

**Pasts Remembered, Future Identities Pursued:  
Postcolonial Nostalgia in Etienne van Heerden's novels,  
*Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam***

**Beverley Jane Cornelius**

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Supervisor: Professor Ileana Dimitriu

## **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to explore the concept and application of nostalgia in two of Etienne van Heerden's novels in their English translation, *Ancestral Voices* (1989) and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* (2011). I aim to show that, although Van Heerden's novels have localized content and context — they arise from the parochial tradition of the *plaasroman* (farm novel) — their wider focus is postcolonial in that the 'ancestral voices' implicate Afrikaans identity in a multicultural entanglement, as well as in a global, cosmopolitan identity.

By selecting an earlier and a later novel, I suggest a trajectory in Van Heerden's work in consonance with a post-apartheid movement from an inward-looking, insular culture to a more general sense of former colonies and metropolises as inextricably linked. The fact that Van Heerden's novels, in translation, enjoy a world readership confirms a local-to-global trajectory, thus emphasizing the postcolonial significance of the author's work.

The concept of nostalgia is viewed by many in the contemporary world as sentimental and biased, based on its focus on positive recall and emotional yearning. In recent years, however, there has been a serious rethink about nostalgia and inquiries are being made into why nostalgic feelings arise, what they mean and what can be learnt from them. It is being recognized that, although it deals with the past, nostalgia has a significant bearing on the present and the future.

Accordingly, this study explores how Van Heerden's nostalgic treatment of the past complements his exploration of the anxieties of the present. Coming to terms with the past — in order to understand the present and imagine a future — is a challenge faced locally, as well as globally. Nostalgia is a concept that allows for the expression of the concerns generated by the rapid social changes in the world, and it is an effective literary device which Van Heerden has applied in his novels.

My study adds to a body of work that explores postcolonial writing in translation and its impact on world writing. Such explorations promote inter-cultural understanding and help preclude cultural homogenization.

## **Declaration**

I, Beverley Jane Cornelius, declare that this study, unless specifically stated otherwise within the text, is my own original work and has not previously been submitted in any form to any other university for the purpose of obtaining a degree.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Chapter 1: Literary Background and Theoretical Concepts

### *Introduction*

The aim of my study is to explore the concept and application of nostalgia in two of Etienne van Heerden's novels in their English translation, *Ancestral Voices* (1989) and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* (2011). My study also aims to show that, although Van Heerden's novels have localised content and context, their postcolonial themes of dislocation and longing make them accessible and relevant (through translation) to a global audience. In this regard, I aim to establish to what extent the application of the globally relevant concept of nostalgia aids in the broadening of the appeal of Van Heerden's work. Furthermore, this will be a comparative study of the two novels — the earlier one which is inward-looking and the later one which is outward-looking — in order to trace the development of Van Heerden's oeuvre from its localised beginnings to its broader reach as world literature.

The concept of nostalgia is viewed by many in the contemporary world as sentimental and biased, based on its exclusive selection of positive recall and emotional yearning. Nostalgia is, therefore, perceived as presenting an unreliable and inauthentic perspective of the past because, in nostalgic explorations of the past, negativity seems to be bracketed and ignored. This is why nostalgia, based on pleasant memories of longing, is often mistrusted. In recent years, however, there has been a serious rethink about nostalgia and inquiries are being made into why nostalgic feelings arise, what they mean and what can be learned from them. Jacob Dlamini, for example, in *Native Nostalgia*, notes that "... the irony about nostalgia is that, for all its fixation with the past, it is essentially about the present. It is about present anxieties refracted through the prism of the past" (2010:16). Bearing this in mind, my study aims to explore how a nostalgic treatment of the past, in Van Heerden's work, complements an exploration of the anxieties of the present.

Van Heerden's work addresses the anxieties related to South African and Afrikaans identity, past and present, and in relation to location, family and community. In the two novels selected for this study, many of the characters are haunted by the past, so much so that they are emotionally and psychologically crippled and stuck, unable to

develop and grow. But when faced with a crisis in the present (in each novel), the characters question the past and confront what it is they yearn for or what they have yearned for. Van Heerden employs nostalgia in his representations of the past to address anxieties in the present, while his application of nostalgia (contrary to the stereotypical perception that nostalgia is only sentimental) is strategic and balanced. In both novels nostalgic remembrances lead to sites of trauma (trauma that can then be acknowledged and attended to) and to sites of reconciliation (that is, reconciliation to another person, to a place or to the self). Nostalgia is harnessed, therefore, as a positive force and used as a tool to address the past — without denying its related trauma — in the search for identity, belonging and wholeness.

To accommodate the scope of this study, I have restricted my analysis to two of Van Heerden's novels, namely *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. I will discuss at a later stage the reasons for this choice. Suffice it at this stage to say, though, that the 22-year time period between the publication of each novel has significance. *Ancestral Voices* was published in 1989 during apartheid-era South Africa, while *30 Nights in Amsterdam* was published in 2011 in a democratic South Africa. Furthermore, the novels in their events have a reach of approximately 174 years, from around 1836 to 2010. This trajectory, to be charted in the comparative focus of my study, will show the development of Afrikaner identity from an earlier, enclosed state of nationalism to a more challenging global sense of place in the world. Nostalgia in *Ancestral Voices*, originally titled *Toorberg* (1986), will be compared to nostalgia in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, originally titled *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* (2008). The very titles signal a shift which I have briefly suggested: from the more localised ancestral voices — the first novel is written in the tradition, albeit in a critical rendition, of the Afrikaans plaasroman of the 1930s — to a more worldly perspective on the Afrikaans subject with roots beyond the borders of South Africa in a Dutch-European inheritance. Etienne van Heerden is an Afrikaans author and he writes his novels in Afrikaans; however, I am concerned here with his novels in translation and his work as a transnational author. Hence my choice of the two English-translated versions, *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. The fact that his work is widely translated suggests the relevance of his themes and preoccupations. It also suggests that his topics are not



simply confined to the Afrikaner past and identity. The extent of the translation of Van Heerden's work — into eleven other languages — also testifies to a status and reputation beyond any single Afrikaans literary system. By means of translation into many languages, Van Heerden's work enjoys wide circulation, a circulation way beyond the sphere of the Afrikaans language. This points to the global relevance of the themes of the novels and, in turn, to the relevance of nostalgia as a global condition. Van Heerden, in short, is a world writer.

By way of explaining what my study aims to accomplish, I would also like to point out here what it does not attempt. It is not a project in the field of Afrikaans literary study. Nor is it a linguistic study and, although the novels I explore are English translations of the original Afrikaans, it is not a translation study. In this study, Van Heerden is to be 'taken out' of the Afrikaans literary system and set against the world literary system. However, before I survey how and why Van Heerden's work has migrated from its localised Afrikaans beginnings and taken various routes into the transnational literary world, I will touch briefly on Afrikaans literature, and especially on the 'plaasroman' (Afrikaans farm novel), a prominent genre in Afrikaans literature.

### ***Literary Background***

#### *Afrikaans Literature and the Plaasroman*

Afrikaans writing, from at least the time of the Great Trek (which began in 1836), has sought to "develop an emergent Afrikaner sense of self" (Warnes, 2009:72). An obvious way in which the Afrikaner cause could be supported and defined was through an "invocation of an idealized past" (Warnes, 2009:72). Themes in Afrikaans literature emerged accordingly.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a dominant theme developed in response to the plight of the many failed farmers (of South Africa). Because of drought and modern capitalist farming practices, many small farmers were forced to leave their land and move into the towns and cities in search of work as skilled and semi-skilled workers. They became known as 'poor whites' and writers responded to the 'poor white' phenomenon by developing literary themes — for example, the relationship between farm and town, the ideas of belonging and duty, as well as the "importance

of the farm as foundational and sacred space” (Warnes, 2009:73) — that paved the way for the genre of the plaasroman.

The plaasroman in its traditional form “emerged as a formal type in Afrikaans literature” (H Viljoen, 2004:109). It developed as “a fictional elaboration of a cultural ontology based in Romantic conceptions of the relationship between land and identity” and it served to elaborate an “idealized cultural system of values” (Warnes, 2009:74). D F Malherbe, Jochem van Bruggen, C M van den Heever and Abraham H Jonker wrote about the conditions and effects of the Depression (1929-1932), the great drought (1932-1933), and the poverty and movement of farmers from country to city (A Coetzee, 2000:4). Chapman describes the plaasroman as a fiction that “yearns for the restoration, amid rural poverty, of lineal memory in patriarchal, familial ownership” (2003:192). The farm, as depicted in the plaasroman, is a “jealous, ancestral ground” and the farmers are men obligated to the legacy and ghosts of their fathers, whereas the labourers are too often depicted as childish, drunken dependents, while capitalist city types, such as “the merchant, the Jew, the alien Englishman”, are cast as disruptive to the Afrikaner ideal. By the 1950s these characteristics had become the conventions of the plaasroman (Chapman, 2003:192).

However, after 1948, as African nationalism and opposition to apartheid grew, the “problematic of race [interrupted] the self-contained world of Afrikaner nationalism” (Warnes, 2009:76), and, in literature, the “cosy local realism” (Van Wyk Louw qtd in Warnes, 2009:76) was challenged.<sup>1</sup> The second wave of the plaasroman, or its renewal, occurred with the writing of, for example, Etienne Leroux, Anna M Louw and of Karel Schoeman, Etienne van Heerden and Eben Venter (A Coetzee, 2000:4). As Van Coller puts it: “[While the] initial plaasroman gave form and substance to Afrikaner nationalism, [t]he new plaasroman recognizes and highlights this role... and through exposing its ideological base, sets about subverting it” (2008:32). To differentiate, somewhat brutally, the earlier plaasromans can be considered and distinguished as ‘traditional’, and the later plaasromans as ‘subversive’. Prinsloo, similarly,

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<sup>1</sup> The great Afrikaans poet N P van Wyk Louw would refer to this type of nationalism with some sarcasm, as “cosy local realism”.

distinguishes between 'normative' and 'contesting' plaasromans: many plaasromans published after 1962 can be seen as 'contesting' because "the 1960s signalled the start of a postmodernist re-writing of the plaasroman tradition in which there was often — during the course of the sixties and up until the present — also a postcolonial reading of history" [my translation] (2006:38).<sup>2</sup> In another type of classification, Van Coller asserts that in Afrikaans literature the plaasroman developed in stages, first as the dorpsroman<sup>3</sup> (village/town novel), then as the peri-urban or suburban novel and finally as the city novel. However, he states that Afrikaans literature has never "reconciled itself to the city" (and neither has the Afrikaner) and one possible explanation is "a nostalgic yearning for a mythical agrarian hinterland" (Van Coller, 2008:42). Chapman, in noting the lasting appeal of the plaasroman, says that the "nostalgia for a mythic time when every Afrikaner was supposed to define his identity on the land" could be explained as "urban escapism" but, on the other hand, it could also "delineate deep-seated fears, in a time of 'multiracial' change, about the demise of Afrikanerdom as a unifying concept" (2003:192).

It is apparent, then, that the plaasroman genre has developed and changed in tandem with history but that, although the approach may change, the basic conventions, themes and concerns remain fairly resilient. The plaasroman addresses the yearnings of a people for 'the farm': a place, a time, a lifestyle, an identity. It is concerned with the relationship between people and places, the trauma brought about by the breakdown/change of that relationship, as well as the haunting responsibility of a legacy.

Plaasroman conventions have been recognised in many of Van Heerden's novels and the nostalgia that Van Coller and Chapman mention could be an explanatory factor for the continued interest in his writing. However, representations of the deep-seated fear of change to which Chapman alludes could also be the reason why Van Heerden's novels are appealing and accessible, both to the local and broader world audience.

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<sup>2</sup> Die plaasroman vanaf die sestigerjare van die vorige eeu kan beskou word as die aanvang van 'n postmodernistiese herskrywing van the plaasromantradisie waarin daar ook met die verloop van die sestigerjare tot en met die hede dikwels 'n postkoloniale lees van die geskiedenis voorkom (Prinsloo, 2006:38).

<sup>3</sup> 'dorp': village; townlet, small town (Pheiffer, 2007:126).

### Van Heerden's Oeuvre

Having investigated the plaasroman as a genre of Afrikaans literature and noting that many of the conventions of the plaasroman are present in Van Heerden's work, I will now survey his oeuvre which extends (from 1978) over a period of thirty-four years. The period during which Van Heerden has been active as an author has been a time of great change and readjustment within South Africa, but also throughout the world. South Africa has moved from apartheid to democracy whilst the world at large, at the same time, has experienced social, political and economic changes resulting from major historical events. Two such major historical events are the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which symbolically marked the end of the Cold War, and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States of America. Major historical events such as these not only cause change at social, economic and political levels, but also result in a psychic shift that reverberates globally and changes world thought.

I note some of the local and global changes of the past three decades because aspects of my study will be to examine if and how the trajectory, followed by Van Heerden's oeuvre, reflects the changes of its time (either local or global); and to consider how global changes may have influenced the reception of his novels.

The body of Van Heerden's work comprises novels, short stories, poetry collections, a cabaret, literary theory and essays, and he has edited and contributed to short story collections. Van Heerden's first novel, *Matoli*, was published in 1978 followed by a collection of poetry, *Obiter dictum* (1981). Thereafter, a collection of short stories, *My Kubaan* (1983), was published and a 'grensliteratuur' (border literature) novel, *Om te awol* (1984).

The novel, *Toorberg* [tr. *Ancestral Voices* (1989)],<sup>4</sup> with which we are concerned in this study, was published in 1986. The novel offers a broad meta-history, which includes aspects of Afrikaner mythology, and themes such as the taming of the landscape, battles with the wild beasts of the land, and the struggles encountered with the San/Bushmen and Xhosa. In this novel characters rise from the dead and Van Heerden

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<sup>4</sup> See table of 'Novels by Etienne van Heerden Translated from Afrikaans to English' in Appendices.

uses magical realism to tell his tale, magical realism being a “kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the reliable tone of objective realistic report” (Baldick, 2008:194). This device is used again in *Die stoetmeester* (1993) [tr. *Leap Year* (1997)] and in *Kikoejoe* (1996) [tr. *Kikuyu* (1998)]. Another novel that features magical realism is *Die swye van Mario Salviati* (2000) [tr. *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (2002)]. It has been described as being closest to *Ancestral Voices* because of its supernatural occurrences and the dimming of the borders between the past and the present, fact and fiction.

Other works — including *Liegfabriek* (1988) [tr. *Mad Dogs and Other Stories* (1995)], *Casspirs en campari’s: ’n historiese entertainment* (1991) [tr. *Casspirs and Camparis* (1993)], *Lied van die Boeings* (1998), *In stede van die liefde* (2005) [tr. *In Love’s Place* (2011)],<sup>5</sup> and *Asbesmiddag* (2007) — display a willingness to take an unflinching look at South Africa’s complex reality. *Mad Dogs and Other Stories* is a collection of short prose, in which the modern Afrikaner is represented as taking stock of the complicated reality of South Africa (Terblanche, 2010:6). Van Heerden’s writing in this collection contrasts “disparate elements that confront one another” and there is a clash between reality and illusion (Terblanche, 2010:5-6). *Casspirs and Camparis* is described as a documentary-type reminder of time past but, Van Heerden assures us, although it is written in a realistic mode, it is not autobiographical (Terblanche, 2010:6). The impression of “not feeling at home” in South Africa, as well as the role of contemporary man in society, is explored in the cabaret, *Lied van die Boeings* (Terblanche, 2010:8). The novel *In Love’s Place* blends urban and rural South African life by placing characters in Stellenbosch, Johannesburg and Matjiesfontein, while it provides a picture of South African society that “does not succumb to sweet nostalgia and the glorifying of the transient past” [my translation] (Terblanche, 2010:11).<sup>6</sup> Van Heerden’s political novel, *Asbesmiddag* (2007), questions the uncertain place of the writer in the new political landscape. Following the writing of *Asbesmiddag*, Van

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, *In Stede van die Liefde* has been translated into English by Leon de Kock, and is titled *In Love’s Place*, but has not yet been published (De Kock, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> “...nie verlei tot soet nostalgie en die verheerliking van die vergange verlede nie” (Terblanche, 2010:11).

Heerden set to work on *30 Nagte in Amsterdam*, which he completed within six months.

*30 Nagte in Amsterdam* was published in 2008 in Afrikaans, and the English version appeared in 2011 as *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. The novel, which deals with the complexities of Afrikaner and South African identity, is set in the farmland and small towns of the Karoo, and also beyond the South African borders, in the cosmopolitan city of Amsterdam. Van Heerden's characters, Henk and his aunt Zan, reunite in Amsterdam where they reflect on their younger days in the Karoo and, through nostalgic recollection and traumatic recall, come to a clearer understanding of themselves, each other and their past.

This broad outline of Van Heerden's oeuvre, culminating with *30 Nights in Amsterdam*,<sup>7</sup> shows that this author has been writing about the South African — or, more specifically the Afrikaner — who is confronted with the complex reality of the present and who looks back at the past for clues left by history and memory. Van Heerden sees his oeuvre as interrelated and forming a whole:

My oeuvre is an assertion of my personality. Every book is a piece of furniture that I put in the room of my soul. Earlier books take their place as furniture too. The newer ones must start a conversation with the older pieces... Everything looks different when you carry it in. Every new book wants its place and wants to belong. When you enter the room, things must cohere. I am an interior decorator that keeps meddling with his inner room. [my translation] (Van Heerden, qtd in Terblanche, 2010:2)<sup>8</sup>

From this body of work, I aim to examine the first and latest of the novels in English translation<sup>9</sup> and to trace the changes and developments of the trajectory that they

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<sup>7</sup> In October 2012, subsequent to the publication of *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, a further collection of short stories in Afrikaans, titled *Haai Karoo* has been published; and, in March 2013, a novel, *Gifkaroo* [tr *Poison Karoo*], is due for publication (Van Heerden, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> My oeuvre is 'n stelling van my persoonlikheid. Elke boek is 'n meubelstuk wat ek in die kamer van my gees neersit. Vorige boeke staan ook as meubels rond. Die nuwe ene moet 'n gesprek aanknoop met die ouer stukke. Hy laat my my ouer meubels só en só. Als lyk anders wanneer jy hom indra. Elke nuwe boek wil staanplek hê en deel wees. As jy die kamer instap, moet dinge saamhang. Ek is 'n binnerversierder wat bly torring aan sy binnekamer (Van Heerden, qtd in Terblanche, 2010:2).

<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, *30 Nights in Amsterdam* is the latest of Van Heerden's novels to be published in English translation. *In Stede van die Liefde* has been translated by Leon de Kock but has not yet been published (De Kock, 2012).

form. Although Van Heerden's work is concerned with the Afrikaner, the South African and their past, it is soon evident (from the translated titles) that, although his work originates in the Afrikaans literary system, his work has a much wider circulation. The question arises as to why has this localised literature attracted a global audience? I propose that the themes Van Heerden addresses in his novels may be characterised as postcolonial: in Van Heerden's case, the search for meaning and identity by the Afrikaner correlates with the search for meaning and identity in a global context. The constant and fast-changing global conditions of the present, in turn, provoke a nostalgic longing for the past.

#### Literary Criticism of Van Heerden's Novels

Before I begin my own examination and critique of the two novels, though, I will survey some of the literary criticism around Van Heerden's body of work. My outline of Van Heerden's oeuvre shows that he has worked in multiple genres, producing for example, novels, short stories, poetry, literary theory, essays and cabaret. Of these genres, a focus on the critical reception of the novels alone — Van Heerden has written eleven<sup>10</sup> novels — provides comprehensive insight into the reach and concerns of his work. (In my survey, I refer to critical commentaries of his novels and some short stories.)

Van Heerden's work has elicited a substantial amount of critical commentary. For my survey I have favoured articles written in English (because my study is primarily focused on Van Heerden's novels in English translation), but I have not altogether avoided literary criticism in Afrikaans. Taking a broad view, I have selected articles that focus on the themes of identity, history, trauma and space, which also inform the thrust of my own study.

The theme of identity in Van Heerden's novels has been explored from a number of perspectives. *Casspirs en kampari's*<sup>11</sup> seems to indicate that our world is "fleeting

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<sup>10</sup> At the time of my writing, a twelfth novel, *Gifkaroo* (and its English version, *Poison Karoo*) is due for publication in 2013 (Van Heerden, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> In this section, on the literary criticism of Van Heerden's novels, and in the later section regarding dissertations focused on Van Heerden's writing, I will mention specifically either the English or Afrikaans title to indicate which version the critique focused on.

[and] insubstantial” (Heyns, 1994:70) and explores what happens to identity when contexts change. Engaging with Afrikaans literature in general, and including Van Heerden’s *Die swye van Mario Salviati* and *Die stoetmeester*, one study states that Afrikaner identity has been “brought into serious crisis” by the “explosions of the mythology behind Afrikaner nationalism” (Van den Berg, 2011:5). The same article also investigates the loss of the father figure and the subsequent loss of a healthy sense of masculinity in Afrikaner culture (which is relevant for my study of *30 Nights in Amsterdam* as well).

Identity is of course linked to history, and in the search for identity the temptation is to look back: Van Coller’s (2008) survey “affirms that Afrikaans literature at large has documented the history of the Afrikaner” and he mentions Van Heerden’s *Die swye van Mario Salviati*. History in relation to literature is explored in another article which states that *Casspirs en campari’s* “fills in the dark areas... of the history of the eighties in South Africa, but also flirts with the supplementation and contradiction of official history” (L Viljoen, 1993:3). With regard to earlier history, Van Heerden’s *Toorberg*, in the search for identity, returns to the farm novel convention and is regarded as having a hopeful approach to the future and to reconciliation (Warnes, 2009). Looking back at South African history includes looking back at, not only Dutch and British settler colonialism, but also at apartheid and the border war. Van Heerden’s ‘grensliteratuur’, particularly the pairing of the short stories “My Kubaan” (1983) and “My Afrikaner” (1988), “constitute[s] the first steps towards the fictional imagining of an ethical reciprocity” (Warnes, 2009:79). Such works are also regarded as being “among the few representative literary texts that reflect critically on the consequences of South Africa’s involvement in Angola during the Cold War” (Popescu, 2008:92).

Interrogations of the past inevitably lead to the unearthing of trauma which in turn leads to remorse, confession, retrospection and questions of complicity. Critics have examined how Van Heerden’s novels address trauma and its consequences. *Die swye van Mario Salviati* is an example of a novel trying to “come to terms with a past that now has to be seen from a different perspective” (Van den Berg, 2011:4). Likewise, the powerless narrator in *Die stoetmeester* is seen as a metaphor of “the Afrikaner writer’s struggle for moral credibility in the midst of his insight into the limitations of



his contribution towards the creation of the new South Africa” (Van den Berg, 2011:4). In the same vein, complicity, guilt and betrayal are noted in the novel *Kikoejoe* which is set on a holiday farm in the Karoo (Heyns, 2000).

With identity being linked to the land, many studies on Van Heerden address the identity of the Afrikaner as linked to space and place (Terblanche, 2010; Van Coller, 2008; Warnes, 2009). Also discussed is the sense of magical realism that the eerie, haunting landscape of the Karoo incites in people (Warnes, 2009). The landscape is central to novels such as *Ancestral Voices*, *Leap Year*, *Kikuyu* and *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* and Van Heerden is quoted as saying, “the Karoo is the great protagonist in my work. It comes from my background and where I grew up” [my translation] (Terblanche, 2010:9).<sup>12</sup> The movement of the Afrikaner between farm and city, and how Afrikaans literature reflects that movement, is often the focus of interest, especially in connection with novels such as *Die swye van Mario Salviati* (Van Coller, 2008:34) and *Toorberg* (Warnes, 2009).

In conclusion, Van Heerden’s novels are concerned with the condition of being an Afrikaner, a South African and/or an African, and have inspired critics to explore his treatment of identity, history, trauma and their relationship to space. As we have seen, Van Coller’s note that Afrikaans literature chronicles Afrikaans history applies to Van Heerden’s oeuvre as well. His work represents aspects of the earliest days of Afrikanerdom in a continual trajectory into the present, without shying away from difficult aspects of that history (from tackling, for example, the way land was acquired by Afrikaners or their involvement in an unpopular war). This brief survey corroborates Van Heerden’s earlier comments about his oeuvre: that it is made up of ‘pieces’ that ‘converse’ with one another.

The studies and debates that I have mentioned above refer to Van Heerden’s work in general, or include his work in more general literary commentary. In the subsection that follows, I shall refer to the most significant critical contributions regarding the two

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<sup>12</sup> “die Karoo is die groot protagonis in my werk. Dit kom maar uit my agtergrond en waar ek grootgeword het” (Terblanche, 2010:9).

novels on which I will concentrate in this study, namely *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*.

Literary Criticism of 'Ancestral Voices' & '30 Nights in Amsterdam'

For this subsection I have, once again, selected articles from a wealth of commentary. I have concentrated, primarily, on articles written in English and/or regarding the novels in English translation, as my study focuses on the novels in English. As with the studies on Van Heerden's work in general (discussed above), a selection of critical studies on the novels, *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, suggests that much of the critical commentary focuses on the theme of identity and its links to history, trauma and space.

Identity, naturally, has strong links with family and family history. One study of *Ancestral Voices* discusses the hybrid nature of an Afrikaans family (the Moolman family), which has whites and so-called 'coloureds' in its family tree. The two sides of the family have to come to terms with each other during a major crisis and, in this way, the novel presents Afrikaners as both white and coloured. As Van Heerden has pointed out "more than half of Afrikaans speakers are not white, but so-called coloured South Africans" (Van Heerden, 2012). By presenting both coloured and white Afrikaners confronting a problem together, *Ancestral Voices* is regarded as refiguring "the Afrikaner as one who investigates his crimes, who acknowledges his coloured offspring, and sheds his arrogant whiteness" (Wicomb, 1998:376).

Another study writes about an "entire culture [that] has become estranged" (Irlam, 2004:703). While arguing that in Afrikaans literature, authors normally interrogate the past, the critic argues that *Ancestral Voices* is an example of literature that seeks to provide distance from "the abominations of the ancestors" (Van Heerden qtd in Irlam, 2004:703). The study goes on to cite *Ancestral Voices* as an example of Afrikaans literature that could be called "colonial gothic", as it deals with a lost past that refuses to be forgotten, and returns in a way that appears 'strange' — 'strange' because, in the novel, the boundaries between the living and the dead are removed (Irlam, 2004:703). The return of a forgotten past in this strange and haunting way implies that traumatic memories have been submerged or subverted (and I will discuss this at a later stage in

my study). This paradigm is also addressed in a study that examines the elements of magical realism in *Toorberg*, here a literary device stemming from old Afrikaans tales of ghosts (Warnes, 2011:125). Ten of the twenty-four characters in *Toorberg* are dead and function in the form of spectres who take on roles of living people; as regards magical realism, the novel is likened to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Warnes, 2011:125). Just as the Buendía family in *One Hundred Years* are bound to the village of Macondo, so the Moolmans in *Ancestral Voices* are bound to Toorberg — the mountain, the farm and the village. And with regard to time, “the story moves backward and forward in time, with forebears taking part in the events, much as the writing of García Márquez” (Toerien, 1987:484).

As I have already mentioned, identity in relation to a place, or to the land, is a theme explored in the genre of the plaasroman, and many critics consider *Toorberg* as an example of a plaasroman (Warnes, 2009:79). An investigation of the novel establishes how Van Heerden, whilst using a literary form (the plaasroman) that has traditionally “obscure[d]... power relations” (Warnes, 2011:121), also exposes power relations embedded in the relationships between people and land. The investigation also details myths that have arisen about the Afrikaner and the land, and explains how Van Heerden draws “on the resources of the genre in order to critique from within its cultural and political implications” (Warnes, 2011:124).

If Van Heerden is seen to be offering a cultural and political critique with his novel, what conclusions are critics drawing from it? One line of appraisal is that Van Heerden's explorations of the past are therapeutic and/or reconciliatory. On the one hand, *Ancestral Voices* is regarded as a pessimistic novel that “subverts the tradition of the Afrikaans farm novel by trying to exorcise Afrikaner guilt [and that] leaves the reader with little hope for the future” (L Viljoen, 1993:21). On the other hand, it has been asserted that, ultimately, the focus of *Ancestral Voices* is on reconciliation, even though the search for truth has been inconclusive (Wicomb, 1998). Yet another critic is struck by *Ancestral Voices* as being “a useful text for a study of the heritage and disposition of the Afrikaner” (Freed, 1992:3) saying that the novel seems to “brood on history” by looking at the past and the present in a way that leaves her looking forward to Van Heerden's future writing about the future of the Afrikaner. I refer to Warnes

(2011:13) once again, in this regard. He has commented that *Toorberg* offers “an alternative set of possibilities” with its reconciliatory conclusion, and that by presenting exclusion as a sin, Van Heerden’s novel is an “important turning point” for both the plaasroman and Afrikaans literature.

After reading *Ancestral Voices*, one critic commented that “it would be fascinating to have Mr Van Heerden’s version of what comes next for his people” (Freed, 1992:3). With *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, Van Heerden’s ‘people’ continue the search for identity and, as with Van Heerden’s other work, critics of the novel have subsequently explored his treatment of identity, history, trauma, and relationship to space in this novel as well.

The search for identity in *30 Nights in Amsterdam* involves, as the title suggests, a visit to Amsterdam. The novel is set in the Karoo and in Amsterdam and the geographical journey that the protagonist undertakes “runs parallel to a psychological or inner journey of self discovery and self disclosure” [my translation] (Human, 2008:2).<sup>13</sup> On this journey, seen from the perspective of a middle-aged white Afrikaner man, an “idiosyncratic family history” [my translation]<sup>14</sup> is explored and is found to be bound up with the “history of the white Afrikaner in South Africa and Africa” [my translation] (Human, 2008:2).<sup>15</sup> The sense of belonging central to white Afrikaner history is, as discussed earlier, closely associated with the Afrikaner’s affinity with the land. In *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, there are several place names that are synonymous with famous military battle scenes in South Africa (Anker, 2009:242). This again supports Van Coller’s assertion that Afrikaans literature chronicles Afrikaner history. Furthermore, the strong contrasts between the geographical spaces that the characters travel to and through — for example, between Graaff-Reinet and Amsterdam, between the Karoo and the Netherlands, and between the dry South African landscape and the waterlogged landscapes of the Netherlands — highlight the issues of home and

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<sup>13</sup> “loop parallel aan ‘n psigologiese of innerlike reis van selfontdekking en selfopenbaring” (Human, 2008:2).

