Postapartheid Ephemerality in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the Fees Must Fall movements in South Africa, Nelson Mandela's invocation of the "Rainbow Nation" in his 1994 inaugural presidential address was subject to renewed criticism. This essay considers how, from its first utterance, the metaphor was never allowed to communicate its most significant affordance: the recognition that processes of transition are frequently buoyed up by ephemeral moments, whose use may be their very transience. By returning to the ephemeral in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, it shows how Van Niekerk's text asks how we allow things to pass away. Signaling this postapartheid ephemerality through the breath, Van Niekerk opens up a discussion about ephemerality in the foundational text of the postapartheid period that has been largely overlooked, but has, perhaps, never been more important than in South Africa's present.

OVER THE RAINBOW

In the aftermath of South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, it became a rhetorical commonplace to suggest that the politically engaged writing of the 1970s and 1980s needed to give way to more pressing social concerns.[1] Postapartheid literature, at its best, assumed the responsibility of inventing new forms of imagined communities and, at its worst, risked obsolescence of means or purpose. If more recent developments in South Africa's literary landscape have insisted on the persistence of apartheid schemata, the literature of the early postapartheid moment is marked by an etiolated hopefulness that matters might be different, together with an uneasiness about the continued relevance or significance of apartheid literary tropes. This was perhaps nowhere so evident as the 1994 inaugural address of Nelson Mandela, when the new president articulated his vision for national unity by putting into dialogue images of rainbows and trees. Early

in the speech, he would positively assert connections to the soil: "Each of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld" (Mandela, "Inaugural Address"). Later, this indirect connection, via the soil, would be reframed as "a new covenant [for] all South Africans … a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world" (Mandela, "Inaugural Address").

If "the Rainbow Nation" was an identification of post-1994 South Africa, coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to imagine a unity for the country through a visual metaphor of its differences, Mandela's mixing of metaphors demonstrates a notable disunity, jarring the biotic rootedness of trees against the ephemeral rainbow, a shadow cast of air, water, and light. For Mandela, the ephemeral "rainbow" togetherness followed each individual's attachment to the soil, which should be treelike (whether the urban jacaranda or the rural mimosa) and which, in this respect, played into a narrative of arboreal essentialism, favored by the so-called architect of apartheid himself, Hendrik Verwoerd. In exploiting the tree metaphor, Mandela was, knowingly or not, echoing Verwoerd's opening address to the Transkei Territorial Authority, *Separate Development: The Positive Side*, given on May 7, 1957: "Separate development," claimed Verwoerd, "is a tree, a fruit tree which this Government gave the Bantu of South Africa. It planted the tree, but that tree must be tended in order to grow. If it is looked after well, it will grow and bear fruit" (qtd. in Sides).[2] Even in its foundational utterance, then, the Rainbow Nation metaphor included its antithesis: a resolute disavowal of the ephemeral and an insistence on a concrete attachment to the soil that traced its roots back to apartheid political discourse. In this paper, I want to return to the weak messianism of this moment, and, in particular, its concern with the ephemeral, by considering another text that addresses the ephemeral with greater care: Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994).[3] Where the rainbow offered Mandela and Tutu the means to frame the ephemeral new nation as unified in their difference, *Triomf* would take the similarly ephemeral matter of breath as the means for articulating a more ambivalent political metamorphosis. By addressing this persistent concern with breathing conditions in *Triomf*, I consider how the early postapartheid offered an illusory respite from past politics of dwelling, through a poetic rethinking of the ephemeral.

The ephemerality of the post-1994 "moment" might best be parsed by any one of the events that signaled its conclusion: Thabo Mbeki's denial of the connection between HIV and AIDS during his speech at the International AIDS conference in Durban in 2000, the increased skepticism about the material fulfillment of promises made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission signaled by the Khulumani Support Group's 2004 "Say Yes to Redress" Campaign, the massacre of platinum miners at Marikana in 2012, or the actions of the Fees Must Fall movements from 2015. Although the first effectively announced the end of the Early Post-Apartheid moment, the last definitively rejected the ephemeral possibilities offered by the Rainbow Nation. On the 9th of March 2015, Chumani Maxwele threw a bucket of shit on a statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. The resulting series of protests, under the banner "Rhodes Must Fall," extended criticisms of the continued presence of the statue on campus to address attendant issues of general inequality: the outsourcing of workers at the university, the economic insecurity

of Black students reliant on government loans, and an uncomfortable perpetuation of white privilege. Allied movements began at other universities across the country. If the protests at the formerly white universities like UCT, Stellenbosch, and the University of Witwatersrand garnered the most attention, they were not exclusively located there. As the movements developed, so too did the reactionary violence directed against them. Police and private security guards were deployed on campuses to quell student protestors. There was overt racial profiling in these securitization measures, especially obvious when using "white shields": white students interposed between black students and police. This striking difference in treatment was often captured and used by the movements to demonstrate their point: that the 1994 transition from apartheid had been a pseudo-transition and that the hegemony of whiteness still largely determines the lived experience of Black South Africans. The rise and fall of this student confederacy forms a complex question in its own right.[4] For my purpose in this essay, I am more concerned with one of its casualties. For, in the midst of the protest, the students identified as one of the chief causes of the current problems, amid a host of terms translated more or less problematically from the US academe, a homegrown concern, rainbowism.

