

# Going to the Dogs

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## Abstract

On his fourteenth journey to South Africa, Oscar Hemer repeatedly comes across the casual expression “going to the dogs” and starts reflecting on dogs and other companion species with regards to his ongoing exploration of “speculative anthropology”. When does something go to the dogs? Is there a correlation between *contaminated diversity* and decline? Even though *contamination* may appear to be a hopeless motto for political mobilisation at present, he arrives at the conclusion that it is the only option for a country—and a planet—increasingly pressured by essentialisms of multiple varieties that all counteract the fine balance of everyday *conviviality*.

The chronological travel account from March 2022 is juxtaposed with a parallel text, written before and after (October in Berlin), which from a slightly altered perspective reflects on the process and the form of the “Conviviality and Contamination” project.

*March 2022*

The skyline of downtown Johannesburg seems somehow distorted, yet reassuringly familiar. But the guest house on 1<sup>st</sup> Street in Melville looks deserted behind the locked gate. Nobody answers the bell. I stand in the hot noon sun, exhausted after trying to sleep wearing a mask on the night flight from Zürich. After some ten minutes I manage to find the phone number in the hotels.com app, only to realise that the number has no recipient, another (landline) number on the print-out yields the same discouraging reply. For a moment I incredulously grasp that I may have been conned but then the fraud must have included hotels.com... Luckily, a friendly neighbour on the other side of the street is the first to notice me with mobile in hand and all luggage at my feet. *Bronwyn, who lives in Auckland Park nearby, will warn me tomorrow that Melville is no longer safe, not even in broad daylight.* It turns out that the guest house owner was at the other end of the compound and did not hear the bell; I am the only guest, and I hadn't announced the hour of my arrival.

I decide on writing journal notes directly on the computer, rather than in the Moleskine notebook. Firstly, because it sharpens me a bit like typewriting represented a qualitative leap from the handwritten draft. Every writer over the age of sixty can attest to the significance of the loss of the typewriter. The first thing I was taught at the School of Journalism was to put the paper in the machine. Handwritten drafts were banned. In terms of writing methodology, the journalistic eye to the essential core of an event is very useful, even if one is more

interested in the details. I think that the ability to find the “significant detail” may be partly due to my journalistic training. Secondly, because so many of my handwritten notes just vanish to no avail. Like all the minutes I made in Pietermaritzburg four years ago, for example. Some of them might be worth retrieving, but now I wouldn’t even know where to find them, to begin with, and if I did, I may very likely be unable to read them.

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I meet Ivan and Bronwyn the next morning in the Bamboo Centre, at the other end of Melville.<sup>[1]</sup> It’s my seventh meeting with Ivan *I believe, yes, it must be* since our first encounter at the Café Zürich in Hillbrow in 1991, but the first time I see Bronwyn. Ivan and Bronwyn are colleagues at Wits University; he was supervisor on her PhD in Creative Writing, the mature debut novel *The Printmaker* and a companion essay; she is now his boss at the same department. Ivan who will be sixty-five in September is, like myself, on the verge of retirement. But in Ivan’s case, it is without apology. I assume that he would easily get a visiting professorship somewhere overseas, but he is not keen on leaving South Africa.

In contrast, Nomsa Mwamuka from Harare, my second eldest South African acquaintance, whom I see for the first time in fifteen years over dinner in the evening a spontaneous reunion with minimal notice; *I wrote to her the night before* is intent on leaving as soon as she can. She says she doesn’t want to see another country go “down” *she doesn’t say “to the dogs”* as she did with Zimbabwe. Nomsa looks different, with a more business-like hairdo, but the wonderful laugh is the same. She had a hard time during the lockdown. Another attempt at finalising a Master’s degree failed due to the sudden death from Covid of her supervisor-to-be. “The government’s policy was a complete failure”, she says, but admits that it would have been much worse with former president Jacob Zuma still in power. “He would have joined the looters.” Nomsa, who helped me get hold of non-mainstream films for my thesis, is now working to promote black filmmakers when the big streaming companies Netflix, HBO, Disney come searching for local content in local productions. She laughingly recounts her efforts to explain to white South African producers that there needs to be real transformation “you can’t just employ your maid.”

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The Uber ride to Maboneng next morning confirms every prejudice about inner-city Johannesburg. The extraordinary ugliness of the urban ecology, shades of rust brown and dark red, litter radiating around symbolic dustbins, yes, bins of dust and dirt, plastic, metal scrap, and people, young men mostly, with expressionless faces. A tired cliché, galvanised with despair or, rather, indifference, which makes it all the more unsettling...

