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'Mapping the Indian Ocean: Poems of a South African migration in dialogue with Australian art'

Abstract:

Since the 1960s, mainly white South Africans have migrated to Australia and New Zealand. I am one of these immigrants, and my creative practice is generated by the ambivalence of a diasporic sensibility. This paper will pose a reflective question: how can I position my creative writing practice of poetry as a contribution to literary studies and research? How does my particular narrative of migration from South Africa, and a family history of migration from pre World War II Europe to the Commonwealth, map a narrative across continents – from Europe to South Africa, then to Australia – as I write in Australia? What might this map of my personal and historical tracking contribute to a conversation with other Australian writing? The paper's focus is on my creative writing as a process of 'coming to know' born of ambivalence and conflict – a knowledge construction emerging from creative practice that starts with a state of 'unknowing', towards a textual mapping of poems in a narrative of settlement and displacement. The paper argues that as poetic writing engages with other creative art works, with literature and with re-membered 'stories', a provisional narrative of settlement is mapped, its process constructing a new 'knowing' as it straddles an Australian present and South African past.

Biographical note:

Marcelle Freiman is the current Chair (President) of the AAWP and a senior lecturer in English at Macquarie University where she teaches creative writing, post-colonial and diaspora literatures, and poetry. Her research areas are: theorising the discipline, pedagogy and research frames of creative writing, on which she has published several articles in *TEXT*; post-colonial writing and theory, the writing and theory of diaspora; and the writing of J. M. Coetzee. Her most recent book of poetry is *White Lines (Vertical)* (Hybrid Publishers, 2010). Her first book, *Monkey's Wedding* (Island Press, 1995) was Highly Commended for the Mary Gilmore Award, 1996. Her poetry has been published in literary magazines and journals over the past 20 years, read on radio and in performance, and translated into other European languages. She is a member of the Sydney poetry group DiVerse, writing and performing poetry in dialogue with contemporary art and museum exhibitions.

This essay aims to position my creative writing practice of poetry as a contribution to literary studies and research. How does a poet who is also a researcher perceive, position and expand on her own work? How does my migration from South Africa to England and then to Australia, and a family history of migration from pre-World War II Eastern Europe to the Commonwealth, map a narrative across continents – from Europe to South Africa, then to Australia? The essay will focus on my creative writing as a process of 'coming to know' born of ambivalent disposition – as knowledge construction in a textual mapping of a narrative of displacement and settlement.

Background and history

My creative writing practice is the poetry I have written and continue to write within multiple, intersecting and often ambiguous contexts. While these contexts involve both situated and remembered affective experience, the most powerful motivation for writing has emerged from my double immigration from South Africa to England in 1977 and then to Australia in 1981. The real sense of displacement that this created required response, or a series of reiterated responses, which I have found in language and writing poetry. Another aspect of this response, and included in it, is my work as a researcher of post-colonial and diaspora literatures.

My family has a history of migration. My parents were born in Lithuania and Latvia in the mid 1920s. Their parents, with many others of their generation, migrated to South Africa soon after this and their elders and siblings who remained perished in the Holocaust in1945. The families of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe, of which mine was one, were thus scattered or lost – setting up a pattern of broken lines of journey, history and story. But there is another line in the 'song lines' of my story – the experience of growing up in South Africa in the 1950s and 60s, spanning the years that established and enforced the Afrikaner Nationalist government's apartheid ideology after it came to power in 1948. Born in 1951, as I grew up I learned how apartheid legitimised separation on racial grounds, denying the rights of black South Africans to their land by establishing the 'Homelands' policy, and about the real poverty of so-called 'Bantu education'. As a child cared for by African nannies who lived in small rooms back of the house, I learned, at the level of intimacy and domesticity, the effects of apartheid.