"Rainbowism" emerged in the student discourse as a pejorative term for self-satisfied endorsements of Tutu-Mandela's biotic-optic mixed metaphoric. But if the student movement popularized it, "rainbowism" was in use in South Africa almost as long as the rainbow metaphor itself. In 1996, Phillip Dexter, in a position piece for the *African Communist*, "Marxism and the National Question in a Democratic South Africa," warned against the "signs of confusion" in understandings of nationalism in the ANC and the South African Communist Party. If such nationalism had been "previously located in a broader understanding of global and regional forces, the perceived global movement from capitalism to socialism, and the development of capitalism and the colonial encounter in South Africa," increasingly, he worried that "a murky, colonised, unclassed, ungendered, 'rainbowism' rules." In a similar manner, Jeremy Cronin, long-time member of the SACP, attacked "rainbowism" in his 1999 critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report, where he decries "the tendency towards a sleight-of-hand rainbowism" and the betrayal risked by "a smug rainbowism" (20). Pumla Dineo Gqola, in 2001, developed "rainbowism" into a more critically reflexive and rigorous term to demarcate "the denial of difference" through the "intertwined and competing processes" of making the label "synonymous with 'South Africa'" and the use of that collectivity to "stifle rigorous discussions of power differentials" (98). By 2005, a Discussion Paper worries that "if the symbolic is not buttressed by material transformation of our society, then it is liable to degenerate into superficiality, or a shallow rainbowism." In 2013, Cronin would again decry rainbowism in a comment on the Nation Development Plan: "The NDP chooses to begin with a demobilising, happy-ever-after in which antagonism and contradiction are reduced merely to plurality, to rainbowism." The SACP Central Committee, in November 2016, would warn against "abandon[ing] a radical and progressive nationalism in the name of espousing an empty 'multi-racial' rainbowism" (25).

The repetition risks eliding a difference, illustrated by the term's epithets. By 2005, and into the present, "rainbowism" had already achieved the epithets "shallow," "mere," "empty." In 1999, it was "smug" and "sleight-of-hand." But in 1996, it "ruled," in a particularly problematic way: "murky, colonised, unclassed,

ungendered." In each thought piece, the question of "rainbowism" emerges in relation to an urgent need to define a Marxist Nationalism that will attend to complex relations of base economic inequality enforced through a superstructure of distrust and racialized division. But, as disenchantment with the Rainbow metaphor progresses from skeptical critique through scorn to casual dismissal, the interrogation shifts from the complex and weighty intentions behind the metaphor, to the metaphor, insubstantial though it is, itself.

In attending to the discursive inadequacies of the metaphor, the focus slowly but surely slipped away from a critical appreciation of the role the metaphor had been invoked to serve, and, more problematically, became complacent about developing new metaphors that might serve to replace it. In the present, this shift has opened the concession period, extending either side of the 1994 election, to critique, demonstrating the painfully obvious disconnect between what was promised then and what has been delivered up to now. Since the overwhelming evidence in the present is that white South Africans retain significant capital, there is an easy target for presentist examinations of the previous period, up to and including the former President Jacob Zuma using "white monopoly capital" as a catchall scapegoat to deflect attention away from his own alleged malfeasance.

While references to "rainbowism" acted to erode the term, turning critical target into rhetorical scapegoat, they consistently relied on the rainbow's alternative significance: ephemera consisting of water, air, and light. In this respect, they maintained a loose, if unknowing, connection to Mandela's oblique disparagement of the rainbow's ephemerality, when contrasted to his rooted tree metaphors mentioned earlier in the address. In both cases, the ephemeral was treated as if it were, in itself, insignificant. Rainbowism, then, never really realized the possibilities offered by its own ephemeral quality, which in turn begs the question, what such a politics—based on the ephemeral, the contingent, the breathy—might possibly look like? Attending to the ephemeral disrupts the straw man that the rainbow metaphor became, not least by challenging the continued reliance on rootedness, captured by Mandela's arboreal imagery. However it was intended, I want to consider how thinking about the 1994 moment as self-consciously ephemeral might reframe our tendency to imagine it as success or failure.

Reconsidering the ephemeral as a formal category might, I believe, offer a way to group together recent literary criticism that has relied on the specter of 1994, either literally or metaphorically, to contain the pessimism of its failed promise. This work has come, explicitly or implicitly, as a response to Thabo Tsehloane's acute diagnosis, already made in 2010, of the "hope fatigue" that arose in response to the postapartheid's attempt at "imagining a new society": "The post-apartheid state thus projects itself as the 'end of history' which cannot be transcended. It perceives itself as a perfect society and state beyond which no kind of a different future is possible" (80). Andrew Van der Vlies takes this affective postapartheid temporality to be a form of disappointment. Theorizing disappointment both as an affect—"the frustration of expectation of closure or completeness" (21)—and a missed appointment, Van der Vlies considers how contemporary South African literature chronicles the disappointment of the New South Africa, only to offer an educated hopefulness (after Ernst Bloch), recalling that "hope holds *eo ipso* the condition of defeat precariously within itself" (14). Literature thus envisaged "turns missed appointments and bad feelings into new appointments with the unfolding

experience of alternative lives and possible futures" (21). Such spectral disappointments enact precisely those pessimistic repetitions that Elleke Boehmer, for instance, finds in large swathes of South African fiction post-2000.[5] But its implicit reliance on a logic of haunting, to describe a broader atmosphere of frustration, ties the land question and its poetics to a set of formal tropes that remain reliant on ephemerality for their articulation.

Both Rebecca Duncan and Timothy Wright have tied such hauntings more explicitly to the spectral when responding to postapartheid literature. For Duncan, it is a literal trope of what she calls the South African Gothic. Duncan shows how the South African Gothic has unpicked the metaphysical reliance on land in South African political discourse from apartheid through the early postapartheid and so into the present. Duncan draws this out as a problem for an ontology inflected by non-present specters, what Jacques Derrida, writing in the wake of Chris Hani's murder, would call a "hauntology." The gothic, in this way, provides a form for reconstituting the remains of a forgotten past for the purposes of South Africa's future. *Triomf* in particular is a useful text for Duncan, since the novel's opening scenes, which describe the excavated remains of the demolished Sophiatown, deliver a "gothic iconography in which the resurfacing past—complex and tangled as the dog-history suggests—is given shape: the fragments of rubble that resemble the fragments of graves, the pieces of bone, the howls of the almost-tangible figure of the ghost" (90–91). The gothic offers Van Niekerk, argues Duncan, the appropriate form for writing apartheid memory.

In a more abstracted response to the problem of haunting for South African literature before and after 2012, Wright notes that, while the period from 1994 to 2012 was haunted by the specters of apartheid, "South Africa post-2012 can broadly be said to be haunted by a new ghost: the ghost of 1994 itself" (200). Moreover, "while the ghosts of apartheid appear as revenants to be exorcised, the ghost of 1994 by contrast offers glimpses of a still breathing utopian desire that was missed, or at any rate not fully achieved" (200). Wright reads the writing of post-2012 as grappling with the untimely sense of being exiled from history, offering the possibility of the past while necessarily reconciling it with the realities of the present. But it is Wright's casually dropped metaphor of "a still breathing utopian desire" that anticipates the mode of ephemerality—the breath, or lack thereof—by which the spectral in South African literature might be refigured to address a problem at the heart of the post-1994 South Africa, the problem of dwelling.

To think the problem of dwelling anew, I return to Mandela's evocation of an attachment to the soil as an instance of Martin Heidegger's examination of dwelling, work that can be, and has been, used to consolidate existing scholarship on *Triomf*. Then, I want to pivot to *Triomf*'s hitherto underappreciated interest in ephemerality, which it fosters through an engagement with breathing conditions. Breathing, in *Triomf*, will recall the moment's interest in ephemerality without resorting to the rainbow that, fairly or not, has come to be the sign of economic whitewashing or what Treppie, in *Triomf*, might call the wallpaper. To keep true to the ephemeral, while turning from the rainbow toward the breath, is not, as it might appear, a position at odds with the Fallist movement. Athinangamso Nkopo, in her contribution to *Rhodes Must Fall*, a collection of essays by members of the movement, notes how, when the rainbow dissolves into "the bright coloured teargas" of police brutality, "there is no air. You just can't breathe" (160). By contrast,

"African cosmology … recognises that none may prevail over another on who has more justificatory reasons to breathe; we must all breathe—the living, the dead and the unborn" (164). Finding breath in *Triomf* allows us to imagine a new, more ephemeral form of dwelling, one that reframes the matter of land from ownership to, in Nkopo's words, custodianship.

DWELLING IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

If the New South Africans are to think of themselves as New South Africans, suggested Mandela in his inaugural address, they must build their new identity out of a prior sense of rootedness in the place where they already dwell. Before the covenant, the ephemeral rainbow, Mandela offers, in the tree, an image of dwelling. Likewise, before we can address the ephemeral, we should establish what it means to dwell. Mandela's attention to rootedness bears some resemblance to the notion of dwelling that Heidegger, in "Building Dwelling Thinking," folds together with building. So, in this section, I'll expand on what Heidegger can teach us about what it means to dwell. Then, I'll consider what is left "unthought" in Heidegger's understanding of dwelling and how we might find that remainder in *Triomf*. Finally, I'll consider how this remainder might usefully be brought into conversation with Luce Irigaray's critique of Heidegger, which focuses on his forgetting of air, or, in other words, the ephemeral, in his thinking about dwelling.

Now, reconstituting Mandela's images in Heideggerian terms appears to generate a political contradiction: the popular inclusion of all South Africans, envisioned by Mandela, presents a stark contrast to Heidegger's unrepented allegiance to the Nazi Party. Here, I follow Grant Farred in confronting this paradox directly. In *Martin Heidegger Saved My Life* (2015), Farred describes how, when faced with a racist encounter, he turned "in his moment of greatest philosophical need" not to Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, or Toni Morrison but to Martin Heidegger: "a thinker historically hostile to 'Senegalese negroes' like me" (24). The reason, Farred surmises, is a matter of priority. Although the incident was racist, and these thinkers begin with race, his own response began, like Heidegger, with thinking about thinking: "Race may be my subject, but I come to race through thinking. For Fanon and Morrison, race is 'A.' For me, it is 'B'" (82). For Farred, "a diasporized black South African," the incident, though it occurred in Ithaca, New York, recalled "the everyday political grammar of apartheid" (6, 13). But if his "political education" under apartheid prepared Farred for his encounter, it was Heidegger who helped him frame his response as a form of Thinking.

The consequence is a "joke," "paradoxical, and a little funny": "Heidegger, the anti-Semite who invokes the 'Senegalese negro' as a pedagogical prop, puts me, the black man from southern Africa, in a position to counter a racist question" (83). Like Farred, I want to consider how Heidegger might be used against himself, in his thinking, and his failure to think, about dwelling in South Africa. To dwell requires one to meditate, or think, on how one dwells, a process that is indistinguishable from building as a process or as praxis. Dwelling occurs between building and thinking in the title of Heidegger's famous essay because it is through dwelling that building and thinking emerge. Dwelling does not arise *after* building and *before* thinking. Rather, building arises out of the need to dwell. Building does not presuppose dwelling; indeed, it is only through

building that humans begin to dwell. Here, building must be understood in its widest possible sense: building may take the form of cultivation or construction, growing crops or erecting structures on the earth. Dwelling is being within building, insofar as building is a process of dwelling. But dwelling is only possible in building because dwelling is *thought* through building. Thought allows for being-as-dwelling to build and to dwell, to build as a form of dwelling, to dwell as a form of building. "Building Dwelling Thinking" is a synchronous statement of correspondence: building, dwelling, and thinking are entangled, necessary, insufficient conditions of each other's emergence. Roots, Mandela's speech suggests, rather than rainbows.

"Dwelling," we might recall, was intended to resolve the anxieties of Being, raised in *Being and Time* (1927). The earlier work cleaves to the radical insecurity of *Dasein*: an alienated homelessness that originates, for the early Heidegger, in "anxiety in the face of death" (Young 189). Heideggerian dwelling, Julian Young argues, "is ontological security—precisely what is excluded by *Being and Time*" (189). Young marks the profound change in Heidegger's thought between 1927 and 1951: "dwelling, the feature universally, ontologically, absent from human existence in 1927 has become, by the latter date, definitive of the human 'essence'" (190). Heideggerian Dwelling gathers together four elements in a coherent *oneness*: earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. We dwell on the earth, under the sky, as mortals, before divinities. Places in which we dwell, which are built with due thought to dwelling, will gather the fourfold together in their design. Heidegger's exemplar of this design is a Black Forest farmhouse, which has idiosyncratic features that demonstrate that it was built with thought to its dwelling: there is a shrine, in recognition of the divinities, a roof that includes a regard for the sky, and so forth.

In Jeff Malpas's gloss, "to dwell is to be located in a harmonious relationship with one's surrounding environment" (16). "Dwelling," Malpas continues, "in place grants us an identity and a meaning we would otherwise lack. We find ourselves in place and to dwell is to have found a proper sense of oneself and a *sense of belonging*" (17). In a parallel call for political "oneness," Mandela's evocation of trees and rainbows, earth and sky, suggests at least a twofold unity on which a new form of South African dwelling might emerge. Nevertheless, poetic engagements with South Africa's moment of transition in the literature of early postapartheid implicitly disrupt this unity and, by extension, any recourse to Heidegger's theory of dwelling as the means to reconcile South Africa's history. *Ereignis*, or the unity of the fourfold of mortals, divinities, earth, and sky that Heidegger finds in a Black Forest farmhouse, is impossible in Triomf or, indeed, anywhere in the New South Africa, where, if anything, the unity of mortals, divinities, earth, and sky is riven by conflict and misunderstanding. Or so it seems, when one places undue emphasis on the unity of the fourfold and dwelling comes to be presented as pleasant and benign. However, as Malpas argues, this understanding of dwelling and place in Heidegger is deeply flawed. It turns dwelling and place into "essentially deterministic, exclusionary and nostalgic concept[s]." "The identity of place is thus *determinate*—a fixed identity into which we ourselves are also fixed. Being rooted *in place*, that identity is also taken to be rooted *in the past* and involves an essentially *backward-looking* orientation that prevents a genuine engagement with the future" (17). Dwelling, by contrast, depends on a dynamic, phenomenological

encounter with place that orients itself toward a future. It is precisely this aspect of Heidegger's work that Farred finds so enabling, opening it up to our thinking about the novel.

Insofar as *Triomf* remains a text that, critics like Duncan and Van der Vlies acknowledge, orients its excavation of South Africa's past to a consideration of its possible futures, it might be understood to be engaging with dwelling in the dynamic sense advocated by Heidegger (and Malpas and Farred). To make sense of this dynamic, Van Niekerk addresses the temporality of the Benade's house through a vertical distribution of place, to include the sedimented layers of previous residents. This decision plays into the wider history of the country: Triomf was an apartheid housing estate, built on the demolished remains of Sophiatown. *Triomf*, published the same year as the 1994 election, follows the Benade family, "a burned-out family of hillbilly Afrikaners struggling haphazardly to adapt to the new South Africa," who occupy a low-income house in Triomf ("Triumph") (Nixon). The entire course of the novel will follow their life in this house. Mol, the matriarch, pretends to be married to her brother, Pop, for the sake of her son Lambert, who believes his Pop to be a distant Benade cousin. Lambert, "a monster," is the product of incest, and his true father may be either Pop or Treppie, their brother, who also lives in the house. Under the legal authority of the Native Resettlement Act of 1954, Sophiatown, a mixed-race freehold suburb of Johannesburg, was exempted from its protection as a majority African area, which gave an appointed board undue powers to evict and relocate its African residents to the newly created South Western Township, or "Soweto." Over its bulldozed remains, South Africa's ruling National Party (NP) built Triomf, a whites-only, low-income housing project, as part of its implementation of a policy of Separate Development, which would come to be known generically as apartheid. Projects such as Triomf were designed to separate, spatially, poor white Afrikaaners from Africans and other designated race groups to prevent "dangerous" fraternizations. If apartheid thinkers like Geoffrey Cronje worried that such fraternization might lead to miscegenation, two other concerns were also paramount.[6] The NP had secured victory in 1948 by assuring its white rural Afrikaans electorate of their essential superiority over other ethnic groups. In order to entrench this ideology, there needed to be a rigorous double-movement in policy making. "Poor" whites were to be elevated "above" Africans, materially and ideologically, while Africans were subjected to increased marginality in terms of access to work, basic services, and public spaces. This double-movement was secured, spatially, by disrupting existing urban situations where mixing might take place, providing new urban "solutions" to the poverty of "poor whites" and indicating an economic preferment that communicated itself as an essential superiority. But, like all housing estates, it would suffer from what Heidegger calls the "plight of dwelling" (363).

Project housing does not satisfy the necessary qualities of "Building Dwelling Thinking," since such buildings are not built "to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for" (349). If "to build is already to dwell," "dwelling" must be manifested in the act of building, itself accompanied by the willingness to spare and preserve the land (349). While providing houses may appear to be a solution to the *plight*, it forgets that the plight "does not lie merely in a lack of houses": "the real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*" (363). For Heidegger, the failure of Triomf, as a project,

would emerge, beyond its history of racial exclusion, economic preferment, and failure of love, in its forgetting that the task of building entails learning to dwell, through thinking. Homelessness is not solved by providing a house; rather, a house may actually risk covering over the need to build and to dwell as processes of being.

Referentially, *Triomf* challenges Heidegger's understanding of dwelling, much as Farred does, by attending to concerns that Heidegger leaves "Unthought" (Farred 84). In the novel, these include the ways in which the Benades' neighbors beautify, distinguish, or otherwise mark their homes as places in which they dwell. The novel is filled with building-as-dwelling and dwelling-as-building. Most apparent is in the efforts the neighbours make to distinguish their houses from other buildings on Martha Street. The women who live across the road cultivate flowers. The next-door neighbors construct braai places and swimming pools. Even Lambert Benade insists on replacing the house's post box, after it is knocked off by the family's Volkswagon Kombi, because "a house looks better with a post box in front in any case" (*T* 30). He uses a logic of signs that links the post box to a form of speech: "It says: People live here and they're got an address" (*T* 30). The post box is a statement of both personhood and address: being and dwelling. Here, being is manifested through dwelling. But dwelling is also made possible through the construction of the post box, a form of building, that is also a practical form of thought. Building the post box becomes a response to the plight of dwelling in Triomf, since it is a form of thought-as-action. A space that is not intrinsically poetic, *Triomf* suggests, can still be the subject of poetry. Heideggerian dwelling is altogether present in Triomf, which unsettles Heidegger's assumption that dwelling is impossible in housing estates. Heidegger's critique of housing projects (as the mere provision of houses) collapses, precisely because such places do entail a kind of Heideggerian dwelling. Heideggerian Dwelling gathers together four elements in a coherent *oneness*: earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. We dwell on the earth, under the sky, as mortals, before divinities. In Triomf, there is thinking about the ground (built on the ruins of Sophiatown), the sky (marked by celestial bodies, sputniks, etc.), the mortals (the being toward death of one of the main characters, who is always described as "on his last legs"), and the divinities (manifested in the frequent efforts to edify the poor white protagonists through politics or religion).