The Centre for the Less Good Idea is in the Arts on Main former factory space, on the strip between Main and Fox Street, the one that Bronwyn likened to an outdoor mall.<sup>[2]</sup> Starting around 2008 and with an early culmination during the World Cup in 2010, when people took to the streets to watch the games, the Maboneng area emerged as a new hip spot, where middle-class whites from the suburbs went to feel the groove of downtown Jozi... Until the pressure on the fringes, from the surrounding municipal desolation, made it appear too dangerous to go there, even by car let alone an Uber. One of my hosts, Athena Mazarakis, tries to see it from a less sombre side; that the formerly secluded space is being transformed from within, by the local community. The Centre is becoming a meeting place for two completely different, yet not necessarily adverse audiences... Isn’t this an exemplary form of conviviality *and* contamination, in the good sense of enabling new encounters? And *or* is it the beginning of a dissolution that will eventually wear down this wonderful initiative, like so many others? *BAT Centre in Durban, to name one that comes to mind, whose gradual decay I have witnessed over the years which nevertheless continues, refusing to give in.* Do these processes necessarily go together? Is

there contamination in the bad sense of enabling enmity rather than conviviality? No, I prefer to accuse social and economic injustice.

The texts that William Kentridge works with are often African proverbs. Even the name of the Centre is drawn from a Tswana proverb: *If the good doctor can't cure the disease, the less good doctor will.* My other guide, Phala Ookeditse Phala, points at the empty restaurant in the courtyard, which was closed for good by the lockdown. Now Kentridge has bought the space. "To make sure that it is not turned into a *shebeen*," Phala smiles. The Centre already has a hard time competing with the ear-splitting night clubs in the area.

At coffee in the Third Space *so called, simply because it was the third room in the building that the centre took over and refurbished* I receive the news that Kentridge's biographer and close collaborator Jane Taylor has suffered a stroke in Switzerland. Although I don't know her, it comes as a shock, as we had been in contact recently. Jane responded almost immediately to my email, and I was intent on somehow involving her in the project. At first, I considered inviting her as a participant, and it was frankly race that held me back. The white predominance in the group is troublesome, and although I hate to adapt to thinking strategically in terms of race, or any other identity category, I fully agree that diversity, if not representativity, is crucial for the project. Therefore, if Jacob Dlamini were to fall out, it would be mandatory that he be replaced by a black South African; not "Indian" or "Coloured", but "African". *See how the maintained apartheid categories reproduce themselves, whether one hates it or not.*

South Africa is diverse, truly a potential "rainbow nation", and the white-black relationship is one of many, over-emphasised by whites for whom it tends to be the only divide.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet the white supreme world remains a separate reality, forcefully imposed on the other South African realities. Whites are still largely living a secluded life that resembles the one under apartheid, in suburbs that may have incorporated a few inhabitants of colour on the fringes. Whites may have black colleagues at equal or even superior level at work, but the people of colour they have the most intimate relation with are most probably their maids and gardeners.

This is not exceptional for South Africa; Brazil has a similar poverty gap that largely follows race lines, segregation is almost as rampant in the USA *and Sweden, for that matter* and the polarising dynamics of neoliberal capitalism are global. Yet, I must face the uncomfortable fact that, on this fourteenth journey to the country, I am inadvertently more than usually moving in the white reality, meeting mostly other whites in secure places. The places of encounter are mixed, but they are also gated spheres of exception, pockets, bubbles. Even the Centre for the Less Good Idea, a bubble in another bubble of Maboneng, the outdoor mall... The misery surrounding these secluded spheres has become ever more conspicuous during lockdown, a destitution beyond belief. *Even in Sea Point I will find people sleeping in the streets; in downtown Cape Town squatters in provisional tents occupy the green turf between the opposing lanes on Strand Street...*

*Is it just the pandemic aftermath, or have things really gone from bad to worse, generally? At least, I intuitively sense that the demarcation lines, inscribed in architecture and city plans but mostly in people's minds, are less easily crossed now than in the early years of the transition.*

*The threat of violence has always been there, but to what extent is fear a matter of evocation? On previous journeys, when I occasionally travelled alone in collective taxis and local buses, I met astonishment rather than hostility in fellow passengers' faces. With a black companion, I was always confident and secure, although I admit that on the very first visit to Soweto in 1991, on the cusp of a furious general strike, not even the protection of the former gangster Don Mattera felt like a warranty.*<sup>[4]</sup>

