

# **The Complexity of Identity: the Afrikaner in a changing South Africa**

**Wilmien Wicomb**

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**Supervisor: Prof. Paul Cilliers**

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## Summary

This thesis sets out to model the notion of group identity in terms of the theory of complexity. It is an attempt to speak meaningfully about a concept that needs to have a sense of stability in order to constitute an 'identity', but at the same time has to be able to change in order to adapt to changing circumstances – and indeed does change. This tension between stability and change is seen as a manifestation of the philosophical endeavour of 'thinking the difference' which, in this context, is understood to mean that if we are committed to thinking the difference (and thereby undermining the philosophy of the same) for ethical reasons, we have to speak of group identity itself in terms that preserve difference. That entails keeping the tensions inherent to the notion intact, rather than choosing to emphasise one end of the tension, thereby reducing the other. As such, identity is understood as being relational. While modelling group identity as a complex system two important tensions are identified: that of the inside-outside divide that is a function of the boundary-formation of the system and the traditional tension between agency and structure in the formation of identity. The emphasis on difference as constitutive of identity places the argument within poststructuralism as a school of thought. More specifically, the links that have been established between complexity theory and the work of Jacques Derrida is explored to unpack the implications these links would have for group identity. This application is done within the framework of time: first the issues of the past and the memory of the group are investigated to explore whether identity as a complex system can cope with its own tensions. The work of Derrida is employed to show how the memory of a complex system can be understood as the *inheritance* of the system. This is an ethical understanding which entails responsibility. Understanding the past in this way, it is argued, allows the future to be thought. This is the case, it is argued, because the future must be understood as a Derridean 'new beginning' which entails engaging with and deconstructing the past. Finally, this notion of the future as a new beginning is unpacked. It is defined as the group's singular opportunity to allow for 'real' change, change that is only possible if the system is disrupted by its outside. It is argued that the complex system as a very particular open system can accommodate the possibility of the 'new beginning'. This understanding of the system and its outside is brought in relation to Derrida's understanding of the economy of the system and the future as a 'new kind of writing'. The implications of this theory for the notion of autonomy are briefly addressed. In order to test the theory, the argument is applied throughout to the example of the Afrikaner as a group identity. In conclusion, suggestions are made as to how the Afrikaner could understand itself and its memories in order for the group identity to survive meaningfully and – more importantly – ethically.

## Opsomming

In hierdie tesis word daar gepoog om die konsep van groepsidentiteit te verstaan in terme van kompleksiteitsteorie. Dit is 'n poging om betekenisvol om te gaan met 'n konsep wat stabiliteit vereis ten einde as 'n 'identiteit' te kwalifiseer, maar terselfdetyd die vermoë moet hê om te verander ten einde aan te pas by 'n omgewing wat self deurgaans verander. Hierdie spanning tussen stabiliteit en verandering word gesien as 'n manifestasie van die filosofiese soeke na 'n wyse om verskil betekenisvol te dink. Binne die konteks van hierdie argument beteken dit dat as ons ten doel het om verskil betekenisvol te konseptualiseer om etiese redes (en in die proses die filosofie van identiteit te ondermyn), sou ons ook oor groepsidentiteit moes praat op 'n wyse wat verskil toelaat. Dit beteken om die spanninge inherent aan die begrip in stand te hou, eerder as om een uiterste te beklemtoon ten koste van 'n ander. Identiteit word dus verstaan as 'n relasionele begrip. Die konseptualisering van groepsidentiteit as 'n komplekse sisteem bring twee spanninge onder die loep: die onderskeid tussen wat binne en buite die sisteem lê, sowel as die tradisionele spanning tussen agentskap en struktuur wat betref die ontwikkeling van identiteit. Die klem op verskil as konstituerend van identiteit plaas die argument binne die skool van die post-strukturalisme. Daar is reeds 'n verband gelê tussen kompleksiteitsteorie en die werk van Jacques Derrida. Hierdie verband word ondersoek ten einde die implikasies vir groepsidentiteit te verstaan. Die toepassing vind plaas binne die raamwerk van tyd: 'n verstaan van die verlede en die herrinerings van 'n groep word ondersoek om te bepaal of groepsidentiteit as 'n komplekse sisteem die spanninge inherent aan die sisteem kan hanteer. Met behulp van die werk van Derrida word aangetoon dat die herrinerings van 'n komplekse sisteem verstaan kan word as die erfenis van die sisteem. Dit is 'n etiese verstaan wat verantwoordelikheid meebring. Daar word geargumenteer dat, deur die verlede op hierdie manier te dink, word 'n verstaan van die toekoms moontlik gemaak. Dit is die geval juis omdat die toekoms verstaan moet word as 'n Derridaanse 'nuwe begin' wat 'n dekonstruksie van die verlede inhoud. Ten slotte word die toekoms as 'n 'nuwe begin' ondersoek. Daar word geargumenteer dat so 'n verstaan moontlik die groep se enigste geleentheid is om 'ware' verandering te akkommodeer. Verandering is slegs moontlik as die sisteem onderbreek word deur dit wat buite die sisteem lê. Daar word voorts geargumenteer dat 'n komplekse sisteem as 'n besondere voorbeeld van 'n oop sisteem die moontlikheid van 'n 'nuwe begin' kan akkommodeer. Hierdie verstaan van die sisteem word in verband gebring met Derrida se konsep van die ekonomie van die sisteem en die toekoms as 'n 'nuwe manier van skryf'. Die implikasies van hierdie teorie vir outonomie word kortliks aangespreek. Ten einde die teorie te toets word die argument deurgaans toegepas op die voorbeeld van die Afrikaner as 'n groepsidentiteit. Daar word gepoog om 'n voorstel te maak oor hoe die Afrikaner sigself en sy herrinerings kan verstaan ten einde vir die groep se identiteit om betekenisvol voort te leef en – selfs belangriker – om dit op 'n etiese wyse te doen.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division.*

— Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*

### 1.1 Introduction

In this thesis the question of identity and difference is discussed in the very specific context of a changing society such as that of South Africa. I will attempt to find a way of speaking meaningfully about group identity in the face of all the contradictions and practical problems inherent in this notion. In order for the notion of identity to be theoretically useful, it must be treated as a universal concept, but one that is able to accommodate contextual and singular difficulties. Co-existence with other groups, the possibility of change and the extraordinary importance of memory and the past are all characteristics associated with group identity without these characteristics necessarily being consistent with how the theoretical concept is ordinarily understood.

The problem itself is broad, however, and the vast amount of literature on the subject has done much to turn identity into something of a buzzword in recent times. This trend has extended across both philosophy and the social sciences (Meyer and Geschiere 1999:7-8), which has resulted in the term 'identity' becoming a very loaded concept indeed. In the light of these developments, a number of choices had to be made in order to make the subject a manageable one for this thesis.

In the first place, the notion of identity is used here to refer to the identity of a group rather than personal identity. This is no absolute distinction. Much of the theory of personal identity will inform the argument, while the implications of group identity theory will have obvious bearing on the members of the group.<sup>1</sup> This decision is based on a number of reasons. For one, group identity is such a controversial concept that a new venture into

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<sup>1</sup> Social scientist Ralp D. Stacy argues that "identity emerges in the human communicative interaction and power relating so far described and it does so simultaneously in individual and collective forms as 'I' and 'we' identities. The two are inextricably linked and for humans one is not possible without the other" (2003:328).

this field seems far from redundant. Despite the relevance of the subject to many of the most burning contemporary issues including large scale migration (whether for economic or political reasons), multiculturalism and even terrorism, an adequate definition of the term remains elusive (Davies 2004:4, Kompridis 2005:320). Such an unstable concept may be theoretically dangerous, but it does provide fertile ground for the renegotiation of its meaning and use<sup>2</sup> which in turn gives us the opportunity to approach the problem from a new angle.

Another reason is the fact that the argument is situated within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The discussion at hand is intended to be a relevant addition to the debate surrounding identity and difference in this country. The South African situation had to be considered, therefore. Identity is indeed a widely discussed issue locally, as different groups are struggling to find their place and their meaning in a new dispensation, while the co-existence with other often very different identities is proving to be a challenge. The South African society we know today was formed on the basis of the separation of “population groups”. The official end of group segregation did not mean the end of a strong sense of group identity, however. The political landscape of South Africa is evidence enough that group identity – and specifically racial and cultural identity – still inform people’s opinions and decisions. If we are to understand personal identity in a changing South Africa, understanding the mechanics of group identity is vital. This is the space within which individuals must learn to find their new role, even if that role will be that of a ‘dissident’ or an ‘outsider’.

Even though the thesis will focus on the example of the Afrikaner group, the important position that group identity has claimed on the international stage has been a third motivation. The problem of fundamentalism and the recent cultural tensions in Europe illustrate the importance that a proper understanding of group identity has for the international debate.

It is not the intention of this thesis to be a political apology for group identity. Rather, it is accepted that individuals form groups around some common denominator, whether we like it or not. The point is rather to find a meaningful way to manage this very human need.

Another choice was made to limit the application of the argument to one specific group, the Afrikaner. It is a risky choice, as the prevalent discussions surrounding this

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<sup>2</sup> See Degenaar (1993).

group are highly politicised and contentious. In fact, it is hard to include the group in a theoretical argument without unwittingly adding oneself to either side of the political divide. Despite this risk, the example of the Afrikaner is of particular interest because of the history and future challenges of this group, as well as its position within a multicultural society, that it was decided to indeed use it in order to apply the argument.

## **1.2 Understanding group identity**

Identity, according to the South African Oxford Dictionary, is “a close similarity or feeling of understanding”. This definition resonates strongly with our intuitive understanding of group identity. As such, it has many manifestations. Groups can form around, amongst other things, a common ancestry, culture, language or even common territory: elements, in other words, which create the basis for such a ‘feeling of understanding’. The difference between these various group identities is of little consequence in this context<sup>3</sup>. As an illustration the Afrikaner-group is quite appropriate. When they first showed signs of forming a group identity at the end of the eighteenth century, this identity was based largely on a common past and common enemy (Dreijmanis 1990:135). The identity quickly developed into a well-defined form of nationalism. But at the beginning of the twenty first century, historian Herman Giliomee (2004:630) observes that, as a group, the Afrikaner is no longer an organised ethnicity, but rather a language community. The basis for the group’s identification has changed more than once, but the theory surrounding group identity applies throughout.

This dictionary definition is not consistent with a philosophical definition of identity, however. The term identity in the philosophical tradition has generally described that which is the same: not similar, but *identical*. This is articulated in logic as the Law of Identity,  $x = x$ . Slootweg (2000:1) writes that we used to ascribe identity to something or someone that we perceive to be *simultaneous* to itself and *stays* that way regardless of changes in time and space.

Such a definition has become very problematic recently, on both an empirical and a conceptual level. Empirically, it has perhaps never been more difficult to define a specific

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<sup>3</sup> It can be significant in other contexts. Some group identities are to a certain extent regarded as a matter of choice, such as that of a music lover. Others, such as the membership to a racial group, cannot be chosen – although the level of commitment to this compulsory membership is most often a choice. In this context the difference between these identity groups would be significant.

group identity. The borders between groups have become blurred by migration and interaction to the extent that belonging to several groups at the same time, or 'originating' from several different backgrounds at once, has become the 'new kind of normal'. This has not kept people from classifying individuals in terms of group identity. In fact, the more vague a concept group identity becomes, the more its importance seems to escalate<sup>4</sup>. And, perhaps, its danger.

This has led some theorists to argue for the neutralisation of group identity.

### **1.2.1 An argument against group identity**

In an article arguing against cultural identity as a fundamental right, Gregor Paul (1998:2) writes that notions of cultural identity (as a form of group identity) are always either fundamentalist, or simply not important enough to defend. Paul (1) substantiates his argument by asking whether it is possible to formulate a clear notion of cultural identity. He attempts to show how clear notions of cultural identity are *always* fundamentalist, and should therefore be disregarded. Cultural identity, he writes, must be characterised as something everyone belonging to that culture, shares – at the same time this element must distinguish them from all other cultures (4). If not, culture becomes irrelevant.

In the light of what was said, it is not difficult to sympathise with Paul's position. It has become quite impossible to define group identities clearly, because it has lost its characteristic homogeneity in most cases. But does it follow that group identity is simply a phenomenon to be dispensed with?

A number of questions can be raised in response to Paul's position. He argues that fundamental rights should only be employed where serious conflicts of morality or norms are immanent. He defends what Van der Merwe (2003:64) would call a "liberal multiculturalism". He is willing to acknowledge forms of cultural diversity, but only to the extent that it has no bearing on issues of "universal, transcultural morality" such as human rights, which basically narrows it down to table manners and greeting habits. Van der Merwe (64-65) argues that this liberalist approach disregards to what extent notions such as natural human rights are not universal, but themselves culture-specific. Furthermore, it

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<sup>4</sup> The widespread popularity of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, in which the author divides the world's population into four categories of group identity based on religion, is a case in point.

“underestimates the human person's embeddedness in, and indebtedness and attachment to cultural forms of life”.

The aim here is not to argue for group identity as a fundamental right. The interest in Paul's argument relates rather to his assertion that group identity must be clearly defined in order to have any relevance. If we accept this, the effect of globalisation on the stability of group identity must lead us to do away with it as a concept. But is this a viable option?

Group identity stands in the eye of the storm that has defined the post-war era. These are fascinating and paradoxical times. On the one hand there is indeed the reality of globalisation and the information age. People know more about the world and each other than ever before. Never before was it as easy to reach one another's borders (if not to cross them). Never before have people had so much exposure to that which is different. Never before has one been so aware of the constructed nature of one's own identity. Never before has tolerance been considered a virtue – at least academically – to the extent that it is today.

And yet, seldom have people been as suspicious of each other. Before the world was a global village, strangers with unrecognisable features were so foreign that it was impossible to fill an impression of them with any content. Today, encountering that stranger often means simply endowing upon her a range of characteristics that supposedly ‘fit her type’. Before, content could not be given to her identity, now it is popularly claimed that superficial knowledge of her group implies knowledge of her identity. Those in power in the leading nations of the world have abused this phenomenon to sow fear and promote solidarity amongst their people. Certainly, forming an impression of the character of the other is not new, but never before has it been as dangerous and hurtful as in a world in the grip of a so-called ‘war on terror’ – a war ignited in the name of religious identity. Never before did it matter as much: encounters with strangers were few and far between. Today, it's a case of walking out the front door.

If Paul regards the concept as irrelevant, while the abuse of group identity by powerful politicians and extremists has made it an extremely dangerous concept<sup>5</sup>, should we not

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5 Amartya Sen (2006:xv) writes: "Indeed, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity. The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns other affiliations, and in a conveniently bellicose form can also overpower any human sympathy or natural kindness that we may normally have. The result can be homespun elemental violence, or globally artful violence and terrorism".

follow Paul in arguing that group identity could really be done away with? Would we not finally be able to agree on universal human rights if only we were not divided into different groups?

I will argue that the answer remains no.

### **1.2.2 The significance of group identity**

An argument in favour of retaining group identity can take a number of roads. It can claim a transcendental truth inherent to group identity, arguing that culture or language has a (metaphysical) significance for humankind that can hardly be explained or challenged. On the other hand, it could be argued that group identity is in some way a useful construct, and should for this reason not be neutralised<sup>6</sup>. Three arguments will be advanced here in defence of retaining the concept of group identity. Sustaining group identity allows for the retention of diversity, and it is therefore both a useful and an ethical concept; further, instead of calling it a transcendental truth, it will be claimed that the empirical reality of the human need to belong to groups makes any effort to ignore or destroy the existence of group identity unrealistic. None of these reasons justify defending group identity as a “fundamental right”, but it does show why group identity should not be discarded when discussing society, identity and difference.

#### 1.2.2.1 Identity and Diversity

Firstly, a multitude of group identities – whether it is conceived as cultural, ethnic, national or even sub-cultural identity – can contribute to a more complex community. If group identities and the meaning they provide were to disappear, there would be no way to ensure that the community does not become more homogenous. Members of the community would have fewer differences between them and it would therefore exhibit less diversity. A complex community provides for richer interaction between the members of the community, precisely as a result of the multitude of differences between them. The richer

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<sup>6</sup> Communitarian philosophy, for instance, sees membership of a community as an extension of the self. Some theorists in this school presume on this basis that the group identity one is 'destined' to belong to (by virtue of race or culture) should be the dominant identity of a person – because it determines patterns of ethics or reasoning, for instance. The lack of personal responsibility which such an approach implies, makes it unacceptable for the purposes of the given argument, however (Sen 2006:33).

the interactions are, the more meaning can be created.<sup>7</sup> Put simply, the more opinions we have on a certain issue, the more material we have from which to formulate an informed position. That would mean that for each problem posed we have a *diverse* number of potential solutions. Having just one, simple answer to every question works well when the questions themselves are simple – or in the unlikely event that the single answer turned out to be the ‘best’ one. But we live in a society where the questions and issues themselves have become so complex, that simple answers are inadequate.

Intuitively, we often try to reduce complex issues to simple questions. This is done by taking an issue apart, dividing it into smaller components and trying to address each as a separate concern. The rationale is that, if we answer every simple question, the very complex issue we started with will also be resolved. Unfortunately, complex problems don't lend themselves to reduction in this way. The problem of terrorism, for instance, has been simplified to a point where it has become the far more manageable problem of religious extremism (limited to one religion), or even simpler, religious extremism in one identifiable country. At one point, the single cause of this global problem was even reduced to a single person. Of course, the issue is a far more complex one. The suggestion may seem politically naïve, but if the complexity of this problem had been acknowledged,, a more successful and certainly more ethical solution may have been chosen<sup>8</sup>.