In her extensive fieldwork research on "the poor white category" in South Africa, Annika Teppo further demonstrates the possibility of dwelling in housing estates, even if, as part of this research, she decries *Triomf* for relying "on the shameful stereotypes attached to [poor whites]. In *Triomf*, the poor whites are depicted as hell-raisers who live totally outside the moral order of normal society" (60). She acknowledges Van Niekerk may have intended "to symbolically present the brutality of apartheid or the decay of the Afrikaner nation," but ultimately dismisses this as "irrelevant" because "most people I met had primarily accepted the book as an accurate description" (60). The novel's reliance on stereotypes, together with its misapprehension as a realist text, has led to an unfair diagnosis of poor whites as "an incestuous, work-shy, pathetic bunch of degenerates sitting in the midst of incredible filth" (60). Teppo defends "poor whites" against their reductive middle-class representation within the novel because, as her study demonstrates, living in such communities also requires the community to learn to dwell (although neither community nor Teppo uses this term).

Teppo helps us to understand how, in the "plight of dwelling," Heidegger fails to think about dwelling in housing estates. But her failure to read the novel's comic grotesque as anything other than "accepted" realism serves as a counterpoint to Farred's "joke." Whereas Farred, by adopting a critical distance to Heidegger's "polemic," can offer a tempered appreciation of his thinking, Teppo, in taking a satiric novel to be realist, collapses that distance.

Teppo's failure to "get the joke" recapitulates a problem that originates in Heidegger's bifurcated thinking about dwelling as, variously, spatial and poetic. Whereas "Building Dwelling Thinking" marks the act of building as intrinsic to the task of dwelling as a form of thinking, in the essay "Poetically Man Dwells…" Heidegger develops the idea that dwelling happens "poetically": "poetry lets us dwell because it renders the ordinary extraordinary" (Young 197). For Heidegger, housing projects lack such poetry. They deploy a language of utility (*eindeutig*, or unambiguous, language) whereas poetry is always *veildeutig*, or "possessed of a multiplicity or richness of meaning" (Young 197). If the tension between Heidegger's notions of dwelling as spatial and as poetic is not unresolvable, it still marks the category error Teppo makes when she conflates the novel's poetic recreation of the housing project with actual dwelling in such places. Even if concrete dwelling is "built" on logics of "blood," "people," and "race," the spatial, architectural concerns of "Building Dwelling Thinking" do not readily give themselves over to the linguistic evocations of "Poetically man dwells." Teppo resolves this tension by implicitly supporting concrete dwelling, while ruling poetic dwelling "irrelevant." But, while useful for ethnography, this gesture cannot help us come to terms with the novel or the poetics of dwelling.

In her defense of the novel against such realist readings, Nicole Devarenne considers how Van Nierkerk's use of demotic Afrikaans subverts the coincidence of linguistic, cultural, and racial purity that underpinned Afrikaner Nationalism. Incest among the Benades, a crucial aspect of the novel's satiric response to Afrikaner Nationalism's obsession with the purity of the volk or people, has its correlative in the Afrikaans they use: both deconstruct discourses of purity that underpin the rhetoric of apartheid by exposing "purity" as, respectively, "a genetic cul-de-sac" and an intrusion of ideology (particularly nationalist ideology) into the narrative (112). Devarenne invokes Treppie, one of the Benade brothers: "He mocks the Afrikaner nationalist motto that family is the cornerstone of the 'volk'— in Triomf, 'family' is a stand-in for 'incest'—and resists nationalism's endemic absolutism and idealism, what he calls 'wallpaper'" (112). The profusion of spatial metaphors means, however, that the language of *Triomf* is entangled with concrete space. Lambert may be a genetic "cul-de-sac," since he is born of the Benades's incest and only has sex with his mother, but the choice of metaphor also reflects the novel's obsession with street names, grid patterns, and other referents to the Johannesburg cityscape.

Catherine Botha links Devarenne's linguistic work to Heidegger's poetics by suggesting we read *Triomf* as a corrective to Heidegger's understanding of homecoming. Following Heidegger's 1942 lectures on *The Ister*, Botha argues that "true homecoming is characterised by a journey into otherness" (20). Moreover, the novel recapitulates this homecoming through its demotic use of an Afrikaans that is "an encounter with the other in terms of language" (34). Botha raises the problem of Heidegger's Nazism and its parallels with the principles of apartheid. But, by

reading Heidegger's Nazism against itself, Botha suggests we might find in the novel a paradoxical engagement with precisely that otherness that the language of home and dwelling risks ejecting. At the same time as it pays greater attention to van Niekerk's spatial language, Botha's engagement with home and homecoming barely extends to the actual house in which the benighted Benade are attempting to dwell. Understanding the novel as a form of linguistic homecoming threatens to occlude those elements of Heideggerian dwelling that make the novel most provocatively a transitional text: its ephemeral, even breathy, renegotiation of the fourfold as dynamic rather than fixed. We begin to see the strategy behind Botha's decision to think the novel's homecoming in terms of its language and not its buildings. By not addressing the house itself as the subject of dwelling, Botha avoids the vicissitudes of conflating a poetics of dwelling with a concrete referent for dwelling in the world. But this bracketing leaves the tension between Heidegger's two notions of dwelling undisclosed, effectively insulating her reading of the novel from any engagement with its material referents. This reconciliatory reading fails to address the visceral, material experience of dwelling in the novel that provoked Teppo's condemnation.