*On my second journey, in 2005, I stayed with my Danish colleague at the Beach Hotel on Durban's worn-down beachfront. Our white South African university partner was so perplexed that she forgot her handbag at the table when she visited us for a coffee, and she was even more confused when the waiter ran after her with it... Durban's waterfront was to be refurbished for the World Cup five years later, but Beach Hotel will surely never regain its long-lost splendour.*

Race trumps class, again, in the populist reaffirmations of both whiteness and blackness. Yet it strikes me, when reading *The Terrorist Album*, Jacob Dlamini's interrogation of the remnants of the apartheid security archive *the fragments escaping the memory purge called the "paper Auschwitz"* that the militant anti-apartheid struggle was truly reflecting the envisioned non-racialist nation.<sup>[5]</sup> The cases, mostly about my age *those who survived are now in their sixties or seventies* represent a South Africa yet to be.

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Normally on my visits here, I immerse myself in the local public sphere, reading daily newspapers comprehensively and the weekly *Mail & Guardian* thoroughly, watching the SABC news and occasional TV shows. But now I am following the Swedish media coverage of the Ukraine war. South Africa has taken a shameful neutral position. The refusal to condemn Russian aggression has of course to do with the partnership in BRICS *which, more importantly, includes China* but it is also due to nostalgia for the most faithful ally in the anti-apartheid struggle, the Soviet Union. To the hardcore left-wingers of the ANC, and the pink berets of Julius Malema's EFF, the rhetoric seems preserved from the 1980s, Ukraine being the spearhead of Western imperialism's aggressive expansion. Indeed, the war is far away. The 11 March issue of the *Mail & Guardian* barely mentions it, except for a column that rightfully points out the racist hypocrisy of the EU's refugee immigration policies. The main news is the risk of "Burnout" as the scandalous parastatal electric power company Eskom is emptying its emergency fuel reserves to keep electricity flowing through the grids. *Nine million litres of diesel a day are burnt to keep the power on*, postponing the inevitable serious *load shedding* that will follow when the reserves are depleted.

*Diversity on display...* The one TV show I actually watch halfheartedly, *Comedy Central*, is like a burlesque, almost a freak show, with the full spectrum of stereotypes: the short Muslim Coloured guy heckling the Gangster Rapper and the Guilt-ridden Afrikaner; Tswana making the audience giggle at risqué jokes about Zulus, hinting at volatile and easily offended masculinity; the woman host dressed like a stripper in black lace, whimsically teasing all the boys on stage... South Africa has a proud tradition of stand-up comedy, with Trevor Noah *Born a Crime* as the internationally shining star. I have difficulties following the dialogues and catching the punchlines and I am completely at a loss in the constant swaps of languages, but I watch in awe. It's like projecting a national self-image in a distorting mirror, and yet a persuasive indication that the "rainbow nation" does exist and has come a substantial distance from the bleak supremacist fantasy of apartheid. *Verwoerd and Eiselen would turn in their graves.*

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The first night in Pietermaritzburg, Cheryl and her husband Bruce take me to dinner at Garlington Estate in nearby Hilton, a longed-for new venue with a grand view over the undulating Midland hills, *if the rain hadn't been pouring down incessantly*. On the way out of town we pass the skeleton of a shopping mall that was looted and burnt down in the July riots. I vaguely remember the TV footage that broke the news, but I had not grasped the

full extent of this South African correspondent to the storming of the Capitol. The demonstrations against Jacob Zuma's incarceration started in his home province KwaZulu-Natal, spread to Gauteng, and became the most violent surge after apartheid, with more than three hundred and fifty dead. The epicentre was the province capital Pietermaritzburg, and the spark was the Constitutional Court's rejection of a rescission application on the grounds of Zuma's health and high age. As we pass in the dusk, I can almost sense the lingering evil spirit, a spooky feeling that something has broken, that people are still struggling to understand what happened. Gys, my host at the B&B where I had stayed for three weeks four years earlier, is like a shadow of his former joyous self; the whole residence seems to be in a state of neglect or perhaps indifference. The residents in Scottville, where the university is, had feared that the riots would get completely out of hand, and some had taken to the streets with firearms to fend off intruders. *In fact, I later learn, an unknown but considerable number of the casualties were innocent alleged looters shot by vigilantes, and the violence was fomented by private security companies with links to the Zuma network.*