In this regard, Cilliers (2005:3) argues that complex phenomena can be understood only if they are approached in their complexity. Instead of reducing a phenomenon to its simplest form in order to be able to deal with it using simple tools of analysis, the ‘tools’ themselves should be able to make a large number of distinctions in order for a lot of

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7 This argument is made by Paul Cilliers (2005:3). He bases it on what he calls the law of meaning which provides that difference is a necessary condition for meaning. An identity gains meaning precisely by being different from other identities. (We know what a table is because we understand how it differs from other pieces of furniture.) It follows that the more differences there are the more meaning is created. The implication used here is that more difference provides for richer interaction and in turn more meaning. I return to the philosophical argument in Chapter 2.

8 Amartya Sen (2006:xiii) writes about international efforts to stop violence: “When the prospects of good relations among different human beings are seen (as they increasingly are) primarily in terms of “amity among civilizations”, or “dialogue between religious groups”, or “friendly relations between different communities” (ignoring the great many different ways in which people relate to each other), a serious miniaturization of human beings precedes the devised programs for peace”.

meaning to exist. This is how we approach complex phenomena without reducing their complexity and as a result, their meaning.

Nietzsche already understood this as a counter-intuitive position. He critically observed the human mind as being fearful of chaos, and described its resultant attempts to simplify the world by reducing diversity to identity, an attempt that he associated with the Hegelian dialectic (McGowan 1991:81-83). This is a significant distinction. In my formulation, identity is seen as an *element* of diversity, whereas Nietzsche suggests that the existence of identity necessarily *stifles* diversity. The difference lies in Nietzsche's understanding of identity as something that cannot co-exist with difference (based on his understanding of the Hegelian concept of the Spirit), and which therefore necessarily reduces difference to identity. However, difference only needs to be reduced if it is feared. If the significance of difference is understood, it can be allowed to co-exist with identity in a constructive tension.

This fear of difference that Nietzsche describes is an attitude which Bauman (1992:xiii) finds typical of modernist thinking: "When seen from the watchtowers of the new ambitious powers [enlightened modern rulers], *diversity* looked more like chaos, scepticism like ineptitude, tolerance like subversion. Certainty, orderliness, homogeneity became the orders of the day" (my emphasis).

Encouraging diversity does not simply mean acknowledging the fact that a society comprises different identity groups with distinct identities. Consider the example of cultural production in the post-apartheid era. The metaphor of the "Rainbow Nation", coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which has been widely used to describe diversity in the new South Africa, does little to move beyond the fixed conception of cultural diversity of the past. Gqola (2001:98) describes this discourse of 'rainbowism' as one that "foregrounds racial variety even as it does not constructively deal with the meanings thereof". Diversity is reduced to the distinctions made between the different identity groups. As a result, all differences within groups are reduced to a single identity. The meaning of the identity of a member of such a group amounts to little more than what distinguishes his group from other groups<sup>9</sup>. Using Cilliers's (2005:3) and Sen's (2006) formulations, one could say that the simplistic metaphor of the rainbow which only acknowledges difference as something

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<sup>9</sup> See Distiller, Natasha and Steyn, Melissa (2004) for criticism about the inability of the rainbow metaphor to include other categories of difference, such as gender, which results in the metaphor containing identities – ironically in the same way as they were contained under the apartheid regime.

static which separates groups along hardened lines of impenetrable division, is a resource too limited to deal successfully with the complexity of a diverse society.

The same phenomenon is evident internationally. Sen (2006:xii) describes what he regards as the odd presumption that humans can be “uniquely categorised according to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning” (author's emphasis). Where people were in the past categorised in terms of class and nationality, today we rely on religion and “civilisation” to define human beings. Sen calls this a solitarist approach. The problem, therefore, is not the fact that people are seen as belonging to groups, but that they can only be defined in terms of their membership of a single group. In such a case, difference is reduced to identity.

One may be tempted to ask why it is still important to talk about *group* identity, if the concepts of identity and diversity need to be open to difference in order not to reduce everything to a stifling form of identity (as Nietzsche understood it)? Would it not be far simpler to understand identity as a non-reductive concept if we restricted it to *personal* identity? In other words, why do we need group identity for diversity?

I would suggest that the groups formed around shared elements feed into the personal identities of the individuals that belong to them. A diversity of group identities – from religious groups to heavy metal sub-cultures – enrich the environment within which any given individual exists and at the same time increases the resources available to the individual in the process of identity formation. When it comes to enhancing diversity, group identity does not stand in opposition to personal identity, but should be an important ally.

Degenaar (1993:53) offers a similar perspective. He illuminates the tension between culture in the plural – group identities – and culture in the singular – the cultural life of mankind as a whole. If both are ‘kept alive’, identities in the plural and the singular intersect, which enhances difference within these identities.

Both notions should be acknowledged and the tension between them kept alive. If, on the one hand, one views humanity as consisting only of distinct cultural groups, it leads to an exclusivist notion of ‘cultures as bounded wholes’ and contact between cultures becomes difficult if not impossible. If, on the other hand, one only operates with the notion of culture in a universalist sense, it leads to the denial of the rich texture of cultural variety. I propose that we view culture in both plural and singular terms, *and*

*discover how our understanding of culture (and, I would add, of ourselves)  
is enriched by the tension between them (my emphasis).*

Consider South Africa as an example.

An important result of globalisation and the resulting weakening of unitary, homogenous cultures is the uncoupling of culture and the social, in the sense that culture is no longer the most important element of the individual's social identity. Culture used to be almost invisible, so deeply embedded in social actions that one could remain oblivious of the extent to which it shaped one's opinions and interactions. Now that culture has lost this dominant role, people are forced to redefine their culture in order to regain confidence in their own values. In this way culture actually comes to the fore. "Taken-for-granted tacit knowledge about what to do, how to respond to particular groups of people and what judgement of taste to make, becomes more problematic" (Featherstone 1995:5). In South Africa, where different racial groups lived in separate localities during apartheid, cultures were formed on the grounds of racial classification. The social became identical to the cultural. Cultures, as bounded wholes, were the exclusive expression of diversity. For members of, for instance, the white Afrikaner group, certain judgements, prejudices and actions were pre-ordained. The heterogeneity with which members of this group are now confronted – both in their renewed interaction with other cultural groups and with members of their own group who now develop independent judgements – forces these individuals to re-examine the judgements they took for granted.

Such an uncoupling of the cultural and the social, or group and personal identity serves to illuminate the tension between culture in the singular and culture in the plural. The advantages are vast: when culture moves beyond the social, it is much harder for any power player, whether it be the government or another social institution, to control culture and identity formation. In addition, freedom of identity becomes a distinct possibility, even if this results in an uncomfortable situation for some individuals involved.

#### 1.2.2.2 The ethics of diversity

The danger of reducing diversity to identity has another dimension. Creating a homogenous identity to encompass diversity – and thus to control it, as Bauman (1992:xiii) suggested above – not only robs us of an enriched environment, but is also unethical.

The diversity of views on the problem of finding an adequate formulation of ethics is an example of how complex the nature of our issues have become. Traditionally, ethics has

been understood as a set of rules that guide our understanding of right and wrong. But such a simplistic approach became increasingly inadequate to address the very difficult ethical issues arising in the post-war world. Today, some theorists have responsibly redefined ethics as an attempt to engage non-violently with the other; whatever form the other should take in a given situation (Cornell 1992:13). This means that individuals are increasingly encouraged not to turn to a fixed set of principles, find the applicable one for a specific situation, and simply apply the rule. Instead, they are expected to investigate every situation as a singular event before deciding what action would have the least violent influence on the other. The responsibility lies not with a set of rules, but with the individual. This is a conception of ethics that requires much more from every ethical being, which in turn allows for more diversity – and uncertainty – in every solution: a set of ethical rules limits our range of solutions. A situation where every problem is treated as a singularity expects of individuals to form their own judgments and provides us with a rich texture of ethical possibilities. Ethics itself becomes ethical again. This is the understanding of ethics that is used in the discussion at hand.

This ethical relation is one that attempts to regard the difference of the other completely and equally<sup>10</sup>. The other is not reduced to a mere object but there is regard for her subjectivity and otherness. This is the basis of a non-violent relation to the other. Violence itself is defined as any action that attempts to reduce the other and its identity, in other words, any attempt to assert a description of the other upon her.

Around 1795, Immanuel Kant (1939) formulated an idea that he called the ‘Society of Nations’ in an effort to find the answer to the eternal question of world peace. The Society of Nations, in this context, is nothing other than an effort to reduce diversity to identity, for very noble reasons indeed.

Kant believed in the natural “unsociability” of man, what Derrida (2002:76) calls the “natural or originary state of war among men”. Difference amongst men cannot but result

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<sup>10</sup> The Other as a philosophical term is often associated with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Once the subject lost its central position, the subject-object relation became problematic. The object could no longer be understood in terms of the subject. This led Levinas to call the object the ‘Other’, to articulate his understanding of this object as being completely other and therefore outside the system. As Gibson explains, “...the other whom I encounter is always radically in excess of what my ego, cognitive powers, consciousness or intuitions would make of her or him. The other always and definitively overflows the frame in which I would seek to enclose the other” (Gibson 1999:25). Seeking to enclose the other in such a frame is committing violence and thus being unethical.

in antagonism and war – it is an inevitability, Kant believed. His reasonable solution, which he believed nations would eventually reach after exhausting the options of war and military strategy, is a Society of Nations. A society of peoples “in which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights not from its own power or its own legal judgement, but solely from this great Society of Nations, from...the...decisions of a united will” (Kant in Derrida 2002:77). Violence is for Kant something that aids reason to reach this conclusion. This ideal requires nations to give up their right to protect their own interests to an extraordinary level – power would be in the hands of an external governing body. Kant was convinced that a world exhausted by the effects of violence and war, would be willing to do so in order to achieve peace. That, he thought, was the only *reasonable* option.

Derrida (2002:77) is critical of this notion of peace, however, because it regards humanity itself as a unity that must disregard all that is other. If not, the dream of the Society of Nations would be in jeopardy. It holds off the possible aggression of difference, and thus leaves no room for the being-with-others. But if peace can only be achieved by disallowing any difference, any aggression, then it is no peace at all. Disallowing difference is precisely being unethical in the sense explained above, because it disallows the other the freedom to be different. The peace Kant envisions can therefore only be achieved by means of violence; violence brought on by what Nietzsche would describe as his fear of difference.

Community for Kant means that all unite against the threat of war, which is to say, all unite against alterity. This common enemy establishes the grounds for “friendship and belonging”.

Trifonas (in Derrida 2002:78) explains that when the ethics of friendship is employed as the basis for the commonality of a group, it becomes possible to turn the diversity of the members into an identity of their friendship and belonging (based on the common enemy). In turn, the possibility of disagreement, of revolution and of difference is neutralised in this identity without difference. The system is safeguarded. “Following the determinative ethics of these rules of consensus in the name of community and commonality reduces the Other to the Same and minimises the potential of a subjective resistance to the inclusion of contrariety within a closed system of shared associations”.

The ethical significance of group identity, therefore, lies in its ability to prevent the creation of such a homogenous society without difference.

### 1.2.2.3 The reality of group identity

Finally, acknowledging the ‘danger’ of group identity, or even the various myths upon which many of these identities are normally based, does not make it any less *real*. There is a subjective element to group identity – people choose to belong to groups – and disregarding this element by reducing group identity to mere social constructions or evil illusions<sup>11</sup> disregards the practical reality of human subjectivity. Academic theory then becomes so detached from practical reality as to become irrelevant. If this reality is accepted, on the other hand, it becomes possible to speak in an informed and responsible way about group identity – and thus to be relevant.

In this regard, questions of group identity *must* remain a point of discussion for at least two reasons: firstly, there are still a significant proportion of people who live as members of groups that have, for whatever reason, a very strong cultural identity. Those who are still suffering under a form of forced identity<sup>12</sup> might lose their voice if the discussion on cultural identity is dismissed. Secondly, the world seems to be moving towards a phase where people will rediscover their ‘lost’ cultural identities and cherish these as never before – as is evident in, for instance, the republics of the former Soviet Union, the revival of the European identity and the identity politics surrounding the Afrikaner.

It is an attempt, perhaps, to regain meaning and direction in a world that seems to have lost those. It cannot be denied that some individuals can and want to root their identities in, amongst others, culture or religion, and that is their right to do so (if not a fundamental right).

In a globalised world, the active recovering of group identity is rampant. Paradoxically, it seems, the more mobile people, goods and images have become, the more closed and fixed identities have become. Meyer and Geschiere (1999:2) write, “There is much empirical evidence that people's awareness of being involved in open-ended global flows seems to trigger a search for fixed orientation points and action frames, as well as determined efforts to affirm old and construct new boundaries”.

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11 See Sen (2006)

12 For a particular example, one might turn to Anzaldua's work on the Mexican woman (1998:888), but forms of ‘forced identity’ are evident everywhere. The mere existence of a feminist movement is perhaps proof enough, while the resurgence of fundamentalist religious movements of late certainly reflect a similar phenomenon.

Bauman (1992:xxi) interprets this post-modern movement as the privatisation of the modern fear of contingency. Now that a claim to universal validity has become impossible, people look to 'imagined communities' to find not only their 'meaning', but also some form of authority. This is precisely why we are driven to a renewed form of tribalism, he argues.

To declare the discussion around group identity over, would deny many people a responsible forum for raising their concerns and experiences living within a group identity. There must be a more responsible approach than simply wishing it away.

### **1.3. Culture as group identity**

We have established the necessity of a the discussion on group identity, but the concepts involved are still far from clear. This is a function of the subject at hand. Since the discussion here will focus on what might be called a form of cultural identity – that of the Afrikaner – and since most literature on the subject of group identity focuses on cultural identity, a brief investigation of these arguments should go some way in clarifying the concept of group identity.

#### **1.3.1 Defining culture**

Culture is a notion that has evolved significantly over the last number of decades. Terry Eagleton (2000:1) observes that culture is sometimes regarded as one of the three most complex words in the English language. He quotes Archer (32) as writing that culture has displayed "the weakest analytical development of any key concept in sociology and it has played the most wildly vacillating role within sociology theory". The difficulty that scholars have had in understanding the phenomenon has, according to Davies (2004:4) led to the unjustifiably small part that it has played in political discourse in the last number of decades.

Perhaps the difficulty is not in *understanding* 'culture', but in *conceptualising* it. In order to conceptualise, one needs to unify a multiplicity of traits which are regarded as universal to that concept, through a process of objectification. Once such a concept 'exists', everything that corresponds to the conditions of the concept can be understood to 'belong' to it (Strauss 2003:253). But this process is necessarily one of reduction – reducing phenomena to their universal traits. When the notion at hand is one as complex as 'culture', too many such reductions are needed in order to conceptualise it.

Eagleton (2000:37) suggests that, despite our sophisticated insights concerning social construction, the term culture is used more narrowly today than ever before. The more we become aware of the instability of the concept, the more we attempt to stabilise it by narrowing it down. This is not limited to the conceptualisation of culture, but extends to its implementation.

So how is 'culture' defined? It would be senseless to quote endless definitions of culture here, but one particularly seminal attempt by Blane R. Després (2005:55) is worth mentioning:

Any given culture is essentially a peculiar narrative, a mythos, that unites individuals by adopted assumptions and practices, and that is generally *resistant to change*...That differs from the 'social' which...is the collective and contractual, or political, arrangements among people inhabiting a common area. Those 'arrangements' can change very rapidly (my emphasis).

It is the importance that Després affords culture's 'resistance to change', that makes the definition so relevant<sup>13</sup>. Sloodweg (2000:1) was quoted as writing that identity was traditionally defined by philosophers as that which stays simultaneous to itself and unchanged despite the involvement of time. It was then contended that such a definition is not consistent with what we understand group identity to be. At the same time, our intuitive understanding of culture, as Després rightly points out, also disallows change largely as a result of the significance that tradition usually has for a given culture. This is a paradox that stands central to the argument here. Apart from the philosophical argument that time necessitates change in identity, it will further be argued that culture (as an identity) *must* allow for change in order to survive, at least ethically, even though our very understanding of culture disallows change.

This is not a new idea. The importance of change in terms of group identity is often acknowledged, but the subsequent conceptual problem is seldom tackled. Perhaps this is because, contrary to the definition, we can observe that cultures in fact *do* change. When theorists have identified this paradox, they have often over-emphasised culture's ability to change, even reducing culture to such an ever-changing concept that their efforts again fall short of accommodating the complexities of the notion, as Davies (2004:4) points out.

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<sup>13</sup> It is not, however, an absolutist definition. Després does concede that cultures do change over time, and there have even been examples of cultures which changed quite rapidly.

Nikolas Kompridis (2005) agrees. While backing the arguments against an essentialist notion of culture – for both empirical and philosophical reasons – Kompridis regards the new and overwhelming anti-essentialist movement as equally essentialist, and ultimately useless in formulating a workable definition of cultural identity.

Because it often exaggerates the fluidity, permeability and renegotiability of culture, it is a view of culture that tends to obscure the empirical complexity of the phenomenon it claims to illuminate...If cultures really are as fluid, porous, unbounded and ever-renegotiable as they are made out to be there would be nothing 'out there' that could respond to such a concept...If the conceptual limitations of the essentialist view of culture are such that it is incapable of understanding and explaining cultural change, the conceptual limitations of the anti-essentialist view of culture are such that it is incapable of understanding and explaining cultural continuity (Kompridis 2005:319-320).

The challenge is to find a notion of group identity that can accommodate the tension between its fluidity and its continuity.

### **1.3.2 Schools of thought**

Kompridis' complaint refers to the two approaches that Davies (2004:4) argues have characterised the study of group identity. On the one hand there is what she calls a "primordial approach", which regards ethnicity as a basic component of human organisation. Culture, according to this approach, has an origin as its defining essence. Both the characteristics and the members of the culture can be traced and defined in terms of this origin. The 'meaning' of the culture can usually be defined precisely, and it is therefore easy to protect it from that which does not belong. On the basis of this origin, culture is endowed with a sacred quality that serves as the motivation for its right to survival.

On the other hand, the constructivist perspective emphasises the contextual nature of what they regard as a social construction – this approach being the more prevalent in scholarship today. Meyer and Geschiere (1999:1-14), for instance, write that it would be impossible to survive the challenge of globalisation if we continued to see cultures as having some sacred essence that needs to be protected from the invasion of other cultures. Wright (in Distiller and Steyn 2004:5) formulates the argument dominating scholarship on group identity as follows: "identity (especially group identity) does not have

a single point or moment of origin but is always being constructed and...is not given and fixed but rather is constantly (re)produced in and as performance”.

Culture has thus gone from being a static and homogenous essence of human existence to being an ever-changing construct of human society. The motivation behind this new notion of culture is often to save members of certain groups from being imprisoned in their cultural heritage. Significantly, though, the essentialist notion of identity remains a force in the discussion surrounding identity politics. Indeed, there is a strong resurgence of ethno-nationalisms, manifested in the many ethnic conflicts raging around the globe. This is not what surprises Davies (2004:4); it is rather the fact that both these approaches survive while having such obvious shortcomings in accommodating “the wider structural shifts and changing cultural, material and symbolic context in which ethnicities are reproduced”.

She suggests that this lack of a model or a notion able to assimilate the complexities of group identity, might be the reason why group identity itself is not given a more prominent position in the discussions surrounding the problem of our age – a problem that is primarily characterised by group conflict. We seem to take ethnic conflict for granted, and look for solutions in other areas, without showing a willingness to engage with the process of group identity itself as a source of conflict.

This provides an important motivation for this analysis. Even though so much has been written about the conflicts ruling this age (whether in South Africa or internationally), not nearly enough scholarly attention has been focused on the flawed understanding of group identity at the heart of most of the conflict. Perhaps one of the reasons why many scholars retain an essentialist and static notion of group identity contrary to all the theories of constructivism that have dominated twentieth century scholarship, is the fact that it seems impossible to use identity as an analytical notion if it is not static and homogenous – at least to a certain degree. The challenge is to find a way to speak about cultural identity meaningfully without succumbing to the temptation to reduce it to a ‘workable’ shape.

#### **1.4 The Afrikaner**

The choice of the Afrikaner as an example of a group identity to be examined in terms of the arguments made here is a significant one. As a group, the Afrikaner has a fascinating history, and seems today to be standing at the cusp of a new era. For most of

its existence, the group has been defined in extraordinarily static terms as a homogenous unity. The recent political and social shifts in its environment have resulted in quite some turmoil within this group. Change has become an inevitability. By choosing the example of the Afrikaner the intention of this argument is not to join the ongoing political debate as to what should define this group or what position they should hold in a democratic society. It is likewise not a moral argument for or against their history, their present or their future. Rather, it is an attempt to find a way to speak of this group that would accommodate its complexity and internal diversity, and indeed its need to change. What follows in this chapter, therefore, is an overview of the history of the Afrikaner and the predominant strands of thought in the politics of Afrikaner identity today. The argument made in this thesis is located within this discourse, but a further analysis of the empirical and political implications is beyond its scope.

#### **1.4.1 The Afrikaner's History**

Dreijmanis (1990:135) writes that the Afrikaners possessed all the characteristics to form a separate group at the end of the eighteenth century. It was also at this time that members of the group for the first time started referring to themselves as Afrikaners (Giliomee 2004:40). Within the decades that followed, group consciousness became *volk*<sup>14</sup> consciousness, until the end of the nineteenth century saw the Afrikaners develop a strong minority nationalism. Dreijmanis identifies the following features as characteristic of the group at that point:

(1) resistance to the loss of independence and absorption in the British Empire and the English cultural stream, (2) an emphasis on nation and fatherland, (3) a major concern for the nation's past, the content of which was interpreted as a struggle between Boer and Briton...(4) There was also the usual belief of having been 'called' and 'chosen' (1990:135).

Suzman (1999:30) argues that it was not until the 1920's, with the formation of the *Afrikaner Broederbond* and the Purified National Party that ethnic nationalism truly arose. The *Broederbond* became especially significant. Bauman (1992:17) has explained how culture used to be of great interest to politicians, as ideologies were captured within cultural identities. In the case of the Afrikaner, this close relationship between culture and

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<sup>14</sup> The word "volk" does not have a direct English equivalent. It is usually translated as "nation" (which has the direct equivalent "nasie" in Afrikaans) — but also contains the more intimate connotations that the English "folk" — deriving from the same Germanic root — retains.

politics was personified in the *Broederbond*<sup>15</sup>. Officially they were known as a cultural organisation, but it was always clear that cultural unity was seen as a prerequisite for political power. Suzman (41): “its activities were always carried out with an eye to political events and actors and became widely known as *kultuurpolitiek* [cultural politics], to distinguish it from the *partypolitiek* [party politics] being carried out in parliament”.

Both Suzman and Dreijmanis’ analysis point to important causes of the remarkable homogeneity that characterised the Afrikaner group up until the end of apartheid<sup>16</sup>. When culture and political ideology are mixed as effectively as the *Broederbond*, amongst others, did, the result is that, once a strong mythology is created as a basis for the definition of the group, it becomes easy to link an uncritical political ideology to that identity. In other words, when a group is convinced that they were called and chosen by God to lead a country – as Dreijmanis describes – no criticism or alternative to such a position is possible. The myth becomes truth and the definition of the group gets written in stone. With such an unwavering foundation, which has the added benefit of membership loyalty, political ideology thrives. In fact, in this case, it soon became difficult to distinguish between culture and politics, or as Suzman says, *kultuurpolitiek* and *partypolitiek*. As Davies (2004:119) writes: “Indeed, Afrikaners’ points of reference entered into a virtuous circle, propagating ideas of community and a collective identity that were perpetuated by their very rise to power”.

The overwhelming importance that the past has always had for the Afrikaner group was another of the defining factors of their closed identity. Such an emphasis on the past – which is very much an emphasis on origin – dictates an identity, as every present phenomenon comes to be interpreted in terms of the ‘sacred origin’. Dreijmanis (1990:39): “The rediscovery of the past and its reinterpretation created the belief that, in the words of Dr DF Malan, the ‘history of the Afrikaner reveals a will and a determination which makes one feel that *Afrikanerdom* is not the work of men but the creation of God”.

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15 In 1921, when the organization became secret, its manifesto described its goal to “carry the Afrikaner volk towards its sense of identity to inspire self-respect and to nurture and cultivate love for language, history, land, volk and law” (Suzman 1999:39).

16 Louw-Potgieter (1988:1), in her study of Afrikaner dissidents, quotes a visiting sociologist as follows: “...the surprising fact is not that there are so few white liberals in South Africa, but rather that there should be any at all, at any rate outside mental hospitals”.

The closed nature of this group identity is also described by Johan van Wyk (1995) in his study of the constitution of Afrikaner identity in literature. The Afrikaner identity, he argues, was initially built on the idea of cultural identity as an organic and complete whole – a closed system, in other words – or in the words of O'Meara (quoted in Van Wyk 1995:ii): an “unchanging, timeless ethnicity”. Van Wyk’s book opens with a quote from Hendrik Verwoerd, former prime minister of the Republic of South Africa:

“Oh, if it could also be granted us as it was granted in the past to great nations in their hour of fame that those would come forward who do not hesitatingly ask ‘what is a nation’, but who will cry out: ‘This is my nation, my nation is like this, thus they can do wonders, thus it can create its own future’” (in Van Wyk 1995:ii).

This idea of the identity of the group as such a precisely definable and complete whole was abruptly interrupted with the fall of apartheid and the subsequent questioning of Afrikaner nationalism. Even the term ‘the Afrikaner’ has become problematic, with little consensus as to the boundaries of the group. For a people who once “cri[ed] out: ‘This is my nation, my nation is like this...’”, such an abrupt loss of identity is severely disruptive. In addition, the once proud group has had to deal with the label of ‘oppressor’ in the aftermath of apartheid. Not surprisingly, then, there has been considerable internal strife amongst Afrikaners with respect to how they should define themselves, and especially their future.

#### **1.4.2 Internal Debate**

Division amongst Afrikaners is nothing new. And yet, earlier divisions were most often centred around the best way to negotiate the survival and development of the proud Afrikaner nation, with voices on different sides of the divide having different ideas about the best way to reach their common goal. The divisions facing the group today have much less political bearing, but it is much more significant in the paradigm of the politics of identity. There is little agreement even on who the members of the group are.

This does not stop scholars from continuing to seek one-dimensional definitions of the new Afrikaner – in the name of identity singularity. In a 2000 article, for instance, Nash (340-365) argued that the ‘new’ politics of Afrikaans is characterised by “a peculiarly selective continuity with the thought of Afrikaner critics of apartheid...it continues their argument that Afrikaans language and culture must be defended on the basis of opposition to Afrikaner nationalism and white privilege”. He proceeds to spend some time

in analysing the 'post-modern' movement amongst young Afrikaner intellectuals, epitomised by the academic journal *Fragmente* ("Fragments"). While his analysis of a small group of Afrikaner intellectuals might have been accurate, the discrepancy between this line of thought and those described by other scholars of the Afrikaner identity is such that any attempt at reducing Afrikaner identity politics to a single narrative is proved futile.

Some still cherish the dream of Afrikaner self-determination, and even discuss the feasibility of a truly independent Afrikaner volkstaat<sup>17</sup>. Many, however, seem to have isolated themselves from the realities of the new South Africa and take no part in the political processes and discussions of the new regime. This is the new apathetic Afrikaner, seemingly bent on material success, with little interest in the future of the group's identity<sup>18</sup>.

Ballard (2004:52-60) includes this phenomenon – which he calls 'semigrating' – in what he describes as the different stages in the development of white/Afrikaner identity (specifically as their relation towards other groups were framed). It is all part of an effort to create 'comfort zones', he explains, spaces where one can feel 'at home'. Initially, as the whites first set foot on African soil, the goal was to assimilate, to change the 'natives' into Europeans and create something of a homogenous culture. The failure of assimilation brought the era of segregation: the attempt to turn the Afrikaner into a European culture that was safeguarded from the 'foreign' influence of Africans by keeping them literally as far away as possible. The end of apartheid meant the end of segregation, and the end of white people's reliance on race to define them – largely because it became socially unacceptable. Race, however, was substituted by a concept harder to define and less likely to ring of racism, the concept of 'civilisation'. "While non-whites would be accepted, they would only be admitted if they made themselves *acceptable as defined by 'white' people*" (56). It was hoped that the market forces would regulate this form of exclusive assimilation 'naturally'. It has not been entirely successful, however, and many Afrikaners have chosen to find a 'comfort zone' elsewhere by emigrating. Many without the resources to do so, choose to 'semigrate'.

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17 CJ Jooste (1994:23), for instance, argues that "it is obvious...that Afrikaners who wish to maintain themselves as a nation, with honour and integrity, must administer their own state in accordance with internationally accepted governmental norms". See also Steyn, Melissa 2004 *Rehybridising the Creole: New South African Afrikaners in 'Under Construction: Race' and Identity in South African Today'* Sandton: Heinemann Publishers.

18 See ZB du Toit (1999).

The most significant public manifestation of the Afrikaners' search for identity and the contemporary internal strife within the group surrounds the issue of the Afrikaans language. It should be noted, however, that this new fight for survival is as much a fight between the Afrikaners and majority rule in South Africa as it is a fight amongst the group members themselves, many arguing for the active defence of the language, while others are content with retaining the language for everyday and literary use (Davies 2004:210). It is the very emotional tone of this public debate that suggests that the Afrikaner is still weary of internal diversity, with little tolerance for alternative views (or difference) within the group.

### **1.4.3 Internal diversity**

The importance of internal diversity as discussed in section 1.2.2.1 above, is also evident in the way diversity was defined in apartheid South Africa. Not only was the identity of the Afrikaner group outlined explicitly – as Verwoerd's quote shows – but so were the identities of other groups also defined in static and unchanging terms. Around certain groups, myths were created and sold as 'truths', purportedly with identifiable origins and histories. As has been shown, these myths even gained something of a teleological meaning. Diversity existed; in fact, the differences between groups were emphasised. But the fear of the destabilising effect of that which is truly other, as Nietzsche and Bauman would have it, ensured that these identities were conceived of as stable enough not to allow difference within their own borders. It is a Hegelian system which tolerates 'internal' difference, while leaving no room for that which is completely other (McGowan 1991: 93)<sup>19</sup>. In practice this means keeping that which is different on the outside, as the absolute other. This can only be achieved by defining identities in absolute and unchanging terms.

As a result of this system identities were very stable. In Verwoerd's words, Afrikaners could not be hesitant about who they were. Only if you can say exactly who you are (and who you are not), it was believed, would you be able to 'create your future'. And you *can*

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19 Hegel's system represents philosophy's insistence on identity, as nothing remains outside of the Spirit. Difference, in Hegel, was difference in relation to the Same. In other words, what his system could not tolerate was that which was completely other in that it had no relation with the system. In the same way, apartheid society could not tolerate that which was completely other. Derrida's reading of the centre of such a system controlling its meaning is explored in the following chapter, while his engagement with the outside within the Hegelian system is addressed in chapter five.

know exactly who you are, because it is possible to trace your history and your origin precisely, and because culture was allowed to dictate the knowledge of the self.

Degenaar (2000: 307) has described the Afrikaner struggle since the mid-twentieth century as “the choice between mere survival and survival through justice”<sup>20</sup>. For members of this group to argue, as many do, that their history should simply be forgotten, or to establish their new position as a minority group by excluding themselves and denying the reality of the multi-cultural community they live in, is to merely survive<sup>21</sup>. By dealing actively and responsibly with their inheritance and by finding ways to interact meaningfully with other groups, they might find a way to survive through justice. That would require overcoming the fear of the other.

Ballard was earlier quoted as outlining the different stages of ‘boundary-formation’ around white cultures in South Africa, from assimilation and segregation to emigration and semigration. In conclusion, he expresses the hope that the final stage in the development of this identity will not be one of strengthening the boundary around the group, as every other stage has been, but one which opens itself up to engagement and diversity. He cites various discourses which support this view (Ballard, 2004:65-66):

Thus, while some ‘white’ South Africans fall easily into the old scripts, others challenge binaries such as ‘First World’/‘Third World’...Such people no longer depend on a heavily regulated and constrained living environment in order to express their identity and feel secure in what they are...The choice by some to use these discourses represents a shift towards what Chantal Mouffe calls, “an identity which can accommodate otherness, which demonstrates the porosity of its frontiers and opens up towards that exterior which makes it possible” (1995:265). In the words of Young, such individuals are open to “unassimilated otherness”, the

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20 Degenaar used this phrase – which he borrowed from Afrikaner writer N.P. van Wyk Louw – to refer to different struggles in the Afrikaner’s history. In the time of apartheid, the tension was formulated by intellectuals who knew that apartheid was not an option for the Afrikaner to ‘survive through justice’. After the end of apartheid, the new struggle for the minority rights of the Afrikaans language community again raises this tension.

21 Nash (2000:350) writes: “In the context of the new South Africa, the defence of Afrikaans more often rests on denying the possibility of collective responsibility for the past, or on the view that “what is past is done with”. Those defending Afrikaans have not done so by seeking, as Afrikaners, to develop a common project with other South Africans, nor do they seem set to do so”.

acceptance of and engagement with difference without trying to reform it to fit into what 'white' racist societies in the past defined as acceptable (qtd in Harvey 1993:16). In this strategy alliances are formed where boundaries were once erected (Harvey 1996:360, Rorty 1989:192).

What follows is an attempt at a formulation of just what such an identity would entail.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the question was posed why we still discuss the issue of group identity in an era where its legitimacy as something sacred and primitive has been undermined, and where its very existence has caused conflict and trauma world wide. It was shown that, even though identity and culture are such popular notions in academic theory, attention is most often given to the problems surrounding this issue, rather than to the issue itself. For this reason, simply defining 'culture', for instance, seems quite impossible. The danger of working with such a vague notion – whether it is reduced to a workable concept or left in the limbo of indeterminacy – is evident.

While this chapter introduced mainly the empirical problems surrounding the notion of group identity, the rest of this thesis will deal with the philosophical issues arising from the notion. The problem of finding a way to speak meaningfully about a concept that needs to have a sense of stability in order to constitute an 'identity', but at the same time has to be able to change in order to adapt to changing circumstances – and indeed does change – will be the first priority.

This tension will be the first manifestation of the philosophical endeavour of 'thinking the difference', which is indeed what motivates this argument as a whole. The discussion of Kant's Society of Nations above illuminated the ethical problem of reducing difference to the same, to an identity. In this context, it means that if we are committed to thinking the difference (and thereby undermining the philosophy of the same) for ethical reasons, we have to speak of group identity itself in terms that preserve difference. That entails keeping the tensions inherent to the notion intact, rather than choosing to emphasise one end of the tension, thereby reducing the other – as is the case with traditional efforts to conceptualise group identity. The importance of thinking the difference will continue to be emphasised in dealing with the different tensions encountered throughout the argument.