How had the first immigrants in my family dealt with the colonial, then apartheid, systems they lived in? As an adult I learned how, in 1945, they had discovered the losses of family members in Europe. My grandparents fled the extremes of rising fascism in Europe only to be confronted with nationalist antisemitism in South Africa, which lessened from 1948 with Afrikaner Nationalism's identification with the fledgling state of Israel in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The small white anti-apartheid resistance movement of the 1950s and 60s would include a number of Jewish activists' (Sakinofosky 2009: 3). I have recently discovered my family's small though risky role in this. By the 1970s black resistance was increasing and was being violently suppressed. The year 1976 was marked by workers' strikes and student protests; life had become frightening, eating away at our hopes for a future. We left for London, where I was able to read for the first time, owing to the censorship in what was a

totalitarian regime, what had really been happening in my own country.

In London I began to write poetry, which continued with my second migration to Australia in 1981. After the liberations of England, this felt like a leap backwards to a white colonial past. I began to read Australian books and then to study literature at postgraduate level. Ironically, because I thought I'd *left* South Africa, I chose for my doctoral research the young writer J. M. Coetzee. It took me longer than it should have to recognise that his novels were dealing with something I understood – the question of what it meant to be a white South African. It was a story that Australians had little interest in, unless it involved sport. Anti-apartheid activism against South African sporting teams in the early 1970s still echoed and by the 1980s apartheid had not yet ended. In Coetzee's allegories I found the creative writing of a white South African grappling with the moral implications of whiteness and apartheid. Amazed by Mandela's release from prison and the democratic elections of 1994 won by the ANC, I watched from afar the creation of a democracy with a new, inclusive constitution.

At first I did not connect my own poetry, which I had begun publishing with a poem in *The Bulletin* in 1984, and my academic research. Later, researching post-colonialism and creativity, I would acknowledge my connections with 'settler culture' writing. Two generations ago my family had tracked lines from Europe to South Africa. Now, I had drawn a long track across the globe – northwards to England, then south east to Australia. Like other English-speaking migrants, I would slide un-noticed into Australia at a time when there was a small number of South African immigrants here, a number that increased during the 1980s and 90s. By 2001 out of 19 million people in Australia, 0.4 per cent listed South Africa as the country of their birth, of which Jews made up 13 per cent (Tatz et al 2007: 52). This group of Jewish migrants had almost all originated in Lithuania and Latvia (Tatz et al 2007). Overall, South African-born Australians are an emerging diaspora group that has contributed in many ways to Australian society, including cultural contributions, though to date there is no study of their contribution to creative arts and literature.

Literary contexts

After the 1994 South African elections and the end of sporting boycotts, Australia became more receptive to the 'white South African story'. Australian publication of South African born creative writers reflects the pattern of migration. Their work began to appear during the mid 1990s: John Mateer's first book of poems *Black Swans* (1994), followed by many others; my first book of poems *Monkey's Wedding* (1995) and *White Lines (Vertical)* (2010); Rose Zwi published *Safe Houses* (1993), *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park* (1997) and *Speak the Truth, Laughing* (2002), which won the Human Rights Award; Joanne Fedler published the popular *Secret Mothers Business* (2006), *Things Without a Name* (2008), and *When Hungry, Eat* (2010). The Nobel Prize laureate J. M. Coetzee immigrated to Australia in 2002. His local literary success includes short listing for the 2010 Prime Minister's Literary Award for *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (2009), which also won the NSW Premier's Christina Stead Prize for fiction. Coetzee has been received into Australian literary culture though internationally he is still considered South African. His 'pre-migration' Booker Prize winning novel *Disgrace* (1999) had an ambiguous reception in South Africa. *Summertime:*

Scenes from Provincial Life, ostensibly a biography of a writer called Coetzee in 1970s South Africa, is the first of his 'Australian era' books to include South African settings and dialogue in Afrikaans.