<sup>14</sup> “idiosynkratiese familiegeskiedenis” (Human, 2008:2).

<sup>15</sup> “geskiedenis van die wit Afrikaner in Suid-Afrika en Afrika” (Human, 2008:2).

belonging. It is the South African spaces that the characters long for (Anker, 2009:242).

In addition to geographical and psychological journeys, the novel also recounts an “emotional migration” and a confrontation with traumas of the past as the characters “retrospectively travel to the landscape of the past, to ultimately make sense of, and be liberated from, the dark secrets of the past” [my translation] (Nel, 2010:166).<sup>16</sup> In addressing traumas suffered, the author extends the link between identity and space in this novel to include the body as space (Nel, 2010:171-178). The body is shown to be a place of resistance and rebellion, for example, the body of Zan in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*: “Indeed, her body becomes a social, historical and ideological construct, and a third space of cultural and political protest” [my translation] (Nel, 2010:177).<sup>17</sup> As far as magical realism is concerned, some critics see a progressive change in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. The magical realism (as related to trauma) of the earlier novels is regarded as giving way to a “more sober, but at the same time also ironic and humorous, touch” [my translation] (Human, 2008:3).<sup>18</sup>

A further study debates the merits of the aesthetic and the therapeutic approach in literature, and comments on how Van Heerden has used a blend of both the therapeutic and the aesthetic approaches (John, 2010). (In John’s study, the therapeutic approach is seen to be a ‘borrowing’ from the terms of the discipline of psychology and, therefore, as a pragmatic approach.) In *30 Nights in Amsterdam* the “idea of personal healing through ‘narrative’... is uniquely combined with... the aesthetic, with art” (John, 2010:192). Similarly, the role of the imagination, the artist and the writer is discussed in relation to this novel (Human, 2008:6; Nel, 2010:169).

In conclusion, I mention again Van Heerden’s comments regarding his oeuvre constantly accommodating new material. My brief critical survey of the reception of *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* shows that the later novel can be

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<sup>16</sup> “terugskouend na die landskap van die verlede reis, om uiteindelik sin te maak en bevry te word van die donker geheime van die verlede” (Nel, 2010:166).

<sup>17</sup> “Haar liggaam word inderdaad ‘n sosiale, historiese en ideologiese konstruk, en a derderuimte van kulturele en politieke protes” (Nel, 2010:177).

<sup>18</sup> “meer sobere, dog tergelykertyd ook ironiese en humoriestiese, aanslag” (Human, 2008:3).

considered to be in 'conversation' with the earlier novel, and that critics seem to regard it as a progression in the conversation.

#### Dissertations Focusing on Van Heerden's Novels

In addition to the many critical articles discussed, a number of Masters' and Doctoral dissertations have contributed in-depth studies of Van Heerden's work. On investigation, I found that the majority of theses focusing on Van Heerden's writing were undertaken in Afrikaans. However, there are a number of studies conducted in English, focusing especially on novels in English translation, as well as studies undertaken at universities outside of South Africa. I will mention, first, studies of Van Heerden's work in general and/or in conjunction with the work of other authors. Most theses have focused, as with the studies mentioned earlier, on history, identity, space, and trauma.

A focus on the historical aspects of the novel, *Casspirs en campari's*, is invited by Van Heerden's description and sub-title of the novel, "an historical entertainment". In the novel the protagonist makes a choice, from a privileged position, to be an activist as his reaction to and against apartheid. One thesis highlights the historical and postmodern aspects of the novel and draws on Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, asserting that as "history is of central importance to postmodernist authors", *Casspir's en campari's* "can be regarded as illustrative of the various visions of history prevalent in postmodernist literature" (Visagie, 1995). Another study regarding the treatment of history examines the short stories "My Kubaan" (1983) and "My Afrikaner" (1988). It focuses on the short stories' use of a third-person narrator to portray "an alternative vision of historical realities" that "provides a subjective vision of the border war" (Kriel, 1990). Also focusing on *Casspirs en campari's* is a study highlighting the existential problem of the mediator, or the 'in-between', that is, the person/character who "experiences both sides of a contradictory relationship" (Hanekom, 1994). The 'in-between' state, as presented by *Casspirs en campari's*, is also investigated, alternately, in this study, as a dilemma and/or a "spiritual development process" (Hanekom, 1994).

Identity and descent are the focus of a study of *Die swye van Mario Salviati*. This study examines how personal identity is linked to origins, and finds that, by using previously

silenced voices, the novel broadens the perceived identity of the Afrikaner (Taljaard, 2002; see also Breed, 2007). The plaasroman genre — which focuses on the themes of identity, descent and origins — has a prominent place in Afrikaans literature, as discussed earlier, and has developed through various phases over time. One study, that compares the differences and similarities between early examples of the plaasroman and Van Heerden's later plaasroman, *Die stoetmeester*, aims to establish "to what degree socio-political and literary-technical factors influenced [the plaasroman's] development" (Wasserman, 1997). Further interest in *Die stoetmeester* has been on aspects of the novel, such as the partnership between landscape and character, as well as the dominant father figure, and the importance of tradition (Biggs, 1996). Biggs shows how elements of the plaasroman are "rejuvenated in the new farm novel" (1996).

Throughout Van Heerden's oeuvre, there is an intertextual conversation regarding trauma and reconciliation. This intertextual conversation is the theme/topic of a dissertation that includes *Toorberg* in a selection of Van Heerden's novels, and which investigates how Van Heerden depicts the individual and collective processing of trauma, concluding that "Van Heerden's novels confirm the healing potential of narrative" [my translation] (Van Zyl, 2008:124).<sup>19</sup>

Alberts (2006) examines the device of magical realism, which can articulate trauma and therefore facilitate healing. This study aims to ascertain whether Afrikaans literature has its own unique brand of magical realism, as developed from Afrikaans folktales and oral narratives, or whether it has been 'learnt' from the magical realism of West Africa and Latin America. Alberts accordingly examines Etienne van Heerden's novels, *Toorberg*, *Die stoetmeester* and *Die swye van Mario Salviati*, together with some of André Brink's novels. Looking at aspects such as family and society, systems of religion, space, socio-political placement and magic, and by comparing magical realism in West African, Latin American and Afrikaans literature, the conclusion of this thesis is that Afrikaans literature *does* have its own unique form of magical realism.

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<sup>19</sup> "Van Heerden se romans bevestig die helende potensiaal van narratief" (Van Zyl, 2008:124) .

(*Toorberg* has been included here together with other novels by Van Heerden and André Brink.)

The dissertations that I mention below have the novel, *Toorberg*, as their sole (or main) focus.

*Toorberg* appears to be the most studied of all Van Heerden's works and has been approached from a variety of angles. One thesis explores the idea of unchanging physical space as a place where the "present and past can be brought together... in a simultaneous crossing of fact and fantasy, history and the future, life and death" (Paul, 1988). Another study analyses the 'plaasroman', through specific reference to *Toorberg*, as dealing fundamentally with the idea of physical space (Venter, 1993). The argument is that the difference between traditional and modern farm novels is the added dimension of social awareness and Venter, the author, states as an example that "the problems of guilt and moral responsibility are central" (1993) to *Toorberg*.

In connection with historic consciousness, Luther (1990) finds that Van Heerden's characters grapple with problems in the present and look to the past for answers. Studying *Toorberg* (together with other work by Van Heerden), Luther's study (1990) concludes that the present and the past should be examined to allow humankind to understand their role in the present.

In De Beer's study (1991), *Toorberg* is linked intertextually to the rest of Van Heerden's oeuvre, as traced by continuous motifs and themes throughout his novels. Similarly, *Toorberg* is also linked intertextually to the sub-genre of the farm novel and, explicitly to other written texts such as The Bible. De Beer, furthermore, makes intertextual links to the author's life and to South Africa as a context. With regard to style, and through highlighting the magical realism in the novel, *Toorberg* is likened to Gabriel García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) (De Beer, 1991). (This aspect of magical realism is one that I will examine later in this study, too, in relation to a persistent haunting by the past, and to nostalgia.)

I will mention one further dissertation regarding *Toorberg*, one that highlights letter writing (Nell, 1994). As a literary device, letter writing hints at broader perspectives,



alternative views, and expanded time and space. Letters can be communication from unseen and unheard characters, thus letter writing allows the author to introduce and insinuate the perspective of characters who live/d in another space or time, so that their presence has a spectral quality. Nell's study is similar to a study that highlights letters in *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* (Botha, commenced 2011), the latter of which appears to be the only dissertation focusing on *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* at the time of my research.<sup>20</sup> Botha's study concentrates on letters in *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* and in *In stede van die liefde* (another of Van Heerden's novels).

All of the dissertations mentioned above were written in Afrikaans but there are also studies of Van Heerden's work written in English.

Dissertations that are written in English on Van Heerden's novels include a study of historiographic meta-fiction in his oeuvre (Murray, 2002). This study investigates the alternative ways that Van Heerden's novels present the past and provide a better understanding of the problems of the past.

Outside of South Africa, studies include *Postmodernism, Interculturality, (Post)colonialism: Uwe Timm's 'Morenga' (1978) and Etienne van Heerden's 'Ancestral Voices' (1986)* (Wolff, 2009). Wolff investigates — in German — the ambivalent relationship to the colonial past represented in the novel and the ironic nature of postcolonial and postmodern texts; and explains how the novel combines irony with a gaze towards the past.

Another study, a doctoral dissertation written in English, examines postcolonial gothic fiction and identifies four distinct functions of the gothic within postcolonial writing (Azzam, 2007). In a chapter of Azzam's study — dedicated to the plaasroman — Van Heerden's *Ancestral Voices* and *Leap Year* are mentioned as examples of plaasromans written during the "period of ironic revision [of the plaasroman]" (Azzam, 2007:81) between the 1960s and 1990s.

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<sup>20</sup> Botha's study on *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* is incomplete at the time of my writing.

Finally, a thesis — entitled *'In Contempt of our Creator': The Nationalist Past and New Developments in Afrikaans Literature* — also features comment on Van Heerden's writing (Devarenne, 2004).

Reviewing this body of both South African and international dissertations, it is apparent that, although Van Heerden's work has been studied from many angles, little work has been conducted in English regarding his novels or concerning his novels in English translation. Also, I did not detect any work on nostalgia or specifically on postcolonial nostalgia in connection with Van Heerden. Although the historical view, the exploration of identity, the issue of farm and space/place, as well as existential matters have been addressed, I feel that my study, which will touch on each of those matters, will present a fresh view from the perspective of postcolonial nostalgia. At the same time, it is interesting to note that research has also been undertaken at universities outside of South Africa, thus indicating the wide circulation of Van Heerden's work and his relevance in the field of world literature. I have asserted that the postcolonial themes of Van Heerden's novels make them relevant to a global audience, but I must add that it is through translation that his work becomes accessible. In the following section I will discuss a few aspects regarding the global circulation of Van Heerden's writing.

#### *Van Heerden's Work in Global Circulation*

Van Heerden has written (in Afrikaans) a total of eleven novels of which six<sup>21</sup> have been translated into English. Via English translation, the reach of his novels has extended to become part of the system of South African English literature. Furthermore, English, being a global language, allows a literature to be appreciated not only by English-language readers within South Africa, but also by readers in other English-speaking countries, as well as by those who are proficient in English as an additional and international language. Not only has his work been translated into English, it has also been translated into French, Dutch, German, Russian and Greek as

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<sup>21</sup> As I mentioned earlier, a twelfth novel in Afrikaans, *Gifkaroo* is due to be published in 2013 together with its English version — the seventh of Van Heerden's novels to be translated into English — *Poison Karoo* (translated by Isobel Dixon) (Van Heerden, 2013).

well as Hebrew, Danish, Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian, giving him a transnational readership and voice.<sup>22</sup>

The six novels that have been translated into English are *Ancestral Voices* (1989), originally *Toorberg* (1986); *Casspirs and Camparis* (1993), originally *Casspirs en campari's: 'n historiese entertainment* (1991); *Leap Year* (1997), originally *Die stoetmeester* (1993); *Kikuyu* (1998), originally *Kikoejoe* (1996); *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (2003), originally *Die swye van Mario Salviati* (2000); and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* (2011), originally *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* (2008).

My interest here is in, firstly, why these particular novels have been translated — how are texts chosen for translation? The choice of texts to be translated “appears to be governed by conditions within the receiving polysystem” (Gentzler, 2001:117) meaning that the translation of a text is considered first from the perspective and interest of the receiving audience. This brings us back to the question of what has prompted such broad interest in these Afrikaans novels. I reiterate my proposal that, although the subject matter is local (with a distinctly rural and small-town South African setting and Afrikaans characters), the themes are relevant to a global audience. Van Heerden’s novels deal with individuals and society at large coping with change. As a result, the themes of his novels are those of dislocation and ambiguity, and of the question of identity, hybridity and double consciousness, all of which fall within the larger ambit of postcolonial theory and experiential concern. Whether local or global, coping with change is the common denominator. It is my intention to explore the common points of interest between a local Afrikaans readership and a global English-language readership. I aim to show — by using nostalgia as an investigative tool — that Van Heerden’s themes are postcolonial and, therefore, global.

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<sup>22</sup> Here is a list of a few prominent translations: *Toorberg* translated into English by Malcolm Hacksley, 1989; French by Anne Rabinovitch, 1990; Danish by Kurt Strandberg, 1991; Dutch by Rob van der Veer, 1991; Finnish by Arja Gothini, 1992; German by Peter Sulzer, 1993; Swedish by Marianne Ojerskog, 1993 and Norwegian by Kjell Risvik, 1993. *Casspirs en campari's* translated into English by Catherine Knox (1993); Dutch by Riet deJong-Goossens (1994). *Die stoetmeester* translated into English by Malcolm Hacksley (1997); Dutch by Riet de Jong-Goossens (1995). *Kikoejoe* translated into English by Catherine Knox (1998). *Die swye van Mario Salviati* translated into English by Catherine Knox (2002); Dutch by Robert Dorsman (2002).

After having ascertained the reach and interest of Van Heerden's work, and the relevance of his work beyond Afrikaans literature, I will discuss nostalgia as the critical instrument to be used in this comparative study. I would like to explore the concept of nostalgia within the broader spectrum of postcolonial theory/study, and its appropriateness to an analysis of Van Heerden's work. I will indicate the pertinence of nostalgia as a global phenomenon that provides a common literary language allowing certain works to travel from the local to the global audience.

### ***Theoretical Concepts***

#### ***Nostalgia***

Nostalgia is that bitter-sweet feeling that we have all felt at one time or another — that yearning for something past set off by a fleeting glimpse, a smell, a touch or taste, or simply by a memory. Although it is a feeling that we all recognise and to which we can all relate, when pressed, can any of us pinpoint what it is, how it should be dealt with, or what purpose, if any, it serves?

The word nostalgia is made up of two parts: *nost (os)*, meaning a return, and *algia*, which means to feel pain or to care about. Thus, to feel nostalgic is to feel pain with regard to a return home, in other words, to feel homesick or to long for home. This is a feeling that has been recognised for centuries if we consider (as pointed out by Su, 2005:1) that one of the earliest examples of longing for home in literature is to be found in Homer's *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus fights many obstacles (including himself) to satisfy his need to return home. Svetlana Boym, in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), explains that in our more recent history, nostalgia was considered a disease and that, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, using opium or leeches or taking a trip to the Swiss Alps were suggested as possible cures. It was seen then as a physical ailment connected to a longing for a certain place. Today, nostalgia, although no longer perceived as a disease, is still treated with suspicion. Neither the progress of technology nor the 'shrinking' of the world into a global village has diminished its effects. On the contrary, it appears to be more pervasive. Evidence of nostalgia is apparent, for example, from the many examples of its exploitation and commodification in the form of kitsch art and the oversimplified sentimentality used very often in advertising and branding.

Nostalgia appears to be a universal emotion, one that most people recognise but, it also has many negative connotations: for example, it is perceived as sentimental, and over-simplified; either as a biased account of the past, or as over-emotional weakness. It is often, therefore, rejected or denied. Nostalgia is vulnerable to exploitation by, for example, advertisers and politicians — who strive to manipulate emotion — and, in consequence, people (individually and collectively) become suspicious of the power and prevalence of nostalgia. Immigrants, for example, who have more obvious grounds for longing, often regard homesickness and nostalgia as sentimental and as an indulgence, “like a waste of time and an unaffordable luxury” (Boym, 2001:xv). However, nostalgic feelings of longing, of pain and of dissatisfaction are persistent and there has been, in recent years, serious thought regarding nostalgia that acknowledges this “harking back” as a persistent yearning that is a “genuine human need” (Su, 2005:3).

So, nostalgia is persistent, it is a yearning and it is a real need — but what is that yearning *for* and why is it so persistent? Although there is a ‘looking back’ to a distant memory of a longed-for home, is this homesickness necessarily about a place? We have noted that many immigrants do not wish to be nostalgic, that they deny themselves the ‘indulgence’ and regard nostalgia as a derogatory term. Svetlana Boym, herself an immigrant, found, though, that unbidden “phantoms... touched [her]” (Boym, 2001:xv) when she visited a familiar place from her distant past. Even though she was physically at the site about which she was feeling nostalgic, the feelings of longing and nostalgia did not abate. It appears that nostalgia is a yearning not only, or necessarily, for a particular place but, rather, for a place *at a different time*.

Similarly, it has been noted (as mentioned by Walder, 2011) that, historically, outbreaks of nostalgia follow the upheavals of revolutions (and it can be surmised that nostalgia could also follow other traumatic events). This suggests, again, that nostalgia is connected, not only to memories of certain places, but also to the way those places were perceived — imaginatively — in other times. Walder asserts (2011:10) that certain conditions seem to be conducive to nostalgia. The view of time as linear, not cyclical for example, leaves no recourse to the past. Present social and political

conditions, which are inefficient and not satisfactory, may cause a wish to return to a time in the past when conditions were perceived to have been more desirable. Also, objects and images from the past stimulate the senses, as do the appearances of buildings and styles of architecture. Having noted the conditions that are conducive to nostalgia, and pointing out their strong link to time, Walder makes the further point that these conditions are also conditions of modernity.

Similarly, Boym has also asserted that “nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (Boym, 2001:xv). We could say, therefore, that the modern condition is conducive to nostalgia, which in turn explains nostalgia’s prevalence in contemporary (and global) society, and why Svetlana Boym has been led to assert that nostalgia is a “symptom of our age” (Boym, 2001:xvi). It is a symptom of modern life, a sign of the condition of modern life, pointing perhaps to something that is not quite right. As a society, as humanity, we are yearning for a more satisfying experience of life and of the world, in short we are yearning for ‘home’, a space in which we feel comfortable and to which we belong. The author, Kazuo Ishiguro, is quoted as saying that “we carry some sort of distant memory of that [better] world somewhere, even though it is a flawed memory, a flawed vision” (qtd in Su, 2005:10).

The symptoms of nostalgia are evident in its manifestations in many areas of modern life and its expression through various mediums, as Boym (2001) discusses. The most obvious examples (by their size and physical prominence) are monuments. Statues, buildings, tombs and stadiums are erected as monuments to commemorate something or someone (to make sure that a community remembers together and does not forget). Parades or festivals are participatory activities that serve a similar purpose to that of monuments in linking people and ideas and producing a sense of shared belonging as they reinforce a commonality. In the same way, rituals and traditions, threading through both the daily and the larger cycles of life, bind people to a common way of life and to a particular outlook. Even the preparation and consumption of food, the most elementary and essential of commodities, is invested with meaning during communal gatherings, which have links to the past and to other people. None of these activities are innocent – they have meaning, whether explicit or implicit – and the meanings we assign to them are ambiguous, ambivalent, mysterious and, of course,

nostalgic. Again the question is, can those meanings (those ‘somethings’) be identified and/or articulated? To articulate and explore the unexplainable, humankind has, through the ages, turned to art — in the images captured in painting or photography, in sculpture, and in the words and language used in literature.

In literature, nostalgic memories can be recorded by the author and explored by the reader. It is to the manifestation of nostalgia in literature (intentional or unintentional/inadvertent) that I turn my attention in this study: to ascertain how nostalgia has been expressed and what its possible meanings (and purposes) could be. Nostalgia is a form of memory, a form of remembering. But nostalgic memory is made up of specifically pleasant memories — it bathes the past in a rosy glow — and can, therefore, never give a complete account of the past. We can look at nostalgia from another angle, though, and consider it in relation to amnesia, in relation to forgetting instead of remembering. Although nostalgic behaviour and activities can foreground pleasant memories, for example through tradition and ritual, nostalgia can, alternatively, by its persistence, also prompt the awakening of latent painful memory. It can lead to what has been forgotten, or more importantly, to what has been submerged or subverted — and what has been submerged or subverted is likely to be traumatic memory. For example, sensory triggers, such as smells or tastes, can stir nostalgic feelings of longing that are much stronger than seems appropriate or necessary, and investigation of those strong reactions can lead to the unearthing of other memories — traumatic memories. As Walder asserts

... the rosy, sentimental glow most commonly associated with nostalgia is only part of the story, and... pursuing its manifestations with a proper sense of the complex of feelings and attitudes it engages, and the contexts upon which it draws, reveals its potential as a source of understanding and creativity. (Walder, 2011:3)

To begin an exploration of the ‘complex of feelings and attitudes it engages’ and to start thinking about the ‘contexts upon which it draws’, I suggest that we return to the question that I posed earlier. I asked: if nostalgia is a yearning, then ‘what is that yearning *for*?’ and addressed the question by discussing nostalgia’s relation to time and place. I will expand on that connection with the intention also of addressing the question ‘why is nostalgia so persistent?’

To be nostalgic (that is, to long for home) implies a movement from one time or place to another — from one space to another space — and to look at one space from the perspective of another. To have been in two different spaces, though, implies that even in looking at one space, the mental image of the other is likely to influence the view. Inadvertently, or not, there will be a comparison. The original view will be by the subsequent view, and vice versa. This results in a double perspective because neither space can be denied or disregarded. Two images are superimposed: “of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life” (Boym, 2001:xiv).

This double perspective is a feature of the postcolonial condition and especially of the migrant. Rushdie (1991), Said (2001), and Boehmer (1995) each discuss the ‘double vision’ or ‘double perspective’ of the migrant, the exile and/or the (post)colonial writer, or person, as being in a privileged, albeit challenging, even painful, position that gives a unique perspective. Rushdie refers to the migrant’s ‘double perspective’ (1991) as a consequence of living between cultures; Said states that the exile has “plurality of visions [that] gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (2001:186); whilst Boehmer says that colonial writers “learnt to exploit the resources of their own half-and-half status” (1995:117). The study of nostalgia, therefore, can be a useful addition to the toolbox of postcolonial analysis. I suggest that nostalgia and memories of trauma also provide a double perspective. Like the double exposure of two images on film, nostalgia and traumatic memory can complement each other, each contributing to the other. Nostalgic memory can provide a ‘safe place’ from which to view uncomfortable or traumatic memory; it can be used as a starting point for an investigation of a past. Traumatic memory, being so overwhelming, can then be balanced by the pleasant memories that nostalgia provides. In other words, by allowing both trauma and nostalgia to be given a voice, each version of remembering is deepened and an overall broader, more nuanced perspective can be gained. This double perspective allows us to be “both actor and spectator” of our past, as Walder (2011:9) claims when he refers to Proust as a master of representing sensory memory and enabling us to revive “not merely the past moment, but the epiphanic experience of the past in its entirety” (2011:9). This suggests “the idea of nostalgia as a pathway



to spirituality” (2011:9). I aim to explore the novels of Etienne van Heerden with this thought in mind, and to consider the impact of nostalgia on his exploration of the past.

Having discussed the double perspective that nostalgia affords, I would now like to concentrate exclusively on the complexities of nostalgia itself. There are arguments promoting nostalgia as a positive concept, but also arguments denouncing it as either useless or harmful. Could both of these arguments have merit? Could there be different types of nostalgia that might be used in different ways?

I touched earlier on some typical reservations about nostalgia, for example, that it provides a biased and subjective perspective and is not a truthful or accurate portrayal of the past. There are more serious criticisms, though, including the view that a nostalgic approach would be utopian and therefore limited and limiting, or the view that by concentrating attention on an ideal perspective of the past, a greater knowledge about the world is inhibited (as noted by Su, 2005:8). A chapter of John Su’s book tackles one of the “central critiques of nostalgia” (Su, 2005:18), that is, that nostalgia encourages passivity and xenophobia because it “represents a dangerous reaction to collective trauma, leading individuals to indulge in fantasies of the past rather than to confront crises facing them” (Su, 2005:18). These are serious charges and correspond with my earlier comment that the concept of nostalgia is more problematic than might be initially apparent. But, as with any complex concept, there is potential for positive, not only negative, impact.

Although, as discussed, nostalgia appears to be an emotion universally recognised, reactions to it vary and its manifestation may dictate its value as a positive or negative force. Boym has advanced the idea of typologies of nostalgia (Boym, 2001:xviii) which place the emotion, or preoccupation, in two distinct camps: restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. For an explanation of Boym’s typologies, it will be helpful here to return to our original analysis of the word ‘nostalgia’. In line with the two parts of the word, *nostos* and *algia*, the two types of nostalgia have been distinguished as *restorative* or as *reflective*.

Restorative nostalgia is concerned with the return home. It seeks to restore the ‘home’ that has been lost and regards itself, not “as nostalgia, but as truth and

tradition" (Boym, 2001:xviii). It is the impetus of national and religious festivals – activities that seek to restore a feeling of togetherness, of belonging and of wholeness. (This would be the type of nostalgia that prompts the xenophobia and passivity mentioned in John Su's book.) Walder says that the way history is regarded is what distinguishes the two types of nostalgia and that restorative nostalgics regard history as "tradition, myth and monument" (2011:11), whereas reflective nostalgics see history as "partial, fragmentary" and they "linger on ruins and loss" (Walder, 2011:11).

Reflective nostalgia deals with the longing, with *algia*. It "delays the homecoming" by facing or dwelling on the pain of longing, confronting the "ambivalences of human longing" and the "contradictions of modernity" (Boym, 2001:xviii). It explores ways of "inhabiting many places at once" (Boym, 2001:xviii); it utilises the double vision, as touched on earlier, to contemplate the past, or that space that is longed for, from the perspective of the present and the currently inhabited space. Reflective nostalgia is contemplative and, as Boym says, it can "at best... present an ethical and creative challenge" (Boym, 2001:xviii). It is the creative challenge that doctors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were relying on when they suggested that those suffering from nostalgia should consult with poets and philosophers.

Turning specifically to postcolonial writing, Walder agrees that there is a "dark side of nostalgia" (2011:14), and quotes Walcott's suggestion that there has been a tendency for postcolonial literature to be "literature of revenge" or "literature of remorse" (qtd in Walder, 2011:14). However, there is also a potential for the positive influence of nostalgia in that it allows for self-reflexivity, which aids an acceptance of the past and the present, and a reimagining of the future. This "tough aesthetic... uses what the past has delivered" and should be part of a "complex negotiation between remembering and forgetting" (Walder, 2011:16).

Let me sum up, briefly, my discussion and explanation of nostalgia. It is a longing type of remembrance, a positive, pleasant reminiscence of a space (a time or physical place) that can no longer be recovered or revisited. It is personal, subjective and persistent, and speaks of a need that demands to be satisfied. And, depending on one's

interpretation, it can be either a limiting preoccupation or a reassuring emotion that 'holds your hand' in your encounters with the past.

As a literary tool for the writer, nostalgia can be used to facilitate the integration of traumatic versions of the past, to nudge dormant memory, and to hint persistently at current dissatisfactions. For the reader and critic, instances of nostalgia can be considered as indications in the text of subverted and submerged elements of the past: they can highlight, by comparison, the unsatisfactory present, and can provide impressions with which to imagine the future anew. As I hope to have suggested earlier on in this chapter, nostalgia is a concept and experience particularly pertinent to Etienne van Heerden's fiction. In the chapters that follow I intend to identify instances of nostalgia in the chosen novels and to analyse their implications and impact for the author, the character and the reader. Exploring instances of nostalgia in literary texts will prompt pertinent questions, for example, 'what has evoked the nostalgia?' and 'what is the object of the nostalgia?' In searching for the answers to these questions, other concepts, generally explored within postcolonial study, must be considered to supplement analysis and to aid further investigation. I will discuss nostalgia in relation to people and spaces, traumatic memory, and haunting. As Walder suggests:

... [T]he imaginative reconstruction of the past may be a conservative and parochial activity, reflecting a 'restorative' desire for belonging that overrides distance; equally, it may be a radical and disturbing activity, reflecting a challenging sense of the inadequacy of recalled or... reclaimed images of earlier times and places; or it may in complex ways address both possibilities. In any case, nostalgia has a power that can be used in a multitude of ways, which is what makes it worth exploring; it is also what raises the issue of the ethics of remembering, and/or forgetting. (Walder, 2011:12)

### *Nostalgia: People & Spaces*

To reiterate, the definition of nostalgia is the yearning for a return to home. It is a longing to be in another place, another time, that is, to be in a different space.<sup>23</sup> We have discussed how nostalgic feelings for a place do not always dissipate even when the individual is physically present in that place. It is not simply the place that is longed for, but that place at another time. This suggests that the place does not stay the same — that it is not static — but that it changes, just as time does. Earlier thought had it that space was constant, even though it was accepted that time was not. “Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile” (Foucault qtd in Wegner, 2002:179). Diverse studies within various disciplines, however, have challenged the “concept of space as an empty container in which human activities unfold” (Wegner, 2002:181). It has been found, on the contrary, that “space itself is both a production, shaped through a diverse range of social *processes* and human interventions, and a *force* that, in turn, influences, directs and delimits possibilities of action and ways of human being in the world” (Wegner, 2002:181). Also, the “apparent stability” of social space, according to Lefebvre (qtd in Wegner, 2002:182), is “short lived and contingent”. In other words, social space is modified and influenced by us (humanity) but we, in turn, are influenced by the space we inhabit, which is constantly changing and developing.