Chapter 2 is intended to provide the reader with an introduction to the important philosophical notions that will be used in the argument. Poststructuralism is discussed as

the school of thought within which this thesis situates itself. Mention has been made of the poststructuralist interpretation of ethics; this interpretation should become much clearer in the context of a broader introduction. In addition, the work of perhaps the most important poststructuralist, Jacques Derrida, is outlined as this philosopher will indeed play a significant role in the formulation of the argument. Finally, systems thinking is introduced. The latter has had a significant impact on the social sciences and, most recently, some philosophical discourses. It will be used here to assist us in modelling group identity while maintaining the tensions already described. This chapter also serves to introduce important themes that will be explored throughout, notably the ethical dimension of the inside-outside divide, the problem of rationality, the philosophical understanding of time and the possibility of change.

In chapter 3, a fully relational model of identity formation is developed. This model is situated within a brief account of the philosophical development of identity thinking. Two important tensions arising from the modelling of group identity are addressed: the problem of boundary-formation that is an articulation of the inside-outside divide, and that of the presence of agency in the formation of identity, which takes up the theme of rationality.

In chapters 4 and 5, the most significant implications of this model for group identity are investigated. Does a new understanding of group identity itself help us to better deal with the difficult issues surrounding the concept? Can the concept cope with its own tensions? Two of the most important problems encountered in dealing with group identity are investigated: the memory of a group (past) and the possibility of a group to transform (future), when transformation would seem indispensable.

In chapter 4 the issue is that of memory. A complex system, such as a relational model of identity, must have a memory in order to survive. At the same time, memory is a defining feature of any example of a group identity. But what is memory? And how does a group deal with an incriminating past? Through the work of Derrida and using the new model of group identity, memory is defined as an *inheritance* which entails responsibility, and a certain freedom from rationality. It is not a debt to be paid, rather it follows the logic of the gift. This interpretation of memory is also significant, because it allows us to look at the future. To truly envisage the future, it is argued, we need to be able to envisage a truly 'new beginning'. For a 'new beginning' to be possible, Derrida argues, time needs to be 'out of joint'.

Chapter 5 engages this idea of the 'new beginning', also defined as the ability of the group to allow for 'real' change. Change, when it is not merely a transformation in terms of the system, implies time, but also that which is outside the system and therefore, 'new'. This chapter investigates both notions of time and the open system, while at the same time continuing the theme of the freedom from reason as begun in chapter 2, and continued in chapters 3 and 4. This is necessitated by the fact that rationality, which can dictate our memory, also dictates (and compromises) the system's ability to change. The significance of Derrida's deconstruction of the present becomes evident here as we try to understand how the outside can possibly penetrate the system. At the same time, his understanding of the future is explicated. It is shown that the key to Derrida's understanding of both the system allowing for that which is new and his conception of the future is his formulation of a 'general economy' as opposed to the restricted economies of closed or dialectical systems. This general economy is his 'new kind of writing' which is, indeed, the future.

In conclusion, the success of this new understanding of identity and its formation is tested. The question is posed whether this model of group identity, while providing the possibility of responsibly dealing with memory and transformation, can also allow for the autonomy of the members of these groups. If so, it will be suggested that we continue to understand group identities as complex systems, and thus continue to think the difference.

# Poststructuralism, complexity and ethics

## **2.1 Introduction**

As was explained above, the focus in this thesis will be on the philosophical problem associated with the conceptualisation of group identity. To this end, this chapter will begin by introducing poststructuralism, as the philosophical problematic of identity will largely be approached from the vantage point of this movement. An introduction to poststructuralism, which includes a brief account of its immediate precursor, structuralism, would therefore be useful. It should be noted that additional attention is afforded to notions such as 'change' and 'closure' when they arise in this introduction, as these notions will form an integral part of the rest of the argument.

Aspects of the work of one philosopher regarded by many as the most important poststructuralist, Jacques Derrida, will play a significant role throughout the argument. In this chapter, some aspects of his work are explored – mostly the best-known ones – as a means of establishing a background to the more specific application of his work in subsequent chapters. The introduction to his work will also serve to illuminate the principles of poststructuralism further.

Finally, complexity theory is introduced. The principles of this theory will be used to model group identity as an alternative to previous attempts by both philosophers and other social scientists to conceptualise the notion. As was shown in chapter one, current attempts at modelling group identity have been inadequate to accommodate the complexities of the notion. It is believed that complexity theory will provide the necessary tools to engage responsibly with this very important issue.

## **2.2 Poststructuralism**

Poststructuralism, as the name suggests, developed in response to the movement known as structuralism. Unfortunately, the two movements do not lend themselves to neat definitions; in fact, few of the thinkers generally associated with either of the movements willingly acknowledge such an association. Just about the only thing theorists seem to

agree on is how difficult it is to define structuralism and poststructuralism or distinguish between them (Bennington and Young in Attridge *et al* 1987:1). This is indeed a function of poststructuralism as a movement. One of the most important attributes of this school of thought is that it demonstrates the danger of exclusion that definitions necessitate (MacKenzie 2001:332). Despite this, the distinction between structuralism and poststructuralism is indeed a very important one.

### 2.2.1 Structuralism

Structuralism is generally seen as an analysis that considered meaning to be a system of difference, and subsequently understood cultural and social systems through their differential relationships (Lechte 1994:35). Social phenomena and knowledge itself were no longer explained in terms of essentialist notions, but in terms of their structural nature (Lechte 1994:1). This line of thinking followed Ferdinand de Saussure's similar description of language<sup>22</sup>.

Within Saussure's language system, the elements are identified not in terms of their intrinsic value, but in terms of the relationship they have with every other element in the system (Bennington and Young in Attridge *et al* 1987:1). This theory was a significant break away from the representational model of language which understood linguistic signs as necessary representations of something external to them. Language was not understood as a system; in fact, little thought was given to the nature of language itself (Culler 1976:18). Each linguistic sign simply carried its own individual meaning within itself. The theory relied on the idea that a sign corresponded directly to something outside of language: the word flower, for instance corresponded to the concept of a flower. It was because a linguistic sign represented something outside the language, that language could be used to communicate. All the users of a language, it was believed, shared knowledge of what (most of) the linguistics signs represented, and meaning was thus communicated.

Such a theory, Saussure (1960:65) argued, made two incorrect assumptions: it assumed that ideas exist in completion before language (and can therefore simply be named by a linguistic sign) and it assumed that the link between a 'name' and a thing is a

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<sup>22</sup> Even though Structuralism is regarded as a French school of the sixties, the Prague Linguistic circle is credited with founding the movement in 1929 at a conference of philologists (Olsson 2003:190). On this occasion they introduced the notion of structure as a method of analysis. See also Dolezel (2000).

simple operation. The first assumption is proven incorrect by the fact that different languages do not simply have different words referring to exactly the same concepts. If this were the case, translation would have been a simple calculation. It would also have necessitated the stability of language. If concepts themselves were stable, the signs referring to them would also not change. But we can certainly observe the way in which the meanings of words change over time (Culler 1976:21-22).

For Saussure, the meaning of a sign is not inherent to the sign itself, but is constituted within the system by the differences that exist between the sign and other signs. The bond between the two elements of the sign, what Saussure called the signifier (the “sound image”) and the signified (abstract concept to which it is tied), is arbitrary (Saussure 1960:67). We know what the linguistic sign ‘flower’ stands for, not only because we are able to distinguish it from other concepts, such as ‘tree’ and ‘leave’, but also because we can conceptualise the difference between ‘flower’ and other signs. We know what it is, because we know what it is not. This theory follows from the mentioned fact that different languages have different signs representing similar concepts. As Culler (1976:24) explains, the concepts ‘river’ and ‘stream’ in English and French differ in different ways. In French, the difference between the concepts is based on whether they run into the sea or not, while in English the size of the water flow is important. This means that a language is necessarily organised as a system, Saussure believed, with meaning created relationally within the system. If language were not a system of conventions, it would just be noise (Culler 1976:19). Outside this system, a sign is meaningless. From this point, it is a simple step to Saussure’s assertion that there are no positive terms in a language system; there are only differences. “This implies that a language exists as a kind of totality, or it does not exist at all” (Lechte 1994:150).

Saussure further distinguished between a synchronic and diachronic study of language, himself emphasising the synchronic study (Culler 1976:35). This reflects his acknowledgment that the system does allow for change. There is a high level of control over the process of change, however (Cilliers 1998:39). This is achieved in part by the fact that individuals have no control over the chosen signifier representing a signified. In other words, even though the relationship between signified and signifier is an arbitrary one, it does not follow that a user of the language can choose to use a different signifier to refer to a signified. The signifier would have no meaning, not because it has a natural link to its signified, but because the system dictates the meaning of the sign. At the same time, the

system is constitutive of the users' understanding of the language itself. This also assures the system of stability (Cilliers 1998:39).

Saussure acknowledged that time, while giving language its continuity, also effects the change of linguistic signs. Because of the continuity of the sign in time, the sign is exposed to change. These two seemingly contradictory consequences of the presence of time are therefore dependent on each other. "What predominates in all change is the persistence of the old substance; disregard for the past is only relative. That is why the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity" (Saussure in Cilliers 1998:39-40).

This process of change is a very complex one. It does not happen instantly, as would have been the case were it possible for users to deliberately decide on change. In addition, change isn't merely the result of time, but a combination of time and social force. If a language were not in use, it would not change even if given time. Saussure also insists that the change described affects only the elements of the system directly, not the system itself. As the changed elements interact, change 'spreads' until the entire system is transformed. This could never be an entirely new system, but rather a transformed version of the old system (Cilliers 1998:40). Even though Saussure's description of the language system allows for change, it is clear that, in this system, signs have a relatively fixed position. It follows that the system itself is very stable.

It was the notion of the system being constitutive of the individuals who use it, which allowed Saussure's theory to be extended to the social sciences. In semiotics, sociology and psychoanalysis, social and cultural phenomena were no longer studied independently, but within the system which gave them meaning (Lechte 1994:151). This was a result of the fact that language came to play a central role in the constitution of the subject and knowledge (Williams 2001:54). At the same time, researchers were more aware of their own status as elements of a system, and greater reflexivity were at the order of the day.

Cultural systems were increasingly regarded as 'languages' in the Saussurian sense: autonomous objective structures that needed no recourse to subjectivity, barring the need for a system to be 'in use' in order to evolve through time. Based on Saussure's theory, change was regarded as a holistic, non-linear process (Olssen 2003:193).

## **2.2.2 Towards Poststructuralism**

The fact that structuralism and poststructuralism emphasised similar issues, such as a critique of the subject, of historicism and of meaning, should be regarded as merely an

apparent similarity between them. Poststructuralism had a much more radical approach to these problems which clearly separated this school from its predecessor. Poststructuralism argued that structuralism left important metaphysical presuppositions untouched in its understanding of meaning (Lechte 1994:95). As a result, poststructuralism set itself the task of unmasking these final bastions of Western philosophy. The critique of the human subject became one of the most important similarities of structuralism and poststructuralism (Sarup 1988:1). Structuralism's approach was a distinct break from earlier traditions which viewed the human subject as a self-conscious being, fully present to itself. This traditional notion was supplemented by a belief that the identity of the subject was essential to the person and therefore untouched by influences from the outside. Since the subject was a unified and rational being, it could be seen as the rational centre not only of its own existence, but also of our understanding of the world.

Structuralism's uncovering of the structural generation of meaning meant that the subject itself could no longer be seen as this untouchable rational centre. The human subject was now seen as being determined by symbolic functions, while the unconscious was explicitly recognised following Freud (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004:2). Structuralists subsequently challenged the identity between self-consciousness and philosophy by questioning the transparency upon which both relied.

While they found the subject as the rational centre of its own existence and reality itself problematic, they did not abolish the subject in its totality however (Williams 2001:55). The ever-present danger (as is often pointed out by the poststructuralists) is that structuralism merely substitutes the role of the subject by purporting to determine the origin of the structure (both its content and form) (56). Their critique of the rational centre of the system is undermined by the fact that they seem to replace the subject at the centre by a new centre of meaning. Derrida's strong criticism of this structuralist position will be discussed in the following section.

In poststructuralism, the problematic of the subject as centre translates into a suspicion of *all* centres and foundations. This was a necessary result of the poststructuralist notion that signs are unstable, which will be encountered shortly. The instability of meaning meant that subjects and indeed all foundations (as 'units of meaning') were ill-equipped to provide a stable centre to the system.

Another superficial similarity between structuralism and poststructuralism is their critique of historicism (Sarup 1988:2). Both schools exhibit a general suspicion of efforts to

find teleology in history. Structuralism believed that the surface appearance of history was dictated by an underlying set of 'laws' or metastructures (Olssen 2003: 192). History constructs the epistemological frameworks that in turn are used to comprehend it, it was believed. As the present experience or situation of an individual or a society changes, so the understanding of history also changes (Lechte 1994:1). This was the result of Saussure's emphasis on the synchronic study of systems of difference.

Poststructuralism, however, rejected the notion of metastructures completely. History itself was not rejected, but rather interpreted as a 'new kind of writing' (see section below). In fact, Derrida (1978:291) explicitly warned against structuralism's inevitable neutralisation of time and history, necessitated by their emphasis on structure. Such a neutralisation of history disallows chance which is precisely the goal of structuralism in order to make scientific analysis possible. For a poststructuralist such as Derrida, however, the element of contingency necessitated by time provides the possibility of disrupting the system. In addition, as Saussure already explained, time necessitates both change and continuity. Time – and by implication, history – then promises the only opportunity for a system to transform, and *must* therefore never be neutralised.

It should be noted, however, that in poststructuralism the notion of time itself came to be understood in a more sophisticated way. Not only was there an emphasis on the temporality of meaning, which worked against attempts at closing off meaning, but poststructuralism also showed that time does not coincide with itself (Chow 2002:177) – most notably in Derrida's formulation of the 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1991:11). The significance of an alternative understanding of history and time cannot be over-emphasised. Indeed, the claims to authenticity and to a right of existence made by cultural groups, are often based on their history. Once the traditional idea of history is shown to be problematic, we must re-examine every assumption surrounding cultural identity and its continued existence.

Thirdly, structuralism and poststructuralism both offer a critique of traditional theories of meaning. Structuralism based its critique on the idea that meaning is generated through structure, rather than being original and essential units (with meaning remaining stable enough to replace the subject at the centre of the system). Poststructuralism offered a critique of the idea that meaning corresponds directly to the sign; it is therefore impossible to convey meaning in its fullness. As Eagleton (1983:130) explains and as was mentioned previously, this critique of meaning corresponds with the critique of the unified subject in

poststructuralism: “It is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails my meaning being always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning, indeed, but I myself: since language is something I am made out of, rather than a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable unified entity must also be a fiction”. The stability of language that was taken for granted by structuralists and that allowed them to give language a central role, was made suspect by poststructuralism which problematises even this quasi-foundation.

Rivkin and Ryan (1998:334) understand this as a key difference between the two movements. Structuralism, they argue, used linguistics as its foundation in order to understand the generation of meaning as based on a stable structure. In the case of poststructuralism, the motivation of its linguistic foundation is not the stability which a linguistic system provides, but precisely the *disorder* in language (and the world) which can never be ordered by imposing a system upon it. It was precisely to free the ‘potential’ inherent to systems but kept under wraps by the structures of the system, that ways were sought to undo these systems, they write. These structures within which social and cultural meanings are created often came to be seen as strategies of power and social control.

Rivkin and Ryan’s formulation is problematic in more than one regard, however. Poststructuralism does not regard the world or language as lacking order, but rather as lacking stability because meaning is not captured in signs but moves through the system in an unending process of “play”. The system is complex, but not chaotic. There is a significant difference. If meaning and the world lacked order – if they were chaotic – one could not say something about meaning or its generation, and one would certainly not have been able to attempt to speak about modelling such a system. The project at hand – to speak meaningfully about the sign of cultural identity – would have been impossible. On the other hand, it could be argued that the idea put forward by Rivkin and Ryan that meaning is tied down by the structures of social control is also problematic in its assumption that meaning can be forced into stability. This issue will receive further attention in the next chapter where constructivism’s challenge to poststructuralism will be explored.

### **2.2.3 Poststructuralism comes into its own**

Poststructuralism became popular in the early nineteen sixties in France, at a time when the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, amongst others, were first

published in French. This had a major impact on the young scholars of the time (Rivkin and Ryan 1998:335). It was especially these philosophers' rejection of the rationalist tradition's reliance on objective description and of the idealist tradition's forever seeking hidden meaning and truth in empirical events, which had the greatest influence on those who became known as poststructuralists.

At first, structuralism continued to dominate French thought, with most scholars obsessed with studying signs and structures (335). Rationality, order and meaning remained the vocabulary of French thought. It was only with Foucault's attack on reason itself (in *The Order of Things*) that poststructuralism became a movement to be reckoned with (Rivkin and Ryan 1998:336). Many subsequent scholars within the school of poststructuralism differed significantly with Foucault, but as Rivkin and Ryan (1998:336) explain, there was a common notion that linked their various endeavours. This was the notion of 'something prior', a space where the world and language had not yet been separated. Once the separation takes place, an equation of meaning – between word and thing or signifier and signified – becomes necessary in order to establish rational knowledge. But this separation is a process of classification: it is not 'natural'.

In this space prior to classification and prior to reason, the play of ambivalence in language is possible, because in this space meaning can be heterogeneous. Such multiplicity exceeds the binary oppositions that are created in the service of rational knowledge. But once reason enters the equation, language is turned into a representation of the world and the subject becomes an entity separate from the world (336). But not even by reducing the multiplicity of meaning into binary oppositions, does reason succeed in completely banishing that which doesn't belong to these oppositions. That which remains outside the oppositions are deemed irrational, but cannot be kept from causing disturbances within the system of reason. Poststructuralists are interested in unshackling these 'disturbances', even if the goal is not to replace the current dominant system of signification with the suppressed 'irrational' system.

This notion was articulated in the work of Derrida as the metaphysical tradition of 'logocentrism' in Western philosophy. This tradition takes the founding principle of the mind (logos or reason) for granted (Rivkin and Ryan 1998:339). These 'laws' of thought presupposed logical reasoning and indeed the existence of an 'origin' to thought. The 'laws' were believed to refer to such an origin. This origin had to be homogenous, simple and simultaneous to itself – in other words, devoid of complexity and difference (Lechte

1994:106). According to Lechte, complexity became another word for impurity. Derrida made it his project to dismantle these 'laws' and in the process embrace complexity, if not necessarily 'impurity'.

Finally, the poststructuralist project coincided to a significant degree with a preoccupation (particularly in French thought) with the notion of difference. In this context, difference could be seen as another word for the 'disturbances' or that which had been banished to the outside in order to sustain reason. In other contexts, difference became associated with the notion of the other, referred to in chapter one. There Sen was quoted as suggesting that we could only create harmony in the world if we start to acknowledge human heterogeneity. This notion became increasingly popular reflecting the growing scepticism towards homogenous Western culture.

The popularity of the notion has in a certain sense led to its undoing, however. As Cilliers (2005: 2-3) explains, an over-emphasis on difference without also acknowledging the necessity of the same inherent to difference, leads to the erroneous belief that difference is absolute and interaction between different groups therefore impossible. Identity is implied by difference because it is impossible to speak about the difference between two things if they were absolutely different. There needs to be an element of identity in order to give content to difference (5). In other words, we can give content to the difference between a saxophone and a clarinet, because they share the identity of musical instruments. It would be difficult, however, to speak meaningfully about the difference between a saxophone and a brick, because it would be hard to identify their sameness. In the same way, if we continue to emphasise the difference between groups without qualifying this difference with reference to the sameness it implies, we end up supporting the dangerous rhetoric of 'us' against 'them' that has dominated the international political rhetoric of late.

Derrida's work is indeed characterised by his insistence on the 'originary difference' – i.e., difference at the origin of all identity. But his insistence on the ambiguity of all notions, on the tensions between supposedly fixed hierarchies, such as identity-difference or difference-identity, helps us to avoid precisely this danger Cilliers warns of.

#### **2.2.4 The work of Jacques Derrida**

Many of the important themes in the work of Derrida will be explored in greater detail as they become relevant during the development of my overall argument, notably

*différance* and his concept of history, and will therefore not receive as much attention here. Because Derrida's body of work forms such a complicated network, where almost every idea is reflected in others and ideas seem to feed off of each other in a non-linear way, it is indeed impossible to summarise in a few points. This should mean that every time a new theme is introduced and used to substantiate the arguments, new light will be shed on Derrida's work as a whole. It is, however, helpful to outline his most important ideas in order to provide at least a framework for what is to come.

Perhaps a good place to start is Derrida's 1966 lecture called 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (Derrida 1978) that has become a landmark in poststructuralist literature and which demonstrates a number of the poststructuralist principles discussed above. In this lecture, Derrida introduced the notion of the *event* as a disruption of the system, acknowledging that it is exactly the possibility of such an event of which structuralism – the prevalent school of thought at the time – was suspicious. For Derrida, the event was not only possible, it was indispensable.

Structuralism's efforts to find the structures underlying cultural and social codes relied on systems of classification as the basis of such meta-structures. The poststructuralists, as we saw, became interested in that which was relegated to the realm of the 'irrational' or the 'outside' by reason and these very forms of classification. In his attempt to disrupt the structure, Derrida investigated what he called the structure's fixed origin, its centre. "The function of this centre was not only to orientate, balance and organise the structure – or rather the structurality of structure – but above all to make sure that the organising principle of the structure would limit what we will call the *play* of the system" (Derrida 1978:278, author's emphasis). 'Play' is allowed within the totality of the system, as controlled by the centre. But nothing which is not dictated by the centre, is allowed. In other words, everything which does not belong within the binary oppositions defined by the system, is pushed to the outside.

The centre is both inside and outside the system: inside, as it is indeed the centre, but outside, as it is not part of that which is structurally constituted, it is not effected by the structurality of the system. If it were not that which stood outside the system, it could not be the centre that controlled the 'play'. "From the basis of what we therefore call the centre (and which because it can be either inside or outside, is as readily called the origin as the end, the archos as the telos), the repetitions, the substitutions, the transformations and the permutations are always taken from a history of meanings – that is a history, period, which

origin may always be revealed or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence" (279)<sup>23</sup>. These 'centres' could also be understood as the foundations upon which philosophers have based their ideas in different eras and schools of thought. As we saw, the movement of structuralism first brought with it a suspicion of these centres. At this point language entered, however, as something of a substitute for the fixed origin. For this reason, 'discourse' became a structuralist buzzword. As soon as the poststructuralists unmasked the instability of language, even language was discredited as a centre. It is precisely this 'decentring of the centre' which Derrida refers to as an *event*.

Derrida's effort to trace the event as described in *Writing and Difference* (1978:280), provide important insights into many of the themes that dominated his thought. He mentions Nietzsche's substitution of the concepts of 'being' and 'truth' with 'play', 'interpretation' and 'sign' – based on Nietzsche's view that our thinking, which we believe to be 'truth', is merely the creation of metaphors in order to substitute some stability for the instability of existence, while we should rather play along with the meaninglessness of the world (Rivkin and Ryan 1998:335); Freud's critique of self-presence and identity and Heidegger's critique of the determination of being as presence. All these notions attempted to undermine a concept of stability at the centre of the system, whether it is in the form of truth, identity or presence. If their attempts were successful, the system would indeed have been disrupted.

The problem with these efforts, Derrida (1978:280-281) argues, is that they need the very concepts they are criticising in order to be able to criticise in the first place. In other words, they want to criticise the concepts underlying Western metaphysics, but the only language they know is precisely the language of Western metaphysics. Before outlining this point further, it is important to understand Derrida's deconstruction of the speech-writing dichotomy.

The notion of 'logocentrism' was briefly introduced above as Derrida's critique of Western philosophy's reliance on the mind/logos as its founding authority, an authority that ensured stability by disallowing complexity or play. The primacy of the logos further resulted in speech – as that form of signification 'closest' to the mind – being privileged as the paramount form of signification. Other forms, such as writing, are mere substitutions (Rivkin and Ryan 1998:339). Such substitutions are banished to the outside. Derrida's

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<sup>23</sup> Derrida's deconstruction of this privileging of the present will be discussed in chapter three in the argument for a relational model of identity.

question is, what justifies this distinction between speech and writing and inside and outside? Shouldn't such a distinction, which is treated as primordial, be based on something prior? Otherwise, how is it justified?

The issue of the privileging of speech over writing is a very important one for Derrida. As Sarup (1988:41) explains, for Derrida, 'writing' has a much broader meaning. "[It] does not refer to the empirical concept of writing (which denotes an intelligible system of notations on a material substance); writing is the name of the structure always already inhabited by the trace". Writing is always already inhabited by the trace that constitutes meaning, but not by speech. Rather than writing being a derivative form of signification, secondary to speech, it is the structure that makes speech possible, as it accommodates the play of traces. This idea was developed from an interpretation of the work of Sigmund Freud – in particular his interpretation of dreams. In a break from the belief held since the writings of Plato (and especially in Aristotle<sup>24</sup>), Freud saw writing, rather than speech, as the symbol of our mental experiences that we call dreams.

Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure's privileging of speech in *Of Grammatology* (1976) is so important because it is here that Derrida properly developed the notion of the inside and the outside of a system – in this case the system of linguistics as the basis of structuralism. The problem with linguistics, Derrida argues, is that it tries to reach general conclusions by interpreting facts within the systems that determine these facts. In order to do this, linguists need to separate the systems of language and that of writing rigorously. Unless they can do so, they cannot make general assumptions about the system of language, since it would be infected by the contingency of the system of writing which would deny them the possibility of scientific discovery. On this point, Derrida (1976) argues that "the system of writing in general is not exterior to the system of language in general, unless it is granted that the division between exterior and interior passes through the interior of the interior or the exterior of the exterior, to the point where the immanence of language is essentially exposed to the intervention of forces that are apparently alien to its system".

These forces alien to the system must be suppressed by the logos in order to be able to work with stable identities. Saussure's system of language taught us that identities (the stable) are constituted by difference (the unstable). The identities that assume such

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24 In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida quotes Aristotle as follows: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words".

stability at the heart of Western philosophy result from the suppression of the constitutive instability – i.e. which is made exterior to the system while it is in fact immanent. Derrida can assume such instability surrounds the stable identities, because he, like all poststructuralists (and following Saussure), regards identity as constituted by difference. For Derrida, unlike for his predecessors, the instability of language - what may be called the duplicity of meaning – is a necessary condition for his strategy of undermining Western philosophy's logocentric reasoning.

Therefore, in order to perform his critique of oppositions and to venture into the histories of concepts, Derrida must take a first step outside of philosophy. In other words, what he showed Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger to be incapable of or insensitive to is precisely the task he sets himself. But, if such illustrious thinkers were incapable of stepping outside philosophy, how could Derrida manage it?

In this case, by introducing (however not yet by name) his '*double strategy*', "which consists in conserving in the field of empirical discovery all these old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use. No longer is any truth-value attributed to them; there is a readiness to abandon them if necessary if other instruments should appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficacy is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces" (Derrida 1978:284).

As Descombes (1980:33) explains, the double strategy cannot be the doing of the 'deconstructor' alone; the duplicity which makes the game possible must already be inherent to the language. This is why Derrida understands the instability of language as a necessary precondition of undermining logocentrism.

Derrida subsequently introduced the notion of *différance* into his work, which he notoriously claimed is neither a word nor a concept (Derrida 1991:63) – allowing him to step outside the language of philosophy because *différance* cannot be given full meaning. This is the case because signs themselves don't carry a fixed meaning, but rather consist only of traces. These traces are traces of difference that interact in a play of difference in which meaning is constituted. This play of difference never stops and therefore the generation of meaning never stops. For this reason, meaning itself can never be final – can, in fact, never 'arrive' – but is always deferred. "As soon as a certain meaning is generated for a sign, it reverberates through the system. Through the various loops and pathways, this disturbance of the traces is reflected back on the sign in question, shifting

its 'original' meaning, even if only imperceptibly" (Cilliers 1998: 45). Similar to the critique of the self-conscious subject, Derrida argues that the meaning of a sign, the signified, is never fully present, not even in the spoken language, as Saussure believed. It is this notion of deferral that allows Derrida to deconstruct the traditional privileging of the present – the significance of which will become clear.

But *différance* is not merely deferral:

[D]ifférance, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only deferral, lateness, delay, postponement. In the incoercible *différance* the here-now unfurls, an absolute singularity, singular because differing, precisely, and always other, binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in *imminence and in urgency* (Derrida 1994:31, author's emphasis)

Van den Adel (2001:19) elaborates on Derrida's substitution of an 'a' for the 'e' in the word difference, and shows how Derrida uses this change to express the movement of difference. The change is merely graphic, since it cannot be heard in the articulation, which subtly points to the fact that we are never able to grasp difference, we are always too late. It also points to the 'emptiness' of letters and words taken by themselves. It is constituted by the traces of the past and the future: in this way, the present is constituted by exactly that which it is not. As will be shown in chapter 5, Barthes also spoke of myths emptying signs, but in a negative way. He proposed that signs had to be filled with stable meaning, as this, he believed, was what true meaning entailed. Derrida shows, against this structuralist approach, that signs are *never* filled with meaning. This notion of *différance* carries significant tensions: it is both active and passive, constitutive of and constituted by the system.

The temporal element of *différance* is thus clearly implied by the notions of deferral and movement in general. But the play of traces also require space 'between' signs. This means that there is already a notion here of the system having space which is not part of the elements themselves, but is at the same time not outside the system.

The distinction between the interior and the exterior of the system implies a further important dimension problematised by Derrida: that of the totality of the system. Earlier, Lechte (1994:150) explained that for Saussure, language had to be a kind of totality in order to exist. A breakdown of the totality would result in a breakdown of the stability and

continuity responsible for meaning. In his study of the myths of a particular culture, structuralist Levi-Strauss (in Derrida 1978:288-289) claims to find knowledge of the totality of myths of that particular culture unimportant, because the syntax of a grammar/myth structure is revealed in merely a small part of the system. Totalisation is both impossible and useless, therefore, because the totality can be found in a single element.

Derrida argues that totalisation has lost its meaning not because it is simply too infinite to grasp with a finite glance, but because of that play which occurs within the system. Play constitutes an infinite number of substitutions within the finite closure of the system. "This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field...there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests and founds the play of substitutions" (Derrida 1978:289). This movement of play without a centre, Derrida calls *supplementarity*. It is impossible to determine the supplement, the sign that takes the place, because it always adds itself in the absence of the centre, there is always something more in the system, which is created by this movement of supplementarity. The play disrupts the present. "The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain" (1978:292). But play should be seen as preceding the opposition between presence and absence: being begins with the possibility of play before it is caught up in the opposition of presence/absence.

The disruption of play stands in opposition to the restricted economy of a Hegelian system (McGowan 1991: 93). In such a system, nothing is wasted. Nothing is invested if not for a profit. Anything that might be expended is re-appropriated by the movement of dialectics into the presence. Such an economy, Derrida maintains, must suppress the radical difference in its other in order to incorporate it into the system.

The significance of the event as the disruption of the system and subsequently of such a restrictive economy becomes evident in Simon Critchley's (1999:61) reading of Derrida. He names the event as that which allows for the *ethics* of deconstructive reading. On Critchley's reading, one becomes acutely aware of the importance of *closure* in Derrida's work – the closure that is disrupted by the event. Critchley distinguishes between spatial and temporal closure. Spatially, one would instinctively think of the closure of a circle. Temporally, closure is reached at the end of a process (Critchley 1999:62). On both levels, closure should be understood as a limit which makes that which is inside and outside of the closure visible as inside and outside (63). Critchley traces the development of the term

'closure' in Derrida's work from a technical term referring to a finite totality, to a notion with very specific implications in his work (69). In 1967, for instance, Derrida starts referring to closure as a 'problem'.

Critchley (1999:70) identifies the problem of the double-bind – of being at the same time within a tradition but achieving breakthroughs from the tradition – with the problem of closure in Derrida. Derrida's critique of Freud and Foucault which points out the problem of closure in their work, exhibits a tension whereby the closure is transgressed (by pointing it out) but at the same time restored (by pointing to the impossibility of its transgression). This, according to Critchley (73), leaves the text on the limit between belonging and not belonging.

So should we understand this limit spatially, as the limit of a circle for example? No, says Derrida, the limit is invaginated, folded back upon itself (Critchley 1999:73). Philosophy traditionally envisions the limit as a circle, because it desires territorial totality and closure. It wants to separate philosophy and non-philosophy, the inside and the outside (74). The function of deconstructive reading, then, is to leave the text as a flawed body. A body that is unable to reduce all the marks of alterity within itself. Because the text is flawed, it cannot separate the inside from the outside, or situate itself inside or outside the tradition of logocentrism. The flaws of alterity within the text, are the traces that Derrida refers to. He formulates the idea of the spatial and temporal closure of the deconstructive reading as follows:

This trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing. The outside, "spatial" and "objective" exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the gramme, without differance as temporalisation, without the non-presence of the other inscribed within the meaning of the present, without the relation to death as the concrete structure of the living present...The presence-absence of the trace (Derrida 1991:42-43).

This problem of closure is also echoed in Derrida's various definitions of deconstruction. Because deconstruction is associated with the process of interpretation and thus analysis, it is often believed to be a method of some sort. But Derrida (1991:273) himself famously declared that deconstruction is not – and could never be – a *method*. A method is a tool which is decided upon in advance. When an interpreter approaches a text

with a method, she knows in advance what she will do; there is no space for the undecidable moment – i.e. when the interpreter has to take responsibility for a decision. Method prohibits that. The systematic nature of method therefore implies closure. As Beardsworth (2000 in Royle 2000: 4) writes: “For Derrida...this is irresponsibility itself”.

Sim (1999:31) writes that deconstruction relies basically on three assumptions. The first follows logically from Derrida’s train of thought as explicated in the lecture discussed above: that is, that language is an unstable system composed of signs. Secondly, because of this instability signs are seen as having indeterminate meanings. This indeterminacy leads to the third assumption, namely that no method of analysis or interpretation can claim to have a definitive interpretation of a text. Interpretation is, therefore, “a free-ranging activity more akin to game-playing than to analysis” (Sim 1999:31). This allows deconstruction to question all assumptions and value judgements purportedly based on solid and scientific analysis. As we saw, the aim of deconstruction is not to find the ‘true meaning’ of a text. Rather, it questions the autonomy of a text from the structures which gave rise to it (Williams 2001:114) – an autonomy and totality which is necessarily assumed by every textual analysis.

This does not mean that deconstruction aims at destroying every single belief in a destructive form of nihilism – as is often claimed.

Derrida emphasised this point in a lecture he gave in America (1986) where the criticism of his alleged ‘relativism’ is perhaps most fierce. In the lecture (in remembrance of his good friend, Paul de Man), he wanted “to demonstrate...on which side – their [De Man’s and Dominato’s] side – is situated not insolence but tolerance, the taste for reading and well-argued discussion, the refusal of arguments resting on authority and academic dogmatism. In short, to borrow Wellek’s own words, the pursuit of ‘the very concepts of knowledge and truth’ that he accuses us of destroying” (Derrida 1986b:12).

One of Derrida’s strongest and most eminent critics has been the German philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, who, like Wellek, believed that Derrida “does not belong to those philosophers who like to argue” (in Flemming 1996:174). Habermas interpreted deconstruction as reversing the primacy of logic over rhetoric, thus abandoning rational argumentation altogether. Poststructuralism’s criticism of structuralism’s reliance on rationality would seem to support Habermas’ intuition. Derrida’s critique, Habermas believed, was not based on analysis, but rather on a critique of style. It follows then that any interpretation or understanding of a text is (or can be) false.

Flemming (174) describes Derrida's angry reaction to these claims, which included his assertion that he has never contested that "there are and that there should be truth, reference, and stable contexts of interpretation". He makes the point even clearer in an interview with Kearns and Newton (in Easthope 1988:238). Asked how he would select some interpretations as better than others, Derrida explains that he is not a pluralist and that he would never call all interpretations equal. The task of selecting is not his, however. Some interpretations are more powerful; they account for more meaning, and will be selected by a process of differentiation, rather than by a criterion of right and wrong. The tension between accepting that one interpretation has more meaning than another, and his view that the rational subject is not in full control or fully self-aware in deciding which interpretation wins out, will become very important in the discussion of memory and inheritance in chapter 4.

The claim that deconstruction abandons rational argumentation is implicitly a claim that Derrida is attempting to exit from the philosophy of the subject – and from this point of view his work is deemed unethical. On the contrary, as should become evident in my own use of the work of Derrida's work, deconstructive thinking can be underscored as an ethical pursuit that can only be described as positive in the most important sense of the word – even if it does not belong within the philosophy of the subject.

In the same vein, Williams (2001:111) explains that those critics of Derrida who simplistically assert that he abandons the subject itself, misunderstands his intentions. Derrida points to the *impossibility* of breaking with the metaphysical underpinnings of subjectivity as conceptualised by Western philosophy without considering the conditions of possibility that make these conceptualisations possible. These are precisely the questions that deconstruction asks, she argues; questions as to the conditions of possibility of, and the constitution of subjectivity. This new line of questioning is what separates deconstruction from prior attempts at demolishing the subject and Western philosophy. This is also what separates deconstruction from other forms of textual analysis.

Royle (2000:7) claims that what separates deconstruction from other forms of textual analysis is the fact that deconstruction has nothing to do with texts. "A widespread misunderstanding...is that deconstruction has to do, not with experience or real life or 'reality'..., but with language and, in particular, with texts". Deconstruction concerns itself with traces, rather than words. This is the case because language is not something separate from the world describing the world. As Derrida writes:

a text is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) – all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (1991: 256-257).

This understanding of the text as an open system is central to the link that has been established between his work and the theory of complex systems, as will be argued in greater detail shortly.

As Derrida (1986) himself has explained, it is hardly possible to discuss deconstruction as a concept, because it involves something of an auto-interpretative function. It is always everywhere at work, and can therefore not be grasped within a meta-discourse or a metanarrative. “If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical, and economical as a password, I would simply say and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue* – both more than a language and no more of a language. In fact, it is neither a statement nor a sentence. It is sententious, it makes no sense if, at least as Austin would have it, words in isolation have no meaning. What makes sense is the sentence. How many sentences can be made with ‘deconstruction’?” (15). Once again, Derrida would remind us that the deconstructive process, like *différance*, is built into rational structures, is therefore always already at work: it does not stand outside of rationality (Flemming 1996:175), and relies upon it, even as it undermines traditional understandings of rationality.

The ethics of deconstruction is underscored by the denial of the present articulated in the notion of *différance*. Intuitively, we rely on our present experience for certainty, particularly as we readily acknowledge that neither the past nor the future could possibly be a source of certain knowledge. We can never be certain of it, because we are not present within it. Derrida’s point is that we (like meanings) are never fully present, and therefore we cannot be certain of anything. As Cilliers (1998:139) explains, the ethical importance of the deconstruction of the present lies in the fact that it engages us to involve both the past and the future in order to understand the meaning of something, because meaning is not caught in the present. Even once we have engaged the past and the future, however, certainty will continue to elude us. What Derrida suggests is that, because

meaning is not self-evident, we must take responsibility for *deciding* meaning, in other words for deciding the undecidable.

The logic of deciding the undecidable echoes the logic of the ethical responsibility implied by poststructural ethics as mentioned in chapter one. There it was argued that we cannot blindly pursue some external ethical code, but that we should learn to treat events in their singularity and decide what is ethical in every separate moment. As Cornell (2000:106) explains in the context of ethics and the law: “For me, a truly non-violent relationship to the other would invoke this recognition of the other as absolutely unique and singular and this no legal system can ever achieve, precisely because it is called to make for evaluations. It is this nonviolative relationship to the other that I call the ethical relationship”.

### **2.3 A theory of complexity**

One of the implications of poststructuralism (and related movements such as pragmatism and hermeneutics) was that theorists would have to stop searching for foundations (because foundations were deemed stabilising origins), but rather search for ways to deal with a pluralist world (Rasch and Wolfe 2000:3). The problem was often that movements like poststructuralism – even when they aligned themselves with broadly leftist positions – destroyed many of the traditional grounds for left-wing rhetoric. Feminism, for instance, argued for the freedom of women on the modernist basis of the autonomous, rational individual. Similarly, in the context of the question of group identity, the use of poststructuralism often led to claims that identities were all unstable signifiers. Racism and ethnic conflict were dismissed as issues based on identity-related specificities that actually ‘do not exist’ (Chow 2002: 179). But, as was argued in chapter 1, the reality of people’s existence cannot be theorised into obscurity. Racially motivated attacks still take place. As soon as the basis of their criticism was problematised, however, many radical political discourses lost their confident position (Rasch and Wolfe 2000:6). As a way out of this impasse, social theory began borrowing tools from other disciplines.

In their book, *Observing Complexity* (2000:8), Rasch and Wolfe suggest that, although systems thinking had already emerged as a tool for political and philosophical thought, its use could be expanded significantly. They base this suggestion on what they see as the unresolved tension between knowledge and action, or the disjunction between system and environment, language and referent. This necessary disjunction should not mean that action cannot be informed. It should not imply, therefore, that there can be no basis from

which to argue for one political action over another. It should instead open up the possibility of political pluralism that does not succumb to a form of relativism or nihilism.

What is systems thinking? Before answering this question, it is perhaps wise to start with the term 'system' as it is used here. As it is a term that is used widely in both science (Marchal 2003:84) and in philosophy of late, it is difficult to define the concept broadly enough to be sufficient for all these different disciplines. Hall and Fagen (2003:63) define it as "a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes".

While Rasch and Wolfe (2000:6) describe systems theory as something of an antidote to the difficulties caused by postmodernism's critique of foundationalism, Midgley (2003:xxii) calls one strand of systems thinking, *general systems theory*, a welcome escape route from reductionist science. The latter investigates its subject matter by focusing on a few linear causal relations between phenomena. It seeks to explain phenomena by understanding their smallest identifiable parts (Midgley 2003:xxii)<sup>25</sup>. General systems theory wants to look at things as a unity of organised elements. The organisational component is very important, because it generates properties in the system that a disorganised bunch of elements would not generate. The method is called *general systems theory*, because it wants to study systems as general phenomena that enable us to understand specific systems (xxiii).

An important aspect of general systems theory is its acknowledgment of open systems (Von Bertalanfy 2003:39). Conventional physics only dealt with systems closed off from their environment. Many systems, such as living organisms, are open systems, however. "[An open system] maintains itself in a continuous inflow and outflow, building up and breaking down of components, never being, so long as it is alive, in a state of chemical and thermodynamic equilibrium but maintained in a so-called steady state which is distant from the latter" (Von Bertalanfy 2003:39). Two scientifically observed differences between closed and open systems are especially significant for Von Bertalanfy. Firstly, closed systems are necessarily determined by their initial conditions. One could say that they are dictated by their origin. Open systems, on the other hand, can develop the same result from completely different initial circumstances. Secondly, whereas closed systems abide by the second law of thermodynamics that states that natural phenomena always develop

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25 One should recall the critique of such a form of analysis in chapter one.

towards greater levels of disorder; open systems can restrain the increase of entropy and thus tend towards higher states of organisation (40-41).

In time with general systems theory, the discourse of *cybernetics* developed and introduced the idea of *feedback* (Midgley 2003:xxiii). The significance of feedback lies in the system's ability to regulate itself. A receptor receives a stimulus that is sent to the effector. The effector responds, and this response is sent back to the receptor that in turn monitors the effector's response.

Also in the mid-twentieth century, the discourse of *complexity* developed. The purpose of systems thinking is indeed often described as a means of dealing with complexity (Von Bertalanfy 2003:38), a description similar to that of Rasch and Wolfe (2000). Cilliers (1998:9) describes a complex system as one that cannot be reduced to a simple form. This means that, as with general systems theory, analysis as a method would be insufficient in explaining this system, since analysis aims at breaking up a system into simpler parts. A complex system is constituted by sets of non-linear interaction and feedback loops rather than by the elements themselves (Cilliers 1998:3).

Cilliers (1998:10) identifies two important features of complex systems, both of specific significance for the argument made in this thesis. With his approach to the modelling of complex systems, he identifies significant relations between the complexity perspective and that of poststructuralism (80).

The first important feature of complex systems is that of *representation*, in other words, the way in which the system generates meaning from the information obtained by it (58). Cilliers (1998:11) suggests that we should understand representation in complex systems as distributed (as opposed to the traditional theory of representation which assumes a one-on-one correspondence between, for example, a linguistic sign and that to which it refers). Distributed representation means that the elements of a system does not have meaning because they correspond to something outside the system, but rather acquire meaning from their relationship with other elements in the system – as in Saussure's theory of language. This is the only theory of representation that can accommodate meaning in a complex system (11).

Importantly, however, the fact that meaning is generated within the system does not mean that there is no relationship between the inside and the outside of the system.

Meaning is a “process” (11), he argues, which involves not only inside and outside elements, but also the history of the system.

As is evident from the earlier discussion, Derrida’s understanding of language is also one that rejects a correspondence theory of meaning. What is more, he does not regard language as transparent (Cilliers 1998:80). The meaning of a word is not present to the word; rather it is constituted by the play of difference and signification within the system. Because meaning is distributed, the ability of the system to represent depends in part on how the system can interact with its environment. It is never possible to fully analyse these interactions and therefore to understand the system completely. In fact, the best one can do is to take “snapshots” of the system, acknowledging that our efforts to capture the essence of the system cannot be anything more than subjective and momentary interpretations. Because the system is always changing, and because of the non-linearity of the interactions between elements, we can never give a snapshot of the system the status of a ‘final’ or ‘essential’ interpretation (80-81).

The second important feature of complex systems is their ability to *self-organise* (89). Cilliers (1998:90) provides the following definition: “The capacity of self-organisation is a property of complex systems which enables them to develop or change internal structure spontaneously and adaptively in order to cope with, or manipulate, their environment”. An example of a system that is able to self-organise is language (91). Language must have structure in order to be used as a means of communication. At the same time, language must be able to adapt to the changing circumstances of its users in order to remain functional. But change cannot be the choice of an individual; it must be the result of the interaction between many individuals using the same language. Self-organisation is in fact the result of a high level of non-linear interactions (91). In addition, self-organising systems increase in complexity (92). The system has to store (‘remember’) previous information in order to compare current information with it. It must have some form of memory, therefore, in order to do more than simply mirror its environment (92). Memory implies selective forgetting. In terms of the system this means that information that is not used disappears, creating patterns of representation. “Self-organisation is only possible if the system can remember *and* forget” (92).

In addition to these two important features, Cilliers (1998:3-5) identifies ten characteristics of complex systems that will help us in using this model in the present argument.

- Complex systems have a large number of elements.
- These elements must interact dynamically, even if the interaction is merely the transference of information. The complex system consequently changes over time.
- These interactions are rich, in the sense that one element can influence a number of others and can be influenced by many other elements.
- The interactions are non-linear – a small cause can have a large effect.
- Although interactions can have a wide influence, the direct route of the interaction is short.
- The interactions have loops that can be positive or negative.
- Complex systems are open systems that interact with their environment. For this reason, it is often difficult to identify the border of the system.
- A complex system cannot be at a state of equilibrium. Energy must always be flowing through the system to ensure its survival.
- Complex systems have a history.
- An element of the system is not conscious of the workings of the system as a whole. The elements themselves are simple, and create complexity through their interactions. For this reason, the focus with complex systems will not be on individual elements but on the structure of their interaction.

## **2.4 The ethics of deconstruction**

In the different approaches to complex systems as well as in the earlier discussions of structuralism and poststructuralism, the significance of the ‘outside’ has repeatedly come to the fore. This should not come as a surprise, as Cornell (1992:1) explains (following Derrida), because the establishment of any system necessarily establishes a beyond to that system – that which is outside. This is the case because a system must exclude something in order for meaning to come about. As we have seen, Derrida is critical of a system such as that of Hegel, because it reduces all that is other to the sameness of the system. Echoing the formulation used at the end of chapter one, we can say that this is a system that does not ‘think the difference’. The outside is encompassed by the system, in order to secure the system. Cornell (1992:2) argues that the need for Derrida to understand a system as something that does not encompass the outside has an ethical motivation. Derrida continues to remind us that the establishment of a system necessarily

implies its beyond, because ethics is precisely the attempt to heed the other's (the outside's) call.

Elsewhere, Cornell (2000:101) describes her understanding of the ethical as paradoxical. This "marks it as a limit principle" (101), she argues. Following the later Wittgenstein, she argues that the limit of a system, or the divide between the inside and the outside, can never be conceptualised (Cornell 2000:101). We can never know this limit in itself. The only access we have to knowledge of the limit is through metaphor. But a metaphor necessarily points to something beyond itself. Likewise, we do not have direct access to ethics, and can only know it through a system of morality, which in turn is limited by ethics. In the same way it is impossible to conceptualise the boundary between the inside and the outside of justice (another one of Cornell's limit principles). We can only describe justice in terms of the law, and in particular in terms of the limits that justice imposes on the law. We know justice only through the workings of the law, and therefore never fully.

The great paradox that intrigued Wittgenstein, according to Cornell (2000:102), was the impossibility of conceptualising the boundary of a semantic system without running up against the limit of philosophical explanation, and subsequently the limit of sense itself. This is the case because in order to conceptualise the boundary of the semantic system, one needs to conceptualise the boundary of language – because language needs to be a self-identical form in order to establish the boundary of the semantic system. Philosophy, however, cannot establish the boundary of language (because it can only work through language), and therefore language cannot be understood as a self-identical form. The result is that language, the very tool that we use to demarcate our life-world, in fact evades our grasp just as we attempt to use it in order to conceptualise.

Cornell (103), reading through Derrida, understands this paradox as a utopian moment. The fact that we cannot conceptualise our form of life, the fact that meaning cannot be demarcated, means that we have endless possibilities of re-imagining this form of life. In terms of feminism, for instance, the impossibility of limiting the meaning of the semantic system that is used to describe women means that women have the opportunity to negotiate new meanings in terms of which to understand themselves. In terms of the argument of this thesis, it would provide for the opportunity to create new meanings for the concept of group identity, or even a specific group. The argument made by Paul (1998:2) in chapter one, that group identity must be clearly defined – the limit between that which is

inside and outside clearly established – in order for it to be recognised, is countered by this reading of Cornell.

This utopian moment Cornell (2000:103) calls the “beyond within”. In Derrida, this moment is given an explicit ethical motivation. It is that space which Critchley (1999:61) earlier described as the ‘event’. The beyond within provides the possibility for the ethical moment (Cornell 2000:104), as it forecloses the possibility of decidable meaning.

## **2.5 Complexity theory and poststructuralism**

On the subject of linguistic systems, Derrida writes:

The play of differences involves synthesis and referrals that prevent them from being at any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each “element” – phoneme or grapheme – is constituted with reference to the trace in or of the other elements of the sequence of the system. This linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces (Derrida 1981b 37-38).

This understanding of a system not in terms of its positive elements but rather in terms of the relationships between the elements, is the basis of the close affinity that Cilliers (1998) establishes between *différance* and deconstruction on the one hand, and complex systems on the other. But there are other similarities: both complexity theory and poststructuralism regard systems as open systems. Memory or the past play a significant role in both descriptions: in poststructuralism, the deferral of the present means that we need to engage with the past (and the future) in order to make decisions and think about ourselves and our life world; in complexity the system likewise needs to engage with its memory in order to self-organise and adapt to its environment. Because meaning is caught in a process of play in both a poststructuralist and a complex system, a description of the system can never be final.

Cilliers’s project to show the analogies between complexity theory and poststructuralism is motivated by his belief that poststructuralism is a style of thinking that

is sensitive to the complexity of its object of study (22). “Post-structuralism has a more ‘playful’ approach [than the general scientific method], but this attitude has nothing childish or frivolous about it. When dealing with complex phenomena, no single method will yield the whole truth. Approaching a complex system playfully allows for different avenues of advance, different viewpoints, and, perhaps, a better understanding of its characteristics” (23). In chapter one an argument was made in favour of diversity on the basis of the fact that complex phenomena need to be approached with tools that can cope with complexity. Poststructuralism, aided by the insights of complexity theory, seems able to do this.

Cilliers (1998:46) equates Derrida’s term ‘trace’ with the term ‘weight’ used in neural network theory (which sees the brain as the prime example of a complex system). The weights of the relationships between neurons perform the function of memory. “Because of the ‘distributed’ nature of these relationships [a property of complex systems in general], a specific weight has no ideational content, but only gains significance in large patterns of interaction”. In the same way, traces have no content in themselves, but only gain ‘weight’ in their interactions that result in meaning. Inversely, *différance* can be used to describe the dynamics of complex neural networks, Cilliers suggests (46). *Différance*, it was explained, refers both to difference and deferral. The play of *différance* supports the poststructuralist notion that words have no meaning or significance in themselves; it is the interaction between elements of the system that produces meaning. In the same way, elements of a complex system gain meaning from the position that they occupy in the system. *Différance* is valuable in helping us understand how such ‘weight’ or meaning is constituted, without ever being finally constituted.

The significance of difference as constitutive of meaning is therefore a central aspect of both poststructuralism and complexity. It explains why a complex system must be investigated in its complexity: to analyse the elements without engaging with their interactions within the network is senseless because the interactions are precisely what gives the elements meaning. This is a significant point to make, because it flies in the face of the traditional understanding of being as self-identical, with difference seen as secondary to identity. Identities in a complex system have significance or meaning only in as far as they differ from other elements in the system. Cilliers (2005:3) writes: “As humans we discover our meaningfulness through being part of the social system. Our position in that system can only be understood in terms of how we differ from others. If I were identical to someone else, I would have no separate, meaningful existence or identity”.

An implication of this notion can be observed in the context of cultural identity as a complex system. Even though elements of the system are relatively 'simple' in terms of the complexity of the system as a whole, we can observe that there are some elements that have more 'importance' within the system than others. For example, in the Afrikaner group, some members are indeed called 'icons'. These icons – frequently stars of popular Afrikaner culture – have a more significant position in the group than other mere followers in the context of cultural production. Their iconic status even seems to suggest that they carry within them a pattern of what the system as a whole represents, or ought to represent. This is of course not the case: no person contains what could be called the 'true Afrikaner-gene'. Not even the fact that she has an ability (writing, singing, telling jokes) or personality trait upon which the iconic status is based, makes the status inherent. It is her position within the network of the system that gives her (and that ability) importance – the meaning of this element is constituted in the network of relations it finds itself in. Similarly, Derrida argues that, even though a text has no inherent truth or one true interpretation, it does not follow that meaning is completely arbitrary – or that he is a pluralist (in Easthope 1988:384). It does mean that, because of the play of differences within the text, some interpretations will have more significance, more meaning even, than others.

More meaning also results from greater complexity. If an element gains meaning from its difference from other elements, it means that if the element found itself in a network with fewer elements (where its interaction was limited to those elements), it would have 'less meaning'. This can be illustrated by the example of a guessing game: if I had to guess an object and could only ask questions about what the object is not, the more characteristics I could thus eliminate (because of the difference between the secret object and the objects in my questions), the more meaning the object gains for me. In a complex system, however, the 'object' has no inherent meaning that an observer can find through a game of elimination; the meaning of the object is rather gained from the differences. An element that finds itself in a system where the elements are many and the interactions complex, will have more meaning (just as my knowledge of the secret object will have more meaning if more eliminations are possible).

The play of *différance* within the system of language also affects the reflexivity of the language. As words are used, their meanings transform. The transformation of the meaning of the word 'identity' has been documented here. What is more, because language is an open system, it interacts with its environment. The issues prevalent in the environment therefore have an impact on the language itself (Cilliers 1998:124) – 'identity'

as a word, for example, has evolved into a political tool as a result of the political climate within which the language has evolved. In a complex system, reflexivity operates as feedback loops, a notion introduced above.

Complexity can also help us explain how this understanding of language can accommodate the relationship between the world and language. In other words, if language is not a mirror of the world but a system of difference within which meaning is constituted in the relations between elements, how is it possible for us to use this language to describe the world – something we indeed do all the time? Cilliers (1998:125) turns to self-organisation as a property of complex systems to explain this phenomenon. “The important point...here is the fact that information from the environment has a direct, though non-determinate, influence on the system; it causes certain changes in the system, but it does not fully determine the nature of these changes” (125, author’s emphasis). It is non-determinate, because the system has the ability to store some information and reject the rest. This is, in fact, what is called the history of the system. The system of language does not mirror the world, but finds itself within the world and receives information from the world. In order to survive, the system ‘deals’ with the information in such a way as to enable it to adapt to the environment.

Finally, it may be noted that both poststructuralism and complexity theory are targets of the general criticism launched against postmodernism that it is a form of relativism. Such criticism is often based on misunderstandings of the central notions of these approaches. The assertion that meaning is unstable is understood to mean that meaning is random; that the system is complex as that it is chaotic. It is consequently asserted that any description of the system can only be provisional. It is hoped that the descriptions provided here of both approaches will go some way towards clearing up the misunderstandings that lead to such scepticism.

## **2.6 The ethics of complexity**

It was previously explained that Cornell (2000) understands deconstructive ethics as the ‘outside’ of a system which always already inhabits the ‘inside’ and therefore disallows for meaning (which relies on closure) to be decided. This undecidability gives us the opportunity to always renegotiate the meaning of terms and, indeed, to find the ethical again in every moment without having recourse to a system of ethical rules, since such a system cannot be demarcated. Complexity provides us with a similar and helpful perspective.

It has been argued that a complex system can never be analysed by ridding it of its complexity: as the meaning of the system resides in the complex interactions between elements, reducing the system's complexity means the system literally loses its meaning. In the same way, complexity theory will argue that ethics cannot be reduced to a set of rules in an attempt to rid the ethical dilemma of its diversity. In other words, the 'problem' of diverse ethical viewpoints should not be 'solved' by eliminating the diversity with the creation (or the discovery) of a universal set of ethical principles. Such diversity is a result of the fact that different groups of people think about the world and indeed about ethics in very different ways. Trying to eliminate this diversity by creating a single ethical meta-narrative, cannot but destroy any possibility of the truly ethical, because it necessitates closure. And closure, we saw in the discussion on Derrida, is what needs to be disrupted in order to make the ethical possible. Diversity is therefore not a 'problem', but rather an opportunity.

But, it is often argued, we must find such a meta-narrative, or we will inevitably find ourselves in a fragmented world where "anything goes". As with the critique of Derrida's deconstructive understanding of texts as arbitrary, such criticism misses the point.

Cilliers (1998:116) argues that the notion that a diverse society will result in such an "anything goes" situation is not a legitimate criticism of complexity. The basis of this fear of fragmentation is the belief that diversity will create isolated discourses, and that it is precisely because of such isolation that it would become impossible to 'control' the production of ethical rules within an isolated group. This is not the case, Cilliers argues, because a complex society is a network. Complete isolation is, therefore, impossible. "Local narratives only make sense in terms of their contrasts and differences to surrounding narratives" (116). In addition, representation in complex systems are distributed. A single element cannot represent the pattern of the entire system (116-117) – the argument made earlier about cultural icons applies. Because representation is distributed, many elements are always involved. The elements themselves form part of different patterns, not simply the pattern of, for example, the ethical community in question. This property of complex systems thus forecloses the possibility of isolation. It also reinforces some points made in chapter one. There it was argued that internal diversity – and therefore differences between elements of a system – is important in order for a system to survive. If the differences between elements of a cultural identity are encouraged rather than suppressed, the distributed nature of the system's representation

will be enhanced. That should mean that isolation is minimised, and consequently, one could argue, the threat of fundamentalism.

The significance of not reducing ethics to a set of rules also preoccupies deconstructive ethics. Deconstructionists understand a decision based on a universal set of ethical principles as simply a 'calculation', and therefore really no decision at all. In terms of the discussion of deconstruction above, one could call this calculation a 'method', something Beardsworth (in Royle 2000:4) describes as, for Derrida, "irresponsibility itself". It is irresponsible, because it allows for no disturbance, nothing from 'outside' the method to enter into the equation. Simultaneously, it allows for no responsibility to be owned by the one making the decision.

In deconstructive ethics, responsibility is defined by personal dilemma, by taking responsibility for a decision that cannot be calculated; deciding the undecidable. Deconstructive ethics and the ethics of complexity find each other on the basis of their shared recognition that ethics cannot be reduced to a set of rules, but must remain singular and local. This does not entail not following rules at all, it rather means that rules should be followed responsibly. In other words, the responsibility for the decision does not lie with the rules but with the one making the decision to follow them (or disregard them) in any given situation.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

Now that we are familiar with the principles of complexity theory, and understand its relation to poststructuralist thought, we will be able to use the theory to model group identity. Because there is a substantial link between complexity theory and a philosophical school of thought (poststructuralism), it will be possible to situate a model based on complexity theory within a philosophical discourse on identity formation. This is important, since this is an attempt to push the limits of previous efforts to understand identity philosophically.

In chapter 3, the all-important ethical dimension of the inside-outside divide, as encountered in this chapter in the work of Derrida and Cornell, will be explored in terms of the boundary-formation of a group identity modelled as a system. In addition, the question of rationality that arose specifically in the discussion on Derrida, will be approached in terms of the notion of agency.

## Chapter 3

# Redefining group identity

### 3.1 Introduction

In chapter one, it was argued that our intuitive understanding of group identity as something unchanging is inconsistent with a philosophical understanding of the notion. It was further explained that traditional definitions of group identity have become problematic on both empirical and conceptual levels. Chapter one dealt largely with the empirical problems related to the concept and in this chapter, the focus will be on the term identity as it has developed philosophically. Against the background provided in chapter two, the importance of the shifts in the understanding of meaning brought about by poststructuralism should become clear in the context of identity formation.

Once the philosophical development of the concept has been traced, it will be suggested that identity be understood in terms of a relational model. To this end, complexity theory is re-introduced. On the basis of the characteristics of complex systems listed in the previous chapter, group identity is modelled as such a system and some of the implications investigated. It is argued that in order to understand cultural identity as an open and changing concept, the *constitution* of identity needs to be understood. This is not an easy endeavour. Meyer and Geschiere (1999:7-8) write that identity is a notion that must be handled with care, since

it relates so easily to the nostalgia of social scientists...it is precisely this possible confusion between its descriptive and its analytic aspects that can make identity quite dangerous as a notion...notions such as 'culture' and 'identity' have become so much ingrained in intellectual and more importantly, in popular jargon that they will be with us for a long time to come.

This confusion between the analytic and descriptive functions of the notion should always be guarded against. But there is a different potential confusion that is a danger here, and which will again be addressed explicitly in chapter four: that is the confusion between a descriptive and a prescriptive notion. In other words, when group identity is

described as a complex system, is the motivation that this is the *only* way in which group identity can be understood, or is the motivation the belief that this is the most 'useful' way of understanding group identity? The answer is perhaps not a straightforward one. It will be argued that it is indeed possible to model our understanding of group identity in different ways for different purposes. The problem with many of the traditional understandings has been pointed out in chapter one. It will be shown that the characteristics of group identities fit those that Cilliers (1998) associates with complex systems, and therefore it is viable to argue that group identities often represent complex systems. But because alternative understandings are possible, it will further be argued that the complex description of group identity is so useful when dealing with the more controversial and paradoxical features of the notion that it is indeed important to encourage the features of complexity. Specifically, it will be argued that in the case of the Afrikaner, the system of meaning which defined this group was turned into a closed system of meaning (some strategies to this end were described in chapter one), but for the group to survive ('through justice') it must redefine itself in terms of an open and complex system. In other words, the argument has both prescriptive and descriptive elements.

But before making this argument, the reconciliation of another pair of seemingly incompatible notions implied by a discussion on identity needs to be addressed – that of ethics and politics.

### **3.2 The ethics and politics of identity**

Contemporary identity politics is characterised by an acknowledgment of the elusive nature of identity and the significance of the body as an expression of race and gender, amongst other things. In the next section, the transformation of identity theory from an essentialist (and modernist) account to this far more complex notion will be discussed.

However, any argument that adds itself to the identity discourse, as the present argument attempts to do, must acknowledge and engage with the tension between the notions of ethics and politics – traditionally seen as incommensurable. Such an acknowledgment is necessary, as contemporary identity politics seem to conflate ethical and political arguments without attempting to address the tension between them.

Chow (2002:174) may understand contemporary 'identity politics' as the unmasking of the ideological practices preceding knowledge production, but the term has in fact been used in a much more traditionally political sense in a number of discourses. Post-

colonialism, for example, resisted traditional notions of the identity of the other and the cultural hegemony of the West (Ahluwalia 2005:140), while feminists resisted the stereotypical female role implied by tradition. Even though these discourses seem overtly political, one cannot ignore the strong ethical motivation implied by their projects: these discourses are similar in their attempt to free identity from the constraints of the 'philosophy of the same'. In the context of the post-structural notion of ethics these discourses are all motivated by the effort to develop a non-violent relationship with the other. In other words, women's rights may be a political issue, but undermining efforts to assert a fixed identity upon women, is an ethical project.

The ethical and the political make up what Derrida calls the pair of Platonic-Western opposition (Derrida 2001:297). In the traditional view, to be ethical and political at the same time implies a paradox. The ethical is regarded as that which is universal and non-specific, while the political is regarded as a singular and practical issue constrained by its specific context. Whereas ethics traditionally could rely on a universal set of principles to guide its decision making, the political relied on human reasoning, context and, ideally, responsibility. Derrida offers an alternative perspective, however.<sup>26</sup>

He points to three important similarities between ethics and politics. Firstly, both ask the question "What should I do?" and demand subsequent action. But they both emphasise that such action needs to be "as thoughtful and responsible as possible" (296). This entails an unending questioning of every axiom. But, finally, such a questioning *must* always be interrupted, because of the urgency of the responsible decision. In other words, it is never possible to wait for the end of the enquiry before reaching a decision; a decision is not a calculation, it is a risk.

The concept of responsibility that lies at the heart of the similarity between ethics and politics is made both possible and impossible by the structure of urgency.

Without this interruption – and this interruption is what defines the structure of urgency that I am talking about – there would never be a decision or responsibility, but only the deployment consequent to a determinate knowledge, the imperturbable application of rules, of rules known or knowable, the deployment of a programme with full knowledge of the

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<sup>26</sup> This is an important move as Derrida's "politics" has always been a contentious point. Some argue that his philosophy is entirely apolitical, as he destroys all the categories necessary to make a political statement. Others, however, believe Derrida is indeed political through and through – see chapter two.

facts...One must, in some way, arrive at a point at which one does not know what to decide for the decision to be made (Derrida 2001:298).

Why is responsibility both possible and impossible? Because these questions which we call ethical and political are always urgent, but at the same time can always wait. Because they are urgent, we have to answer to our responsibility before we are fully able to do so, when it is still impossible. And because they can always wait for us to find ever more information upon which to base our decisions, our responsibility never ends – we can never fulfil it. (The significance of this point, not only for an understanding of the relation between the political and the ethical, but for understanding the responsibility involved in the formation of identity, will become apparent in the next chapter.)

Derrida names as the most *apparent* difference between ethics and politics their different “rhythms” in relation to urgency (2001:301). Because ethical responsibility is based on universal principles, one should be able to answer immediately, “without getting caught up in an analysis of hypothetical imperatives, in calculations, in evaluations of interests and powers”. Because political inquiry does take such hypotheses and power relations into account, it needs both the time and the courage to gamble. But, writes Derrida, this is merely an *apparent* difference between the two. Every time the ethical and the political are caught up “in a knot”, it is not that two separate concepts are colliding, but rather that what seems purely ethical, unconditional and unaffected by power relations, is made subject to a political interaction. “One should not have to negotiate between two negotiables. One must negotiate the nonnegotiable” (304).

That is the project of this thesis. To negotiate the nonnegotiable that is identity. To interrupt the inquiry. We don't have the luxury of delaying a definition of identity until we know everything about identities, or about the Afrikaner for that matter: We are forced to make a decision urgently in order to engage with the notion and with the practical and political problems that arise out of its operations in the world. In the case of the Afrikaner, it seems that the longer we wait before responsibly dealing with this identity – including its heritage and its future – the more dangerous it becomes. The recent resurgence of old Afrikaner symbols is perhaps indicative of the uncertainty among members of the group as to how they should define themselves. Finding a meaningful and responsible way of talking about group identity and subsequently about Afrikaner identity, is indeed urgent. In a more general sense, it is the case that identities and individuals are violated everywhere

on a daily basis. Their call makes our ethical responsibility urgent, and our definition of identity, political.

This negotiation will be conducted around two specific tensions inherent to the term identity. The first is the tension between the *content* and the *boundary* of identity. This tension finds two applications: earlier philosophers saw identity as something absolutely separate from external objects and influences (although different theorists conceived of 'the external' in different ways). This separation stemmed from the belief in an essence as the foundation of humankind, since such an essence had to be segregated from its contingent and changing surroundings. Absolute separation resulted in a complete disregard for the importance (and the flexibility) of the boundary of an identity.

Even as the influence of the external was acknowledged, theorists remained stuck in the traditional description of boundaries as absolute barriers. This results in theories of meaning that disregard the importance of difference in generating meaning. To reduce the content of a culture or an identity to nothing more than a sign is to have no regard for the way in which meaning is not only created by difference, but actually resides in difference. Once this is understood, a redefinition of boundaries becomes inevitable.

The second tension concerns *agency*: to what extent can we control who we are? Few theorists take an absolutist view on this subject, but a fear of giving up agency has driven most to look for ways to rescue the autonomous agent. It thus remains an important point of discussion.

### **3.3 Towards a relational model of identity**

Contemporary identity politics is the result of a number of developments in philosophy and the social sciences. In this section, the philosophical development of the notion will be traced, while the sections that follow will focus on how the philosophical development influenced the tensions of boundary formation and agency which were mentioned above. Developments in other fields will be discussed briefly where relevant. It should become clear that scholars who seem to support fundamentally different schools of thought, often end up relying on similar foundations.

We will first trace the development of the philosophical understanding of *personal* identity up to its being understood relationally; then, the focus will shift to *group* identity. This jump is qualified on two grounds: firstly, the important aspects of identity thinking

discussed here – the inside-outside divide, essentialism and agency, among others – apply as much to personal identity as group identity in this context. Secondly, group identity theory has only relatively recently become a dynamic field of study. This means that there have been far fewer philosophical arguments on the subject than on personal identity.

Cilliers and De Villiers (2000:226) divide modernist identity theories into the analytical and Cartesian approaches. The Cartesian interpretation of identity, true to the modernist penchant for oversimplification, rests on the assumption that the self has a “timeless, permanent structure...which does not change in a contingent world” (228) – the mind. In order for Descartes to describe identity as something timeless, he is forced to reduce the subject to something that is completely knowable, thereby committing himself to the principle of full determination. This is only possible when an absolute distinction is made between the world on the outside – that which is ever changing and unpredictable, and therefore cannot be measured with accuracy – and the world on the inside, the mind (229).

A similar distinction is found in the analytical tradition: here, only the ‘I’ can be known directly, whereas the external is the object of mere indirect knowledge (230).

Nietzsche’s critique of the modernist subject is worth mentioning (see e.g. Nietzsche 1998). He rejected the idea of human identity being unchanging and fully knowable. He regarded such an idea as far too limiting. Man, for Nietzsche the ever-changing, indeterminable animal rather moves creatively between masks, always reinventing himself. Because man is constituted through struggle and tension, he cannot possibly be a stable and measurable being. At the same time, Nietzsche rejected the Darwinian idea that external conditions determine the subject. He believed that the creative force, the will to power inherent to humans, is the primary force determining their reaction to external conditions. Even though Nietzsche regarded identity as changing, his dependence on a creative force at the core of human identity remains essentialist, and depends on the possibility of humans being perfectly free from external influence. Such a possibility might seem ideal, but, as we shall see, cannot find theoretical support.

In the philosophy of Leibniz, on the other hand, the view of humans as bodies carrying a mind inside, but separate from it, evolved into his notion of humans as “windowless monads” who presented external worlds internally (Stacey 2003:193). The fact that they are windowless means that they cannot be affected by the outside (195). Leibniz’s work therefore represented a form of atomism, in that he sought to find the irreducible elements

of all phenomena – these he called monads (194). Since mind and body are both monads, there can be no duality between them (196).

This approach has been very influential in identity thinking. Connolly (in Frueh 2003:23) writes that

(t)he view of human beings as self-contained unitary individuals who carry their uniqueness deep inside themselves, like pearls hidden in their shells [in other words, carrying the essence of being human], is one that is deeply ingrained in the Western tradition of thought. It is a vision captured in the idea of a person as monad – that is, solitary individual divided from other human beings by deep walls and barriers.

It was precisely because such “deep walls and barriers” divided people, not only from each other but also from the external world as such, that there was no need to study these barriers. Since the boundaries were invisible, the focus could be on the content exclusively.

Stacey (2003:203) reads the development of identity theory as being driven by the paradox of the inside-outside divide. The different understandings of identity offered by different philosophers represent, in other words, different solutions to the same problem, he believes: how to deal with the strange ‘reality’ of humans as having an inner and an outer world. In contrast to these philosophers, he wants to develop a notion of identity that completely eradicates the inside-outside division. He draws on the work of Hegel to support his argument.

Stacey (203) understands Leibniz as having ‘solved’ the ‘paradox’ of the inside-outside divide by seeing reality as a whole, with the inside and the outside (or the body and the mind) equal parts of this whole – as monads. He contrasts this approach with the dualistic Kantian understanding of the paradox. In Kant’s thinking there is both reality which we cannot know and appearances which we can know through the senses.

In Hegel, these ideas were developed to a point where paradox or conflict became the process through which the object arises from the subject-object dialectic (206). For Hegel, nature was a self-organising whole with a regulating and constituting force inherent to it (207). An internal rationality – rather than an external designer – is responsible for nature conforming to its purpose. Mind and matter are only stages in the development of forms – mind being the most organised and developed stage. Everything is part of a whole, the

absolute, which carries attributes of the subjective and the objective. For Hegel, it was impossible to start with the individual subject experiencing the world when one is trying to trace objective judgement. Instead, the world is always already shared (207). Hegel's disregard for the inside-outside divide is evident in his understanding of ethics as neither an entirely natural process nor does it have recourse to a different realm. Rather, ethics results from people's mutual recognition; it is, in other words, social.

Stacey uses the Hegelian system to argue that, when speaking about the constitution of human identity, there is *no inside or outside*. There is no such thing as an internal world, a mind, something 'inside' humans – all of it is part of the Hegelian whole. "Interaction produces only further interaction and is its own reflexive, self-referential cause. There is only process, no system at all. In fact, there is no inside and outside. There is no 'internal world' and there is no social system" (Stacey 2003:5). Even though Stacey does not deny that we experience individuality, he maintains that the individual is in fact social "to the core because the processes of mind are the same as social processes" (17). This he understands as direct interaction between bodies. It neither creates a system, nor is driven by a system as a causal power. Interaction only constructs further interaction. "The patterns that emerge in these self-organising processes are patterns of collective and individual identity at the same time" (17)<sup>27</sup>.

The viability of a position such as Stacey's will be investigated in greater detail later in this chapter with the discussion on boundaries. At this point, it is interesting to keep his position – which he explicitly links to complexity theory – in mind as we approach the relational model of identity suggested here.

Another position critical of the essentialism typical of modernism is offered by Cuypers (in Cilliers and De Villiers 2000:231). He criticises the analytical tradition and offers as an alternative a conception of the person as "a bodily, public and dynamic agent who engages with other persons and the world". A person is partly constituted by the web of relations in which she finds herself. He thus moves away from the typical timelessness of modernist theory by taking historical conditions into account. He writes, "In sum, personal identity as agential identity essentially consists in the narrative unity of the actions of a rational and moral agent in a social setting within a historical condition" (232). Cuypers'

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<sup>27</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that Stacey does recognise power relations within a group where bodies interact and the subsequent processes of inclusion and exclusion (Stacey 2003:326).

theory, however, does not exclude a non-bodily personal identity, and therefore still exhibits a form of essentialism.

His emphasis on the timeliness of the subject is significant however, and points to a fundamental shift in identity thinking associated with poststructuralism. In chapter two, Derrida's notion of *différance* was introduced. The deconstruction of the privileging of the present implied by this notion is what is important here.

Culler's (1983:94) use of the image of an arrow to explain this deconstruction is illuminating in this context. He writes that the arrow cannot be perceived to be in motion when present instants are perceived in isolation. We can only understand the arrow to be in motion if every present instant carries traces of past and future instants. "It turns out that the present instant can serve as ground only insofar as it is not a pure and autonomous given. If motion is to be present, presence must already be marked by a difference and deferral" (95). The present, therefore, is an effect of difference – the difference from the past and the future. Now, if personal identity is understood as a person being fully identical to herself, the identity must be fully present to itself. If not, it cannot be essential in the philosophical sense, since it would not be a complete unity. But if the present is an effect of difference, then that identity itself cannot rely on presence to give it its unity. In the same way that we must differentiate in order to understand the present instant of the arrow as an instant of motion, we need to differentiate in order for an identity to be. The identity only has identity once it has been differentiated from what it is not – there is no unity of presence that can provide such identity. This is why Derrida speaks of identity as always already differentiated.

In response, Cilliers and De Villiers (2000) develop a fully relational understanding of the self. They show that Cuyper's distinction between the body and a separate non-bodily identity, fully present to itself, is not so different from Descartes' *cogito*, in that it cannot escape the idea of an external world upon which the subject acts as a separate identity (232) – and that it cannot escape the metaphysics of presence. As an alternative, they offer a theory of the self as a complex system.

A relational understanding implies for a theory of identity, firstly, that the self is partly constituted by her world/environment as the identity self-organises in response to the information it receives from its environment; and secondly, that the self is inseparable from the body. According to Cilliers and De Villiers (2000:238), there is no way of getting around a theory of identity that interprets the self as a dynamic process, rather than a self-

contained essence, since "we cannot be born pre-programmed with an inherent idea of what it means to be human and of how we have to be in order to get on in the world". Such an understanding of identity undermines the traditional notion of identity as unchanging (despite spatial and temporal changes); in fact, identity is constituted by these very changes. A relational identity is a complex system with all the relevant elements (the body, mind, genes, environment, history, social interaction and status, to name but a few) continuously interacting in a network of relations to constitute – though never finally – an identity. The identity cannot be reduced to any single one of these elements, because none of these elements represent the essence of an identity. There can therefore not be a separation between a non-bodily identity present to itself on the one hand, and the body, or the 'outside', on the other.

Even though both Stacey and Cilliers and De Villiers employ complexity theory in their theories of identity, the important difference between their approaches lies in their understanding of boundaries. Stacey saw the system as having no boundaries – in fact, he argued that there is no system at all. Cilliers and De Villiers, in contrast, not only see an identity as a system but emphasise the importance of the system's having boundaries – even though they do not regard the system as closed. This issue is important enough for us to now discuss it in some greater detail. It should be noted that, because their relational model of identity applies equally to personal and to group identity, the argument will draw examples from both fields.

### **3.4 On boundaries: where do you draw the line?**

Whereas boundaries were practically invisible in modernist theories, identity politics' over-emphasis on boundaries is equally problematic. Connolly (in Frueh 2003:25) showed that contemporary identity politics' focus on boundaries has created an "antinomy between those within and those beyond the boundary of 'us'". The boundary is maintained by equating outsiders with some sort of 'evil'. The problem is that this evil restrains the insiders from interacting with the outsiders, maintaining a static boundary. How can this problem be solved?

A radical approach to identity is to deny, like Stacey (2003), the very existence of boundaries. Stacey, writing from the perspective of a group therapist, argues that the idea that the mind is an 'internal world' inside us developed as a result of growing social pressures. People became aware that there were certain feelings, such as aggression and sexual desire, which society frowned upon. This resulted in the human need to hide

certain feelings and experiences, and thus the myth of the 'inner world' was created (Stacey 2003:6). Stacey rejects the divide between inner world and social system, claiming that there is, in fact, no inside and outside. Boundaries make visible what is inside and outside, and therefore would be redundant in the work of Stacey's conception. His understanding of identity as constituted in a network of relations without any boundaries is a process which he opposes to a system – perhaps because he understands a system as being closed and therefore static.

Cilliers (2001:140) suggests two important aspects of boundaries that need to be considered, specifically when dealing with complex systems. The first, which has already been alluded to, is to understand boundaries not as things that separate, and therefore constrain, but things that *constitute* that which they frame. Boundaries are constraints and constraints are necessary for the constitution of meaning. If an identity had no frames, it would have no meaning. This is the case because, as we saw in chapter two, meaning resides in the difference between a sign and other signs. Against Stacey, one would argue that an interpretation that disregards the inside-outside divide, also disregards the possibility of a meaningful identity, or at the very least, the possibility of talking about identities.

But at the same time, such a frame cannot be closed or static, because meaning was shown to be dynamic and therefore cannot be closed in. Cilliers (2001:140) writes that "...complex systems are open systems where the relationships amongst the components of the system are usually more important than the components themselves. Since there are also relationships with the environment, specifying clearly where a boundary could be is not obvious". It is this notion of the system as a process that leads Stacey to suggest that it is no system at all. Cilliers retains the notion of a system, however. He suggests that the notion of "operational closure" may be useful in understanding the fluid boundary of a complex system. Operational closure implies the emergence of a boundary as a result of the system reproducing itself through self-organisation. In other words, the boundary of a group identity will not be defined by what the group states is the boundary, but by the process of self-organisation by which the identity of the group emerges. It is important, however, not to see such a boundary as either "purely a function of our description nor...a purely natural thing" (2001:141).

The second important aspect of boundaries deals with their spatial orientation. We are inclined to think of boundaries as encircling one whole – for example the boundaries of a

living organism. But an identity or a social system need not operate as such a spatial unity; indeed, it very seldom does. Different parts of the system may operate in separate spaces without the system losing its unity.

To understand this idea, which certainly seems counterintuitive, one might turn to aesthetics. In art appreciation, the 'myth' of the artwork as an organic whole is generally blamed on the act of framing (Culler 1983:199). The emergence of the notion of intertextuality in literary and art criticism began to defy the presumed unity of the artwork. Traditionally, the artwork is understood as a unity if it is able to assert its own position within the work. In other words, the work of art is truly whole if it needs no supplement to account for itself. Derrida uses this notion to work against the artwork. He shows that the self-reflexivity that is necessary in order for a work of art at the same time to 'be' and 'be about itself', can be understood as the age-old attempt to 'know thyself'. This process sees the text/work folding back upon itself (rather than being one with itself), creating the invaginated pocket where the outside becomes inside and the inside is given a moment of exteriority (Culler 1983:205). This means that the work is never an organic whole, because traces of the outside are found on the inside.

A third point that could be added to the discussion of boundaries is the significance of closure as illuminated in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida did much to broaden our understanding of boundaries, precisely because his deconstruction of the inside-outside divide – rather than denial of it – necessitated a redefinition of boundaries. As was explained in chapter two, the establishment of a system necessitates its beyond as that which it excludes in order to have meaning (Cornell 1992:1). For Derrida, the double bind as a strategy of resistance is only possible if we accept the inside-outside divide. In order to stay within the tradition – while also transgressing it – we need boundaries. And the double bind is necessary in turn, as this moment of staying within and transgressing at the same time is the instant of tension, of the nonnegotiable, which carries the possibility of finding something new – that which enables the system to transform. It is, in Pierce's formulation, that which resists beyond our attempts to conceptualise reality or indeed the system (in Cornell 1992:1). If there was nothing beyond our conceptualisation, there could never be anything 'new' to enter the system<sup>28</sup>.

Derrida's use of the term 'invagination' or 'invaginated typology' is fundamental to his understanding of the complex relation between the inside and the outside. His point with

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28 Derrida's critique of Hegel's system as referred to in chapter 2, also applies here.

these notions is that what we believe to be absolutely interior, the vagina, the intestines, are in truth “pockets of externality folded in” (Culler 1983:198). What makes the vagina inner is the fact that it marks off a space differentiated from the flesh and bone, a space where the outer is contained. Culler (1983:198-199) explains:

An external frame may function as the most intrinsic element of a work, folding itself in; conversely, what seems the most inner or central aspect of a work will acquire this role through qualities that fold it back outside of and against the work. The secret centre that appears to explain everything folds back on the work, incorporating an external position from which to elucidate the whole in which it also figures.

A new understanding of boundaries also implies a new understanding of what is regarded as the ‘centre’ of a system, precisely because the centre loses its function as the dictator of the system. This function is lost because the centre, in order to be a centre, must at the same time be inside and outside (see chapter two). But an alternative spatial understanding also implies that “in a critically organised system we are never far away from the boundary...there will always be a short route from any component to the ‘outside’ of the system”, as Cilliers (2001:142) explains. This is significant, because it implies that no part of the system is sufficiently removed from the ‘outside’ so as to be able to isolate itself from its environment. If this is the case, an understanding of the boundary as something that encircles a whole spatial unit, becomes untenable.

Let us consider a practical example.

Nagel (1998:240) describes the close association between ethnic identity and boundaries in the context of a discussion on how the apparent weakening of boundaries amongst white Americans – brought about by for example intermarriages – has paradoxically led to an increase in ethnic identification. This leads Nagel to an important question: “How can people behave in ways which disregard ethnic boundaries while at the same time claim an ethnic identity?” This question can only be answered once boundaries themselves are redefined. Nagel assumes that in order for the content of ethnic identity to be reinforced, the boundary needs to be reinforced. Hence there is an apparent contradiction in the content of an identity becoming stronger while the boundary becomes ‘weaker’. Even if a boundary is not understood as a constraint, but as that which constitutes, the contradiction remains, as Nagel’s work shows.

Her understanding of boundaries is drawn from the writings of Barth (in Nagel 1998: 250-251). In deciphering the constitution of identity, she couples culture with ethnicity, rather than with the social, and develops a more complex theory of culture and ethnicity as a shopping cart. Culture does not 'arrive' from some historical origin, complete and filled with some transcendental meaning (in the same way that personal identity is not a transcendental essence). Instead, she sees ethnic boundaries as the *construction* of the cart, while culture is that with which we fill the cart, the contents of ethnicity. Nagel therefore acknowledges the constitutive nature of boundaries, which is precisely the basis of the contradiction she identifies.

The solution, it is argued here, lies both in the alternative spatial understanding of boundaries suggested above and in the deconstruction of the organic unity of an identity. I would suggest that both notions can help us to explain the ability of these white Americans to operate in different ethnic or identity systems at the same time. If a boundary is understood as an invaginated topology rather than as a circle around an organic whole, it allows for people to reside in different groups at the same time without conceding their identities, because our understanding of what is inside and outside these identities is redefined. Derrida's understanding of closure is such that traces of the outside will and must always reside on the inside; in fact, it will become impossible for a text/identity to define its position as inside or outside. Again, this does not mean that the division does not exist. Rather, it means that the tension between the inside and the outside denies the identity the ability to define itself in terms of absolutes – either absolutely inside or absolutely outside. Nagel's contradiction is settled, because it is premised on the false notion that traces of the outside on the inside will weaken the content and the boundary of the identity. The boundary will only be weakened if it is defined as something which ensures that the outside remains absolutely other. The invaginated boundary is precisely that which frames the exterior on the inside of the identity.

The possibility of residing in different groups at the same time without conceding ones identity, frees the identity from unnecessary constraints. