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van der Waal, Margriet

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Long distance Afrikaners: Afrikaans literature and dislocated identity in a European context

Margriet van der Waal*

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

During the 1980s and 1990s, thousands of (white) South Africans (many Afrikaans-speaking) left the country in search for a different and more stable political and economic situation abroad. This article focuses on the imagined expatriate identity expressed in three Afrikaans literary texts set in a European context. It examines *Sabbatsreis* by Annelie Botes, Dan Roodt's *Moltrein* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* by Etienne van Heerden. By focusing on expatriate identities in these texts, it investigates how postcolonial Afrikaner subjectivity is formulated in a European context, and examines the representation of Afrikaners' view of Europe. What does this Europe look like, and how does this Europe relate to the characters' own Afrikaner identity? The "displaced" position of the protagonists enables a critical perspective on Europe, different interpretations of the South African situation, and various understandings of their own identity as postcolonial subjects.

Keywords: Afrikaner identity; exile literature; postcolonial Europe; whiteness; Annelie Botes; Dan Roodt; Etienne van Heerden

Since the late 1980s, South Africans have been negotiating radical social, cultural and political changes. Doubting, mistrusting and fearing a future South Africa shaped by these changes, a significant group of higher-educated, professionally skilled, mostly white and often Afrikaans-speaking South Africans left the country because of crime, lack of job opportunities, affirmative action and pessimism about the future of the country (Z.B. du Toit 2003). In South Africa this phenomenon has been dubbed "the new Great Trek" (Van Rooyen 2000), the "brain drain", the "slip or stay issue" or "the chicken run" (e.g. Brand 2003, n.p.).¹ Many of these emigrants moved to English-speaking countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, North America and the UK, but expatriate South Africans also resettled elsewhere in Europe, Japan and the Middle East (Bailey 2003, 243). Afrikaner emigrants seem to prefer to reside in "predominantly Caucasian countries" in order to "settle among communities of European settlers, where their ethnicity is not questioned or challenged, and where the cultural and religious milieu more or less matches their requirements" (Visser 2007, 10). Although numbers are unreliable, estimates are that about 800,000 white South Africans have left the country since 1995 ("Between Staying and Going" 2008).² This sizeable exodus has elicited numerous reactions within South Africa over the course of the first decade of the 21st century, especially from Afrikaans-speaking intellectuals such as B.M. du Toit (2003) and writers of fiction.

*Email: m.c.van.der.waal@rug.nl

This article discusses three works by Afrikaans authors published in the past ten years, and focuses specifically on the imagined, expatriate identity of the fictive Afrikaans-speaking characters in a European context. These novels are *Sabbatsreis* (Sabbatical Journey) by Annelie Botes (2007), which is set in London; the Parisian-situated *Moltrein* (Subway) by Dan Roodt (2004), and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* by Etienne van Heerden (2008; translated in 2011 as *30 Nights in Amsterdam*). Expressions in Afrikaans literature of Afrikaner identities and the possible meanings of these expressions are a concern within the field of literary scholarship in South Africa (Blaser 2007; Boersema 2013; Davies 2009; Giliomee 2003). However, I would like to shift the focus away from the South African context, and rather consider how postcolonial, expatriate Afrikaner identities are constructed in a European environment.³ In this article I examine not only how postcolonial Afrikaner subjectivity is formulated in a European context, but also how Europe is viewed by these expatriate Afrikaners. What does the Afrikaners' Europe look like, and how does this Europe relate to the characters' own Afrikaner identity? The "displaced" position of the protagonists engenders a critical perspective on Europe, different interpretations of the South African situation and various understandings of their own identity as postcolonial subjects. How do (white) Afrikaners, who embody the privileged, (formerly) dominant members of the colonial project, reflect on their own (privileged) identity when they move from their own, familiar, home to Europe? How is their sense of identity reconstructed in this new and unfamiliar space, and what knowledge do their perceptions offer us; that is, how do they conceive Europe from a white, privileged, but outsider perspective?