That same day, Bruce tells me as we pass the rubble of the burnt-down mall, foreign shop owners in the centre had been attacked by a mob, leaving two dead one stabbed, one shot and one seriously injured. Again, these outbursts of vile xenophobia that harm South Africa's reputation on the continent more than anything else. As most of the outstanding problems in this country, it is a legacy of apartheid, albeit indirectly... I once discussed this at length with Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley, who did a very timely comparative analysis of "xenophobia, citizenship and identity in South Africa, Canada and Germany" a year before the outburst of the 2015 riots.<sup>[6]</sup> It is lack of identity that instigates murder, they conclude. An internalised Bantustan mentality: insecure, fragile identities searching to assert themselves, escape humiliation and reverse denigration. The *Mail & Guardian* dedicates most of its 18 March issue to the theme of "Migration" and explodes some myths about South Africa's exceptionalism; for example, the common belief that South Africa is hosting more refugee migrants than any other African country. The truth is that countries like Kenya and Uganda house a much higher number. Uganda, with its economy a tenth of the size of South Africa's, offers protection to a refugee population ten times larger.

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The next day, Cheryl and Bruce take me to the mountains, to Cheryl's favourite spot in the Southern Drakensberg, the Mermaid's Pool, barely accessible in the high waters that have soaked the grasslands around the creek and the furious current that makes bathing in the tiny backwater puddle scary, if not risky. The Rhino peak never comes clear of the clouds but breathing the mountain air is more refreshing than usual, like clearing the head and restoring confidence. Cheryl's other favourite spot is Umdloti, by the sea north of Durban, which has also become one of my coordinates. I will go there the next evening to watch the frightening ocean at dusk. A text on the wall in the Sand Bar says: *If I gave a shit you'd be the first I'd give it to.*

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It is likewise a relief to return to Sea Point, especially the public bath, *my* favourite place, a disclaimer of the myth of English White Cape Town. I first heard somebody at the Centre for the Less Good Ideas mention in passing that there was a rumour a few years ago that Sea Point had gone to the dogs. "Going to the dogs" is apparently a commonplace South African saying that I had never noticed before. I may have come across it occasionally on my previous journeys, but now I hear it all the time, an expression as casual as "at the end of the day". Susan Hayden, my former student and proof-reader, smiles at the remark and reminds me of a book I ought to have read: *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*, by Alexandra Fuller, a childhood memoir about white

Rhodesia's conversion to black Zimbabwe.<sup>[7]</sup> When I ask what it means, Susan looks bewildered, as if it were the stupidest question, or as if she had never really thought about it: "well, *going to hell...*" Aryan Kaganof will give a more intriguing explanation, translating it to the Dutch word *beludering*. I automatically associate the Swedish word *luden* (hairy) and understand the process of becoming *luden* as something like the werewolf's transformation from man to beast, a metaphor for civilisation's transition to barbarity. But when I put "beludering" through Google translate, it disappointingly comes out as "cheating".<sup>[8]</sup>

However, the animal metaphors stay with me. In the posh white suburbs on the Cape Peninsula, the imminent threat might rather be described as *going to the baboons*. Concerned residents complain to the media about the big monkeys becoming more and more fearless, huge males breaking into houses by simply lifting out window frames, others learning to detect the sound of remote keys and getting to cars before their drivers... *In Khayelitsha and the Cape Flats, rats are a far more severe danger, but the big rodents do not hit the media charts...*

*I remember travelling in a small boat to Jane Goodall's reserve at the tip of Lake Tanganyika, passing by deserted lakeshore villages that had seemingly been taken over by baboons; on that same journey I walked back to the hotel late at night from a bar in Kigoma and was approached by a pack of dogs; they merely nudged at my behind, the leader dog biting through the trousers but not through the skin, yet this was one of the most terrifying moments I had ever experienced. Everyone who has watched wildlife porn on TV knows that going to the dogs would be the most horrific way to go, being disembowelled alive and literally torn to pieces.*

When exactly does something go to the dogs?... What was the tipping point for Hillbrow, the cosmopolitan haven of the late apartheid dictatorship that turned into a drug- and violence-ridden "misunderstood area" during democracy? What is the state of transformation in Melville? And why do these two examples come to my mind? Again: is there a correlation between vernacular cosmopolitanism and dissolution? The fine, yet critical, line that differentiates *contaminated diversity* from the gentrified colours of Benetton... I can write back to Johannesburg and assure that Sea Point is not going to the dogs. Not yet. *Somehow there is the expectation that it eventually will.*

