (value) made material, or assigned to a material 'thing.' In this way the sacred is both vulnerable in itself and a metonym for the uncertainty of meaning. This is not a necessarily religious conception of the sacred; rather, it articulates the sacred as a consequence of considered and repeated performance and investment in aspects of everyday life.

Hägglund's demonstration of a secular faith allows us not only to see the possibility of an *imminent sacred*, but also what would motivate such a thing. I use *imminent* here in the sense of impending: a sacred that is proximate, present and emerges from the everyday. The imminent sacred I propose therefore is one not invested in reaching for eternity. It is rather a resignification of the temporal, finite and mundane for its own sake. I also invite the conflation between 'imminent' and 'immanent' which means in-dwelling and is often used to describe an intimate God.<sup>8</sup> Thus immanent contained within the imminent together refer to a sacred that contains within it the threat and promise of the ordinary, elevating the ordinary to the importance of the sacred while maintaining the contradiction of contamination and danger. Gestures may be made to a 'noumenon,' a region or domain

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Taylor writes of what he terms 'the immanent frame,' 'this frame constitutes a "natural" order, to be contrasted to a "supernatural" one, an "immanent" world, over against a possible "transcendent" one' (Taylor 542). The frame is constituted by 'the buffered identity of the disciplined individual mov[ing] in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular.'

beyond the limits of phenomenological experience, but such a conception is still bound to the limitations of a finite subject. It is then the precariousness, the vulnerability of living on, which initiates the impetus to sacralise, to set apart, and through repeated ritualistic behaviour and interpretation to evaluate and assign a sacred value.

At first glance it may appear that there is very little overlap between Hägglund's work and African traditional religions, but upon closer consideration a vital similarity is apparent – the religious subject's experience of time. As we have seen, Hägglund explains that all experience is necessarily finite, and that immortality in the sense of an eternal life of repose is therefore undesirable. African traditional religions are essentially anthropocentric, positioning man, not God, as the centre of the universe. Additionally, many gods are given human characteristics and vulnerabilities, even anthropomorphised in wooden carvings. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka begins 'by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature, and in so doing presses them into further service on behalf of human society, and its quest for the explication of being' (Soyinka 1). He goes on to detail the distinctly human features and stories of some of the gods in the Yoruba aegis, who despite their essential purity, are marked at some time in their history by acts of 'excess, hubris or other human weakness' (Soyinka 13). 'The consequences are, significantly, measured in human terms and such gods are placed under an eternal obligation of some practical form of penance which compensates humanity' (13).

What exists in the universe exists in relation to humankind and since an eternal future cannot be experienced it does not exist in any real sense. The myths, rituals and praxis of African traditional religions are predicated upon human finite temporality. The ancestors, departed or living-dead do not continue on in eternity as the dead do in a Christian sense; rather, they only retain this status as long as they (their name) is remembered by someone living. This might be called, as John Mbiti suggests, 'personal

immortality' (Mbiti 25). Yet even this is finite; limited to living memory. This is one reason that lineage is so foundational to African indigenous religions – without a son to continue the name, to extend the lineage, a family line reaches a dead end. Marriage, childbirth and community are all primarily concerned with the continuation of temporal existence.

The figure of a unitary creator is common to most African indigenous religions, and in many cases this creator is supported by deities and spirits who perform certain roles, but as Mbiti claims, '[t]hese mythological figures of a spiritual nature are on the whole man's attempt to historicise what is otherwise "timeless," and what man experiences in another context as divinities' (Mbiti 77). This aspect, even though it has changed with the influence of Christianity, colonialism, modernity and globalisation, founds an experience of the world which values above all human, temporal life not merely of the individual but of the community.

There are limitations to the overlaps between Hägglund's work and African indigenous religions, and Mbiti's assessments do not have universal purchase in African literatures, yet the emphasis on human temporality is certainly productive. It also helps to ground an application of the imminent sacred in reading African literatures, because this configuration of the sacred considers the co-implication of space and time and positions itself at the centre of the dynamic between religion and secular, traditional and contemporary aspects of experience. The syncretic nature of contemporary African religious theology, praxis and culture and its representation in literature is a particularly fertile area of analysis because of this complexity. Further, F. Abiola Irele traces the beginnings of African imaginative expression to its sacred origins, and outlines the continuing influences and legacies of this history. He argues that 'as a signifying dimension of the African imagination,' 'narrative' is the 'effort by the African writer to discern for the continent, beyond the harsh realities of African experience in modern times,

a principle of transcendence in history' (Irele, *Imagination* 114). Irele identifies this transcendent history in his genealogy of African literatures which includes the sacred, 'mythic sources' of 'traditional cultures,' orality, and the 'influence of Christian and Islamic religious texts' (Irele, 'Perspectives' 5). These sources 'identified as a collective resource from which to derive a new relation to the world' present African writers with an 'existential and affective' predicament (Irele, *Imagination* 60). Whether these sources are used as organising tropes, 'formal categor[ies],' or as authentic representations of the author's worldview, they still pose 'serious dilemmas in the formation of a consciousness adapted to the exigencies of the modern world' – a world where postcolonial and postsecular negotiations determine the course of everyday life (Irele, *Imagination* 61). These dilemmas are transcribed in various ways by the black African authors discussed here: Ndibe, Abani, Vera, Mpe and Cole. Despite their bifurcated histories, for these black African writers as for Coetzee and van Niekerk, writing is its own ritual. Thus the hermeneutic and iterative work of writing is a valuable site for studying the generation of the sacred. Indeed, '*the act of writing itself*,' J. Z. Smith notes, is 'the chief ritual activity': 'the ritual of writing is [...] a displacement of ritual practice into writing' (Smith, *Relating* 226–27).

Ritual and the ritual of writing are essential to this project, as is the particular aesthetic quality of the poetic prose employed by the writers considered here.<sup>9</sup> The shared characteristics of ritual and literary writing, and the displacement of ritual practice into writing, emerge forcefully in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Song for Night* (2007), and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) and *Butterfly Burning* (2000), discussed in chapter two. In this chapter I demonstrate how these authors use both the writing of ritual and the poetics of ritual language to construct a singular experience of the

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<sup>9</sup> The texts were selected for the conversations the writers invite about the sacred and the secular, the traffic between the two and the ways in which the authors foreground their preoccupations with these issues in the content and form of their writing. Thus, the imminent sacred is not an imposition on the text, but rather a way of bringing these exchanges to the fore.

precarious, vulnerable, and sacred body. Vera has written the stories of women and taboo into Zimbabwe's historiography. Abani has garnered much attention for his representations of the liminal, suffering subject caught in the no man's land between human rights and state law. While some may find Vera and Abani's aestheticisation of violence distasteful, it is the lyricism of their prose that establishes a somatic empathy between reader and text – exposing and destabilising the unevenness in this relationship. From the lyrical and graceful choreography of female bodies in Vera's scenes of pleasure and violation, to Abani's descriptions of ritual scarification on sacrificed and spiritual bodies, these writers dwell on the finitude and exposure of the human form. As the subjects of ritual and lyrical attention these bodies are sacralised.

Chapter three considers how the sacred is drawn into the narrative and form of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), and Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* (2006). The first two novels illustrate the incorporation of African epistemologies<sup>10</sup> into the postsecular, postcolonial city, while the third is structured as a ritualised resignification of Johannesburg. These novels marvel at the possibilities of urban pedestrian access, while representing the precarious position of the subject in the globalised city. Traversing, naming and mapping the territory that has been covered as they walk, integrating sacred knowledge systems in the city, the protagonists of these texts assert a hard-won knowledge of the streets, establishing a point of identification and belonging in the otherwise sprawling, anonymous mass of the city – a process I call *pedestrian mapping*. Read through this lens, the narrator-protagonists' incorporation of African epistemologies and ritualised behaviour into the conception of the urban environment become productive strategies of belonging. Further, I compare these

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term 'African epistemologies' hesitantly, since it would be reductive to suggest that there is a unitary or homogenous African belief or knowledge system. While there are commonalities to be found in the cultures and rituals of some communities across the continent, there are just as many, if not more, distinctive practices. In a gesture to this multiplicity I use the term in its plural form to allude to this heterogeneity that the scope of this thesis prevents me from addressing.

peripatetic narratives with accounts of driving in the city in order to demonstrate the uniquely productive and sacralising possibilities of pedestrian access.

In response to J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1998) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006) chapter four approaches the particular anxieties of settler colonialism in relation to the sacralised space of the farm and the experience of the sublime. I argue that the protagonists' affective and psychological ambivalence towards to the space of the farm is where the contradiction of the sublime is registered. The sublime experience of fear and pleasure occurs when the spectator is made aware of the limits of her imagination and the failure of reason to fully comprehend the unrepresentable expanse of the landscape. John and Milla are devoted to their respective farms, Voëlfontein and Grootmoedersdrift. These demarcated and cultivated pieces of land provide John and Milla with an understanding of their position in the world, and a place to which they feel they belong. But Voëlfontein hums with a sacred silence John cannot fully comprehend, and Grootmoedersdrift seems to resist Milla's attempts to tame and contain the landscape. The organisational capacity of the sacred enables Milla and John to codify their troubled connection to the land and their ambiguous experience of the sublime.

Each of the following chapters is focused on the literary representations of particular patterns of anxiety and explores the ways in which the sacred is used to partially alleviate that discomfort. Chapter two articulates the angst of physical and social precarity relieved by somatic and written ritual. Chapter three regards the uncertainty of diasporic urban belonging quelled by sacred epistemologies and pedestrian access. Chapter four formulates the disquiet of land claims as a relation to the sublime, subdued, however briefly, by the conceptual order of sacralisation. The imminent sacred underpins each chapter as it attunes the reader to the dynamic co-implication of vulnerability and care which motivate sacralisation.

## **Body: Ritualisation, the sacred and somatic limits in Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera**

‘So it seems that the desire to make art, to draw the limits of the body, to create a simulacrum has its roots in loss; or at least, the possibility of loss.’ (Abani, ‘Millions’ pag.)

‘The body is only a feather held upright, pinned down to the ground and poised to fall from the slightest whisper. It is suspended, ready to collapse when a shadow falls.’ (Vera, *Butterfly* 114)

This chapter considers the intersections of the imminent sacred, ritual and the body. I consider three distinct but related ideas. First, I continue to explore the notion that the imminent sacred is motivated by the inevitability of loss and the finitude of human life. Second, the body, which is contained, choreographed, purified, disciplined and beautified in an attempt to ward off disease and forestall death, illustrates this dynamic of vulnerability and veneration. Third, ritual provides strategies to manage these contradictions, and is a vital aspect of sacralisation. The body, the sacred and ritual are connected by their conceptual dependence on, and management of, the promise of pollution and an impending end. This is perhaps illustrated most clearly in the cases of subjective and somatic vulnerability – so effectively rendered by Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera as they write through the transformative qualities of language, ritual and metaphor.

## **A postsecular, humanist aesthetic?**

In *The Postsecular Imagination* Manav Ratti explores the productive limits of religion and secularism, arguing for the political potential of postsecularism as he sees it emerging in South Asian anglophone literature. Although his work is concerned with a different geographic region, his argument is germane to my own. He argues that South Asian writers, particularly Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje, disheartened by the devastations of religious and national warfare, undermine and override religious symbolism in their novels, thus opening the possibility for a humanist identification that he calls postsecular faith: ‘forms of belief’ which originate ‘from secular lived experience’ (Ratti 44). For example, writing on *The English Patient* (1992), Ratti argues that Ondaatje evacuates the spaces of religious signification by filling them with aestheticised descriptions – beautiful, poetic descriptions which remake those religious spaces in the form that Ondaatje requires. Taking place at the end of the Second World War, in a partially destroyed Tuscan villa, *The English Patient* tells the story of Count Almásy and the nurse, Hana, who cares for him and his fire ravaged body. Through Almásy’s recollections of his past as an explorer of the Egyptian deserts, we learn too of his love affair with Katherine. The Italian churches, frescoes and even the minarets of Cairo, Ratti suggests, are emptied of their religious meaning. While Ratti argues that Ondaatje’s aestheticisation leaves no room for religious signification, he overlooks the specific poetic quality of Ondaatje’s writing which reinvests those spaces with a postsecular sacrality. Developing from Ratti’s close reading of *The English Patient*, which I discuss in more detail, I propose that rather than evacuating the sacred from the text, Ondaatje relocates the sacred to the body of Almásy’s beloved, Katherine, through the poetic language of the text but also through the ritualised performance of the protagonist. Engaging with Ratti’s analysis initially, I extend it to consider the work of Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera.

‘Sinners in a holy city’ – Almásy and Katherine walk through the streets of Cairo in the early morning: ‘The beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret

answering another, as if passing on a rumour of the two of them [...] the smell of charcoal and hemp already making the air profound' (Ondaatje 164). In response to this passage, Ratti remarks that rather than calling the righteous to prayer, the call to prayer seems to announce the couple's affair to the city. The religious symbolism of the minaret is undermined by this description. The minarets, personified not as they call the righteous to prayer, but as they profanely spread gossip. In his analysis, however, Ratti undermines the very negotiation that he argues is central to the postsecular. The postsecular cannot only be a removal of religious signification; it must, in the frame of the argument, also be an intercession between the secular and the religious. Ratti overlooks the reference to the profundity of the air, and to the holy city. These allusions illustrate not the removal of religious significance, but rather its displacement to secular spaces, thus reimagining the elevation of secular spaces. Rather than evacuating religious meaning, the poetics of the text displace it onto otherwise secular spaces, resignifying them as something apart from the normal, mundane world.

This is certainly the case in Almásy's ritualistic treatment of Katherine's body. After their plane crashes into the desert leaving Katherine mortally wounded, Almásy carries her to the Cave of Swimmers, a cave whose walls are covered in beautiful rock paintings which depict swimming figures. Once she has died in the cave, Almásy covers her body in its pigments:

He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hands thick with red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin, so her knee that poked out of the plane that first day was saffron. The pubis. Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human. There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors

celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal – a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing.  
(Ondaatje 264)

Ratti explains that Ondaatje makes Katherine's beauty distinct in a way which is informed by Almásy's reverence for the desert. He writes 'The desert is "pure"<sup>1</sup> and natural, and the "ritual" through which Almásy consecrates his lover's fragile body reflects some of that purity, away from any artifice' of national sentiment (Ratti 41). I would remove the scare quotes from 'ritual' – here Almásy enacts a ritual that he has read about in his copy of *Herodotus*, the book he treats as his personal bible and guide. Almásy consecrates Katherine's body with a practice set down by Herodotus, a historical ritual practice Almásy recreates. It may not be recognised as a religious act, but it is an act of ritual and therefore has recourse to the possibilities of the sacred. For Ratti 'there is faith here, but it is located in the world and it is neither overly religious nor a return to the religious; we may think of it as postsecular. Almásy's lover becomes of the world, the secular here-and-now world of the desert' (Ratti 41). A faith located in secular lived experience, but it is the lyrical description, the repetitions and rhythms of the language which separate this moment from the mundane.

Katherine's body, the cave, the presence of Almásy, all constitute the space and the scene as ordinary, until Almásy begins his ritualised movement in the space around her body. Almásy removes the pigmentation from the cave paintings around him and transfers it to Katherine's body. He takes something vital, blood-like, from the cave, 'his hands thick with red.' Almásy enacts a ritual of burial and mourning. He covers Katherine's body in the colour and matter of the desert, removing it from the walls of the cave and placing it on her body; he tries to mark Katherine's body as separate from the immediacy, the 'here-and-

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<sup>1</sup> 'And my own monograph, I must admit, had been stern with accuracy. The fear of describing her presence as I wrote caused me to burn down sentiment, all rhetoric of love. Still, I described the desert as purely as I would have spoken of her' (Ondaatje 256).

now' of the world; to consecrate her in the materials of timelessness – the pigments of the desert, and the burial rituals of desert custom: 'Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human' (Ondaatje 264). Although Ratti reads the desert and therefore the cave as secular, he overlooks the ritualised performance and lyricism of this passage, the poetic textual form draws the sacred into Ondaatje's prose: 'When I turned her around, her whole body was covered in bright pigment. Herbs and stones and light and the ashes of acacia *to make her eternal*. The body pressed against sacred colour' (Ondaatje 276) (emphasis mine).

Ratti argues persuasively for the constructive political potential of the South Asian literature he selects, looking at the formal and rhetorical methods authors like Ondaatje use to imagine a community established on humanist, rather than religious or secularist national principles. Ratti's analysis falls short, however, in its consideration of the lyrical prose and aestheticised descriptions which displace sacred attention from the religious to the mundane. Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera, I argue, also seek to establish a community of shared experience, based not on political affiliations, but on somatic empathy and unequal relations between reader and text. This relies on Abani and Vera's lyrical prose, and the unique bodily aesthetic created in their work. Abani and Vera engage explicitly with the precarious position of the human body as a site that is terrifyingly vulnerable to violation and illness.

Rather than simply lamenting this susceptibility, Vera and Abani use it and the subjective anxiety which is shared between text and reader in concert with poetic language in order to constitute a kind of community of shared mortality. Thus, building on Hägglund's conception of secular faith, which tends to privilege a Euro-American individualism, I demonstrate the ways in which this fiction relies on, as well as helps to produce, a communal experience of human vulnerability. This all hinges on how the authors construct the performativity of the protagonists' bodies: how these bodies are aesthetically and imaginatively set apart from others in the text and made to hold excess

symbolic value. It hinges on the imminent sacralisation of the body through ritual practice in Abani's novellas, and ritual poetics in his and Vera's work.

### **The body and ritual**

In Christian and humanist tradition, the body is subordinate to the soul or the self; it is seen merely as an instrument of the self, a vessel the soul will outlive. In more recent scholarship in philosophy, psychology, medicine and anthropology, the body and self are perceived as mutually constitutive. Developments in the interdisciplinary field of body studies, moving through dualist, functionalist, naturalist, constructionist and deconstructionist assessments of the body, as outlined in Chris Shilling's *The Body and Social Theory*, inform Shilling's argument that 'that the body is most profitably conceptualized as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its entry into, and participation in, society' (Shilling 11). Shilling's theorisation of the body, taking into account the biomedical and socio-political influences on constructions and perceptions of the body, seeks to deal with the body in its material embodiments and in discourse, always aware of the particularities of context. Shilling's argument is notable for its assessment that death is central to how theorists and modern subjects conceive of and relate to the body: 'in conditions of high modernity, there is a tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity. In this context, the prospect of death assumes an importance [...] central to our contemporary understanding of the body' (Shilling 1). The desacralisation of social life and the retreat of belief and meaning to private domains, which theorists of modernity have seen as a process twinned with the rise of science in the modern age, leaves individuals to establish and maintain 'values to make sense of their daily lives' and the certainty of death (Shilling 2). Without the 'trans-personal meaning structures' provided by religious belief and the grand narratives of humanist, nationalist and economic triumph, the body 'initially

appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world' (Shilling 2). Yet the more scientific and social inquiries teach us about the body, the more stark the limits of our control over ageing and death become. This aligns with Hägglund's assessment that it is only the certainty of death which instils the desire to live on, a secular faith based on the finitude of human life. Shilling writes, 'it is only in the context of the body's inevitable death that we can understand its full social importance' (Shilling 152).

Literature is particularly attuned to the 'complexities of embodied life,' for as David Hillman and Ulrika Maude note in their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion of the Body in Literature*: 'Literary texts, after all, tend to deal with the more ambivalent and amorphous areas of experience where simple definitions break down or prove inadequate' (Hillman and Maude 1). 'The body,' they suggest, 'is not simply as immediate a presence in literature as anywhere else: rather, here, precisely in its illusory absence (and, by the same token, its illusory presence), it is perhaps most intimately engaged with the endless aporia of corporeal presence and absence' (Hillman and Maude 4). The literary conjuring of the body 'confronts the reader' with its 'legible materiality,' and in so doing 'often provides powerful forms of resistance to socially instituted perceptions and demands' (Hillman and Maude 4).

The difficulty of representing the materiality of the body in literature is undertaken through play with form and structure. Even so, what is conveyed to the reader relies on sense, sensation and empathy. The novels discussed in this chapter articulate the discomfort and ethical imbalances of a reader's immersion in the text. In these novels the body is both represented in the text, and written on as a text itself. Socio-political, biomedical and economic authorities structure the body in particular ways, and have vested interests in doing so, but by drawing attention to the constructed nature of these discourses, and by writing heterogeneous alternatives that pay homage to the alterity of the body, the

bodies in Abani and Vera's fiction are also loci 'of socio-political resistance' (Hillman and Maude 6). Setting the body apart in this way relies on ritualised language and performance.

Ritual is a vital component of sacralisation since the sacred is a consequence of ritualised strategies of hermeneutic and performative engagement which set the sacred object apart from the everyday world. Like the concepts considered in the introduction, 'religion,' 'secular,' and 'sacred,' 'ritual' is similarly difficult to define.<sup>2</sup> Etymologically ritual derives from the correct performance of religious rites, and over time the word has come to mean something as commonplace as routine or habitual behaviour. There is a long religious and intellectual history between these two usages, which Talal Asad begins to trace in the essay 'Towards a genealogy of the concept of ritual.' Here Asad establishes a genealogy of ritual in order to investigate how 'changes in institutional structures and in organisations of the self' have made possible the 'concept of ritual as a universal category', and further what these changes might illustrate about the genealogies of "religion" and "secular" (Asad, *Genealogies* 55).<sup>3</sup> He proposes that alterations in the connotations of rite and ritual illustrate shifting conceptions of religion, the self, and the growing influence of ideologically secular scholarship.

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<sup>2</sup> While beyond the necessities of this project, a more detailed discussion of theories of ritual and their development can be found in Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, in Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion*, and in Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff's *Secular Ritual*. As an example of the developing definitions of ritual, Victor Turner views ritual as 'prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers' (Turner 19). Jonathan Z. Smith's theorisation of ritual maps onto both religious and secular contexts; for him, 'ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life have been displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualised perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things' (Smith, 'Bare' 124–25). Further, in their introduction to the collection *Secular Ritual*, Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff define ritual as, 'in part a form, and a form which gives certain meanings to its contents. The work of ritual, then, is partly attributable to its morphological characteristics. Its medium is part of its message' (Moore and Myerhoff 8).

<sup>3</sup> Beginning with the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Asad tracks how the entries under ritual change over time. From the first 1771 entry on ritual, a book which presents 'the order and manner to be observed in performing divine service in a particular church,' to the entry from 1910 which is preoccupied with ritual's 'symbolic character, the meaning attached to it, and the fact that it is a universal phenomenon' (Asad, *Genealogies* 56, 60). Ritual, once associated with written script that detailed practices in a particular premodern Christian church, is now an action that has universal applicability. Asad's critique undermines the claims of ritual as a universal phenomenon emerging from early anthropologists and ethnographers.

Asad's critique is extended by Catherine Bell, whose comprehensive studies of ritual and its academic study, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997), finds two dominant camps: the first 'stress[es] the distinctiveness of ritual, how it is clearly different from all other kinds of activity,' 'and the second stress[es] the congruity of ritual with other forms of human action, usually by seeing ritual as "the expressive, symbolical or communicative aspect" of action in general' (Bell 70). However, Bell reasons that there is no universal understanding of what constitutes ritual; as a set of activities historically and culturally determined, 'ritual is always contingent, provisional and defined by difference,' whether ritual is congruent with or uniquely separated from ordinary behaviour (Bell 91). Rather than focusing on ritual as a category, Bell attends to 'ritualization': the process by which ritual is established as a cultural form. Ritualisation is praxis. She writes:

ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors. (Bell 74)

Bell's ritualisation turns on differentiation and distinction. She points to J. Z. Smith's pivotal claim that 'Ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference' (Smith, *Place* 109). Hence the process of ritualisation intends the differentiation of the sacred and the profane, the distinction between what has been invested with symbolic meaning through ritual, from that which remains mundane. It does not intend the related construction of the ritualised body: 'a body invested with a "sense" of ritual' (Bell 98). A cyclical relation exists

between ritualisation, the ritualised body, and the structured and structuring environment. The physical and linguistic acts of ritual order, schematise, and transform a spatio-temporal environment according to a logic of ‘privileged opposition’ (Bell 98). The body with a ‘sense of ritual’ is a body mediated and transformed which mediates and transforms its environment in turn, as we shall see with Abani’s protagonist. In this way, ritual does not exert control. It does however, Bell argues, ‘constitute [...] a particular dynamic of social empowerment,’ since ‘ritual practices are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations’ (Bell 181, 196).

In the introduction to the edited collection *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, Jean and John Comaroff focus on ‘the role of ritual in African modernity’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xiv). They argue that ‘in the efforts of people to empower themselves, thus to assert a measure of control over worlds often perceived to be rapidly changing,’ the dynamic technologies of ritual have been employed to intervene in and manage the production of power relations across the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial epochs (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xiv). The Comaroffs explain that ritual is ‘an experimental technology intended to affect the flow of power in the universe’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xxx). Further, it is

an especially likely response to the contradictions created and (literally) engendered by processes of social, material, and cultural transformation, processes re-presented, rationalized, and authorized in the name of modernity and its various alibis (“civilisation,” “social progress,” “economic development,” “conversion” and the like). (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xxx)

Each alibi has a local valence that informs the structured and structuring environment the ritualised body inhabits. Although ritual may have been conceptually aligned with ‘tradition,’ ‘superstition’ and ‘religion’ against the progressive narratives of modernity, the

genealogies offered by Asad and Bell, and the essays in *Modernity and its Malcontents*, are no longer satisfied with a theorisation of ‘ritual as the mere reflection of a transcendent “tradition”’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xvi). They ‘try, instead, to make the concept embrace more mundane meaningful practice, practice often meant to transform, not reproduce, the environment in which it occurs’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xvi). After all, ‘we are confronted on all sides,’ particularly in African contexts, ‘with evidence of global systems – systems of capital, technology, ideology and representation – these systems are in the plural: diverse and dynamic, multiple and multidirectional’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xi). In order to make sense of the alibis of modernity, and the polyphonies and entangled simultaneities of contemporary African experience, ‘the work of ritual [...] is unceasing’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xviii). The transformative and appropriative dimension of ritual originates in its creative and imaginative potential; it is a way of performing ‘the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things’ (Smith, ‘Bare’ 124–25). Performing the way things ought to be, such that this perfection is able to exist in tension with the mundane or even profane reality, relies on its creative power:

The creative power of ritual, [...] arises from the fact that (i) it exists in continuing *tension* with more mundane modes of action, of producing and communicating meanings and values; (ii) its constituent signs are ever open to the accumulation of new associations and referents; and (iii) it has the capacity to act in diverse ways on a contradictory world. (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xxi)

Ritualisation is the process of distinction and differentiation; the value or meaning of ritual is derived from its opposition to mundane action. Ritual creates alternative meanings and

heterogeneous power relations by employing literary techniques like repetition, metaphor, metonymy, elaboration and occlusion. Ritual 'deploys the poetic properties of signs to the fullest'; it depends upon the openness of the sign to instantiate alternative modes of belief and praxis in order to codify the multivalent tensions of 'recalcitrant realities' (Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity* xxi). Thus, it is the poetic potential of language to expand and enclose meaning that makes ritual such a powerful imaginative tool. As Bell reminds us, ritual is always contingent and defined by difference: its signs and symbols are dynamic, receptive to multiple and contradictory meanings and are thus a vibrant mechanism for navigating the concatenations of modern African experience. In the first section I analyse the representation of ritual in Abani's novellas, and how the sacred emerges through scarification. In the second section I examine Vera's tendency to draw on the language of ritual in her sacralisation of the female body. I explore how ritual in its performative and linguistic manifestations contributes to the development of the characters in the work of both authors, and thus to a shared experience of vulnerability between reader and text.

### **Abani: Human rights, scarification, and the ritualised body**

Chris Abani's work is a perfect illustration of the socio-political complexities experienced by a contemporary African subject caught up in the powerful tides of the world-system. Abani is a writer and political activist. He was born in Nigeria in 1967 to an English mother and Igbo father. He was imprisoned three times. At eighteen Abani was arrested and imprisoned for six months for suspected involvement in a political coup. He was thought to be the mastermind behind this coup because of the plot of his first novel, *Masters of the Board* (1985). He was then imprisoned for a year during his time at university for his participation in a 'guerilla theatre group,' which performed plays critical of the Nigerian government of the time (Aycok 1). In 1990 Abani was arrested and imprisoned because of the subject matter of a play he wrote, entitled *Song of a Broken Flute* (Aycok 1). In

order to protect the other people involved in the play, Abani pleaded guilty to treason and was put on death row. He remained there for eighteen months, six of which were spent in solitary confinement. Abani was tortured during this time. He writes about his experiences of prison and torture in his poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic*. Abani was finally ‘ransomed out of prison’ with the help of his friends and fled to England (Aycock 2). After an assassination attempt at Oxford, Abani moved to the US where he still lives. Abani explains that he ‘wasn’t necessarily anti-government as much as anti-human rights violations or anti-poverty and such policies of the Nigerian government that were intended to achieve a fascist and oppressive result’ (Abani, ‘Resisting’ 23).

The phrase that gives this study its title is taken from Abani’s TED talk given in 2008. Abani says he is always searching ‘to find ways to chronicle, to share and to document stories about people, just everyday people. Stories that offer transformation, that lean into transcendence, but that are never sentimental, that never look away from the darkest things about us’ (Abani, *Humanity* pag.). Abani’s continued engagement with these issues is reflected in his poetry, fiction and non-fiction writing. For example, his full length novel *GraceLand* (2004) follows its adolescent protagonist Elvis as he moves through the underground and alternative economies of the Lagos ghetto where he lives. Gestures to the sacred or transcendent are present in much of Abani’s fiction; he leans into it, as he says. *The Virgin of Flames* (2008), which I discuss in the final chapter, is a particularly explicit example of this. In *GraceLand* the sacred structures the narrative: every chapter begins with an explication of the sacred rituals of the kola nut, and these chapters are interspersed with extracts from Elvis’s mother’s notebook which holds recipes akin to spells. Transcendence and sacralisation are pivotal aspects of *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Song for Night* (2007). The protagonists of these two novellas, a sex-trafficked teenage girl and a child soldier, inhabit the no man’s land between human rights and state law.

*Becoming Abigail*, as the title suggests, is a story of becoming: a version of the bildungsroman, which follows an adolescent girl’s formation of selfhood in response to

experiences of loss, displacement and sexual violation. Abigail's mother, after whom she is named, died giving birth to her. Her father, in a perpetual state of mourning, watches as she grows to look more and more like her mother. When Abigail is mature enough to register a sense of self she becomes aware of her mother's absence and how much this lack has informed her being and her relationship with her father. Abigail feels detached from her body, as if it does not belong to her: she looks like her mother, but cannot know her, and incites sadness and longing in her father. The novella compellingly relates Abigail's performative and material attempts to know her mother, and failing that, becomes herself by asserting a connection with and possession of her own body through ritual scarification and sacralisation. In his use of the third person omniscient narrative voice, Abani makes clear the privileged and vexed position of the reader as voyeur. It is the intimacy of this perspective that permits the reader to observe how Abigail's exploration and marking of her body enables her to develop a sense of self.

Recalling the onset of puberty, the narrator describes Abigail feeling the 'heft of her breast,' rolling 'her breasts between her palms like dough being shaped for a lover's bread' (Abani, *Abigail* 28). The development of her sexualised and gendered body, and her awareness of it, is intricately bound up with the ghostly figure of her mother, and the attention she receives from her father. Nonetheless, she is fascinated by the changes to her body, perceiving the alteration of her embodied form and constitutive subjectivity:

At first it was a curiosity, a genuine wonder at the burgeoning of a self, a self that was still Abigail, yet still her. With the tip of a wax crayon she would write "me," over and over on the brown rise of them. And when she washed in the shower the next day, the colour would bleed, but the wax left a sheen, the memory of night and her reclamation. (Abani, *Abigail* 29)

Rather than the possession of the words ‘my’ or ‘mine,’ the objective pronoun ‘me’ alludes to a burgeoning articulation of an individual self. Abigail’s use of a wax crayon, a child-like tool, to write on her skin is juxtaposed with her developing physical maturity – her acts of personal inscription are washed away in the morning like menstrual blood, as the colour bleeds but the memory of her reclamation remains. The novella traces the ever more permanent methods Abigail uses to mark her body: the rituals of inscription and scarification that facilitate her careful recovery and reappropriation of her embodied self lead to the sacralisation of her body in the text. Often read in secular terms as self-harm, bodily markings and ritual scarification are in fact an important part of many indigenous cultures. Rituals of scarification signify the body in its religio-cultural form: as signs of cultural or community identity; as markers of initiation into man or womanhood; as symbols of a connection to the ancestors or gods. For example, ‘Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria,’ Olanike Ola Orié notes, ‘lineage identification marks are etched into people’s cheeks’ (Orié 15). While it would be reductive and absurd to read Abani’s representation of scarification as a simple translation of Yoruba practice, Abigail’s use of scarification is analogous since she uses her scars to establish a relation to herself through a connection to her mother.

Abigail’s interpretive resignification of the symbolic value of her body, her possession and performative organisation of it are read as affirmative gestures of incorporation. At first marking her body is a way of getting to know her mother. She collects anecdotes about her mother: ‘Collected until she was suffused with all parts of her’ (Abani, *Abigail* 33). Later she would write these fragments of information on pieces of paper and stick them to her skin, ‘wearing them under her clothes; all day. Chaffing [*sic*]. Becoming. Becoming and chaffing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of the joining, until she became her mother and her mother her’ (Abani, *Abigail* 36). From crayon, to paper, to fire: Abigail’s maturity is measured in how she chooses to inscribe her body: ‘This burning wasn’t immolation. Not

combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permanence even' (Abani, *Abigail* 36). Her use of fire is prophylactic, sterilising – the mass of scars begin to tell her story, they 'had the nature of lines in a tree trunk: varied, different, telling' (Abani, *Abigail* 35). Brail-like marks of memory index the passing of time like the growth of a tree. Abigail's marking of her body is ritualised in the constitutive repetition and symbolic valence of her scarification. It is the ritual practice and its descriptive, linguistic aspects which transform her body, and her relationship to it. She sets her body apart from her mother's through affirmative acts of ritual scarification, mourning her mother by rendering the limits of herself, which enables her to reclaim herself. Abani represents ritual and makes use of its literary aspects, thus sacralising Abigail's body. Although she falls short of engaging with its sacred and productive aspects, Ashley Dawson supports the constructive nature of Abigail's scarification, analysing them as 'willed rituals of remembrance,' which 'are a means of charting the world on the body, an assertion of loss but also of an ordering of self' (Dawson 185).

Dawson explores what she terms 'cargo culture': the aesthetic representation of displaced persons in film and literature and how these cultural products are distributed. Reflecting on Abani's characterisation of Abigail as an illegally displaced person but highly profitable cargo, Dawson argues that Abani offers a unique and necessary insight into the interior worlds, and 'struggle for agency' of those human beings who are made cargo (Dawson 181). The novella facilitates this interiority, in Abani's choice of narrative voice, but also the chapter structure which alternates between 'then' and 'now.' These spatio-temporal indicators track between present and past, and England and Nigeria. The shifting focus of the narrative forces 'the reader to piece together a life lived – and recounted – in fragments' (Dawson 183). Piecing these fragments together through Abigail's recollected memories (offered as she walks through London at night), the reader learns that Abigail and her father were duped by her uncle Peter. Peter promised her father he would provide a better life for Abigail in London; instead, he traffics her into England

under a false name and passport, intending to use her as a sex worker. When Abigail violently resists the first man Peter brings to rape her, Peter chains her to the dog kennel in the backyard. Binding her hands, he urinates on her, brings her only ‘rancid water’ and ‘rotting food,’ and repeatedly sexually assaults her – turning her into a dog, occluding her humanity:

And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.

Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate the tattoos that made her.

Abigail.

One night.

Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of Abigail.

And with her teeth tore off Peter’s penis. (Abani, *Abigail* 97–99)

For fifteen days Abigail is tortured, brutalised, violated, and subjected to grossly inhumane treatment. Yet, in the moments when she is alone, using her nose because her hands are bound, Abigail searches for ‘the brandings, for the limits of herself’ (Abani, *Abigail* 93). It is when Peter’s filth threatens to cover ‘the tattoos that made her,’ that she finds the strength to fight back again. Abigail’s name is repeated twice in this short passage: first as an assertion of the self she has shaped through ritual scarification, and second as an invocation of her mother. In these moments of extreme pain and precarity, a verification of lineage and selfhood fuel Abigail’s revolt – her markings are the tangible sign of her exposure, but they are also the sacred scars which bring her back to herself.

Abigail is the embodiment of the vulnerable subject. She is in England without any kind of official documentation; she is orphaned since her father committed suicide a week before she left Nigeria with Peter. She is a stateless and parentless adolescent girl who has been the victim of sex trafficking. The formation of Abigail’s character contradicts any desire to reduce her to a helpless victim, since the novella so carefully narrates Abigail’s

becoming. This is reinforced as the 'now' sections of the story happen after she has escaped Peter, and after she has had an affair with her state-appointed caseworker, Derek. The plot moves beyond her violation to the moments in which she experiences sustained sexual desire and pleasure with Derek. Once again denying simplistic identification with or sympathy for Abigail, she has a relationship that is clearly illegal and inappropriate; not only is Abigail a legal minor, but Derek is also a married man responsible for her care.

Nevertheless, it is with him that Abigail falls in love and in doing so becomes 'herself, this Abigail. In this particular moment, in this particular way. As particular as the dots burning across her body, mapping a constellation' (Abani, *Abigail* 118). Leaving Derek to a post-coital doze on his sofa after they have had sex for the first time, Abigail goes into the kitchen, finds a needle, and heats it over the naked gas flame. With its scorching end she burns pin-points on her skin:

she burned two points onto her breast, one on each. Each one. One on one. Then one on the middle, the hard of her sternum pressing back against the needle. One on her stomach. On each thigh. Each knee. Several round each ankle until they were wearing a garland [...] Then one on her pudenda, dead center. (Abani, *Abigail* 54)

Passing over each burn, she bursts the blister, the released fluid mirroring her tears. Abigail presents herself and her scars, new and old, to Derek:

"This one," she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. "This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here," and she was down on her stomach, "is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don't you see?" and she showed him the words branded in her skin. [...] "This is my mother. Words. And

words. And words. But me? These dots. Me, Abigail.” (Abani,

*Abigail* 55)

This is the singular instance of reported speech in the novella; the only time Abigail voices an assertion of her self, offering Derek an explanation of herself and of the map that orders her world.

Throughout the novella the words ‘branding,’ ‘scar,’ and ‘tattoo’ are repeated, repeated in the text as they are on Abigail’s body. As Jonathan Z. Smith says of myth and ritual, ‘repetition guarantees significance’ (Smith, *Relating* 362). The affective rhythm of these two passages depends almost entirely on repetition, metaphor and metonymy. ‘One,’ ‘each,’ ‘here’ pepper the description of Abigail’s ritual scarification of her body, and it is the grammatical refrain coupled with her repetitive performance which designate her body as sacred. She sacralises her body, reappropriating it by inscribing her skin, her body, her self, with signs only she can interpret. Each burn stands in for some aspect of her life: the point on her sternum is her sign for Greenwich, fixing her in time and space; the words branded on her skin are her mother, but the dots, the dots are Abigail, ‘Me, Abigail.’ Each burn is a mark of braille script: ‘And he traced her in that moment, the map of her, the skin of her world, as she emerged in pointillism. Emerging in parts of a whole’ (Abani, *Abigail* 55). A map, a script, dabs of paint on a canvas, a constellation of bodily inscriptions, ritualistically marked – ritualised not merely in the repetition of performance, but also in their symbolic reverberations. A body made sacred through the metaphor and metonymy of ritual: ‘Sometimes there is no way to leave something behind. [...] We know this. We know this. We know this. This is the prevalence of ritual. To remember something that cannot be forgotten. Yet not left over’ (Abani, *Abigail* 61). Each dot is a node of remembrance, a promise that what can be lost, will be lost; the promise of an end. The teleology of Abigail’s becoming includes her death; she commits suicide at the end of the novella. The temporal transitions are read differently after Abigail’s suicide: ‘With a sigh

she flicked the stub at the darkness and followed it' (Abani, *Abigail* 123). 'Now' and 'Then' sections are written in the past tense, always told through an omniscient narrator. While this certainly keeps Abigail isolated from the reader, the temporal fragmentation and the recollected memories position Abigail both within the linear time the novella disrupts, and outside of it. She understands her death as a sacrifice: 'It is just like the Igbo said. The sacrifice is always commensurate to the thing wished for. Sometimes a lizard will do, sometimes a goat, or a dog, sometimes a cow or buffalo. Sometimes a human being' (Abani, *Abigail* 120). The magnitude of her wish requires a great sacrifice. Sacrificing herself for her love of Derek, 'her love was the full measure of her decision,' it is not clear what Abigail wishes to achieve (Abani, *Abigail* 121). However, her body, already sacralised through her repeated rituals of scarification and self-creation, is made sacred once again as a sacrifice. Abigail's suicide is not an act of nihilism: like her scarification it is an act of incorporation, transformation and a demonstration of personal choice in a sea of difficult decisions.

Abani's work has generated debate over the representation of human rights in literature. Much scholarly attention has been paid to the confluence of literary studies, narrative and human rights. Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* (2007) offers a historical account of the eighteenth-century evolution of human rights and the novel, which hinges on the self-evidently autonomous subject, arguing that narrative practice made possible the advancement of a human rights movement. Similarly Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.*, (2007) traces the relation between the rise of world literature and international human rights law, arguing that a particular conception of the human individual connects human rights law and the novel (especially the bildungsroman), and that this formation of the individual has 'hints of the Western cultural imperialism that infuses the human rights regime' (Dawes 401). Summarising these approaches James Dawes writes that as 'an artistic form,' the novel is 'dependent upon a certain conception of the human

(individualistic, autonomous, defined less by status than by valuable interior feelings which, implicitly, all can share)' (Dawes 397). He goes on to assert that this conception of the human 'is likely also a prerequisite for the modern, liberal conception of (natural, equal, and universal) human rights' (397). If, as Slaughter argues, the bildungsroman and the novel form in general do some of the cultural labour of normalising human rights law, liberal secular values and the autonomous, individual human subject, then the aesthetics of such an endeavour are an ethical concern.

Human rights scholars have been critical of the literary aesthetic on the 'grounds that it not only aestheticizes suffering but, more pointedly, masks the structural imbalances that generate human rights violations, cultivates a sense of literary humanitarianism, and substitutes sympathy with the text for action in the world beyond it' (Moore and Goldberg 60). The reader is affected by the aesthetic: experiencing the pain of others, through a moment of lyrical pleasure which occludes the differences of 'class, race, gender,' ethnicity and geography, which make possible the inequality of this imaginative interaction and the possibility of a 'universalizing humanism' (Dawes 399–400). Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg outline these theoretical foundations and explain that,

When the aesthetic produces concern in this way, and sympathy elides the distance between reader and subject, it contributes to what Makau Mutua calls a "messianic ethos" (231), Lilie Chouliaraki analyzes as "'universal' morality and grand emotion" ("Post-humanitarianism" 107), and Joseph Slaughter (*Human Rights, Inc.*) and Elizabeth Anker each critique as literary humanitarianism that re-centers the ostensibly secure (read: Western) reader as the paradigmatic liberal subject and, thus, the true subject of human rights. (Moore and Goldberg 60)

However, Abani's two novellas intervene in the questioning of the aesthetic to argue that lyric can destabilise the easier, unequal identification which elides distance and difference. His work is prefaced on a shared experience of human mortality and vulnerability expressed through lyric, as we have seen in *Becoming Abigail*.

In their article 'Let Us Begin with a Small Gesture,' a title taken from Abani's own essay 'Ethics and Narrative: The Human and the Other,' Moore and Goldberg provide a close reading of Abani's novellas (Moore and Goldberg 62; Abani, 'Ethics' pag.). Their approach to his work is informed by a critical human rights perspective, and they examine the ways in which Abani's form might be useful in theorising the difficulties of 'human rights presentation' and the conditions of reading practice (Moore and Goldberg 64). Further, they assert that Abani's form evades the ethical pitfalls of narrating violation, violence, and human rights abuses because his lyrical prose relies on what he calls a 'deeper human syntax [...] that we value the lives of others precisely because we know the limits of our own' (Abani, 'Resisting' 29–30).<sup>4</sup> Moore and Goldberg suggest that Abani grounds 'human rights not in individual dignity and autonomy [...] but in the recognition of our shared capacity to harm and be harmed as a deep structural arrangement, or "ordering together," to recall the classical Greek origins of "syntax," which therefore 'calls for innovative strategies of literary representation that seek alternatives to the teleology of the triumphant protagonist or mourned victim' (Moore and Goldberg 65).

Abani's preoccupation with 'our shared capacity to harm and be harmed' can be read, *pace* Hägglund, as our shared experience of finitude and vulnerability. Thus, as he begins to do in his 2008 Ted talk, Abani reconceptualises the basis of human rights, not in terms of an Enlightenment conception of an autonomous individual, but rather, in terms more closely aligned to sub-Saharan African epistemologies whereby an individual has value and dignity by virtue of their positive participation in the community (Abani,

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<sup>4</sup> This resonates with what Mark Sanders calls 'foldedness.' Addressing intellectual 'responsibility-in-complicities' in Apartheid, Sanders writes: 'Complicity, in this convergence of act and responsibility, is thus at one with the basic folded-together-ness of being, of being-human, of self and other. Such foldedness is the condition of possibility of all particular affiliations, loyalties, and commitments' (Sanders 11).

*Humanity* pag.).<sup>5</sup> Though iterations of this philosophy can be found in most sub-Saharan African traditions, in the languages of Southern Africa which share the Bantu root it is called *ubuntu* and its basic principles emerge, for example, from the Xhosa proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which translates as ‘a person is a person by or through other people’ (Shutte 46; Cornell 5). This philosophy underpins Abani’s alternative conceptualisation of human rights, and the relations between persons. Drucilla Cornell, a scholar of jurisprudence and philosophy explains:

*uBuntu* is both the African principle of transcendence for the individual, and the law of the social bond. In *ubuntu* human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations and obligations from the time they are born. [...] It is only through the engagement and support of others that we are able to realise a true individuality and rise above our biological distinctiveness into a fully developed person whose uniqueness is inseparable from the journey to moral and ethical development. (Cornell 3)

A moral, political and social philosophy of this order accords with Abani’s alternative conception of the foundation of human rights: a relation between persons premised on a shared responsibility, communal obligation and vulnerability which leads to an ethic of inherent human dignity. For Abani, this formulation depends on a linguistic ‘ordering together,’ so, while his fiction may at times make the reader uncomfortable, this feeling of discomfort, this affect, so carefully orchestrated, is in itself an ethical injunction against the easier identification of universal humanism that elides the distance and difference between reader and the representation of suffering in the text. This is the ethos that he explores in

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<sup>5</sup> Abani says in his 2008 TED talk: ‘But what I’ve come to learn is that the world is never saved in grand messianic gestures, but in the simple accumulation of gentle, soft, almost invisible acts of compassion, everyday acts of compassion. In South Africa, they have a phrase called Ubuntu. Ubuntu comes out of a philosophy that says, the only way for me to be human is for you to reflect my humanity back at me. [...] So what Ubuntu really says is that there is no way for us to be human without other people’ (Abani, *Humanity*).

the novellas under discussion here. While the protagonists of *Becoming Abigail* and *Song for Night* figure the stateless and silenced persons peripheral to governmental or human rights law, and in this way illustrate the failure of these systems, Abani creates through his lyrical prose an alternative, ‘deeper human syntax’ that facilitates an uneasy recognition between the reader, and the victim and aggressor. This syntax or ‘ordering together’ depends upon human finitude – somatic and psychological precariousness and vulnerability. Like the motivation for the sacred, in the certainty of exposure, pain, and loss, Abani finds not only order but meaning. This meaning is carefully curated by the repetition and rituals of the lyrical prose. Abani constructs a more ethical reading practice dependent on a mutual experience of vulnerability and finitude.

Understood in these terms there is great intellectual sympathy between the socio-political dimensions of Abani’s work and Martin Hägglund’s theorisation of secular faith, outlined in the previous chapter. Abani and Hägglund share a common concern for the vulnerability of the subject and the frailty of the body. Neither perceives this in wholly negative terms; rather, they cast it as a necessary condition of the relation between persons, and reader and text. The sacralisation of the body is an important aspect of this dynamic, and reading precarious bodies in Abani, and later Vera’s fiction, through the imminent sacred extends the moral and political interventions of their work in creating a community of shared mortality between reader and the fiction. The imminent sacred is the careful setting apart of the body through ritualised, performative engagement, coupled with a hermeneutic resignification of its value. Through the particular aesthetic quality of their lyrical prose, Abani and Vera reconceive the terms under which the body is constituted and also then the terms of the relation between novel and reader. Abani wants his work to confront the reader, to challenge her to imagine a world in which we are all capable of anything, the beautiful, the ugly and the terrible:

The point is to dissolve oneself into the journey of the protagonist, to face the most terrifying thing in narrative, the thing that has been at its heart since the earliest campfire and story. To dare ourselves to imagine, to conjure and then face all of our darkness and all of our light simultaneously. To stand in that liminal moment when we have no solid ground beneath us, no clear firmament above, when the ambiguity of our nature reveals what we are capable of, on both sides. The intensity of that confrontation is the only gift the writer has to offer, the only redemption that is possible. (Abani, 'Ethics' pag.)

Abani confronts the ethical ambiguity of the reader's position. He engages the reader's empathy by creating an experience of shared somatic and existential vulnerability and transformation. For Abani and Vera, I argue, this is facilitated by singling out the body as a site of rich and complex symbolic value explored and extended by these writers' aesthetic representations of the body.

My Luck, the 15-year-old, narrator-protagonist of Abani's *Song for Night*, is a child soldier in what historical details suggest is the Biafran war.<sup>6</sup> My Luck warns his reader in the opening of the novella, 'What you hear is not my voice': he, and the other children in his platoon, have had their vocal cords cut so that, should they trigger a mine while defusing it their cries of pain from injury or death will not distract the others (Abani, *Song* 9). My Luck regains consciousness after such an explosion, separated from his platoon. Believing he is still alive, My Luck attempts to reunite with his platoon. This journey is organised by chapter titles: 'Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat'; 'Memory is a Pattern Cut into an Arm'; 'Dreaming is Hands Held in Prayer over the Nose,' each an evocative and prescient description of the sign language the children use to communicate with one

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<sup>6</sup> An independent Biafra was the nationalist hope of the Igbo people. The civil war was fought between June 1967 and January 1970 by secessionist Biafra in the southeast and the federal government of Nigeria. The Biafran polity is the subject of significant literary endeavour: Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) are among the most recent publications in a long bibliography.

another (Abani, *Song* 9, 28, 79). It becomes apparent as the narrative develops that My Luck is dead. He died as the mine he was defusing exploded. The purpose of his spiritual passage is not to reunite with his platoon, but to find peace in death. My Luck's stygian journey takes place alongside or on a river. Treading in the literary footsteps of eminent Nigerian writers like Amos Tutuola, Daniel O. Fagunwa, and Wole Soyinka, Abani writes of a coextensive universe inhabited by the living and dead, a world in which a boy soldier undertakes a sacred journey.

Despite the obvious violence of the novella's premise, Abani wants the reader to be confronted by the moral ambiguity of My Luck's character, as both victim and aggressor:

Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivaled [sic] only by an orgasm? It doesn't matter how the death is dealt – a bullet tearing through a body, the juicy suck of flesh around a bayonet, the grainy globular disintegration brought on by clubs – the joy is the same and requires only the complete focus on the moment, on the act. (Abani, *Song* 135)

The 'intensity of the confrontation' Abani wishes to impart comes across forcefully in the comparison between the pleasure of sex and killing; and further, in the joy of undifferentiated killing described in visceral terms: 'juicy suck,' 'grainy globular disintegration.' The reader might expect a certain level of violence from a child soldier in a civil war, yet it is the enjoyment, the repeated attention to the brutal acts that is so disquieting. The reader is challenged in a similar way when My Luck's platoon commander forces him, at gunpoint, to rape an elderly woman. The scene is fraught with moral uncertainty, and ultimately the question of who is to blame falls far short of providing any insight into the complexities of this particular horror. The carefully curated discomfort of *Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail* is intended to undermine the empty

sympathies and voyeuristic identifications of the reader. In these novellas readers are confronted by the privilege and safety of their position, while still being made aware of the precariousness of their own somatic and existential experience – a deeper human syntax.

The successful orchestration of this in both novellas is owed in part to the lyricism of Abani's prose which contrasts poetic style and violence, and in part to the singular treatment of the body. Like Abigail, My Luck marks his body. On his right forearm, 'There are six X's carved there: one for each person that I enjoyed killing' (Abani, *Song* 29). On his left forearm is his 'own personal cemetery,' one cross for 'every loved one lost in this war, although there are a couple from before the war. I cut the first one when my grandfather died; the second I cut when my father died, with one of his circumcision knives' (Abani, *Song* 28–29). My Luck's father was an Imam: 'It is a terrible thing in this divided nation, even in its infancy, for an Igbo man to be Muslim' (Abani, *Song* 84). My Luck uses a ritual knife, necessary in the sacred rite of circumcision, to cut a cross into his skin to commemorate his father. He marks his body with a ritual object in an act of remembrance that will become a ritual of commemoration. The crosses on his left arm, signs for the loved ones he has lost, are a personal cemetery carried on his body, symbols of loss and memory:

To ground myself, I run my fingers meditatively over the small crosses cut into my left forearm. The tiny bumps, more like a rash than anything, help me to calm myself, center my breathing, return me to my body. In a strange way they are like a map of my consciousness, something that brings me back from the dark brink of war madness. My grandfather, a fisherman and storyteller, had a long rosary with bones, cowries, pieces of metal, feathers, pebbles, and twigs tied into it that he used to remember our genealogy. Mnemonic

devices, he called things like this. These crosses are mine. (Abani,

*Song* 15–16)

Here, as in Abigail's case, the pattern is one of marking the body with sacred symbols as a route to personal sovereignty. My Luck's scar cemetery is transformative because it writes the trajectory of My Luck's life in each death it represents. The scars map out how he came to be where he is. That they have become so indistinct from the skin itself, so patterned as to be a rash emerging from the skin, not carved by a foreign object, affirms their symbolic value in My Luck's story of himself. For him they are like his grandfather's rosary, a mnemonic device, a system of memory that draws him away from the madness of war and back into his body and his lineage. The ritualised distinction of My Luck's body is similar to that of Abigail's body; he cuts in remembrance, treating these scars as a way of scripting his experience and affirming his embodied presence in the world. The meaning of My Luck's embodied experience is altered, however, as he becomes increasingly uncertain about what is happening to him:

This trek of mine is getting more and more ridiculous, I think. I am mostly moving from one scene of past trauma and to another, the distances between them, though vast, have collapsed to the span of a thought, and my platoon is ever elusive. I am thoroughly confused, but my desire – which is larger than my need to find my platoon, yet wrapped into it – is relentless in propelling me forward. (Abani, *Song* 139)

The time between memories is collapsing, and there is something odd about their chronology. Retracing the steps through the places his platoon has been, trying to reunite with them, My Luck realises that the spatial distance between them remains and yet he is confronted by one traumatic memory after another. The mine explosion which My Luck

believes has resulted in a concussion has, in fact, killed him, and the violence of his death has separated his spirit from his body.

In this place everything is possible. Here we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirit wanders confused looking for its body. Confused because they don't realise they are dead. I know this. Traditionally a shaman would ease such a spirit across to the other world. Now, well, the land is crowded with confused spirits and all the shamans are soldiers. (Abani, *Song* 101)

The purpose of the journey the narrative tracks is not to reunite My Luck with his platoon, but rather, for him to find some peace after the devastations he has committed and experienced. In this place, where 'everything is possible,' what My Luck knows of the experience of violent death comes to pass: the text constructs this very possibility. Like the world imagined in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods Inc.*, the literary realm of Abani's novella is the sanctioned space where enchantment and disenchantment operate together. My Luck eventually comes upon a shaman helping the spirits of dead soldiers find their bodies, but there is no mention of his lost body.

In a novella suffused with damaged, violated and decaying bodies it is unsettling that the protagonist is unaware of his spirit's violent rupture from his body, that he is not reunited with his body (probably torn to pieces by the mine explosion), and yet the crosses on his forearms organise his memories, anchoring him in an embodied experience of loss and remembrance. The confusion of My Luck's physical presence makes his relation to his body and to his markings all the more important, they are his mnemonic anchor. In a dream, his dead girlfriend Ijeoma, says to him: "You aren't dreaming, My Luck, my love. These are memories. Before we can move from here, we have to relieve and release our darkness" (Abani, *Song* 96). Finally, after reencountering the traumatic moments of his

life before and during the war, My Luck achieves a semblance of peace, and even this he experiences in and through his body:

This morning, unaccountably, I am filled with an almost unbearable lightness. This light comes not from a sudden wholeness on my part, but from the very wounds I carry on my body and in my soul. Each wound, in its particular way, giving off a particular and peculiar light.

(Abani, *Song* 143)

Relieved of his darkness, My Luck's wounds now radiate. The ritual he used to scar his flesh in commemoration of loss now marks his body in light. The protagonists of Abani's two novellas share a similar relationship to the limits of their body; they use their flesh, mark it, in order to create a tangible, scripted narrative of their lives: each scar a sign for a past trauma or lost loved one. The scarring of their bodies should not be understood negatively as self-mutilation; it should be read for its constructive potential as ritual scarification. The body is scarred not simply to inflict pain, but rather the ritual of marking is performed to write a story of loss and the fear of forgetting – the skin is paper and ink. The body, as object and actor, is made sacred by sacrifice and spiritual journey, and by these signs of ritual, which commemorate the frailty and strength of the human form. For Abani, this vulnerability is what inspires the creative process; it is also what motivates sacralisation:

So it seems that the desire to make art, to draw the limits of the body, to create a simulacrum has its roots in loss; or at least, the possibility of loss. The need to remember, to create (or re-create) a body out of loss, but also against loss, and against forgetting, is what drives the artist. This intervention in the world is repeated through time and culture and place, regardless of the truth of this or any other myth. It

can be argued that the creative process is a ritual of remembrance.

(Abani, 'Millions' pag.)

### **Vera: The poetics of ritual and the female body**

Abani's words have purchase too in reading the representation of trauma and loss in Yvonne Vera's novels. Vera is well known for her attention to women, and for the chronology of her fiction that inserts the experience of women into the history of Zimbabwe. Beginning with *Nehanda* (1993), set in the late nineteenth century during the first moments of colonial encounter, through *Butterfly Burning* (1998) set in a township in the 1940s, and ending with *The Stone Virgins* (2002) which takes place during the civil war in the 1980s, Vera explains that she writes 'a woman and her struggles. Political, religious, whatever; to [do] with the body, to do with death, to do with all sorts of philosophy. And that is before; that is in the instant of contact. That encounter, that was vocalized and was synthesized by a woman figure' (Primorac, 'Interview' 158). In an interview with Ranka Primorac, Vera states that aside from the obvious political and social issues, she addresses the theme of taboo by writing openly about women's experiences of sex, incest and abortion (Primorac, 'Interview' 160). Vera's depictions of taboo themes are often explicitly related to the land, to the women's relation to the land and how this relation is disturbed by sex, rape and abortion. She says: 'The connection to the land for the women is that of the disturbance. Something negative' (Primorac, 'Interview' 161). *Nehanda*, Vera's first novel, opens with this description of its heroine:

Rivers and trees cover her palms; the trees are lifeless and the rivers dry. She feels that gaping wound everywhere. [...] The grass has abandoned the soil and sprouts triumphantly from her very feet. It is a grass with tendrils that violently claim the earth. Her arms feel boneless to her spirit. The earth moves. She feels her body turn to

water. Insects sing in and out of her armpits. She looks up in surprise and her body has changed from water to stone. (Vera, *Nehanda* 1)

The inspiration for *Nehanda* comes from a mythic story of a female spirit medium who was a prominent leader during the first *Chimurenga* or revolutionary struggle. The afterlife of her story has become an important narrative of anti-colonial resistance. Primorac, who has engaged extensively with Vera's oeuvre, offers a compelling analysis of the borderlines of her fiction. For Primorac, Nehanda finds 'herself precariously placed at the intersection of *two* spatio-temporal borderlines: one between the living and the dead, [...] and the other between the African universe and that of the invading white men. In this she is unique and completely alone' (Primorac, 'Crossing' 81). Nehanda's singularity is constructed in this opening passage where she has a vision of the future, a vision shown on and experienced through her body. The simplicity of the language, the description suffused with plain nouns, and the 'synaesthetic character' of Vera's poetic style, turn the descriptive focus to Nehanda's body (Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvunga 5). The effects of British encroachment on the land materialise on Nehanda's body, which is both continuous with and distinct from the land: 'The earth moves. She feels her body turn to water.' Primorac argues that the physical space of Vera's novelistic world is 'heterogeneous and constrained, rather than continuous and unlimited,' and further that these 'spatio-temporal components' 'intersect with another spatio-temporal' component that Primorac refers to as the 'space-time of memory' (Primorac, 'Crossing' 78). Primorac demonstrates how Vera's 'heroines derive important components of their identities from a positioning in relation to these two spatio-temporal dimensions, as well as from the ability (or lack thereof) to exercise control over the space of their own bodies' (Primorac, 'Crossing' 78). The success of Vera's explicit writing of taboo is due to her privileging of the complexities of the body, how she clearly sets the body apart through her opaque and lyrical style. Thus Vera's novels are 'not only an organization of signs which produces meaning,' they produce 'a

world charged with meaning' (Primorac, 'Crossing' 78), and the body is the lightning rod, sacralised through poetic ritual attention.

Like Abani, whose fictional works expose the cracks in a globalising and transnational world and the voiceless people who inhabit these spaces (literally, in My Luck's case), Vera's work too offers voice to the voiceless, narrating Zimbabwean women's experiences of the moments overlooked by national historiographies. Avoiding the pitfalls of attempting to represent the subaltern subject, neither Vera nor Abani offer any direct or transparent access to their protagonists. The compositional style always keeps the subject at a distance, and whatever resolution might be offered, Phephelaphi's immolation, Nonceba's slow recovery, Abigail's suicide or My Luck's acceptance of his death, none of these narratives provide a fruitful story of self-realisation; instead, they narrate moments of violence and violation, and struggles for selfhood, agency and resistance against these darkest of human behaviours.

I argue that Vera, like Abani, uses her art to express and explore the inevitability of loss, pain and human vulnerability, and does so through ritualised attention to the body. While Abani's protagonists clearly ritualise their bodies through marking, the female bodies in Vera's work are ritualised through the lyrical descriptions they receive, which rely heavily on repetition and metaphor – ritual and literary modes of expression. Vera's style is characterised by 'the seductive rhythms of the prose, the apparent simplicity of the language, the repetition of syntactic patterns and motifs,' symbolism, metonymy, the embedded influence of orality, and its 'synaesthetic character' (Muponde and Maodzwa-Taruvinga 5). All of this contributes to the ritual attention on the body, their additional symbolic valence, and consequent sacralisation.

*The Stone Virgins*, which gives voice to the experience of two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, is divided into two sections. The first reflects the sense of promise present in Zimbabwe in the pre-independence period; the second takes place after independence from white minority rule, during the 'Gukurahundi Massacres' which took place between 1980

and 1986 (Chait 132). During this time the Fifth Brigade, known to be loyal to then ZANLA leader, Robert Mugabe, were sent into Matabeleland under the ruse of rooting out political dissidents. However, recently found documentation proves what has long been suspected, that under orders from Mugabe the Fifth Brigade waged an ethnic war against the Ndebele, who supported Joshua Nkomo, the leader of ZIPRA, and Mugabe's political competition. There were 20,000 estimated casualties, and the majority of these deaths were women, many of whom had also been raped (Chait 132; Doran pag.). This period of Zimbabwean history is rarely acknowledged, especially not the violence against women, but Vera takes up this taboo subject.

The two female bodies in the text can be understood as allegories of the promise of a new nation, and of the violent disappointment when that promise is not fulfilled. In the pre-independence section of the novel *Thenjiwe*, the elder of the two sisters, takes a lover. The descriptions of these scenes are lavish, with a particular adoration shown towards *Thenjiwe's* body. In the post-independence part of the novel, *Thenjiwe* is decapitated and her sister, *Nonceba*, is violently raped and disfigured. Here too the descriptions are vividly focused on the body. This novel explores not only the ritualisation and sacralisation of the site of the body, but also the transgression of that site – one informing the other. The title of the novel is particularly significant. Elleke Boehmer explains that it refers 'to San paintings in the Motopo hills in western Zimbabwe depicting virgins sacrificed before the burial of a king' (Boehmer 194). After his attack on the sisters, *Sibaso* retreats to these hills, to the sacred *Mbelele Cave*, or 'shrine of *Mbelele*' where these paintings are found (Vera, *Stone* 142). This is clearly an allegory for the sacrifice required of the sisters in the novel. Their bodies are in one way or another literally sacrificed for the nation, a rewriting of the history depicted in the cave paintings: 'her hands chaste dead bone, porously thin, painted on a rock' (Vera, *Stone* 78). Moreover, Vera explains: 'I wanted to talk about the Matopo [hills] [...] the women painted on the rocks, and all these things, but in a way that is surrounded by this war, and the man interprets this very sexually, this language of the

rocks. And the women – in violence’ (Primorac, ‘Interview’ 161–62). Like the women painted on the rock of the sacred shrine, Thenjiwe and Nonceba’s bodies are sacrificed in service to the idea of a nation. However, Vera does not write sacred painted stillness; she writes erotic and violated bodies made sacred in ritual language, not location. Even though they are brutalised and violated in the text, Vera maintains an aesthetic tenderness, even reverence, for the female body in the lyricism of her composition. The eroticism of *The Stone Virgins* celebrates Thenjiwe agency and sense of control over her body. Nonceba’s recovery after the rape and cutting off of her lips, so poetically described, traces her slow and painful reclamation of her body.

The first half of the novel is remarkable for its eroticism. Thenjiwe is described by the omniscient narrator as fecund, lithe, and ripe with the possibility of creation: ‘Thenjiwe moves without hesitation, with lips ripe,’ ‘she has offered him her hips, her laughter, her waiting thighs’ (Vera, *Stone* 36, 38). Thenjiwe is described through the gaze of her lover, Cephas, as he follows her home from the Kezi bus stop: ‘he places his foot where she has left her imprint on the soil, wanting to possess, already, each part of her, her weight on soft soil, her shape. He wants to preserve her in his own body, gathering her presence from the soil like a perfume’ (Vera, *Stone* 38). Thenjiwe’s connection to the land is different to Cephas’s; her footsteps are on the soil, on the surface. He is overcome by her presence, by the movement of her body as she walks ahead of him, and already he wishes to possess her, but her connection to him, to the land she claims, is impermanent – she leaves only her imprint and perfume on the soil.

Thenjiwe’s attention to Cephas wanes in favour of her deep fascination with a seed he has inadvertently carried with him on his clothing:

With the tip of her tongue, she slides the seed around, intending to spit it out into some corner of the room, some dark space where it can lie unclaimed [...] However, with one touch of her tongue tip, she

loses the rest of her senses. After she sucked the dryness off it, she is breathless. She has been hit by an illumination so profound, so total she has to breathe deeply [...] The seed in her mouth is sudden and sweet. She wants to sink into its sweetness. (Vera, *Stone* 39)

The procreative potential of Thenjiwe's body is expressed metaphorically in the sexually charged imagery of her mouth and the seed. With 'illumination' and the loss of senses Vera uses the language of revelation and transcendence to describe Thenjiwe's curiosity for a land she has not seen – she elevates this landed erotic beyond the mundane. Cephas and his seed, Vera explains, came from Mashonaland, a place Thenjiwe has never been, and she is driven almost ecstatic by her inquisitiveness:

She is possessed by the dry sweetness she has roused from its hard skin. Her tongue seeks it like comfort. [...] She rises [from the bed] to ask what kind of tree the seed comes from, the shape of its leaves, the size of its trunk, the shape of its branches, the colour of its bloom, the measure of its veins. (Vera, *Stone* 42)

Thenjiwe imagines the tree that the seed came from, the land it grew in, wanting to imagine its exact likeness, giving the tree form and almost bodily presence, particularly in the phrase 'measure of its veins.' Thus Vera links Thenjiwe explicitly not only to her own land, but also to Mashonaland, a place she can only imagine.

Boehmer argues that synecdochal imagery is characteristic of Vera's writing: 'body parts, especially those belonging to lovers, and those in pain, are – like music and labour – often depicted in synecdoche, as disconnected from whole bodies' (Boehmer 179). Like the description of Thenjiwe's body, where her mouth is made to stand for the potential of her whole body, the description of her bones is a metaphor for mortality and the permanence of death:

He loves her fingernails. He loves each of her bones, from her wrist to her ankle, the blood flowing under her skin [...] He loves her bones, the harmony of her fingers. He loves most the bone branching along her hip. The sliding silence of each motion, tendons expanding [...] He places his palm along her waist and announces, as though she is a new creation, “This is a beautiful bone.” (Vera, *Stone* 37)

Thenjiwe’s body is split, fragmented and opened up into a selection of its composite parts. This fragmentation happens through the narrator and through the lover. The fragmentation of the loved, procreative body is thus compounded – isolating and separating her body on both levels. Her lover’s description cleaves her body into distinct parts; the eroticism of this gaze is also violent, and foreshadows Thenjiwe’s decapitation.

Bone: the only material in us that cracks, that fractures, that can hurt our entire being, that breaks while we are still living. This he loves, this bone in her, as it is the deepest part of her, the most prevailing of her being, beyond death, a fossil before dying. (Vera, *Stone* 37)

Listing the parts of her body that he loves, disarticulating her body into its composite parts, the lover’s gaze moves from the impermanence of flesh to the longevity of bone. Her hip bone, ‘the deepest part of her,’ will remain after her body has decomposed. Analogous to Almásy’s treatment of Katherine’s form, Cephas is concerned with the parts of Thenjiwe’s body that make her eternal. The vulnerability of Thenjiwe’s body, her susceptibility to pleasure, pain and death are precisely what make her form so precious to her lover. The description is elongated and metered by the paratactic rhythm, the persistent repetition of ‘she’, and the immediacy of the present tense celebrate this precarious balance and mark her body as sacred through the repeated, ritualised and reverential attention.

Cephas’s veneration for Thenjiwe, and her own sexual agency are juxtaposed with the appalling brutality of Nonceba’s rape and disfiguration.

He enters her body like a vacuum. She can do nothing to save herself. He clutches her from the waist, his entire hand resting boldly over her stomach. He presses down. He pulls her to him. She hesitates. He forces her down. She yields. She is leaning backwards into his body. He holds her like a bent stem. He draws her waist into the curve of his arm. She is moulded into the shape of his waiting arm – a tendril on a hard rock. (Vera, *Stone* 68)

In contrast to the seamless, elongated sentences that describe Thenjiwe's sensual body, these are clipped and fragmented; here the parataxis is a cinematic shot, or what Ratti might term a tableau of violence. Each sentence is a separate violence inflicted on Nonceba's body – each image a snapshot of the rape. He enters her body as if there were nothing, as if she were a vacuum, a total absence. There are no names in this passage; Sibaso and Nonceba are reduced to a series of personal and possessive pronouns, bodies in space rather than the persons. His violation is absolute: 'His fingers part her lips, dry skin, find her tongue. His fingers are on her tongue... move into her mouth... over her tongue. [...] He bends his fingers farther into the warm spaces beneath her tongue' (Vera, *Stone* 70). Recalling the seed rolling around Thenjiwe's mouth, Nonceba's mouth is invaded by her rapist's fingers. There is no seed here; there is no creative potential, only the invasive probing of his fingers.

While Nonceba is raped, Thenjiwe lies dead on the floor, Sibaso having killed her as he approached the home:

His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body; he is in her body. [...] He is absorbing Thenjiwe's motions into his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied. Then Thenjiwe vanishes and he is affixed in her place. (Vera, *Stone* 73)

Thenjiwe's murder, orchestrated in almost balletic movements, is articulated not as an incursion of her body, but as an assault on her physical space – where she was, now he stands. This is echoed in the equally poetic rape scene. Though the imagery and rhythm of the prose changes, Vera maintains the aesthetic, synaesthetic quality of her composition from scenes of love to rape. Thenjiwe and Nonceba's bodies are treated with lyrical reverence throughout the novel; here, if nowhere else, Vera imagines tenderness and compassion. As Boehmer notes, 'Writing in the context of Zimbabwe's history of independence struggle, women in her view can be the interpreters of the nation's destiny, just as their bodies provide an accurate gauge of its (pre- or post-independence) condition' (Boehmer 198). Women and their bodies can have both destructive and restorative relationships to a national history, and it is in the matter of choice, in the exercising of agency, that Vera imagines a different and perhaps better world for her heroines.

Agency and taboo come together in the depiction of Phephelaphi in Vera's previous novel *Butterfly Burning*, where Phephelaphi performs a 'self-induced abortion and self-immolation, a kind of African *sati*' (Boehmer 178). *Butterfly Burning* is set in Makokoba, a township in Bulawayo, at the end of the 1940s. It follows the story of Phephelaphi, a young woman drawn to the possibilities of her own freedom and independence – to the potential of alternative futures outside of the township. She believes that she has control over her own body and her fate. She meets Fumbatha, a much older man, who becomes her lover. Slowly Phephelaphi comes to realise that her world is constrained, that her choices, while she has them, are limited, and that her body can be both her salvation and her destruction. Despite Fumbatha's objections and cautions of rejection, Phephelaphi applies for a nurses training programme and is accepted. She is, however, pregnant and pregnant women are not accepted into the course. Feeling betrayed by her body and constrained by the limits of her life in Makokoba with Fumbatha, Phephelaphi performs a self-induced abortion. Phephelaphi goes to the dry bush-land on the outskirts on Makokoba: 'Push. She has pushed it in. Sharp and piercing. [...] Her hand is steady inside her body. Her own

hand inserting an irreversible harm' (Vera, *Butterfly* 115). In what is still exquisitely choreographed expression and movement, Vera writes an abortion, she writes self-inflicted harm and excruciating pain as the far side of bodily control: 'It is herself, her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming which she has ceased suddenly to understand, too light and too heavy. She embraces it, braces for the tearing. Her body breaks like decaying wood' (Vera, *Butterfly* 116). Phephelaphi's pain, the consequence of her choice is entangled and co-implicated with the land. The tool she uses to break the 'watery sac' comes from a dry thorn bush – the thorn, 'the longest and strongest needle she could find' (Vera, *Butterfly* 115, 117). This same bush is 'now bright with dots of red' (Vera, *Butterfly* 117). Whether bloom or blood Phephelaphi is too exhausted and pain-ridden to discern, but the landscape appears as sympathetic and claustrophobic witness to her bloody pain. The pages that describe her abortion are rich with imagery of the landscape, of the flora and fauna that surround her, and particularly of the sand which absorbs her agony and blood. 'The land, soft pliant sifting soil, carries her entire shape on it. She sees the place where she has been buried when she lifts her body forward from the ground and offers the blood to her petticoat' (Vera, *Butterfly* 121). She buries the unborn child in her blood-soaked petticoat in the soft soil.

Fumbatha leaves her, and when Phephelaphi finds that she is pregnant again, she does not return to the land. The novel ends at the limit of her agency, with her self-immolation. The comparison Boehmer draws between this and the Indian burial custom of *sati*, where a widow is expected to immolate herself on her husband's pyre, recalls the myth of sacrifice found in *The Stone Virgins*. Despite Phephelaphi's belief in her independence, in her freedom, she is constrained by the single room she shares with Fumbatha, by Sidojiwe E2, the single road she seems to walk on. The space she inhabits is one of containment, but the one thing left to her is choice and the control she has over her body. She uses this to liberate herself:

The fire moves over her light as a feather, smooth like oil. She has wings. She can fly. She turns her arms over and sees them burn and raises them higher above her head [...] She is a bird with wings spread. She falls into a beautiful sound of something weightless rising, a blue light, a yellow light, the smell of skin burning. (Vera, *Butterfly* 150)

She is a bird, freed by the fire consuming her body. Through the transformation of metaphor Vera imagines Phephelaphi's end in the perfection of what it ought to be. The lyrical, synaesthetic prose characteristic of Vera is evident here – metaphor and fire releasing Phephelaphi from the restrictions of her form. In this novel, as in *The Stone Virgins* and *Nehanda*, Vera's poetic style elevates the bodies of her heroines to the forefront of the text. Nehanda, Thenjiwe, Nonceba, and Phephelaphi's bodies are the signs of their struggle, of their precarious and vulnerable place in the patriarchal, national history of Zimbabwe. Yet, their bodies too are the site of their struggle and resistance, the site of their agency and strength. And it is here that Vera dares to imagine, and dares her reader to imagine, an alternative. Vera's veneration for the female body is expressed in the repetitions and metaphors of lyrical prose and ritual attention. Vera makes use of the syntax and signification of ritual to set the female body apart. She writes the female form as sacred – as vulnerable, violable and finite, and therefore sacred. Despite the violent, sometimes horrific taboos Vera writes about, the poetic veneration of the female body is a constant presence in her work. They remain the objects of ritual attention, and no male body is treated in the same way.

Vera's heroines embody, in every sense of the word, the precarity of the world they inhabit, as do My Luck and Abigail. In a world in which the limitations and failures of human rights are daily evident; in the absence of belief in a transcendent good; and without

plausible national and transnational grand narratives of improvement, the writing of Yvonne Vera and Chris Abani documents this often violent mess, at the same time envisioning heterodox alternatives. Their work constructs, and relies on, the somatic empathy between reader and text; it depends on a shared experience and acceptance of the vulnerability and precarity of the human form, and in doing so, presents the possibility of a deeper human syntax, an affiliation of shared mortality. While this may be operative in the fiction of other writers, Vera and Abani's evident and prolonged concern with the position of the voiceless, subaltern and in-between subject plays out in their particularly rigorous stylistic and compositional attention to the body. To repeat J. Z. Smith's definition of ritual: Vera and Abani write 'the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things' (Smith, 'Bare' 125). The objects of poetic and ritual attention, bodies in Vera and Abani's fiction are resignified and made sacred by the ritualised attention they receive in the text. Abigail's ritual scarification; My Luck's cemetery of crosses on his forearm, his already dead spirit-body seeking resolution; Phephelaphi's self-immolation and Cephas's poetic consecration of Thenjiwe's form – in each case the ritual of lyrical description sacralises the body, rejoicing in and mourning its limits.

## **City: Sacralising the urban in Phaswane Mpe, Teju Cole and Ivan Vladislavić**

‘To walk is to lack a site. It is the indeterminate process of being both absent and in search of the proper, of one’s own.’ (de Certeau, ‘Space’ 139)

‘The way and the walker (and the driver, too, if he has time for such things) are in conversation. The ‘long poem of walking’ is a dialogue.’ (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 53)

The sacred permeates the pages of Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) and Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* (2006). It is written into the text by Cole’s protagonist, for whom the city of New York is built upon slave burial grounds, while the presence of Yoruba deities punctuates his experience and understanding of the city. The entirety of Mpe’s novel is narrated from Heaven, a place of liminality and transcendence where the ancestors reside and where the protagonist’s stories are told after he has died. Vladislavić’s work of creative non-fiction sacralises the city through the poetic prose and creative structure of the text. These novels invite us to consider the presence of the sacred in Johannesburg and New York: firstly in the incorporation of sacred knowledge into what might otherwise be thought of as a secular environment; and secondly, in the writers’ deployment of ritualised behaviour as a strategy of integration. In these novels Mpe, Cole, and Vladislavić envision the ways the sacred may be leveraged to resignify urban environments so that their protagonists might assert a sense of belonging in their chosen locality.

As a counterpoint to this analysis, I first consider alternative modes of transport in the city in Cole's *Every Day is for the Thief* (2014) and Mark Gevisser's *Dispatcher* (2014). By reflecting on the experience of driving through the city, as a local or returnee, I highlight the unique constructive position of the pedestrian protagonist as they engage in processes of sacralisation particular to the city that I call *pedestrian mapping*. Pedestrian mapping is the peripatetic and physical performance of being in the city coupled with the incorporation of sacred knowledge systems and ritual behaviours in the imaginative appropriation of space. It revels in the extraordinary in the everyday; encompassing and exceeding the ambulatory and quotidian connotations of 'pedestrian.' In Mpe, Cole, and Vladislavić's texts, pedestrian, cultural, and historical mapping are all present and interrelated, as the protagonist-narrators conceptually reconstruct their relationship to the new environment.

Walking to construct a pedestrian map of their environment allows these protagonists to access the history of the places they encounter and they use their own sacred knowledge and the ritual of walking to order and categorise the space they now inhabit, thus conceptually mapping the city in different terms. Unlike Michel de Certeau's theorisation of the urban walker who is distinctly European and secular, pedestrian mapping is founded on the ritualisation of walking and an appreciation and integration of African epistemologies. It therefore provides an analytical tool for reading and rethinking experiences of belonging in relation to the ways in which ancestral ties to community and 'home' can be utilised in order to sacralise, and therefore resignify, the urban spaces of globalised modernity. The texts in this chapter emerge from an African and diasporic context distinct from that of de Certeau, Charles Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* – in these globalised, postcolonial spaces making sense of the city demands a culturally polyglot subject.

The globalised city as a postcolonial and postsecular environment registers it as a site of ‘multiculturalism,’ migration, displacement and non-belonging.<sup>1</sup> High-growth expansion, globalisation, high rates of transnational and rural to urban migration are common features of postcolonial, global cities such as Mumbai, Johannesburg and Rio de Janeiro (Cabigon 86). The finitude of the human subject, which founds my notion of the *imminent sacred*, is compounded by the precarious position of these narrator-protagonists, whose vulnerability is exacerbated by the conditions of the metropolis.

The tensions central to my argument are twofold. In response to the intimate local accounts by Gevisser and Vladislavić, and then to the migrant subjectivities of Mpe and Cole’s protagonists, this chapter first granulates the complex tensions between experiences of alienation and belonging in the postcolonial globalised city, and the role of sacralisation in mitigating these pressures. Secondly, it considers the distinction between walking and driving as one of many indicators of the heterogeneous and uneven nature of the city.

Refentše and Julius, the protagonists of Mpe and Cole’s novels respectively, are migrants who have left their homes to pursue study and career opportunities. Their migration into a strange city distances them psychologically and emotionally from the comfort and familiarity of home, leaving them isolated in the anonymity and sprawl of their new environment. In order to compensate for this, Refentše and Julius reframe the city through their pedestrian access and through the imaginative, sacred, and intellectual resources they use to establish order and generate meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Chambers and Graham Huggan provide a useful distinction between the global city and the postcolonial city: ‘The global city is perhaps best understood as a relatively recent phenomenon, coextensive with economic developments in late-capitalist modernity and allied to spiralling increases in world population, both of which help account for accelerated rates of urbanization – the unevenly developed transition from rural to urban ways of living – all over the world (Bishop *et al.*; see also Sassen 2001). The postcolonial city, on the other hand, is connected to a more distant past: it is both informed and transformed by the ‘long’ colonial histories that shape it, as well as by more recent patterns of migration, and the social dynamics tied in with these, which are in turn often linked directly or indirectly to the colonial past (King 2009; McLeod 2004; Varma 2011)’ (Chambers and Huggan 4). Elements of both terms can be found in Johannesburg, Lagos and New York so I will refer to them as such.

The novelistic reflections on migration and belonging emerge from the autobiographical experience of Cole and Mpe. Teju Cole was born in the US to Nigerian parents. Raised in Nigeria, he moved back to the US in 1992 when he was 17 ('Bio' pag.; Wood pag.). The narrator-protagonist of his novel *Open City* is a part-Nigerian, part-German psychiatrist who walks New York (and, for a short time, Brussels) interacting with the city's other immigrant inhabitants. The novel is, as James Wood notes, 'as close to a diary as a novel can get, with room for reflection, autobiography, stasis, and repetition' (Wood pag.). It is from this intimate form that Julius's 'feelings of isolation' and intensified 'solitude' emerge as symptoms of his psychological alienation from the city (Cole, *Open* 6, 7). Similarly, like his protagonist Refentše, Mpe moved to Johannesburg from a rural town in Polokwane, South Africa to study at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) – living in the 'menacing monster' of Hillbrow during this time (Mpe 3). Mpe was 34 when he died in 2004. He was a lecturer at Wits, but in the weeks before his death, following a long period of illness, he decided to apprentice as a Ngaka (Sepedi for healer) (Attree 147; McGregor pag.). In his personal life, and in his fiction, Mpe enacts a syncretic vision of modern African experience.

*Portrait with Keys*, by contrast, takes Johannesburg, the narrator's home, as its location and subject. He is not a migrant; nonetheless, the narrator's conflicted sense of belonging arises, as Julius's does in part, from his awareness of the historical and political dimensions of the city and his complicity with them. While Vladislavić is often described as a 'writer of place,' he explains that *Portrait with Keys*, in particular, is concerned with the 'layering of memory and place' (Steyn pag.). 'I consciously decided,' he explains, 'to write about places of significance to me, to find a set of "street addresses" that would allow me to map my own attachments to Johannesburg. One could say I sought out places where the topsoil of memory lay thick' (Steyn pag.). I argue that this layering, this excavation of the topsoil, so carefully integrated into the structure of the text, performs pedestrian mapping and in doing so constructs a sacralising account of the narrator's beloved city.

### **Not walking but driving: The uneven, globalised city**

Jeremy Black notes that cities are organised not around neighbourhoods, but around streets, and maps follow the same organisational logic. Referring to street atlases like the London A-Z, Black writes that ‘In the “A-Z”ing of life, habitations emerge as the spaces between streets’ and signs of economic, social and environmental inequality are erased. Consequently,

The city is a space to be traversed, a region to be manipulated or overcome in the individual’s search for a given destination, not an area to be lived in and through. Far from being composed of neighbourhoods, the city is a sphere of distance to be negotiated, indeed overcome, by road. (Black 13)

As I shall demonstrate, the pedestrian maps constructed in Mpe, Cole and Vladislavić’s novels offer an alternative view of the city; a map profoundly attentive to the habitations of modern life and to the multiplicities and inequalities of urban living. These maps insist on the individual’s rootedness in the city streets. However, Gevisser’s experience of driving Johannesburg is closer to the indexed sanitisation of the A-Z map. Thus, I want to counterpose the remarkable stories of pedestrian appropriation and pedestrian mapping with two texts that consider the pedestrian, but which also interrogate the experience and perspective of the globalised postcolonial city through driving and the use of public transport.

The first, also by Teju Cole, is *Every Day is for the Thief*. In this novel, published in Nigeria prior to the release of *Open City*, and afterwards in the United States, the unnamed narrator returns from the US to visit family in Lagos. The novel is an impressionistic and personal reflection on what it means to ‘visit’ home, to return to a city that is intimately known and yet irrevocably altered and estranged. The second,

*Dispatcher: Lost and Found in Johannesburg* is a memoir by Mark Gevisser which explores his experience of growing up in Johannesburg. Hedley Twidle suggests that ‘these two city books are linked by an inquiry into the mysterious ways in which the spaces of our early lives come to structure imagination, creativity, the self – and what happens when these primal attachments must weather disaffection, estrangement and violence’ (Twidle pag.). I would suggest that they are linked too in their articulation of the distinction between walking and driving (in) an African city, and how this alters the interaction with and imagining of that environment.

The city is an arena of multiplicity and mobility – actual and attempted; financial and physical; imaginative and creative. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s short article “Afropolis: From Johannesburg”<sup>2</sup> considers the notion of the Afropolis and opens with a personal anecdote of driving across Johannesburg: ‘To produce an original form, if not of African cosmopolitanism, then of worldliness. The Afropolitan? Afropolis? At least, the entanglement of the modern and the African. To pursue and shape a city that has developed an aura of its own, a uniqueness’ (Nuttall and Mbembe 282). This description applies not only to Afropolitan cities such as Lagos and Johannesburg, but also to Julius’s New York. Driving is not the only way to experience this in Johannesburg or in any other city, yet the enclosure of a car coupled with the potential speed of mobility mean that driving offers a voyeuristic encounter with the Afropolis. ‘Driving is ubiquitous in Johannesburg,’ they write: ‘So much of what is seen appears through the enclosure of a car window, in private cars, buses, and minibus taxis. Since we’re on the road so much, we have time to look around, to see what’s going on’ (Nuttall and Mbembe 128). The verbs ‘look’ and ‘see’ which animate their description expose the passivity and remove of this mode of being in the city. Unlike Julius and Refentše who inhabit and appropriate areas by walking, the only

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<sup>2</sup> The term Afropolis is an optimistic middle ground between the globalised city and the postcolonial city: one which reflects aspects of both and celebrates the creative hybrid potential of African cities, and Johannesburg particularly.

space inhabited by driving is the car. A. Igoni Barrett's offering in the anthology *Africa39* provides a vivid description of being in a car in Lagos at rush hour:

Faro stared through the windscreen at the congested road [...] it had a chaos all of its own. It looked exactly like after-work traffic in Lagos was supposed to look. A sprawling coastal city that had no ferry system, no commuter trains, no underground tunnels or overhead tramlines, where hordes of people leaving work poured on to the roads at the same time as the freight trucks carting petroleum products and food produce and all manner of manufacture from all corners of Nigeria. (Allfrey, *Africa39* 43–44)

The windscreen separates Faro from the chaos of the road; he is simultaneously in it and removed from it. The perspective mimics this as the description shifts from what is immediately before him to a sweeping vision of urban traffic. The external sense of chaos in Barrett's account offers a productive contrast to the subjective interiority of Cole's. On his first night back in Lagos the narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief* reflects on his homecoming. Unlike the teeming activity of Barrett's description, Cole's narrator presents a stilled meditation on what it is to return estranged.

I am breathing the air of the city for the first time in a decade and a half, its white smoke and ochre dust which are as familiar as my own breath. But other things, less visible, have changed. I have taken into myself some of the assumptions of life in a Western democracy – certain ideas about legality, for instance, certain expectations of due process – and in that sense I have returned a stranger. (Cole, *Thief* 16–17)

Corruption, and its insidious violence, is the cause of the returning narrator's disaffection. The Yoruba proverb 'every day is for the thief, but one day is for the owner' from which the novel takes its title refers to the widespread corruption and thievery that seem to be the

normal order of business in Nigeria (Cole, *Thief* epigraph). Though the protagonist's perception of home is coloured by what Twidle calls a 'Naipaulian' tint, the narrative tracks not only this scepticism but also how the narrator tries to work himself back into the city of his early life.

The narrator wants to walk, and there are certainly peripatetic moments in *Thief* which reveal an intimacy and proximity with urban spaces: 'It is in this aimless wandering that I find myself truly in the city,' declares the narrator (Cole, *Thief* 128). However, the narrator also immerses himself in Lagos, by choosing to use the public transport, against his family's wishes:

The degree to which my family members wish me to be separate from the life of the city is matched only by my desire to know that life. The danfo, carrier of the masses, is the perfect symbol of our contest. The energies of Lagos life – creative, malevolent, ambiguous – converge at the bus stops. There is no better place to make an inquiry into what it was I longed for all those times I longed for home. (Cole, *Thief* 35)

To be separated from the teeming metropolis means to take a private car, to be driven or to drive one's self. This is the way that the narrator's family move about the city, if indeed they need to come at all. Cole's narrator balks against this isolationist attitude; instead, he plunges into the life of the city by taking the 'danfo, carrier of the masses' and going to the market. In his description the complexity and ambiguity of Lagos converge at the bus stop, and in the danfo, a shared taxi. 'Everyone says I must not travel by danfo. The danfo is a death trap. It is a haven for practitioners of black magic, and is full of thieves. This much is known' (Cole, *Thief* 33). The intangible and real dangers of this bustling liminal social sphere are framed in terms of the threat, excitement and multiplicity particular to an African metropolis – precisely what the narrator wants, what he longs for when he yearns for home.

The market is the ‘essence’ of Lagos ‘always alive with possibility and danger,’ the place where ‘one goes [...] to participate in the world’ (Cole, *Thief* 57). In the market, as in the rest of the city, the narrator is quick to remember the appropriate posture and attitude that will allow him to blend in: ‘The trick is to present an outward attitude of alertness, while keeping a calm and observant mood within. And there also has to be the will to be violent, a will that has to be available when it is called for’ (Cole, *Thief* 37–38). The narrator’s feelings of alterity urge him further into the urban environment. This sense of unease pervades the depiction of Lagos. Through the narrator’s interior subjectivity the city appears familiar and beloved, and yet chaotic and overwhelming. The narrator feels himself caught up in the events of the ‘city of Scheherazades,’ a city of storytellers telling overlapping and conflicting narratives of African modernity (Cole, *Thief* 27).

The narrator of *Thief* reflects on the return home, on the possibility of re-familiarising himself with the places where he came of age. He does this by inserting himself back into the city by walking and getting lost in the streets, but also by going to the market and using public transport, even riding a motorbike. The narrator’s experience is divided between, on the one hand, walking the city, inhabiting it as a place of social and geometrically planned connections, a place to get lost in: ‘letting go of my moorings makes me connect to the city as pure place, through which I move without prejudging what I will see when I come around a corner’ (Cole, *Thief* 159). On the other hand is driving, where his experience is not immediately of the city, but rather of the speedy transitional social spaces like the danfo and the market. Despite the first person narration, and illustrations of walking the city in both of Cole’s novels, I show that the purposeful interiority of Julius’s pedestrian mapping is distinct.

Mark Gevisser registers the potential of pedestrian mapping in *Dispatcher*, but his experience of his urban environment is primarily one of barriers, edges, security fences and violence. His perspective is informed by his troubled political position in the city and by

his primary mode of transport, the private car. Directly addressing Cole's *Open City* and the accessibility of New York, Gevisser remarks:

it leads me to think about Johannesburg as anything but that: it draws its energy precisely from its atomization and its edges, its stacking of boundaries against each other. It is no place to wander; no place, either, to throw your window open and let the world blow in.  
(Gevisser 20).

For Mpe's protagonist and Vladislavić's narrator Johannesburg is, despite its dangers, a place to wander. In at least this sense Gevisser's access to the city, privileged as it has been because of apartheid and its legacies, diverges from that of the other protagonists. These legacies, though they emerge from a history of institutionalised racism, are more suitably addressed as an intersection between race and class struggles, as Gevisser's framing suggests:

These people who walk Johannesburg daily are not *flâneurs* at all but migrants, or workers, to whom the city still denies the right to public transport [...] the stories their feet tell, unlike those of the idealised *flâneurs*, imagined by Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin, are often ones of pain and dislocation. The rest of us drive. (Gevisser 20)

In addition to the critique of theorisations of *flâneurs*, economic unevenness is conceived here in terms of mobility; walking in this case is no longer the performative aspect of pedestrian mapping, it is the sign of those who migrate, labour, and those who struggle – 'The rest of us drive.' The hubris of the *flâneur* characteristically conceived of as a European male urban subject clashes against the presence of the pedestrian in this South African metropolis who is instead a migrant, walking the streets either looking for work, or commuting. To walk in this instance is less a marker of authority over the space than an indication of socio-economic vulnerability.

The memoir intersperses recollections from Gevisser's life with historic and topographical details, which together with the plotted routes, street names and urban landmarks locate the reader and the narrative firmly in Johannesburg. The title of the memoir is taken from Gevisser's favourite childhood game. With a street atlas of the city from 1979, *Holmden's Register of Johannesburg* feeding his cartomania, the young Gevisser sends his imaginary couriers out on journeys through the streets. The title and game offer a 'master metaphor' for the memoir, positioning Gevisser's 'street-map obsession' as the primary plot device in the text (Twidle pag.; Gevisser 26). The game of Dispatcher opens up the city of Johannesburg to Gevisser's imagination. As he sends his imaginary couriers out on their deliveries, he selects and traces the routes they will travel. As a child these streets are limited to those in the *Holmden's*, but as a politically sensitive adult who could walk, but chooses to drive, his experience of the city shifts.

According to the *Holmden's*, here is your route. You are to travel west up Roosevelt, (as Alfred Nzo was previously called), crossing into the industrial area of Wynberg and continuing along 2nd, over the old Pretoria road. And here, as you hit Andries Street at the top edge of page 75, you will find yourself in trouble. For here you are up against that uncrossable divide between pages 75 and 77.

(Gevisser 326)

The present tense, third person narration generates the immediacy of a conversation, making it easy to forget that these directions are not given according to the streets themselves but according to their representation in *Holmden's*. The inclusion of page numbers as impediments to mobility finds purchase in the cityscape itself. What the young Gevisser comes to realise is that the neat, discreet suburban borders in his map book do not adequately represent the geography of the city – between pages 75 and 77 is the cartographic blank where Soweto should be. The awareness of the politics of the map, of the unevenness of the cartographic representation frames the rest of the narrative.

The intention of the game and the text reflect the interpretive investment and performative dimensions of the imminent sacred, but without the peripatetic aspect of pedestrian mapping. With a consistency that echoes the other authors in this chapter, Gevisser enacts in and through his narrative the cartographic ritual of his childhood game. The narrative shifts within a phrase between actual descriptions of moving through the streets and those imagined in the terms of the game. Although the game rehearses the incorporation and resignification of the city that we shall see in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Open City* and *Portrait with Keys*, Gevisser confines himself within the car, keeping himself slightly removed just as he longs to be more integrated.

Gevisser is vexed by his privileged and contingent position in Johannesburg. He seems unable to overcome this feeling because he isolates himself within the speed and security of a car. In many ways Vladislavić's narrator, who I discuss next, inhabits a similarly precarious site, yet he walks the streets, insistent on affirming the validity of his belonging. Gevisser succeeds perhaps in resignifying the city through his memoir, but he does not insert himself into his urban environment as the pedestrian protagonists do.

### **Pedestrian mapping, the imminent sacred, and the postsecular city**

In the simplest terms, a map is a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional space; it is a means of organising and categorising space which can either contribute to the dominant discourse or undermine it. As Jeremy Black notes, the map is an 'assertion of sovereignty,' and 'the subject of a map reflects choice' (Black 17, 12). Thus Black insists that maps and cartography should be firmly located in their given socio-political contexts where they are understood as a 'medium' of discourse, not the message itself (Black 168). Maps are 'documents that contribute to the discourse of power,' whether social, political or scientific; they are 'instruments of power' but that power needs always to be understood in context (Black 18). Reflecting on the decolonisation of cartography, 'in the pursuit of

social and cultural change,' Graham Huggan argues that although the map continues to be a 'paradigm of colonial discourse, its deconstruction and/or revisualisation permits a "disidentification" from the procedures of colonialism (and other hegemonic discourses) and a (re)engagement in the ongoing process of cultural decolonisation' (Huggan 128). The maps constructed in the novels discussed in this chapter therefore emerge from dissenting cartographic impulses – the desire to construct a map of the city which is representative of an individual's particular cultural script and its place in a multifaceted urban reality. In the assertion of personal presence, the protagonists of these novels resignify spaces of the city as intimate, and as we shall see, imminent and sacred. Additionally, as Sarah Nuttall argues of post-apartheid urban fiction, these pedestrian novels extend the idiom of 'city-culture' by narrating the 'intricacy of the city as a spatial formation, its density as a concentration of people, things, institutions and architectural forms; the heterogeneity of lives juxtaposed in close proximity, the citiness of cities' (Nuttall 740).

De Certeau's well-known essay "Walking in the City" asserts that walking defines or creates a 'space of enunciation' (de Certeau, *Everyday* 98). Despite his privileging of the white, male subject, de Certeau's explanation of 'pedestrian enunciation' celebrates the creative agency of the individual,<sup>3</sup> and has an additional 'function of introducing an other in relation to' the walker (de Certeau, *Everyday* 99). In a following essay 'Practices of Space,' he writes: 'the act of walking is to the urban system what the act of speaking, the *Speech Act*, is to language or to spoken utterance' (de Certeau, 'Space' 129). He goes on to explain that the pedestrian walking the city has 'a threefold "uttering" function' (de Certeau, 'Space' 129–30). The first is 'a process of *appropriation* of the topographic

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin 'stressed the *flâneur*'s embeddedness in commercial mass culture' (Gluck 54). Yet, rather than being entirely alienated by 'commodified urban culture,' the *flâneur* was a figure who emphasised the 'public and heroic potential of the city' (Gluck 55). While this is one version of the modern, 19<sup>th</sup> century *flâneur*, a figure privileged by whiteness and financial means, Mpe and Cole recast the pedestrian protagonist not as heroic observer but as an inquirer into the concatenations of secular, spiritual, and urban experience.

system' (de Certeau, 'Space' 130). As a 'speaker appropriates and assumes language' through utterance, so too does the pedestrian appropriate the urban streets by walking (de Certeau, 'Space' 130). Thus, the act of walking, central to Mpe, Cole and Vladislavić's novels, is not merely a physical action, it is a 'taking in,' a conceptual assumption of the street facilitated by the second 'uttering' function of walking which is 'a spatial *realisation* of the site' (de Certeau, 'Space' 130). The pedestrian moves through the city, at each moment gaining a new awareness of their spatial orientation, physically and imaginatively locating themselves in space. Paired with the third function of walking, the distinction between places, this provides the pedestrian a space *against* which to position themselves, but also enables them to differentiate between discrete places in the city. The comparison between the act of walking and the act of speaking is pertinent to understanding how the characters make sense of their urban presence. If speech brings the subject into language, then walking brings the subject into the city. In these literary narratives walking is an expression of the imminent presence of the pedestrian in the city, a physical and conceptual claim to the space, made feasible by the interpretive and imaginative engagement of the character in categorising and organising their knowledge and experience.

When conceptualising the sacred, there are significant resonances between the ways in which de Certeau's pedestrian constructs a version of the city by walking, and the ways in which Chidester and Linenthal claim a space is sacralised by particular interpretive manoeuvres. They assert, 'characteristic modes of symbolic engagement in the production of sacred space include strategies of appropriation, exclusion, inversion, and hybridization' (Chidester and Linenthal 18–19). Chidester and Linenthal's theory of the sacred valorises the capacity of the individual to make strategic organisational choices, similar to those of de Certeau's pedestrian. Just as the speech act is a materialisation of language, so too is walking a materialisation of the space of the city, as it brings an aspect of the city into being. The physical and conceptual appropriation of space is common to both pedestrian

and sacralising theories. Chidester and Linenthal's assertion, however, that sacralisation is an interpretive and imaginative appropriation and recategorisation of space that enables the subject to establish a sense of control and belonging as a way to access the transcendent, goes beyond the capabilities of de Certeau's pedestrian. What de Certeau's theorisation cannot but overlook are the echoes of sacralisation in the habitual, indeed ritualised, mapping of the globalised city, and the integration of African systems of knowledge in conceptualising this relation between subject and space.

The kind of physical, conceptual and imaginative engagement with the urban environment present in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Open City* and *Portrait with Keys* moves beyond the cultural trope of de Certeau's European pedestrian to consider a modern African subject's experience of the teeming entanglement of the postcolonial city. These novels enact a disruption of colonial mapping and neo-colonial/neoliberal restructuring of the city. In Johannesburg and New York the movement and access of the protagonists is restricted by the boundaries and instrumental spaces of the city, but in the streets, a 'public' space, they are able to construct and mobilise a sense of agency and belonging. The psychological motivation towards imminent sacrality is kindled by the existential vulnerability of each of the protagonists. Sacred knowledge is a vital aspect of this, since the experience of sacralisation these novels narrate extends the capacity of mapping beyond the solitary pedestrian walking the streets as a way of asserting control, to pedestrian mapping that draws imaginative communion with the ancestors and an ancestral 'home' into a cartography of the city.

There are echoes of Jameson's comparison between the situation of the subject in postmodern late capitalist society and the experience of the subject in the postmodern city. Jameson writes 'that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves' (Jameson 49). Cognitive mapping is salve for this feeling of alienation and 'involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction

of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories' (Jameson 51). This sense of mapping as a mobile assertion of place carries through my notion of pedestrian mapping. However, while the 'vocation' of cognitive mapping is an ideological critique, which allows the individual to conceptualise their place in systems of multinational capital and postmodern culture, pedestrian mapping operates on a more intimate scale: it conceptualises the particularly sacred and proximate dimensions of the protagonist's assertions of belonging and appropriations of urban space, as a strategy of resistance to the radical precariousness of urban experience (Jameson 54).

The postsecular negotiations of postcolonial environments also require specific consideration. In the introduction to their edited collection *Postsecular Cities*, Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker argue that this century has been marked by a return of 'religion, faith communities and spiritual values,' to the 'centre of public life, especially public policy, governance, and social identity' (Baker and Beaumont 1). Urban areas, defined as they often are by immigration and rapid diversification, are a prime location to observe the ways in which 'religious and spiritual traditions are creating both new alliances but also bifurcations with secular sectors' (Baker and Beaumont 1). In these city spaces where 'new relations of possibility are emerging,' they suggest that the 'metaphor of fusion or the notion of "rapprochement" are profitable for thinking about cities as the interface between disciplines, theoretical orientations and philosophical perspectives' (Baker and Beaumont 2, 1). Beaumont proposes, as I have in the introduction, that

[i]f we consider postsecular as the indication of diverse religious, humanist and secularist positionalities – and not merely an assumption of complete and total secularization – it is precisely the relations between these dimensions and not just the religious that are taken into account and [are] the focus of attention. (Beaumont 6)

The term postsecular does not suggest that these complex processes are somehow ‘new,’ but it does offer a grammar for thinking through the concatenations, fusions and heterogeneity of the sacred and the secular in contemporary African experience and its written fictions. Beaumont and Baker also note a lack of scholarship on the cultural production of postsecular cities, an absence this chapter attends to.

### **Vladislavić and ritualised constructions of Johannesburg**

For Achille Mbembe, the mobility, flexibility and multiplicity of the globalised African city can be violent and ugly, but also constructive (Mbembe 242). Thus the city of the postcolony, Lagos, Johannesburg, and certainly Julius’s New York, is characterised by its multiplicities, contradictions, simultaneities and overlaps. There is a violence and threat inherent in this space of entanglement, and though the violence cannot be negated or ignored, it does not foreclose the possibility of creativity, productivity or resistance – in fact violence may be thought of as constitutive of this affirmation. In the preceding discussion and in the following analysis of *Portrait with Keys*, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Open City*, I emphasise the productive, assertive and affirmative aspects of the postcolony.

Pedestrian mapping is a creative act of incorporation; it is an attempt by the subject to locate the spaces of their city, and to be situated, to belong within them. Pablo Mukherjee makes a valuable intervention into this question when he articulates the ways in which Ivan Vladislavić’s work registers the unevenness of Johannesburg as a paradigmatic example of an African metropolis. He argues that urban theorists such as Nuttall and Mbembe glorify the mobile and flexible characteristics of African experience, and somewhat myopically claim them as unique to African modernity. Instead, Mukherjee contends that the ‘casualized and migratory mode of human existence signals [...] the unfolding of a single, uneven, global modernity over time and space,’ and further,

that it is precisely in the resistance to the enforced and involuntary conditions of migration, circumlocution and “flexible existence” that the creativity and dynamism of contemporary modernity’s human subject becomes most obvious. That is, they often fully realise themselves in acts of rooting and habitation instead of acts of uprooting and travel. (Mukherjee 476)

By positioning the conditions of the postcolony within the broader context of ‘uneven global modernity’ Mukherjee’s intervention facilitates a comparative analysis of the experience of the subject in African metropolises and those further afield like London and New York. Moreover, Mukherjee looks through the flux and fragmentations of global modernity to see that resistance is offered not through further flexibility but through habitation and assertions of belonging. This is certainly the case for Gevisser and Cole’s narrator in *Thief*. As we shall see in Julius and Refentše’s case, this impetus to locate oneself in a specific place is often a result of the vicissitudes of migrant experiences of non-belonging. Thus I agree with Mukherjee’s assertion that the most successful forms of resistance to the sometimes ‘forced’ mobility of modernity are those which root the subject in the particularities of place. And I argue that the incorporation of sacred epistemologies into the city is a vital component of these novels’ assertions of belonging and rootedness.

The incorporation of Yoruba and Sepedi belief systems are an important facet of the pedestrian maps Julius and Refentše construct. The narrators of Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* and Gevisser’s *Dispatcher* construct their maps out of different cultural materials. Julius’s self-consciously literary and historic imagining of New York is echoed in the ways Vladislavić incorporates himself into Johannesburg through his cultural, geographic and historic knowledge. Unlike *Open City* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which explore urban immigrant subjectivity, *Portrait with Keys* enacts through its form and content the pedestrian mapping of a narrator who is South African and has lived in Johannesburg for a number of decades. As a particularly urban iteration of imminent

sacralisation, pedestrian mapping is both the imaginative construction of the city in and through the text, and the performative appropriation of the space through peripatetic narratives. Together these processes combine to resignify the urban environment in the narrator's terms.

This is precisely what *Portrait with Keys* performs so successfully. This artfully constructed assemblage of textual pieces offers an ever-shifting urban imaginary. The immersive and affecting fragments are numbered. The impulse is to read them linearly; however, Vladislavić offers alternative 'Routes' of varying lengths, short, medium and long, through which the reader can explore the text. The final section, 'Itineraries,' lists these conceptually organised, curated fragments: 'Walking' and 'Street addresses, Johannesburg' are two cycles or pathways through the text that speak directly to the argument of this chapter. Significantly it is also the structure of the work which enacts pedestrian mapping.

*Portrait with Keys* begins with an epigraph from Lionel Abrahams, 'Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half's in the concrete streets we have lived along.' The division of memory between the subject and the city intricately binds him to that locality. As the work unfolds each entry is a new memory: a fragment situated precisely in the topography and the history of the city. In a later reference to Abrahams as part of the 'Writers' book' itinerary, the narrator recalls Abrahams writing about how 'certain stray corners of the city' assume personal significance through association: 'places where we feel more alive and more at home because a 'topsoil of memory' has been allowed to form there' (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 188). The text is an excavation of the narrator's personal topsoil; an exploration of the places where the sediments of memory have settled. In this way the book as a whole is an interpretive engagement with Johannesburg. Additionally, the structure which encourages the use of alternative, but still ordered pathways through the text performs an imaginative organisation and sacralisation of the narrator's urban

environment. The narrator locates himself in the time and space of the city and in doing so asserts his belonging.

It is also true that the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint. (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 12)

The habituated pathways, those driven and walked, ‘would appear as unique as a fingerprint,’ and would leave a mark as delicate and almost always unseen. This text makes those patterns explicit by bringing to the surface private, ritualised trajectories that are inscribed with personal knowledge and history.

For example, Vladislavić describes the area where he lives in Johannesburg as an ‘accidental island’:

I live on an island, an accidental island, made by geography and the town planners who laid out these city streets. Roberts and Kitchener, avenues in the uniforms of English soldiers, march away to the east, side by side. A spine of rock, an outcrop of the gold-bearing reef on which the city depends, blocks every thoroughfare between the avenues, except for Blenheim and Juno. When I am driven to walk, which is often, only the long way round, following this shore – Blenheim, Roberts, Juno, Kitchener – will bring me back to the beginning. Johannesburg surges and recedes like a tide. I come home with my shoes full of sand. (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 18)

Accidents of geography and history have conspired to shape and give name to the streets of this neighbourhood. The mimetic layering of this account which brings Vladislavić’s historical knowledge of the city to bear on the descriptions of the streets mirrors the

experience of walking those streets. His descriptions in this extract and in many others in the text seem to abstract the perspective in order to bring a fuller image into view. The structure of the fragments is almost cubist. In this passage, the streets Roberts and Kitchener – named for the two successive English commander-in-chiefs during the South African War – are figured in the metaphor of their soldier garb marching off together to the east. Recalling a history ignored or forgotten by many inhabitants, the narrator uses his knowledge of these details to anchor his place in his neighbourhood, and the city beyond his accidental island. The narrator walks the edge of the island; he is ‘driven to walk’ the boundary where the sea of Johannesburg, a city without water, begins to encroach. Returning home with his pockets weighed down by the sandy matter he has collected along the way: the residue of the city remains with him.

The narrator describes the topography of the city in somatic metaphors: ‘spine’ and ‘backbone’ (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 60). In this way the urban environment is cultivated as a presence in the text: a presence that is fleshed out by the stories and historic details the narrator relates. The layering of information in these passages seems to bring multiple historical moments to exist in the same space – a purposeful flattening of time in order to expose the fractious overlaps of historical space. The city’s material history is ‘coming back to the surface’ – tramlines from the sixties pushing up through the tarred street (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 60). Material histories are ever-present in a city founded on mining: ‘Today, going down Commissioner into the high-rise heart of the city, I am reminded that here we are all still prospectors, with a digger’s claim on the earth beneath our feet’ (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 60). The narrator feels himself and the rest of the city’s inhabitants to be prospectors trying to lay claim to the ground. His claim, like others, can only be speculative: ‘a digger’s claim’ to the land and what it might provide. These speculative claims of belonging are amplified through the narrator’s performance of urban knowledge. Shopping malls, residential homes, the maternity hospital Marymount which becomes a home for the elderly – each entry specifically locates the reader and narrator, and as the

chronology of the entries progress we see the city change. The persistent feeling of alteration is exacerbated by the transitions between entries: the narrative, like the city, is constantly shifting.

The pedestrian fascination in the narrative comes through in the mobility generated by the structure of the work – like a conversation moving seamlessly from one everyday subject to another:

The way and the walker (and the driver, too, if he has time for such things) are in conversation. The ‘long poem of walking’ is a dialogue. Ask a question of any intersection [...] and it will answer, not always straightforwardly, allowing a quirk of the topography, the lie of the land, a glimpse of a prospect to nudge you one way or another.

(Vladislavić, *Portrait* 53)

Vladislavić echoes de Certeau’s comparison between the acts of speaking and walking by referring to walking as a conversation or poem. The way and the walker are mutually constitutive, engaging in a dialogue which propels them through time and space. The puns ‘straightforwardly,’ ‘lie’ and ‘nudge’ extend the metaphor of this conversation, personifying the ways in which urban topography might mislead or waylay the walker.

Yet it is precisely this elusiveness that fascinates the author: ‘I live in a city that resists the imagination. Or have I misunderstood? Is the problem that I live in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it?’ (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 54). Experience made fiction or fiction made experiential? The city resists imaginative capture by evading the narrator’s attempts to signify it in singular terms, to map it along a single vector. Even though each entry is an attempt to grasp some facet of the narrator’s urban environment, what emerges is striking in its shifting multiplicity. An epistemological gamble, the text as a whole operates as an imaginative resignification and sacralisation of Johannesburg, one which treasures the conceptual slipperiness of such a city. Where the narrator ‘should feel utterly out of place, but instead I feel that I belong here. I am given shape. I do not follow but I conclude, as

surely as a non sequitur' (Vladislavić, *Portrait* 87). The narrator's rootedness in Johannesburg flouts the alienating logic of the street map and the politics of post-1994 South African belonging. Gevisser mediates his difficult relationship to Johannesburg through the ritual of his game, but he cannot sacralise his environment because he withholds himself from it. Vladislavić's narrator insists on his pedestrian access, and it is this ritualised movement through the city, mirrored in textual form, that sacralises the city. In the case of Mpe and Cole's narratives, sacralisation is taken a step further, as Johannesburg and New York are reinvested with African epistemologies.

### **Mpe: Mapping Johannesburg from Heaven**

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe writes coextensive worlds that are suggestive of Sepedi epistemology. While Refentše tries to establish a place for himself in Hillbrow, it is only in Heaven where he finally finds the sense of collective belonging he has been searching for – a desire successively denied as the earthly places in the novel become unstable. The narration of the novel is ingenious, as the story is told retrospectively to Refentše by an ancestor, after he has died. This narrative construction enables Mpe to enact in his fiction a particular cultural knowledge in which the dead, the living and the unborn inhabit coextensive spheres (Mbiti 24). Thus the transcendent and the sacred occupy the same space as Refentše's mundane, lived experience.

The novel is set in Hillbrow, a once-middle class inner-city suburb of Johannesburg that is now the home to immigrants from the rest of the African continent, as well as migrants from rural areas in South Africa. The collection of stories the narrator relates are drawn from these migrants to Johannesburg who offer a view of the city from the ground, while the narrator offers a view from above. The integration of these perspectives creates the global scale of the narrative by connecting Hillbrow and Johannesburg to the rest of Africa, to England and the rural villages closer to home (Hunt 113). This perspective asks

the reader to consider Johannesburg as a globalised city, with transnational and local networks of migration and capital.

The novel begins when Refentše arrives in Hillbrow to begin his studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. Initially, he lives with his cousin who is a policeman in the area. At the end of his studies Refentše finds employment at the university, which enables him to stay in Johannesburg. During this time Refentše dates Lerato, a woman from Johannesburg who his mother disapproves of because she is not from his rural home, Tiragalong. The discord between Refentše and his mother causes him to pull away from Tiragalong, from home and to rely more on his life with Lerato in Hillbrow. When Refentše discovers that Lerato has been unfaithful to him with their mutual friend, the stability he briefly found in Hillbrow is lost and he commits suicide. Refentše's suicide is caused partially by the disintegration of his personal relationships and partially by the impossibility of secure belonging or identification. 'You discovered, on arriving in Hillbrow, that to be drawn away from Tiragalong also went hand-in-hand with a loss of interest in Hillbrow. Because Tiragalong was in Hillbrow' (Mpe 49). The cultural alienation Refentše feels has additional existential implications: the precariousness of his psychological position and mortality trigger his yearning for the transcendent security offered by his pedestrian map.

The desire for a concrete, bounded place comes to the fore at the beginning of the novel, as Mpe and the narrator offer a pedestrian map and characterisation of Hillbrow. Mpe imagines Hillbrow enriched and made vibrant by the various African inhabitants and their cultures. The impulse to set Hillbrow up as an intersectional and multicultural place strengthened by its differences is indicative of Mpe's optimistic but troubled attempt to construct a place of successful community and personal identification. Emma Hunt explains that,

[f]or Mpe, the new mobility between Johannesburg and other spaces enabled by the opening of South Africa's borders after apartheid can

be harnessed to build an inclusive city and a heterogeneous society that rejects the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nationality set up by apartheid in favour of a broad vision of allegiance based on a common humanity. (Hunt 104–105)

This optimistic construction of a South African community based on an ‘allegiance of common humanity’ only materialises in Heaven, while Hillbrow is a place of highly contingent inclusion, derelict buildings and governmental and police neglect. Hunt puts Mpe’s novel in conversation with Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup*, arguing that the novels explore Johannesburg as a post-apartheid city and ‘look at the expansion of the city beyond the borders of the nation,’ positioning it in both texts as a ‘metonym for an increasingly globalised world’ (Hunt 104). In particular ways, Johannesburg has followed the neoliberal trend of urban restructuring observed in other global cities (Didier, Morange, and Peyroux 122). Gentrification of inner city areas of Johannesburg like the Maboneng Precinct (meaning ‘Place of Light’) and Newtown have further isolated the suburb of Hillbrow and its impoverished and overlooked inhabitants. Yet due to the immigrant and migrant workforces that reside there, Hillbrow remains an area of cultural overlap and exchange.

Just as national boundaries are permeable, so too are the boundaries of the city – it is the mobility of the characters in the novel and the fluidity of their stories which articulate the identity of Hillbrow in complicated and dynamic ways. The narrator, addressing Refentše, offers a description of Hillbrow:

you already knew that Hillbrow was a menacing monster [...] The lure of the monster was, however, hard to resist; Hillbrow had swallowed a number of the children of Tiragalong, who thought that the City of Gold was full of career opportunities for them. (Mpe 3)

In these few lines the city is referred to as both a place of opportunity and a ravenous monster, devouring migrants seeking opportunity. Refentše has come to the city for the opportunities it has to offer him, but he is devoured, not only by the monstrous Hillbrow

but also by feelings of dislocation and non-belonging that envelop him as he is increasingly isolated from his friends and family.

Refentše is overwhelmed by the multiplicity of voices and strands of gossip that provide details of Hillbrow, and also of his personal life: ‘All of these things that you have heard seen heard about felt smelt believed disbelieved shirked embraced brewing in your consciousness would find chilling haunting echoes in the simple words... Welcome to our Hillbrow’ (Mpe 27). These sentences close the first and second chapters (‘Notes from Heaven’) and describe the two primary locations of the novel, Hillbrow and Heaven. They speak to the difficulty Refentše has in finding a consistent point of identification. The lack of punctuation, which echoes the destabilisation of place, is an enactment of the subject grasping at meaning – Refentše attempts to establish a sense of cohesion and order. Only in Heaven, when ‘alive in a different realm,’ does Refentše acknowledge that his influence is limited, that he does not ‘own this life’ (Mpe 67). Thus the only sense of order he can create is through the ‘linguistic trip’ he spins for Lerato his ex-girlfriend, when she has joined him in Heaven after committing suicide (Mpe 68).

As the novel progresses, the notion of the city ‘place’ with concrete and impermeable boundaries is gradually undermined by networks of migration. Refentše moves from Tiragalong to Hillbrow while his friend Refilwe, the novel’s second protagonist, follows him but also goes to Oxford to further her studies. They carry with them the places they have been to: ‘Hillbrow in Hillbrow. Hillbrow in Cape Town. Cape Town in Hillbrow. Oxford in both. Both in Oxford. Welcome to our All’ (Mpe 104). The multiple locations of the novel are imaginatively conflated – the national and local boundaries, made permeable by the characters that travel between them, begin to collapse completely so that one place seems to be present in the other; Hillbrow, Cape Town and Oxford are forced together by the stories the immigrants tell and the experiences they share. It is only the location of Heaven that remains conceptually intact, since it embraces its necessarily unidirectional permeability. The conceptual collapse of place gestures to the

transnational networks which facilitate Johannesburg's characterisation as a globalised city, and it is this instability and material fluidity that isolates Refentše.

In an attempt to secure the limits of place in the novel, the title and opening chapter named 'Hillbrow: The Map,' demarcate the suburb. This distinct cartographic intention is an attempt to counteract the mutability of place and the instability of identity and belonging that it engenders. The pedestrian map is established, not only through Refentše's repeated and ritualised walking but also through the stories which help to imaginatively construct Hillbrow. It is this dual process which attempts to offer some secure loci of personal belonging in an avalanche of collapsing place.

Thus, in an attempt to secure the limits of place, the novel and opening chapter titles designate the suburb of Hillbrow. The title and refrain of the novel, '*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*' is both a bi-fold gesture of problematic inclusion as the reader and Refentše are introduced to the perils and intolerance of Hillbrow and Tiragalong, and an instantiation of place, as the notion of Hillbrow is articulated for the first time. But the ironic 'welcome' of the title signals an inclusion that only materialises in Heaven. The possessive 'our' defines Hillbrow as a communal space, a definition reiterated as Hillbrow is described by its inhabitants as 'that locality of just over one square kilometre, according to official records; and according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people' (Mpe 1). Neither Refentše nor the narrator know where the actual boundaries of Hillbrow lie, and in Refentše's explorations and descriptions of the city, the limits of Hillbrow are confused. This is not due to his own confusion but rather to the arbitrary imposition of suburban limits imposed by the city authorities and the competing experience of a much larger Hillbrow, as experienced by its inhabitants. The juxtaposition of the cartographic measurement of Hillbrow with the estimation offered by the inhabitants illustrates the tension between the stories that create Hillbrow in the narrative, and the pedestrian map that is an attempt to define it in concrete terms. In the chapter following this description of

Johannesburg, the reader accompanies Refentše as he walks the streets between Hillbrow and the University of the Witwatersrand:

You cross Twist, walk past the Bible Centred Church. Caroline makes a curve just after the church and becomes the lane of Edith Cavell Street, which takes you downtown; or, more precisely, to Wolmarans at the edge of the city. Edith Cavell runs parallel to Twist. (Mpe 11)

Like grids on a map, or measured steps, the paratactic rhythm resounds with certainty, and the ease of local knowledge – a journey marked by street names and neighbourhood landmarks. The compulsive cartographic references are a reaction to the collapse of place and identity in the novel. The compulsion to walk, according to de Certeau, to map by walking, is by necessity to lack a site, yet it is also the impulse to overcome this absence. Despite this, Refentše's attempts to claim a space for himself in Hillbrow fail. It is only when he inhabits the world of the ancestors that he is able to construct a pedestrian map and a narrative of his life and death. The retelling and reinterpretation of his story from the sacred space of Heaven provides Refentše with a stable place of identification, to which he wants to and does feel a sense of belonging. Since the Heaven of the novel is imaginatively constructed and made possible through such stories, Refentše's narrative is one part of the fabrication of this sacred space.

The whole narrative is told from Heaven where the narrator tells Refentše, and later Refilwe, the story of their lives. For much of the novel, Refentše is poised between the chaos of Hillbrow and the order of Heaven. Heaven allows Refentše not only to see the errors of his life, but also the mistakes and follies of his friends and family who are still living. The 'benefit of retrospect and omniscience' (Mpe 47) that Refentše and the narrator provide draws the liminality of Heaven into the structure of the novel as the boundaries between spaces deteriorate:

As you, Refentše[...], sat in the lounge of Heaven and pondered the complex paradox of life, death and everything in between, you seemed to see, simultaneously, the vibrating panorama of Hillbrow and all its multitudinous life stories, conducting themselves in the milk, honey and bile regions of your own expanding brain. (Mpe 79)

Refentše's god-like perspective of his life and the lives of others is overwhelming – the panorama vibrates with biblical promise (milk and honey), but also with the bitter bile of urban sprawl. Refentše has moved beyond the limits of his own experience and is granted a point of view only possible in Heaven as he grapples with 'infinite fragments.' 'Your skull threatened to collapse at any moment [...] the infinite fragments combining and recombining in the containing frame of your head' (Mpe 79). Although Heaven is the only place in the novel that is permitted to maintain its boundaries, it is disconcertingly described in earthly terms as Refentše sits in the 'lounge,' the meeting area in Heaven. While Heaven is certainly a transcendent place, it is also linked in profound ways to earthly realities because it is constructed by the stories of those still living and inhabited by those recently dead. Thus Heaven is explained as an archive:

the world of our continuing existence, located in the memory and consciousness of those who live with us and after us. It is the archive that those we left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that. Continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives, as if they alone hold the real and true version. (Mpe 124)

An archive, but also an archival construction; Heaven and its inhabitants are the product of memory – of the violations, intrusions, and reconstructions of memory. Like burial mounds dug, visited, and refashioned, Heaven is the site of memory and of its making. The 'personal immortality' of the ancestors depends upon the remembrance of the living (Mbiti 82). Ancestors 'are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities,' acting as intermediaries between the living and the spirits or God (Mbiti 82). The protagonists

and the narrator of the novel inhabit Heaven, the sacred home of the ancestors. It is from this transcendent place that the narrative is told. Thus Mpe's novel locates fiction in a space marked out by African epistemologies; indeed; he resituates fiction in the sacred. The temporal strangeness of the novel, as it is told in the present tense despite both protagonists being dead, means that Heaven is present in the text from the first line, and what the reader experiences is a 'linguistic trip' through the Hillbrow of Refentše's imagining (Mpe 68).

Where Refentše once orientated himself, it is now the narrator who positions Refentše in the narrative and in Hillbrow. The identity of the narrator is unknown; however, the persistent second person narration which simultaneously distances and engages the reader enacts the complexity of Refentše's search for belonging (Clarkson 452). This persistent double positioning of the protagonist throughout the novel means that he is constantly orientated and then reoriented as the narrator tells his story, a representation of Refentše's search for a sense of identification in an unfamiliar place. While this cartographic intention can be seen as a form of resistance to the isolation and alienation that Refentše feels, it is only in Heaven that his intention is fulfilled. For once he is in Heaven and granted an omniscient perspective, Refentše is able to map not only the streets of Hillbrow, but the networks of his fellow migrants, the connections between places and people, and therefore better able to understand his position within it all. Refentše's experience of this omniscient perspective, and its focalisation through the narrator, incorporates the sacred into the text. He now inhabits the world of the ancestors, the world of Heaven, and it is from here that he is able to construct a pedestrian map and a narrative of his life and death. The retelling and reinterpretation of his story from the sacred space of Heaven provides Refentše with a stable place of identification, to which he wants to and does feel a sense of belonging. Since the Heaven of the novel is imaginatively constructed and made possible through such stories, Refentše's narrative is one part of the making of this sacred space.

### **Burial grounds and the Yoruba aegis in Cole's New York**

The heavenly narrative perspective of Mpe's novel is brought down to earth in Teju Cole's *Open City*. While Refentše is already dead and in Heaven as the narrator tells his story, Julius is alive, telling his own. However, Julius's experience is still punctuated by the presence of the dead, entombed in burial grounds beneath the streets of New York.

Although Julius's daily walks propel the narrative and draw ritual behaviour into the text, it is in the incorporation of buried slaves and the sacred (Yoruba epistemologies) that Julius's resignification of the city is cemented.

The novel begins in a similar way to Mpe's by offering a cartographic description of the city. Julius, the protagonist, describes the location of his home and the ease with which he can access the metropolis around him. He orientates himself and his apartment within the urban landscape, relating how he began walking the city streets each evening: 'These walks, a counterpoint to my busy days at the hospital, steadily lengthened, taking me farther and farther afield each time [...] In this way, at the beginning of the final year of my psychiatry fellowship, New York City worked itself into my life at walking pace' (Cole, *Open* 3). In a nod to Fanon's profession, Julius spends his days completing a fellowship in psychiatry, and his personal time working himself into the city, and the city into his life. The novel explores the question of migrant belonging, as Julius walks the streets of New York seeking a site of identification. He even goes as far as Brussels in search of his maternal grandmother, but returns to New York, and its streets, unsuccessful in this quest.

The novel begins 'And so,' as if the reader were entering into an ongoing conversation about the city and its navigability. In a similar way to the ostensibly inclusive welcome of Mpe's novel, the title of *Open City* seems to indicate an ease of access, a city that is open to all: a promise of inclusion that Julius seeks but struggles to find. New York

‘worked itself into his life’; it becomes a part of the way he identifies himself, a place where he feels a significant connection. Yet his first experiences of the streets of New York are not welcoming but overwhelming: ‘At first, I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness [...] as though someone had shattered the calm of a *silent private chapel* with the blare of a TV set [...] but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything it intensified them’ (Cole, *Open* 6) (emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

Julius purposefully chooses to walk in the busier streets in order to come into contact with more people, to see more faces, but instead of the sense of connection, he is made to feel even more isolated by his anonymity within the pedestrian horde. Initially he experiences the streets as a sacrilegious cacophony of sound, the mass of pedestrians walking the city with him, all alone in their solitude, the privacy of their mobility, but when he is in the subway ‘standing close to strangers, jostling them and being jostled by them for space and breathing room, all of us enacting unacknowledged traumas, the solitude intensified’ (Cole, *Open* 7).

Against the feeling of isolation, solitude and alienation, Julius takes to walking the streets of New York, each time a little farther or following a different route, extending his own knowledge and experience of the city. Julius is obsessive about orientating and mapping his location; the novel is littered with accounts which position Julius within the topos of the city: ‘Wall Street, from where I stood on the corner of William Street’ (Cole, *Open* 47). Julius’s descriptions of his location are persistent and precise: ‘I walked north on Sixth Avenue as far as Fifty-ninth Street’ and ‘From the intersection of 172nd Street,

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<sup>4</sup> There are aspects of the Baudelaire-Benjamin *flâneur* in the intellectualised and ‘cultured’ self-awareness of Cole’s narrator-protagonist, and certainly in his devotion to the labyrinthine city. Benjamin writes: ‘The city is the realisation of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the *flâneur*, without knowing it, devotes himself’ (Benjamin 429). Indeed, Julius’s feelings of isolation in the New York crowd echo the masses as they appear in Baudelaire, as ‘the newest drug for the solitary,’ and ‘the newest and most inscrutable labyrinth. Through them, previously unknown chthonic traits are imprinted on the image of the city’ (Benjamin 446). Yet Julius is distinct from the secular European *flâneur*. His trajectory through the labyrinthine city is marked by his personal and political sensitivity to its racist, exploitative history, by his search for an open church, and by his incorporation of Yoruba deities into the urban environment.

the George Washington Bridge came into view for the first time' (Cole, *Open* 115, 234). It is their repetition throughout the text that conveys the almost compulsive need to pinpoint his place in New York. Further, like the peripatetic ritual found in the form and narrative of *Portrait with Keys*, Julius repeatedly walks and maps his location in order to imagine how things ought to be in constant tension with how things are. His walking is ritual: an assertion of his vital and temporary presence in the city.

Julius's ritualised conceptualisation of an alternative urban environment depends upon his knowledge of the city and its history. He locates himself within the city by locating the city within his knowledge of its history: 'The circuit from the old Customs House to Wall Street, and then down to South Street Seaport, was a distance of less than a mile. The Customs House faced Bowling Green, which had been used in the seventeenth century for the executions of paupers and slaves' (Cole, *Open* 164). A space once used for executions is now a park, where an immigrant community gathers. Aware of the history of this public park, Julius is able to situate his experience as an immigrant within the present moment of the park, but still to locate that knowledge within the broader history of the area. The dead are ever-present in Julius's descriptions. Returning from Brussels and seeing New York from the window of the aeroplane, he experiences a 'mental transposition,' in which 'the plane was a coffin, and the city below was a vast graveyard with white marble and stone blocks of various heights and sizes' (Cole, *Open* 150). In this moment the metropolis below appears to Julius as a graveyard, the buildings transfigured into gravestones. The plane carrying Julius is now a coffin, conveying him to the graveyard below. This imagery reflects Julius's knowledge that the city is built upon the dead bodies of those buried beneath the streets he walks and the buildings he passes. The mental transposition reminds Julius of his own mortality and historical links to the exploitative physical labour that built the city. He does not experience this constant somatic history as morbid or threatening; rather, it is essential to how he imagines his urban presence.

On another of his evening walks Julius comes upon a monument, the inscription on which identifies it as ‘a memorial for the site of an African burial ground’ (Cole, *Open* 220). In the landscape of New York, Julius almost overlooks this unassuming historical marker, yet his awareness of it establishes, once again, the affecting presence of the dead in Julius’s experience of New York.

The tiny plot was what had been set aside now to indicate the spot, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the site had been large, some six acres, as far north as present-day Duane Street, and as far south as City Hall Park. Along Chambers Street and in the park itself, human remains were still routinely uncovered. But most of the burial ground was now under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government. (Cole, *Open* 220)

Setting the limits of the burial ground along the boundaries of contemporary streets transposes the burial ground, and the bodies of long-dead Africans, into the present-day – disinterring the US’s history of slavery. Julius incorporates these sacred burial grounds into his urban environment, positioning the sacred as a vital aspect of his personal construction of the city. The history of New York is literally beneath Julius’s feet and the feet of millions of other pedestrians. In the section which follows this extract Julius fills in some of the missing information about the burial sites located under the streets. It is clear that he did not have this information when he first came upon the monument, and that as he has gathered knowledge of the streets through his walking, he has also collected histories of the sites he has walked through or passed. It is not sufficient for him to map the streets, he must also create a narrative of their history, and in doing so re-invest the city with its dead, with whom he identifies, as an African and as a migrant. It is the combination of walking and re-inscribing which gradually permits Julius to feel as if he has a fulcrum of identification within the metropolis.

Towards the end of the novel Julius describes the abnormal processes of mourning that he perceives in the aftermath of September 11 2001. In Freudian terms, a normal pattern of mourning culminates when the dead is 'assimilated into the living' through introjection; in New York, however, Julius observes that the dead have come to 'occupy only a part of the one who has survived' and from this 'sectioned off' area the dead are able to haunt the living (Cole, *Open* 208–209). Julius sees the line that has been drawn around this trauma; he is attuned to the incomplete processes of mourning and the 'anxiety' that has 'cloaked the city.' While Julius is not haunted by his experience of the dead in New York, he registers and is affected nonetheless. The distinction between anxiety and disrupted mourning are indicative of his slight remove from this environment and the unique ways in which he chooses to formulate his presence in it.

Julius's re-casting of the city emerges from an African epistemology similar to that in Mpe. While Mpe's training as a Ngaka suggests that the world imagined in his fiction is perhaps more closely related to his own worldview, his writing of coextensive spheres is also a successful narrative strategy. Similarly, Cole's references to the Yoruba aegis are as much a literary and mythical allusion as they are a way of interpreting what Julius sees before him in the streets of New York.

In *The African Imagination*, F. Abiola Irele shows that the literary use of epistemological and mythical sources is a complex endeavour. With reference to Soyinka's use of the Yoruba deity Ogun 'as an organising symbol,' Irele asks whether Ogun functions as a 'master trope, a formal category of his system of images, or an authentic agency of the writer's imaginative grasp of the world, constituting, therefore, a principle of conduct in that world?' (Irele, *Imagination* 60). Mpe's narrative construction falls into the last category, while Cole's functions more as a formal category or inquiry. Growing up in Nigeria, Julius is familiar with the pantheon of Yoruba deities. He employs them now as he reimagines New York as the site of his belonging by investing this Western, urban city with the presence of Olodumare 'the owner of the Spirit,' 'the owner of life,' the Supreme

Being who created the other deities in the Yoruba aegis, and Obatala, ‘the creator of man’ (Idowu 39; Beier 14). On his way home one evening Julius is discomfited by the sight of a crippled man and then a blind man, one after the other. He draws from what is familiar and finds an explanation in the Yoruba belief system. I quote at some length here because Julius’s matter-of-fact explanation of the interaction between the two gods undercuts the mysticism of the account, coolly positioning this mythical account in a ‘secular’ city.

I got the idea that some of the things I was seeing around me were under the aegis of Obatala, the demiurge charged by Olodumare with the formation of humans from clay. Obatala did well at the task until he started drinking. As he drank more and more, he became inebriated, and began to fashion damaged human beings. The Yoruba believe that in this drunken state he made dwarfs, cripples, people missing limbs, and those burdened with debilitating illness. Olodumare had to reclaim the role he had delegated and finish the creation of humankind himself and, as a result, people who suffer from physical infirmities identify themselves as worshipers of Obatala. This is an interesting relationship with a god, one not of affection or praise but of antagonism. (Cole, *Open* 25)

The Yoruba worldview of Julius’s childhood in Nigeria is transferred to New York’s urban landscape, insistently locating the transcendental Yoruba episteme in Julius’s immediate world. The rationality of Obatala’s drunken creation of ‘mis-formed’ or damaged humans comes to him in this moment, as a conceptual thread linking Nigeria and New York. Not quite the collapsing of space experienced in Mpe’s novel, the passage draws the Yoruba pantheon and their myths of creation into the New York train station to explain the presence of these two figures, and Julius’s sense of unease at seeing them.

The presence of Olodumare appears once again in Central Park when Julius finds a cloud of bees. ‘Above a boxwood hedge, a swarm of hovering bees reminded me of certain

Yoruba epithets for Olodumare, the supreme deity: he who turns blood into children, who sits in the sky like a cloud of bees' (Cole, *Open* 42). Julius sits beneath this 'cloud of bees,' he feels he is led there as if by an 'invisible hand,' and is overcome, his breath rising, as he watches the bees hover and leave. In this slightly incongruous moment of spiritual ecstasy in Central Park and in the instance in the train station, Julius is appeased by his integration of Yoruba deities into his surroundings. It enables him to create a sense of meaning and order by interpreting his urban environment in perceptual terms determined by his Nigerian experience.

Inclusions of Yoruba deities in the narrative are particularly interesting when set alongside the enclosed religious space of churches in New York. On two separate evening walks Julius comes to churches which are closed. It is not that the doors to the churches are closed; there is simply no point of entry through the walled and fenced perimeter: 'Going around Rector Street, I came into Trinity Place, where an ancient wall hemmed the church in and the air was cold and smelled of the sea' (Cole, *Open* 49). 'There were chains on all the gates, and I could find neither a way into the building nor anyone to help me' (Cole, *Open* 51). Churches, which are meant to be open to those in need, and those seeking solace, have not only been closed, but enclosed. Julius cannot get to the doors of the churches; rather, he is stopped at the perimeter. Instead, his only option is to walk on Rector Street and Trinity Place. The street names ironically signify what he seeks, but it is constantly denied by the urban geography which makes manifest the secularist divisions between religious and public space. A sacred site which was once open to the public is now separated from that domain by a fence and chains which deter those with unsavoury intentions but it also leaves Julius feeling he has 'no place in which to pray' for his patient who has been ill (Cole, *Open* 51). Julius's wish to pray in a church and his use of Yoruba deities are two sides of his attempt to overcome his feeling of non-belonging by finding the transcendental and the numinous in his urban environment. The spaces which might offer

access to the transcendent are enclosed; Julius is denied access and is left feeling alienated by the inaccessibility of the traditional religious spaces in New York.

In an illustrative inversion, Julius describes Wall Street station as if it were a grand cathedral: 'The vaults strengthened this impression, and what came to mind was the florid Gothic style of England' (Cole, *Open* 46). It is 'not that the station replicated the stone tracery of such churches. It evoked the effect, rather, by means of its finely checkered or woven surface, a gigantic assemblage of white.' The enclosure of traditional religious sites forces Julius to find the numinous in other places. He notices the cathedral-like architecture of a station – an incomplete transfer of the structures of a liminal spiritual place onto this public secular space of transfer and mobility.

Julius's transposition of Yoruba deities into his conception of New York's urban landscape seems to be the singular successful attempt at creating a sense of meaningful order, and is a significant part of his conceptual, historical and pedestrian mapping of this city. At all other turns his attempts crash against the boundaries of the postcolonial globalised city. In a city that is twice defamiliarised, once by his immigrant status and once as the public spaces of the city close to him or alter, Julius's pedestrian mapping resonates strongly as an act of incorporation: of his incorporating the streets, and therefore selected parts of the city, into his life and thus forcing his inclusion into those spaces as well.

His walks begin shortly after he witnesses a migration of birds from his window. As a migrant himself he identifies with these birds – with the possibilities and pitfalls of migration; flight and death. Like the birds he inhabits the city, but also exists at a distance from it. The image of birds is reiterated at the close of the novel when Julius recounts how birds seem unable to navigate around the Statue of Liberty, especially in a storm. While the birds manage to avoid the skyscrapers just beyond the monument they cannot dodge it, and thousands of birds die as they strike this symbol of American hope and the promise of possibility (Cole, *Open* 258–9). The Statue of Liberty was not only a beacon to ships in the night, it is or was emblematic of the 'American dream' for those immigrating to her shores.

While Julius's immigration to the US is on the whole successful, he cannot help but acknowledge the dangers of the welcome that the statue might represent.

The imagery of birds migrating and meeting their deaths which bookends the narrative is symbolic of the human migration Julius is a part of. The flight and ease of movement that Julius perceives as he watches the birds, speaks to his own migration but also to the transience and rootlessness that he feels. He does not experience an ease of movement unless he is walking; in these moments he has immediate access to the city he is imaginatively mapping and resignifying. It is not surprising then that he begins his evening walks after seeing the migrating birds. His walking exploration is an attempt to know the city better in order to establish his presence and assert his belonging within the urban chaos.

This pursuit is not without its dangers. On one of his walks, he is mugged. Julius passes two young black men on his walk home on 124th Street. He passes them, astonished by their use of profanities and does not think about them again until he comes upon them later. At first he becomes anxious when he sees 'movement in the shadows up ahead,' but relaxes when he recognises the men from before (Cole, *Open* 211). On their previous meeting a glance was exchanged: 'These glances were exchanged between black men all over the city every minute of the day, a quick solidarity worked into the weave of each man's mundane pursuits' (Cole, *Open* 212). This glance is not repeated when they meet again, and as they pass him, Julius feels a blow from behind. The men with whom he had only moments before acknowledged some common difficulty in the otherwise anonymous life in the city, demonstrate that this glance of solidarity does not protect him from crime and violence. Once Julius is on the ground they continue to beat and kick him, an 'ease to their violence,' intended not to kill, but to humiliate him (Cole, *Open* 212–13). This instance of overt violence and intrusion serves to further isolate and alienate Julius from the urban environment and the relations it creates. His experience of time during the attack is 'fragmented, torn into incoherent tufts,' as is his sense of security (Cole, *Open* 212).

After the attackers have left, and Julius has pulled himself to sit on the curb, a man passes him, not noticing or caring to notice that he had been beaten (Cole, *Open* 214).

There is no good Samaritan to help him to his feet and while he makes a police report there is little hope of an arrest – and so Julius retreats back to his apartment, to the safety and seclusion of his personal space. This incident comes towards the end of the novel, after so many of his explorations, and after his return from Brussels. While it does not deter him or undermine his assertions of belonging, it does bring home the realisation that he can only know the city in fragments, and that to be caught on its uneven edges is always a risk.

While Gevisser, Vladislavić, Cole and Mpe all respond to the ontological vulnerability confronted in the globalised, postcolonial city, the resignification of the urban environment is most successful in the pedestrian narratives that include ritual and sacred epistemologies. The inclusion of driving in this perspective serves to further highlight the unevenness of mobility and how assertions of subjective belonging differ. The imminent sacred is still available in narratives that take the automobile as their primary setting: Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* (2012) for example. Yet as a mode of access to the multiplicity of the streets, pedestrian perspectives are more intimate and immediate, as seen in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Open City*, and *Portrait with Keys*. In these pedestrian texts, where the pace of walking and access to the city allows the incorporation of sacred knowledge and the time for ritualised behaviour, the protagonists are able to work themselves and the sacred into the city. Julius is obsessive about articulating his physical orientation, laying claim to the streets as he incorporates the Yoruba deities and his own knowledge into a point of identification with the city itself. For Refentše the careful cartographic map he constructs of Hillbrow from the sacred home of the ancestors is an attempt to stabilise the fragmentation of place and, in doing so, find a firm point of personal identification and belonging. The narrator of *Portrait with Keys* leverages his socio-historical knowledge of

Johannesburg to sustain his belonging, and it is in the structure of Vladislavić's work that we find the interpretive and performative labour of the imminent sacred. Conceptualised in these terms, it is apparent that the literary resignification of the streets as a site of identity formation and affirmation is supported by the incorporation of the sacred and processes of sacralisation within these urban environments.

**Farm: Cultivation, containment and excess in J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*  
and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat***

‘The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*.’ (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 95)

‘I want to see my ground, I want to see my land, even if only in outline, place names on a level surface. I want to send my eyes voyaging.’ (van Niekerk 49)

Taken from J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1998) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006), these epigraphs are an indication of a current that runs through South African literature broadly, and specifically through the *plaasroman* genre. A fascination with land, landscape and belonging is a common concern in South African literature where contestations over land and land rights draw from colonial and anti-colonial histories and register latent political, ideological and existential anxieties. As Coetzee explains in *White Writing*, the characteristics of the *plaasroman* seek to validate settler land claims and rest on the hope that the land can be owned and controlled. This representation of the farm is distinctly postcolonial and patriarchal, with Coetzee and van Niekerk rewriting the *plaasroman* in order to bring out the latent tensions in the genre. My interest is in the tamed, farmed landscape which *resists* being fully known, and by doing so entices the love, reverence and fear of the spectator. Coetzee and van Niekerk's critique of the genre envisages an alternative relationship between the subject and the land. The subject is freed from the aesthetic and ideological limitations of settler-colonial representations; instead, Coetzee and van Niekerk *resacralise* the land. This resacralisation is both transcendence and resistance to the sublime experience of the landscape. I argue that John and Milla, the

novels' respective protagonists, experience a profound existential and psychological ambivalence towards the land, which is both untameable, unrepresentable and yet owned, demarcated and cultivated. The land is resacralised in an attempt to relieve this sublime contradiction.

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) registers similar tensions, as does Justin Cartwright's less pleasing *White Lightning* (2002). Eben Venter's *Trencherman* (2008) portrays a gothic version of this on a contaminated, post-apocalyptic farm. The angst of settler colonialism is a common theme in all of this work, as it is in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Perhaps the most famous South African farm novel in English, this antipastoral and feminist novel also makes reference to crossdressing and Christian scepticism. In the unbounded barren vastness of Schreiner's Karoo farm Waldo's appeals to a Christian God go unanswered and his existential curiosity leads him to an alternative spiritual relation to the land: 'the earth ceases for us to be a weltering chaos. We walk in the great hall of life, looking up and around reverentially. [...] The life that throbs in us is a pulsation from it; too mighty for our comprehension' (Schreiner 133). Van Niekerk and Coetzee respond to legacies of Schreiner's work. This is apparent not only in van Niekerk's feminist revisions of the plaasroman, but also in the animist spirituality demonstrated by Agaat which is akin to Waldo's apprehension of nature's sublimity. Further, Dominic Head argues that Coetzee's 'own novels extend Schreiner's antipastoral vision' (Head 60). In addition to *Boyhood* and *Summertime* (2009), Coetzee's preoccupation with the farm is present in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Disgrace* (1999) and the short story 'Nietverloren' (2009). The sacred is an especially important dimension of Michael K's relationship to the land and his 'life as a cultivator' (Coetzee, *Michael K* 59). The doctor's narration in section two ascribes sacred meaning to Michael's garden, similar to Waldo's spiritual description: 'Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of

the desert and produces the food of life [...] It is another name for the only place where you belong' (Coetzee, *Michael K* 166). The doctor invokes the sacred and refers to Michael's garden as though it were the garden of paradise. Yet the abundance of this conjured image contradicts the ascetic spirituality which defines Michael's bond to the dry land and his beloved pumpkins. There is an austere purity to Michael's self-assumed role as cultivator. He is neither owner nor settler; there is no claim to the land. His garden is as impermanent as he is: its small furrows and delicate produce vulnerable against the barren Karoo landscape.

John and Milla's bonds with their farms are distinct from Michael's. John, the child protagonist of *Boyhood*, loves a farm he will not inherit or cultivate. In the final days of her life, Milla, the narrator-protagonist of *Agaat*, reasserts and resacralises her claim to a farm which was her birthright. While representations of land are legion in South African cultural production, especially in English and Afrikaans, *Boyhood* and *Agaat* are particularly interesting in their constellation of the sacred, the sublime and belonging.<sup>1</sup> To begin, I contextualise the *plaasroman* and discuss four articulations of the sublime: the Kantian versus the Burckean, Bill Ashcroft's horizontal sublime, and what Mark Mathuray calls the stalled sublime. My analysis begins with *Boyhood* and closes with *Agaat*.

### **Belonging – 'the secret and sacred word'**

*Boyhood* is a difficult confessional "autobiography." As Derek Attridge notes, the text is at once immediate and intimate as it is told in the present tense, and dissociative and distancing by virtue of the third person narration (Attridge 81). Despite the carefully crafted narrative distance, John's love and reverence for the farm are clear and palpable.

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<sup>1</sup> In the South African context the settler, the subject of this discussion, is white, so the relationship to land I am articulating is particular to a white South African experience. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid dictate that black South Africans have a different relation to land, a relation based in part on forced removals and dispossession.

For him the farm is sacred, and he ritualises his devotion to it. His experience of the farm is akin to the sublime – overwhelmed and absorbed as he is by the stillness and excess of the landscape: ‘the silence that descends heavy as a cloud [...] and always the landscape enclosing them’ (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 90). John feels the farm is where he belongs, and yet he has no claim to the land:

He must go to the farm because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more [...] Yet since as far back as he can remember this love has had an edge of pain. He may visit the farm but he will never live there. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 79)

The farm John loves belongs to his father’s family, some of whom still reside and work on the farm, so he is allowed there, welcomed, but only as a guest. His father’s eldest brother will inherit the farm; it will never pass into John’s possession. And yet when he is on the farm he is filled with his love for it, even as it exemplifies his marginality and non-belonging, a feeling that echoes through the narration.

Nonetheless, John traces his heritage to the farms held by his paternal and maternal relations, such that the history he constructs for himself comes directly from the idea and the space of the farm: ‘Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance’ (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 22). The origin myth of his becoming does not rest with a deity, as one might expect; rather, the farm takes the place of the creator. It is the farm which gives John substance, made not from clay but from the arid stillness of its land. John’s rootedness on the farm allows him to locate himself in the material world and within his lineage. This history, this myth of belonging, begins with the dead. John has ancestral ties to the farm; part of his family is buried here:

Whatever dies here dies firmly and finally: its flesh is picked off by the ants, its bones are bleached by the sun, and that is that. Yet

among these graves he treads nervously. From the earth comes a deep silence, so deep that it could almost be a hum. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 97)

On the farm death is final; human life is finite and more precious for being so. There is no mention of a spiritual afterlife, only the natural order of the land which takes the material of the dead into itself. Like Hägglund's living on, which is the foundation of secular faith, '[t]o survive is never to be absolutely present; it is to remain after a past that is no longer and to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet' (Hägglund, *Atheism* 1). Thus the 'relation to loss is inscribed in the very experience of living on,' and as 'a consequence, you have to take your experience on *faith*, relying on memories of a past that you cannot know with certainty and on expectations of a future that you cannot predict' (Hägglund, *Life* 5). John's care for the farm and his relation to it are based on a secular 'faith in the value of what can be lost' (Hägglund, *Life* 7). While his ancestral connection to the farm gives him a sense of belonging, the limits of those finite lives deny him a proprietary claim. But his love for the farm has another transcendent dimension: the harsh sun of the Karoo, the insects which eat the flesh of the dead, the personification of the land that seems to vibrate with its silence – this is the landscape that cannot be owned, tamed or fully known. The dead die finally but the hum of the land is eternal; it is the land itself which is sacred, not the bones buried within it.

The Karoo is a vast semi-arid region in the heart of South Africa. The area is not defined by particular geographical boundaries but by the climate, which produces very little rain except the occasional flash flood after a thunderstorm. There is sufficient ground water to maintain small settlements and sheep farming, which is what the region is known for. Like other semi-deserts, the Karoo is marked by the beauty of its contrasts, the clear blue horizon against the olive and ochre of the dry landscape, the extremes of hot and cold, and the harsh stillness.

These features are depicted in *Boyhood*; the silence and mystery of the farm that absorb John and his imagination. John knows his family's history on the farm, he understands his place within it, yet the uncontained excess of the landscape is transcendent: 'There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love' (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 91). Though he strives to know intimately the thing that he loves, the complexity and rich detail of Voëlfontein exceed John's imagination. John is drawn to this. He seeks out a connection with the farm and intuits a kind of power, the hum which excites and scares him:

But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its own way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be there. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 96)

For John the farm itself is eternal. The ancestral claims to the land, the built structures that proclaim that dominion will age and fall away, while the farm remains 'from eternity to eternity.' John's description of the farm subverts the anthropocentric features of the *plaasroman*: reorienting the 'lineal consciousness' of the genre (Coetzee, *White* 109). In the logic of this kind of narrative the farmer sees himself as the temporary overseer of 'permanent family land,' as the intermediary between 'past and future generations' which are manifest in agricultural and biological inscriptions on the land (Wenzel, 'Pastoral' 94). Jennifer Wenzel explains that *Boyhood* is distinguished from this genre because '[t]he farm will outlast the boy and his family; his uncle is not a transitory steward of family land [...] but merely a temporary sojourner on land that belongs merely to itself' (Wenzel, 'Pastoral' 108). The farm is not merely personified, it is described in transcendent terms: it gives John substance, it reaches into eternity, it hums with a sacred stillness, and is infinite

beyond measure, beyond John's understanding. John's experience of the farm is therefore of the sacred and the sublime. He understands the fragility of the farm's ancestral and agricultural structures. He is both awed and gratified by the spatial and imaginative excess of the farm, where he finds belonging rather than ownership.

The same is true when he returns to the farm as an adult, having recently returned from living in the United States. In *Summertime*, the third instalment of Coetzee's fictionalised memoir, the details of John's life are recounted by five people who have known him. When, after a long absence, John returns to the farm Margot, John's cousin, recounts his reunion with the family and Voëlfontein. Among their relatives, John and Margot are bound together by their love for the Karoo: 'It touches one's soul, this landscape. They are in the minority, a tiny minority, the two of them, of souls that are stirred by these great, desolate expanses' (Coetzee, *Summertime* 129). It is the abundance of space along the horizon, the pallet of scorched colours stretching out as far as the eye can see that resonates so profoundly with John and Margot. Margot acknowledges, as John does that this is 'a sacred space' (Coetzee, *Summertime* 134). For both of them the farm and the Karoo are experienced as excess: 'That is what they share above all: not just a love of this farm, this *kontrei*, this Karoo, but an understanding that goes with the love, an understanding that love can be too much' (Coetzee, *Summertime* 134). For Margot, as for John, the farm is defined by its perceptual, emotional and imaginative excess. Words and gestures are insufficient to convey this experience. When Margot asks John if he is pleased to have come back to South Africa and the farm his answer is incomplete. But Margot understands because she feels the same: "I don't know," he replies "Of course, in the midst of this" – he does not gesture, but she knows what he means: this sky, this space, the vast silence enclosing them' (Coetzee, *Summertime* 132–33). In *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, as child and adult, John experiences the 'great, desolate' landscape of the Karoo as sublime. Here, Coetzee establishes an alternative relation between the subject and the land.

John and Margot are attuned to the sublime and the sacred in the landscape. They do not feel a proprietary claim to the land; instead, they feel it is them who belong to the farm, their sacred space.

Coetzee has led the way in *White Writing* in articulating the relation between the subject and the land in Foucauldian terms, by stressing the power invested in representation and ownership. While this is certainly one aspect of the *plaasroman*, what has been consistently overlooked in criticism to date is the subtle presence of metaphysical concerns, the yearning for the numinous and the performance of the sacred. This is evinced as *Boyhood* continues to reorder the power relations of the *plaasroman*, since the single word that John uses to understand this relationship is ‘*belong*’:

The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*. What he really believes but does not utter, what he keeps to himself for fear that the spell will end, is a different form of the word: *I belong to the farm*. (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 95–96)

The simple change in preposition alters the truth of his connection. It is not he who exerts power or authority over the farm; rather, the farm exerts considerable influence over him, felt not as an imposition, but as a comfort. The farm is a place of love; a place that John cannot own or fully know. It is at once inhabited and beyond reach – and it is this mystery – belonging and the yearning for belonging that signify the farm for John. He even attempts to incorporate a performative aspect into this relationship: ‘Once, out in the veld far from the house, he bends down and rubs his palms in the dust as if washing them. It is ritual. He is making up a ritual’ (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 96). Like water, which would cleanse his hands, wash away impurity, the profane and the mundane, John immerses his hands in the dust of the farm, drawing the farm onto his body, ritualising his love. Through this ritual John imagines the perfection of the farm in conscious tension with the realities of his

relationship to it. For John the farm is already sacred. The bipartite performative and hermeneutical processes of his ritual further contribute to his signification and imminent sacralisation of the land. Ritualisation, as discussed in chapter two, is the process, of always contingent, classification and differentiation. John's ritual allows him to draw an aspect of the sacred vastness of the farm literally within his grasp; he is able, even if only for the duration of the ritual, to contain his sublime experience of the Karoo landscape.

Like the map, the farm is a way of delimiting, organising and categorising space. The untameable expanse of landscape is circumscribed by the exterior borders of the farm and specialisation of land within. Fences facilitate, and are representative of, the subject's control of the land; the attempt, not only to contain the land but to cultivate it and utilise its resources. The fence is the pastoral symbol of the subject's possession of the land. And yet the unknowable and uncontrollable remains and with it, the promise of the sublime. The farm is an attempt to tame the sublime by controlling the landscape. Reason cannot order the sublime, but it can sacralise (categorise, differentiate and resignify) a relation between the subject and land.

### **The sublime: Four forms**

Vanessa Ryan argues that eighteenth-century discussions of the sublime were not primarily concerned with art; rather, they were concerned with 'how a particular experience of being moved impacts the self' (Ryan 265). Thus in the most famous discussions of the sublime by Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, 'the sublime most fully explores the question of how we make sense of our experience: "Why and how does this object move me?"' (Ryan 265). Kant holds that the sublime 'is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind,' just as Burke proposes that the sublime 'is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling' (Kant 147; Burke I, sect. 7). Burke and Kant agree that the sublime is interior to the subject; it is a feeling of awe, terror, or astonishment

generated by the subject's perception of a magnitude which defies the capabilities of the imagination. This is, however, where their accounts of the sublime diverge. In Kant's explanation, the feeling of 'displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination,' is met by 'a simultaneously awakened pleasure,' which lies in the capacity of reason to judge the 'inadequacy' of the imagination (Kant 141). While Kant maintains that the 'sublime allows us to intuit our rational capacity, Burke's physiological version of the sublime involves a critique of reason' (Ryan 266). Burke holds that the sublime 'is a question not of the subject's increasing self-awareness but of the subject's sense of limitation and of the ultimate value of that experience within a social and ethical context' (Ryan 266). For Burke, 'the power of the sublime' is not a product of reason; the sublime 'anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force,' resulting in 'astonishment' in its 'highest degree' (Burke II, sect. 1). The Burkean sublime, close to what is found in *Boyhood* and *Agaat*, is a feeling of astonishment that results from the subject's exposure to the limits of the imagination and reason. The sublime is the consequence of the subject being confronted by that which is unrepresentable, unknowable – the numinous.

As John says, 'There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein' (Coetzee, *Boyhood* 91). This statement conveys delight at the mystery that the farm maintains, and displeasure at being unable to know the farm completely. John uses his intellect and emotional distance to reason his way through most of his social and familial relationships; his relationship with the farm, however, is founded on the emotional peaks and troughs he experiences when his reason is insufficient to take in the whole of the farm, and what remains, in his case, is love.

John's bond with the farm is richly affective. He cannot assert his ownership of the land; rather, in a critical inversion, he conceives of himself as belonging to the farm. The subversion of established power relations in *Boyhood* is elaborated upon in Coetzee's *White Writing*. Here he explores the discourse of power operative in representations of the

South African landscape. Searching for an appropriate language with which to know Africa, South African writers and artists displace the European vertical sublime in favour of one true to the particularities of the local setting.

Coetzee relates the work of Shaftsbury and Edmund Burke in establishing the sublime as an aesthetic category (Coetzee, *White* 51–52). He defines the sublime as ‘spectacle’ that ‘exceeds all measure (all comparison), is in this sense absolute’ (Coetzee, *White* 54). The aesthetic sublime seeks to formulate the viewer’s experience of awe, fear and wonder when beholding the incomprehensible vastness of nature. As seen in Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) the visual vocabulary of this European, vertical version of the sublime includes the high peaks reaching into the heavens; the lone male figure resolute on a rocky outcrop beholding the magnificence of forest and mountain below him.

Coetzee notes that the landscape paintings of the South African artist J. H. Peirneef draw from this European tradition of the sublime, but for the most part, the vertical sublime does not find a foothold in South African art. Coetzee attributes this to the absence of a ‘tradition of landscape painting or writing [...] among the Dutch at the Cape,’ or among the English travelling in the area at the time (Coetzee, *White* 55). Though a fascination with the sublime does not emerge in any significant way, an interest in the pastoral does. The problem of the pastoral novel, Coetzee notes, is that ‘The landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it’ (Coetzee, *White* 7). Coetzee is interested primarily in the capacity of language to capture and depict the landscape within particular ideological, historical and cultural terms. He suggests, for instance, that the descriptive language of British poets alienates the South African landscape by privileging comparisons between the rolling, verdant plains of their homeland and the perceived ‘wildness’ of an ‘uncontrollable’ Africa. By contrast Coetzee

vividly depicts John's connection to Voëlfontein – a child's true connection to the land not yet augmented by social convention.

Coetzee contends that Afrikaans is a local language capable of grappling with the particularities of the South African landscape – able to tease out the tensions between landscape and landed property. The *plaasroman* represents these concerns; the genre is a justification of the Afrikaner right to the land, to own property, to tame landscape – a validation and valorisation of an agrarian, settler existence. Through a critical analysis of the works of C. M. van der Heever and others, Coetzee sets out what we might understand to be the characteristics of the *plaasroman*, as distinct from the European pastoral novel. The broad characteristics of the *plaasroman* are the representation of an empty wilderness; the relationship between the farmer and land that is created when the farmer sheds blood and sweat as he captures the land from the chaos and disorder of the wilderness. It is through this dedicated labour that the farmer comes to be a husband and protector of the land; this connection is morally and culturally preferable to a purchase of land. The burial of family members on the land assures a family heritage and claim, while the promise of a son who will inherit the farm provides longevity into the future. All of this is ideologically founded on the invisibility of black labour. In these themes, individually and taken together, the validation of the Afrikaner claim to land is clear. The Afrikaner farmer has a special relationship with the land: his containment of the landscape, his taming of the empty wilderness, and his harnessing of its fertile potential figure the farmer as the king of his domain. This imagined and strongly asserted claim is present in the *plaasroman*, but so too is the continued mystery and irrepressible power of the land. The land maintains its power as it resists cultivations and representation. The demarcation of boundaries and utility is merely an attempt to tame and contain the expanse of space – a perpetual attempt, continually failing – since the sublime persists in the moment when the imagination falters and comprehension fails. The collapse of the settler imagination before an unfamiliar form

of plenitude in the ‘uncentered’ geomorphic space of the colony generates anxiety that echoes the unease of beholding the sublime, before the moment of transcendence.

This relationship to land and the representation of it appear to be a particularly South African, Afrikaner idiom. While there are certainly other countries with a similar proprietary colonial and literary history, the South African context and the *plaasroman* are unique to their historic and cultural context.<sup>2</sup> That being said, there are valuable links to be made between Australian literary and artistic engagements with landscape and the white settler. In *Intimate Horizons* Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden make a convincing argument for the presence of the sacred in Australian postcolonial literature. Tracing a creative trajectory between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden propose that the European vertical sublime is altered, reimagined and ‘re-placed’ in Australian art and fiction (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 4). The writers they discuss share a common formulation of the sacred ‘imagined as earthed, embodied, humbled, local, demotic, ordinary and proximate’; ‘it is also the sacred of interrelationship – an ethics which is open not just to the agency of human ego but also to the other, to the land, and to that which is not human’ (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 2–3). In the Australian ‘literary and artistic imagination’ ‘the numinous, the unrepresentable [*sic*], the awesome’ was projected onto ‘the incomprehensible vastness of Australian space,’ and the ‘sacred provided a grammar with which to ‘consider that vastness and that difference’ (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 4). For this critical trio, the grammar provided by the sacred ‘is the language of the sublime’ (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 4). The vocabulary used to articulate the contradictory feelings of the sublime is a language of the sacred: a language of awe and order. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden argue that in Australian literary

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<sup>2</sup> Cuthbeth Tagwirei and Leon de Kock offer an analysis of similar issues particular to the Zimbabwean context in their article ‘From “bush” to “farm”’: Emplacement and Displacement in Contemporary White Zimbabwean Narratives.’ Here they discuss the places of white belonging in Zimbabwean literature before and after the land reform. They trace the changing valence of ‘bush’ and ‘farm’ as white protagonists seek and establish places of belonging through what they term emplacement.

production the sacred and the sublime are 're-placed' as they are invested with and transformed by the particularity of place rather than the universal or transcendent. They hold that the beginnings of 'an aesthetically conceived sacred [...] occurred in a transformation of the sublime' (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 5). Whereas the Romantic notion of the sublime is focused on 'wild natural spaces' and a vertical relation between the subject and Subject, this is disrupted in the Australian setting where the excess of space is not only vertical but also horizontal. With the vocabulary provided by the sacred this incomprehensible vastness (the sublime) is brought within the taxonomic capabilities of language. The two particular features of the Australian sacred drawn out in *Intimate Horizons* are the quotidian and the located nature of the sacred, one expression of which is the horizontal sublime. The horizontal sublime is experienced as alien and intimidating and yet still available for 'intimate engagement (it can "charm" and its subdued innerness, waywardness and exuberance become familiar)' (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 9). While the materiality of the landscape makes the sacred imminent, the unrepresentable excess of space places the numinous in that vastness along the horizon.

The experience of the excess of space along the line of the horizon is uncanny: 'its "not-at-home-ness" is a direct consequence of sublime plenitude of space rather than its "form" or location. The horizon traces the "edge" where *no-thing* – the unrepresentable [*sic*] Subject – appears' (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden 11). Thus, similar to John's experience of Voëlfontein, the horizontal sublime is experienced not as a result of being in awe of one grand place, but rather as the experience of the incomprehension of too much unlimited space: a void of understanding which is taken up by the numinous and the unknowable. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden are careful to locate the Australian literary sacred outside of the 'hermeneutic of received religion or systematic theology,'

figuring it instead as an '(aesthetic) moment "beyond meaning"' (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredde 11).

The Australian sacred which is positioned between the sacredness of ordinary life and material, and the sublime of expansive space, clearly resonates with John's experience of his beloved Voëlfontein, and with Milla's experience of her farm, as we shall see. The sublime conceptualised as an aesthetic moment when meaning is disrupted corresponds usefully to the notion of the sublime I have found in *Boyhood* and *Agaat*. Further, the theorisation of the sacred as proximate, earthed and demotic coincides with my construction of the imminent sacred. The horizontal sublime that theorises a settler anxiety and awe of unlimited space can be found in these and other South African texts. The idea of the horizontal sublime is profitable to my reading of *Boyhood* and *Agaat* since it suggests that such an experience can be affirmative and transformative, founded as it is on localised and personalised relations to space.

Mark Mathuray provides an alternative reading. In discussing the sacred in African literature, Mathuray picks up on a particular formulation of the sacred in Coetzee's work, what he calls the 'stalled sublime.' While the focus of his analysis is *Foe*, with references to *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I believe that a version of Mathuray's stalled sublime can be found in the *plaasroman*, and its more contemporary, self-conscious iterations. The intervention Mathuray makes is to reorient how we conceive of the mythical and religious in African literature. He claims that the idea of myth has been used 'in the elucidation of the logic of African symbolic production' when, in actuality, it is more appropriate to think of such complex ideas and practices in terms of the sacred (Mathuray 11). Mathuray holds that the sacred is such a fertile area for critical attention because of its inherent ambiguity.

The idea of the sacred also houses, often within a single term, both oppositional qualities (the profane) and at the same time charts their

reversibility and interchangeability. Most significantly, the ambivalence attached to the sacred allows us to address the social conflicts, as well as solidarities, expressed in sacred symbols, and, following on from that, insists on relating them to history and society.

(Mathuray 14)

Mathuray focuses on the sacred in the production of symbolic value in the works of Ben Okri, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. It is only in his final chapter that he turns his attention to Coetzee and the notion of the sublime (in his reading distinct from, but related to the sacred). In this chapter Mathuray investigates the 'relation between the sacred and the aesthetic category of the sublime' (Mathuray 15). He traces the development of the notion of the sacred and sublime through a number of theorists, beginning with Emile Benveniste's identification of two words which denote the sacred in Latin: *sacer* and *sanctus*. *Sanctus* indicates a person who has risen above other men because he has been attributed 'divine favour,' yet for Mathuray it is the ambiguity of *sacer*, which 'incorporates both the mythic hero and the sacrificial victim' that suggests the duality of the sacred he intends to develop. The ambivalence of the sacred, that it indicates and incorporates not only the sanctified, but also the profane and the dreadful, is supported by Mary Douglas, Mircea Eliade, Maurice Blanchot, Emile Durkheim and by Victor W. Turner who find ambivalence in the categorisation of the symbolic order that grounds ritual process.

Appreciating the ambivalence of the sacred, which indicates itself and its opposite, Mathuray comes to the conclusion that the sacred and the sublime are not only connected, but that the sacred and the sublime move towards a similar point, the numinous, and inspire a related affect: delight, horror and the continuously deferred moment of transcendence. It is at the moment just before resolution, before meaning and before

transcendence that the stalled sublime takes shape. Mathuray describes the stalled sublime as:

a post-Kantian, post-Romantic rupture and stalling of the sublime movement. This suspension prevents the intervention of the transcendent. The refusal to resolve the breakdown of discourse/meaning means that Coetzee's novels rest uneasily on the moment of defeat. There is no intervention of grace, no resolution of the breakdown in meaning. (Mathuray 142)

If the sublime moment is an experience of transcendence, however fleeting, when meaning is revealed and order created, then the sublime moment offers access to the numinous. Such ecstatic comfort is not available to Coetzee's characters or his readers. The moment when meaning might become whole never arrives; 'Terror does not transform into tranquil superiority' (Mathuray 142). In Coetzee's

texts we are confronted not with a failed dialectic (the disarticulation between self and other) but rather with a failed epiphany. The principal subjective dimension of the stalled sublime is alienation – the metaphysical homelessness of the modern subject and the solitary individual estranged from history are its correlatives. (Mathuray 142)

The stalled sublime does not permit an instant of catharsis, or ease; rather, the movement of the sublime is halted at the point of confusion, where meaning is forever deferred. The prime example of this in *Foe*, the Coetzee novel Mathuray focuses on, is Susan Barton's incomprehension of Friday's tonguelessness. The meaning of Friday as a subject is beyond what Susan can imagine, and her deep confusion about him is never resolved. The stalling of the moment of transcendence can also be found in *Agaat* in Milla's seemingly impossible attempts to find peace as she tries to comprehend her relationship with the farm

and resolve the psychological damage she has inflicted upon Agaat. Echoing Susan's fascination with Friday's mouth, Milla dreams about Agaat's tongue: 'Dream I pull out her tongue like an aerial, one section, two, three, longer and longer' (van Niekerk 402). Milla also relates the experience of Agaat cleaning Milla's teeth: 'It gives her an opportunity to get into my mouth, under my tongue, behind my teeth' (van Niekerk 51). The horror, fear and awe of this phase of the sublime movement persist and the character and reader are left confused and alienated from their surroundings and the text.

Using Thomas Weiskel's division of the sublime experience into three distinct 'mental moments,' Mathuray is able to identify where the sublime begins and stalls in Coetzee (Mathuray 143). In the initial phase the 'mind and object, signifier and signified, are in a determinate relationship' (Mathuray 144). In the second phase the association between the mind and what it sees falters, such as when the reader is met with a 'text that exceeds comprehension by having too many signifiers or signifieds' (Mathuray 143-44). The third and final phase is the moment of transcendence, when we are allowed to glimpse our 'destiny as moral beings' and the 'possibility of meaning is rescued' (Mathuray 144). The sublime moment when the spectator experiences awe and delight, is phase two. Read through Mathuray's stalled sublime this is where the sublime is interrupted in Coetzee's work. Mathuray's argument is profitable for reading the sublime and the sacred in *Agaat* where, with the exception of Milla's death, the final movement of the sublime is stalled before meaning is rescued or transcendence achieved.

In the hands of Coetzee and van Niekerk, the postcolonial *plaasroman* reveals how the cultivation of the farm forces the sublimity of African space into landscape. That is to say, landscape is made to bear the signification of the farm as a way of overriding the manifold signifieds of the land. This attempt to create order and meaning by taming nature and the sublime moment cannot be successful, these novels show, because what is sought is not the transcendent, but control over a landscape that continually resists. In this, both

the excess of space of the horizontal sublime and the stalled sublime are relevant. The central tension of the sublime as it is depicted in *Boyhood* and *Agaat* is the strain between the transience of the farm (its built structures and human organisation), and the permanence of the land itself. Imaginatively and materially the land cannot fully satisfy the subject's desire for belonging and plenitude; instead, the geomorphic vastness serves to emphasise the subject's impermanence, which is experienced as both aesthetic and existential anxiety. The farm cuts across the dualism of the finite subject and extended ecological time, because it is the site of alteration and altercation where John and Milla intervene in the landscape. For both protagonists the farm is a place of belonging; a place which is simultaneously the foundation of their origin stories and a reminder of their finite influence and presence. As narratives which subvert the traditional power structures of the *plaasroman*, *Agaat* and *Boyhood* set up a relation of mutual belonging. John belongs to farm; the farm does not belong to him but he feels a metaphysical and spiritual connection to the land. Milla feels this connection too, and it mediates her approach to the land as owner and cultivator. John and Milla resacralise the land in order to make sense of this experience. John performs this through his sand ritual and, as we shall see, Milla does this through her mapping of the farm. In each case sacralisation enables the protagonist to conceptualise their relation to the farm, to its contained, cultivated spaces, but also to the unrepresentable excesses which figure the landscape.

### **Agaat: Boundaries and bodies against the sublime**

In *Agaat*, translated from the Afrikaans by Michiel Heyns, these pathways of interconnection are represented through Milla's conflation of her body and the farm; her desperate desire to see the maps of her property before she dies; her profound love for the land of the farm; and her agricultural instruction of Agaat, who also develops an extraordinary relationship with the farm. The temporal perspective of *Agaat* shifts between

1996 (the present-day), which is taken up by Milla's monologue from her paralysed body; the journal entries which span the late 1950s and 1960s, and finally Milla's recollections of her troubled marriage, her son, Agaat and the farm itself, narrated in the second person. Additionally there are the italicised sections which depict Milla's stream of consciousness anxieties and reminiscences. With the exception of the epilogue and prologue, which are narrated by Milla's son Jakkie, the entirety of the novel is focalised through Milla. In an act of ventriloquism which displays the power inversion in their relationship, Agaat reads Milla's journal entries aloud to Milla, forcing her to listen to her own past mistreatment of Agaat. These episodes and the entirety of the novel appear as an attempt to make sense of what has occurred in Milla and Agaat's fraught relationship.

Like John, Milla has ancestral ties to farms on her mother's and father's side of the family. The farm she inherits when she marries Jak de Wet, Grootmoedersdrift (Grandmother's Ford or Passion), 'had been her ancestral land for generations back in her mother's line' (van Niekerk 23; Stobie 59). While she knows a great deal about farming, Jak turns out to be a great disappointment. It is Agaat, who Milla 'made and unmade and remade,' as she was adopted daughter, then servant and finally carer, with whom Milla develops a substantial, if complicated and uneven partnership (van Niekerk 181). In the end, as Milla progresses through the debilitating stages of motor neurone disease, the power balance of her relationship with Agaat shifts in Agaat's favour. Cheryl Stobie argues that through biblical allusion to the story of Ruth and Naomi in Milla and Agaat's bond, van Niekerk figures the moral difficulties of relations of alterity to the 'homeless, the abused and reviled' (Stobie 69). Through this biblical allusion and others, Stobie analyses van Niekerk's 'representation of religion as an unethical practice used in consolidating a narrowly nationalist Afrikaner ideology, her representation of good and evil, and her representation of alternative forms of spirituality syncretically associated with Christianity' (Stobie 59). Stobie's argument is convincing. There certainly is a (sometimes subversive)

biblical undercurrent to much of the narrative, and I return to Stobie's syncretic reading of Agaat's ritual; nevertheless, her analysis of the text's 'spirituality' does not extend to representations of the sublime nor does it adequately engage with Milla and Agaat's sacralisation of the land.

The trajectory of the novel and the development of the plot depend upon two narrative arcs. The first is the uncovering of the secret of Agaat's origin, and the second is Milla's inexorable proximity to her own death. The narrative is the meditation of a dying woman moving closer to death and possibly transcendence. The distinct narrative sections of the novel can be positioned within Weiskel's movement of the sublime. The searching clarity of the journal entries expresses the first movement, the determinate relationship between Milla and her world. The second movement, when meaning becomes unstable arise from Milla's sometimes illusory perspective from her paralysed body and the abstract italicised sections.

In the earliest stages of Milla's hopes for the farm she imagines it as a preordained paradise that she and Jak will create together, that he will help her to 'make a garden,' 'like paradise' (van Niekerk 27). By the time Milla's bedridden, paralysed self wants to see the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, the optimism of the fantasy farm is gone; instead, she is desperate to see the written down, cartographic representation of her domain, the figures, lines, colours and markings. The preoccupation with maps is established in Jakkie's epilogue to the novel.

Five farms in a fertile basin, nestling against the foothills of the Langeberg, the range running all the way from Worcester to eternity where it turns into the Outeniqua. Grootmoedersdrift, the middle farm, between Frambooskop to the east and The Glen to the west. There. From the middlest, inbetweenest place [...] Perhaps that was what delivered me from completedness. (van Niekerk 5)

Returned from Canada at Agaat's insistence, Jakkie comes home to his mother's deathbed. Jakkie relates the map as a way of orientating himself and the reader within the geography and history of the farm. Jakkie does not experience the farm as a space of comfort; instead, he describes the farm as the 'inbetweenest,' as a place that withholds 'completedness.' Jakkie captures the farm and the characters in a liminal space where wholeness is denied, where meaning is sought but not found.

The opening of the main section of the novel is indicative of this, as it begins with Milla's frustration at not being able to communicate with Agaat. When Agaat was first brought to the farm as a young child she refused to speak; instead she and Milla would communicate with gestures and eye signals, restored to use now as Milla lies entombed in her body. The role reversal is pregnant with all that has been unsaid between them, for now Milla is entirely vulnerable to and dependent upon Agaat, not only as her nurse, but as her interlocutor and mouthpiece. The novel begins searching for understanding and comprehension, and the words which could, but ultimately do not confer meaning, reason or sense.

Agaat's recitation of Milla's journals is, on the one hand, her way of torturing Milla by making her confront the missteps and mistakes she made with Jak, Jakkie, the farm and herself. On the other hand, it is a way for Agaat to learn more about her origins and how she came to be where she is. Milla's terrible treatment of Agaat is revealed as the plot unfolds, but throughout, Milla and Agaat are engaged in a perverse, passive-aggressive dance of penance and punishment – the narrative can be read as Milla's final confession. Agaat remains opaque to Milla; she is out of Milla's interpretive reach, just as Friday is out of Susan's imaginative reach. To know her completeness is impossible, and yet she is always present, Milla's other half, easing her towards death with all the skills Milla has taught her through the farm: 'It will be the best-managed death in history' (van Niekerk 15).

The farm is the presence between Milla and Agaat. In Agaat's case, the knowledge she has gained from running the farm has enabled her to care for Milla. In Milla's case, the farm, and its workings are how she retains some purchase on her body: 'I feel around inside me. There's still vegetation, there's water, there's soil' (van Niekerk 14).

Furthermore, Milla uses her intimate knowledge of agricultural procedures of the farm to encourage the muscles of her body to respond to once basic commands,

I feel the porridge ooze down both sides of my tongue before I'm ready for it. I close my eyes and picture the sluice in the irrigation furrow, the water damming up, a hand pulling out the locking-peg and lifting the plate in its grooves, letting through the water, and lowering it again, so that it bumps shut in the track of the sluice frame below. That is how I try to activate my swallowing. (van Niekerk 35)

The muscles of Milla's body, the very force that enabled Milla to shape the farm, no longer obey her. The physical processes that happened independently of Milla's attention now require her total concentration. In order to encourage the workings of her body Milla imagines a familiar agricultural process; she imagines water moving through the irrigation furrow and the sluice that controls the flow, a process she knows and understands. The sluice replaces her gullet as the part of the body that controls the movement of porridge down her throat. Control is the motivation behind Milla's conflation of the function of her body with the thing she feels she is expert at ordering and controlling – the farm. When she speaks of her body the sentences are contracted, yet when she speaks of the movement of water over the farm the sentence elongates and flows like the water she describes.

Structural liquidity is reserved for the phrases that describe the associated movement of the water, while the contained, stationary sentences echo the state of her body. Milla substitutes her failing bodily processes for familiar and reliable agricultural mechanisms.

She collapses the conceptual boundaries between her body and the farm again when she needs to encourage her body to urinate. This time instead of the control needed to swallow porridge without choking, Milla thinks of the material fluidity of water to make her own body pass water.

I think of the water map. I think of the underground water-chambers in the mountain, of the veins branching from them, of the springs in the kloofs, of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices. I think of the drift when it's in flood, the foaming mass of water, the drift in the rain, when the drops drip silver ringlets on the dark water. (van Niekerk 69)

She thinks about the water map of Grootmoedersdrift, a map that details all the water sources on the farm, and those outside of its boundaries. Milla considers the liquid which connects the land of the farm to the geomorphic expanse beyond it: the 'underground water-chambers of the mountain' to the drift in flood. Every water source is a part of the same water table that feeds the farm. Milla thinks of them all, transporting herself and the reader beyond the confines of her room and the boundaries of the farm to the great mountains which neighbour it. It is not merely that Milla overrides the bodily constraints which divide her body from the farm; she also seems to disrupt the fixity of the mind as she transports her imagination on to the farm to walk the fences and follow the flow of water. As Agaat gives her daily updates about the farm Milla is still body-bound and so mental transposition and imagination allow her to access the continuing life of the farm. Her imminent finitude, the looming end of her own life is perceived in starker relief because of its direct comparison to the undaunted agricultural mechanisms which regulate the land.

Moreover Milla believes that Agaat understands her and her illness in agricultural terms: 'She'll want to judge me in as many categories as she can think up, that's certain.

Sphincter pressure, melting-point, share suction, sowing density, rust resistance, siphon level, tailwind, drainage slope, crimp index, inverse proportion, *Sphaeropsis malorum*, core rot' (van Niekerk 17). Milla conflates the nomenclature of farming with her own symptoms, each an illustrative and instructive comparison. While she envisages these to be Agaat's estimation of her body, as it might be, it is still Milla's echo as she taught Agaat everything she knows about farming. Milla transfers these terms to the pastoral care of her own body, imposing upon Agaat a vocabulary with which to speak of and deal with her illness – detailed, precise, and ordered.

What becomes evident each time Milla uses the farm as a metaphor for her body is that it is not an equal comparison. Milla makes continuous recourse to the farm, a space she has created, knows and can control, in order to encourage her body to function despite its spreading paralysis. Moreover, the mental transpositions which Milla undertakes to escape her claustrophobic body destabilise the boundaries between Milla's subjectivity and the farm. The control Milla seeks when she conflates her body with the farm is an attempt to regulate the movement towards death and transcendence, a movement gestured to each time Milla transfers her mind to the farm beyond her room. These moments fall between Weiskel's first and second movements of the sublime, somewhere between understanding and the unsteadiness of reality, between Milla's wish to regulate her death through her control of the farm and her willingness to send her mind and soul wandering in that bounded area.

Agaat manages Milla's death and she attends to her duties with a sense of purpose instilled in her by her prone mistress – she cares for her physical form with the same fastidiousness she would the farm. The contentious moments between Agaat and immobilised Milla have less to do with the maintenance of Milla's body, than they do with the difficulties of communication. The principle frustration that motivates Milla's days is her desire to see the maps of her farm and her inability to communicate this to Agaat. With each failed attempt to convey her request to see the 'schematic representation' of her

world, her need becomes more vital (van Niekerk 50). In the passage that follows, Milla's persistence is overshadowed only by the reverence of her description.

It will take time to make clear that the downstroke is the beginning of an m and that m stands for map, that I want to see the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, the maps of my region, of my place. Fixed points, veritable places, the co-ordinates of my land between the Korenlandrivier and the Buffeljagsrivier [...] I want to hook my eye to the little blue vein with the red bracket that marks the crossing [...] Places to clamp myself to, a space outside these chambered systems of retribution, something on which to graft my imagination, my memories, an incision, a notch, an oculation leading away from these sterile planes. (van Niekerk 34)

On the one hand, Milla wants tangible evidence of her claim to the land. She wants to bear witness to the figures, words and marks that signify ownership. She wants to look upon the maps not merely as a sign of her ownership, but also as a sign of her lineage, and as a material representation of her place in the world – the coordinates of longitude and latitude which demarcate her belonging. Metaphysically, Milla wants to see the maps so that she can transport herself out of the confines of her body and her room, onto the farm itself. She wants to walk along the fence which defines the limit of her influence, to be everywhere, to see everything; she wants to experience once again all the intimate ways that she knows the bounded land of the farm, rather than the excess of space beyond. 'I shall walk along a boundary fence and count the little carcasses strung up by the butcher bird' (van Niekerk 34). The farm is an anchor holding Milla's love and attention in place.

Her reminiscences of the farm tether her attention to its past, as her body deteriorates and she comes ever closer to death. The transcendent experience she imagines of transporting herself onto the farm is mirrored in the structure of the paragraph from 'the

figures and words in clear print' to 'I shall walk,' the first in a litany of 'I shall's,' the scene shifts from the symbols on the map to the actual objects on the farm. The perspective of the description shifts from the vertical, cartographic perspective to a grounded, somatic perspective which affirms Milla's embodied presence on the farm. 'Oculation,' Heyns's translation of 'okulering,' connotes the materiality of Milla's vision, hooking her eye to the lines of the map, a bodily seeing. Yet, the repetition of the emphatic future tense verb 'shall' suggests Milla's longing and desperation, a future that will never be. Thus the extract takes on an eerily disembodied vision, a transcendent moment when Milla is both present and not present on the farm to which she has 'clamped' her physical and psychological state. Imminent sacralisation is operative here in Milla's performative and hermeneutic engagement with the maps and the space of the farm; through the maps she sacralises the farm.

Twice Milla locates herself in the liminal space 'between heaven and earth,' wondering what is real, believing that the maps will help her to ground herself (van Niekerk 37; 69). 'What is fixed and where? What real?' Milla asks into the vastness of the untameable landscape and into the unknowable absence of death (van Niekerk 69). Mirroring the feeling of alienation and familiarity elicited by the horizontal sublime, Milla resorts to a cartographic liturgy in an always, already failed attempt to contain the sublime and the sacred: 'If only I could once again see the places marked on the map, the red brackets denoting gates, cattle-grids, sluices, the red is-equal-to sign of the bridge over the drift' (van Niekerk 69). A liturgy repeated often in the narrative, this instance locates Milla's temporary form in the timelessness of the farm. The gate over the drift: 'first and last gateway over which the livestock of Grootmoedersdrift move and will continue to move when I am gone. Sheep, cattle, cars, lorries, wire cars, mud and time. Slippery, supple, subtle, silvery time' (van Niekerk 69). The liturgy ends in sibilance: the repetition and rhythm mimicking the intangible qualities of time, just as the previous phrases trace its

objective progression. Deliberating once again on the maps, and the correspondence between the drawn figures and the material object, Milla is forced to consider that all of these apparatuses will outlive her. What remains as evidence of her existence and her relation to the land are the maps which recount in detailed perspective, scale and alteration the ordering of Milla's world and place within it: 'Maps attend lifetimes. What is an age without maps?' (van Niekerk 69).

She confronts herself with the finitude of her own lifetime. She is the temporary steward of the land of Grootmoedersdrift which she has cultivated according to her desires, but her own child will not inherit it, Agaat will. An ancestral claim to the land that will end with Milla, though the land itself will remain. Between heaven and earth, time and space, the confines of her body and the farm, Milla inhabits a liminal space between life and death. As proprietor of the land Milla has understood her value and identity in terms of the farm she has created. The maps contain and organise the landscape just as the farm delimits and tames a section of the geomorphic expanse. The maps and the farm symbolise Milla's ownership and control, but also her search for meaning through their familiar figures. Left to drift, Milla uses the maps of the farm as a way of anchoring herself against the movement towards transcendence. The sublimity of the geomorphic expanse beyond the farm and the unknowable numinous beyond death resonate with one another in Milla's imagination: 'What is fixed and where? What real?'

The maps provide Milla with some answers to her searching, existential questions. She imagines seeing the maps as a way of perceiving the totality of her 'world, so that I can see the map of Grootmoedersdrift and its boundlessness' (van Niekerk 88). Neither the farm, nor the maps which represents it are boundless, but the farm has taken on such sublime significance in Milla's mind. In a moment of Eucharistic devotion Milla envisages taking the maps of the farm into her body:

Between the land and the map I must look, up and down, far and near until I've had enough, until I'm satiated with what I have occupied here. And then they must roll it up in a tube and put on my neckbrace again like the mouth of a quiver. And I will close my eyes and prepare myself so that they can unscrew my head and allow the map to slip into my lacunae.

So that I can be filled and braced from the inside and fortified for the voyage. (van Niekerk 88)

The sacramental maps fortify Milla from within. Her bodily internalisation of the map is the internalisation of the farm. Her sacralisation of the map is her bodily sacralisation of the farm. She wants to take the sum total of the farm into her body, to fill it out, to give her deflated body structure and strength so that she might withstand the 'voyage' towards transcendence. What is most arresting about this passage is the complete erasure of the boundaries between Milla's body, the maps and the farm: 'Because without my world inside me I will contract and congeal, even more than I am now, without speech and without actions and without any purchase upon time' (van Niekerk 88). This passage eradicates the false separation between farm and nature that the maps signify. The maps are a reduction of the geomorphic expanse – depicting only what is within the proprietary boundary with the exception of water, which in its very form shows the demarcation of land to be superficial. So that when Milla takes the maps into her body she consumes the very documents that verify and validate her ownership – ingesting the thing that separates her and the farm from the unrepresentable excess of space beyond the edge of the map, beyond the fence.

Maps are central to Milla's conceptualisation of her place in the world, enabling her to transpose her mind outside of the body she no longer has any control over, onto the land

which she has cultivated for years. Milla's inclination to manage her death as she has managed the farm is her attempt to alleviate her existential anxiety by containing the sublime landscape around her. An intimate part of this process, one that is registered beautifully in the Afrikaans and English versions of the novel, are the names given to the farms and rivers in the area: 'But there is also space, cartographed, stippled, inalienable, the mountains, the valleys, the distance from A to B, laid down in place names for a century or two or three, Susverlore or Sogevonden, farms Foundlikethis or Lostlikethat' (van Niekerk 55). In the Afrikaans novel there is no need to translate the names of the farms: their melancholy longing are already 'emblems and sediment of a whole history of human habitation and cultivation' (Heyns 126). The same is true of the names of rivers which Jakkie lists so reverentially,

They were different, their names cannot tell how beautiful they were:

Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks,  
Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier,  
Korenlandrivier: rivers burgeoning, rivers without end, small rivers  
crossing; rivers redolent of dovecotes, of salt-on-Mondays, of snakes;  
rivers of the hunting of the buffalo, rivers like buttermilk, rivers  
running through fields of wheat. (van Niekerk 4)

The names of the farms and rivers indicate a cultural and linguistic specificity. In the context of the plot of the novel their translation into English is unnecessary; the names could simply record a foreign location. Yet, hoping to convey something of the cultural and aesthetic quality of the names, Heyns has chosen to translate them. He offers to the English reader what the Afrikaans reader has already experienced. There is an ambiguity, though, for the English reader who knows enough Afrikaans to get by. For this reader, 'Botrivier' and 'Riviersonderend' already resonate with a local history and geography, and so it is their richly imagistic translation, a creative iteration of all they signify, that draws a

reverential tone into the text: the repetition, the list, the litany of once wild spaces named for the visions, hopes and devastated wishes of the people who ‘found’ it. The naming of the farm is necessary to the ownership and appropriation of the land, but it is the magnification of their aesthetic quality, which is drawn out in the repetition, that the translation makes possible. In doing so, in this instance and in others, Heyns highlights the quality of van Niekerk’s language, exposing the reverence imbricated in her descriptions of the land.

This reverential tone is evident in Milla’s descriptions of her land, but particularly in her experience of Agaat’s master embroidery. Agaat has been working on the piece of embroidery since Jakkie first went to school as a young boy. The work was Agaat’s solace during her hours of loneliness, and with it she has tracked the passing of her time on Grootmoedersdrift. The description of Agaat’s creative work is, once again, focalised through Milla’s narration:

A straight inside section of the body of the rainbow. All over the cloth. The yellow of the spectrum runs off into creamy white, then pure white. The veld gradated so subtly that my eye reels, that I seek for a stay inside of me, for the blue-green of the Waenhuiskrans horizon, for yellow-green shoots of self-sown oats, water-green pineapple drink, lime peel, sunflower, orange cannas, a dust-dimmed sun over stubble field, a harvest moon blood-red, a watermelon’s flesh [...] Swift effulgences, pleats of light. (van Niekerk 183)

The expanse of the cloth is taken over by the delicate lines of coloured thread that combine to create a rainbow. Milla is able to register and locate each colour of the rainbow in the specific pallet of Grootmoedersdrift. From the colour of the horizon, to oats and the flesh of a watermelon, each colour represents a facet of Agaat’s life on the farm. Agaat has embroidered her history on the farm and her love of it onto this simple sheet of fabric. This

is the closest description of a traditional aesthetic sublime in the novel. Milla is overwhelmed by the colour, detail and emotion of what she sees before her. 'It radiates down on' her, full of shade, tint and light (van Niekerk 183). Milla's pleasure is offset by the reminder of her own limitation: 'But here is neither place nor time. It's an embroidery of nothing and nowhere [...] everything that slipped out of her grasp, Jakkie's whole childhood, replaced by this embroidered emptiness' (van Niekerk 183). Milla realises that it is a memorial to and archive of everything Agaat has lost. Like Milla's maps, Agaat's master embroidery is a symbolic and sacralising schema of Agaat's world.

Encompassing the specificity of place, the embroidery also stands outside of the place it signifies; it captures many precious moments but exists independently of them. It conveys an overabundance of emotion and personal history, an excess felt to be emptiness. The rainbow stands, as Milla does, in the liminal zone between time and place. Milla experiences this not as chaos, but as a 'Rainbow of death' (van Niekerk 184). The movement of this section of the text appears to mirror the movement of the sublime. Milla recognises the detailed artwork in all its complexity, before it is abstracted into its multitonal pallet; she is awed and overwhelmed. Milla recasts it as the 'Rainbow of death,' a synthesis of history and landscape which conveys both the profound depth of Agaat's past and the emptiness of her loss. Milla seems to find comfort and finally understanding in this declaration. It is a 'complete colour chart. The origin, the fullness, the foundation of all' (van Niekerk 184). In a moment approaching transcendence Milla feels 'Perfection, purity, order,' but Milla is unable to express it, paralysed inside her body she is incapable of sharing this moment of clear understanding with the person who seeks it just as she does (van Niekerk 184). Instead, she balks at the tardiness of this resolution. It is 'too late,' this 'completeness' is 'the wrong medicine' (van Niekerk 184). It cannot give Milla the answers she seeks, because those are still locked away inside Agaat who refuses to share them. The completeness Agaat offers through her embroidery is the wholeness of the farm and their history upon it, capturing it and drawing into the room of Milla's death. It is an

iteration, a shade of the perfection of order that Milla has sought to create on Grootmoedersdrift, an artistic containment of the land that she was never able to make material. In its material and metaphorical form the rainbow embroidery is the containment of the farm itself; it is a sacralisation of the farm that holds the sublime excess of the landscape in the tension of coloured thread. The embroidery offers the moment of sublime transcendence, of completeness, which Milla is unable to share with Agaat. While Milla approaches the transcendent, it is stalled at the boundary of her body.

The farm is the interlocutor between Milla and the geomorphic space it sits on; the farm is also the intermediary between Agaat and Milla. Agaat is an inquisitive and intelligent child, thriving under the attention and education Milla provides when she is first brought to the farm. Milla teaches Agaat with ‘four master narratives’: ‘the Bible for spiritual matters, a handbook for farmers for agricultural matters, an Afrikaans folk-song book for cultural matters, and a book on embroidery for a practical – and appropriately feminine and domestic – form of aesthetics’ (Stobie 63). Agaat’s master embroidery is a synthesis of these four texts. The book which has pride of place amongst the others is not the Bible; her sacred text is, as Rossmann and Stobie note, her ‘*Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* (Handbook for Farmers in South Africa)’ (Rossmann and Stobie 24). Agaat reads from this book, not from scripture, during the ‘intimate church service around Milla’s bed, attended by the farm labourers and their families’ (Rossmann and Stobie 24). Agaat mirrors Milla in a multitude of ways, and here too Milla’s guidance and influence is keenly felt. Milla has taught Agaat reverence for and deference to the farm above all. The farm is their sacred space, and its care a sacred rite. While it emerges from Milla’s teaching, Agaat’s belief is her own. Stobie explains that Agaat identifies as a Christian, but is also

something of an animist or pantheist. She practises a kind of nature mysticism allied to the elements, particularly fire, but also associated

with animal sacrifice and butterflies, symbolising metamorphosis.

Her form of prayer is highly individualistic: it consists of exposure of the shame of her deformed arm, a personal bloodletting, a litany of farmyard disease which stands in for Milla's condition, and a cry of love for Milla. (Stobie 65)

The origins of Agaat's mysticism lie in Milla's wonderful agricultural instruction. When Milla adopts Agaat it is clear that she has been physically and psychologically abused. She has a 'weak right hand and arm probably an ante-natal injury' (van Niekerk 399). She will not speak, eat or make eye contact until Milla has coaxed and taught her to do so. Her young body is a site of pain and torture that Milla patiently heals.

As part of this healing process Milla teaches Agaat a short dance to warm her body up in the morning. Milla calls this dance 'The Greeting of the Sun':

I demonstrate it to her, first nice and high on the toes, then stretch with one arm, then stretch with the other, one big step forward, one big step back, dip at the knees, down with the head, up with the head, good morning, o mighty king sun! (van Niekerk 404)

Milla thinks of this dance as nothing more than a little warm up exercise for Agaat, but as the years pass Agaat makes the dance her own. The explanation of the origin of the dance only comes towards the end of the novel when the secrets of Agaat's arrival at Grootmoedersdrift are revealed. On two occasions, once on the farm, and once at Witsand, Milla sees Agaat perform some kind of dance but is unable or unwilling to recognise it:

That to-do on the hill I can't figure out. Sideways & backwards knees bent foot-stamping jumping on one leg jump-jump-jump & point-point with one arm at the ground. Then the arms rigid next to the sides. Then she folded them & then stretched them out. Looked as if

she was keeping the one arm in the air with the other arm & waving.

(van Niekerk 126)

Milla cannot see the connection between the dance she taught Agaat and ritual she sees: 'Judgement? Blessing? [...] A farewell ritual?' (van Niekerk 127). First silhouetted on a Grootmoedersdrift hill against the night sky, and then in the early morning knee deep in the waves, Milla sees Agaat performing her ritual – 'explicating the horizon' (van Niekerk 263). Though the movements certainly have a particular resonance for Agaat, the meaning of the gestures remains opaque to the reader. It is the repetition of the dance, its origin and the intention Agaat puts into it which elevate it to the level of ritual, echoing John's ritual with the dust. Though Milla will not understand, it becomes obvious to the reader that Agaat has appropriated Milla's dance and transformed it into a sacred ritual.

There are resonances here to the fascinating scene in *Foe*, where Susan sees Friday row out into the sea and drop what Susan assumes are petals, onto the surface of the water. In both cases the voyeur is left unknowing. Friday's ritual is witnessed once in *Foe*, while Agaat performs hers a number of times and we know the origin of the ritual. Despite Milla's unseeing perspective it is possible to discern that the movements Agaat performs are practised, deliberate and filled with personal meaning. It is no longer the dance Milla taught her as a child, or the jerky, flailing movements of the St Vitus dance as Milla might think, but a profound ritual which connects Agaat with the land, 'explicating the horizon' – illuminating the expanse. The performance of this ritual on the beach and on a hill overlooking the farm suggests animist or pagan influences. The ritual and the beautiful rainbow embroidery demonstrate Agaat's vital connection with the farm, as does the burial shroud Agaat embroiders for Milla. This shroud is 'filled with pastoral images of birth, of generations, of farming'; it depicts 'Genesis and Grootmoedersdrift in one' (Vuuren 105; van Niekerk 564). Agaat's skilled and detailed needlework expresses her biblical, spiritual and pastoral investment in Grootmoedersdrift. From the white on white stitch of her

starched caps, to the rainbow embroidery, and finally the burial shroud, Agaat captures the vastness of the farm and the richness of its history in a complexity and perfection of stitches. Her embroidery is a cultivation of sacred order; a sacralisation of the farm that resists the overwhelming excess of the sublime landscape.

### **The land remains unrepresentable and uncontainable**

*Boyhood* and *Agaat* subvert the traditional characteristics of the *plaasroman* that Coetzee outlines in *White Writing*. Both novels engage with the material realities of the farm, but their key concerns are with the metaphysical connections between the subject and the land. Picking apart the Foucauldian power dynamics embedded in the logic of settler colonialism and agricultural economy, the protagonist of *Boyhood* has an affective rather than commercial relationship with the farm. In *Agaat* too, the once hidden presence of ‘black labour’ is foregrounded in *Agaat*. Her labour is evident in every aspect of farm life, yet she lives in the back room between the house and the labourers’ homes, inhabiting the middle ground. The novel also hinges on matrilineal, rather than patrilineal inheritance of land. Agaat and John ritualise their love for the land. John’s love is pure perhaps, since he will never own the land. Agaat and Milla love the land of Grootmoedersdrift, demonstrated not only in their actions discussed above, but also in the language of the text. Agaat will inherit the farm and for both her and Milla labour, cultivation and production are imbricated in their love for the land and for each other. In a scene of rare intimacy Agaat washes Milla’s paralysed body. Milla imagines this care as cleansing her of the dirt of the day, of the tasks they have performed innumerable times together. Each ‘soapy stroke’ making reference to their shared experience of the farm and their adoration of it:

She soaps the cloth, wrings it half dry and washes the arm with firm soapy strokes up to the armpit [...] she washes as if I’d just deboned a chicken. And between my fingers, which she straightens, and up

against the cuticles she washes as if I'd been working in the black garden soil. (van Niekerk 157)

The farm is always present between them; the constant referent in their relationship. It mediates their interactions by providing a vocabulary with which they can speak to one another. In the latter stages of the novel Milla eventually asks Agaat, through their ocular grammar, all the questions she has wanted to ask over the years. Agaat answers each probing question by explicating tangentially related agricultural procedures. She uses the farm to answer Milla's questions indirectly, keeping herself at a distance. The farm, then, is more than demarcated agricultural space, it becomes a tool that Milla and Agaat use to make sense of their world and each other. Milla uses the farm to encourage her body to function, to escape its paralysed limits, and to comprehend her mortality. The farm is the permanent metaphor in her communication with Agaat and in Agaat's care of her body. The farm is the means by which Milla brings order into her world, just as the farm is the means that Milla uses to encode her presence onto the landscape. Control of the body and control of the land through the farm are two implications of the same anxiety, the mortality of the subject metred against the unlimited, unrepresentable expanse and her own death. While Grootmoedersdrift contains an area of the wilderness in the Helderberg, an area Milla is able to cultivate, there is an uncanny sense that the land resists containment and representation.

The first example is a short extract from Milla's journal, one of many entries which register the haunting quality of the farm: 'Yard quiet but something's not right [...] I was awake just now even though I feel all the time as if I'm walking just above the ground on somebody else's farm in a dream in somebody else's head' (van Niekerk 124). Lying awake at night Milla often feels a sense of unease on the farm, that there is something out there that she does not know and cannot control. She experiences this again when the cows turn cannibalistic: 'Cows that eat skeletons. As if death itself had nutritional value' (van

Niekerk 195). The cows' consumption of bones is associated with a lack of oxygen and phosphorus in the soil. Unable to get the nourishment they need from the land, the cows begin to eat the carcasses instead. The cows indicate the precarious balance of cultivation. They further symbolise the maternal and feminine since among this herd, which was Milla's birthright from her mother, there are some expired, some cannibalistic, and some pregnant cows. Rossmann and Stobie note that Milla's horror at the scene 'marks a confrontation with the "utmost of abjection," that which erodes the boundaries between ingested and expelled, inside and outside, dead and alive: pregnant cows, erupted carcasses, drool, skeletons, a dead foetus' (Rossmann and Stobie 20). The health and productivity of the cows is correlative to the condition of the soil and the land. The cows link the cultivator to the untameable land; they are also the sign of the erosion of those boundaries.

Though this link appears repeatedly in the text, as there is often trouble with the cows, when Milla falls into a ditch during a late night walk the troubling porousness of the connection is made grotesquely clear.

You didn't see the ditch in time [...] You screamed as you tried to find a handhold against the side, but the soil was mushy and muddy and broke up into lumps under your hands [...] there was something under your feet, it gave way with a smacking sound, you sank into it up to your ankles. Something crawled against your legs. (van Niekerk 426)

Contrasted with the lyrical, first person account that describes the farm imagined from Milla's sickbed, the second person narration emphasises the tone of panic. Literally and figuratively Milla's hands simply cannot find a hold on the earth inside the ditch, even though it is the soil of the farm, her soil. The alarm Milla feels gives way to visceral horror as she realises that she is standing on and in the rotting, maggot infested carcass of a cow.

Matched only by Jakkie's birth on the Tradouw Pass, the haunted, gothic quality of this except reverberates through the text and the landscape. While the gothic anxiety of van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994) is amplified through the bodies of buried dogs and miscellaneous fragments dug up from the Benades' backyard, the sense of haunting is pervasive in this 'literature of terror' (Shear 71). Similarly, although focalised through the monstrous cannibalistic and cadaverous cows and through Agaat's witchy presence, Milla's anxiety is felt as an amorphous, intangible disturbance in the land. The land refuses conceptual capture; it resists being apprehended in purely material terms, pushing against the containment of presentation and cultivation.

In a novel which compulsively returns to the anxiety and ambivalence of death, it is not only the land which is manifold, death too becomes an excess. It is the excess then, the unimaginable excess of death and the geomorphic expanse that draw the sublime and the related, but ever deferred moment of transcendence into the novel. The movement towards transcendence stalls at the moment when the subject is met with an abundance of signifieds, the excessive detail of the farm in John's case. In Milla's case the movement towards transcendence is stalled at what the farm withholds from her, at Agaat's silence, and at her own death. There can be no moment of transcendence even as Milla moves towards death, because the text does not and cannot resolve the tension between the finite, mortal subject and the landed expanse they claim to own a part of.

This trajectory is echoed in the narrative structure. Each narrative mode seems to move towards the italicised sections which abstract and destabilise meaning. These sections are Milla's unconscious wandering thoughts, memories, reflections and anxieties which coincide and intermingle. Similar to the journal entries, which also lack punctuation, these stream of consciousness sections evoke the most intimate aspects of Milla's life.

*i don't add up on any side am wrong geometry am failed electricity  
am vapour before the sun am nothing more than particles and waves*

*my irradiated skeleton a room-divider my head in a tunnel my neck in  
a whole my leg in a bath my arms weightless groping for nothing.*

(van Niekerk 197)

The disintegration of meaning in the structure of the extract mimics the disarticulation of the body that Milla describes. As one example, taken from many, this italicised extract gestures to the dissolution of the mind and the self into nothingness, into the transcendence of death. Until the last, these sections can be read as a textual moment of the stalled sublime. Like the italicised sections in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, those in *Agaat* are suggestive of the subject's search for meaning. Structurally these sections mimic Milla's sublime experience: they are frequent, richly imagistic and tend toward abstraction and multivalence. It is the failure of the imagination and language to present the unrepresentable; the failure to successfully contain the manifold signifiers and signifieds of the landscape through agricultural and linguistic cultivation that make the subject unable to comprehend their own end. Each of these moments exist before the final movement of the sublime towards meaning, transcendence, the numinous. Neither *Boyhood* nor *Agaat* offer a resolution of the sublime. John's abounding love for the farm does not dissipate in the pages of *Boyhood*. The vast, haunted expanse of Grootmoedersdrift and the mountains beyond do not reveal their coherence to Milla. Nevertheless John and Milla's love for the farm is contained by the sacred. John's soil ritual binds him to the farm, ordering his relation to it and the world beyond. The sacredness of the farm is accessed through John's ritual of devotion.

From the first page to the last Milla's narrative is confessional. In the novel's closing pages Milla remembers her first days with Agaat on the farm, then a small, terrified child. Agaat seeks this beginning of their shared history, but Milla's words are trapped in her mind. Agaat tends to her as she dies and Milla's story closes with a final stream of consciousness section:

*where are you agaat?*

*here I am*

*a voice speaking for me a riddle where there is rest*

*a candle being lit for me in the mirror*

*my rod and my staff my whirling wheel*

*a mouth that with mine mists the glass in the valley of the shadow of  
death*

*where you go there I shall go*

*your house is my house*

*your land is my land*

*the land that the Lord thy God giveth you*

*is this the beginning now this lightness? (van Niekerk 560–61)*

In the ‘final epiphany of her death’ Milla recalls her adoration of the farm, and her claim to the land, both of which she passes on to Agaat (Stobie 66). Psalm 23 is rewritten in a syncretic inversion typical of the novel.<sup>3</sup> Agaat appears as a stygian figure guiding Milla towards death and peace. Taking David’s words of biblical comfort Agaat seems to speak from Milla’s unconscious: ‘*speaking for me a riddle where there is rest.*’ Amended to first person narration this final benediction accounts for their love and for their labour: ‘*my rod and my staff my whirling wheel.*’ Although Stobie reads this alteration as an inclusion of the feminine symbol of the spinning wheel, it also suggests the agricultural mechanisms of farming – a reference to their life-long labours. Milla’s ancestral claim to the land is ordained by God, referring to a common theme of the *plaasroman*. This is subverted, however, as the pronouns in the rest of the passage refer to Milla and Agaat; rather than Milla and a divine creator. True to the illusory, stream of conscious quality of this extract

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<sup>3</sup> “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” Psalm 23: 4 (King James version)

conceptual boundaries appear to slip. All that remains is the land, Agaat and Milla asking if this is transcendence – ‘*lightness*.’

Milla’s final words affirm this trinity: ‘in my overberg / over the bent world brooding / in my hand the hand of the small agaat’ (van Niekerk 561). Grootmoedersdrift is a metaphysical and mystical presence in Milla’s narrative. Never merely an inanimate area of earth, this piece of land brings order to Milla’s universe; it is how she understands her relation to the world and the people who inhabit it. This link, forged by Milla’s legal and ancestral claim to the property, remains tenuous since the land appears to resist Milla’s agricultural and conceptual containment. In the flatness of the arid Karoo, John’s Voëlfontein vibrates with a sacred stillness; in the verdant and mountainous region of the Overberg Milla and Agaat’s Grootmoedersdrift pulses with an animistic energy. John, Agaat and Milla conceive of their mortal limitations in relation to the transcendent permanence of the land. Alleviating some of the anxiety of this sublime encounter each sacralises their kinship with the farm: John’s sand ritual, Agaat’s dance, and Milla’s maps.

The sublime is a way of theorising the subject’s experience of the excess of space. It is a way of theorising the anxiety of the subject as they become aware of their own limited influence and mortality when met with the unrepresentable, unlimited reach of geomorphic time and space. It offers a way of reading the *plaasroman* as more than a presentation of power relations, but as an articulation of the metaphysical concerns expressed by the subject who demarcates and creates a farm within and against the untameable landscape. Sacralisation enables John, Agaat and Milla to order and perform their love and reverence for the land. The sacred does not subdue the experience of the sublime; rather it orchestrates a fleeting and incomplete epiphany of the numinous.



## Conclusion

In a 2009 interview Chris Abani admits to being ‘fascinated with the connection between ritual, religion and taboo’ (Aycock 2). Each novel in the preceding discussion echoes Abani’s fascination. In an interview Yvonne Vera states her interest in writing the stories of women and taboo into Zimbabwean historiography (Primorac, ‘Interview’ 160). Similarly Phaswane Mpe writes of xenophobia, suicide, sex and HIV/AIDS (Attree 144–45). Teju Cole tells of the difficulties of diasporic belonging and alienation from the urban environment. Ivan Vladislavić composes a narrative cartography which accounts in ritual precision for his white protagonist’s place in the streets of the ‘new’ South Africa. Marlene van Niekerk rewrites black labour into the *plaasroman*; she transcribes female stories of violation, abuse and abandonment. Van Niekerk and Coetzee portray a relation between the subject and the land mediated through and organised by the sacred. Ritual, religion, belonging, and the sacred are themes interwoven and drawn out in my analysis of these writers.

Attending to a significant lack in contemporary scholarship in African literatures I have examined how these African authors have engaged with the intersection of secular and religious (postsecular) modern experience. I have used the sacred as a sign of this interrelation and as a hermeneutic to explore these concatenations and their creative expressions. There are enduring debates around the secular and postsecular in social science fields, as well as in philosophy. Yet, with the notable exceptions of John McClure, Justin Neuman and Manav Ratti, there is a dearth of critical literary interest in this area in general, and in African literatures in particular. While Ratti finds that South Asian anglophone writers evacuate religious signification and the sacred from their texts, I have shown that Ondaatje, Abani, Vera, Cole, Mpe, Vladislavić, Coetzee and van Niekerk,

reinvest their texts with the sacred. This reading of the imminent sacred – to sacralise because what is precious is always threatened by loss – exalts in the subject’s creative and recuperative potential. The imminent sacred includes physical and metaphysical negotiations as the subject structures their environment and is structured by it in turn.

As an articulation of this dynamic and as a means of making sense of the constellations of modern experience, the imminent sacred is operative in each of the novels I discuss. Working through a genealogy of the sacred I define the imminent sacred as a consequence of sustained interpretive and performative engagement that results in a separation of the invested ‘thing’ from the contiguous mundane. The profit of Chidester and Linenthal’s definition of the sacred is their attention to its literary and narratological formations. Like ritual, the construction of the sacred relies on the protean quality of language and the constitutive power of interpretation. The sacred is polysemic and is, as such, a profitable method of reading the literary representations of the mobile junctures of postsecular and postcolonial experience. The imminent sacred makes the reader attentive to the creative and recuperative gestures of this literature as it draws from the syncretic, heterogeneous and simultaneous multiplicity of the continent and its transnational networks.

Postsecular mediations are an important vector when considering the constitutive entanglements of the postcolony. Following Talal Asad I have understood the secular to be a concept that provides a grammar with which to explore and explain the conditions of the modern world. I have perceived the ‘postsecular’ in the same terms: as a notion that furnishes a vocabulary to discuss the overlaps, conflicts and contradictions between religious and secular modes of being. The literatures analysed in this thesis offer an alternative to the telos of secular modernity by establishing a literary space where enchantment, the sacred, and sublime are essential to the postsecular entanglements of life.

Put in conversation with Chidester and Linenthal's definition of the sacred, Hägglund's theorisation of a secular faith illuminates the motivation towards imminent sacralisation. Through a close reading of mourning narratives written by Martin Luther, Saint Augustine and C. S. Lewis, Hägglund argues that investment in survival or living on cannot occur without 'faith in the value of what can be lost' (Hägglund, *Life* 7). In other words: the care, love and consideration that animate daily life emerge from the necessarily precarious and vulnerable finitude of human life. Thus, it is a faith in the value of what can and will be lost that induces imminent sacralisation. Indeed, this is the motivation behind ritual, the rituals of writing and the archive of stories Abani, Vera, Cole, Mpe, Coetzee and van Niekerk contribute to.

I have grouped these authors thematically – the body, the city, the farm – in order to extricate particular patterns of anxiety and recuperation around these sites. Vera and Abani restore the sanctity of the vulnerable and violated body through the poetics of ritual language and the writing of ritual scarification. Vladislavić, Mpe and Cole address the complexity of postcolonial urban belonging, and how, through the ritualisation of walking and the incorporation of African epistemologies, their protagonists are able to work themselves into a city sacralised by their interpretive labours. Similarly Coetzee and van Niekerk's protagonists manage the angst of settler colonialism by sacralising their relation to the farmland. The sacred is vital in each of these texts; it is present in the energetic lyricism of the writing and is operative in the protagonists' resignification of their bodies and their environments.

While I have focused on a selection of contemporary African writers, a natural extension of this project would be a comparative analysis of fiction emerging from other postcolonial regions where the intercessions of faith, politics and economics contribute to literatures resistant to a neoliberal or secular teleology. While this would expand the geo-cultural

range of my analysis, it would, more pointedly, permit further investigation into the syncretic epistemologies and cosmologies of world literature. Thus, there is one more text I want to include in this discussion: Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), set in present-day Los Angeles. Not only does the novel bring together the major concerns of this thesis: the sacred, the body, and the subject's assertions of belonging; it is also where Abani stitches together black diasporic and Hispanic epistemologies. Black, the novel's protagonist, is the son of a catholic Salvadorian mother and an atheist Igbo father, and he is fascinated by the Virgin of Guadalupe. The Virgin is the patron saint of Mexico and a symbol of migratory and transnational political spirituality. In the origin myth the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to Juan Diego, an Aztec convert to Christianity, requesting that a shrine be built on the site in her honour (Wolf 34). In East Los Angeles where Black resides '[t]he Virgin was important' to Hispanic residents, 'Not only as a symbol of the adopted religion of Catholicism, but because she was a brown virgin who had appeared to a brown saint, Juan Diego. She was also a symbol of justice, of a political spirituality' (Abani, *Virgin* 41). Black's interest in the Virgin is not purely religious, although being mistaken for her seems to give him access to the transcendent.<sup>1</sup> Rather, Black is caught up in the idea that the Virgin may or may not be a vision of him. Black's body is where the boundaries of himself and the Virgin of Guadalupe blur, and the site where the limits of an Igbo curse are negotiated. Thus the mundane and sublime dimensions of the Virgin are vital in Abani's construction of a postsecular globalised narrative.

Black is a mural artist, rarely paid for his work. He is in his late thirties and while a Californian local, Black is the product of immigrant parents one of whom is devout, the other an atheist. One of Black's recollections of his father succinctly registers the binary logic of secularism, as articulated in the introduction. His father says: "Don't believe your mother when she talks about God, son. God is a superstition. The truth is we make our own

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<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Stobie explores the postcolonial and transgender aspects of Black's fascination of the Virgin in her article 'Indecent Theology, Trans-theology, and the Transgendered Madonna in Chris Abani's "The Virgin of Flames",' but does not explore the postsecular implications of the novel.

God, and this is mine: science. Something you can trust, something that doesn't need faith" (Abani, *Virgin* 47). For Black's father, Frank, God is nothing but a superstition, so he makes his own god of science and is devout in his faith. In contrast, Black's mother descends into religious hysteria after Frank's departure and her spiritual education of Black is more like abuse than the practice of the faithful. In the figures of Black's parents Abani sets up the dichotomy of modern life: secular and religious, science and belief. Yet in this text, as in those discussed in previous chapters, Abani is concerned with the affective currents that flow beneath the simplicity of these dichotomies, and *The Virgin of Flames* is keenly attuned to the postsecular negotiations of globalised urban life. Even his father, a man of science, is superstitious when it comes to the well-being of his son.

Frank leaves when Black is seven and is killed fighting in Vietnam. Upon his death a letter is sent to Black, but he does not read it until he is fifteen and his mother has died. In the letter Frank writes that he will confess one truth and one lie. The lie is that he only ever believed in science; he says that he has 'always believed in forces other than science' (Abani, *Virgin* 164). The truth he confesses to his son is that 'our family has a curse, an evil spirit that kills all male offspring before they are six. So we have always hidden our sons, dressing them as girls until their seventh birthday' (Abani, *Virgin* 164). Black says that he has no memory of this until he reads the letter and sees the enclosed photograph of his younger self wearing a dress. Before this revelation Black has consciously dressed in his mother's clothing, and now he wears the wedding dress he stole from his friend Iggy. The only proof Black has of this experience is the photograph that Frank carried in his breast pocket near his 'heart [...] as good as praying' (Abani, *Virgin* 164). Now Black wears this photograph in a plastic pouch around his neck as his own talisman. Despite Frank's secular claims his 'superstitions' remain to inform Black's identity in the years of his early development. Like Ike, Ndibe's protagonist, who lives a seemingly secular life until the god Ngene intervenes, Abani's novel figures postsecular identities inextricably

informed by an acknowledgement that enlightenment rationality cannot sufficiently account for the experience of these subjects of globalised modernity. The novels discussed in this thesis register this insufficiency, and as I have shown, they each depict an alternative existential mode conversant with their local, global and transnational contexts. The distinctive profit of Abani, Ndibe, and Mpe's novels is their explicit representation of these concerns, which are more implicitly figured in the other novels.

There is no linear narrative of the secular or religious in Abani's work; instead, these concepts are presented dialogically – surfacing haphazardly and always in conversation. Thus, for Abani, Black's body is inscribed by the postsecular: he is attired against malicious spirits, made to kneel on rice while he says penance for earthly pleasures, and wearing a wedding dress he is mistaken for the Virgin of Guadalupe. Religion, pain, pleasure and identity are mediated through Black's body, as they are too on the bodies of Vera's heroines, and My Luck and Abigail. 'All religion is negotiated on the body,' Abani says, 'abstinence, celibacy, ritual sacrifice, delayed sacrifice' (Aycock 3). In Abani's fiction it is not only religion that is 'negotiated on the body'; it is also memory, history and finitude, as seen in his two novellas. The body is the site of intersection and negotiation in Abani's work, but the same is true of bodies in Vera's novels, of Mila's body in *Agaat*, and John's profound awareness of his own physical and ancestral limitations in *Boyhood*. In all of these texts subjective and physical vulnerability is marked on and measured by the body, and it is precisely this precariousness that motivates ritualisation and sacralisation. This dynamic of the imminent sacred is played out in the meter of this passage and its vacillation between pleasure and pain, body and ritual, exposure and care:

Pain.

Kneeling on the shards of broken glass from the tumbler he knocked over in that long ago. Kneeling for the penance of his mother's devotion.

Pleasure.

*Yes, my Jesus of the Heart of Flames, yes, I love you and renounce  
the world and my pleasure for sin,* Black intoned in that long ago, all  
the while flogging the Bishop, so to speak.

Pain.

A finger held too long over the flame of a votive candle, while the  
other hand counted out the slope of the spell in the hard of wood,  
stroking, *Hail Mary full of grace.*

Pleasure. (Abani, *Virgin* 64)

In the construction of this extract the seesaw momentum of 'Pleasure' and 'Pain' is echoed in the shift between religious and mundane, even profane, imagery in the linking sentences. The imminent sacred is present in the uneasy coupling of the holy and the quotidian: kneeling on 'shards of broken glass from the tumbler' Black performs his mother's rituals of penance. Black renounces the sins of desire, touching himself as he does so. He burns his flesh on a votive candle while praying for absolution. Self-harm, punishment, ritual and faith operate together as Black disciplines and sacralises his corporeal form. Like My Luck and Abigail's bodily inscriptions, Black's entanglement of pleasure and religious pain is a demonstration of his groping for a sense of self – the tangible signs of religious observance warring with physical sensation. His existential ambivalence extends beyond his own body to his desire for another: Sweet Girl.

Sweet Girl is the object of Black's desire and obsession. She is an exotic dancer and she is also a man. Black is physically attracted to Sweet Girl. He is also drawn by the performance and fluidity of crossdressing, but is unable to reach climax when he is with her. He is still compelled by a force he cannot explain to dress as a woman, and specifically in the wedding dress. His fascination with and attraction to Sweet Girl's body, is his shame and revulsion at his own. After seeing Sweet Girl, Black retreats to the altar

he has built in the corner of the spaceship. Black built the spaceship: a 'squat metal blimp-like shape [...] tethered by a forty-foot rusting metal pole' to the roof of Iggy's store (Abani, *Virgin* 36–37). The spaceship was Black's 'desire, in a sense, to become a thing of his own making. With an Igbo father and a Salvadorian mother, Black never felt he was much of either' (Abani, *Virgin* 37). Black goes through 'several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe' (Abani, *Virgin* 37). The construction of the spaceship and wearing the wedding dress are ritualistic performances that allow Black to imagine the way things ought to be in tension with how they actually are, they allow him to 'become a thing of his own making.' And it is to this sacred space, the spaceship housing his personal altar that Black comes to seek absolution:

Black knelt before the candle against which an icon of the Lady  
leaned drunkenly next to the little dog. A rosary dangled from his  
hand and his lips moved silently as he rolled each bead intently,  
squeezing the last drop of faith from it before moving on to the next.  
The shadow of his hand and the rosary on the wall was a fist-headed  
snake swallowing an endless string of prey. It was always the same.  
Whenever he went to see Sweet Girl, he came home and did penance.  
Penance to wash the pleasure from his soul, because in his mind,  
pleasure was a sin, but a sin he loved. (Abani, *Virgin* 69)

As if the object of the rosary held in itself the materials of faith, something to be extracted and exhausted, Black 'squeezes' each precious drop, desperate for the faith that will absolve him of his desire and shame. In the depiction of this Catholic ritual Abani uses the imagery of a snake eating an 'endless string of prey' that suggests Ouroboros: the symbol of a snake eating its own tail that has resonances in Egyptian, Greek and Indian mythology. In Judeo-Christian terms, the snake refers to the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden,

the moment of the first sin and the fall of man. Black thinks he is fallen: living in alternating states of sin and penance. While the endless string of prey suggests gluttony rather than survival, the Ouroboros symbolises the cyclical nature of life and death, destruction and rebirth. With this singular image Abani expands the possible readings of this scene. It is not only a Catholic ritual; it is also a culturally polyglot performance of faith and contrition. Black's altar reaffirms this in the simultaneously irreverent and loving depiction of the Virgin 'drunkenly' leaning next to the dog: 'a representation of his totem' (Abani, *Virgin* 39). 'He loved altars. Always had': a carefully curated assemblage of symbolic objects designed to focus ritual attention (Abani, *Virgin* 39). The altar is the sacred within the mundane and a sign of the diversity of spiritual practice. Thus Abani writes multiple religious and mythological traditions, and the imminent sacred into this simple scene.

Black is working on a mural of the Virgin: from the first sketches to the completed mural being sandblasted away by the municipality, Black remains enthralled. In his first sketched strokes, 'neat straights and abrupt crosses,' it is not the Virgin who appears on the paper:

something else was forming or trying to form. A being both Virgin and not and closer to the profane than the sacred yet holding the two. The shape was elusive and though he rubbed out and resketched the lines, it was unyielding. He paused. If he couldn't find her body in his body on the paper, perhaps he would find it in the space where the paper had been. (Abani, *Virgin* 56)

This postsecular Virgin captivates Black. She figures the imminent sacred: animated and determined, vulnerable and ethereal, a being that manages to hold the sacred and profane together. Black tries to find her form in the paper, in his own body on the paper. Part of his artistic process is to physically connect with the paper, to mark the paper with the contours

of his own body before he begins to find other shapes in it. In this way Black draughts the Virgin – or what will become his mural of Fatima – in relation to his own body, further blurring the boundaries between himself and the Virgin. In Black’s artistic vision of the Virgin as the unity of sacred and profane, Abani writes a postsecular sacred that holds the concatenations of globalised modernity in tension. Black’s mural takes form on the wall of an abattoir: ‘Rising fifty feet [...] in a head to toe yashmak, was the figure of a Muslim woman’ (Abani, *Virgin* 188). In one hand ‘she was strangling a dove’; in the other she was holding ‘something that, though still largely unformed, was meant to be an AK-47’ (Abani, *Virgin* 188). This religiously dressed woman recalls Black’s own crossdressing. She is the Virgin, she is Fatima, and she is Black, holding the threat of religio-political war in outstretched hands, another image of political spirituality.

Whatever else she might be, Black stands in awe of her, with ‘swaying arms raised in worship’ (Abani, *Virgin* 241). Standing before her, Black is compared to an Iroko tree: ‘An Iroko the wind could not uproot’ (Abani, *Virgin* 241). In Igbo society the Iroko is a sacred tree, symbolising ‘immortality, strength, nobility, durability, incorruptibility, power and resistance’ (Onunwa 106). His mural, his relation to the Virgin and Fatima, root him in this scene of rapture. This passage is also marked by the diversity of religious and spiritual imagery: a syncretic, racially and politically sensitive iteration of the Virgin that transforms in Black’s imagination into a sublime image of a Muslim woman, concluding with reference to Igbo mythology. Like Cole and Mpe’s protagonists, Black invests his urban environment with an entanglement of alternative spiritualities. Here Abani marries Igbo, Hispanic and Islamic imagery in the resignification of Black’s urban environment. While walking is an important aspect of this, as I discuss shortly, Black’s murals are a visual intervention in the cityscape.

Black finds wonder and enchantment all around him. He often refers to his artistic processes in terms of ritual: ‘This too was part of his ritual,’ ‘Again, it was ritual’ (Abani,

*Virgin* 6, 7). As he empties ‘the pens, paint-sticks and charcoal onto the floor’ in front of his installation at The Ugly Store, he is also compared to ‘a shaman throwing divination bones’; that in his creative processes he might divine the unseen horrors and delights of the world (Abani, *Virgin* 91). Even in the mundane experience of listening to a drummer, Black finds a moment of transcendence: ‘The entire operation, done by touch, by feel, made Black think of ritual, of sacrifice, as though Walter were speaking to the gazelles – if indeed they were gazelles – who had given their hides for this sound, for this sacred communion’ (Abani, *Virgin* 250). Black finds the sacred in the everyday; he finds transcendence in the finite, fleeting moments of his travel through the city – he finds the imminent sacred.

The imminent sacred pervades *The Virgin of Flames*. The Angel Gabriel stalks Black: ‘sometimes in the shape of a fifteen-foot-tall man with wings, sometimes as a pigeon’ (Abani, *Virgin* 6). Gabriel does not speak or intervene in Black’s affairs; he merely seems to sit in divine judgement, either as an imposing human figure or as the most humble and dirty of city vermin: the pigeon. This twin image again highlights the duality of Abani’s religio-secular perspective – Gabriel is neither sacred nor mundane, but both. The same is true of the novel’s sections. They are entitled ‘Annunciation,’ ‘The Unconsoled,’ ‘Idolatry,’ ‘The Anointing’ and ‘Benediction.’ In this structure Abani conceives a Dantesque journey of the soul through a globalised postsecular landscape. What the other novels have implicitly tracked, Abani makes explicit in a narrative of postsecular becoming that moves towards a moment of transcendent apotheosis. ‘Annunciation’ refers to the biblical moment when the Angel Gabriel foretells the birth of Jesus to Mary, in the novel this section culminates in the first sighting of the Virgin of Guadalupe atop Black’s spaceship. The vision of the Virgin is, in fact, Black dressed in Iggy’s wedding dress, but for the down-trodden believers in the street below this apparition is a sign of hope. Black is again mistaken for the Virgin in the closing of ‘Idolatry’ – aptly

named. Sexually frustrated after a date with Sweet Girl, Black leaves his van at an underpass and walks off naked 'into the night' (Abani, *Virgin* 223). Finding himself perched on a windowsill of an abandoned warehouse clothed in Iggy's wedding dress, Black becomes aware of a 'small group of people' saying '*Hail Marys*' below him (Abani, *Virgin* 224). 'He felt both an old and inexplicable terror, and something akin to the sublime' (Abani, *Virgin* 224). The revelations of the Virgin and her/Black's finite reality determine the progression of the narrative. While the people who perceive the Virgin remain a faithful but faceless mass, it is Black who experiences these moments of transcendence, as though being mistaken for the Virgin tunes him into 'something akin to the sublime' or 'some such truth' (Abani, *Virgin* 224).

'The Anointing,' the novel's penultimate section, ends with Black's death, anointed with turpentine. Transcendence is the undercurrent in this closing scene. Black, again in the wedding dress, this time also in full make-up, is standing on top of his spaceship. The dress is drenched with the turpentine spilled on him during his fight with Sweet Girl, and so when he drops his lit cigarette the dress goes up in flames. The faithful below observe this as a miracle, while Black experiences it in awful and distinct sensations. Black 'could hear everything; feel everything: the heartbeat of the faithful, the band in *The Ugly Store*, Sweet Girl on the roof screaming' (Abani, *Virgin* 289). He is 'a woman on fire': the Virgin of flames. The gust from the circling helicopters blows pieces of the dress into the night, to unite with the forest-fire ash that has been falling on Los Angeles.

Black's death is not written in the narrative; instead, this section ends with pieces of lace from the burning dress floating 'over the crowd [...] Adrift on night's River' (Abani, *Virgin* 290). The suggestion is that Black follows these pieces of lace into the infinite flow of the River that alludes both to the Los Angeles River and to an afterlife, as seen in the stygian journey in *Song for Night*. Finally the closing of the novel is entitled 'Benediction' and the blessing uttered is of the sublime and of love: 'Leavened. This blue

light here and trembling with knowledge beyond measure; also love: perhaps' (Abani, *Virgin* 291). Abani makes this biblical grammar (annunciation, idolatry, anointing and benediction) account for Black's excruciatingly human and mundane experience. The segment that appears to sit outside of this religious vocabulary is 'The Unconsoled' [*sic*]. It refers, perhaps, to a state of being: the existential condition of the globalised urban subject that Black animates so well. The concluding passage illustrates this. Taken from the lengthiest account of walking through Los Angeles, Black walks with the Angel Gabriel. 'Angels Walk': an explicit twinning of the sacred and pedestrian seen in Mpe, Cole and Vladislavić's novels (Abani, *Virgin* 143).

Black and Gabriel on a quest unfolding like a rosary. And these were the stops. The beads unfolding in sweat-grained piety. These were the stops, not the steps, the careful measure of each, the small steps in which it was done and undone, the subtle movements that made and unmade a life, like the constant seismic tremors of this land, this city.

(Abani, *Virgin* 143)

Black's walks have taken him all over the city. In this urban environment of wonder and decay, seemingly without physical and mental healthcare or social support, and without figures upon whom to model behaviour, Black has two coping strategies – painting and walking. This is not a pilgrimage to a particular place; instead, the walk itself is sacred, 'unfolding like a rosary [...] in sweat-grained piety.' Their walk is compared directly to the use of the rosary, a prayer ritual based on repetition – a meditation. The function of this form of prayer is to meditate on the mysteries of the rosary and the rosary is the organising metaphor of Black and Gabriel's walk: a distinctly postsecular meditation. The description of what they encounter is punctuated by: 'Stop. The Joyful Mysteries,' 'Stop. The Luminous Mysteries,' 'Stop. The Sorrowful Mysteries' and 'Stop. The Glorious Mysteries' (Abani, *Virgin* 144, 145, 146, 148). Not steps, but stops: the small measured movements of

the thumbed and shifting beads; Abani is clear about the constitutive potential of pedestrian access: ‘the small steps in which it was done and undone,’ the peripatetic efforts that make and unmake a life.

Meditation in movement: each stop a new bead, a new mystery to contemplate, and within these stops, more steps than can be counted, each step a new image of desolation, isolation and the transcendent.

Step. The way an old Victorian house in green wood leaned against a fence barely holding back a strip mall. And the trees in this street, thick and shady, said that someone had loved this place, paid attention, and in that moment, even here, there *was hope for the eternal*. Step. (Abani, *Virgin* 144) (emphasis mine)

This extended account of their walk is a litany, a lyrical list of the mundane and the eternal. The aesthetic and structural aspects of ritualisation come to the fore in the poetry of these passages. ‘Stop’ and ‘Step’ are percussive parentheses creating singular images of the postcolonial and postsecular negotiations of Black’s city. Like ‘Pain’ and ‘Pleasure’ the meter of ‘Stop’ and ‘Step’ simultaneously contains and propels this poetic pedestrian map akin to those of Mpe, Cole and Vladislavić. Indeed, Black’s experience of Los Angeles as an ever expanding radius of excess recalls Milla and John’s experience of their agrarian home. Like them, Black tries to chronicle the existential abundance, the mysteries, that surround him and in the catalogue of his pedestrian litany Black demonstrates his embeddedness in this environment, his devoted belonging.

The imminent sacred, ritual and the postsecular are drawn into the novel in the opening sentence: ‘This is the religion of cities’ (Abani, *Virgin* 3). The absent antecedent that is the subject of this sentence – this is the space that I have been exploring – the intersection and entanglement of globalised, intimately local, and postsecular modalities. It is the very absence of the antecedent that suggests its pervasiveness, begging the question

that the rest of the novel attempts to answer: What is the ‘religion of cities’? The following lines offer a partial insight as Abani describes some of the consecrated areas of urban life:

The sacraments: iridescent in its concrete sleeve, the Los Angeles River losing faith with every inch traveled [*sic*]. A child riding a bicycle against the backdrop of desolate lots and leaning chain-link fences, while in the distance, a cluster of high-rises, like the spires of old Cathedrals, trace a jagged line against the sky, over the uneven heart of prayer. (Abani, *Virgin* 3)

Rather than the traditional religious sites the reader might expect, each sacrament is a syncretic, postsecular vision of the religion of cities: a river losing faith, the tableau of a child set against urban decay, high-rises crowning the city as Cathedrals once did, the ‘blessed coolness of water’ from a fire hydrant (Abani, *Virgin* 3). While Ratti might have read this imagery as an evacuation or secularisation of the religious, it is clear that Abani’s novel is invested with the imminent sacred from the first words. Like the authors discussed in previous chapters, Abani finds the sacred in the everyday. The imagery here, as in the rest of the novel, holds the mundane and sacred together in tension:

He was in the cathedral of Union Station [...] He could turn it into his own Sistine. The old wood of the ceiling beams, the cracked and aged leather of the seats, the polished Mexican tiles on the floor and the high windows and white speckled paint all gave it a heightened sense of the sacred (Abani, *Virgin* 243).

For Black the sacred emerges out of the wear and tear of the everyday: it is the passage of time and promise of decay that gives these objects value. Black’s own Sistine Chapel would certainly be different from Michelangelo’s religious frescos, but the historical contrast between fresco painters of the Italian Renaissance and Black’s postsecular murals is foregrounded here, evoking the long history of religion and secularisation. Further,

Black's comparison recalls Julius's link between Wall Street Station and the Gothic vaults of an English cathedral. The architectural resonances between transit stations and grand places of worship collapse the boundaries between secular and religious spaces. Altars, shrines, murals and sightings of the Virgin – these are the landmarks in Black's city – precious and fleeting incursions of the sacred into the everyday.

The postsecular, diasporic, syncretic envisioning of *The Virgin of Flames* is presaged in the contemporary African fiction in the preceding analysis. In Abani, Cole, Mpe, Vera, Coetzee and van Niekerk's work, the literary is the sanctioned space of enchantment. It is the sphere where the sacred, spiritual and mysterious coexist with experiences of globalised modernity. More than coexist: these epistemologies offer alternative worldviews and strategies of belonging. In this postsecular dynamic, the imminent sacred attunes the reader to what is 'made and unmade': to the constructive and recuperative potential of the literary, conjoined with ritual and the sacred (Abani, *Virgin* 143). As a hermeneutic inclined towards the constructive and recuperative potential of the sacred and the literary, the imminent sacred provides a way to read the heterodox strategies of belonging created by writers responding to the convergences and multiplicities of our postsecular and postcolonial experience.

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