Afrikaans literature after 1994

Given its specific historic background, Afrikaans literature is intimately tied up with postcolonial concerns and issues. As Viljoen (1996) explained in the mid-1990s, Afrikaans literature developed from the political movement of (white) Afrikaans-speakers against the political oppression of British colonialism of the 19th century and filled an important symbolic function in the creation of Afrikaner nationalism.⁴ At the same time, however, the dominant users of the language started marginalizing and excluding the language's coloured and black speakers in a move to racially homogenize the category of Afrikaners. Thus, the language itself acted as a typically colonizing institution. This, Viljoen (1996, 162) states, means that Afrikaners have been both the colonizers and the colonized, which makes attempts at categorizing them, and their literature, a rather difficult process (see also Wasserman 2000). By the 1960s one sees an internal resistance against this state of affairs in the texts of a number of Afrikaans writers. The so-called *Sestigers*, writers of the 1960s, such as André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach, tried to detach themselves from the exclusivist and narrow-minded nationalism of the Afrikaners through their literary writing. Louise Viljoen (2014) calls this the "anti-hegemonic" phase in the Afrikaans literature (8). Concerning more recent Afrikaans literature, she identifies a trend of dystopian writing, which "reflect[s] on South African society with feelings of disillusion, moral uncertainty and the fear of a political and/or ecological disaster" (2012, 468).

An expression of this dystopia is the sense of "global placelessness", as Henriette Roos (2006, 85) explains. Many literary texts deal with a foreign experience of literary characters – some based on the real-life experience of the authors. According to Roos,

the isolation of the apartheid years widened to new worlds of experience and especially whites – and large groups of Afrikaans-speaking people – moved to new worlds. The Afrikaans “diaspora” [...] is the subtext in several stories about and by exiles and emigrants, and poses questions about identity in these new living conditions. (86; my translation)

In the three novels under review, this placelessness is characterized by a sense of loss of certainty and power, and a clear longing for a return to some kind of home. All three texts present the reader with dislocated characters who reside temporarily abroad. These characters display some of the features of diasporic communities as listed by Robin Cohen: strong notions of “a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements”, “an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective approbation”, “wish for return to the home country” and “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate” (quoted in Fludernik 2003, xiv–xv).

Over the past 20 years, the experience of white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans abroad has been addressed in a number of literary texts (fiction and non-fiction) by authors such as Jaco Fouché, Eben Venter, Manie de Waal, François Loots, Carel van der Merwe, Marlene van Niekerk, Tom Gouws, Danie Marais and S.J. Naudé. I have chosen to consider the novels by Botes, Roodt and Van Heerden because they represent geographical variation (London, Paris and Amsterdam) and different types of fiction: popular fiction (*Sabbatsreis*); (controversial) fiction published by a small, independent publisher (*Moltrein*); and literary, award-winning fiction (*30 Nights in Amsterdam*).

Whiteness

The Afrikaans-speaking characters in the three novels are white South Africans, even though the texts make little or no explicit references to their skin colour. As a critical reader, one is confronted with the assumptions one unwittingly makes in ordering fictional characters into different social categories according to race, ethnicity, class, culture, etc. This happens on the basis of cognitive frames and scripts we as readers use to make sense of texts.⁵ Whiteness is, as Simon Clarke and Steve Garner (2010) state,

a form of ethnicity, [which] is rarely acknowledged by its bearers, yet it has significant ramifications in terms of the construction of ‘other’ identities; in the creation of community; in processes of exclusion and inclusion; and discourses around ‘race’ and nation. (1)

This identity construction process – and specifically the inclusion and exclusion of others – is what interests me in relation to the constitution of a postcolonial Afrikaner subjectivity on the one hand, and a postcolonial European subjectivity on the other.