If Teppo prefers a concrete form of dwelling at the expense of the poetic, Devarenne and Botha present poetic responses that risk forgetting the concrete. Noting a tension between the concrete and the poetic is not a novel insight, but it does remind us of the aporia lurking between the concrete reality of land ownership in South Africa and the poetics that informed Mandela's image of rootedness. It is hardly surprising, then, that Mandela resolves this aporia through his use of the rainbow, which displaces the irresolvable tension between the poetics of dwelling and its concrete realities onto the ephemeral and the airy. If this seems an empty solution, dictated by the needs of political rhetoric, it, like Farred's utterance, offers us the possibility of thinking about what remains "unthought" in Heidegger's dwelling (83), a concern that Luce Irigaray, in her critique of Heidegger, would call "the forgetting of air."

For Heidegger, between earth and sky, air yawns like an "abyss" (170). "To breathe," Iirigaray offers in response, "is also to be. This does not occur to him [Heidegger]. Is it because there is still and always too much air that he has not yet reached the point of conserving it? But what is forgotten is always recalled. Doesn't the unconcealment-concealment of Being suggest the breathing of air?" (62). Unconcealing any aspect of Being, represented by small case being, conceals its other aspects. To remember being is always to forget Being. Likewise, an inhalation forgets its preceding exhalation. Forgetting and recalling, as natural as breathing. And yet, we recall our Dwelling in air, it presents itself to our awareness, only when air's qualities affect our ability to breathe. "Always there, it allows itself to be forgotten. Place of all presence and absence? No presence without air" (9). Air may allow itself to be forgotten in general, but why, Irigaray asks, does Martin Heidegger forget, in his meditations on Being and Dwelling, that both Being and Dwelling take place in air? "Since air never takes place in the mode of an 'entry into presence'—except in wind?—the philosopher can think there is nothing but absence there, for in air he does not come up against a being or a thing" (9). The absence constituted by air is forgotten by the philosopher precisely because it does not allow for a "destruktion" of metaphysics: there is nothing to destruct. "Metaphysics always supposes, in some manner, a solid crust from which to raise

a construction.… Whether philosophers distance themselves from it or whether they modify it, the ground is always there. As long as Heidegger does not leave the 'earth,' he does not leave metaphysics" (2). The task Irigaray sets herself is to remove Heidegger's thought on Dwelling from "that earth on which he so loved to walk" (2). This task finds its stunning corollary in Farred's thinking, not simply in the joke that he makes at Heidegger's expense, but in the thinking that Heidegger facilitates. After responding to the racist incident, Farred recalls giving thanks to Heidegger. Between "my response and my giving thanks," he writes, "there was barely a breath" (26). If breath lies between his use of Heidegger and his realization that he has used Heidegger, we might ask, in parallel, what breath might offer a concomitant project of South African *Bildung*, to help it leave the land?

BREATHING IN *TRIOMF*

Irigaray based her criticism of Heidegger on his failure to imagine the aporias that exist between the sites of dwelling. These abysses, the air if you will, allow living to be thought of as a process, rather than a reconciliation within the fourfold. This is not so divorced from the novel as it might first appear. *Triomf*, Duncan argues, is full of such gothic cavities. After all, according to Treppie, Johannesburg is "hollow on the inside. Not just one big hollow like a shell, but lots of dead mines with empty passageways and old tunnels … that's why it's become so expensive to get buried in Jo'burg. There just isn't enough solid ground left for graves" (*T* 214). As Duncan notes, Johannesburg's hollowness would become a trope of postapartheid literature, exemplified in Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010) and SL Grey's *Downside* trilogy (2010–13). But in 1994, it offered a corrective to the ideological wallpaper of both the Old and New South Africas, epitomized by Mandela's inaugural. Such abysses interfere with the dwelling of both the living and the dead, as Mol illustrates in her anxiety about sinkholes and burial. When her dog, Gerty, dies, Mol wants to cremate her. Pop worries that this will lead to them signing "all kinds of papers" and proposes they bury Gerty in the backyard. Mol responds:

> The earth is hollow.
> Come again? Says Pop.
> Just now she falls through. Down. Through a sinkhole.
> Lambert catches on quickly. That story was just a lie, Ma. It's all right I promise. The earth is still very hard here in Triomf. Packed hard.… She won't fall through. (224)

The story Lambert refers to is the Carletonville Sinkhole disaster of 1964, in which the Oosthuizen family and their domestic servant disappeared along with their house down a sinkhole in Carletonville, Johannesburg. The cause is generally attributed to the extensive underground mining in the area, which has made the ground in Carletonville and surrounding areas (like Triomf) unstable. Johannesburg's ground lends itself to an anxiety about dwelling precisely because it rests on air. Nevertheless, this emptiness needs to be qualified, if it is to be understood as something other than mere nihilism.

Jeanne-Marie Jackson finds in this hollowness the material correspondent to Mol's grief at losing Gerty. But, because this relationship, in its rich

particularity, is not easily reconstructed in allegorical or narrative convention, Gerty's death was either ignored or understood symbolically by most contemporary criticism. For Jackson, however, "Gerty's death is similarly introduced as a negation rather than an apotheosis of meaning" (125). "Nor, ultimately, is Gerty's drawn-out demise transformative for Mol or for the novel in which she appears … in defiance, in fact, of the very conventions of novelistic climax and catharsis—this most vibrant relationship is stamped out by the book's halfway point" (124). Mol goes on to register a difference in Gerty's dreaming, toward the end, as "dreaming white" (*T* 215), which, Jackson notes, she connects to Pop's nightmare of whiteness: "he's surrounded by white … he can't see anything but white. It makes him feel suffocated.… It's just white, he says. White nothing" (*T* 215). Jackson recognizes "the allegorical import of these nightmares [as] the literal and figurative vacancy of white supremacy's purely oppositional self-definition" and this as the moment when Gerty is "enfolded into the novel's social signification," noting, moreover, "this imagery indicates both the absence of allegory … from experientially derived meaning, and the association of allegory … with the loss of such meaning" (125). While Jackson seems here to invite a nihilism to her reading of the relationship, in fact, it invests the dogs in *Triomf* with greater immediacy, since their significance must operate "outside of not only the Afrikaner allegory that *Triomf* enacts but outside of its narrative development" (125). Jackson's powerful reading of the dog as resisting allegorical or narrative sublation is, as is evident, suffused with breath and space imagery, albeit an imagery she does not acknowledge. Nevertheless, her account of the novel makes it clear that breath is the basis for immanent, empathetic relations, it is what is "suffocated" by the overwhelming whiteness, and, in its absence, it is what brings the hollowness under Jo'burg rushing back to Mol's awareness. It parallels, then, Irigaray's reminder that air is not empty or hollow, rather carrying the promise of what Ashon Crawley calls "the otherwise possibility" offered by breath (2). Indeed, Gerty's breath becomes the vehicle for thinking both about hollowness and its alternatives.

Listening to Gerty's breath, according to Mol, "sounds like it's more than just a dog's breath. It feels like the room itself is breathing, like a big in-breath that sucks all the air from the corners and the cupboards and from behind the dressing table, holding it all in" (*T* 162). Gerty's breath comes to represent something "more than just a dog's breath"; the room itself seems to be breathing. Dwelling, as a process, is here figured as akin to the process of breathing, even if this breathing is, in the moment of transition, stunted and disfigured, a last gasp rather than a pausing sigh. To dwell is then less to build and to think than to breathe and "to feel it." Mol experiences this empathetic feeling not just by attending to Pop's breathing, but also to Gerty's coughing: "when Gerty coughs, it feels like she's the one who's actually coughing" (*T* 177). Jackson glosses this moment, when Mol feels Gerty's coughing as her own, as "the discovery of her body [that] also recalls and now rectifies the disconnect van Niekerk establishes early on between being *like* a dog and simply being *a* dog whose meaning is manifest only relationally and immersively" (128). This relational, immersive meaning may be found in the parallels between Gerty and Pop Benade, who also suffers some advanced respiratory condition, noted by Mol: "She has to listen for a long time, above the noise of Gerty's breath … , before she can hear Pop's breathing. It's very shallow. She feels

it more than she hears it" (*T* 164). While Pop's "whistling" breaths are shallow and difficult to hear, they can still be felt, much like Gerty's coughs.

This parallel is more productively understood as an inversion than as a congruity. While Mol might feel Gerty's coughs through her body, in an experience of empathetic unity, this "feeling" is because the dog's coughs drown everything else out, not because, in the case of Pop's breath, "feeling" is the only sense that can still register it. Feeling, then, operates when things are either too loud or too soft to hear. Feeling apprehends breathing, finding in it the relationality that Heidegger identified in his more grounded logic of dwelling. The eighty-five references to breath dotted throughout the novel tend to mark moments of transition, or states of intoxication, which suggests that such relational dwelling is also processual, punctuating moments of transitional time rather than existing as substantive, durational states. When Lambert and Treppie howl at the moon, for instance, they pause to "take a deep breath" (*T* 21), the Jehovah's Witness will "breathe between sentences" (*T* 36), "Gerty's breath comes and goes heavily in between the bites of sandwich" (*T* 76), Mol "[draws] in more breath for the next sentence" (*T* 130), Pop will spend much of the novel struggling to breathe (*T* 164, 165, 259, 273), while Treppie's breath carries the telltale traces of Klipdrift, a cheap brandy (*T* 171, 322, 341). Treppie, sermonizing about the transitory nature of life, summarizes its path: "Breathe in, breathe out, eat shit, eat, shit, poof, gone! No one asked for it!" (*T* 419). Even Gerty's breath, which expanded its significance beyond the bounds of her body to include the whole room, is important only insofar as it punctuates the narrative to communicate otherwise invisible ebbs and flows of transitional time.

One need not read a five hundred–page novel to know that breath signals transition, even if its presence in such a novel allows for a useful reimagining of transitional metaphors as necessarily ephemeral. Moreover, this emphasis on feeling and organic process suggests that the resolution to South Africa's existential crisis might be reconciled by paying more heed to what Leon de Kock refers to as "a widely perceived sickness in the body politic, where the plot, metaphorically speaking, is thought to have been lost" (9). Refinding the plot, as Wright does, in forms of "post-revolutionary allegory in which the memory of an anticipated future is continually brought back to the fore" (208), in the gothic form (Duncan), in repetitive poetics (Boehmer), or in disappointed temporalities (Van der Vlies), all offer more substantive responses to the problem of transition than the breath. What if, however, the diagnosis has misread the symptom? It is a standard trope of national illness narratives, argues Julie Robert of the "sick lit" turn in post-1940s Quebecois fiction, to offer "national diagnoses based on narrative symptoms" (8). But, she notes, taking the patient to be the representative of the body politic is reductive, in its understanding of illness, narrative, and national identity. Instead, Robert hypothesizes that "illness narratives are a response to change, particularly the kinds of change that occasion collective anxieties about the social, political, and cultural status of the nation" (14). If this is the case, we might follow Robert's example in attending to how the breath is conceived in *Triomf*, less to identify it with transition as such than to appreciate its specific dynamics.

When Mol listens to Pop's shallow breathing,

> She feels it on her forehead. It's faint. Lukewarm. Lambert says a person's lungs work like a fridge's evaporator, cooling down your blood so you can live longer.

> That's why the out-breaths are warm. It's the warmth of your blood coming out.
> Blood must never be too warm. (*T* 164)

Mol restates the faintness of Pop's breath, its sound, as a property of heat ("luke-warm"). This permits a narrative transition to Lambert's simile, which, echoing Aristotle's treatise, *On Breath*, explains breath through its refrigerative function. Breath is meant to extract the heat from the blood, or in Aristotle's words, "that everything needs cooling is almost obvious from the fact that the blood retains the heat in the veins as though sheltering it" (505). But, in Pop's case, his lukewarm breath shows him to have too little heat, as Aristotle goes on to state: "So too when it flows out, the animal loses its heat and dies, because the liver has no air duct" (505). Pop's breath, already described through its affinity to the nonhuman animal (Gerty), is further alienated from the human by its presentation as mechanical process: "the fridge's evaporator."

Van Niekerk has already described fridge evaporators in the novel's epigraph, which is taken from a trade manual for refrigeration service:

> Removing the heat from inside a refrigerator is somewhat like removing water
> from a leaking canoe. A sponge may be used to soak up the water. The sponge
> is held over the side, squeezed, and the water is released overboard. The opera-
> tion may be repeated as often as necessary to transfer the water from the canoe
> into the lake. (*T* epigraph)

The narrative returns to this manual several times, most notably when Treppie tests Lambert on his understanding of fridge repair. The novel's iteration of the fridge as an object serves to reinforce its function as a comparator, first as the target of the metaphor of the leaking canoe and then as the vehicle for a further metaphor, likening Pop's breath to just such a process of "cooling down your blood so you can live longer" (*T* 164). This chain metaphor has a double effect. First, there is something mechanical about breathing in *Triomf*, that detaches the process from either the animal or the vegetal. Second, it becomes a process for removing heat that, as the absurd metaphor of the sponge attests, "may be repeated as often as necessary." By prefacing *Triomf* with this phrase, van Niekerk figures her novel as participating, in some sense, in just such a process of "water transfer" by attempt-ing to extract from the postapartheid present, the "heat" of apartheid. This process is necessarily absurd, naive, even hopeless, since the canoe, in the original meta-phor, is "leaking." As fast as the sponge may soak up and squeeze out the water, the overwhelming likelihood is that the canoe will be swamped. Breathing might soak up the heat, even as the rainbow metaphor was meant to soak up apartheid's discontents, but, if Pop's own respiratory apparatus is anything to go by, both processes are likely to die from a "lack of breath," to use Lambert's euphemistic explanation of Pop's cause of death (*T* 523).

Insofar as the novel likens breath to a fridge's evaporator that, in turn, sym-bolizes the Sisyphean task of using a sponge to bail water from a leaky canoe, it turns breath away from its apparent vitalist organicism to a mechanized process of interminable extraction. However successful the sponge, however efficient the evaporator, however fit the breather, the chain implies that the process will ter-minate only in saturation, malfunction, or death. Any successes are ephemeral,

bound to be swamped, overheated, or suffocated at any moment. However absurd the struggle is, however, the message of *Triomf* is not that it is meaningless or useless. Rather, such processes are better understood as "means without ends," to adopt a phrase from Giorgio Agamben. Here, we might find the use value of the rainbow, so long denigrated, in its function as sponge, evaporator, or breath; less as received image than as a device that might for a brief moment keep the waters at bay.

Writing of both *Triomf* and Van Niekerk's second novel, *Agaat*, Van der Vlies invokes J. M. Coetzee's musings on the Great South African novel, whose emergence might, Coetzee suggests, be linked to an intimacy with the soil:

> The prospects for "a great, authentic South African novel" were slim, J.M. Coetzee declared in an essay in 1983. While it stood "a better chance of coming into being in Afrikaans than in English" (Afrikaans had a closer relation to the land, Coetzee reasoned, although it stood in "a peculiarly compromised relation to the soil … of South Africa"), such a novel would have to effect "a clean break" with tradition, since Afrikaans literature remained "haunted, even into our day, by the idea of the plaas (farm)." (76)

If van der Vlies notes that *Agaat*, in particular, breaks with the land-based traditions, he nevertheless acknowledges, with Coetzee, the tradition of "soil relation" from which it must depart. That land remains the most pressing issue is an understandable and necessary material concern for ongoing efforts toward redistributive justice in the country. This explains why commentators, including literary critics, have tended toward analyses grounded by land questions. This preoccupation with the land, however, implicitly relies on Heidegger's fundamental presupposition: that building, dwelling, thinking is best thought, best rooted in the ground. And yet, as this essay has shown, literary works of the postapartheid period show a surprising emphasis on emptiness, on hollowness, and on abyss. By framing the "Great South African novel" as a break with a tradition still haunted by the farm, Coetzee (and Van der Vlies) seem to suggest an alternative to grounded poetics. However, as the concern with hollowness suggests, such an ideal remains haunted by the tradition itself, simply displacing the solidity of the farm with an evacuated space that it once occupied. We might observe a parallel problem in the denigration of rainbowism, which, in taking apart an inadequate, even absurd metaphor, appears to offer a reality check to postapartheid window-dressing. This disenchantment of the ordinary, however, continues to reify an image that might have been better understood as marking the ephemeral nature of unity moments, rather than claiming unity in itself.

CODA

By way of coda I would like to jump to 2019, when the South African rugby team won the World Cup. Coming twelve years after the win in 2007 and twenty-four years after the win in 1995, there was every risk that this victory would simply reiterate the artificial claims to national unity that characterized South Africa's previous wins: first made triumphantly by Nelson Mandela and Francois Pienaar, then farcically by a beleaguered Thabo Mbeki seeking to offset his loss of national

standing by sharing in John Smit's still all-too-white team's glory. Indeed, it was well-placed to do so and more meaningfully with Siyamthanda Kolisi, the first Black captain of the Springboks, from Zwide township, near Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. But both Kolisi and the team's coach, Rassie Erasmus, were clear in setting the limits to this success. In Erasmus's words,

> In South Africa [pressure] is not having a job, [or] having a close relative who is murdered.… Rugby should not create pressure, it should create hope. We have a privilege, not a burden … and no matter what political or religious difference for those 80 minutes, you agree when you usually disagree. That is our privilege, and that was the way we tackled it. ("Erasmus")

By delimiting the importance of the game to the eighty minutes when it is played, and setting its pressures against the ongoing realities of the majority of South Africans, Erasmus invoked a logic of ephemerality that, while appreciative of the transformational effect the game might have, did not imagine this effect needed to be permanent to have some limited value. Such rearticulations of the ephemeral perhaps offer what the rainbow might have, had the ambitions of its creators not been too great, an ephemeral moment in which to pause and breathe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Durrant; and Bethlehem.
2. Kirk B. Sides has shown how this insistence on what Édouard Glissant calls "root identity" was already a feature of apartheid discourse, citing Hendrik Verwoerd's use of the tree in *Separate Development*.
3. Hereafter *T*.
4. See for instance, Desai's *Everything Must Fall*.
5. See, in particular, chapter 5 in Boehmer.
6. For a critical account of Geoffrey Cronje's work, see chapter 9 of Coetzee.

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