So, there is a link, a relationship, between people and spaces because, as Viljoen says, “both the concept of space and that of identity have to do with our experience as human beings” (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:12). He continues that “we can thus view the relationship between space and identity as a symbiotic relationship, a mutual dependency creating meaningfulness” (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:12). It follows, then, that when people are nostalgic for a particular space they are longing for the way they felt in that time and place — for the person they were, for the identity that particular space afforded. In order to explore nostalgic references to

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<sup>23</sup> There are different connotations to the words ‘space’ and ‘place’. ‘Space’ is considered more neutral than ‘place’. ‘Place’ is “understood as a matter of the human response to physical surroundings of locations” (Malpas, 1999:30) and “implies a strong emotional tie, temporary or more long lasting, between a person and a particular physical location” (Sime, 1986:50). I will use the word ‘space’ here to refer to a particular place at a particular time.

place/space in literature, therefore, we need to understand the relationship between the person and the place in the present and the past (that is, both in the current space and in the space longed for). What has changed — the person, the space, or the relationship between the two?

In postcolonial studies, this relationship between people and spaces represents an important and prominent new area of investigation. Many people in the modern world are living in 'different spaces': different in the sense that they have physically moved from one place to another (for example, the migrant or exile) or that the place they are in has changed and their relationship to it is different (for example, there has been a change in the power structures of a country or region and societal status/hierarchy has changed). Furthermore, literature is a site where people can express and share their experiences with different spaces and it is in "literary and cultural texts" that we can see reflected the "changes in actual spatial practices" (Wegner, 2002:186).

In South/African literature, the link between people and spaces is particularly important. In Afrikaans literature, for example, the themes of identity and place are often featured because the Afrikaner has, historically, been strongly associated with the land and with the farm. However, the very idea of being a South African is contentious and ambivalent because of the question of who and what a South African is or should be. In the post-apartheid period the relationship between people and places has changed significantly, and this has had a radical impact on the concept of South African identity.

Identity and belonging, as well as the relationship between people and spaces, are themes that Van Heerden explores in *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. I aim to examine the author's nostalgic approach to these complex relationships and to ascertain the nature of the characters' nostalgic feelings towards significant sites. Viljoen has said, "significant places acquire mythic proportions... that satisfy the deepest human yearnings even if only temporarily" (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:21). If so, what deep yearnings are satisfied by the nostalgic 'visits' that are made to significant places in Van Heerden's books? I suspect that 'visiting' a space

nostalgically, knowing that all space is socially produced, allows us to take an objective look at how that particular space is constructed and thus what social power of influence it has. By returning and validating that space, while keeping in mind that it is a construct, we can move beyond rigid perceptions/attitudes. In other words, we look at the spaces for which we are nostalgic with the eyes of the present moment — thus exercising double vision and gaining a new perspective. Walder says that “the more conscious we are of our own nostalgia, the more we reflect upon it, the more aware we may become of our history” (Walder, 2011:9). Once it is accepted that identity is founded on something that is constructed, it can be accepted that identity is not fixed and can then be accordingly re-imagined.

With regard to people and spaces, then, we have found that by ‘revisiting’ a place that is nostalgically longed for, the influences inherent in that place can be (re)considered and the site can be viewed from a new perspective. Furthermore, it is possible that taking a different view could reveal previously hidden or subverted memories. Nostalgic trips to the past do not simply mean that only the pleasant memories associated with nostalgia will be encountered.

#### *Nostalgia: Trauma and Articulation*

Earlier I mentioned that for many critics nostalgia is a form of memory that selectively recalls *pleasant* memory (and, therefore, cannot possibly give a complete account). Memory, whether personal or collective, is subjective and selective so that the parts that we do not want to know, or do not want to remember, can simply be omitted. The point here is that memory (in its various forms) does not tell the whole story. However, there are parts of one’s life story on which nostalgia will not focus, because it is within the factual, ordinary memory (personal and historic) that a recall of trauma resides, never within the nostalgic. I would now like to pay closer attention to how, as I have already said, nostalgia — together with traumatic memory — can form a double perspective, a dual view, a fuller picture of the past.

The word ‘trauma’, originating from the Greek word ‘traûma’, means ‘wound’ and implies a physical or psychic wound. Psychic wounds are not visible and traumatic memories can either be subverted by the psyche so that the individual does not

remember the event, or the traumatic memories can dominate memory, obliterating or colouring all other aspects of recall.

Exploring nostalgia in a literary text will prompt questions such as: ‘what has evoked this nostalgia?’ or ‘why is this character nostalgic?’ But the question could also be: ‘what memories are associated with this case of nostalgia?’ and the answer, very often, is that the memories associated with nostalgia are of a traumatic time or event, memories that have been forgotten or, more seriously, are memories that have been subverted. As Walcott has asserted (in relation to the traumas of colonisation), “traumas... must, in a sense, be forgotten as a means of survival... in time, the slave surrendered to amnesia” (Walcott qtd in Edwards, 2008:132). Amnesia, he claims, is our inheritance as the “true history of the New World”. Much of the work done in postcolonial writing aims to fill in the gaps in records and narratives of the past — the forgotten parts, the parts that have not been written/told.

Whether acknowledged or not, however, trauma remains etched in one’s memory and has influence over an individual or over a whole society “...for trauma is that which inverts linear history, that which forever inserts a wedge into history’s doors, keeping them permanently open, preventing closure...” (Punter, 2000:137). In other words, the trauma, the wound, does not go away and will not heal until it is confronted — but how can something be confronted if it cannot be remembered? Slavoj Žižek says that

there is an inherent link between the notions of trauma and repetition, signalled in Freud’s well-known motto that what one is not able to remember, one is condemned to repeat: a trauma is by definition something one is not able to remember... as such, it repeats itself indefinitely, returning to haunt the subject — more precisely, what repeats itself is the very failure, impossibility even to repeat/recollect the trauma properly. (qtd in Wolfreys, 2002:136)

“Do you remember?” is a question that literature seems to ask consistently in one way or another (Punter, 2000:131) and it appears that what is recounted is what can be remembered. But what cannot be remembered also finds its way onto the page, surreptitiously, there to be deciphered by the reader and critic. This is “literature’s memory work”, says Wolfreys (2002:131), and he goes on to say that “literature *just is* testimony”.

The aim of articulating trauma in postcolonial writing is that “if a trauma can be explained, can be represented in speech or writing, then it sometimes exorcises the trauma that has haunted the subject or the community” (Edwards, 2008:136). “These acts of remembering are recorded with the hope that abuses of power will not be repeated and that the process of articulation will enable the individual and the community to heal and move on...” (Edwards, 2008:138). To reiterate, nostalgia can facilitate the articulation of trauma (by, for example, awakening subverted traumatic memory, and/or by balancing and complementing traumatic memory). Nostalgia can help an individual and/or a community to recuperate, heal and integrate traumatic memories.

#### *Nostalgia: Haunting & Ghosts*

The articulation of trauma, in the form of literary language, is an attempt to convey that which is “outside of language” (Herman qtd in Edwards, 2008:136). Literary language attempts to put into words something that has been suppressed because it is “unspeakable and unrepresentable” (Herman qtd in Edwards, 2008:136). Some traumas, however, are more “unspeakable and unrepresentable” than others. Toni Morrison has asserted that “unspeakable things unspoken” can be represented by the “literary use of haunting” (qtd in Edwards, 2008:119).

I have said that, in exploring instances of nostalgia, it is inevitable that we will encounter traumatic memories. It is also possible that we will face scenes of hauntedness, scenes that are suggested sites of repressed memory. Like nostalgia, hauntedness is a provocative emotion, an unsatisfied and persistent call from the past — it is (a symptom of) the repressed insisting on return. Homi Bhabha says (in regard to the collective haunting of a nation) that “repression always leads to a return of the repressed and that, as a result, the ‘unified’ nation is haunted by that which has been erased...” (qtd in Edwards, 2008:127). In other words, a psychic wound, or a trauma that has been repressed will not stay forgotten forever, and its attempts to be remembered or recalled can be manifested as a haunting.

It has been asserted that trauma “effects an incision” in the self and splits one into two (Felman and Laub qtd in Wolfreys, 2002:139) in a process called “internal psychic



splitting” (Abraham and Torok qtd in Wolfreys, 2002:139). “These two selves are the one who experiences and the one who survives” (King qtd in Wolfreys, 2002:139). The one who survives, however, cannot ever be free of the one who experiences. In an attempt to explain the idea of the ever-present phantom, David Punter (2000:66-67) recounts the story of a man whose arm was severed in an accident involving a machine. That morning, however, he had suffered another accident — he got a splinter under his fingernail — and “for the rest of his life he suffered constant pain from the non-existent splinter under his non-existent fingernail” (Punter, 2000:67). In this case, the one who survives the trauma of the severed arm is haunted by the pain of the one who experienced the splinter as well as the accident with the machine. The pain in the phantom limb insistently prompts the traumatic memory.

Haunting and nostalgia are very similar in that they both prompt the memory by bearing memories (or messages) from the past that will not allow movement into the future without being acknowledged. But haunting is the opposite of nostalgia. Nostalgia is an evocation, it is gentle and pleasant, something you move towards; it coaxes you. Haunting, on the other hand, is a provocation. Ghosts are frightening, are something you try to escape. Ghosts, like trauma, are difficult to face but, like nostalgia, ghosts persistently raise memories and emotions that must be faced and acknowledged in order to form a more complete, integrated picture of the past.

In the postcolonial world, pictures or accounts of the past are often incomplete. Edwards says that “the nation relies on repression to manufacture a homogenous culture” (2008:127) in the struggle to form and assert itself. However, Bhabha avers that the repressed will return and that “the nation is haunted by an uncanny return of the differences that have been denied” (qtd in Edwards, 2008:127). In postcolonial writing, the ‘return of the repressed’ is apparent in the ghosts and the hauntings that often feature, and some postcolonial literature has even been labelled ‘postcolonial gothic’, conveying the idea that there has been a transfer of a “European genre [that is, gothic]<sup>24</sup> to a colonial environment” (Newman qtd in Edwards, 2008:120). The

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<sup>24</sup> A Gothic novel is a story of terror and suspense, usually set in a gloomy old castle or monastery (hence ‘Gothic’, a term applied to medieval architecture and thus associated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with superstition).... In an extended sense, many novels that do not have a medievalized setting, but which

concept, 'postcolonial gothic', seems apt for the Afrikaans plaasroman with its prevalence of ghosts and haunting. Close examination of the ghosts in Afrikaans literature (and in the plaasroman) are likely, therefore, to reveal traumas and expose gaps that have been left in the story of the past — the gaps that postcolonial writing seeks to fill. As Abraham and Torok assert "...what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (qtd in Punter, 2000:63). I would add that 'the secrets of others' referred to here could also apply to the secrets that our other self keeps from us — that is, the secrets of the traumatised self that is left behind by the self that survives the trauma, the self that has repressed the painful memory.

We can see, then, that, within postcolonial studies, an understanding of spectral criticism and an awareness of the concepts of ghosts and haunting are important additional concepts to be used and explored in conjunction with nostalgia. An understanding of spectral criticism and what it yields when applied to the reading of a literary text will be complementary to the nostalgic investigation of the two novels in this study, as each novel presents sites of haunting and, therefore, suggests that 'unspeakable things' are waiting to be 'spoken' or expressed in one way or another. To reiterate, articulation — even when prompted by nostalgia — can exorcise the haunting of a trauma and "the process of articulation [can] enable the individual and the community to heal and move on..." (Edwards, 2008:138). In the context of this study, if/when the exploration of the concept and application of nostalgia in Van Heerden's novels leads to scenes of hauntedness, the inherent trauma of those scenes will be examined, in conjunction with nostalgia, in an attempt at a greater understanding of the texts and of the appeal of the texts. I aim to explain how nostalgia has aided in the articulation of 'unspeakable things' in *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, and how that articulation is relevant to a global readership.

### ***Structure of this Dissertation***

This dissertation comprises three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices.

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share a comparably sinister, grotesque, or claustrophobic atmosphere, have been classed as Gothic (Baldick, 2008:144).

Chapter 1, entitled 'Literary Background and Theoretical Concepts' has introduced the topic, primary sources of data (i.e. the novels), and primary sources of theory. It has provided information on the author, his literary background, and a selection of relevant critical commentaries, including dissertations.

Chapter 2 provides a text analysis of *Ancestral Voices* using nostalgia as the main critical tool. Instances of nostalgia in the novel are identified and analysed. I discuss the localized content and context of the novel, as well as the growth and development of characters and themes.

Chapter 3 offers a text analysis of *30 Nights in Amsterdam* and a comparison with the earlier novel, *Ancestral Voices*. I discuss the trajectory of the development of literary themes provided by the scope of the novels as a pair and, furthermore, the shift in focus from local content and context (in the earlier novel) to global content and context (of the later novel).

In the Conclusion I summarise my findings and suggest possible avenues for further studies. Following the Conclusion is the Bibliography, listing all sources and references. Finally, two appendices provide supplementary information on works by Van Heerden mentioned in this study, and of his novels translated to English.

## Chapter 2: *Ancestral Voices*

### *Introduction to Ancestral Voices*

*Ancestral Voices* (1989) is an English translation (by Malcolm Hacksley) of the original Afrikaans novel, *Toorberg* (1986). Van Heerden's "family saga" (Kannemeyer, 1993:136) tells the story of a family situated in the isolated farmlands of the Karoo in the early 1900s. A magistrate is sent to the area, on commission, to investigate the death of a child who, a year previously, had fallen into a disused borehole. The magistrate's investigation reveals how the dilemma of the trapped child forces the fragmented family to collaborate with one another. Noah, the child, is the focal point of the family gathered at the well and, in turn, their gathering situates the assembled family as the focal point of the novel.

By depicting a farm and a family that forms an isolated, closed unit — and which is also the source of potential conflict — Van Heerden employs conventions of the traditional plaasroman (A Coetzee, 2000:11). *Ancestral Voices*, as Van Coller says, "certainly is a plaasroman as it tells of generations of devotion and attachment to the land, labour and hereditary succession" [my translation].<sup>25</sup> Van Heerden is quoted as saying, however, that the novel should not be called a plaasroman as it is, rather, a reaction to plaasromans such as those by C M van den Heever, and that he, instead, takes a new look at that world (in Van Coller, 1995:198).<sup>26</sup> Earlier, in my introduction, I described the emergence of the plaasroman as a genre, its development from a traditional (or normative) form to a more modern (self-referential) form, and noted that plaasroman conventions have been identified in Van Heerden's novels. I aim, in this chapter, to analyse how the novel displays elements of the traditional plaasroman as well as those of the modern/self-referential plaasroman — a move that also signifies a 'postcolonial' turn — in its use of subversive features such as giving voice to the previously voiceless, highlighting the relationship between the central and peripheral configurations, exploring hybridity and liminality, as well as the trauma of dislocation. I will

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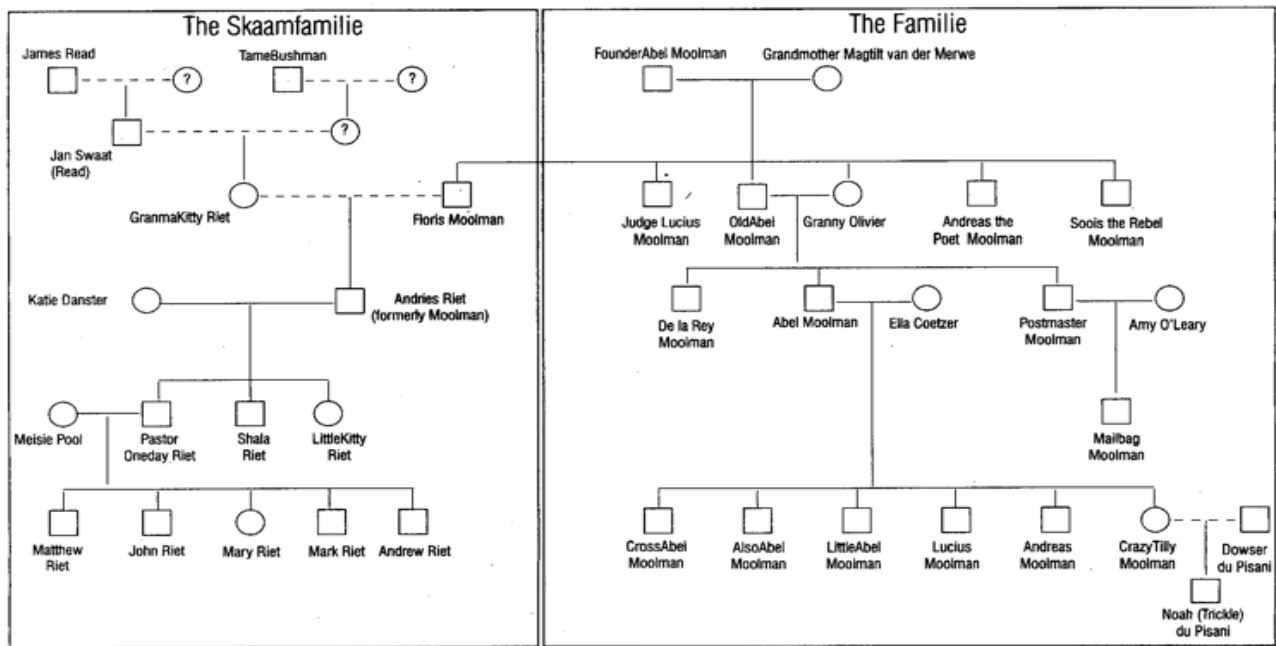
<sup>25</sup> "...dit is beslis 'n plaasroman wat vertel van geslagte se verknogtheid aan die grond, arbeid en erfopvolging" (Van Coller, 1995:198).

<sup>26</sup> Rialette Wiehahn (1995) considers *Toorberg* to have a "multidimensional and evasive nature" and discusses it, in turn, as a plaasroman, family saga, detective story, and postmodern novel.

foreground the exploration of cultural identity and diversity, mimicry and essentialism, as well as the use of magical realism — sometimes similarly known as “colonial gothic” (Newman qtd in Edwards, 2008:120) — which allows for an exploration of recollections of a past that is too traumatic for words.

The novel’s title itself suggests diversity and a diversity of voices and perspective by using the plural form: *Ancestral Voices*. The novel reaches to an ancestry as far back as the beginning of the Great Trek, presenting the origins of the Afrikaner nation — or the Afrikaner founding myth — as the formative background of the contemporary Moolman family. The Moolman family, as presented in the opening of the novel, has farmed at Toorberg since the first, pioneering Abel Moolman discovered a natural spring on the mountain, obtained title deeds for the vast stretch of land surrounding it (that he demarcated himself), and developed what he conceived of as his own, ancestral farm. This first Abel Moolman — FounderAbel — is depicted, in the tradition of the early Afrikaans plaasroman, as a founding father who pays for the farm, not only in money, but “in blood, sweat and tears [by] hack[ing] it out of primeval bush [and] defend[ing] it against barbarians” (JM Coetzee, 1988:85). Subsequently, the farm is passed on from one generation of Moolman to the next. The novel opens with the farm in the care of the third Abel Moolman and his son, CrossAbel, the fourth Abel, who is poised to take over. In this respect, the elements of the traditional plaasroman are recognisable — the founder, the white Afrikaner male, the land, the farm, and the hereditary succession — but the novel also incorporates other levels, other discourses, other ‘ancestral voices’. Whereas the traditional plaasroman would be restricted to the single narrative of the white, male, Afrikaner Moolman, the modern/contesting plaasroman incorporates the additional voices and narratives of marginal characters and groups. These voices include those of the San/Bushman, the Malay, the Riets, the rebellious white characters who refuse to fit the patriarchal ‘mould’, and even the voices of the dead, the ghosts of Toorberg.

To illustrate the diversity (and number) of voices, and the divide between them — between those voices that would be audible in a traditional plaasroman and those that can be heard in a subversive plaasroman — it is helpful to consult the chart that is included in the novel (and which I have reproduced below).



(Van Heerden, 2011a:chart included before Chapter 1).<sup>27</sup>

The family tree is clearly divided into two main branches, namely the 'Familie' and the 'Skaamfamilie'. The 'Familie' is the white Moolman family and the 'Skaamfamilie' is the Riet family. Although the two branches of the family are clearly connected through (white) Floris Moolman and his union with ( ) Kitty Riet, there is such a strong division of custom and prejudice between the two branches that, on the chart, they are framed in separate blocks with different headings.

Included with the Riets, under the heading of the 'skaamfamilie' — as can be seen on the chart — are TameBushman and Jan Swaat. These are the two men (a San/Bushman and a man) who, together with FounderAbel, discovered and founded Toorberg. Jan Swaat's line reaches back to James Read, an English missionary whom Jan Swaat claims was his father. It is from an adaptation of 'Read' that the name 'Riet' has developed. The son of Floris Moolman and Kitty Riet, Andries, is born and christened 'Moolman', but officially changes his name to 'Riet' (on the strength of his

<sup>27</sup> From this point on, whenever I quote from the novel I shall only quote page numbers.

maternal link to Jan Swaat and James Read) and, from this point on, the family is clearly divided into the white Moolman branch and the Riet branch.

There is a further division within the white, Moolman branch of the family. Those who do not conform to the ideal of the patriarchal masculinity are rejected, so that there is a group of 'white renegades' who become known as the 'step family'. They are also marginal voices, which would not be given a prominence in the discourse of the traditional plaasroman. The group includes Judge Lucius Moolman, Andreas the Poet Moolman, and Soois the Rebel Moolman. (Floris Moolman is included in the coloured, 'Riet' section of the chart because, following the discovery of Kitty Riet's pregnancy by him, he is chased off the farm and leaves the district.) In the generation that follows, the white renegades include De la Rey Moolman and Postmaster Moolman. (See chart on page 40.)

In addition to the divide between the (white) Moolmans and the ( ) Riets, and the subdivision within the Moolman family, there is also the division between the living and the dead. Van Heerden has employed elements of magical realism, which have become part of the postcolonial vocabulary. Just as magical realism, which originated in Latin America, attempts to mingle current with older traditions, so the ghosts of Toorberg mingle with the living in a natural, unobtrusive manner, adding dimensions of remembrance, even nostalgia, to the novel. These are subversive characters who cannot rest in peace after their deaths because of the tug of the past and unresolved conflicts.

These 'other' marginal voices — that would not have been foregrounded in the traditional plaasroman — are critical, dissenting and reflective and, in postcolonial approaches, are heard at the level of discourse as equal to, and interactive with, the voices of the more central characters. Van Heerden's initial impulse to gaze back to the traditional plaasroman scene has produced the main lineage of the Moolman family — the masculine, patriarchal family leaders — as the mainstream voices. His *reflection* on that traditional scene has produced the subversive and marginal voices of the Riets, the 'white rebel' Moolmans, the Bushmen, and the ghosts.

My aim is to identify the postcolonial force of longing and nostalgia, as outlined in the Introduction. I will also reflect on the search for identity in this novel, which disrupts the core conventions of the traditional plaasroman, as its subversive voices, especially in their nostalgic recall, allow for ambivalence, fragmentation and — almost paradoxically — new possibilities within the genre of the plaasroman.

The traditional plaasroman is, in essence, a nostalgic genre, confined to the past and harking back to an earlier time of supposed simplicity and purity, in which the farm reveals itself as a “good, idyllic space — religious, mythical, patriarchal yet meaningful through lived experience, through joy in labour, and especially through the sense of the passing away of time and life” (H Viljoen, 2004:113). Such a condition of nostalgia, however, is distinct from Van Heerden’s use of nostalgia. We return to Boym’s typologies of restorative and reflective nostalgia. Whereas the traditional plaasroman would be an example of restorative nostalgia in that it seeks to restore, textually, that ‘good, idyllic space’, Van Heerden’s novel challenges many such assumptions. The nostalgic plaasroman, like more traditional senses of nostalgia, “tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial” (Boym, 2001:xvii). In this novel, Van Heerden has turned the plaasroman conventions away from such restorative nostalgia towards reflective nostalgia, in order to explore the themes of identity and belonging, responsibility and accountability. While the novel acknowledges the nostalgic and persistent lure of the traditional farm, this novelist does not simply re-visit that space in search of a golden era, but revisits it to reflect, self-referentially, on the very temptations of such a return. As noted in my introduction, Van Heerden uses nostalgia reflectively, that is, in a strategic manner, by acknowledging sites of nostalgia as sometimes also being sites of trauma and/or reconciliation. He introduces subversive elements and marginal voices in the search for identity and meaning, and in an attempt to understand the sense of displacement in the present. It is these self-referential elements, which are also features of postcolonial writing, that make the novel relevant to a global audience today. Because the novel focuses on the pain, ambivalence and longing inherent in the plaasroman — by utilising reflective nostalgia — Van Heerden tells a local story in a globally recognisable ‘nostalgic language’. As a



“global epidemic” and “symptom of our age”— Boym’s terms (2001) — nostalgia has a global reach, and the local touches the global.

What follows, is an analysis of the nostalgic elements of *Ancestral Voices*, in relation, firstly, to the characters, and, secondly, to places. I aim to trace instances of nostalgia and to examine their application and meaning as either restorative or reflective. Corresponding sites of possible trauma and/or reconciliation will be examined in the process, as I gauge what nostalgia reveals, not only about the past, but also about the anxieties of the present day (that is, the times of Van Heerden’s writing of this novel).

### ***Nostalgia in the Novel: Characters***

To begin my survey of nostalgia within the characters of this novel, I will start by examining the nostalgic perceptions about the typical patriarch (FounderAbel) and the attempts of successive generations of Abels to emulate their founder. Following that, I will explore the subversive perspective of the rebellious male characters who wish to break away from traditional patriarchal roles. Thereafter, I will discuss the longings that result from a hybrid and peripheral position and highlight nostalgic feelings (both restorative and reflective) about the founding of Toorberg which, based on the Afrikaner ‘founding myth’, introduces the concept/issue of race. Finally, at the end of this section, I will examine the nostalgic perspective of the dead (ghosts) and contrast their longings in life with their longings in death.

### ***The White Moolman Family: Traditional and Subversive Voices***

As would be the case in the traditional plaasroman, FounderAbel, the original founder of Toorberg farm, embodies “the insular patriarchal culture of the Boer farm” (JM Coetzee, 1988:63) and he fills that central role in *Ancestral Voices*. FounderAbel is the man who develops the farm and hands it on, through the generations, from one ‘Abel’ to the next. The way he is represented supports an “invocation of an idealized past” (Warnes, 2009:72). He serves as a role model for the subsequent farmers of Toorberg; he is the ancestor whose example they are meant to follow.

To be successful, each Abel must follow in FounderAbel’s footsteps. “ ‘There were few men who were better Afrikaners than FounderAbel... He drove out the Xhosa and Bushmen, and with his tame [soldier] at his side, he cleared this part of the country for

succeeding generations,' ” explains his grandson’s wife, Ella, who goes on to assert that, “ ‘None of today’s Afrikaners are better than he was’ ” (Van Heerden, 2011:215). FounderAbel is a man who, according to Katie Danster/Riet, “ ‘learnt to love the soil’ ” (6) and who “shot and ploughed and chopped and built... Toorberg” (7). He made provision in his will for the “inalienable right [of every Moolman man and woman] to a share in the produce of the farm” (25), Ella noted, and the ghost of his wife, Magtilt, asserted that, “[f]or sheer manliness, none would ever be able to outdo [him]” (34). He is the masculine prototype of the Moolman family and those who do not live up to his example are rejected and become dejected. When it comes to choosing a successor and heir, FounderAbel can choose only one of his five sons. He chooses his third son, OldAbel, to carry on the role of patriarch, rejecting the others for various reasons, such as their unacceptable relationships with women (Floris Moolman, with the Kitty Riet), for practising law (Judge Lucius Moolman is seen as a ‘city’ man), or for their poetic and rebellious natures (Andreas and Soois Moolman). OldAbel, in turn, follows his father’s example and, in his older age, chooses one of his sons, another Abel, whilst rejecting his sons De la Rey and Postmaster. (See chart on page 40.)

FounderAbel’s presence fills a nostalgic longing for a strong protector who represents a particular way of life. His successors experience that same sense of longing and seek to emulate FounderAbel and to restore their perceptions of who he was, and who (they believe) they should be as well. But, although hereditary succession and the handing down of a legacy from father to son are traditionally viewed as an honour and a privilege, there is another perspective, which reveals that hereditary succession can also be experienced as a traumatic burden. Van Heerden reflects on the difficulties and pain that this attempt at emulation causes those who are restoratively nostalgic for FounderAbel. OldAbel (the second Abel) and Abel (the third) struggle to live up to expectations that they should conscientiously follow FounderAbel’s example. “It was the burden of this heavy calling,” OldAbel felt, “that had exhausted [him] so early in life. He was the one who from his youth had to tame this stubborn soil. He was the one who had to pray for rain...” (282-83). When the spring water began to dwindle, his wife, Granny Olivier, saw his fear that “ ‘the farm [was] going to dry out under [his] feet...’ as though he was personally to blame for the subterranean water drying up”

(275-76). OldAbel's son, Abel (the third Abel), recalls how he receives "repeated visitations from [the ghosts of] OldAbel and FounderAbel, seated solemnly in the easy chairs on the other side of the writing desk" (293). They pointedly ask him, " 'where are you taking your patrimony? Are you farming successfully, like your fathers — or are you failing?' " (293). CrossAbel (the fourth generation Abel) is haunted not only by the three generations before him, as he is tormented by the same restless energy that drove FounderAbel. He is also haunted by the trauma of his time in the national/apartheid army, patrolling in the townships. It is as if the patriarchal legacy and responsibility have become increasingly burdensome with each generation. These men abide by the restoratively nostalgic memory of the founder of Toorberg farm, and strive to emulate him. But, by doing so, and driven by a restoratively nostalgic view, they remain shackled to the past and to FounderAbel's vision for the farm; thus, by doggedly trying to repeat his achievements, they become mere imitators of someone else's dreams. Yet they do not rebel against FounderAbel's legacy. Rather, "the repeated stress on the role of ancestors in 'subduing' and 'taming' the land is experienced as a strategy of appropriating, akin to post-colonial expansion..." (Coetzee qtd in Van Coller, 2008:32).

So, the successive Abels, who are initially seen as being the fortunate successors of the white Afrikaner Moolman legacy, are shown, instead, to be men weighed down by the heavy responsibility of past tradition that is thrust upon them. They are trapped and emotionally debilitated; the memory of the great founding Afrikaner is as much a restorative memory as it is a haunting memory (a memory that traumatises by the weight of impossible expectations).

In addition to the succession of Abels — the chosen sons for the hereditary line, who all strive to restore FounderAbel's vision — there are the rejected sons, the renegades. FounderAbel's rejected sons include Floris Moolman, the wanderer; Judge Lucius Moolman, the man of the law; Andreas Moolman, the poet; and Soois Moolman, the rebel. They are the sons to whom FounderAbel would not entrust the farm. These are characters who — in a traditional plaasroman — would, in all likelihood not be given a voice.

Van Heerden, however, has foregrounded these subversive, eccentric and marginal characters, all of whom challenge the traditional discourses and this, in spite of the fact that they, at the same time, long for a sense of belonging and validation as Afrikaners. These are ambivalent characters who reflect on the pain of longing, because they pine after something they have rejected. First of all, they refuse the stereotypical ideal for themselves — they refuse to mimic the essentialist notion of the Afrikaner man — only to emerge as marginal ‘others’; to be ultimately rejected as ‘other’. The idealised perception of the Afrikaner man does not fit in with their own sense of self; yet, — paradoxically — to complete their sense of self, they long for a sense of identity as Afrikaners, for a sense of belonging to community and family. While they do not want to restore the patriarchal past, they do want to make sense of why they long for the past. In this way, nostalgia reveals itself to be a site of trauma, haunting, and a search for identity. In their longing for the family and farm, for their identity as Afrikaners and as Moolmans, they are drawn perpetually to dwell on the pain of having been rejected.

One of the rejected sons is Andreas (the poet) Moolman, who is the fourth son of Founder Abel Moolman and Grandmother Magtilt Moolman. (See chart on page 40.) From an early age, Andreas does not comply with the traditional ideal of masculinity. He questions and challenges the beliefs and norms of his family and community. For example, he says that “ ‘[g]oing to church is an underestimation of God’ ” (117) and expresses himself in art, rather than through the rough play of farm boys.<sup>28</sup> He begins to sculpt with the clay that he finds at the mouth of the spring, showing early signs of artistic inclination. His education and an artistic temperament take him away from Toorberg and he accepts, and is accepted by, an alternative city lifestyle among English soldiers. But when he writes heroic ballads favouring the English, he receives a telegram from his father telling him he must “ ‘[n]ever again set [his] turncoat feet on the native soil of [his] fathers’ ” (119). The separation is complete. Yet, although he knows that “his leaving Toorberg had been inevitable” (118), he never completely

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<sup>28</sup> Like another outsider, the character Waldo, in Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (Schreiner, 1883).

accepts his banishment. He occasionally “catch[es] the sharp scent of dew and early morning, and then suddenly the ravines of the Toorberg... crack open deep within him” (119). When he visits the farm surreptitiously, in an attempt to assuage his longing, he wears the disguise of “a false beard borrowed from a theatrical friend” (119). Although he has rejected the Toorberg ideology, and Toorberg has rejected him, he is perpetually and painfully drawn back to the family farm.

Andreas’s older brother, Judge Lucius, is another of the rejected sons of Founder Abel Moolman and Magtilt Moolman. (See chart on page 40.) Judge Lucius is the second son, whom Founder Abel describes as “the clever one, [who] had picked up too much knowledge for his own good in the city” (137). The enclosed world of Toorberg rejects Judge Lucius as a man of the law because, at Toorberg, the opinion is that “ ‘[o]ur district has always known what to do about its own sins. We deal with them ourselves’ ” (16). In Founder Abel’s eyes, “the farm [is] a clearly defined space that bars intrusion and provides a relative independence where the owner’s voice is law” (Coetzee qtd in Van Coller, 2008:3). In following the balanced and fair view of the law, rather than simply standing squarely on the side of Toorberg, Judge Lucius is regarded as much of a ‘turncoat’ as Andreas the poet is for writing in support of the English. Accordingly, Founder Abel’s ghost laments, “Lucius had been lost to Toorberg and later became a judge” (137). But Lucius, even though he is successful in law and “[h]is years at the Bar and on the Bench had brought him recognition and renown”, feels unfulfilled and “[h]alf-ashamed” because “the right to leave his footprints on the farm of his birth was denied him” (181).

The examples of rejected Judge Lucius Moolman and Andreas (the poet) Moolman serve to illustrate the difference between the longings of the rebels/renegeades and those of the mainstream ‘Abel’ Moolmans. The restorative nostalgia of the generations of Abels does not allow them to grow or develop — for they simply perpetuate the beliefs and lifestyle of their ancestor — whilst the longing of the renegeades, Lucius and Andreas, focused as it is on the pain of their longing, allows for reflection and integration. Reflection brings them the awareness that what they long for is associated with trauma: in order to identify themselves as Afrikaners, they will have to re-imagine what it means to be an Afrikaner. Thus, the concept of the

Afrikaner will have to expand, if it is to integrate each of their identities as 'other'. Van Heerden has created these 'unacceptable' brothers/sons, therefore, as a reflection on the tradition/identity of the Afrikaner man. They are the subversive voices that challenge the restorative ideal. Such a restorative ideal is further challenged by the Riet family, who introduce to the novel the problematic of race. (See next sub-section.)

*Floris Moolman: In-Between the (White) Moolmans and the (Coloured) Riets*

The Riets, as mentioned, are the branch of the family and are also known as the 'shame family'. (The distinct separation between the two families is clearly indicated on the chart of the family tree (see chart on page 40) and the epithet, 'shame family', implies that the branch is peripheral to the central, white Moolman family.) As such, the Riets's voices are subversive and challenging. As Warnes puts it, "[t]he Skaamfamilie [shame family] can... be read metonymically to stand in for Afrikanerdom's racial others" (Warnes, 2011:122).

The Riet family is linked to the Moolman family by another of FounderAbel's sons, Floris Moolman, who has had a relationship with Kitty Riet. Cross-cultural sexual relationships are unacceptable to FounderAbel and he rejects Floris, driving him out of the Moolman family/farm upon learning of his 'forbidden' relationship and Kitty's resultant pregnancy. FounderAbel asks, " 'Have you no respect for your own kind, Floris Moolman?' " (229), implying that Floris has betrayed the homogeneous centre — his 'own kind' — by engaging with the marginal 'other'. Furthermore, by questioning Floris's respect for his own kind, FounderAbel suggests that the 'other' is always inferior and degrading to the 'superior' centre. When Floris does not defend himself he asks, " 'What? Are you a coward too?' " (229), thereby also questioning Floris's masculinity.

FounderAbel humiliatingly thrashes Floris with a whip in the farmyard and Floris flees the farm to live the life of a wanderer. "Floris never return[s]" (230), but nor does he ever forget the trauma of his past or where he comes from, because "these were things he would never be able to shake off" (206). He longs to return home and to be 'Floris Moolman' again. His longing is a restorative nostalgia, though, because he can

imagine only one way to be Floris Moolman, and that is as a Moolman of and on Toorberg farm. Whereas his brothers rebelliously retain their individuality and long only for the integration of their identities as Afrikaners, Floris, — physically and psychologically scarred by his father's whipping — suffers a severe loss of identity. He assumes a false name and, as he travels, initiates gossip with strangers only to hear news of his family. "Time and again he denied his identity just to be able to hear something about Floris Moolman from someone, anyone — just to feel that he was somebody, something more than a flinching dodger driving a rickety government coach from outspan to outspan" (207). His trauma is all encompassing and blots out any other perspectives on life. Also, by clinging to his nostalgia for restoration of his identity as a Moolman, and by rejecting the possibility of alternative versions of himself (and, therefore, any possibility of inclusion in the Riet family), he perpetuates the cycle of rejection in never meeting or acknowledging his own son, Andries, born to Kitty Riet of the 'shame family'.

Rejected by the Moolmans, and rejecting the Riets, Floris Moolman places himself 'in-between' the two families. He is the link between the two families (through his short-lived relationship with Kitty Riet) but he, himself, becomes a peripheral figure, forever circling, but avoiding, the farm and family as he travels. The legacy that he leaves for his abandoned son, Andries, corresponds to the dilemma of finding one's own identity in relation to the Moolman and Riet families.

*The Coloured Riet Family: Listening to Ancestral Voices, Hearing Different Things*

Andries, the son of Floris Moolman and Kitty Riet, begins life as a Moolman — but in name only — and ends life as a Riet. While his mother lies dying, Andries goes to Pretoria using his and his wife's life-savings to change his name from 'Moolman' to 'Riet', thus hoping to bury his traumatic past together with his mother. On his return he tells his wife, " 'I was christened a Moolman, but now I'm a Riet. I've got a brown name now, my own name' " (85). He does not tell his mother, Kitty Riet, that he has changed his name because of the pride she takes in her deluded sense of affiliation with the Moolmans. Andries allows her to die "still dreaming that she had left behind a clan of Moolmans who would, together with the white Moolmans, the sons of Abel, enter eternity with the descendants of Floris" (89).

Kitty Riet, like Founder Abel, is acutely aware of the social imbalance of the relationship that links the two families. But whereas Founder Abel is concerned that the connection between the families is degrading to 'his kind', Kitty sees it, in reverse, as enriching for 'her kind' because her subaltern condition is so firmly embedded in her psyche. Regardless of the trauma she suffers as a result of her relationship with Floris — Floris's rejection of her and their son — she fondly remembers "her love for the young Floris Moolman of the white tribe" (88) and is proud of her son's lineage. Her restorative nostalgia is for "the only love of her life" (89); she "cherished her dreams... till the day she died" (89).

Andries, son of Kitty and Floris, however, is tormented by the connection between the two branches of his family. His 'hybridity', as the child of a mother and white father, confuses him, as does his sense of liminality: he does not know with which aspect of his lineage to identify. Andries feels the direct conflict of being 'in-between'. He is rejected by his white family and his father, and given conflicting messages from his mother, Kitty. She tells him he is " 'a stolen child' " (88) who has been " 'cast off like a skin' " (88), but also that he should " 'remember to bear [him]self with pride' " (88) and that he should never walk with his eyes cast down. He vows on the day of his mother's funeral — the day that turns into a celebration of his new name — that "Toorberg would yet know the pride of the sons of Riet" (89).

In his search for identity, Andries Riet reflects on the past. Although he is nostalgic and longs for dignity and a sense of identity, he is able to acknowledge the traumatic consequences of a cross-cultural sexual relationship in a racist society, a society in which you are either white or brown (which, in his case, would be either a Moolman or a Riet). Having reflected on the past and acknowledged his pain, he makes a decisive choice for the future and, in an attempt at his own agency, or his power to intervene, he rejects his Moolman heritage, by adopting the name of 'Riet'. This is ironic because, having reflected on his past, in his attempt to return to a time before the Moolmans, Andries has accepted the restoratively nostalgic view of John Read, the white missionary, — who, Jan Swaat claims, was his father and therefore Andries's great-grandfather (see chart on page 40) — as a pious (white) missionary, and reached the conclusion that " '[t]hat's the family that I want to belong to' " (85).



In his ambivalent search for meaning in his family's past, Andries experiences both 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia. (As I have suggested, Boym's typologies of 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia are helpful in understanding manifestations of nostalgia: its source, impact and consequences.) From Andries Riet's example, it is evident that both reflective and restorative nostalgia can operate within one consciousness; and that nostalgia is not an absolute or limited/limiting concept. Andries reflects on his past, acknowledging both his longing and pain, especially his longing for his father. " 'But, MaKitty... is Pa Floris never coming home again?' " (88), he asks as a child. When he realises that the answer is no, his nostalgia narrows to a 'restorative' longing because ultimately he rejects and denies his Moolman lineage and focuses on a more distant past, that is, on the memory of James Read, the missionary, his white ancestor.

Andries Riet does not resolve these issues of identity and dignity in his own lifetime, but expresses hope that his dreams may be realised by his sons: " '[N]either I, nor my children, will ever again sit under a window sill and howl like dogs when one of the Abels dies' " (86-7). Naming his son 'Oneday', Andries indicates his hope for the future: "It would be through his children that he spoke, he decided" (87). Oneday acknowledges his father's hope in a rallying speech, or rather, sermon: " 'My earthly father... vowed at my birth that my name should be Oneday. Because my father, Andries Riet of the Stiefveld, said at my birth that one day the day would come... One day is today. Jesus Christ is with us, to liberate us, today!' " (313-14).

Oneday Riet might share his father's angry view of the past, but his mother, Katie Danster/Riet<sup>29</sup>, has a more conservative view of the issue of lineage. Despite her marginal situation, Katie's view is 'restoratively' nostalgic. She seeks to sustain the past in its white patriarchal line, even though her position is one of subjugation and hardship. She tells stories to her grandchildren that glorify the 'founding father' — FounderAbel — as their great-grandfather and patriarchal leader. In tracing the genealogical links of her children to each of the three founders, Katie tells them:

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<sup>29</sup> Katie Danster is the wife of Andries Riet. For clarity, I will refer to her throughout as Katie Danster/Riet. (Please refer to the chart on page 40.)

“ ‘your great-great-grandfather FounderAbel learnt to love the soil’ ” (6); and appears to take great pride in linking her children to the patriarchal founder. “ ‘She is still one of the old generation. She is still proud of the Moolman blood’ ” (130-31), Oneday tells the Magistrate. From Katie’s point of view, however, their claim/hold on the land is justified through their link with the founder, the owner, the patriarch. She cannot conceive of them (her family and/or the community) as having a claim to the land in their own right, so ingrained is her subservience to FounderAbel, the white Afrikaner farmer, and his successors. At the evening fire, Katie tells her grandchildren the story of the founding of Toorberg:

The story of water... was the story of the Moolmans. High up in the Toorberg, the Eye, the source of the now dried-up spring, had been discovered by FounderAbel himself, as he came trekking through on his stallion, with his packhorse and his mounted bondsman Jan Swaat behind, and his tracker, TameBushman, leashed to his stirrup. (4)

Katie identifies the three men who found the source of water on the mountain — FounderAbel, Jan Swaat, and TameBushman — the three men responsible for the ‘discovery’ and founding of Toorberg. They name the space Toorberg and become irrevocably linked to it, even though FounderAbel’s claim usurps the claim of the two ‘non-white’ founders.

Katie’s nostalgic view, nevertheless, sees the three men (Jan Swaat, TameBushman and FounderAbel) working together, in dignity. Her restorative nostalgia seeks to re-establish a harmonious, dignified co-existence of white and brown family members within the community. This is why she is dissatisfied with the divide within the extended family (that is, Moolman and Riet), and is disturbed by her sons’ discontent and anger, which she does not understand. Katie tells her grandchildren stories to convey to this younger generation a sense of pride in the common ancestors. She clings to her nostalgic view in the hope of capturing the (perceived) spirit of togetherness to take them (her family and community) beyond the troubled present and into a better future. But Katie Danster/Riet’s stories are not always interpreted or accepted in the way that she intends them to be understood. In the opening scenes of the novel, she tells the story of the discovery of water “while Shala [her son] listened in morose silence” (6). Shala and Oneday have grown up with Katie’s nostalgic accounts

but also with the accounts of, for example, their bitter father, Andries Riet, and they have formed their own interpretation. While Katie is nostalgic for the past in a 'restorative' manner, her sons, Shala and Oneday are, instead, haunted by the past; their nostalgic reflection focuses on (the pain of) longing, which includes traumatic memory.

Oneday and Shala are haunted by the degradation, indignity and unjust treatment that their brown forebears endured (at the hands of the white Moolmans), and how that has impacted on their lives. They are obsessed by the past, by the founding of Toorberg, and long to right the perceived imbalances of that past. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the plot of the novel is focalised through twenty-one characters, but that neither of the brown forebears — neither Jan Swaat, nor TameBushman — is among them. Their stories must be told by others, by Oneday and Shala Riet, who, following their father Andries Riet's example, feel it is their responsibility to speak on behalf of TameBushman and Jan Swaat and, in doing so, to speak up for themselves too.

Oneday, instead of seeing Jan Swaat and FounderAbel as partners in a common mission to found a farm, tells the magistrate, " 'Jan Swaat, my great-grandfather, lived like a dog under FounderAbel, and died like one when FounderAbel died' " (131). He points out to Meisie Pool, his wife, on a visit to the source of the spring that

[h]ere... Grandpa Jan Swaat and TameBushman lay and rested. They were the ones, the two of them, who brought FounderAbel here... But who's got the title deeds today? And who is stuck out on the Stiefveld with a plot of prickly-pears and a goat-pen and a few rabbits? The Riets here, the Moolmans there! (235-36)

It is Oneday's dissatisfaction with the present (with the disparities between the Moolmans and the Riets, as well as with the broader social wrongs and injustices) that keeps his attention fixed on the injustices/traumas of the past, on what he sees as the source of current problems. Dissatisfaction with the present and hope for the future is where the similarities lie between Oneday and his mother's views, and what motivates both of their explorations of the past. Both look to the past in order to be guided by the 'ancestral voices', but, seemingly, they hear different predictions.

*Ancestral Voices: Spectral Voices*

The ‘ancestral voices’ ‘show up’ — they appear and are heard — in various ways: stories are told about them, their legacies speak for them, artefacts hold symbolic memory of them, their names are bestowed on various successors in honour of them, and their rituals and habits are mimicked. But, most prominently, the ancestors speak in the form of ghosts who have returned to the current scene.

Earlier on, in Chapter 1, I discussed how haunting can be used as a literary device to articulate trauma that is beyond words. The spectral, in literature, is composed of a curious mix of “presence/absence” (Punter, 2000:90): it is concerned with the “gaps” and “secrets” of the past (Abraham and Torok qtd in Punter, 2000:63); the gaps that haunt us and the ghosts that return to fill in those empty spaces. In *Ancestral Voices*, Van Heerden endeavours to retrieve those parts of a collective memory that have been forgotten or never known. Abraham and Torok assert that there is a “psychic space different from the unconscious, a location that is not a location but whose existence is felt only as an insistent pressure from an otherwise absent or unattributable source” (Punter, 2002:263), and they refer to this space as a “ ‘crypt’... where the secrets of our parents and grandparents are buried” (Punter, 2002:263). Even though these secrets and memories are not our own, they have a force, or an influence; their absence is a presence in the form of a void, because, in Freud’s words, “nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away, and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one” (qtd in Punter, 2002:263). In other words, there is a space for something that did (and therefore still does) exist.

In *Ancestral Voices*, Van Heerden gives the dead of Toorberg a presence through the spectral device<sup>30</sup> of integrating the voices of the dead and the living. Ancestors, long dead — both Moolmans and Riets — gather at the borehole, together with the living,

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<sup>30</sup> *Ancestral Voices* has been compared to Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) for its use of magical realism. However, recent studies (for example, Alberts, 2006) have explored the concept of a South African form of magical realism derived from Afrikaans folktales and oral narratives which is independent from the magical realism of West Africa and Latin America. Similarly, Gaylard (2005) explores magical realist characteristics in African writing in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

to ponder the problem of the trapped child and the chain of events that has brought them to this point: “The ghosts are granted full subjectivity — their senses are functional, they remember, they are capable of emotion” (Warnes, 2011:127). Van Heerden’s ghosts, then, create a sense of circularity for the history of Toorberg and of the two divided families; the living and the dead are perpetually returning to the past — and from the past — to try to make sense of the present as they encircle the borehole and the problems that it encapsulates.

The nostalgic return to the past, then, can be attributed to the uncanny feelings felt by the characters in the present. The ‘uncanny’ or ‘unheimlich’ is “that which is unfamiliar — or more literally unhomely — in the familiar or homely... the archetype of which is the ghost or the zombie... [and] which recurs in the place where it is not expected” (Buchanan, 2010:476). The return of the ghosts in Toorberg is uncanny in the sense that they have returned to a place that was once familiar to them, but is now unfamiliar because time has moved on, and Toorberg has changed. Their feelings of unfamiliarity mirror the living characters’ feelings because the living, too, feel an uncanniness (or a feeling of not being ‘at home’) which prompts their nostalgic return to the past.

Earlier on, I discussed Floris Moolman as the figure who links the Moolman and Riet families, and who becomes a peripheral figure in the process. Floris never returns to Toorberg during his life — following his physical and emotional thrashing — but he does return after his death and is amongst the ghosts gathered with the living at the mouth of the borehole. Here, his thoughts take a reflective turn:

I can wander at will here, as though at last it was mine too. I have to tread warily, of course, because I have not earned a grave in the family plot. But I have returned, like all the Moolmans, because my descendants [the Riets], too, are here — even if all they have inherited is the Stiefveld, and even if they are bitter and rejected. They are still here; they can still wake up in the morning and look up at the crown of Toorberg and think: We belong here. (210-211)

In contrast to his ‘restorative’ nostalgic view during life (that there was only one way for him to be a Moolman), he reflects in death — we understand that he has died some time ago — on his position as a Moolman and acknowledges his descendants in

the Riet family. He talks tentatively at first of not 'earning' a right to burial in the farm's family plot and says it is as if Toorberg was his (but not quite). He is assertive, though, when he claims that this is the place where he (and his own kind) must and should be, that he and they belong here. Floris, through the device of haunting, shifts between life and death, and returns (from death) to Toorberg with a changed perspective. In retrospect, the narrating 'I' can be contrasted with that of the experiencing 'I' which, in other words, means that the character has the benefit of a 'double perspective' or of hindsight. A return to the past is essential for a better understanding of the present because "such events as these, such personal and historical traumas, can never be recounted in linear fashion, they can never be considered [as simply] consigned to an untroubled or untroubling past" (Punter, 2002:67). As for Floris, he is now able to reflect on the longing he felt, during life, for his lost identity as a Moolman of Toorberg, and on the trauma of rejection that haunted him for the rest of his life. By revisiting, as a ghost, both the site of his trauma and his longing, Floris Moolman is now able to integrate both into a fuller, more layered picture of his past, thus reconciling and extending his conception of himself as a Moolman, and of his family/descendants as, at the same time, being Moolmans and Riets. (The irony is that, had he been able mentally to do so while alive, he might have avoided the painful legacy that he left for his son, Andries.)

Floris Moolman, in effect, has been given an "afterlife", a life in the "aftermath", in other words, he is "living after" his life and death (Punter, 2000:62). Punter suggests that the idea of "living in ruins and rubble [is] to be living a life which cannot but be haunted by the spectres of failed projects" (Punter, 2000:62). The failed projects to which Van Heerden alludes in *Ancestral Voices* are those of the Moolman family and farmstead, and, by extension, that of a homogeneous Afrikaner nationalism. In contrast to a frozen interpretation, postcolonialism (as well as postmodernism and poststructuralism)

are all formulations of the 'after', of what comes 'after'; at the same time, however, they necessarily conjure up, make uncannily to appear before us, the very phenomena they have, in a different sense, surpassed, they prolong the life of their predecessors — unnaturally,

some might say — giving them the status of spirits haunting the apparently purged landscape of the contemporary. (Punter, 2000:62)

Punter's view may also be applied to the spectral in Van Heerden's novel, which does not simply provide the opportunity of a double perspective and a reflection on the past, but enables the ghost-like continuity of characters in the present and future, in a way that strikes a credible note. As Warnes says, "...what Van Heerden is doing [in *Ancestral Voices*] is drawing on longstanding local literary resources in order to represent a worldview, a way of seeing that makes place for the dead within the world of the living" (2011:126). Andries Riet, for example, almost forgets that he, himself, is a ghost, as he reaches out to touch Katie Danster/Riet, his widow (91). The penchant of magical realism for lending an appearance of ordinariness to the extraordinary allows for the depiction of nostalgia in life and beyond, because it suggests that it is feasible for the characters to continue to grow in understanding and wisdom after death, instead of remaining fixed in the attitudes that they held in their life. For Andries Riet, the "release which death had brought him was still unsatisfactory" (85), and he remains haunted by the question that Katie had asked him when he returned from Pretoria after buying a new name, " 'What have you brought back, An'ries?' " (85). Although he had gone away to change his name and reject his white/Moolman heritage, he brought back with him a name only; he did not bring back any peace of mind, in spite of his change of name. As his ambivalence deepens — he still, as a ghost, has more questions than answers — he continues to search for clarity.

Andries's regret mirrors FounderAbel's, the latter also a ghost at the borehole. FounderAbel is frustrated at not being able to intervene in the crisis: "[H]e was bursting to frighten the hell out of the lifeless bunch gathered round the hole" (136), thus belying his claim that "there is serenity in all things" (139). Even in his ghostly form, FounderAbel does not display serenity: he is still judgmental and restless, and believes that "the earth of Toorberg would never yield up what it had once taken unto itself" (143); he cannot conceive of change. Whereas Andries Riet, as a ghost, continues to search for clarity, FounderAbel, as the ghost of a typical patriarch, is obdurate in his patriarchal voice and presence. He remains as constant as Toorberg

mountain within the landscape, a touchstone against which the other characters can be measured.

The narrative is focalised through at least eight ghosts, including Floris Moolman, Andries Riet and Founder Abel Moolman. In addition, there are several ghosts whose presences are witnessed, but who do not speak. Yet other ghosts are unseen but leave signs of their visits: for example, a bloodstain appears on the wall on the commemoration of a death, and inexplicable footprints appear in the vegetable garden. Katie Danster/Riet believes that she has premonitions of death by seeing people in a ghost-like form before they have died, and in a similar vein, the rock paintings in the cave on Toorberg suggest a haunting trace of previous inhabitants. These spectres indicate a palimpsest of trauma at Toorberg: the nostalgic evocation of the Moolman and Riet farmstead leads us to a site with many layers of trauma, so that we can experience the parts of the story that have not previously been told, but that must be acknowledged in order to complete the picture. Floris Moolman's story, for example, must be told in order that Andries Riet be understood. Andries Riet's story must be told in order that Oneday Riet be understood, and so on. With a clearer articulation of the past comes a clearer understanding and acceptance of the present, and a clearer vision of the future because "the process of articulation [can] enable the individual and the community to heal and move on..." (Edwards, 2008:138).

When tracing the nostalgic longings in this story, it is apparent that the characters' relations with the past affect relations with the present and, therefore, with the future. At the beginning of this section (on nostalgia and characters), I pointed out the strong division between the two sides of the family — the Moolmans and the Riets — as clearly marked on the chart of the family tree (see page 40). It appears, from following each family's development through the generations, that strong and decisive beginnings do not guarantee a strong and decisive continuity. On the (white) Moolman side of the family — the central figures in the narrative — the family has well-defined origins and the aspiration of a strong lineage. However, with each generation, the emulation of the founding father becomes an increasingly heavy burden for those who attempt to repeat past lives and patterns of behaviour. The more the Moolmans strive to retain their sense of identity as defined in the past, the



weaker the family line becomes, culminating in a string of still-born babies: the children of Abel (the third) and Ella Moolman. These babies are the ghosts of the future, a future that will not materialise and that cannot be.<sup>31</sup>

On the other side of the family, the ( ) Riets, who have scattered origins, cannot decisively trace their origins. In their family, there is much rumination about identity, but the focus is on who they want to be in the present and who they wish to become in the future, rather than on who they were in the past. With each generation, the Riet family's sense of identity — unlike the Moolmans — becomes stronger and more clearly defined, and culminates in a brood of healthy children who thrive, much like the family's herd of goats, on the rugged landscape of their home. These contrasting examples — of the Moolman and Riet families' development — indicate that, through reflection, various unearthed/recuperated aspects of the past can strengthen a sense of identity with which to face the future, whilst, in contrast, attempts to restore the past will, inevitably, founder and stunt development.

Although the overview of the families has shown that one family, as a unit, has gradually weakened, whilst the other has gained in strength, this is not presented as an opposition. Within each family there are individuals who seek unproblematically to restore the past and individuals who critically reflect on the past and incorporate trauma into their reminiscences. In addition, some characters are presented, ambiguously, as harbouring both restorative and reflective longings for the past. In this way Van Heerden has employed nostalgia to reveal complexity rather than simple polarisation. He has utilised what Walder would call “the ‘tough aesthetic’ of postcolonial nostalgias... [because] an approach to postcolonial nostalgia that captures this kind of complexity [is] tough, and... nuanced” (Walder, 2011:17). Its societal reverberations, now explicitly articulated, are immense: a South Africa moving through trauma to a landscape no longer defined by white Afrikanerdom, but by a diversified, “, or at least a mixed-race, cultural future.

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<sup>31</sup> It is a bizarrely Shakespearean reminder of Macbeth's doomed line, of a life of sound and fury ultimately destined for extinction.

### ***Nostalgia in the Novel: Places***

A nostalgic mood, as mentioned earlier, is established in the very titles *Ancestral Voices* and *Toorberg*. The English title, *Ancestral Voices*, focuses on people (whom I discussed in the previous section), while the title, *Toorberg*, (in the original Afrikaans) focuses attention on place as having considerable importance in the novel. Toorberg is the name of the mountain, the village, and the farm and, connotations of magic and spells in the word 'toor',<sup>32</sup> suggest a quality beyond mere geographical marking, which supports the idea that space is not seen as static or devoid of influence.

In the previous section — on nostalgia in relation to people — I discussed how central voices are challenged and contested by marginal voices. In this section — on nostalgia in relation to places — I will examine Van Heerden's nostalgic evocation of the Karoo landscape and farm. Instead of simply revisiting those traditional places, however, he expands on the domain of the traditional plaasroman in order to break new ground, as it were. Van Heerden offers a multi-faceted perspective: he does not only approach place and space from the characters' own view-points; he also explores interconnected relationships that some of the characters experience with their natural environment and this, in contrast to the dis-connection or alienation experienced by others. To consider the natural environment as an active 'player' enters the domain of environmentalism, in which the 'extra-human' is "indissolubly interwoven with the human past, present, and... future" (Ashcroft et al, 2007:71). Environmentalism, so understood, is another postcolonial concept that Van Heerden explores alongside displacement and dislocation, ownership and belonging, and the connection between place and identity.

Although "place is... associated with habits, particularity, and fairly stable characteristics" (Su, 2005:26), while some consider that "all social relations are organized spatially" (Massey qtd in Su, 2005:21), we must also consider that "a particular place has multiple and shifting associations" (Su, 2005:29) and that the "apparent stability" of social space, according to Lefebvre (qtd in Wegner, 2002:182), is

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<sup>32</sup> toor: bewitch, put a spell on, jinx; practise witchcraft; conjure, juggle; charm, enchant (Pheiffer, 2007:622).

“short lived and contingent”. Nostalgia, then, “does not necessarily lead to regressive attitudes, but can in certain instances enable characters and readers alike to revise their perceptions of the past in two complementary senses” (Su, 2005:7): to ‘fix it’ either by securing it more firmly in the imagination, or by revising or repairing it (in Su, 2005:7).

Nostalgia often focuses on particular spaces. It is, to reiterate, commonly associated with homesickness, a longing for home, a longing for a place of belonging. Van Heerden depicts just such a place of longing and belonging in *Ancestral Voices*, at least from the patriarchal/Moolman perspective. The landscape is recognisable in South African and Afrikaans literature: the wide-open spaces of the Karoo and its lonely and isolated farmlands. Van Heerden *secures* such a landscape prior to *revising* its centrality by acknowledging and including within it previously unacknowledged marginal perspectives. The Riet family, for example, qualify the authority of the Moolman patriarchy.

In the following subsections I will explore Van Heerden’s treatment of people’s relationships with space: the pioneers’ feelings while traversing the wilderness; their attitudes towards the mountain as either a gift of nature or a place of power and control. I will consider the farmstead from a restoratively nostalgic point of view as an idyllic space, and, alternatively, as a site of trauma; and, finally, consider the houses and homes of Toorberg which may be felt as protective shells, or as memorials to earlier times and people.<sup>33</sup>

#### *The Wilderness: Traversing Pre-existing Space/ Discovering Virgin Territory*

*Ancestral Voices* reaches back as far as the period of the Great Trek (which began in 1836) to tell the story of Founder Abel’s journey through the wilderness with his wife, Magtelt, which culminates in their arrival at Toorberg. The landscape is initially portrayed, by storytellers such as Katie Danster/Riet, as being a vast and empty space, a place that Founder Abel has the courage and foresight to traverse, together with his

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<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Paul’s (1988) dissertation, *Functions of the Physical Space in ‘Toorberg’*, distinguishes three topographical regions in *Toorberg*: the mountain, the farm, and the district, and discusses the symbolism in and of each region.

faithful helpers, Jan Swaat and TameBushman, and whose efforts are rewarded in the discovery of a spring high on the magical mountain of Toorberg.

This is the typical nostalgic Afrikaner founding myth, typically told in the plaasroman as the nostalgic story of a beginning. The view that “nostalgia... is essentially history without guilt [and] heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than with shame” (Kammen qtd in Boym, 2001:xiv) could apply to *Ancestral Voices*, were this novel to tell only the story of the central characters and their relationship to the landscape, and were the hardships in the novel glossed over as a series of obstacles to be overcome by the actions of the ‘heroic pioneer’. But Van Heerden qualifies such accounts by introducing alternative perspectives and, thus, providing a counter discourse to the pioneer experience.

For FounderAbel’s wife, Magtilt, for example, the trek is not an exciting adventure into a land of opportunity and freedom. For her, it is a series of “savage days of encircled wagons, sick children and commando expeditions against the black impis” (31). During the day the trekkers are surrounded by herds of game “as far as the eye can see” (32), but at night, the silence and darkness is so imposing that “eventually... Magtilt wanted to scream her fear out loud, so the whole wilderness would hear and come and claim her” (32). Seen through her eyes, this wilderness is not a place of adventurous opportunity; it is, rather, a place of dislocation where she feels unwelcome, foreign and exposed.

Contrary to Magtilt, TameBushman appears, initially, to be at home in the vast, dark spaces. “On moonlit nights he would squat on his haunches, rocking back and forth under the moon. Sometimes he would light a fire and dance round and round...” in what appears to be a dance of freedom and communion with the moon and the earth (33). But TameBushman originates from a now hunted and displaced people, as we are reminded when, for example, “[FounderAbel] fire[s] on a small band of Bushmen gathering honey under an overhanging cliff” (5). So we see that, because of TameBushman’s displaced condition, he is seeking comfort in ancient ritual — with his dance — which becomes an attempt to survive through the recollection of a sense of freedom, happiness and security.

The vast and beautiful spaces of the Karoo, which are initially presented as a restoratively nostalgic site of freedom and opportunity, are seen — through the eyes of Magtilt and TameBushman, therefore — also as a site of trauma: of loneliness, fear, displacement, and the abuse of power. Neither Magtilt nor TameBushman are ‘at home’ in this environment; nor is this landscape merely a blank canvas, as attested by TameBushman’s kin who are “fired on” (5), and the impis who pose a constant threat to the pioneers. By nostalgically re-visiting the site of the Trek and incorporating its painful recollections, Van Heerden complicates any myth of discovery. This Karoo is not, simply, the domain of the pioneer who is the first to stake his claim. Rather, the space has been “reconceived as both a historical and a geographical-spatial project”; there has been a “dissolution and reorganization of the environments” (Soja qtd in Wegner, 2002:181).

For the pioneers, though, whether the wilderness be considered as a site of freedom and opportunity, or as site of trauma and hardship, it is a liminal space. As FounderAbel and Magtilt leave the Cape Colony heading into the interior in search of freedom and a new home, they enter a liminal space. They are between homes (and between identities).

*The Mountain: Accepting Natural Gifts/ Exerting Power and Control*

After trekking through the wilderness, FounderAbel and Magtilt (together with Jan Swaat and TameBushman) find what they can call their new home when they arrive at the mountain with its spring. FounderAbel names the large and imposing mountain ‘Toorberg’ because “he could not fully understand the strange enchantment of this world” (6), inferring from the beginning that this is a special place which appeals not only to their practical needs, but also to their spiritual and emotional senses, and that the mountain and its immediate surrounds is a world unto its own. They feel compelled to settle there and immediately form a relationship with their new home.

Symbolically, then, Toorberg mountain is the central point of the action.<sup>34</sup> It is on the mountain where the new inhabitants drill for water and where Noah, the child, falls

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<sup>34</sup> Symbolically, when viewed from above, mountains form the centre of a/the world (Chevalier, 1996:680).

into the borehole. The farm, the village and the houses and homes are positioned in relation to the mountain, which is also central to each of the character's lives. The mountain is constantly referred to as the characters habitually orientate themselves in relation to its physical presence. This is evident, for example, when Katie Danster/Riet sets out, in the opening scene, at first light, "just as the mist was curling down past the heels of the Toorberg and the wild geese were starting to cry out to one another" (1). The closing scene presents a similar picture of Katie Danster/Riet and the wild geese who, "crying... flew over her head, dived through the wind and swung away into the white mist that was tumbling down over the head of the Toorberg" (344). The human and the natural world are granted a close correspondence. Whatever has happened between the first and last page of the novel — or in the lives of the people at Toorberg — has not altered the mountain. It appears constant and eternal, in stark contrast to the evanescence of humanity.

Nostalgia for the mountain permeates the novel. It is a place unmarked by time, and suggests a reassuring, identifiable and recognisable world of its own. Again, the nostalgic instances in the novel that relate to the mountain are both restorative *and* reflective. Initial nostalgia relates to its 'discovery'. FounderAbel, following TameBushman's lead, finds the spring on the mountain. He "looked out over the Valley below and resolved: he would apply to the nearest landdrost for a deed of title to this land. There in the groin of the Toorberg, FounderAbel pitched camp and planned his farm" (5). In this decisive moment, Toorberg becomes the Moolman home. This moment is decisive also because it is at this point that the ideas of ownership and belonging diverge. FounderAbel's sense of belonging is based on ownership and control. For others, such as Jan Swaat and TameBushman, a sense of belonging is based on communion with the mountain as a nurturing space, and acceptance of its natural gifts (most importantly water, but also shelter). The mountain and the spring are subsequently incorporated into the farm's boundaries. That means that FounderAbel, legally and officially, owns the mountain and the spring as part of the farm. Yet, although he owns the water's point of origin, he cannot control the water. As the water slowly dries up for successive generations, their attempts at control lead to arrogance and pride and their eventual weakening and

downfall. Ultimately, it is the desperate attempt to find water by drilling that leads to child Noah's accident and to the gathering of the entire family at the borehole.

So, although the mountain looms large, it is water that is life-giving. It is the search for water that leads them to Toorberg, and water that keeps them at Toorberg. "The symbolic meanings of water may be reduced to three main areas. It is a source of life, a vehicle of cleansing and a centre of regeneration" (Chevalier, 1996:1081), whilst mountains are seen as numinous places which — when viewed from below — "stand against the horizon like world axes" (Chevalier, 1996:680), reaching up to the heavens so that the top of a mountain is where heaven and earth meet. Toorberg together with its water can be considered metaphysically, therefore, as mystical and god-given, not only a geographical landmark. Although all the characters relate to the mountain as a physical presence, it is their attitudes towards the mountain and the water as *metaphysically* central to their lives that differentiates them. While they all feel a sense of belonging to Toorberg, for some that sense of belonging is based on ownership and control, whilst for others it is intuitively based on acceptance and communion.

Katie Danster/Riet, for example, acknowledges that TameBushman's sensitivity to his natural environment led to the discovery of water on Toorberg when she recalls that " 'they say TameBushman had smelt the water four days to the south, eighty miles away...' " (5); Dowser DuPisani, talking about his search for water on Toorberg years later, grants that it is the earth that decides whether or not — or when and where — to offer up its precious gift. As he points out, " 'somewhere there were streams of bubbling water, but they were keeping hidden, as though the earth was shy' " (258). When Dowser DuPisani tells of his plans to teach Noah to dowse, he acknowledges the inherent skill and intuition that is required: " '... I wanted to teach him how to dowse. I could see he had the feeling for it... even when he was standing up, he was listening to the water under the ground' " (68), he says. These are intuitive characters who accept what the mountain offers and respect their interconnected relationship with their environment — with nature — as they strive to live in harmony with it.

Founder Abel, on the other hand, has a close association with the land, but does not see himself in partnership with it. Rather, he sees himself as controlling and managing the land. He tells his son that “ ‘water as sweet as this comes straight from God Himself — we have a divine calling in this place’ ” (282), but his immediate reaction is to get title deeds to the land and to plan and build his farm. Although he acknowledges that Toorberg is God-given and that their mission there is a spiritual one, the ‘we’ that he refers to as having a divine calling are confined to himself and his sons, in other words, to the core, the Moolman family. His imagination does not allow for ‘others’.

But there *are* ‘others’. Van Heerden, as we have seen, introduces marginal characters and explores their relationships with the mountain. The reflectively nostalgic aspects of this novel consider that belonging, in an emotional, spiritual and psychological sense, has broad implications, and affects all the characters. All the people who live, or have lived at Toorberg, feel a sense of belonging and kinship with the mountain. Just as Katie Danster/Riet does in the opening lines of the novel, many other characters habitually orientate themselves using the mountain as point of reference. For example, Ella Moolman, on a routine morning visit to her herb garden, “looked up for a moment at the wild geese, crying as they circled overhead above the homestead before flying back into the mist shrouding the crown of the Toorberg” (19), whilst Amy O’Leary, in the village, “looked up at the Toorberg and noticed a shroud of mist covering the peak” (51) when opening the curtain at breakfast time. On the night that the child, Noah, gets stuck in the borehole, “there was a golden moon above the Toorberg” (155) which Oneday Riet observes as he walks home. The ghost of Floris Moolman sums up the sentiment of belonging — using the mountain as a point of reference in terms of location and time — when he says that his family “ ‘can still wake up in the morning and look up at the crown of Toorberg and think: We belong here’ ” (211).

In relation to the mountain, Van Heerden has conveyed a sense of longing that surpasses the restrictions of ownership and legality. Rather, various characters (both central and marginal) have an emotional, spiritual and psychological attachment to place. Such representations of connection, or disconnection, between people and



spaces are a feature of postcolonial writing. The question of who belongs to a place, and why, is asked over and above the question of ownership and political right/might. These questions are pertinent to many areas of the world today and “there also has been in recent years more and more attention given to the ways that diverse subaltern publics are able to ‘divert and reappropriate’ dominated spaces” (Wegner, 2002:185). Nostalgia allows the individual to relive and validate a sense of self by revisiting a space (either physically or imaginatively) because “... a return to one’s region of origin is mostly a return to memories” (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:7).

In short, for those who settle around Toorberg, the mountain is perceived to have a metaphysical connection to Nature/God, stronger than — or perhaps overriding — its social, political or legal connection to humankind/society. In contrast, the farmstead is a space firmly under the control of people, society and ideology. The farm, a natural space demarcated and controlled by man, can even be considered a buffer between the natural (for example, wilderness) and the man-made (for example, houses), between the ‘outside’ and the ‘inside’.

*The Farmstead: Reflecting on Longing/ Restoring an Idyllic Space*

“The farm is an icon of Afrikaner identity symbolizing a heroic struggle against the wilderness” (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:10). The observation holds true for FounderAbel’s struggle to create Toorberg farm while the following four generations of Moolmans attempt to make their mark and forge an identity. “In Afrikaans literature, the farm has had a symbolic power for many decades. In early fiction, it was a psychological home, a marker of identity for the Afrikaner...” (Van der Merwe, 2004:125). The farm is thus central to the plaasroman and, in this novel, is the seat of the Moolman family; it presents a closed and homogeneous environment. Such observations, at least, apply to FounderAbel, who, after the discovery of the spring on the mountain, creates a kind of Garden of Eden. He considers the farm to be God-given and his responsibility that of a steward. In return for his hard work and sacrifice FounderAbel receives — as he believes — from God, a life on this piece of land that he can pass on from generation to generation. Of his efforts, Katie Danster/Riet recounts that, “within three years, FounderAbel had shot and ploughed and chopped and built till Toorberg Farm was the pride of the frontier” (7). In the tradition of the

plaasroman, once the founder has 'married' the land and established an identity in relation to the land, the symbiotic relationship must be sustained. Three generations of Abel Moolmans follow in FounderAbel's footsteps to farm Toorberg, a bountiful and yielding place of " 'divine calling' " (282).

Van Heerden, accordingly, takes the reader of *Ancestral Voices* on a nostalgic visit to this idealised version of the Karoo farm, the "good, idyllic space" (H Viljoen, 2004:113). This initial view of the farm as an Eden-like haven fulfils a longing for the idyll and is an example of restorative nostalgia as expressed by characters such as Katie Danster/Riet and Floris Moolman. Floris, like Katie, expresses a nostalgia for Toorberg that seeks to restore the farm as an idyllic space even as, in the qualificatory hints of the narrative, we begin to acknowledge that such a perception is misguided. Floris's longing for Toorberg, the farm from which he has been banished, reveals a hopeless longing for a place that cannot define his identity. His wandering (following his banishment) is driven by "his yearning for farmland and cattle and the hot veld sun on his back" (210) because, by recalling those sensations, Floris Moolman returns to a time and place of happiness and, at least in his imagination, belonging. He does not reflect on the trauma that is associated with his banishment from the family farm; he simply wishes to restore his early relationship to the farm.

In addition to such a restorative view of the idyllic farm space, however, Van Heerden introduces the counter-balance of reflective nostalgia in order to remind us of the punishment and rejection that are also attached to the concept of the farm. He contemplates what effect, as both physical and mental presence, the construct of 'the farm' has on those who do not submit to its ideology. Apart from its simplicity and purity, and the idyllic life the farm provides (close to the land, to nature and to God), the farm is also a site of trauma. To the ancestral line, the farm might be seen to reward hard work, sacrifice and duty, that is, to provide for all the members of the extended family — because, according to FounderAbel's will "every Moolman woman and every Moolman man who did not himself farm on Toorberg had an inalienable right to share in the produce of the farm" (25). But the farm is also seen to punish and reject the deviance of those who do not comply with FounderAbel's patterns of behaviour. When Andreas Moolman, for example, is disgraced (for being a 'traitor' in

composing a poem for the English Queen), we read that “Toorberg turned its back on Andreas Moolman” (119); and, when the ghosts of Magtilt and FounderAbel visit the borehole when the boy, Noah, is trapped in its shaft, they know “what the living did not: that the earth of Toorberg would never yield up what it had once taken unto itself” (143).

The idea of the land taking control of the people, entrapping them by their self-imposed sense of duty, is illustrated by the relationships among FounderAbel’s sons. To his heirs, the farm is a crippling burden of responsibility. For the renegade sons who leave the farm, there is a lifelong restlessness and sense of displacement and loss because their sense of identity is dependent on the farm. Whether they stay or go, the farm exerts a strong influence and control over their sense of self. For other marginal characters, the farm is also a site of dislocation and displacement. The Riets, for example, have been “exiled into poverty onto a dusty, barren, isolated part of the farm because of their skin colour” (Warnes, 2009:80). In addition, particularly for Shala and Oneday Riet — who are conscious of their mixed-race identity and who strongly identify with their San/Bushman lineage — there is the feeling of displacement in response to the historical treatment and displacement of San/Bushmen in the area. In response, when Shala Riet routinely takes his herd of goats up onto the mountain for grazing, he looks down on the valley and the farm and dreams of a bygone era when “hunting was free” (76). He imagines that the San/Bushman paintings in the cave come to life “... and the brown herds of antelope with the tiny hunters after them rush out through the mouth of the cave... and swarm down into the Valley below” (76). As a marginal character, Shala is set in contrast to his nostalgic imaginings of historical events, thus confirming Wegner’s claim that although “we think of [space] as a reified thing... [it is, rather] an open-ended, conflicted and contradictory process, a process in which we as agents continuously intervene” (2002:182). The space that Shala Riet inhabits has the power to marginalise him because of the socio-political implications in/of that space. Shala Riet is, therefore, nostalgic for the place that he inhabits — the farm — but at another time: a time of different socio-political circumstance. His brother, Oneday Riet, has similar intimations. He too longs for Toorberg in an earlier

time: the time of the founding of the farm, because he longs to grant equal status to the three founding fathers, the white, the , and the San/Bushman.

It is apparent, therefore, that reflective nostalgia allows us, as readers, to consider spaces from different perspectives (central and peripheral), but also to consider spaces in different times and, as such, as involving different, even contrasting, social constructs. Space is, indeed, not static. In *Ancestral Voices*, Van Heerden's narrative succumbs to the temptation of a nostalgic visit to the traditional Karoo farm; but, once there, nostalgic reflection intrudes to alert the reader to the alternative perspectives: the peripheral spaces of those who, in the traditional plaasroman, would be marginal characters, if they appeared as presences at all. In this 'self-referential' plaasroman, however, not only are the bountiful areas of the farm surveyed, but also the arid areas; not only is the privilege of custodianship considered, but also its debilitating burden. By reflecting on the farm, almost simultaneously, as a longed-for home, and as a site of trauma, a more detailed and complex picture can emerge. When considering the farm-as-home through others' eyes, an alternative home — and, therefore, an alternative identity — can be envisioned because "if social and cultural spaces... are indeed the product of human actions, then there is the possibility of our reconstituting human spaces, and hence human being-in-the-world as well" (Wegner, 2002:185).

*The House: A Shelter for Solitude and Daydreams/ A Memorial for the Dead*

Within the spaces that I have discussed — the wilderness, the mountain and the farm — there are also private shelters: houses and homes. In *Ancestral Voices*, Van Heerden nostalgically portrays several houses and homes as sheltering spaces. There is merit in their exploration because, as Viljoen, Lewis & Van der Merwe suggest,

[i]n searching for identity and a place to belong, rather than returning to the region of your heart, another reaction might be to take shelter in your own little corner of the world, your own little shell. A house is in this regard the essence of inhabited space — the place we call home shelters us and forms a kind of shell for our solitude and our daydreams. (2004:9)

By visiting, in turn, the Toorberg farmstead, Amy O'Leary's house in the village, Katie Danster/Riet's cottage, and the San/Bushman cave, I ask: are these homes 'sheltering

corners of the world' which allow for 'solitude and daydreams', or are they simply memorials to times and people past? In other words, I aim to pinpoint the nostalgic allure of each of these spaces — either as instances of restorative or reflective nostalgia — and what that reveals about our contemporary attitudes to 'home'.

As a representation of 'home', the Toorberg homestead is the quintessential farmhouse. It is big, imposing and easily visible in the area. After battling the wilderness, and giving of his material, physical and spiritual self to found the farm, Founder Abel — as he himself wishes to believe — built this house for his wife, Magtild. Later he claims that

[i]t was for her... that he had tamed this land, so that she would be able to lie in a proper bed when the birth-pangs were upon her: so that she could step out into a properly laid out and carefully watered kitchen garden; so that she should have a proper oven for her baking and a window to sit beside to look out over her husband's fields. (136)

However, not only does he build a comfortable shelter from the elements, he also builds a 'spoghuis';<sup>35</sup> a house to show off his wonderful success, wealth and power. The house, as viewed from the perspective of the present, reveals a solid, traceable history. Alterations or additions are traceable to late family members, while pictures and artefacts are referred to their original owner's name. With "the dour ancestral portraits on the walls; the walking sticks in the umbrella-stand in the hall, some with a patina produced by hands long since crumbled into dust; the attic like a collective memory accumulating the flotsam of generations", the house has a "shrine-like ambience" (147). It represents safety and continuity, a 'sheltering corner of the world'. But is this a house or a home? Ella Moolman, the current 'woman of the house', "[would often] simply wander through the house, from room to room, moving a piece of furniture here, straightening a picture there, running her hand across a curtain or plumping up a cushion" (33). We see Ella staring wistfully out of the window and waiting expectantly for a spectral visitation. She is lonely and alone within this imposing space; even though a multitude of servants hover peripherally, there is little

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<sup>35</sup> spog: boast, brag, show off (Pfeiffer, 2007:572); therefore a 'spoghuis' is a 'show house' or a house to show-off with.

interaction. The impression is that Ella fills the role of housekeeper, or of curator in a museum in honour of the Moolman family, which is headed up by the Moolman patriarch. The house is the site of power that, in turn, highlights the imbalance of power in the family and the community.

In contrast, Amy O'Leary's house in the village depicts a home run with a steady, maternal hand. Here the three inhabitants (family members Amy, her husband Postmaster, and their son Mailbag) eat their meals at the kitchen table in comfortable companionship, where Amy herself slices bread and pours tea. When the magistrate visits, there is a pot of tea at the ready and he feels relaxed and comfortable. Mailbag is proud of his home and says, when he shows his room to Kitty Riet: " 'This is where I lie at night thinking about all that we have talked about' " (204). He thus indicates that his home is for him "shell-like in the way that [it] protect[s] [his] solitude and spaces of intimacy" (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:9). As one of the rejected Moolman brothers — rejected for having married a Catholic woman — Postmaster, on the other hand, is still haunted by his family/childhood home, as he gazes up at the Moolman farmstead through his brother's binoculars. Although he pretends that he is checking the weather, it is "his childhood home that he [is] really looking at, with a yearning so palpable that when he [comes] back indoors again and [Amy] stroke[s] his forearm with her fingertips she [can] actually feel the gooseflesh" (55). Postmaster has not come to terms with the loss of his former home and his rejection by the Moolman family. His longing for home is entirely focused on the Moolman farmstead as a 'memorial' which blinds him to the nurturing home that has been created in its stead. The O'Leary household offers Postmaster an alternative form of belonging, but he is unable to accept it because his desire to restore his former home, as it was (or as he chooses to remember it), limits his imagination. It should be noted, however, that Van Heerden has not simply created (in the O'Leary cottage) a sentimental reconstruction of a home; he also reveals this home's imperfections and limitations. It is a place of shortage (the family has limited resources) and there is anger and bitterness as a result of the family's situation as an impoverished 'step family'. In this way, Van Heerden creates a home that is a place of belonging, nurture and safety, but that is certainly not a utopia.

Similarly, the nostalgic picture of the Riet family's cottage, as seen from a distance, is balanced against the hardships and discomforts that become apparent on closer inspection. The Riets on the Stiefveld are nostalgically pictured as living "in the distance across the Valley" where, as Katie Danster/Riet walks home, she can see "a wisp of smoke curling up out of the chimney of her little house" (12). In a traditional tale or plaasroman, a glimpse of the smoke curling out of the chimney from across the valley would signify an inner contentment. Van Heerden, however, disturbs such expectations by exposing the reader to the smoky, dusty interior, which explains Katie's chest problems and the children's perpetually runny noses. We witness the hasty sweeping up of ash when the magistrate visits, the dragging in of benches to sit on, and the "path [that] became too stony, littered with too many broken bottles" to allow access to the magistrate's car. The cosy scene, which the wisp of smoke seen from across the valley suggests, cannot be sustained on closer inspection. This is a hard environment in which we see a family eking out its existence on a piece of wasteland. Neither are human relationships within this house easy: the women are at odds with one another; and, as discussed earlier, Katie has a very different understanding of the past and the present than do her two sons, Shala and Oneday Riet. The cottage, if the somewhat sentimental tone has any meaning here, is the site of a disjointed family.

The final 'home' in the novel is a cave: a shelter that offers the nostalgic promise of security in a pre-Christian reminder of human origin. "As the archetype of the maternal womb, caverns feature in myths of origin, rebirth and initiation from many cultures" (Chevalier, 1996:167). Shala and Oneday Riet often retreat to the cave on the mountain which, in the past, was inhabited, visited or used by "a small band of Bushmen" (5) who scattered when Founder Abel "fired" (5) on them three days after his arrival. "From this vantage point [Shala and Oneday] could... watch... [and they] saw... observed... noticed" (76) all the activity in the village and on the farm below them in the manner of gods or, similarly, omniscient narrators. This was also where they "pretended" (76) and imagined different lives. Although this is not a house or a home in which any of the characters live, it is a safe place of solitude and intimacy, a spiritual home to which Shala and Oneday, intermittently, retreat. Perhaps, as

mythology suggests, it is for them a “locale of identity formation, that is to say, the process of psychological internalization through which the individual reaches maturity and achieves a fixed identity” (Chevalier, 1996:171). The nostalgic tug of the cave (as a space) is for a place at a time when ownership did not define belonging; when there was enough space and shelter for all and when there was co-existence between humans, animals and nature. This home, the cave, is a natural shelter, a womb-like space that will endure despite the evanescence of the human experience and it, therefore, symbolises birth, rebirth and hope.

For an analysis of Van Heerden’s treatment of space in *Ancestral Voices*, nostalgia has proved to be a valuable conceptual tool. I consider Van Heerden’s choice of spatial context to be nostalgic — he is drawn to the spaces of early Afrikaner nationalism — but to be nostalgic in both a positive and negative light. With nostalgia having restorative and/or reflective typologies, Van Heerden is revealed, in a qualificatory manner, to have not simply reconstituted that space, the space of the traditional plaasroman, but to have reflected on longing by opening the space to several, sometimes conflicting, perspectives. A historical myth of origin has been questioned implicitly and modified; the longing for ownership has been revealed to be less than a destiny; idyllic pictures have been exposed as one dimensional, barely concealing their trauma; and it has become apparent that houses are not always homes and homes are not always houses. As with the exploration of nostalgia in relation to people, nostalgia in relation to places also cannot be confined to oppositions. Just as central and marginal spaces inspire feelings of both restorative and reflective nostalgias, so both central and marginal characters experience longings for places and identities that bring them no ultimate peace of mind.

If the relationship between reflective and restorative nostalgia is shot through with ambiguity, then this double-edged concept is an apt summarising metaphor of the novel, *Ancestral Voices*. It is apt both in the local and global application, the issue of ‘home and exile’ being central to current international concerns with postcolonial literature.



In the next chapter, I will explore aspects of postcolonial nostalgia, again both in its local and global application, in another of Van Heerden's novels, *30 Nights in Amsterdam*.

### Chapter 3: *30 Nights in Amsterdam*

#### *Introduction to 30 Nights in Amsterdam*

The version entitled *30 Nights in Amsterdam* (2011) is the English translation — by Michiel Heyns — of the original Afrikaans novel, *30 Nagte in Amsterdam* (2008). Like *Ancestral Voices*, this novel is set in the Karoo and focuses on a farming family, the De Melkers. The steady demise of the family is recounted, retrospectively, through the recollections of two family members, Zan de Melker and her nephew Henk de Melker,<sup>36</sup> both broken people in search of their respective identities, who, after years of estrangement, reunite in Amsterdam. In contrast to *Ancestral Voices* (1989), *30 Nights in Amsterdam* — published 22 years later — moves beyond the confines of the farm, as the novel extends from the towns and cities of the Eastern Cape to a greater South Africa, and, as the title suggests, eventually to the Dutch and cosmopolitan city of Amsterdam. As in *Toorberg* (the original title of *Ancestral Voices*), the very title of this novel, by including the name of the city of Amsterdam, suggests a prominent idea/theme: the broadening of the Afrikaner outlook, which is examined by looking out at the world from the dusty Karoo landscape while additionally, looking back at it — from ‘out there’ — for a new perspective. At the same time, the focus on ‘*30 Nights*’ introduces the concept of time, hinting that ‘looking back’ applies not only to the idea of viewing one place from the perspective of another, but also looking back at one period of time from the vantage point of another.

The De Melker family, on whom the story focuses, have farmed in the Karoo for generations as neighbours of the Moolmans of Toorberg, the latter being the family and farm of *Ancestral Voices*. The De Melkers, furthermore, have familial links with the Moolmans. It is mentioned that Soois Moolman, a character in *Ancestral Voices*, is the uncle of MaOlivier, a character in *30 Nights* (431). There are several other intertextual references to *Ancestral Voices* throughout this novel, particularly to the mountain and region called Toorberg (238; 239; 262; 280; 326; 412), but also to the character/family Du Pisani (191), confirming Van Heerden’s statement that new texts

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<sup>36</sup> Zan de Melker is the daughter of the nameless patriarchal figure and his wife Granny/MaOlivier. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to Henk de Melker as ‘Henk’ or ‘Henk de Melker’ — the other character in the novel who is also named Henk is his father who, to avoid confusion, I will refer to as Henk (Senior).

in his oeuvre “start a conversation with the older pieces” (Terblanche, 2010:2).<sup>37</sup> It is safe to say, therefore, that the De Melkers and their community are of similar stock and tradition to the people/characters of *Ancestral Voices* and, as part of the same community, are subject to similar social and ideological influences. After reading *Ancestral Voices*, Lynne Freed commented that “it would be fascinating to have Mr Van Heerden’s version of what comes next for his people” (1992:3). In *30 Nights* we are given one such version: several generations later, the issues that — in *Ancestral Voices* — concerned the Moolmans as white Afrikaners have been developed and now confront the De Melkers. In *30 Nights*, the contemporary setting is a post-1990 democratic South Africa. Read together, these two novels form a trajectory of inter-related themes and motifs — from the beginning of the earlier novel to the end of the later novel.<sup>38</sup>

As in *Ancestral Voices*, in *30 Nights* the search for identity is central to the novel’s purpose: Van Heerden’s Afrikaner is now forced to explore an identity that is no longer automatically supported or defined by land ownership. Changing socio-political circumstances, together with an inability to sustain hereditary succession, have loosened the white male’s exclusive hold on land in South Africa. The search for identity, therefore, extends to include the question of who, or what, a South African is and, indeed, how people everywhere re-define their identity in the changing world of today. Amsterdam, as we shall see, signifies not only a global cityscape but, ironically, links the Afrikaner back to his/her roots, beyond even the founding myth of the Great Trek, to a kind of ancestral collusion in an earlier Dutch colonial adventure in Africa.

As with *Ancestral Voices*, there are a multitude of characters in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. Attention, however, is focused primarily on two main persons, Zan de Melker (also known as Susan or Xan) and her nephew, Henk de Melker. Focalisation in

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<sup>37</sup> The intertextuality of *30 Nights in Amsterdam* with other texts of Van Heerden’s oeuvre — particularly *Ancestral Voices* — and with Afrikaans literature in general, has been examined by Anker (2009:242). An earlier study discussing the intertextuality of Van Heerden’s texts, by De Beer (1991), is also relevant if we bear in mind that *30 Nights in Amsterdam* is intertextually linked to *Ancestral Voices*.

<sup>38</sup> Whereas the trajectory of *Ancestral Voices* stretches from the Great Trek to approximately the 1950s, *30 Nights in Amsterdam* reaches in memory back to the 1940s-1960s, from the vantage point of the 2000s, so that the time span of the two novels overlaps somewhat. More generally, as mentioned earlier, *Ancestral Voices* was written and published during the apartheid years, while *30 Nights in Amsterdam* was written and published after the end of apartheid.

the novel's fifty-eight chapters is divided evenly between these two characters as they recount and consider — from the perspective of the new millennium in the 2000s — their formative years in the home of the De Melker matriarch, Granny/MaOlivier.<sup>39</sup> The action, which encompasses the reminiscences of Zan and Henk, is provoked by a letter from Zan's lawyer — one Grotius, in Amsterdam — to Henk in the Karoo. Henk is informed that his aunt (Zan), whom he has not seen for approximately forty years, has died and left her estate to him on the condition that he travel to Amsterdam to view and/or accept the terms of the will. In fact, as we learn later, Zan has not died but is terminally ill. With Grotius as go-between, she intervenes in Henk's life by luring him to Amsterdam under false pretensions. The purpose, it turns out, is to attempt a reconciliation with her nephew. The juxtaposition of the nostalgic and traumatic recollections of Henk and Zan results in startling revisions of their memories, revisions which dispel any singular view of what it is to be an Afrikaner in the modern world. Such a double perspective compares and combines two people's accounts of their lives then and now. There is, in addition, the double perspective from far and near as we travel between the Karoo and Amsterdam in what is a journey into the characters respective memories.

In the light of this, I shall examine Van Heerden's response to forms of nostalgia in the novel with regard to places/spaces. Van Heerden's characters imaginatively visit the Karoo in South Africa — its landscape, farm, town and city — while they venture abroad to the European city of Amsterdam. As Viljoen, Lewis, and Van der Merwe observe, "[S]pace in literature, as in life, is never just an empty, neutral extension but rather a place that has been named, demarcated, allocated. It is a place that gets its meaning from human experience and memories from relations between people. It is often a stage where human desires and interests clash" (2004:3).

Before I discuss nostalgia and space, however, I will explore, in the following subsection, nostalgia in the novel with regard to the characters.

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<sup>39</sup> The De Melker matriarch is referred to in the novel as GrannyOlivier (as Henk de Melker's grandmother) or MaOlivier (as Zan de Melker's mother). For the sake of clarity I will refer to her as Granny/MaOlivier.

### ***Nostalgia in the Novel: Characters***

Place, of course, is granted significance through people. Before turning to a metonymic Amsterdam, therefore, I shall focus on the characters whose lives constitute what we might call Van Heerden's move from the collective identity of 'Afrikanerdom' (as in the older tradition) to a more fluid identity of the Afrikaner individual. As such a move suggests, the concept of the plaasroman — initially questioned in *Ancestral Voices* — almost ceases to be an anchoring point of reference. 'Almost', however, is the operative word: there is no simple turn from the Karoo of Afrikaner ancestry to the free space of Amsterdam. The character who most obviously, perhaps symbolically, links the older tradition to a younger generation is Granny/MaOlivier.

#### *Granny/MaOlivier: Clinging to 'Truth' and Tradition*

In Granny/MaOlivier, Van Heerden presents a strong and traditional Afrikaner woman. Traditionally, the Afrikaner woman is portrayed in the plaasroman "essentially as a housewife, usually unhappy, and as having little to do with the forming of a national ideology" [my translation] (A Coetzee, 2000:77);<sup>40</sup> instead, it was the "patriarch who spoke" [my translation] (A Coetzee, 2000:77).<sup>41</sup> The De Melkers, however, no longer have a patriarch. Granny/MaOlivier is a widow who has moved from the family farm to a house in town, leaving the farm in the hands of the son and heir, Henk (Senior),<sup>42</sup> who does not have the necessary strong skills of leadership. Granny/MaOlivier oversees the family trust (as an enterprise) from her imposing desk at her house in town. Although she could capably manage the farm herself, she considers herself simply to be a guardian while she waits for either Henk (Senior) to "get a grip" (Van Heerden, 2011b:145)<sup>43</sup> on himself or for Henk, her grandson, to mature and take up the reins.

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<sup>40</sup> "Daarbenewens is die vrou hoofsaaklik huisvrou, en gewoonlik ongelukkig; maar aan die vorming van 'n volksideologie het sy weinig deel gehad" (A Coetzee, 2000:77).

<sup>41</sup> "Dit was die patriarg wat gepraat het..." (A Coetzee, 2000:77).

<sup>42</sup> Henk (Senior) is MaOlivier's son. His son (and therefore Granny/MaOlivier's grandson) is Henk, the novel's protagonist.

<sup>43</sup> Henceforth, when quoting from *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, I shall note only the page number.

As he did in *Ancestral Voices*, Van Heerden has introduced a subversive figure into the plaasroman: in this case, a prominent female character who is central not only to the family, but to the farm as a commercial enterprise as well; a female character who stands in as the substitute patriarch within the structure of the novel. Van Heerden has nostalgically created a hardworking and devout woman devoted to family and 'volk', but one who is shown to have considerable and unusual capabilities. Zan de Melker, her daughter, points out that " 'MaOlivier's word is law' " (326) and that she " 'knows about farming; she's ram breeder number one' " (276). The character, Granny/MaOlivier herself, however, is not convinced of her own strengths. Although she has taken the lead in farming and family matters, and is most knowledgeable as farmer and breeder of sheep, she sees herself only as the " 'guardian of the Substantiality' " (27). Even though she is an atypically strong woman, Granny/MaOlivier is nostalgic for the patriarchal past to be restored. She longs to restore the farm to its former glory, and to restore " 'the De Melkers... once again [to] where they belong and always did...' " (219); she longs for the restoration of the patriarch. Physically, there is no central patriarchal figure; all the characters are peripheral (not according to the structure of a traditional plaasroman), but " 'grandfather De Melker... had a strong influence... even though he was no longer there' " (271). He could be considered to be a spectral representation of a central figure, a presence that haunts Granny/MaOlivier's memories. Granny/MaOlivier tells Henk that " '[t]here are many challenges ahead for the Afrikaner' " (218), thus indicating that her nostalgia is a "defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" which — as Svetlana Boym asserts — is when "nostalgia inevitably reappears" (2001:xiv).

While Granny/MaOlivier attempts to restore the arrangements that have worked in the past, and with which she is familiar and comfortable, she also attempts to manipulate others. For example, she bullies her son, Henk (Senior). Even though he is floundering and battling with depression, she implores him to "get a grip on [him]self or give up the farm", while at the same time pointing out that he "should look well after what [he has been] given in trust, for the next generation" (145). On the other hand, she overprotects and restricts her daughter, Zan. Though neither at school, nor

employed, Zan, who suffers from epilepsy, is not taught anything useful and is not given a productive role in either the running of the household or the farm/business. Furthermore, Granny/MaOlivier sends prospective suitors away without Zan's knowledge, saying that "[Zan's] mental equilibrium... was to be preserved at any price" (345). Granny/MaOlivier's other daughter (sister to Henk (Senior) and Zan) is overlooked entirely. MaOlivier refers to her as the "Pretoria sister" (145) — we never learn her name — and, instead, consults with this daughter's husband, on farm and family matters. Henk, her youngest grandson (the son of Henk Senior) is her last hope of a successor to take the place of her husband, and she overbearingly attempts to mould him into the man she wants (and needs) him to be, by overseeing every aspect of his life. So strong is her conviction that the past can be restored, that she denies herself the happiness of a second marriage because, she says, it would be "[a] betrayal of Oupa, always such a proud man" (192). Henk (as a child), standing behind a curtain, overhears her "[decline] the old man's marriage proposal in tears: 'I can't just leave them in the lurch. I cannot abandon them'" (432).

Granny/MaOlivier, being 'restoratively' nostalgic, believes that she is being faithful to "truth and tradition" (Boym, 2001:xviii). But her endeavours to control people and events in her "attempt [at] a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym, 2001:xviii) do not have the desired effects. Her son, Henk (Senior), instead of becoming the next patriarchal leader of the family farm, suffers a mental breakdown and has to be hospitalised. Zan, her daughter, does not succumb to the quiet life that her mother wants for her but, on the contrary, rebels dramatically and eventually disappears from the Karoo region. The younger Henk, Granny/MaOlivier's grandson, quietly slips into a life of obscurity, away from the role she had expected him to assume. When Granny/MaOlivier dies (alone) in her rose garden at her house in Graaff-Reinet, her son-in-law takes over the farm, thus ending the De Melker authority over the land. It appears, then, that not only has she not achieved what she intended — she has not restored the former patriarchal order — but she has also obstructed her own potential and foiled alternative futures for the family and the family farm. The effects of her need to restore the past, and of her attempts to mould her children and grandchildren, has, instead, left Henk and Zan with unresolved questions regarding

their identity and their place in the world. Both are stunted: they know what they *do not* want, but are unable to imagine what they *do* want.

By clinging to tradition and what she believes to be the 'truth', Granny/MaOlivier has neither allowed herself to develop and grow, nor has she nurtured the younger generations. Henk and Zan, as I will discuss next, chafe against the pre-conceived roles that they are expected to fill, while experiencing psychological difficulties in the process of their maturation. Their traumatic memories, however, are eventually confronted; and through 'reflective nostalgia' each comes to a point of integration, reconciliation, and emotional growth.

*Henk de Melker: Haunted by Trauma/ Emerging from his Crypt*

The novel opens by introducing Henk de Melker, a forty-seven year old museum assistant, who "considers himself a simple man, a man who asks for little from life and gives little in return" (3). He lives a monastic life: "[T]he last time he touched a woman's skin blazes more fiercely in his memory with each passing year" (3), and, tucked away from society, he has effectively retreated from life. He works on his monographs about obscure historical people and quells the loneliness "that grips him on Saturday afternoons" (37) by drinking beer and driving out to "where the plains open out around him..." (37). He has underachieved to the point where no one bothers him. But he does not allow thoughts of the past to intrude on his life, believing instead that "he's got everything neatly sorted here in [the Karoo] now" (5). As Boym has it, "for some, nostalgia [is] a taboo" and this could apply to Henk de Melker. He seems to share the "predicament of Lot's wife, a fear that looking back might paralyze [him] forever, turning [him] into a pillar of salt, a pitiful monument to [his] own grief" (Boym, 2001:xv). This lifeless existence, however, hints at unresolved trauma, raising inevitable questions about what he is retreating from. Henk's withdrawal suggests that he is living in the "aftermath" of a significant event, perhaps an event that was unpleasant, overwhelming, and/or traumatic; perhaps he is living in the aftermath of what Punter would describe a "failed project" (2000:62).

The letter Henk receives from the lawyer, Grotius — informing him of Zan's death and requesting that he travel to Amsterdam to view/claim her 'estate' — arrives to explode



Henk's carefully constructed existence. Even though he has resolved that "[h]e won't allow those years to crowd clamouring into his head again... [that] it's over, forever, [and] he's shaken it off" (5), he is provoked by the letter and is suddenly confronted with thoughts of the past. As mentioned earlier, "repression always leads to a return of the repressed..." (Bhabha qtd in Edwards, 2008:127), and traumas that have been forgotten will not stay forgotten; they will assert themselves in one way or another, often through nostalgia or haunting. Henk's office in the museum has the grave of a little boy in its corner, where "the minister and his wife buried their little son" (114). Such is the extent of Henk's retreat and loneliness that "the simple stone... gives him the feeling of family" (116). But shortly before Grotius's letter arrives, Henk has an emotional and tearful reaction to a phrase that he has read in the advice column of a newspaper: "Be tender with the little boy you once were" (116). In response, he considers his feelings about the grave in his office: " '[T]hat's how you've buried yourself, your childhood. That's you lying there' " (116), he admits to himself, suggesting that the ghosts of his past, of himself as a boy, are provoking profound reflection and recognition.

On receipt of the letter, he is stunned into realising that life has continued outside of his narrow sphere of existence; that his Aunt Zan, whom he had not thought about in years, has been living a life despite his lack of interest in her, and that, by extension, there is a world full of life outside the limits of his meagre world. The stirring of his curiosity and subsequent feelings of becoming "haunted by his childhood" (116) hint at a stifled desire to live a fully engaged life. A sense of loss — which Punter identifies as a recurrent feature of a postcolonial condition (2000:130) — seems to surround Henk because, although he is not dead, he seems to have lost his purpose in life and has been merely existing. Now, thoughts of Zan being "vividly before him" (7) suggest that the "apparently purged landscape of the contemporary" (Punter, 2000:62), in Henk's life, the apparently sanitised mental spaces that Henk inhabits, are the site of submerged trauma, foreshadowing the revelations to follow. In other words, Henk's uneventful life — life pared down to a simple routine of sparse interaction and lack of emotional involvement — is not 'neutral' but, rather, an apparent tranquillity that masks an unresolved inner disturbance. His repressed memories will be stirred by his

own nostalgia. Although he is not, initially, nostalgic himself, nostalgia will play a role in his awakening. (It is Zan's nostalgia, as we will learn later, that prompted the lawyer's involvement that, in turn, will be the catalyst to disturb Henk's apparently placid existence.) But what has caused Henk to retreat from life?

Astutely, Zan explains the life that Granny/MaOlivier envisaged for Henk:

[F]irst team rugby, lieutenant in the defence force, then studies at Maties or Kovies, postgraduate and university rugby. Student council and chairman of the National Party, of course Rapportryer and SCA member. Then Henkie comes home and he's the shining star of Graaff-Reinet, who knows, he could be lawyer or even dominee. (219)

However, Henk has not become such a person, the person whom Granny/MaOlivier wanted (or needed) him to be. His rebellion against Granny/MaOlivier's plans for him — as in the case of the renegade sons and brothers in *Ancestral Voices* — takes the form of his doing nothing and becoming no-one. On one of her surreptitious visits to South Africa (which I will discuss in the subsection that follows), Zan observes the shell of a man that Henk has become; she witnesses a “failed project” (Punter, 2000:62). Although he has evaded the rigid role that Granny/MaOlivier wanted for him, Henk has failed to find a purposeful or satisfying alternative role, and, furthermore, has lost sight of the person he was in childhood. Zan is nostalgic for the adventurous and curious little boy Henk once was. Nostalgia for that little boy, the boy whom Zan remembers, and whom he admits he has buried, “wells up in Henk” (60) when he arrives in Amsterdam. Initially, he is struck by the stark contrasts between the city and the Karoo. The feeling of homesickness, however, is not for the Karoo he has just left, but for the Karoo of an earlier time, the time that he shared with Zan when they were growing up in Granny/MaOlivier's household. Henk has suppressed these recollections because they had threatened to lead directly to traumatic memories of guilt, loss and loneliness; but now, away from the Karoo, the nostalgia, paradoxically, wells up in him. His heightened sense of urgency is provoked, possibly because he is faced with the choice set out in Zan's ‘will’: either to relocate permanently to Amsterdam and inherit her house, or return to his current life in the Karoo. Henk is, therefore, compelled to confront who he has become and to (re)consider what he now wants in life.

I have mentioned that a combination of Henk's hauntedness and Zan's nostalgia are at play in Henk's 'awakening'. These two characters — Henk and Zan — can be considered in tandem in their search for identity and meaning, but they could also be considered as binary opposites of each other. Either way, it is because of their reunion and interaction that they arrive at greater insights; and it is in the spaces between them, as well as in the double perspective of their combined memories, that an integrated 'truth' can be found. " 'In this city [Amsterdam] I am closer to the things that I was consciously trying to live away from in [the Karoo]' " (284), Henk notes. He is faced with profound insights into his past and his family, insights of which he had been unaware before arriving in Amsterdam. Henk acquires painful information during his time in Holland, both from Grotius and, later, from Zan herself (following their reconciliation, when it is revealed that she is not, in fact, dead). Some of the information that he acquires in Amsterdam, though painful, ultimately liberates him from the unnecessary guilt that he has assumed, thus changing the way in which he sees things and the way he feels. For example, he had believed that he was somehow implicated in Zan's disappearance, not realising that it was, in fact, her own choices and traumatic experiences that led to her flight. The traumas that have haunted Henk — apart from the weight of expectation placed on him by Granny/MaOlivier, and his misplaced guilt regarding Zan's disappearance — concern his father's ill health and sudden death; the family tensions and the failing of the family farm; his isolation as a loner at school; his fear of Zan and her epilepsy; and his fears for his own mental health. Much of his anguish arises from a lack of information and understanding, from gaps in the story of his youth. He is haunted, therefore, by misplaced feelings of guilt and fear. As Abraham and Torok have said: "What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (qtd in Punter, 2000:63). By reuniting with Zan, and reflecting on the painful past, therefore, the secrets are told, the gaps are filled and, consequently, Henk's hauntedness recedes and his traumatic memories are gradually assimilated and integrated into his life.

Once Henk has begun to deal with his traumatic memories, he is increasingly able to acknowledge and incorporate pleasantly nostalgic memories. And, as he sheds the burden of trauma and assumed guilt, his attitude towards his work and towards

creativity improves.<sup>44</sup> He had intended to write a factual account of the life of Cornelius van Gogh, brother of the famous artist, Vincent van Gogh; Cornelius, as the obscure brother, mirrors Henk's sense of himself. (I will discuss this analogy, in greater detail, at a later stage.) His workmanlike engagement with Cornelius becomes an increasingly creative project: "A fantasy seizes him" (382) as his imagination begins to fill in the gaps that research and public record cannot. He begins to qualify his rigid ideas about truth and fact: "Is it true? 'I don't care,' Henk says out loud. 'I'll *make* it true' " (438), and, instead, he reaches intuitively for potential and possibility in his research of the lesser known Van Gogh, almost as if he were researching his own alter ego. Eventually, he applies the same intuitive approach to scrutinising his own life, past and present, to envisaging alternative understandings of his present, his past, and even his future. " 'I'm going to bring Cornelius van Gogh to life. I'm going to make him get up out of his grave, and myself too in the process; I'm going to get up out of my child's grave. I! Henk de Melker!' " (438). This awakening of Henk's imagination and enthusiasm is, perhaps, what Zan had envisioned. Grotius tells Henk: " '[Zan] wanted to force you out of your country. She wanted to force you to reflection' " (272), and it seems that, by the end of the novel, she has succeeded. His reflectively nostalgic and traumatic memories start blending as he allows them to develop and come to the forefront of his consciousness; his disparate memories begin to cohere as he increasingly learns to reconcile himself to his choices.

In Henk de Melker, Van Heerden has created a character who struggles to find an alternative Afrikaner identity for himself, an identity different from that prescribed for him by the 'ancestral' ideas of his family, with its nostalgia for "a single plot of national identity" (Boym, 2001:xviii). Rather, Henk is symbolic of today's Afrikaner — or is it Afrikaans person — who does not adhere to a prescription in matters of identity because, "to speak of 'Afrikaners' is to assume an imagined community that nowadays indicates a diversity rather than a unity" (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:4). In Henk, Van Heerden has illustrated how spectral provocations of trauma together with

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<sup>44</sup> The role of the artist's imagination and the process of remembering are discussed by Human (2008:6) with regard to *30 Nights in Amsterdam*; and by Nel (2010:169), who discusses Henk de Melker's developing creativity and imagination with regard to his writing.

the evocations of nostalgia — which, for Henk, were prompted by Zan — can help one reflect on the past in a way that fosters emotional growth and an understanding of the diversity, not only of an Afrikaner identity, but of a human identity.

*Zan de Melker: The Ambivalence of Human Longing*

Zan de Melker's nostalgia provides the impetus for the action of the novel. As she nears the end of her life, in her suffering from cancer, she can no longer ignore the nostalgia that has haunted her since her arrival in Amsterdam forty years earlier.

Zan de Melker is not in Amsterdam by choice. Through a series of events (in the 1960s) she was forced into exile there as a young woman. While living with her mother in the town of Graaff-Reinet, this young woman's rebellious nature, manifest in her notorious eccentricity, was exploited by members of a political resistance group, the Sobukwe Cell. She was co-opted into joining them in the resistance/freedom struggle against the apartheid regime. (The cell members believed that she would be useful as a messenger and runner between town and township, without raising undue suspicion.) Zan became involved, as part of the activities of the Cell, in two murders and a plan to bomb electricity pylons and railway lines. When the police and security forces (and her brother, Henk Senior), became aware of her involvement, she was spirited away by the 'movement', placed in hiding in a safe house in Cape Town and, after that, transported to Amsterdam.

Contrary to Henk's initial instinct to deny any nostalgic recall, Zan is always painfully aware of her longings. It was on arrival in Amsterdam that she first felt an intense longing for home. Chapter 41 is focalised by Zan de Melker in first-person narration, and the word 'longing' is used twenty-five times (within six pages). She longs for people, places, buildings, and animals — in short, for everything that has been familiar and dear — but she questions the ambivalence of her longings. How is it possible to long so strongly for a home she has rejected and against which she has rebelled: "a longing for a lost home set in a politically problematic space and time" (Dlamini,

2010:152)?<sup>45</sup> Hers is a reflective nostalgia that “dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging” (Boym, 2001:xviii); it is the nostalgia typically experienced by the exile who is “at once homesick and sick of home... a survivalist aesthetics of estrangement and longing” (xix).

Zan longs for her home in the Karoo of her youth; for her mother, MaOlivier, and the rest of the family; and for Katie, the maid; but, most importantly, her nostalgia focuses on Henk as she knew him then, as a child. Unbeknown to Henk, Zan surreptitiously returned to South Africa on two occasions during the forty years of her exile and observed him in his quiet existence in the museum. Seeing him as an adult — “sitting there so stingily in [his] little corner... [his] pen crawling across the paper as if nothing could perturb [him]” (418-19) — makes her mourn for the bright young boy whom she knew when they were growing up, the boy whom she tormented, but who was the only person who, she felt, understood her. She now contacts Henk, indirectly, and tricks him into leaving the Karoo and travelling to Amsterdam, because she wants to ‘resurrect’ the Henk who has become ‘buried’; she wants to provoke him into the reflection necessary for healing. Her connection with him is also her final attempt to connect with her past and with her family. As Boym has said, quoting Joseph Brodsky, “what drives [the exile] is not a ‘nostalgia for the old country,’ but an attempt to revisit the world of [their] parents that had once included [them]” (Boym, 2001:295). Similarly, by connecting with Henk, Zan attempts to connect with the family that once included her. This attempt could, perhaps, be seen as an example of ‘restorative’ nostalgia, as Zan seeks to restore the family within which she had once felt a strong sense of belonging. But in her attempts to reconnect with that lost family, Zan finally contemplates not only her nostalgic memories, but also her own traumatic memories, as well as her anger. By contacting Henk, a process of deeper reflection is initiated and Zan is thus driven by her nostalgia to the sites of her traumas.

It appears that Zan’s nostalgia parallels Henk’s nostalgia: for the feeling of belonging as a family trio with Granny/MaOlivier. I have already discussed Granny/MaOlivier’s

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<sup>45</sup> Jacob Dlamini’s book, *Native Nostalgia* (2010), consists of “fragments, shards of memory through which [he] examine[s] indirectly what it means to be nostalgic for a past generally considered to have been a dark chapter of South Africa’s history” (2010:22).

attitude towards the two young people in her care: her expectations of them in her own need to restore the order of her past. With her traditional outlook influenced by her role as a woman, Granny/MaOlivier had applied the same limiting standards to her daughter. Zan, therefore, has been subject to triple constraints: the 'rules' of a land-owning, Afrikaner farming family, of a Karoo town community, as well as of the strictures of the Dutch Reformed Church. (Zan was also cloyingly over-protected because she suffered from epilepsy.) Unlike Granny/MaOlivier, Zan was unable to accept all these social constraints and she rebelled in dramatic, explosive fashion, even to the point of taking advantage of her epilepsy as an excuse to run wild. " 'I lied to MaOliver that I was taking my pills,' " she tells Henk, " '[t]hen my mind broke its banks. Then the wildcat came out, the hellraiser raised hell, the bats flew out of the belfry' " (417-18).

But for what is she nostalgic? For what does she long? For her brother, for her mother's caged bird, for familiar food, for Katie (their house maid), for the gardener, for landmarks like the school's creaking flag pole, for the Dominee and the Doctor, for her sister-in-law, Dorrit, for the dog in the neighbour's yard, for the postman on his bicycle. Mostly she longs for her mother, MaOlivier (333-35). All these memories constitute her 'family'. She is nostalgic for these members of the community, even though they constrained her spirit — at a time before she had realised the full consequences of their stifling hold on her. She imagines a conversation with her brother in which she asks him, " 'Boet, do you remember MaOlivier back then? Tender her touch, careful her voice of admonition, her hands soft as the cheeks of peaches and her flavour the fragrance of apricots when she comes to say goodnight. Boet, what wore us down so?' " (354). Her brother, Henk (Senior), of course, cannot answer her because he is dead, and she, in Amsterdam, has no one who can understand her. When she "expound[s] [her] longing" (337), people simply look at her with incomprehension.

Her anger at not being accepted for whom she was has shaped her fight against all forms of authority and manifested itself in various forms of rebellion: " 'Angry. Angry. Do you understand? My body was my slogan, my battle cry. With my body I was angry' " (417). Zan uses her body to express her rage towards herself and her world,

for example, through reckless sexual encounters. Her body, though, ultimately gives in, as all mortal bodies must, and now she is old and riddled with cancer. Van Heerden has defamiliarised Zan's body by focusing on the ugly and deformed to highlight feelings of dissatisfaction and of uncanniness. Memories of physical tenderness — Granny/MaOlivier's tender touch and soft skin (354); Henk softly stroking her face when she suffered a fit of epilepsy at the prizegiving (54); the touch of her lover, Wehmeyer (29) — are sharply contrasted with her crude descriptions of bodily fluids and smells, with her sexual exploits, with her traumatic memories of witnessing the assassination of Wehmeyer (26-8), and her condoning the murder of her own brother (316). (If this suggests abjection, I will explore Van Heerden's use of the abject in greater detail at a later stage in this chapter, in the subsection 'The Spectral and the Abject'.)

Zan seeks now to return to a time before her innocence was quashed, for a time of potential before she was consumed with anger. She longs to return to a time of 'what if'. One of the earliest recollections that she shares with Henk is their common interest in Vincent van Gogh. Zan found some comfort, as a young woman, to learn that this artist had been a fellow-sufferer of epilepsy: " 'This Vincent also had seizures, just like me!' " (186). In trying to describe the "overwhelming sensation" of an imminent seizure, she explains that "only real artists knew it" (20), artists such as "Vincent van Gogh [when he] create[d] his yellow café" (20). She notes that, unlike her experience of epilepsy, Vincent's eccentricity is celebrated. His brightly coloured art endorses her view of the world, just as, for Henk, Vincent van Gogh's brother, Cornelius van Gogh — we learn, surprisingly, that Cornelius visited South Africa — mirrors his own obscurity. (In a later subsection, 'The Spectral and the Abject', I will discuss the spectral presence of the Van Gogh brothers in the lives of Zan and Henk.) By reconnecting with Henk, Zan reconnects with her past as she seeks to validate and heal it.<sup>46</sup> She cannot reclaim, recreate or restore the past because nostalgia, which "tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence... is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, [the] materialization of the immaterial" (Boym, 2001:xvii). But,

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<sup>46</sup> Philip (2010:193) discusses how Zan's healing is directly linked to Henk's healing.



ultimately, through her nostalgic recall and her reflection, she can acknowledge her earlier view of the world, a view of heightened awareness that mirrors the creativity of Vincent van Gogh.

Zan's nostalgia does not suggest a wallowing in sentiment. It does not focus exclusively on her pleasant memories, but offers her a chance to reconnect with her trauma and her thwarted potential, to form an integrated, healed, and whole memory. By considering 'what if' together with 'what is', she can move on from MaOlivier's prescription for her, and towards a greater wholeness: a wholeness that MaOlivier had denied in herself, but was ultimately unable to crush in Zan. By reflecting on both her longings and her pain, Zan engages with the ambivalence of her longing. She begins to understand how it is possible to long for the home she has rejected. She is nostalgic for her earlier self, for the ghost of the self she had left behind.

With regard to nostalgia and the characters, then, Van Heerden has, in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, presented instances of both 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia. As with *Ancestral Voices*, the distinctions between the two are not always clearly defined. While Granny/MaOlivier aligns herself strongly with the past and is restoratively nostalgic, for Zan and Henk de Melker, the line between restorative and reflective nostalgia is sometimes blurred. Their feelings of longing are ambivalent: they find that reflecting on the positive *and* negative aspects of the past allows for the healing of past traumas. How great an influence the places of the past have on such processes must also be reflected on, and I will, therefore, explore nostalgia in relation to place in the next subsection.

### ***Nostalgia in the Novel: Places***

The title, *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, immediately introduces the concepts of place and space by incorporating the name of the city of Amsterdam, while the first chapter introduces another space, a quiet Karoo town in South Africa. The first two lines of the novel inform us that a "letter from Amsterdam... arrives in the early afternoon" (1) thereby creating an immediate link between the two places. Furthermore, Van Heerden includes two maps in the novel: one is a regional map of the Eastern Cape, featuring the area where the De Melker family lived and farmed (and which, as

intertextual reference, includes Toorberg in its markings); and the other is of the inner city of Amsterdam.

The letter from Amsterdam that arrives for Henk (in the opening scene of the novel) forges a link between Amsterdam and the Karoo, and between Zan and Henk de Melker. Henk has been unaware of Zan's whereabouts since her mysterious disappearance from Graaff-Reinet (the Karoo town where, as children, they had lived with Granny/MaOlivier). The shock of the news about Zan's supposed death, together with the invitation to travel outside of South Africa, provides Henk with the impetus for a re-evaluation of his life and encourages him to broaden his outlook beyond the boundaries of his immediate surroundings.

After many years abroad, Zan's nostalgic desire to re-connect with her home has prompted her to take the action of leaving her estate (including her house in Amsterdam) to Henk, her last surviving De Melker relative. It seems that she is not able, even after decades without any contact with him, to die without that last connection being re-established; she cannot sever her ties completely. Henk takes up the invitation/challenge to travel to Amsterdam and, over the course of fifty-eight chapters — and thirty nights — he and Zan (who eventually reveals herself to be paradoxically not yet/not quite dead) explore their memories of the shared spaces of the Karoo, prompted as much by each other as by the contrasting spaces of Amsterdam.

Dealing with space, Van Heerden has again utilised, in this novel, conventions of the traditional plaasroman. He explores, for example, the relationship between farm and town, the ideas of belonging and duty, as well as the "importance of the farm as foundational and sacred space" (Warnes, 2009:73). Van Heerden's novel, however, is a subversive form of the plaasroman and in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, he has developed and subverted the traditional conventions even further than he did in *Ancestral Voices*. The link to the farm is now more distant and tentative: the main characters, although they still share ownership of a farm and are closely associated with it, no longer live on the farm and, eventually, lose their hold on it altogether after Zan disappears and "[Henk] and his mother [are] manoeuvred out of the De Melker Trust" (369). So,

although in *30 Nights* Van Heerden has introduced the farm in its nostalgic guise as a significant space, along with marginal/subversive spaces — as he did in *Ancestral Voices* — he has broadened the view further still by insinuating South Africa into Europe, in an exploration of the nostalgic relationship between space and identity.

Van Heerden begins his journey to the Karoo by introducing the reader to Henk de Melker, an insignificant, forty-seven year-old museum assistant living in a contemporary Karoo town. The museum, where he quietly works as assistant and as a writer of pamphlets about obscure historical personalities, is positioned above the town, on a hillside. Henk watches, from the deep shade of the museum's passageway, as the postman labours up the gravel road on his bicycle in the heat of the day and, when he fetches the postman a glass of water, "[t]he echo of his footsteps sounds hollow and forlorn" (2). The museum is a building that stands apart from the village which has "quiet, deserted streets" (2), a quietness that is emphasised when the sound of the postman's "bicycle chain plinks tinnily against the mudguard, and gravel chips sputter up" (2). The stultifying atmosphere of the museum is enhanced when the "gong of the grandfather clock judders" (5) and "[n]othing stirs" (5), while the gardener lies fast asleep in the shade of a tree and Henk "gazes out of the window" (5): this is a lifeless scene. The postman leaves a letter though, and that letter — bringing news of Aunt Zan's death — penetrates the quiet, lifeless 'crypt' of Henk's shrunken world so that "all of a sudden Aunt Zan is vividly before him" (7).

As I have said, Zan has faked her death to get Henk to travel to Amsterdam, thus awakening him from his somnolence. On arrival in Amsterdam, Henk finds that "[i]t's impossible not to notice contrasts," (265) and for every observation he makes about Amsterdam, he has a counter-image of the Karoo: "Nostalgia wells up in Henk" (60). For the first time in years he thinks about his home, his surroundings — past and present — and his relationship to them. Thoughts of the comfortable, familiar and secure home and office that he has recently vacated, though, are less prominent than his nostalgic recollections of the Karoo spaces that he and his Aunt Zan shared during his childhood. He remembers the same place (the Karoo) but at a different time, that is, the nostalgic space of his youth, as a time of belonging and happiness.

So, we arrive at a point where Zan's life and Henk's life intersect and where their 'spaces' intersect (they are both in Amsterdam and are looking back at the Karoo home/space that they have come from). As their stories and recollections unfold — in the equal sharing of focalisation and chapters — Van Heerden takes the reader on a nostalgic journey to the places that have informed their identities, the spaces that evoke their nostalgia. I will now explore those spaces — the Karoo farmland/landscape, and the house in Graaff-Reinet, while discussing the relevance of Amsterdam as their newly-found point of reference. In considering a discussion of selected instances of nostalgia in *30 Nights in Amsterdam* — differentiating between 'restorative' and 'reflective' examples — we may ponder the implications of nostalgia for the novel as a postcolonial text, and its relevance for the local and global reader.

#### *Nostalgia for the Karoo: Farm and Landscape*

The Karoo farm, in a traditional plaasroman, is a central space and is nostalgically portrayed as an idyll. *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, with its plaasroman foundations, introduces the farm as the space that is central to the identity of the De Melker family. They define themselves as owners and stewards of the land and have passed the farm down from one generation to the next. However, the loosening of a single family's grip on the land — as seen in *Ancestral Voices*, where the male line of the Moolman family disintegrated — is also seen as the plight of the De Melker family. The problem is greater for the De Melkers: there is no longer a strong patriarchal leader and they have but a tentative hold on the farm because it is being managed in a lacklustre manner by Henk (Senior) de Melker, the son and heir of Granny/MaOlivier. Henk (Senior), a man with mental health problems, does not command the respect of either his workforce or the family. We have glimpses of the farm from the perspective of a neighbouring farmer, who reports to Granny/MaOlivier that "the fences are slack and the lower pasture wasn't sown this year" (145), and from a visitor who comments to Zan that " '[t]he people look poverty stricken... doesn't your brother buy clothes for the workers in his house?' " (151). Seen through these outsiders' eyes, this farm is no idyllic space. Thus, although Van Heerden's return to the traditional farm in this self-critical version of a plaasroman is a nostalgic gesture, he ponders that the "farm is now

a prime site of injustice and iniquity and a stage for the age-old struggle with the father..." (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:10).

Henk (Senior), it would appear, has already lost his 'struggle with the father', as depression incapacitates him and he is unable to shoulder the weight of the patriarchal legacy. Granny/MaOlivier, Henk (Senior's) mother, and the earlier patriarch's widow, seeks to restore the farm to its former glory and manages to oversee all farming and family matters from her giant desk in her house in town. Following her husband's death, she has removed herself from the farm to allow her son to take the leading role. But, as Henk (Senior) flounders, she pins her hopes on Henk, her grandson — the son of Henk (Senior) and, therefore, the next in line as heir. She wishes to groom him for a role as successor, as farmer, and as a prominent Afrikaner. Granny/MaOlivier has subscribed to the ideology that the farm is a man's domain and that her role is one of temporary leadership, while she waits for Henk, in adulthood, to fill the role of her late husband: the strong Afrikaner man who will take up the patriarchal leadership role aligned with the land. Neither Granny/MaOlivier nor Henk (Senior) can conceive of alternative roles for themselves, as Afrikaners divorced from the farm. Although Henk (Senior) is not suitable as a farmer and leader, he must (he believes) assume that role even though it cripples him mentally and emotionally. Granny/MaOlivier, as a woman, cannot and will not fully accept the leadership role; nor will she take charge of the farm, even though she is capable of doing so.

Granny/MaOlivier and Henk (Senior) are bound to the social 'rules' of the farm space, which they accept as familiar and understandable. However, the socio-political influences affecting the farm have changed, so that, in effect, they are now living in a changed/different social space, while trying to apply outdated behaviours and beliefs. Consequently, they long for earlier times in their desire for the restoration of order and control. They seek to restore the farm to what it once was: there is a longing for a different temporal space (the same place, the same farm, but at a different time). There is potential for the De Melkers to change with the times — MaOlivier could be the farmer, Henk (Senior) could give up the farming, hand the responsibility to someone else, and choose a different occupation for himself — but they are locked into their 'restoratively' nostalgic ideals. They do not realise that space "is both a

*production*, shaped through a diverse range of social processes and human interventions, and a *force* that, in turn, influences, directs and delimits possibilities of action and ways of being in the world” (Wegner, 2002:181). In other words, they do not realise that the relationship between people and spaces is one between two active parties, and that it has the potential to create close, symbiotic bonds.

Similarly, Zan and Henk de Melker, each in their way, feel out of place in the traditional farm space. But — unlike Henk (Senior) and Granny/MaOlivier — they do not accept the authoritarian forces of the farm. Instead, they disconnect themselves from the farm: Zan completely deserts the area; Henk settles in a neighbouring village and lives in obscurity. Although they cannot live according to the farm’s prescriptions, they do not know how to live differently. They are renegade characters and — similarly to the character, Floris Moolman, in *Ancestral Voices* — they realise that they do not inhabit the old patterns. But, at the same time, they do not know how to be De Melkers away from the farm, how to be a different kind of De Melker. Now, as they meet in Amsterdam, much later in life, Zan and Henk reflect on both their warmly nostalgic and painfully traumatic memories, in attempting to form an integrated picture of the farm as a space that is not simply an idyll (as in Granny/MaOlivier’s restorative view), but a complex and an ambivalent site.

Henk has several fond memories of the farm — for example, of riding with his father on the tractor (51). But the farm also elicits feelings of guilt and disloyalty, as when he drives to the Boland with his mother, and “feels a strange loyalty to the world they’ve come from. He feels that he shouldn’t allow himself to be enthralled by this lovely Boland. He feels as if he is betraying his father, who dotes on the Karoo mountain world” (49). He also has feelings of trepidation, for example, when his mother quarrels with his grandmother (192). In addition, he senses the oppressive nosiness of the neighbours when his mother, Dorrit, waits until late at night before she makes any private telephone calls, for fear of eavesdroppers on the party line. After arguing with Granny/MaOlivier one night, for example, she sees the neighbours’ lights burning and says, “ ‘They’ve been listening in. They got up when they heard the ping. They heard every word. Tomorrow the whole district will be jabbering’ ” (191).

Zan's feelings towards place, the farm, and authority are similarly ambivalent. She struggles to reconcile the outside world to that of the family farm, as she struggles to understand where and when she should reject or accept authority. In her everyday life in Graaff-Reinet, she constantly challenges the authority of her mother, the dominee, the doctor, and society in general. On the farm, she displays a similar disdain for authority when she is placed in a position of authority herself. She is left temporarily in charge of the farm while her brother, Henk (Senior), visits the hospital. Nonetheless, she struggles to maintain her role as caretaker: instead, she dances naked around the house in full sight of the farm workers, and thwarts the hierarchy by taking the tractor driver/foreman as a lover. However, when she unexpectedly receives a visit from Cecil Dimaggio — the leader of the Sobukwe Cell, the resistance group to which she has been co-opted — she is outraged that he has invaded the 'sacred space' of the De Melker farm. She is " 'angry really pissed off when the swank-car of Cecil Dimaggio stops in the brother's yard, the family farm the Substantiality-soil' [and mentally addressing Dimaggio, she says,] 'you don't belong here in the yard of my brother? Surely not? Not?' " (148-49). She cannot accept his apparent challenge to the authority of the farm as a De Melker stronghold. It would appear that, particularly on the farm, the boundaries of authority which she constantly tests and resists also give her a sense of security. Within the boundaries of the farm, a separate set of rules apply, and Zan's secret activities as a member of the resistance cell, to her mind, belong to the world beyond the boundaries of the farm. When Dimaggio crosses into the demarcated space of the farm, therefore, she is confused and afraid. Much as she loathes the patriarchal legacy, she will defend it fiercely when an outsider dares trespass.

We see that there are strong bonds between the characters and the Karoo farmlands, strong feelings of longing and belonging. However, it is the nature of the relationships that differ. As in *Ancestral Voices*, there is also, in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, a tension between ideas of ownership and belonging.<sup>47</sup> In *30 Nights*, it is again when associated

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<sup>47</sup> An instance of such a tension in *Ancestral Voices* is when Founder Abel plans *his* farm at the mouth of the spring on the Toorberg mountain — coupling his sense of belonging with ownership, power and control. By contrast, Tame Bushman and Jan Swaat accept the spring as a gift from nature and are able to live symbiotically with the land.

with the farm that the sense of belonging manifests itself in differing ways in the various characters. While Granny/MaOlivier and her son, Henk (Senior), feel a sense of belonging precisely *because* they are land owners, for Henk and Zan belonging is based on spiritual and emotional identification. When Henk and Zan identify themselves with place, they do so with a wider sense of symbolic belonging to the landscape, the area, the town or the house in which they grew up. Zan's medicine bottles (in her cupboard in Amsterdam), for example, are all labelled with the names of rivers, regions and streets of the Karoo (209); Henk remembers how he sat and read and recited lists of birds and animals to Zan when she was deep in medicated sleep after an epileptic fit (420); and Zan makes peace with life in Amsterdam when she takes a bicycle ride to the outskirts of the city and shouts " 'the names of buck of birds of the little lizards... call[s] the mountains by name... call[s] for the rivers and the names of farms...' " (425).

With regard to their own place in relation to those spaces and markers, Zan says, " 'I'm a De Melker of Graaff-Reinet' " (325), while Henk declares, " 'I am Henk de Melker. Henk of the Great Karoo' " (436), and, in the final scene of the novel, Zan calls them, collectively, " 'kudus of the Camdeboo!' [and says], 'so we dance, together we dance, we, the last of the De Melkers of Somerset Street [in Graaff-Reinet]' " (444). Intriguingly, they do not identify themselves with the family farm but rather with the family name, De Melker, and with the region, the landscape, a self-identification which suggests a spiritual, emotional attachment and sense of belonging to the spaces of the Karoo landscape, rather than a proprietorial attachment based on ownership, power and control over the farmland. It is interesting to note, at this point, that although there is emphasis placed on the names of places and geographical markers, the De Melker farm itself is not named in the novel but simply referred to as "the farm". So, although Henk and Zan were taught that their identities depended on the farm, they could never embrace the farm as an identity marker. In the alternative spaces of Amsterdam, they allow themselves to be themselves, to imagine whatever version of themselves they wish to emulate. In effect, it is in Amsterdam — with the clarity of distance — that they 'find' themselves (or, at least, different versions of themselves)



only to transfer those 'selves' back to the Karoo. Not to the farm, however, but to Granny/MaOlivier's house in town.

*The House and Home: Proof or Illusion of Stability*

After the death of her husband, Granny/MaOlivier moved to the Graaff-Reinet house, leaving the responsibility of the farm to her son and heir, Henk (Senior). Her grandchild, Henk, comes to live with her and Zan when Henk (Senior), his father, suffers a series of nervous breakdowns. The trio — Granny/MaOlivier, Zan, and Henk — form a family group. The house in the town is thus fixed in the minds of both Zan and Henk as their home. As Bachelard says, "a house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proof or illusions of stability" (Bachelard qtd in Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:9). This is why the house in town is the central space of their lives and a place of (perceived) belonging and security.

In the narrative present, both Henk and Zan feel adrift and without a sense of belonging. Both have persistent, nostalgic recollections of the house in which they lived in Graaff-Reinet. For them, "the house is a potent emblem of belonging" (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:1) and, because "a sense of self seems to require a sense of belonging at least somewhere, even if temporarily" (Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:20), each represents to the other a witness of their time spent there: that is, proof in that time and place that they did, indeed, belong 'somewhere, even if temporarily'. When they meet approximately forty years later in their exile in Amsterdam, they form a 'private' diaspora of De Melkers, and, as such, can validate each other. As Ashcroft has it, "the place of the diasporic persons' 'belonging' may have little to do with spatial location, but be situated in family, community, in those symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief, including nostalgia for a distant homeland" (qtd in Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:16).

Henk recalls fondly that, in that 'distant homeland', he was once nurtured, that food was plentiful, served on time and produced specially to his taste: for example, he ate porridge "on which Katie always sprinkle[d] some biltong shavings... [h]oney spoon[ed] in and a sliced banana..." (73). He also remembers that he was encouraged

to concentrate on his school work; and that he had a room of his own, where he could store his treasures, read and dream. Years later, “[h]e longs for the creaking old house with its wide stoeps, surrounded by tidy gravel garden paths and the garden beds... all laid out geometrically to GrannyOlivier’s hand” (110-11).

Zan recalls the quiet, the order and the sanctity of her glass room, which held her collection of vases. Their reminiscences, however, are not all pleasant. Zan’s nostalgia, which awakens Henk’s recollections, also resurrects traumatic memories. Henk remembers the tension in the house, how everyone waited for Zan’s next epileptic ‘turn’: his fear of Zan, not only of her epilepsy, but also “of her silences, of the way in which she would dawdle indecisively in the dark passage” (15). While he remembers his attempts to befriend Zan, to be affectionate and helpful, he remembers how she violently rejected him (for example, she bit at him at the school prize-giving (54) and attacked him in the yard when he burnt a bug (127)). Furthermore, in this house he was separated from his parents, and was aware of tensions between his grandmother and his mother; he was aware that his father was unwell; he felt the pressure to succeed in school and the weight of the family’s expectation of him to be the next strong De Melker man. But, he was bullied at school, a loner with no friends.

Henk’s recollections, therefore, are ambivalent because his place of belonging is also, ultimately, the place of his rejection. Similarly, Zan’s nostalgia for the house in Graaff-Reinet masks the trauma associated with it, which began with the expectations placed on her as a young Afrikaner woman of ‘good family’. The restrictions and over-protection were exacerbated by her epileptic condition. For her, the house in Graaff-Reinet was a domestic jail and its inhabitants, including the many servants, were the warders (watchers) from whom she sought to escape.

Now in Amsterdam, both Henk and Zan eschew Zan’s new house, which is beautiful, comfortable and solidly conventional in a way that echoes Granny/MaOlivier’s house in Graaff-Reinet. Their avoidance indicates that neither of them seeks to restore a past home, but rather to reminisce about it. Henk is living day-by-day (in Amsterdam) in an apartment which he has dubbed ‘the nest’. He neither sticks to a strict time schedule

nor keeps to the usual rules of tidiness and order as he does in his semi-monastic existence at home. In addition, he is introduced to an alternative type of home, together with Zan, when he visits the 'Amsterdam trio', a group of people close to Zan; in an abandoned loft, where they have set up a temporary home, and where they are seemingly secure and content in one another's company.<sup>48</sup>

Reflecting on their nostalgic and traumatic memories allows Henk and Zan to feel a retrospective sense of belonging, even though they now realise that the house in Graaff-Reinet was less of a home than they had believed it to be. As Bachelard says, "the places we call home are shell-like in the way that they protect our solitude and our 'spaces of intimacy'" (qtd in Viljoen, Lewis, Van der Merwe, 2004:9), whereas the Graaff-Reinet house is where their 'spaces of intimacy' — their core/authentic selves — were rejected for not being the 'Afrikaner' versions of themselves that had been prescribed by the older tradition. Those 'pre-selves', or ghosts of themselves, the selves that hold their potential, are what prompt their nostalgia, what haunt them. Henk and Zan seek to retrieve their authentic selves from the house in Graaff-Reinet, and Amsterdam has given them the clarity of distance required for sustained reflection.

#### *Amsterdam and the Karoo: Vantage Points and Founding Myths*

In *30 Nights*, Henk and Zan orientate themselves, and each other, in relation to the Karoo as their point of reference — just as, in *Ancestral Voices*, characters orientate themselves in relation to the mountain, Toorberg. For example, Henk calls Zan "a deserter from the Karoo" (4), aligning her, first and foremost, with the Karoo, even though she has been away for forty years. Both Henk and Zan de Melker become nostalgic for the Karoo only after they have left the area, and their recollections are focused on the spaces of the Karoo from their vantage point in Amsterdam, which affords geographical and temporal distance. As exiles (even if only temporarily) they have the "plurality of vision [that] gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions" (Said, 2001:186); two images are superimposed: "of home and abroad,

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<sup>48</sup> The Amsterdam trio is a group of people affiliated with Zan: Manuel, a street musician and Zan's lover; Alphonse, a pickpocket; and Suri, a young beggar-girl. The loft is also the place where Zan chooses to spend her nights rather than in her permanent Amsterdam domicile.

past and present, dream and everyday life” (Boym, 2001:xiv). They are able to view the Karoo, together with their memories, through fresh eyes. Their nostalgia is triggered by the sights, smells and sounds of a city that contrasts sharply with the Karoo. “ ‘It’s impossible not to notice contrasts,’ ” Henk comments (265), highlighting the importance of these two separate but, in their minds, connected, spaces for the novel.

Apart from providing a double perspective, the Karoo and Amsterdam form a series of binary oppositions; that is, “a pair of terms that, although opposed to one another, are necessarily bound together” (Buchanan, 2010:59). Amsterdam is wet and rainy, an urban, crowded place that is noisy and unconstrained in its behaviour, its history visible in its architecture and monuments (32); it is also, as Henk comments, part of a nation of former colonisers. The Karoo, in direct opposition, is dry and dusty, a vast and sparsely populated area that is quiet and conservative, its past “not so physically visible” (32), but also a place of former colonisation. Binary oppositions, in turn, form interstitial spaces. As Ashcroft says, “It may be argued that the very domain of post-colonial theory is the region of ‘taboo’ — the very domain of overlap between these imperial binary oppositions...” and, as Henk and Zan move between these two places (physically and imaginatively), it becomes apparent that there is an overlap between the two places/oppositions which form “the area in which ambivalence, hybridity and complexity continually disrupt the certainties” (2007:20).

Such disruption is felt by both Henk and Zan de Melker. Although Zan has been longing for home for forty years, she chooses to force Henk into leaving the Karoo rather than return and confront him in the formative place of their younger lives. As Brodsky said, “the more one travels, the more complex one’s sense of nostalgia becomes” (qtd in Boym, 2001:288). Henk first experienced feelings of dislocation as a child, when he travelled to the Boland with his mother and was torn between admiring the beauty of the area and feeling disloyal to the region of his father’s heart. Now, as an adult, his initial reaction on arrival in Amsterdam — “the domicile of his distant ancestors” (61) — is that “it’s love at first sight” (61), even though it elicits an almost immediate feeling of homesickness; and even though (and perhaps because) the city is different to what he has expected. “ ‘[W]here are the blond Dutchmen?’ ” (58), he

asks, thus indicating his stereotypical, one-dimensional and perhaps anachronistic expectation of what Amsterdam should be. This is the beginning of his illumination that there are many manifestations of 'the Dutchman', just as there are many ways of being human, of being a man, and, therefore, of being an Afrikaner, and even of being 'Henk de Melker'. His view is reinforced later in the novel when the life and personality that he had imagined for Zan proves to be far from whom and what she actually is and was. Zan's relationship with Amsterdam has flourished over the years, despite her longing for her homeland. It is interesting to note that when Zan makes her surreptitious return trips to South Africa (in disguise), she is "homesick even for Amsterdam" (423) suggesting, perhaps, that in Amsterdam, she "gets closer to the seat of the ideas which inspired [her] all along" and which makes a return to South Africa, for her, "a second exile" (Brotsky qtd in Boym, 2001:288). For Henk, the borders between home and away also become blurred when he realises that "[i]n this city [he is] closer to the things that [he] was consciously trying to live away from in [the Karoo]" (284).

By allowing his characters to move beyond the Karoo — Henk and Zan move beyond South Africa to Europe, Amsterdam — Van Heerden, in *30 Nights*, paradoxically, reaches further back than in *Ancestral Voices* into the history of the Afrikaner. On arriving in Amsterdam, Henk "recognises something of a memory harking back very far. For twelve generations his people have been settled in Africa. But now there is this primordial memory through which he wades. He is a Dutchman on a bicycle..." (59). The founding myth of the Afrikaner was scrutinised in *Ancestral Voices* in an exploration of the Afrikaner as either a pioneer moving into the wilderness of South Africa as virgin territory, or an appropriator of already populated and inhabited areas. *30 Nights* takes the exploration of the founding myth further: by refuting the idea that the Afrikaner came into being in the Karoo (as if formed from the soil), the novel refers to an earlier origin: that is, the Afrikaner's historical connection to Europe (predominantly to Holland). In this novel, the Afrikaner — represented by both Henk and Zan — moves from the past, through an African re-anchoring into the future as a cosmopolitan citizen of the world, one looking outward to new spaces, peoples, and possibilities, and, at the same time, looking back into a distant history. This dual view

lends a circularity to time and history, forming a full circle from Holland/Amsterdam to South Africa/Karoo and back to Amsterdam, and is indicative of the value of looking back in order to move forward. Henk's comment that, " 'We hate our own earths. Driven, we want to leave... But in the end we have to go back' " (382) concurs with the idea of a human need, simultaneously, to look back as we perpetually move forward into an uncertain future.

The use of nostalgia as a conceptual tool to analyse the treatment of space in *30 Nights in Amsterdam* is valuable, especially when the findings are compared with the similar analysis of *Ancestral Voices*. The comparison suggests a development in Van Heerden's approach to place. In *Ancestral Voices*, places of longing yield to broader views and contrasting perspectives, while the focus remains inward, on the surroundings of the farm and Karoo, and on a particular community. In *30 Nights in Amsterdam* the gaze is directed outward: the novel travels beyond the confines of the Karoo farm and village to the cosmopolitan spaces of the European city of Amsterdam. Van Heerden moves his Afrikaner characters ever further away from the farm. The longing remains, however, and *30 Nights* poses the question of why and how places can evoke feelings of nostalgia even after physical connection has been shattered. Through the perceptions of Henk, Zan and Granny/MaOlivier, Van Heerden explores this ambivalence.

The contrasts between Amsterdam and the Karoo, therefore, afford some clarity of distance, but also provide interstitial spaces — typical in postcolonial writing — where ambivalence and ambiguity remain as potent forces. The characters have no strict polarity of feeling for the places that they inhabit; rather, they have an affinity for both places. They experience positive and negative feelings for both Amsterdam and the Karoo. Their mixed feelings cannot always be explained in realistic terms; however, there is a certain uncanniness attached to their reactions and memories and, in the section that follows, I will shift my exploration of the novel to aspects of the spectral and the abject.

### ***Nostalgia in the Novel: The Spectral and the Abject***

Thus far, my explorations of *30 Nights in Amsterdam* have tended towards a formal realistic interpretation of character, plot and setting. As in *Ancestral Voices*, however, Van Heerden intermittently shifts his syntagmatic narrative on to a paradigmatic, or symbolic, or poetic plane. The purpose is to make visible elements of psychological or social repression: again, as in the earlier novel, a spectral dimension haunts the Afrikaner, whether in the tradition of 'Afrikanerdom' or in the later guises of the Afrikaans person as global inhabitant.

In my first chapter I pointed out that the search/quest for nostalgia is likely to lead to other associated memories and that those memories are often traumatic. Trauma that is beyond language can be represented in literature by the states of haunting and/or hauntedness. In *Ancestral Voices*, Van Heerden introduced the presences of ghosts as an overt form of haunting: the ghosts of the ancestors return from the dead, are given voices, and even interact with one another and with the living. In *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, there are also spectral elements that feature strongly, but not as such obvious presences. Rather, there is a dream-like quality — an 'other-worldliness' — surrounding certain characters and events that evokes in the reader an uncanny feeling of unease that is linked to instances of hybridity, liminality and in-between presence. In the sections that follow, I will select instances of the spectral and the abject, in which Henk and Zan de Melker will once again be the focus of the investigation. I will highlight the spectral elements of Henk's apparently ordinary life, as well as Zan's disconnected relationship with her own body. I will then go on to discuss the people who guide the two principal characters in the present and the past (Granny/MaOlivier and Grotius) and the figures (of Cornelius and Vincent van Gogh) who mirror them and their potential for the future.

#### *Henk: Trauma and the Spectral Realm*

I discussed earlier how trauma can split the psyche into two selves, "the one who experiences and the one who survives" (Wolfreys, 2002:139), but that the self that survives can never be free of the one who experiences. Henk, who is traumatised by his childhood, avoids thinking about, or remembering, his painful past. He is not nostalgic, as Zan is, because he has too many painful memories associated with his

past: the separation from his parents, the loss of his father, the unbearable weight of expectation that was placed upon him, and fear of the mental problems that plague the family. He, therefore, chooses to ignore both his nostalgic and his traumatic memories. He is the 'Henk who survives' and who believes that the 'Henk who experienced' has been discarded. However, as discussed earlier, suppressed memory *will* resurface in one way or another, often in the form of haunting, and, as a result, Henk's life has many spectral elements, as trauma has led him into a spectral realm.

The first and most obvious example of spectral elements in Henk's life is the way Henk and his lifestyle are presented at the opening of the novel. He has the appearance of a ghost, working quietly, tucked away in the museum, living alone, and making little impression on his environment. Even when he is lonely, he does not seek out the company of others, but drives off into the wilderness to brood. This sense of isolation is reinforced by the grave of the little boy in the corner of his office. This son of earlier residents keeps him company: "When he settles in with a mug of coffee at his desk in the morning and casts his eye on the simple stone, [the grave] gives him the feeling of family" (116). Henk has disengaged from life and it is as if he were simply going through the motions as the ghost of a person, the ghost of his former self and of his potential self. It is ironic, then, that what spurs his return to 'life' is news of death.

When Henk arrives in Amsterdam, in response to the request in his aunt's 'will', spectral occurrences intensify and multiply. On the evening of his arrival at the Amsterdam apartment where he will stay during his visit, he falls into a deep and troubled sleep, "the sleep of the dead" (65). Although he lives on the fourth floor of an apartment block, he is woken by a man outside the window. " 'How...? Is the man floating?' " (64), he wonders, but the man is part of a work crew scraping a giant poster from the sides of the building, and when the man confesses that he is afraid, Henk prepares a bowl of coffee for him. Later that night, Henk 'sees' Zan walking towards him down the deserted street, "shimmering" and "radiant" (66), even though he, at this point, believes that she is dead. These dream-like sightings shake the steady foundations of Henk's perceptions of reality and foreshadow the paradigm shifts of his consciousness during his thirty-night visit to Amsterdam.



Meeting the lawyer, Grotius, in Zan's house is an equally uncanny experience. Hers is a house without occupants, but which retains the aura of recent occupation, bearing all the signs of being lived in, and of there being a void created by the departed. It is as if one could still sense those who have just left, as if some essence of them still remains. Zan is not physically there, yet her presence is felt intensely by Henk: she is an absent presence.

Similarly, Henk experiences a split between physical and spiritual presence when he is the victim of 'reverse pick-pocketing' (or 'put-pocketing!'). When he returns to his apartment after wandering the streets of Amsterdam, he finds a wallet in his pocket that does not belong to him (201) — a wallet that (like the house) retains the identity of the person who had recently handled it. The wallet is the evidence, as it were, of the physical presence of another person, the person who placed the object on his body; yet he had not been aware of that person, the 'put-pocket'. Being in possession of the wallet, he feels the presence of both the put-pocket and the original owner of the wallet, even though they are not physically apparent. This strange acquisition of wallets recurs until he has a collection of five (206) and, although he is disturbed by the mysterious appearance of objects, he is intrigued by the insight they provide into another's private life and the tentative connection they suggest between identity and name. Henk's contemplations lead him to give a false name to a stranger "in a bar [when he] gets talking to an Australian" (208). This opens him to the sense that his identity is not fixed, that it is mutable, adaptable. Similarly, the body — he realises — is not solid or fixed but, rather, subject to change and capable of influencing change itself. Henk learns that even though the body and space are strongly linked to identity, they are both changeable and constantly in flux.

As Henk begins to contemplate other ways of being, Grotius — himself a shadowy figure (whom I will examine more closely a little later) — introduces Henk to the 'Amsterdam trio', or the " 'three-headed triad' " (176) as Grotius calls them. The trio comprises Zan's former lover, the street musician Manuel, and his 'side-kicks', the adept pick-pocket, Alphonse, and the young girl, Suri, a beggar. Although they are living people, Henk's initial glimpses of them are fleeting and, as creatures of the night, they seem ghost-like and liminal; it is as if they were poised to disappear, as if there

were no permanency to their lives. Henk gets to know them better during the course of his stay in Amsterdam, but they speak little, if at all, which reinforces their dream-like, spectral qualities. Yet, their alternative, fluid lifestyle, so far removed from his own, broadens his outlook with regard to family and co-existence. The Amsterdam trio — in distorted reflection — mirror the Karoo trio, the family group that — decades ago — was made up of Henk, Zan and Granny/MaOlivier. But the Amsterdam trio are the ultimate opposite of the Karoo trio, in that there appear to be no restrictions or expectations placed on them. They comfortably co-exist, contrary to the Karoo trio who were bound by the strict roles and rules of Afrikaner tradition.

Perhaps the most startling shift from a novel of realism to a novel in the symbolic realm is that Zan turns out not to be dead. To add to the strangeness, she appears, not in her own form, but in the guise of an old man, 'Mr Zuiderzinnen'. Not only is she 'resurrected' after being apparently dead, but she is also transgendered — uncanny, indeed! Henk's spectral encounters come to a head with Zan's emergence. As she appears to return from the dead, at least in Henk's encounter, she becomes a physical and undeniable symbol of his past. As spectral manifestations become more frequent and more assertive in his mind, Henk is compelled to face the traumas (of loss, fear and misplaced guilt) that the manifestations represent. Once he begins to interact and communicate with Zan, ignorance is dispelled and he becomes more receptive to investigations of his distant past; to the resurfacing of his traumatic memories regarding, for example, his father's death and, forty years ago, Zan's disappearance from Graaff-Reinet. These are memories which he can now counter and balance against his newly realised nostalgic memories. By contemplating and integrating his memories he, paradoxically, 'returns to life'.

#### Zan: Trauma and the Abject

Zan's appearance as a living being is a turning point for Henk. As we are initially led to understand, together with Henk (until the end of the first sections of the novel), Zan is dead. However, it is when she deems Henk to have reached a particular point of emotional development in his journey in life, that she reveals to him — and the reader — that she is still alive. Shocked and angry, Henk describes Zan as a " 'walking corpse' " (310) and when she reaches out to take his hand he sees "[t]he hand of a

ghost, the hand of death” (310). Henk is confronted with somebody who, he believes, has ‘returned from the dead’, but who, even so, is not fully alive, weakened as she is by illness, and facing imminent death. It is not too far off the mark, therefore, to consider Zan to be a ‘walking corpse’.

Van Heerden, as I have noted, utilises spectral elements to articulate trauma beyond language: in his explicit introduction of ghosts as characters in *Ancestral Voices* and in the more subtle, yet equally suggestive, hauntings that Henk experiences in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. These ghosts and hauntings serve to ‘defamiliarise’ the realistic dimension, causing the reader to see “afresh [because...] habitual perception is disrupted” (Baldick, 2008:83). Similarly, the author seeks to represent trauma that is beyond words, by the presentation of the body as deformed and abject (Zan’s epilepsy, her terminal cancer) in the Kristevan sense. According to Julia Kristeva, bodies and things are perceived as abject when they inspire profound ambivalence: on the one hand, morbid attraction, on the other, irrational loathing and revulsion. As Burton has it,

Kristeva suggests that whatever is deemed abject has two major qualities: firstly, it is imagined as ‘Other’ to ourselves; secondly, it is in fact only relatively ‘Other’ to us [...] By reason of its potential similarity to us, the abject has the capacity to transgress bodily and psychological boundaries, [it] has the potential to take us over, physically becoming our body, or psychologically becoming us. (qtd in Peach, 1998:173)

This condition of the physical and psychological abject is explicitly manifest in the character, Zan de Melker: a loathesome, yet compelling presence in Henk’s life. Although he irrationally fears being ‘contaminated’ by her mental disorder and chaotic lifestyle, he is equally drawn to her unpredictable creativity. Henk has always seen Zan as threatening, even monstrous; as a child, he was frightened by her behaviour, her aggression, and her epilepsy. Now, as an ageing adult, he is repulsed by her physical condition: by her cancer-ravaged body. Fearing ‘contamination’ with uncontrollable indeterminacy, Henk feels profoundly uncomfortable in Zan’s unsettling presence, which is an embodiment of a past that he is struggling to repress and a present that he can still not understand. As Baldick says, “Unsett[ling people] are described as abject

insofar as we attempt to maintain our stable sense of self by imaginatively expelling them or projecting them in the form of monstrous aliens, ghosts, or bogeys” (2008:1).

Zan’s physical decay operates, of course, as an analogy of her psychological trauma. She inhabits a female body and her experience has been restricted by, not only the Afrikaner tradition, but also by the exploitation of women within that tradition where she was cosseted; and she is bored because — as an epileptic — she is not given any useful occupation. Furthermore, she is exploited because of her strangeness — again, symbolically reinforced in the physical manifestation of her epilepsy. The major traumas that she suffers, though, do not concern her own body, but those of her lover, Wehmeyer, and her brother, Henk (Senior).

In the second chapter of the book — the first chapter that has Zan as focaliser-narrator — Zan suffers the horrific experience of witnessing the disposal of Wehmeyer’s assassinated body. Wehmeyer had been her friend and lover, and it was Wehmeyer who had persuaded her to join the resistance Cell which included one Cecil Dimaggio as leader. For reasons undisclosed to the reader, however, Wehmeyer is later regarded as an errant member of the resistance cell and executed, and his body must be disposed of. Zan has to witness the disposal of his body as an initiation test which will ensure her full membership of the Cell: “ ‘[H]ow I help to finish off this matter, that is my test. That’s what Cecil Dimaggio said’ ” (10), Zan recalls but, as Zan, Cecil and Bra Zolani drive out into the wilderness to dispose of the body, she “ ‘shudder[s] with grief and horror’ ” (12). Wehmeyer appears to have been executed, “his shirt has only one blood stain and his hands are tied behind his back”, and Zan looks on while his corpse is “ ‘man-handle[d]... [and] lug[ged]... into the sandy ditch’ ” (13), doused in petrol and set alight. Zan remembers him as he was in life, but now “ ‘his body [is] a bag of nothing’ ” (13). She is severely traumatised by this atrocity, and emotionally scarred for life:

Now I smell his fat crackling, his muscles torch, his stomach plops open and bubbles battle the flames... the heat peels away stomach lining and gut, it all goes up in steam and fire and air, and he fries to a crozzle, the skull of my beloved bursts open, soggy as boiled cabbage. (13)

After the incineration, they have to 'manhandle' *her* to get her back into the car when " '[s]oon nothing is left' " (13), and on the drive back they listen to Vera Lynn on the radio. As Nel (2010:179) has pointed out, Vera Lynn's most popular song during the Second World War was 'We'll Meet Again'. Van Heerden's intertextual reference here prefigures the spectral quality that Zan's relationship with Wehmeyer will assume and also foreshadows the macabre 'meeting' they will have at the end of the novel when she will return to the site of his immolation.

In addition to Wehmeyer's death, Zan also carries with her the guilt of her involvement in her brother's murder — that is, of Henk (Senior), Henk's father: " 'Your brother and your beloved, their blood on your hands' " (362), she admonishes herself many years later. When Henk (Senior) threatened to alert the authorities to the activities of the Cell, Zan had endorsed his elimination. She confesses to Henk that, " '[t]hey slaughtered him like an old ram... And I... I wasn't there... But I was the one' " (318).

In witnessing the ease with which the bodies of Wehmeyer and Henk (Senior) are discarded, Zan witnesses the fragility of the human body, and, in response, she effectively disconnects herself from the feelings of her own body, regarding it as abject because her body is symbolically the seat of immense trauma. She experiences feelings of what Kristeva would refer to as "loathing and disgust [with regard to her body], the horrible, to which [she] can only respond with aversion... and distraction" (Young, 2003:376). Zan's disconnection from her body manifests itself in various ways in the novel. She uses her body as a tool of dissent, expressing her anger in anti-social behaviour, including her promiscuity (an expression of anger later identified as sex-addiction). She also rejects her physical self by adopting disguises: male disguises, which change her gender and deny her womanhood. Ultimately, in an act of extreme self-rejection, she feigns death before reconnecting with Henk. It is understandable, then, that when Henk is first confronted with Zan, alive, in Amsterdam, he reacts to her as abject and describes her as a " 'walking corpse' " (310).

Her revealing to Henk that she is still alive is as much a turning point for Zan as it is for Henk. Henk, at this point, is beginning to reconnect with his own life, while Zan begins to reconnect with her own body. Their reconciliation and the integration of their

accounts of the past result in an integration of Zan's traumatic memories with her nostalgic memories, and she at last feels whole, even though, ironically, she is now physically incapacitated. At this stage, age and illness have disfigured her, and she is frail and deformed (part of her cancer-ravaged lip is missing, giving her mouth and face a misshapen appearance (314, 416, 417)). However, when — at the end of the novel — Zan and Henk reconcile and return to the Karoo, she miraculously recovers her youthful energy and dances naked in the wilderness. On this occasion she does not seek to shock but dances with abandon for herself alone. " 'I start dancing... [m]y feet old and orphaned, but my feet know the beat... I reel-dance...' " (444). Her physical and emotional selves find alignment; body and soul integrate just as traumatic memory and nostalgia find a meeting point. For Henk, Zan's monstrousness dissipates at the same pace as his fear and trauma recede. " 'Henkie who watches... unfolds his arms... who smiles now, to the whole world free' " (444). Their reconciliation and subsequent communication have relieved them of mutual ignorance, so that Henk can engage with Zan as a fellow human being whom he can see, hear and even (tentatively) touch. As Zan sheds her clothes to perform her naked and macabre dance on the grave of Wehmeyer — symbolically, the site of her trauma — Henk is able to laugh and dance along with her: " '[h]is eyes on my feet, he picks up my jive... So we dance, together we dance, we, the last of the De Melkers of Somerset Street' " (444). They have come full circle.

In his representation of Zan, Van Heerden has reflected on the abject and the deformed — not shying away from that which is ugly — in order to deal with submerged trauma. The defamiliarisation of Zan's body encourages the reader to seek the underlying cause of her abject body because, "of course the whole point of estrangement, according to Shklovsky,<sup>49</sup> is that we *do see* something" (qtd in Brown, 1982:354). In this case, the reader witnesses, or becomes aware of, the trauma that, in the lives of the two characters, is/was beyond words. Van Heerden's point in his defamiliarisation "represents a necessary and... productive response to trauma" (Su,

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<sup>49</sup> Victor Shklovsky is "best known for his invention of the concept of *ostranenie* ('defamiliarisation' or 'estrangement') (Buchanan, 2010:431).

2005:143); when traumatic memories are confronted, they can be integrated into the flow of nostalgic memories.

Henk and Zan, reunited in Amsterdam, finally face the traumatic recollections that their encounter provokes in each of them. Furthermore, with fear of traumatic memories diminishing, and in the form of revised nostalgic memories, they are given the opportunity to enjoy reminiscing about their early days in the home of Granny/MaOlivier in the Karoo town of Graaff-Reinet.

*Henk, Zan and their Intermediaries*

Granny/MaOlivier, as mother (to Zan) and grandmother (to Henk), is the person who had linked the lives of Henk and Zan in their youth. The three of them had lived together, in the house in Graaff-Reinet, as a family unit. But, as I have suggested, Granny/MaOlivier is, in effect, the substitute patriarch who is not entirely independent of the will of her late husband. Through her, he is an incessant presence. Her strongly-held ideas and beliefs, which had been adopted from the late patriarch, guide and dictate her every move and decision. When Henk and Zan cannot conform to the tradition, Granny/MaOlivier's 'system' of values falters, the structure of her restoratively nostalgic world crumbles because it cannot be adapted to new times and individual sensibilities. The family trio disintegrates: Zan absconds, Henk retreats, and, finally, Granny/MaOlivier dies alone. But, Granny/MaOlivier's legacy (and, therefore, also that of the late De Melker patriarch) haunts Zan and Henk because she stunted their growth. By trying to force onto them preconceived roles, she robbed them of their true identity and, haunted by their failure to conform, they are unable to develop into whole, balanced people.

Whereas Granny/MaOlivier, as an intermediary between Zan and Henk (in the past), is prescriptive, thus stunting their emotional development, another intermediary, Grotius (in the narrative present), is flexible and open-minded, he encourages Zan and Henk to be their authentic selves. For example, he was equally accepting of, and loyal to, Zan in her former beauty as he is in the ugliness of her illness and impending death. Similarly, Grotius is accepting of his own unconventional self, — he 'lets himself go', he lets his hair grow long, enjoys his food and drink, and is casual in his appearance —

which suggests his open-minded, expansive approach to life. Granny/MaOlivier, on the other hand, in her attempts at maintaining power, rigidly controls herself (as well as others); she is always conscious of her appearance (for example, she was never seen without her strand of pearls and high heeled shoes). She remained self-conscious in her matriarchal role.

Grotius, in contrast, appears as a guiding light, but one that could be seen as spooky and unreal. He does not develop as a character, but serves as a catalyst in the lives of both Henk and Zan. Not only does he accept them as they are, he also questions and encourages reflection rather than judgement. He provides an alternative view, an alternative approach, and introduces them to a different way of being in the world: a way that is not prescriptive; a way that liberates them both and permits them to accept not only themselves, but also each other. Grotius is an enabling presence whose mediation provides the space for them to process the traumatic influences that have haunted them. The traumatic memories are thus not denied, but the grip on the two is loosened. Henk and Zan can then reconnect to their pre-selves, their potential selves, the selves that were submerged/subverted by trauma.

There is yet another ‘intermediary’ between Henk and Zan, one which has already been mentioned. Whereas Granny/MaOlivier provides a link between them in their youth, and Grotius in the present, the other link — which follows a trajectory from their youth, through to their present, and into their future — is provided by their shared interest in the life and work of Vincent van Gogh. Zan’s initial interest in the famous artist was sparked when she discovered that Van Gogh had also been an epileptic. She excitedly bought a book about Van Gogh’s art, as a gift for Henk: “It was the most beautiful present he’d ever received [and] it haunted him through the years” (186). Years later, when Henk receives Grotius’s letter and invitation to visit Amsterdam, he is considering writing a monograph on Vincent van Gogh’s brother, Cornelius — the unknown, unremarkable brother of the great artist — and the fact that he can research his topic in Amsterdam endorses his decision to make the trip: “It was Aunt Zan who first introduced him to Vincent van Gogh’s paintings... [b]ut it’s not Vincent... in whom Henk is interested” (6). He is interested in “the unremarkable one... named Cornelius [who] lived in South Africa and is buried here” (6), and with whose



obscure, mediocre existence he identifies. Henk's information on Cornelius van Gogh documents how he left Europe to travel to South Africa at the time of the gold rush of the nineteenth century (33), and how he worked as a machine builder with the Netherlands Railway Company in the Transvaal (36). Cornelius married, later divorced a German woman in South Africa, and died "by his own hand" (36). This makes him "quite unremarkable enough, indeed obscure enough, to fit under the pointed nib of Henk's fountain pen" (6).

Henk is unsure about what spurs this ongoing work, but he has completed thirteen monographs on obscure, unimportant people, knowing that "he had to chronicle the thirteen lives... [that] [s]omething forced him to it" (90), and he considers that "[p]erhaps it was the obstinate conviction that the unimportant life does have a purpose" (90). This was an observation that for many years had given Henk the consolation of obscure purpose. He knew that there are those

who can pick up one life as if it were a grain of wheat<sup>50</sup> lying there unsown, a seed fallen on stony ground, an unremarkable life... and [who can] pick up that seed between thumb and index finger and dig deep and plant it and bring forth a whole harvest from that one, unremarkable life. (186)

But, although it is "his dream" (186) to illuminate even obscure lives, Henk has not lifted any obscurity to new-found significance, thus being more aligned with Vincent's obscure brother, Cornelius. On arriving in Amsterdam and reconnecting with Zan, however, that submerged dream resurfaces as his imagination and his creativity begin to flow. He is emboldened to give life and colour to his monograph on Cornelius van Gogh's life and, by implication, enliven his own existence.

Here we see, yet again, that submerged forces and desires are the impetus for action. Henk "cannot resist the Van Gogh theme" (115), as he admits to himself: " 'I'm seeking to understand myself better. So if I can now find a family — creative, eccentric people [in Amsterdam] — in which I can trace myself, why not?' " (116). These

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<sup>50</sup> The term 'a grain of wheat' is reminiscent of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel of the same name, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), as well as of the Bible verse Ngũgĩ quotes from I Corinthians 15:36. The term implies that a grain of wheat, though small and insignificant, has the potential, not only to produce wheat, but to produce life anew, that is, to replenish life.

thoughts cross his mind on his first meeting with Grotius: that is, before his reconciliation with Zan, so that the obsession with the two Van Gogh brothers foreshadows the new family which he is about to encounter. Grotius, Zan, and the 'Amsterdam trio' are the eccentric family that, in a tangential but creative mirror, remind him of the family of his past. Henk is able to embrace this new family because his reflective nostalgia has "drawn attention to moments of lost possibility... that were never fully realized" (Su, 2005:149), to memories of what was good (for example, feelings of belonging and rapport) about that family. Henk's reflections on his early family life have led to new insights. As John Su asserts, "precisely because nostalgic fantasies so often take non-threatening forms, initially, individuals... gain knowledge about themselves and their world that they would otherwise have repressed" (2005:14).

As we see in the spectral realm of the novel, nostalgic memories may be the spur to accessing and healing traumatic memories so that out of haunting comes a new grasp of creativity in life. The characters, as well as the readers, are compelled to reflect on uncanniness and feelings of unease, a reflective exploration — Boym's 'reflective' nostalgia — that uncovers submerged memories and brings emotions to the light of healing. The subtle spectrality of *30 Nights in Amsterdam* elicits such a response. Van Heerden's exploration of trauma by means of the literary devices of the spectral and the abject seems to support Achebe's statement that "this is what literature, what art, is supposed to do: to give us a second handle on reality, so that when it becomes necessary to do so, we can turn to art and find a way out" (qtd in Su, 2005:148). Or, as Su puts it,

[T]he longing for a lost or imagined homeland certainly *can* reinforce trauma... by oversimplifying the past and repressing uncomfortable events, but it *need not* do so. [This is because] the alternatives provided by nostalgic narratives are valuable less for their potential to provide a blueprint for a better or more utopian world than for their potential to offer hope that alternatives continue to exist. (Su, 2005:149, 176)

## Conclusion

The aim of my study has been to explore the concept and application of nostalgia in two of Etienne van Heerden's novels, *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, based on my initial interest in why Van Heerden's novels are so widely read. I wanted to ascertain the relevance and accessibility of his writing — stories about Afrikaners, set in South Africa — for local as well as broad, global audiences.

Beginning my investigation by placing Van Heerden's novels within Afrikaans and South African literature, I found that he is a writer, among many, who return to plaasroman conventions and themes; and this raises the question of why the plaasroman (albeit in many new forms) continues to fascinate the writer and reader. It is at this early point in my investigation that nostalgia, as a concept, becomes apparent: the plaasroman, as a genre, is nostalgic, being based on the idyllic idea of the farmer and the farm, the family and the land, all working in the name of God, and hoping for an imaginative return to a time of (perceived) simplicity and belonging.

However, on examining the development of the plaasroman genre, and questioning and challenging the idyll of its focus, the themes of the plaasroman — for example, the search for identity, the question of belonging and duty, and the examination of human response to change — become apparent as themes that are common with those of postcolonial theory, which also highlights conditions of identity, location, time and memory.

So, Van Heerden's writing is nostalgic, therefore, while its themes are postcolonial. If we bear in mind, accordingly, that postcolonial conditions — or postcolonial culture — are broadly manifest throughout the world today, then conditions/cultures that are postcolonial can also be considered global. As I mentioned in the subsection 'Nostalgia: People and Spaces' in the first chapter of this study, many people in the modern world are living in 'different spaces' either because they have physically moved to a different location, or because the space that they occupy has altered. Postcolonial themes in literature resonate with a broad global range of people and can often be regarded as global themes.

The same can be said of nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is “a symptom of our age” and we are today experiencing a “global epidemic of nostalgia” (Boym, 2001:xiv). As discussed in the first chapter, modern conditions are conducive to nostalgia, which is an emotion that is widely known and experienced. If that is the case, then a language of nostalgia can be considered to be a global language, and nostalgic literature will resonate with a broad global range of people. In short, Van Heerden’s novels have global concerns that make them relevant and interesting to a global readership. Van Heerden’s nostalgic approach aids in broadening the appeal of his novels because both his message and mode of communication are globally recognisable, even though the content and context are local.

In light of the above conditions, the application of postcolonial nostalgia as a critical tool is effective and illuminating. Bearing in mind that, as Boym has said, “nostalgia can be both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure” (Boym, 2001:354), I utilised Boym’s typologies of nostalgia to identify examples of both restorative and reflective nostalgia. The varying examples of nostalgia — there are many instances of both restorative and reflective nostalgia — indicate a view of the past that is not polarised or one-dimensional but, rather, complex and nuanced. Van Heerden has risen to “the challenge facing the writer... [which] is to locate and recover experiences that a community has failed to understand and assimilate” (Su, 2005:148). He has used nostalgia reflectively to approach pleasant memory as well as trauma, and has aided in the articulation of ‘unspeakable things’, that is, traumas and memories that are often not spoken of or that have been submerged or subverted.

We return to the past, “to the pause, the moment of shock”, says Gaylard, “when the old certitudes are no longer working” (2005:49); an idea that concurs with Dlamini’s view that nostalgia, ironically, “for all its fixation with the past, is essentially about the present” (2010:16). In this light, the value of a nostalgic approach — if it is a *reflectively* nostalgic approach that focuses on longing — is particularly evident when the two novels are compared and the development of Van Heerden’s view is examined. I found that Van Heerden, by continuing to explore themes of identity and belonging in/with his writing, charts a development in the Afrikaner’s psyche and outlook. This is particularly evident in the trajectory formed by the two novels which I

have chosen for this study: Afrikaner insulation in *Ancestral Voices* opens up to a cosmopolitan outlook in *30 Nights in Amsterdam*. The time difference of twenty-two years between the publication dates of the novels means that the ‘present’ in which each of the novels was written — and that provoked a nostalgic return to the past — was different for each of the novels and, therefore, results in different nostalgic focuses. The scope of exploration of *Ancestral Voices* covers the Afrikaner’s experience from the time of arrival in the Karoo, and deals with a community striving to cope and survive within a changing environment. In *30 Nights in Amsterdam*, the scope of longing is broader than that of *Ancestral Voices*: it goes beyond the Afrikaners’ arrival/beginning in the Karoo, to explore earlier roots in Europe, thus opening up the world of the Afrikaner to the future, in order to show that changes are occurring within a changing world. The Afrikaner, Van Heerden’s view indicates, has moved away from a ‘closed’, ancestral perspective, to share and participate in an environment of global change, an environment that precludes isolation and insulation.

Van Heerden’s novels are a window on Afrikaner culture enabling readers better to understand the complexities of the Afrikaner psyche, as well as the developments that are continuing — although less ideologically fraught — within Afrikaans/cosmopolitan culture. To expand on such a metaphor of development and change, therefore, we could expand the scope of the investigation to include other texts from Van Heerden’s oeuvre. Further dissertations could explore, for example, *The Long Silence of Mario Salviati* (2002), which has also enjoyed a broad readership. It examines Afrikaner nationalism and identity, utilises magical realism, and the Karoo landscape is, once again, central to the novel. *Mad Dogs and Other Stories* (1992), is a collection of short stories which focuses, in part, on the border war, and is “among the few representative literary texts that reflect critically” (Popescu, 2008:92) on that aspect of Afrikaner/South African history. Also, as I conclude this dissertation, the publication of a novel by Van Heerden entitled *Gifkaroo* (in Afrikaans) and/or *Poison Karoo* (in English, translated by Isobel Dixon) is imminent (Van Heerden, 2013). This novel promises to develop the idea of human affinity with place/space, as it deals with the fracking of oil in the Karoo, much as *Ancestral Voices* dealt with the search for, and

acquisition of, water in the Karoo. Will nostalgia feature in this new novel? Will the Karoo expand into a global metaphor?

It would be interesting to compare instances of nostalgia from any or all of the above mentioned texts with each other and with *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam*; and to consider the significance of the publication dates of the three texts spaced neatly by a decade each (that is, 1992, 2002 and 2013); furthermore, it would be interesting to examine what prompted nostalgia at the time of writing in each case.

This study, nonetheless, must be limited to two of Etienne Van Heerden's novels. My conclusion is that nostalgia, as a tool to be used in addressing the past, can be harnessed as a positive force in the individual and/or collective search for identity and belonging. I conclude also that postcolonial nostalgia in *Ancestral Voices* and *30 Nights in Amsterdam* has added to the broad appeal of the novels, in that the local content and context have resonated beyond ancestral voices, to global voices. Van Heerden's reputation as both an Afrikaans writer and a writer of the world seems assured.

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## Appendices

### ***Overview of Van Heerden's Main Works Mentioned in this Study***

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***Novels by Etienne van Heerden Translated from Afrikaans into English***

<b>Year Published</b>	<b>Afrikaans Title</b>	<b>English Title</b>	<b>Year Published</b>	<b>Translator</b>
1986	Toorberg	Ancestral Voices	1989	Malcolm Hacksley
1991	Casspirs en campari's: 'n historiese entertainment	Casspirs and Camparis	1993	Catherine Knox
1993	Die stoetmeester	Leap Year	1997	Malcolm Hacksley
1996	Kikoejoe	Kikuyu	1998	Catherine Knox
2000	Die swye van Mario Salviati	The Long Silence of Mario Salviati	2003	Catherine Knox
2005	In stede van die liefde	In Love's Place	Pending	Leon de Kock
2008	30 Nagte in Amsterdam	30 Nights in Amsterdam	2011	Michiel Heyns
Pending	Gifkaroo	Poison Karoo	Pending	Isobel Dixon