An analytical use of the concept of whiteness enables the reader to investigate the construction and functioning of “white” and other racialized categories, and to explore how these operate relationally – in terms of power difference, for example. Furthermore, it also helps to identify and become aware of differences and similarities within these categories, such as the economic, class and cultural differences between white subjects. Whiteness as an analytical tool allows one to start seeing race as a form of capital that allows or hinders one in conducting certain behaviour in certain spaces. According to Peggy McIntosh, who describes whiteness as a “‘knapsack’ of privileges”, being white allows her to do things that other people who are not white cannot do, such as “unnoticed, unharrassed, ‘un-othered’ movement through public space;

being treated as an individual rather than as a representative of a group; and finding her experiences and needs catered for as normal” (quoted by Clarke and Garner 2010, 27).

The literary strategy of situating white characters from South Africa in a European context presents interesting cases of how outsiders perceive differences and similarities between postcolonial, white subjects from different contexts: South Africa and Europe.

Sabbatsreis (2007)

Using a first-person narrator, Annelie Botes’s autobiographical novel, *Sabbatsreis*, tells the story of how she flees from South Africa to London for a year to work off her towering gambling debt. With a Calvinist work ethic and the determination not to fail, she becomes the private carer of the frail, 82-year-old mother of Clare, who recently married Luke, a wealthy American. In this new context, Annelie describes herself and her turbulent and moving personal history with what one critic called “an unsettling honesty that pulls you along whether you like it or not” (Van Coller 2007, 4). Annelie is proud of the fact that she hails from Africa. In the back garden of Clare and Luke’s English mansion, she builds an “African forest” by carrying in logs of wood from the nearby woods, with “African hands” (Botes 2007, 52) and an “African heart” (53).⁶

With her reference to her “African hands” she makes clear that she does not shy away from heavy physical labour, a characteristic she closely relates to her origin. Explaining her forest-building project to her English employers, she says: “I am from Africa, *we* know about carrying wood” (112; emphasis added). Her insistence, as a white person, on her African background suggests a close connection to the African continent, its people and its mores:

I told her [Clare] an African story. [...] In Africa, whenever two black Xhosa women are each other’s confidantes and guardian angels, they greet each other with the words: *I see you, my sister*, and shake hands. Then they sit with stretched legs in the shade of a tree and share an orange; they speak about the matters of their sister hearts. When the sun sets, they greet each other with: *I see you, my sister*, and walk away without fearing their unguarded backsides. (136; emphasis in the original)

In the novel, the accommodating and romanticizing Annelie is offset by the intolerant Clare, who is exposed as being blatantly racist. After an incident where Pretty Nomvula – a second South African carer employed by Clare and Luke to assist Annelie – confuses pancake batter with custard, Clare shouts: “For God’s sake! Don’t you black African people know the difference between custard and pancake batter?” (232). She also refers to Pretty in a discussion with Annelie as “a bloody black monkey!” who does not have “an inch of logic in her thick skull!” (243). Annelie is convinced that “the Brits are bigger racists than we Boere people are. We still have inborn compassion. If a Brit has hardened his heart, he carries a rock in his chest” (228).

Annelie’s own “inborn compassion” is demonstrated in her relationship with Pretty, whom she describes as a Xhosa woman. At some point, she instructs Pretty on how to bake a blueberry pie. The scene is probably intended to be humorous and illustrative of successful intercultural communication between two South Africans from different life-worlds. Annelie, who does not speak Xhosa herself nor appears to expect Pretty’s English to be sufficient for understanding her baking instructions, accommodatingly, but patronizingly, “xhosifies” them by adding an i-sound to her English words (i-mixer and i-flour).⁷ Pretty, however, puts her hand around Annelie’s arm in a blessing gesture

and responds in Afrikaans, a language Annelie did not consider Pretty would possibly speak, calling her “nonnatjie” – a servile, although possibly endearing form of address for white women (246). The scene poses interesting questions about the nature of Annelie’s compassion and emphasizes her condescending ignorance with regard to Pretty. No less discomfiting is the racial harmony that emanates from Annelie’s memories of Dollie, the “toothless brown mother” whom she remembers as her childhood “shadow”: “bath time, loo time, making-braids time was Dollie time” (89).⁸ Although not explicitly stated, the description of Dollie implies that her presence in the white family extended the parameters of a nine-to-five working day. Annelie has many complaints about the overtime that Clare expects her to work, which suggests an uncritical and ignorant attitude to the fate of black domestic workers a generation earlier. It also shows Annelie’s continued inability to fathom the real hardship implied in Dollie’s loyalty to Annelie-the-child.

Such ignorance and lack of empathy render the many references to “Africanness” and sisterhood in the novel problematic. They create superficial exoticism but do not address the social divisions within South African society. The existence of such problematic divisions is confirmed when Annelie’s own explicit racism is revealed in a recollection of her experience as a music teacher. She was helping a choir of young black men to add the finishing touches to their repertoire in order to record a CD. Initially, she refuses the choir leader’s request for help, because she feels unsafe:

No, sorry. I cannot practise alone with twenty young black men in the city hall in the evenings. No one will hear me call, and I’ll be an open target. ‘You see, Eric, I don’t trust you. I’m white; you’re black. I’m a woman; you are men. Who says I won’t be dead or raped after a week?’ (223)

Nevertheless, Annelie starts rehearsing with them, and the project is completed successfully. This experience across initially impermeable boundaries is a first start in imagining new social relationships. The interpersonal possibilities proposed in this scene, however, are more or less overruled by the opinion of the real-life Annelie Botes, which caused quite a storm in 2010. In an interview with a newspaper, she stated quite bluntly that she dislikes black:

I don’t like black people. [...] I don’t *understand* them! In my growing up years in Uniondale there were no black people. If one walked around there, it was probably a criminal who had escaped. And then you had to *run*, because he was going to catch you, right? I *know* they are just such people like me. I *know* they have the same rights as I do. But I don’t *understand* them. And then ... I don’t like them. I avoid them, because I’m afraid of them. (Retief 2010; emphases in the original)

This fear and lack of understanding of the South African other brings Annelie closer in line with Clare than she might like to acknowledge herself. In her new European context Annelie sets up a clear dichotomy between her understanding of “African” and “European”. “Africanness” implies the possibility of interpersonal contact, as the story she tells Clare about African sisterhood reveals, while “Europeanness”, by implication, represents for Annelie the lack of such contact or the inability to achieve it. Furthermore, Annelie clearly refers to what she sees as an irresolvable difference between the British and the “Boere”, given the history of domination and violence against the “Boere” by the British.⁹ To emphasize this fundamental difference, Annelie reveals Clare’s blatant English racism, but in the text she also exposes and confirms her own racial bias. This problematizes not only Annelie’s repeated insistence on the difference she perceives between Boer and Brit, but also her own supposed “Africanness”.

This novel presents a critical attitude towards Europe. It poses clear questions about enduring colonial, racist attitudes and about a perceived sense of superiority among Europeans in privileged positions in relation to those they consider different from their European self. At the same time, however, this critical position towards Europeans obfuscates comparable attitudes of racism and superiority held by the “displaced” character of Annelie towards those she perceives as the other from or in the South African context. According to this reading, the novel succeeds therefore – perhaps unintentionally – in posing clear questions about how colonial and postcolonial relationships are constructed and understood in postcolonial contexts.

***Moltrein* (2004)**

Unlike Annelie, who proudly speaks of her “African heart”, as we saw above, the protagonist in *Moltrein*, by Dan Roodt, is strongly tied to his European roots. The novel introduces the reader to Anton du Preez, a failed pianist, barely able to make a living as a piano teacher in Paris. His material position improves when he meets business tycoon Erika de Ruiter, a fellow Afrikaner living in Paris with whom he starts a relationship. She takes him to Berlin in her sports car, wines and dines him in fancy restaurants and buys him very expensive clothing. Finally, Du Preez is run over by a van shortly before he would have returned to South Africa. Both the fictive Du Preez and the real-life Roodt left South Africa in the 1980s in an attempt to evade military conscription. But unlike Du Preez, Roodt returned to the country, where he is currently active as a public intellectual lobbying for the cultural and political rights of Afrikaners.¹⁰

On occasion, Du Preez reflects on his position as a white “refugee” in Paris – a position that allows him considerable freedom – in comparison to other, racially marked migrants and refugees whom the CRS (the riot and crowd control forces of the French police) often stopped and searched:

My pale skin amazed me; it was that which the French newspapers and opinion formers detested about me,¹¹ but which was actually my passport to a peaceful life in France, as a fellow white who could readily mix with the inhabitants of a mother country. (Roodt 2004, 49)

Roodt exposes what he claims is the bias and bigotry of French criticism of apartheid and Afrikaners¹² when the situation in France itself is hardly better, and clearly operates on the basis of racial differentiation as well.

Du Preez, like Annelie in *Sabbatsreis*, reminisces about a childhood in South Africa, spent playing in the garden and the swimming pool. This idyll is now threatened by rumours of increasing violence and crime (Roodt 2004, 178), as Anton learns from friends emigrating from South Africa. According to one of them, the country has become a place unfit for children (257). The irony is, however, that Anton has identified Paris as a childless place too. This absence of children holds only for the white Parisian population, however:

There were no children in Paris. People lived on their own, or in childless couples. In comparison, the North Africans had a high population growth, with many children. In the long run no identity control checks on the subway could keep them out of Paris or out of France, just as apartheid was unable to keep black people out of the white cities. (134–135)

In Anton’s mind the population decline of white Europe was part of the demise of the western, Eurocentric world, not only in Europe, but in South Africa as well. In a scene in which he has sex with the grandmother of one of his students, he observes:

this was a fitting action for me as an Afrikaner to copulate with a post-menopausal woman, because my people could not reproduce sufficiently amidst the all-surrounding fertility of the African womb that bore millions and millions of babies while we uselessly gave birth to playing the piano and literature, things that would soon be abolished by one or other progressive minister as 'belonging to the apartheid era'. (293)

A strong subtext in *Moltrein* is that of Afrikaner and European culture and identity under duress. It articulates an understanding of the self as an underdog in a radically changing political situation, where the wrongs of the past are traded for what are perceived as the wrongs of the new system. According to Anton's view, western arts and culture in Africa are declining as a result of the changing sociopolitical context in the country, and he ultimately considers these changes as an attack on himself: "the attack on music in South Africa, and with time also on Afrikaans and the only culture or identity I could really call my own, was also an attack on me" (177).

One reviewer of *Moltrein* argues that the text is a search for what it means to experience community amidst a modern reality that is "radically indifferent about community" (Goosen 2004). The character Anton, however, reveals his inability but also his reluctance to become part of a (changing) community – both in France, which he intends to leave, and South Africa, about which he is very critical. Rather than partaking in constructing a sense of community, he throws himself into hedonist consumerism together with, and paid for by, his lover Erika. His own death at the end of the novel is a dramatic confirmation of his inability to become part of a meaningful social community.¹³

The Europe constructed in this novel is a number of different things at the same time: for those with sufficient income it offers choice and seemingly limitless possibilities of consumerism and cultural participation. At the same time, however, it is also a drab and grey place, a dystopia marked by decline. There are many references to the social problems in Paris that result from unemployment and poverty. The European elite is characterized as hypocritical in its recognition of social injustice in South Africa, while it is unable, or unwilling, to recognize or address it at home. The protagonist bemoans the decline of western values and culture in South Africa, and implicitly also in Europe. In South Africa the decline is ascribed to the new political regime, where western culture has been replaced by African culture. In Europe, the reason for the decline is attributed to growing migrant communities coming from former European colonies. The novel strongly suggests that the political and social changes that marked South Africa during the 1990s are a gloomy preview of the inevitable downfall of western civilization in Europe.

30 Nights in Amsterdam (2008)

Much less gloomy than the previous novel is the third text, by award-winning author Etienne van Heerden. *30 Nights in Amsterdam* tells the story of Henk de Melker, historian and museum assistant in a dusty Karoo town, who is summoned to Amsterdam where he is to inherit his dying aunt's house. His aunt, Tante Zan, was an eccentric epileptic involved in a local South African cell of the resistance movement against apartheid.

As a child, Henkie was unable to fully grasp and understand the social relations he was part of in the 1950s, a period in South Africa's history when apartheid was becoming increasingly institutionalized, and Afrikaner nationalism stronger and more self-assured. There were the complex colonial relations between his family – descendants

from Dutch colonists – and the black farm workers and domestic help employed by his grandmother, MaOliver (sic), and the friendships his aunt struck up with the other, non-Afrikaner members of the “Sobukwe cell”: “Bra Zolani”, “Hamerkop Galata” and Cecil Dimaggio”.¹⁴ The novel critically reflects on the colonial history of South Africa, and investigates Afrikaner participation in the movement against apartheid. Much of this history only starts making sense to Henk in Amsterdam, to where his aunt has summoned him in order to reflect on his personal and familial entanglement in South Africa’s history (Van Heerden 2011, 272). In this new context Henk starts seeing, cynically, the impact of colonialism on the current South African condition:

Owing to the curses and flukes of history we ended up here, and the northern border that repels us and pens us in claustrophobically, was just a pencil line on a map made by a colonial authority largely ignorant of this part of the world and its people. Now we’re stuck here and demand loyalty from each other with sentimental-patriotic phrases. [...] Here in Amsterdam I realise that I’m fed up with concepts like citizenship and patriotism, with all the debates over belonging or leaving [...]. The whingeing over xenophobia. (212)

In a fashion reminiscent of Annelie’s uncritical celebration of her Africanness in *Sabbatsreis*, Henk realizes that he is “from the colonies”, and in his heart “blazes the flickering of fires and the rhythms of other landscapes unfurl. [...] A freak, an in-between person with no kith nor kin. A white man from Africa” (61).

30 Nights in Amsterdam is a fascinating text because, compared to the other texts discussed here, it presents a vivid image of present-day postcolonial Europe and non-dystopian examination of the postcolonial South African condition. The Europe in which Henk finds himself is multicultural, which at first puzzles him. Expecting naively to see blond Dutchmen, he sees young men with “[s]mooth, gelled hair, combed back. Brown skins. Oriental-looking” (Van Heerden 2011, 58). Later, he realizes that neither the country nor he himself is homogeneous:

He remembers the Arabic curses against the walls of his flat on the Spui. The brown taxi drivers at Schiphol. The prostitutes on the Walle from all corners of the world. I myself, he thinks, am a product of Holland’s appetite for the new world, for the foreign, the exotic, for the so-called colonies. (91)

This postcolonial European context prompts Henk to compare the Dutch situation with the South African past: “He knows about the new challenges facing this city. In South Africa he often hears: Europe’s now going to see what South Africa has been contending with all these years” (432). What exactly South Africa has been “contending with” is not explicitly mentioned, but clearly implied here: the question of how to live together.

Part of the struggle in answering this question, no doubt, is related to the sense of fear that white South Africans, Afrikaners especially (as we also have seen in *Sabbatsreis* and *Moltrein*), have felt towards the racialized (and male) other – the always threatening black man. Henk remembers his childhood fear of a black man lying underneath one of the beds when the family returned home in the evenings. In today’s context, the fear remains, but is largely crime-driven:

Where is the euphoria of liberation if you don’t have freedom of movement in your own country? The criminal classes are enforcing a new kind of apartheid: those who attack, and those who are being attacked. It’s a power relation that seeps into the finest grain of everyday life, into the looking out of your window, into the switching off of your reading light at night, into the creak of the floorboard, the wind that comes up, the forest path with its inviting coolness. To live under siege, robbed of your rights, how would she feel, she who’s lived in safety for so long in Amsterdam? (Van Heerden 2011, 370–371)

The description and perception of Amsterdam as a safe place, however, is problematized by an earlier passage in which Henk observes that “nothing really perturbs the city. Except [...] their fear of the crescent moon” (293). According to Henk, Europeans are afraid that the rise of Islam in Europe will be followed by increasing cultural and political intolerance of western culture, and violence committed upon westerners by Muslims. This was already alluded to earlier on when Henk remarked that

their [the Dutch] day is nigh in any case – that he could hear in the whiplashes of the Arabic voice on the Spui. That indignant man verbalised it all with the raising of his voice. It was, in audio format, the blade that rasped across Theo van Gogh’s throat. (121)¹⁵

But instead of a defeatist story such as the one Anton du Preez tells in *Moltrein*, Henk’s investigation of identity in *30 Nights in Amsterdam* avoids easy and simplistic liaisons between Africa and the Afrikaner on the one hand, and the Afrikaner and Europe on the other. He realizes how problematic narrow and essentialist definitions of identity are (Van Heerden 2011, 213, 245), and discovers that one’s origin and place of origin are unattainable and untenable if understood as stable and fixed orientation points. Henk therefore concludes at the end of the novel that he has left one homeland – one about which he was naive and uninformed – and will return to another – one whose fascinating and at times problematic complexity he has come to see and understand (436).

The image of Europe presented in *30 Nights in Amsterdam* is by far the most intriguing of the three outsider perspectives considered in this article. It not only investigates the relationship between South Africa and the Netherlands through the perspective of a personal history, but more generally succeeds in examining the positioning of postcolonial subjects in relation to one another – both in the South African and European contexts.

Conclusion

To return to the notion of displaced writing: I was struck by a comment by an Afrikaner intellectual, who resided in Melbourne for three years but eventually returned to South Africa. He admitted in an interview that his earlier self-labelling as an “exile” was perhaps inappropriate, and that he would rather describe himself as an expatriate – he used the Afrikaans word *uitgewekene*, which has a semantic connection to the act of dodging or stepping aside (De Vries 2012, 303). This sense of stepping aside and getting (temporarily) out of harm’s way partly characterizes the texts discussed in this article.

This harm has many faces: it is a haunting colonial and personal past, a terrorizing possibility in the present (the “black peril” turned into seeming ubiquitous crime and violence) and a bleak and desolate future. This future apparently holds no place for Afrikaner – or Eurocentric – culture, since the Afrikaans language as well as “white” and “western” manifestations of culture are perceived as being under attack. Viewing this in a wider context than a fear amongst Afrikaners only, one might call it a sense of “whiteness under duress”, to use Tony Simoes da Silva’s (2008, 5) term. It is a sentiment currently widely evident in Europe, and one which the Dutch writer Adriaan van Dis (2010) in his novel *Tikkop* describes as a sentiment found in Dutch newspapers these days: “Islam, Islam, and fear for the future” (220). This sentiment echoes the earlier observation by Henk in *30 Nights in Amsterdam* that nothing seems to faze the city, except for Islam.

Robert Spencer (2010) proposes in his contribution to *Rerouting the Postcolonial* the creation of a postcolonial cosmopolitanism that will help us:

to work *through* the national *towards* the global, establishing the rights, autonomy and distinctiveness of the former in order to then guarantee and extend these at the level of the latter. Cosmopolitanism, you might say, begins at home. It involves reconciling local attachments with global allegiances. (40; emphasis in original)

An important condition for reconciling these local attachments is to “reimagine and invent new forms of human relationships, our ability to imaginatively reconsider the relationships that we have” (41). The novels discussed here offer evidence of just how problematic and difficult this task is. But a function or consequence of reading literature, as Spencer also points out, is the “knowledge of other cultures and the capacity to reflect critically on one’s own” (41). It is the “diversity of voices from unfamiliar situations” that allow us to test and adjust our own preconceptions exactly as a result of being confronted with such preconceptions in literature. Above I have argued that “outsider perspectives” on Europe allow us to investigate perceptions of Europe and Europeans from the special position of the postcolonial subject – albeit a postcolonial subject situated in a position of (relative) privilege. These novels show that identity construction is a relational activity: despite essentialist claims about what constitutes certain identities, the construction of identities is always a reaction to interaction and confrontation with someone who is perceived to be different. Such insight is crucial not only to understand Afrikaner identity in South Africa, but also European subjectivity in a postcolonial Europe.

Notes

1. Compare this South African interpretation with a more general consideration of decolonization migration, such as the repatriation of *retornados* from Mozambique and Angola to Portugal, and the *pied-noirs* from Algeria to France given in the volume edited by Smith (2003).
2. According to the latest census information from 2011, the white population in South Africa constitutes about 8.9% or 4.5 million people of the population of nearly 52 million. The number of people speaking Afrikaans as a home language (first language) is estimated at about 6.8 million. The language is spoken by coloured, white and black South Africans as a home language (Statistics South Africa 2012).
3. This approach is a variation on a topic of a special edition of *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* (Bekers, Helff, and Merolla 2009) entitled “Transcultural Modernities”, on identity constructions of Africans in Europe. Here, however, the focus is explicitly on the self-perception of Afrikaners (white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans) as represented in Afrikaans literature.
4. This political struggle received strong support from members of the Afrikaans Language Movement, who campaigned to have Afrikaans recognized as official language alongside the already existing official languages, Dutch and English.
5. A case in point is the categorization of the character Melanie Isaacs in *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee. Although her race is never mentioned explicitly, there are clues, following a particular racial “script”, that Melanie is – according to apartheid categorization – coloured. See Van der Vlies (2010, 25) for a discussion.
6. Translations from the original Afrikaans texts are my own, except for quotations from Van Heerden (2011), for which the English translation by Michiel Heyns was used.
7. In Xhosa, loan words from English generally fall into a noun class that adds the prefix *i-* to the loaned word. For a description of such loan integration processes, see Dowling (2011).
8. See Jansen (2011) for a discussion of other literary descriptions of the relationship between black “nannies” and their white children.

9. One of the themes in this novel is that of the historical clash between the British and the Boere, which resulted in the Anglo-Boer war at the start of the 20th century. Annelie refers in a number of places to this “Boer-English” conflict (e.g. 237).
10. Roodt is one of the founding figures of an Afrikaans culture lobby group, the Pro-Afrikaanse Aktie Groep (PRAAG). PRAAG has its own publishing house, which published *Moltrein*. For a discussion of Roodt’s Afrikaans activism, see Geertsema (2006).
11. Roodt refers here to the anti-apartheid movement in France and its strong position-taking against white South Africans. In the novel it is described as the French media’s “laughable shouting at the evil whites and Afrikaners” (2004, 10) and elsewhere he describes how the anti-apartheid movement’s “hatred” towards Afrikaners intended to “destroy the psyche of a small people, perhaps irrevocably destruct [it]” (182–183).
12. For example, a French communist with whom Anton has a short relationship refers to white South Africans as the “disgusting white tribe” (Roodt 2004, 33).
13. This attitude was strongly condemned by fellow writer Marlene van Niekerk. She rejects the elitist and racist ideological position-taking of authors such as Roodt, who create an image of the Afrikaner as someone “who has discarded the debt burden of the past in a [...] pissed off, self-pitying, defensive and attacking mood” (Van Niekerk 2008, 86).
14. A fifth member of the cell, Carl Wehmeyer, is killed by the other cell members. The “Sobukwe cell” and its members are in this novel a fictive construction. However, the cell’s name refers to the political activist Robert Sobukwe, who founded a political party called the Pan Africanist Congress.
15. Theo van Gogh was a provocative Dutch film-maker, who was killed violently by a young Dutch Muslim of Moroccan descent in 2004.

Notes on contributor

Originally from South Africa, Margriet van der Waal now lives and works in the Netherlands, where she teaches in a European Studies programme at the University of Groningen and the Liberal Arts and Science programme of the University College Groningen. Her research focuses on identity construction in postcolonial Europe through imaginative texts, and investigates the complex construction and negotiation of cultural identity in the context of a new Europe that is coming into being.

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