In terms of literary commentary, post-colonial criticism from the mid 1970s concentrated on black African writers, including the small output of black South African writers prior to 1994, most of them writers in exile (Denis Brutus, Bessie Head, Oswald Joseph Mtshali, Lewis Nkosi). White writers such as Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer and Andre Brink received attention though there has been much debate about whether settler culture writing from South Africa, Australia, Canada and New Zealand can be considered as post-colonial. No study viewing Australian and South African literature appeared until the 1996 publication of the edited collection of essays *Text, Theory, Space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia* (Darian-Smith, Gunner and Nuttall) signaling the post-1994 shift and noted as a comparative undertaking 'seldom attempted before' (Hofmeyr 1998). In Sue Kossew's *Writing Women, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction* (2004), Kossew (a South African born Australian scholar) contests the rather hostile idea that it is '"deeply unfashionable" (Whitlock 2000: 41) to engage with the notion of the settler subject':

> it is a crucial project of post-colonial theory to examine the ways in which such 'unsettled settlers' (in J. M. Coetzee's memorable phrase) inscribe, through their literary practices, their shifting and ambivalent identities and subjectivities, illuminating as it does the complex nature of resistance, complicity and representation (Kossew: 1).

At the 2006 SAACLALS (South African Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies) Conference in Stellenbosch, Isabel Hofmeyr, in her plenary address, 'The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean: Forging New Paradigms of Transnationalism for the Global South', proposed an approach to Southern ocean connections, such as India and South Africa, that might lead to new perspectives on lines of influence, connection and ways of reading. She cited, for example, the re-thinking from an Indian perspective of indentured labour of the nineteenth-century that resulted in Indian diaspora settler cultures, disrupting the assumptions of settler culture identity. I suggest that there are other possibilities for disruptions of settler culture in reading connections of the global South – in West East connections between South Africa and Australia, both on the Indian Ocean rim. Historically, connection between the two countries is characterised by the imperial origins of their European settlement, their status as invader cultures of the territories of indigenous peoples, and their shared history as members of the British Commonwealth.

South African born Australian writers and scholars negotiating individual and cultural identities have an almost excruciating sensitivity to issues of race and ethnicity, with attendant opportunities for interrogations of inscribed South African identity as well as of Australia's colonial past and present (eg. Colin Tatz, *Obstacle race: Aborigines in sport,* 2009). The poetry of John Mateer engages with the transitional nature of the migrant's identity, using Afrikaans as both 'political' identification (a source of shame) and as appropriation into his asserted English (1994, 2002). He also engages with Malay and Indonesian languages, which historically have echoes in Afrikaans, in a process he calls 'mirroring'. He claims that his aim is not to appropriate, nor is it 'the capturing of "other

meaning" but rather a process parallel with the generalised experience of learning, and more deeply, with language acquisition' (Mateer 2007: 103). He articulates his strategy as an extension of post-colonial mimicry, which inserts ambivalence into colonial discourse: 'Mirroring can be regarded as the reverse of that: a process by means of which the now ideologically emptied colonial is revivified as a person by the 'native' context. (Mateer 2007: 103)

What Mateer is challenging here (perhaps naively) is significant: the conventions of defining paradigms of 'native' and 'otherness', disrupting the binaries inherent in the language of these concepts to articulate 'the dilemma of alienation' (Mateer 2007: 103). Though Mateer's interrogation of 'otherness' (in self and other) through language identifications has been read as problematic, even transgressive, the language of his contentious poem 'In the Presence of a Severed Head' (2002: 67) is dialogic, addressing the other, the 'you', Yagan, Nyoongar resistance warrior, in an echoing identification with the poet's alienation: 'your buried head brought out into Westralian glare/ enabled an alien to hymn you in nineteen ninety-nine' (Mateer 2002: 73). Mateer was to discover, despite his desire to 'establish a place for contact and eloquence where there might have previously only been the gap of suspicion and silence' (2007: 104), that mirroring 'has its limits' (105) in Australia's cultural norms of public discourse and cultural ownership.

Yet I think it is important to read Mateer's work as the struggle of ambivalence attempting to dislodge itself from colonial binaries – a refusal to identify with white Australia, and to situate *a* 'whiteness' as *difference*; to *engage* the other rather than to re-iteratively displace the other through enforced silence and *non*-engagement, thereby propagating a discourse of whiteness. Those who write within and outside South Africa as migrants carry the legacy of apartheid, an ingrained alertness, in their connection with that country's history, to confronting the question of dealing with 'the other'. This is not necessarily with the assumption of power or need, as in Hegel's dialectic model of 'master and slave', but as in the ethical humanism of Levinas, for whom the other or Other invokes, only ever relationally, our own sense of being ('Being'). For Levinas human existence is, phenomenologically speaking, in affective and dispositional relation to the other; our responsibility to the other is a precognitive state 'already always there' (Bergo 2008).

That this state of ambiguity, of incompleteness of relations of 'self and other' – or the need to address ambivalence towards one's own story – is inherent, is evident to me in my creative practice, both in active composition and in 'pre-cognitive' dispositions. The title of my most recent book, *White Lines (Vertical)* (2010) comes directly from the painting *White Lines (vertical) on ultramarine* (1970-73) by Australian artist Tony Tuckson in the AGNSW, which is also a trigger for the poem 'Intuitively' in the collection. The naming of the painting appealed to me so much that I chose part of it for my title and its image for the cover – an assertion of 'Australian-ness'. Only afterwards did it begin to accrue more meaning: the bracketed 'vertical' suggested a particular, though still bracketed, disposition – after living for twenty-seven years in Australia, to claim the white South African story as relationally 'here' and in dialogue with the Australian 'other' of Tuckson's painting. I was also not conscious of an intertextual echoe of the title of Coetzee's *White Writing: On the Culture of*

Letters in South Africa (1988), which I'd read much earlier. Coetzee describes the 'unsettled settlers' (Coetzee 1988: 5) and later qualifies the term 'white writing' as 'white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (11). The white settler in South Africa (and Australia) was always a site of contestation. Coetzee describes a sense of being in-between, being neither/or both here nor/and there. Doubly displaced by migration, my approach here is to try to articulate the sense of instability and uncertainty, the 'unsettledness', which drives my creative practice and locates its process as knowledge construction.

Process – poetry as research

Much of my creative practice is driven by a 'desire to know' in responding to stimulus experience. Most often it begins with a state of 'unknowing', perhaps of 'being lost', and a desire to submit to creative processing – initially, and largely, without the input of reasoning or critical thought, a process articulated by Vico's 'imaginative metaphysics' oppositional to rational understanding that shows 'when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them' (Leitch: 414). Writing a poem is a way of 'coming to know' from an initial 'unknowing'. The knowing is emergent and dependant on prior knowledges, but visual perception and memory are most pervasive, being 'hailed up' by the affective response to the stimulus event – its effect on the body and the senses (Freiman 2010). The feeling disposition might be disturbance, or pleasurable and celebratory, creating the desire to contain, or expand, the experience *as* language and form; to make something meaningful from what is exciting, uncomfortable or unknown, but which is always conditional to the temporal moment of its making:

> you come – face to the glass,
> nose to the stone, you arrive
> that minute, that second
> like a bird's wing up against
> the grain, the wood, the tree,
> the board, the gate,
> the bend in the road
> that stops your tracks, stops you –
> and you break in two, in three,
> looking all the while straight ahead
> for that forceful shining thing
> you know you've lost   ('Gate' 2010: 1)

Graeme Sullivan observes that like the artist who 'intuitively adopts the dual roles of the researcher and the researched', a 'viewer or reader is changed by an encounter with an art object or a research text as prior knowledge is brought into doubt by new possibilities' (Sullivan 2009: 51). A number of my poems are composed as *ekphrasis* – the transference or translation of visual response to an artwork image in poetry. The process of *ekphrasis* is a change-generating, knowledge-building response. It creates a new form, or 'commentary', on

the viewed object which, like Midrash – the inquiring, interpretative rabbinical exegeses of Biblical texts – is conditionally open to further commentary. In effect, the poem-as-commentary is a *reflective* process, a 'reading' or articulation of experience in language. The perceptive focus is enabling: it creates a space of writing that circulates within a network of affective sensations including, importantly, patterns of rhythm and sound. Thus, on seeing Fred Williams' 'You Yangs Landscape (1963)':

> When I landed this place
> felt hard-stippled, I could not bear
> its crackling harshness –
> my fingernail on tough grey leaf
> came away oil tinged with memory:
> dry-twig bark-stripped ground
> hard as berries on bare feet
> remnant of my homeland.   ('This Country' 2010: 59)

The emergent poems are negotiations with the 'other' of the creative work, object or image, and in this case, the 'other' of place through the other's creative output. The poems are, in effect, 'research in practice' (Haseman 2010: 213); 'coming to know' within a dialogic, perceptual spaces through articulations of spatial and temporal experiences.

Memory, as Kerwin Lee Klein points out, is 'partial, allusive, fragmentary, transient, and for precisely these reasons is suited to our chaotic times' (Klein 2000:138) – times, I would argue, characterised by conditions of diaspora in which, in a world of somewhat erratic global movements, only 'temporary spaces of control and stability are possible' (Sharrad 1993:144). Thus memory is dialogic:

> Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation. Every scene or situation in a new country necessarily draws on its counterpart in the old country. Intellectually this means that an idea or experience is always counterposed with another, therefore making them both appear in a sometimes new and unpredictable light …' (Said 1994: 60)

The 'place' of writing is always new, always at the beginning. Memory is not a turning back to the past, but an incorporation of the past into the present, what Stuart Hall suggests is 'the *production* of identity. Not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past' (Hall 1987: 393). Writing to engage with the 'here and now' of creative unpredictability, my work creates re-interpretations and re-inscriptions of memory containing traces of the 'other' of place, time and relation. Although temporally I am settled in Australia, it is also *as* difference – the land I live in is not the one that shaped me. Kerryn Goldsworthy remarks that 'an emigrant is not only a being in transition, but a transitional being; to be an emigrant is not just to be on the border, but to be the border itself' (Darian-Smith 1996: 53). The sense of temporal-spatial displacement reiteratively creates a desire to map a textual space: my creative practice articulates this process of mapping. One of my unpublished poems is prefaced with a quote from Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) – 'I do not love this land anymore' (111) – a phrase expressive of my feelings about South Africa during the 1970s and

80s. One emigrates in order to leave something but it is not possible to leave the past: it reasserts itself at the slightest stimulus. Associations arrive unbidden, yet they can be a 'rich seam' (Rushdie 1991: 11), particularly for an identity being 'formed at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture' (Hall 1987:134).

In creative practice the process of knowledge construction is an enacted, performative, reflective process – a practice-led research method which is 'intrinsically experiential': practice-led researchers construct 'experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to "dive in", to commence practising to see what emerges' (Haseman 2006: 4). The emphasis on allowing the practice to *enact* the research, to allow it to be *complex*, *emergent* in its structures, and *reflexive* towards these processes (Haseman and Mafe: 217-220) mirrors the creative practice I have described. It must, however, be coupled with the other areas of my scholarly research. The body of my research and creative practice is encompassed by what Smith and Dean term the 'iterative cyclic web' – a model that 'accommodates practice-led research and research-led practice, creative work and basic research' and includes 'many points of entry and transition within the cycle' (Smith and Dean 2009: 19). The significance of this model is its inclusion of academic research together with 'practice-based' (and experiential) research. Constitutive of such a model is a life of commitment to poetry and creative writing; to negotiating cultural memory and history; to explorations of place, self and others; and of contributing to academic research and literature through both my academic *and* creative work.

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