1 Introduction

Other than the name of this special issue might suggest, the present collection of articles is not meant as a revisionist perspective on earlier, established versions of the history of language and literature in Afrikaans. Its aim is, however, closely related, and takes its cue from the title of the symposium ‘Bredie van stories: herinnering en geschiedenis in recente Afrikaanse literatuur’ organised in the context of the ‘Week van de Afrikaanse roman’, held at Leiden University in October 2014. As the use of the word ‘bredie’ suggests, storytelling is approached as the result of stewing various different ingredients. As such, the bredie, itself a dish that combines multiple culinary traditions like Dutch and Cape Malay cooking, might serve as a good example of the idea of transculturation as a profound and inevitable mixing of voices, stories and experiences, which is the focus of this special issue. In other words, the use of history in the title of this issue does not denote a metanarrative of history, but points towards the representations of moments of intimate contact and violent clashes that form our perspectives on history in Afrikaans.

As Leon de Kock persuasively argues in his discussion of the status of South African literary history in the 1990s and early 2000s, many scholars have developed a suspicion of metanarratives like the archive, because it is often paired with a wish to make previously silenced voices heard. Although the tracing of the archive is, following Foucault, crucial to critical approaches that aim to shed light on how histories are formed, de Kock emphasises that the ‘naming of parts’ in any kind of revisionist project is not necessarily possible, desirable or even feasible. De Kock names three reasons for this, the first being that signs are ‘contingent, culturally embedded, historically influenced and generally quite slippery’ (2005: 6). Apart from this poststructuralist legacy, however, it is also the case that, as Hayden White has shown, historical narratives cannot ‘escape the condition of their own tropology’ (2005: 6). Taken together, these points flow into de Kock’s final claim about the importance of processes of cognition, namely that any kind of interpretation is inevitably based on the perceiver’s guess of how different data are imagined to relate (2005: 7). Any literary history, according to De Kock, thus becomes ‘a play of the precise and the imprecise, of the provisional datum at hand and the imagined possibilities of its working interrelations, its inner secrets’ (2005: 7).

1 Bredie is a South African stew. The Oxford English dictionary describes it as ‘a traditional southern African dish consisting of a stew of meat (typically mutton) and vegetables’. The etymology is also of interest in this context of transculturation, since the word is said to be borrowed from the Indo-Portuguese Creole word bredos, which means ‘edible greens’ and goes back to the Portuguese plural of bredo: ‘any of several species of amaranth eaten for its greens, as Amaranthus blitum’ (Merriam Webster).
The aim here is precisely to shed light on these imagined possibilities of literary histories’ working relations by foregrounding and analysing texts and cultural phenomena that may help to look anew at the connections and imaginations at work in the South African cultural field. In doing so, this issue explores the relation between literary form and the concept of transculturation from various standpoints. The fact that it does so from the perspective of Afrikaans literary and cultural phenomena, is, on the one hand, a practical delimitation of what Jansen calls ‘the cultural archive’ later in this issue. On the other hand, however, this delimitation itself already foregrounds the extent of clashing and mixing that is at the origin of any delimited artificially collection of texts, people or events.

The special issue includes approaches that explore the questions present day interpreters of literature and culture can ask of the functions and effects of the ‘archive’ of South African texts (Jansen, Krog); it offers perspectives on how transculturation takes place, on the different narrative strands and traditions that can be discerned in specific cultural phenomena and representations (Kapp); it offers reflections on how to deal with these often violent spaces of transculturation, which might produce feelings of productive nostalgia (Robbe); and finally also posits this violence itself as a possible avenue of productive and imaginative thought (Roux & Nortje; Stuit). Together, the contributions to this issue bring to the fore a perspective on transculturation that is itself multiple and pinpoints its productive aspects.

2 Transculturation and Thinking Resistance to Cultural Domination

Used broadly in postcolonial literary studies (Jobs & Mackenthun 2013: 8), transculturation in the narrow sense refers to Ortiz’ description of the effects of displacement on the ‘steady human stream’ of immigrants brought to Cuba under the auspices of Spanish colonialism:

[E]ach of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation – in a word, of transculturation (Ortiz 1995: 98).

Transculturation thus allows for a recognition of the losses and disenfranchising experiences of different cultures coming together, but also involves the ‘consequent creation of new cultural phenomena’ (Ortiz 1995: 103). As the contributions to this issue will also show, transculturation is thus a double process of loss and gain. As such, it is a particularly apt term for understanding the relation between the master narratives of a dominant culture and more marginalized ones, as it foregrounds the extremely particular experience of the effects of these master narratives on cultural change. Transculturation brings to the fore, so Fernando Coronil explains in his introduction to Fernando Ortiz’ Cuban Counterpoint, how the constitution of the modern world ‘has entailed the clash and disarticulation of peoples and civilizations together with the production of images of integrated cultures, bounded identities, and inexorable progress’ (Ortiz 1995: xiii).

By reading the term in this fashion, Coronil addresses two important aspects of transculturation. Firstly, he places the experience of transculturation at the heart
of the construction of modernity, usefully broadening the concept beyond a usage in specific cultural settings without losing sight of cultural disarticulation and disenfranchisement. Secondly, his reading already suggests that any straightforward emphasis on neoculturation, though a decidedly emancipative gesture on the part of Ortiz, is a much more complex issue than the oft quoted and schematic rendition of the three aspects of transculturation leads one to believe. In their analysis of the opera *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha*, for instance, James Davies and Lindiwe Dovey suggest that Ortiz ‘own championing of new transcultural processes in Cuban popular culture is indeed very useful, but also potentially problematic. Especially with regard to Afro-Cuban musical traditions, Ortiz is said to ‘at once advocate for and then racialize Afro-Cuban music’ in terms of its supposed sensuality, devilry or filth (Davies & Dovey 2010: 48). Similarly, Davies and Dovey point out, Ortiz keeps in place a rigid distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture by recognizing the improvisatory and democratic potential of Afro-Cuban music in influencing conservatory trained musicians.

In Mary Louise Pratt’s use of transculturation, a similar problem arises in the introduction to her renowned study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). There, Pratt explains that the use of the term transculturation in the title of her book reflects her efforts to avoid ‘reproducing the dynamics of possession and innocence’ (Pratt 2003: 6) that she analyses in travel writing. Pratt then proceeds to describe transculturation as follows:

Ethnographers have used this term to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for. Transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone (Pratt 2003: 6).

Indeed, in regarding what she fruitfully calls the contact zone from the perspective of transculturation, Pratt opens up an important strand of research on exactly how this contact takes place in colonial settings. However, in resorting to an investigation of the genre of travel writing, Pratt is unable to leave open a significant perspective taking place outside her rather rigid distinction between ‘metropolitan cultures’ and ‘subjugated peoples’ as evidenced in the above passage. Her questions in *Imperial Eyes* thus seem geared towards researching how ‘metropolitan’ cultures are absorbed by others in the contact zone, but leaves unaddressed ‘that the centre was unable to recognize the materials from the periphery as constituting Knowledge’ (Parry 2004: 9, see also Jobs & Mackenthun 2013: 11). As Benita Parry rightfully argues, Pratt’s use of the term implies a ‘solipsistic notion’ of transculturation that seems to foreclose analyses of the double effect of transculturation as formulated by Ortiz (2004: 9). A transculturation that is about more than absorbing enforced cultural values, and also entails relinquishing the loss of one’s own cultural moorings in favour of unknown and new cultural forms, remains out of sight.

Yet, Parry’s critique on Pratt is perhaps overly harsh, especially when considering Pratt’s explicit emphasis in the quote given above on the *use* of absorbed cultural material by subjugated peoples. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has also argued in his refutation of the point of view that globalisation will inevitably lead to cultural homogenisation:
Talk of cultural imperialism structuring the consciousness of those in the periphery treats [people] as tabula rasa on which global capitalism’s moving finger writes its message, leaving behind another homogenized consumer as it moves on. It is deeply condescending, and it isn’t true (Appiah 2004: 111).

The fact that Pratt resorts to the phrase ‘what they use it for’, from this perspective thus also opens up the possibility of thinking a strategic transculturation, even if the choice for travel writing tends to dictate a metropolitan perspective in Pratt’s own close readings.

A possible way of thinking through the idea of strategic transculturation comes to the fore in Walter Mignolo’s and Freya Schiwy’s description of transculturation, where they provide an approach that is, perhaps, more ‘true’ to Ortiz’ emancipatory vision. In their description of the Zapatista movement, Mignolo and Schiwy insist on an elaboration of the concept of transculturation to those processes that are still a result of ‘colonial difference’, but do not necessarily entail an exchange between the ‘territorial internal domain of empires’ and the often passively regarded periphery (Mignolo & Schiwy 2007: 28). Instead, they argue, the analytical gaze of transculturation and translation should be directed at those instances structured by the contact between groups who are disenfranchised and placed in the periphery, even if crucial differences in relation to the presumed centre still exist. The transcultural processes occurring between groups of this kind (for instance, between people speaking Tojolabal and Aymara in the Mexican context of the Zapatista movement) would allow for a more sustained analysis and critique of the ways in which peripheries relate to presumed centres of cultural domination.

Although potentially very productive for analysing the lived experiences of transculturation, the proposed emancipation of the peripheral view that Mignolo and Schiwy seem to hint at is still firmly positioned within the framework of what they insist on calling colonial difference. Colonial difference, here, refers to the unequal effects of translation in colonising gestures, most clearly defined in what Mignolo and Schiwy (2007: 15) call ‘the translation machine’, by which they mean the twin colonial occupations of writing grammars of indigenous languages and consequently using those translations for conversion purposes. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent a decolonisation of cosmologies that deviate from the Western perspective, even if these cosmologies consist of transcultural perspectives shared between groups located in the periphery, is useful in thinking about cultural change that is not based on yet another system of binary differentiation.

An important contrast to this mode of thought is formed by Bhabha’s work on hybridity and cultural translation, which allows for a positive emphasis on the neocultural aspects of transculturation without losing sight of the ‘master narratives’ of cultural domination in which it takes place. The implicit notion of strategy in Bhabha’s work, thus provides possible ways of thinking about ‘how newness enters the world’ (Bhabha 2004). In The Location of Culture, in his chapter about dissemination, Bhabha provides the idea of the supplement as a concrete way in which cultural hybridity is, in fact, located in writing. This location is, however, not the result of a simple mixing of binaries or of a straightforward in-
roduction of multiple perspectives. Rather, it is a strategic *placing* of various perspectives that are different from those at the centre of the dominant cultural master narrative. Bhabha gives the useful example of the supplementary question in British parliamentary procedures, where the supplementary question is attached to the order paper of the minister’s response:

Coming ‘after’ the original, or in ‘addition to’ it, gives the supplementary question the advantage of introducing a sense of ‘secondariness’ or belatedness into the structure of the original demand. The supplementary strategy suggests that adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb the calculation (Bhabha 2004: 222).

So even if the present writing comes later in time, it may still change the original structure of the cultural formation it is asking questions about. As Bhabha’s formulation suggests, the supplement is not necessarily a way of making the original narrative more complete, but rather to question and disturb the ways in which dominant cultural narratives work to create an illusory sense of origin and wholeness, as was also suggested by Coronil’s reading of transculturation as an important drive in the construction of modernity given above. In this way, Bhabha’s treatment of the Derridean notion of the supplement becomes a powerful way of thinking through the possibilities of offering a transcultural moment at the start of any question, rather than inscribing it afterwards, when the stakes are already set.

3 Transculturization and Narrative in Afrikaans

In contemporary South African critical and cultural discourses such an exploration of supplementary perspectives is already under way. Crucially, it takes place as an exploration of transculturization in terms of inclusivity, rather than in binary terms. This does not mean, however, that radical difference needs to be eliminated or cannot be respected. Chielozona Eze (2015), for instance, discerns a clear trend towards what he calls ‘transcultural affinity’ in contemporary South African public discourse. Drawing on work by people like Tutu, Comaroff and Comaroff, Ramose, Ndebele, Mbembe, Krog, and Nutall, Eze aims to put the spotlight on a current of thought that seeks to address transcultural processes in terms of affinity and common ground. In order to take on board this different worldview, Eze refers to Welsh’s definition of transculturality:

> [T]he concept of transculturality aims for [a] multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive, understanding of culture. It intends a culture and society whose pragmatic feats exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition (Welsh qtd. in Eze 2015: 219).

This conception posits transculturality not as a way to acknowledge the loss of cultural agency in favour of new cultural dispositions, but rather emphasises its ethical potential. Transcultural affinity, Eze argues, ‘instantiates in human relations what is already evident in culture’, namely that any cultural matrix is always already transcultural in nature. In South Africa, especially, this is reflected in a sustained body of writing seeking to ‘break down artificial boundaries created by centuries of racist [and] classicist ideologies’ (Eze 2015: 219).
As Sarah Nuttall points out, however, breaking down the boundaries of the divisions of the past is, if indeed a crucial step, not enough. Entanglement, for Nuttall, represents a way of working with ‘difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication’ (Nuttall 2009: 1). Herein, entanglement seeks to acknowledge the possibilities and limits of both difference and sameness. From the perspective of transculturation, then, entanglement offers ways of reading the contact zone that offer new perspectives on the South African public sphere, but also to ‘properly transnational conversations’ (Nuttall 2009: 11). As Nuttall suggests, this conversation has everything to do with making room for talking about ‘human enfoldedness’ as a ‘utopian horizon’ without losing sight of ‘what is going on’ (Nuttall 2009: 1, 11).

This special issue is meant to place emphasis on the role of literary form and narrative in moments of transcultural contact and affinity as described by Eze and theorized by Nuttall. All contributions, although in different ways, deal with the relationship between transculturation and narrative in an attempt to explore how language use and storytelling determine the ways in which cultures, groups and individuals relate to each other. In this sense, the issue tries to ‘supplement’ Afrikaans literary and cultural history in terms of Bhabha, rather to create a revisionist perspective. In offering analyses of various representations of historically grounded and culturally specific transcultural processes in Afrikaans literature, this issue seeks to provide what could be called, in the Dutch context, an unexpected prism on and supplement to the ways in which transculturation can be thought, both in and outside South Africa.

The issue opens with Ena Jansen’s perspective on the dramatic change taking place after 1994 in the representation of domestic workers in South African literature. As Jansen shows, domestic workers are no longer represented as almost ghostly figures that disappeared to the background as soon as the duties they were hired to perform were fulfilled. Instead, they step out of the shadow of history in powerful and productive ways, with their own status, autonomy and a striking physical presence and materiality. In her article, Jansen explores a number of texts in which the position of domestic workers is further explored from the perspective of their role as intermediaries between the city, the townships and the rural. In this investigation, the literary representations under discussion offer a widely recognizable and familiar, yet unexpected perspective on ‘maid and madam’ situations. Jansen discusses the mutual influence, the entanglement, if you will, between domestic workers and the families for whom they worked, and, as such, makes visible a deeply divisive, but transcultured space at the heart of South African everyday life, as well as its literary and cultural archive.

Antjie Krog investigates a very specific archive consisting of a number of affidavits by Afrikaner women who were sexually assaulted and raped by the British forces during the South African War. Krog suggests how after the end of the war, these affidavits were initially gathered to be instrumentalised by the broader Boer community to demonstrate and condemn the barbarism of the British enemy. By analysing these testimonies through the frame of narrative and agency, Krog’s article discusses the ways in which these affidavits, ‘foreground sexual violence and its complex relationships with power, vocabulary, event and context’ (see this volume 301). Krog shows where parts of these statements are likely to be influenced...
by the cultural narratives around female sexuality current at the time, but also where these cultural frames leave gaps of interpretation. In zooming in on these gaps, the article offers a glimpse of the agency of the women behind the affidavits and reveals a double or hidden transcultural process in the period of transition after the South African War: the negotiation of the individual agency of women who had to live with being violated, and the imagined needs of their broader community takes central stage. From these personal and institutional entanglements, transculturation becomes a verb, a doing, as well as a layered process of strategic positioning and potential opposition. This article powerfully demonstrates how processes of transculturation are extremely difficult to capture in narrative form, because the normative and institutionalised position of the person doing the ‘transculturing’ often prevents the telling and making visible of the ‘actual’ story. Because these important affidavits were shelved the moment the war ended and then embargoed until recently, this article also testifies to the massive failure of transcultural processes to make any of these specific voices heard in any context.

A different shadow history is discussed in Tertius Kapp’s article, where he analyses the subculture and language of the South African Number gangs, which are most influential in South African prisons and Coloured communities. Although the gangs have become increasingly visible in South African cultural landscapes, most people are not familiar with their highly ritualised and symbolically driven culture. For instance, stories about the gang’s inception in the Johannesburg area as the city came into being, still form the basis for the hierarchical structure and social codes in the gangs. In his article, Kapp undertakes an exploration of the status of these narratives and combines literary analysis with social-anthropological, ethnographic and linguistic sources in order to better understand this subculture’s semantic space. In exploring prison gang language and the different stories that structure gang history, Kapp manages to shed light on the transcultural processes taking place in this context by viewing the gangs from the perspective of Halliday’s anti-language and the genre of the epic. Through these tools, Kapp manages to make visible how different cultural traditions collide and mix within the extremely structured gang narratives and how they stand in a dialectical relation to dominant colonial discourses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ksenia Robbe’s discussion of A Change of Tongue and Begging to be Black by Antjie Krog furthers the discussion by foregrounding the role of time and transition in transcultural processes. In her article, Robbe proposes a new perspective on Krog’s recent work in prose that differs from a framing through melancholia and mourning for the violence of the past. Instead, Robbe focuses on the use of nostalgia, which makes it possible to look anew at the bonds with European heritage and culture in Krog’s work. By drawing on the concept of provincialisation, Robbe manages to tease out Krog’s critique on centralised perspectives and their seemingly inevitable ties to history and locality. In her analysis of the moments of transition that feature in the books – namely that from a pre-colonial to a colonial period during and after the South African War; the meetings between King Moshoeshoe and the Frenchman Casalis; and the transition from Apartheid to a democratic South Africa – Robbe explicates how Krog takes on, not just the relations between people from different cultural backgrounds, but also the relation between time and space in transcultural moments. Specifically, Robbe shows how
these moments of transition can serve to rethink the hierarchical and violent inequal­ities of those who meet in any contact zone.

Hanneke Stuit takes up the issue of violence and conflict in her discussion of prison gang narratives in an analysis of Tertius Kapp’s play Rooiland. The play takes place in an unspecified South African prison during an immanent gang war within its walls and relies heavily on prison gang histories, which are often referred to as ‘mythologies’. Stuit asks exactly what the ‘mythical’ entails in the context of Kapp’s text and explores the use of the concepts of mythology and transculturation as described by Barthes and Ortiz for reading the extremely dense layering of signification in the play. The reading of the play suggests that mythology as described by Barthes is a complex and gritty process of violent interaction that can be better understood by seeing it as a transcultural process of simultaneous renewal and loss of individual attachments. It will be argued that the play helps to understand the profound mixing of cultural strands at moments when ideology is solidified in shared narratives about what counts as a communal origin. Specifically, the play places volatile and violent processes of transculturation and cultural appropriation at the core of prison gang narratives.

The question of how to deal with such spaces and traces of violence productively is taken up by Alwyn Roux and Elizabeth Louise Nortjé in their discussion of Breyten Breytenbach’s open letters to Nelson Mandela. In their analysis of these letters, Roux and Nortjé focus on how Breytenbach’s combination of different disparate images of the South African landscape identifies challenges embodied in the country and potentially creates alternative future imaginings of change. The article zooms in on the representations of the ‘dead ends’ of violence in these texts, and asks how the impasse of violence can paradoxically still contribute to rewriting and understanding the South African (social) landscape.

Together, the contributions explore, but also demonstrate the use of the concept of transculturation for understanding and analysing Afrikaans literary and cultural phenomena. But they are also much more than this; they do not merely fill gaps in terms of histories of representation in the South African context, but also show the limitations and possibilities for survival or cultural renewal in transitory and transcultural moments. The specific engagements with transculturation and affiliated concepts like transition and cultural translation in this special issue foreground the importance of representation, time and processuality in thinking contact zones between people, ideologies and texts. To be sure, the issue makes clear that violence is involved in (representing) such moments of transition and transculturation, but it also provides, hopefully, avenues for thinking this violence productively.

Bibliography


Abstract – This article departs from the premise that the South African literary ar­
chive has many gaps concerning the experiences of black people and argues that 
these gaps can perhaps be partially filled by ‘mining’ old and recent literary texts 
by white Afrikaans authors which feature domestic worker characters. Domes­
tic workers have a pivotal role as ‘outsiders within’; as people with an exceptional 
knowledge of both black and white culture. Because contributions by black au­
thors to the South African archive covering the twentieth century are limited, this 
article argues that interactions in the intercultural contact zone (Pratt 1992) of 
‘maid & madam’ situations as described by white authors can be studied in an ef­
fort to extend the existing archive. In addition, the literary works under discus­
sion here allow for a focus on the relations between people as well as different re­
sponses to historical change. Ways in which historically important events such as 
voting day 1994, the Rebellion of 1914, the assassination of prime minister H.F. 
Verwoerd in 1966, Soweto 1976, township violence and ongoing post-apartheid 
rural poverty are represented, serve as ‘raw material’. A few older and more recent 
literary works are discussed in ‘pairs’ or ‘groups’ in order to make comparisons. 
The works discussed include novels by J. van Melle and Jan van Tonder, André P. 
Brink and J.M. Coetzee, as well as work by Elsa Joubert and Antjie Krog.

1 Introduction

The Rebellion of 1914, the death of prime minister H.F. Verwoerd in 1966, the af­
termath of the Sowetan student uprising in June 1976, political violence during the 
late 1980s on the Cape Flats, violence and poverty in the townships and rural ar­
eas in post-apartheid South Africa: these are some of the socio-political situations 
which are mentioned in the interactions between ‘maids and madams’ in South 
African texts featuring domestic workers. The fact that such events are referred 
to in these texts – all grounded mainly in the realist tradition – is not surprising in 
view of the fact that all South Africans have a shared and mutual, even a ‘unifying 
history’, as is convincingly argued by Attwell and Attridge in the Introduction to 
The Cambridge History of South African Literature:

To say this is not to assert a uniformity of experience, nor a consensus, not to mention a 
common identity, but it is to affirm that South Africans generally understand what they 
disagree about. A shared history has produced politicised discursive reflexes that are com­
monly understood. South Africa might be radically heterogeneous in linguistic and cul­
tural terms, but a common history has been imposed on it, a history which is the prod­
uct of its violent absorption into the modern world-system (Attwell & Attridge 2012: 5).

It would take me far beyond the scope of this article to go into particulars about 
the spread and consumption of information about this common history, but it is
important to take cognizance of the fact that although the writerly skills and the social and economic status of employers and employees differ extensively, both black and white, especially in the cities, invariably tap into a shared flow of information regarding the main political events and circumstances. Although many African women still cannot read and write, for instance, they are avid radio listeners and watchers of television, preferring programmes in their own languages. As such they are well-attuned to the issues that circulate in the public sphere.

According to Attwell and Attridge the ‘peculiarly aggressive form of modernity that was imposed on the region – racial capitalism abetted by the state in successive forms – has had the effect of creating pan-ethnic forms of association in the fields of labour, the economy, political life and cultural expression’ (Attwell & Attridge 2012: 5). The relation between cultural expression and labour relations lies at the core of my interest in the entanglement between black and white, specifically in the highly personal interaction of domestic work done mostly by black women in white suburban homes (see Jansen 2015). For generations, the master-servant relationship has been the main meeting point for black and white South Africans. Cities were even built with the expectation that the average middle-class white family would have live-in black servants and many otherwise modest homes in the suburbs still include maid’s quarters in the back. The most popular post-apartheid comic strip in the country actually concerns a white houseowner and her black maid. ‘Domestic servants are ubiquitous in South Africa’, said Harry Dugmore, a co-writer of the comic strip, ‘Madam and Eve’ which appeared for the first time in The Weekly Mail (Mail & Guardian) in 1992, in the interregnum between the release of Nelson Mandela and the first democratic elections. ‘If you have money, you have a servant. It is the South African way’.

In this article, I am particularly interested in how these relations are represented in the archive of South African literary imaginations, the nature of which is, as is the case with many archives (in particular in colonial settings), a ‘vexed one’, as Carli Coetzee (2012: 139) reminds us: it is dominated by a white perspective. This is, of course, in keeping with the fact that white people enjoyed without any doubt far better education, resulting also in white authors having much easier access to publishers and a reading public than black writers could ever dream to attain.

It was Michel Foucault who radically changed our ideas about the archive in 1970 and 1972 when he pointed out that the archive is not simply the sum of texts which a particular culture wishes to remember and deems worth their while to record and protect. Nor does it represent in any simplistic way the institutions which gave instructions for their recording and protection. Archives in the sense used by Foucault and postcolonial theorists, such as Ann Stoler (2002), speak to the imagination because they continue to call for interpretation, for translating configurations of power. The archive is a metaphor for the desire and longing which characterise the search for a hypothetical ‘truth’ and for an imaginary ‘origin’. As becomes clear from Refiguring the Archive (Hamilton e.a. 2002), the archive is practically always and everywhere, and especially in South Africa, a sys-

tem of inclusion and exclusion, of laws and rules which give shape to what may and may not be said and heard. So-called factual accounts make it possible for a nation to maintain its fictions; the range of philanthropic missions can be worked out in moralistic tales, but selection and manipulation always play a part.

In keeping with Walter Benjamin, who considers working class people as important ‘depositories’ for historical knowledge, this article argues that interactions in the intercultural contact zone (Pratt 1992) of ‘maid & madam’ situations can be ‘mined’ or ‘excavated’ in an effort to extend the existing archive. As Bruce Robbins writes in The Servant’s Hand: ‘The barest expository mention of a servant’s existence is sufficient to place the protagonist’s life in a problematic relation to the labouring community’ (Robbins 1986: 123). Although the texts under scrutiny in this article which feature domestic workers are written by white authors and are therefore per definition restricted, biased and technically form part of the white input into the archive, one could also argue that such texts are a reflection and representation of the black experience as well, however dim and scant it might be. Such texts sometimes try to understand and imagine a black experience (e.g. in the novel by Jan van Tonder discussed further down), but even from texts which do not explicitly try (e.g. the novel by Van Melle) information can be gathered. In stating this, I take my cue from Antoinette Burton who in Dwelling in the Archive. Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India (2003) convincingly argued that the Indian elite could have done much more to document the everyday lives of the servant class. She actually blames the upper class for failing to pick up on the stories of women and men who themselves had no access to writing and publishing, whose histories have remained in the shadows. Where stories have been passed on, though, they should be looked into. What Burton writes about colonial India, also goes for South Africa:

[W]e can see, if only by glimpsing, what their architectural imagination lost down the corridor of years as well as what it captured – with servants’ lives the most dramatic and perhaps paradigmatic example of what can never be fully recovered (Burton 2003: 144).

I therefore argue that when information with regards to the lives of domestic workers actually has been captured in some way in literary works by the upper classes, it should be taken seriously, analyzed and even valued as an important substitute for what would otherwise be completely lost and forgotten. Despite racism and prejudice, an element of truth exists in such stories and there is little reason to suspect deliberate contortions of portrayals of the servant class, especially concerning factual matters. Of course, factors such as nostalgia and structural-aesthetic demands of stories should be taken into account and ‘truthfulness’ is in any case hardly ever attainable.

Situations in which historical events and social circumstances, such as rebellions and the death of a prime minister are represented, are selected as scenes to focus on. These events are chosen because they impacted dramatically on the lives of everybody in South Africa. However, information on how such events were experienced by ‘ordinary’ black people, is hard to come by. I therefore suggest that cognizance should be taken of scenes in literary works by white authors in which responses by black women are included. What domestic workers did in those loaded circumstances is therefore brought to the fore in an effort to recover some-
thing of ordinary black women’s experiences of historical events. I will compare texts by J. van Melle and Jan van Tonder regarding prime ministers in 1914 and 1966 respectively, briefly mention texts by Elsa Joubert and André P. Brink published shortly after Soweto 1976, discuss the story ‘Agterplaas’ (‘Backyard’) by Elsa Joubert concerning the late 1970s, and in conclusion briefly focus on a series of poems by Antjie Krog published in 2014. I also include a fragment from an oral interview with a black domestic worker and short references to novels by J.M. Coetzee. The texts under discussion involve black domestic workers but the texts are invariably written from the particular point of view of white South African authors – and of course selected by me who also belong to this group.

2 Voting Day: 27th April 1994

Before focusing on the literary archive, I want to briefly refer to a watershed moment in South African history, an event which produced a huge variety of public images about a common historical event: 27th April 1994. On that day black and white went to the polls together for the first time. It is perhaps not surprising that many visual and oral testimonies (see Brink 1994) of experiences on voting day in the urban areas focused on images of black and brown domestic workers standing in endless queues together with their employers. Many white people apparently had the urge to share the day with black people but realized that they knew no other black person besides their domestic worker and gardener intimately enough to suggest to them to be together on that momentous day. The reason why some domestic workers did actually share the day with their employers had perhaps to do with their own uncertainty. Thinking back on that day, one could indeed pick up strains of discomfort of both employers and employees at being together outside the home environment for such a length of time, but also witness the relaxed happiness which was such an amazing feature of the day. Many children were also in the queue, for on that day their nannies were equal participants in the ‘grown-up’ world of their parents, not left behind at home to care for them there.

Although I sketch a mainly positive picture of voting day 1994 as I had witnessed it in the progressive middle-class neighborhood of Melville, Johannesburg, there were also strained interpersonal relationships during and after the elections; both in Johannesburg and in many parts of the country. The New York Times reported the following case:

A hard life has gotten harder since the campaign last April. A few days before the election, Delsie Sedibe recalled, her employer showed her a copy of the ballot and pointed to the picture of F.W. de Klerk, the former President, and gave instructions: ‘This is what you vote for. Don’t make a mistake. There is de Klerk. There is Buthelezi below him. You must be careful. Mandela is light in complexion. Don’t confuse him with de Klerk’. The employer took her maid to the polls, as many did, and warned her again about what she must do. Mrs. Sedibe nodded and stepped inside. She took a deep breath. ‘When I was in the voting booth, it was only me and my God’, she said. ‘So I put an X next to Mandela’.

Afterward came the questions. ‘Are you sure you didn’t make a mistake and vote for Mandela or Buthelezi?’ the employer asked her after she got home.
'She asked me so many times, she was so worried’, Mrs. Sedibe said.
Some time after Mr. Mandela won, Mrs. Sedibe was watching the news, after finishing the ironing, when she was asked what she was doing.
‘I want to hear what Mandela is saying’, Mrs. Sedibe said.
‘Why are you listening?’ the master said. ‘That means you like him’.
‘He’s the President’, she said. ‘He was voted by the people’.
‘Oh, that means you voted for him, too’, the master said angrily.
A few weeks later she was dismissed.

In view of the fact that the maid-white family relationship has for generations been the main meeting point of black and white South Africans, comparisons between patterns of decorum and behaviour within the average middle-class white family conveys much of the historically-grown entanglement between black and white. As C.W. de Kiewiet (1957) already suggested, the deepest truth of South African history is that the more dispossession occurred, the more blacks and whites depended on each other. Sarah Nuttall sums up De Kiewiet’s views on this entangled relationship in the following way:

There was an intricate entanglement on the earliest colonial frontiers: accompanying whites’ search for land was the process of acquiring labour, and in this process, whites became dependent on blacks, and blacks on whites. Precisely as this dependency grew, so whites tried to preserve their difference through ideology – racism (Nuttall 2009: 2).

This is the kind of racism which ‘legitimized’ the employers of Mrs Delsie Sedibe to think that they could, even on the 27th of April 1994, expect of her to obey their orders, that they could dictate to her for whom she should vote. Due to a newspaper interview her story of 27th April 1994 and its aftermath can, however, be added to the archive.

3 Prime Ministers and Domestic Workers: 1914 and 1966

Two novels form the basis of my first set of comparison: scenes in which South African prime ministers and domestic workers are described in some relation to each other. The first text is Bart Nel (1936 and 1942) by J. van Melle (1887-1953) in which Louis Botha, the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa is involved. The other is Roepman (2004) by Jan van Tonder (born 1954) in which the assassination of H.F. Verwoerd (1901-1966), prime minister of South Africa from 1958 until his death, is described in one of the chapters.

At the core of the Bart Nel text lie anxieties concerning the fictional character Bart joining the rebellion of 1914. The rebellion was a reaction by some Afrikaners to the government of the newly-formed Union of South Africa which was lead by two former Boer War generals: Louis Botha and J.C. Smuts. A few of Bart’s neighbors agree that Botha and Smuts know what they are doing by fulfilling their duties now that South Africa is part of the British Commonwealth, but others, in-
cluding Bart, are dead against the participation of South Africa in the First World War. It would mean fighting on the side of the British who only a few years before were the sworn enemies of the Boers.

A particularly poignant scene occurs when a neighbor arrives with the newspaper to inform Bart that Louis Botha has definitely decided to join forces with the British. All able South African men will be ordered to partake in the invasion of German South West Africa. Bart is absolutely devastated when he hears the news. His neighbor Pieter taunts him with the words: ‘What do you say now, my brother? What do you say?’

But Bart says nothing. He sits and stares at the newspaper and gives no answer. Then he stands up and goes to the wall where a portrait of Louis Botha hangs and takes it down. He walks with it to the kitchen and they hear him calling for Sara. ‘Take it’, he says, ‘break it and put it in the fire’.

Upon returning to the room, he despondently sits down on the bench. Everybody sits and stares at him. His dark face is pale and his hands tremble as he takes out his tobacco pouch and starts filling his pipe.

There is a long silence before anyone starts talking again (Van Melle 1988: 10).41

No insight is given by the narrator into Sara’s thoughts upon being ordered to fulfill one of the most interesting tasks I have come across in South African literary texts: to destroy the object of her master’s disgust. Her presence had already been acknowledged in a previous scene when she was ordered to come and take the baby called Kleinbaas to play outside; the usual type of task. She is now asked to do something completely different. Bart’s disappointment is so great that he cannot even bring himself to destroy the image of his beloved Botha himself. His utter disgust and contempt for Botha is expressed by the fact that the demolition of Botha has now become dirty work. It is therefore the task of the servant to ‘clean up’, to mop up her master’s grief and in this way to even start doing Trauerarbeit on his behalf. J. van Melle makes no attempt at describing Sara’s feelings. What she is ordered to do happens back stage and no cognizance is taken of her reactions to the changes about to happen, not only on a national scale, but also in the household where she works: Bart and his wife Fransina will separate and divorce because of his role in the rebellion.

Many years later Dutch-born H.F. Verwoerd (1901–1966) was South Africa’s prime minister between 1958 and 1966. He is considered the ‘architect of apartheid’ and was greatly admired by many white South Africans. In Roepman (2004) a photograph of Verwoerd takes centre stage in the ‘showcase’ in the small Durban sitting room of a poor working class Afrikaans family. One of the tasks of their maid Gladys is to regularly dust the portrait. On the day when she returns from her ‘homeland’ after having been ordered by Mr Rademan to take her two year old son Boytjie away because of a law prohibiting more than one person to live in the maid’s quarters in the yard, Timus, the 13 year old narrator, tells her that Verwoerd has just been assassinated. Her shock is described vividly but with-

4 All translations of Afrikaans texts are by me unless stated otherwise. Quotations from Antjie Krog’s work are from Synapse, the English edition of Mede-wete. Information concerning all references to political events can easily be found on internet.