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If the cosmopolitan inner suburb is for the dogs, then what companion species is Stellenbosch for? It's my third visit to the Institute for Advanced Study. I was there six years ago, a year after my own stay, to see Zoë Wicomb, who at the time was struggling with a novel that wouldn't come out *Still Life*. Now I visit Thomas, my mentor, colleague and friend since the promising early 1990s. Everything is ridiculously familiar; the cleaning staff who remember me, the polite conversations around the coffee machine, the fellows, mostly elderly white male professors, a category to which I myself undoubtedly belong. After lunch, and a coffee with Thomas in the Botanical Garden, the reencounter with Aryan Kaganof and Stephanus Muller at the Africa Open Institute, where the website of the Genadendal Music Archive is being launched, with representatives from the Genadendal coloured community, and a secretary from the German Consulate in Cape Town. I remember passing by the former German mission with Aryan when I visited him in Greyton, either the first or the second time. After the ceremony, I walk through the *dorp* at dusk, this incredible pocket in time-space, an outdoor museum in another country, another century. Who is safeguarding *this* haven?

*I recall my late disclosure of the security people, cleverly camouflaged, all black; I had taken them for road workers.*

The wealth of Stellenbosch is inconspicuous, invisible, insignificant in the larger picture. The university that tries hard to conceal its crucial role in the intellectual history of apartheid maintains its standing as one of the leading national institutions, but somehow discreetly abiding in the shadow of the English-speaking UCT and Wits.

I asked Aryan what happened to the Open Stellenbosch movement that he so meticulously documented as a fellow at the Institute, in a film *Opening Stellenbosch: From Assimilation to Occupation* that he was not allowed to show at his seminar.<sup>[9]</sup> It's gone without a trace, he said and added a characteristic pun, "as if it had been a performance". Students performing *mimicking* a perceived act of revolution? The whole nationwide #FeesMustFall movement, which followed on the heels of the #RhodesMustFall campaign that had sparked at UCT while I was at the Institute, seems indeed to have waned. And whereas protests occasionally flare up at other universities, blocking entrances and burning professors' cars, as happened at UKZN in Pietermaritzburg not long ago, such outbursts are difficult to imagine in Stellenbosch.

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The principal language at the public bath in Sea Point is Afrikaans, but the guests are predominantly black that is, largely *Coloured* and *Indian*, according to the apartheid typology, but it is difficult to discern the shades of pigment on sun-tanned bodies. The water is chilly, just above twenty degrees, the fifty-metre pool is surely not heated and hence the temperature decreases from day to day, as in Stellenbosch in the "kind month of April" seven years ago, when it finally got so cold that I shivered with blue lips already after one length. I realise that some redundancy is inevitable. I can't expect readers to be familiar with *Cape Calypso*.<sup>[10]</sup> But who *is* my addressee? Hardly the curious Swedish high-school student as my first mentor at *Dagens Nyheter*, Karl Erik Lagerlöf, defined his imagined reader of the paper's cultural section. But neither the buyer of the *Mail & Guardian*, for whom most explanations of the South African reality would be irritatingly superfluous. Am I addressing an academic or a literary public? At the Institute's coffee machine before lunch, one of Thomas's fellows asked me what the purpose of "ethnographic fiction" was. To make the stuff more accessible, more *popular*? Definitely not, I replied with emphasis although the opposite would of course not be my deliberate intention either.

Summing up the impressions from my last journey to this country for which I have such ambivalent affection, I return in memory to that revolutionary moment seven years ago, when Achille Mbembe came to Stellenbosch to address the students. South Africa, he said, is the only country in the world where a black majority is ruling over a substantial, influential white minority. "The reverse from the USA".<sup>[11]</sup> *And that was in Obama's time. Before Trump.* The core of Mbembe's memorable talk was his definition of decolonisation as the "decommissioning of absolute knowledges" with the caution that this must not be confused with either "de-Westernisation" or "Africanisation".

Indeed, that is what is still at stake, not only in the global pilot project South Africa but on this entire planet, increasingly pressured by essentialisms of multiple varieties that all counteract the fine balance of everyday conviviality. Contamination *contaminated diversity* may appear to be a hopeless motto for political mobilisation. But it's not only a matter of necessity, but of choice.

*Unless we really want to go to the dogs tonight.*

## **Who is I?**

Am I going to play the gender card, again? Not quite as provocative as the race card, but even more unsettling, perhaps. I can't pretend to be black, especially not in South Africa. But I can pretend to be gay or bisexual. Sexual preferences are not disclosed by the look. Moreover, hardly anyone, not even in South Africa, would object to a white male writer's use of a woman focaliser, straight or gay provided that she's white. So, *I or Ze?* After long deliberation, I opt for the conventional solution, yet keeping an arm's-length distance between author and first-person narrator. *I is an Other.*

What I never could have imagined was, however, that, more than two months into my full-time project, I would still be struggling with Lévi-Strauss and Leiris, none of whom I had even had on the index list of the book proposal. They were supposed to be little more than footnotes to an introductory chapter on literature and anthropology... But even before I have started to discern my envisioned literary history of contamination, another tradition is appearing, stronger and already established, predominantly French perhaps distinctively French, going from Montaigne via Montesquieu to the French ethnographers of the twentieth century and the ethnography-inspired poets and philosophers of the French Antilles. Montesquieu and Glissant were on my list, so the traditions do converge, but I wasn't really aware of how strong the ethnography nexus was, let alone the crucial importance of French ethnography in its bud as a discipline in the 1920s and '30s. Between the two World War disasters, at a time when European colonialism was still unchecked and rising colonial powers fought for their piece of the cake, when "racial hygiene" and social Darwinism were commonly acknowledged or even implemented as politics, French ethnography represented a beacon of humanism and tolerance, symbolised by the new Musée de l'Homme in Paris that grew out of the former ethnographic museum of Trocadéro, a metamorphosis in its turn associated with the emerging Front Populaire... The founding mission of the museum, formulated by its first director Paul Rivet, was that Humanity is one and indivisible, not only in space, but also in time. During the German occupation, the museum was one of the outspoken hubs of resistance. Rivet survived the war, in exile in Colombia, but many of the employees who stayed were charged with "espionage" by a German court and ten were sentenced to death.<sup>[12]</sup> Others, like Deborah Lifchitz, expert on Semitic languages of Ethiopia, and the only woman member of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, faced similar fates, simply for being Jewish.<sup>[13]</sup>

Yet, it was at Musée de l'Homme where Lévi-Strauss was to become interim director after the war and Leiris one of the prominent researchers that Saartjie Baartman's genitals were on display until 1974. After having been stored in a museum closet another twenty-eight years, her remains were repatriated to South Africa in one of the most symbol-laden ceremonies of the transition.<sup>[14]</sup>

What that unfortunate woman needs more than anything is to be left alone, to rest in her warm Eastern Cape grave although he imagines that she'd rather be wrapped in Parisian couture than her new shroud of native kudu skin.<sup>[15]</sup>

Does Zoë Wicomb's involuntary identity as "coloured" give her a privileged position in the booby-trapped terrain of race relations? She can unproblematically put any words even the k word in the mouth of her phantom characters; in her latest novel, *Still Life*, two of them are described by the third as "nigger upstarts a saucy slave



woman and a badly dressed Bushman.” The main character is Thomas Pringle, a Scottish poet who emigrated to the Eastern Cape and eventually was known as “the father of South African poetry”. As a harsh critic of the Cape government’s treatment of the native people, he was expelled, and became a leading abolitionist on his return to Britain.

Wicomb’s intricate novel is the story of an author with writer’s block who attempts writing Pringle’s biography. She hires two of the real characters from Pringle’s life to help with the task: Hinza, his adopted African son, and Mary Prince, a former slave from the West Indies, whom Pringle offered to work for the Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society and whose autobiography he co-wrote; their joint book project caused sensation and played an important part in the abolitionist struggle.<sup>[16]</sup> These two historical figures are accompanied by the seasoned time traveller Nicholas Greene, who appears twice in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando*, first as a poet in the Elizabethan era, contemporary with Shakespeare and Marlowe, and later as a literary critic in the Victorian nineteenth century.

At the signing of the contract between protagonist and writer, resuscitated Pringle is sceptical:

Can this woman be trusted with the task, this story that is neither fish nor fowl, neither fact nor fiction?<sup>[17]</sup>

Yet, three assistants set out on a time journey in their more and less reluctant attempt to come to grips with Pringle’s elusive persona. *Wicomb is the ghost participant in my project, whom I will look up for guidance if the going gets too clogged.*

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October 2022

## ***When did things start to go viral?***

At the Kåseberga workshop, Kerry asks us to write “anything” for three minutes non-stop. Her slot is after mine and the thoughts process the critique my presentation just received: Ivan’s concern about unknowingly becoming a character in a text that is not an interview or a memoir, but a reflection in the process of writing the current text; Bronwyn’s caution about expectations of genre; that you read a text very differently if you expect it to be fiction, ethnography, memoir or what-what. I claim in defence that, to some extent at least, contamination is about challenging expectations. Yet, I am reminded that “contamination” as genre classification may serve as an excuse for irresponsibility, for insufficient research, or sloppy writing at worst.

I have had unknowing protagonists in my previous contaminations and novels and I never thought of it as *ethically* troublesome, as the aim was always benevolent. But I ought to have learned that it can be with the main character in my novel *Santiago* as the warning example. Do I understand why it broke our friendship? With difficulty, yes. I would have been immensely flattered if I were made the protagonist of somebody’s novel. But the devil lives in the detail, and some observations may have appeared to be deliberately offensive, albeit accurate. The lack of self-irony, for example, which was confirmed by his reaction.

Next exercise is to think of our projects as *archeological excavations*. An excavation of *Going to the Dogs* would imply the uncovering of layers from previous journeys to South Africa, which has already been done, but

not only that: I would dig into other writings about places that may or may not be familiar to me. That is, library mining, not necessarily in situ. For example, the history of Sea Point as well as Melville and Pietermaritzburg with regards to the specific metaphor, or to dogs in general, or other “companion species” *baboons? rats? pigeons?* A global search for the etymology of going to the dogs.<sup>[18]</sup> *Why the dogs? What about cats? What would “going to the cats” imply?* The big cats, as in Amitav Ghosh’s story of the Sundarbans, the mangrove forest of the Bay of Bengal, where tigers have killed on average twenty-five humans annually, casually.<sup>[19]</sup>

The thought on excavation recurs the following week in Berlin, with its layers on layers of troublesome pasts. What would be the pertinent animal metaphor for Europe, where fascism is now coming back with a vengeance... *First, we take Sweden, then we take Italy...* Going to the wolves? No, that would be an insult to the untamed canines, one of the main effigies of hate of the right-wing constituent of Northern Sweden... Berlin, the former eye of the storm, is now a haven of humanism, Germany being the only country in this continent of savagery that has come to some reconciliation with its atrocious past; the worst colonisers who, after failing to challenge the already established drug cartels of Britain and France, conquered and colonised its hinterland. Like Russia... *Excavating the anti-liberal rhetoric of the GDR, echoing the Third Reich propaganda, now resurfacing in Putin Russia’s war bulletins.*

I spend an afternoon with Cheryl at the Neues Museum. We see Nefertiti together. I even forget that it’s the second time I see her, because I can’t recall perceiving anything like it. My eyes water and my heart beats faster before this sublime beauty. It is just as overwhelming as my first encounter with ancient Egypt in Cairo and in Luxor. Whereas the return visit to Luxor, twenty years later, was disappointing. So was the return visit to the archaeological museum in Mexico City. Or the British Museum. *Revisiting the Gates of Nineveh.* Disenchantment *is that the right word in this context?* which also applies to travel in general. The sorry fact that I forget; that recent trips have left little if any trace. Not consciously, anyway. Cheryl was jubilant to share this experience with me, to see how something really moved me. I enjoy her company more and more. And I really appreciate that she and Thomas found each other. She could sense the bond between him and me which also moves me to tears. I have never experienced our symbiosis so clearly before, that I was and am as important to him as he is to me... Can I give expression to this, in the book that will be the result of my project? The project that is not only mine. Lucy has appropriated it brilliantly and all participants are in some sense complicit.

At the Berlin workshop, Salomé Voegelin gives a guest lecture and exercise on *Transversal Sound Studies: An Affirmative Troubling of Knowledge*. Interestingly, when relating to the keywords “conviviality” and “contamination” she immediately associates the latter with *contagion* and more specifically with the recent pandemic and lingering Covid virus.

People tend to react strongly to the word contamination in Germany because of its connotations to Nazi terminology, even though it signifies an affirmation of precisely that which the Nazi ideology condemned. A similar reaction is provoked in postapartheid South Africa, but there it possibly has more to do with the connotations related to the HIV/Aids virus and the shadow still cast by that previous pandemic over the transition. *Viruses, as opposed to bacteria, are never desired companion species.*

I am repeatedly asked why I prefer “contamination” to “creolisation” if the terms are used synonymously anyway. Because it sparks such a strong response, would be one answer, whereas creolisation is often met with a gaping silence. If the latter concept is comprehended at all, it is associated with a specific region, the Caribbean, possibly Latin America and some island nations in the Indian Ocean, but surely not South Africa, although apartheid was the epitome of suppressed creolisation. Attempts at introducing the creolisation debate are even

reduced to some identity project for the “coloured”. *Yet another proof of how deeply entrenched the apartheid categories are.*

Thus, contamination.

## Footnotes

1. Members of the project are presented by their first names only. A principal aim of this journey was to meet the South African participants, in preparation for the workshops in Sweden and Germany.
2. See <https://lessgoodidea.com/> accessed 2023-04-17).
3. “White” and “Black” refer to the apartheid categories, also named “European” and “African”, excluding “Coloureds” and “Indians”, although an overarching divide in apartheid South Africa was between “white” (*blank*) and “non-white” (*nie-blank*).
4. Don Mattera, aka Bra Zinga, author of *Memory is the Weapon* and *Gone with the Twilight: A Story of Sophiatown* (1987), passed away on 18 July (Nelson Mandela’s birthday) 2022.
5. Dlamini, Jacob. *The Terrorist Album: Apartheid’s Insurgents, Collaborators, and the Security Police*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2020.
6. Adam, Heribert and Moodley, Kogila. *Imagined Liberation: Xenophobia, Citizenship and Identity in South Africa, Germany and Canada*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press. 2013.
7. Fuller, Alexandra. *Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*. London: Picador. 2002.
8. Gerrie van Noord, the Dutch copyeditor, will eventually remark that there is no such Dutch word. Aryan probably meant “beloedering” (tainting) or “verloedering” (degradation).
9. See <https://vimeo.com/173585724> (accessed 2023-04-17).
10. See Hemer, Oscar. “Impurity and Danger: Excerpts from *Cape Calypso*”. *Conviviality at the Crossroads: The Poetics of Everyday Encounters*. Edited by Oscar Hemer, Maja Povrzanović Frykman and Per-Markku Ristilammi. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2019. pp. 247–65. Available at [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-28979-9\\_13](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-28979-9_13) (accessed 2023-04-17).
11. Hemer, Oscar. *Contaminations and Ethnographic Fictions: Southern Crossings*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2020. p. 164.
12. The seven men were executed by firing squad, whereas the three women were deported to camps. One of them, Germaine Tillion, returned from Ravensbrück at the end of the war and was put in charge of organising voluntary resistance fighter pensions.
13. Lifchitz, whom Leiris often refers to in *Phantom Africa*—always by the Polish spelling Lifszyc—was hiding in his apartment in Paris in 1942, when the French police arrested her and sent her to Auschwitz, where she was gassed.
14. Saartjie Baartman’s case gained worldwide fame after being rediscovered by biologist Stephen Jay Gold in *The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (1985). Her fate is told in Zoë Wicomb’s great novel *David’s Story* (2000). I discuss the novel extensively in my thesis. See Hemer, Oscar. *Fiction and Truth and Transition: Writing the Present Past in South Africa and Argentina* Berlin: Lit Verlag 2012. pp. 132–41). For a thorough analysis of Saartjie Baartman’s symbolic role in the transition, see Samuelson, Meg. *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women?: Stories of the South African Transition*.

Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. 2007. pp. 88–89.

15. Wicomb, Zoë. *Still Life*. New York, NY: The New Press. 2020. p. 14.
16. Mary Prince, born in Bermuda around 1788, was the first black British woman to escape from slavery. Her *History*, “Related by Herself”, was published in London and Edinburgh in 1831. A new, revised edition, edited by Moira Ferguson, appeared in 1997.
17. Wicomb, *Still Life*, p. 34.
18. Lucy eventually points me to this clarifying explanation by Welsh writer and teacher Tim Bowen. The origin of the expression is believed to be in ancient China where dogs, by tradition, were not permitted within the walls of cities. Consequently, stray dogs roamed the areas outside the city walls and lived off the rubbish thrown out of the city by its inhabitants. Criminals and social outcasts were often expelled from cities and were sent to live among the rubbish—and the dogs. Such people were said to have *gone to the dogs*, both literally in that that was where they were now to be found, and metaphorically in the sense that their lives had taken a distinct turn for the worse. See <https://www.onestopenglish.com/your-english/phrase-of-the-week-to-go-to-the-dogs/145674.article#:~:text=Criminals%20and%20social%20outcast%20were,distinct%20turn%20for%20the%20worse> (accessed 2023-04-17).
19. Ghosh, Amitav. *Jungle-Nama: A Story of the Sundarban*. London: John Murray. 2021.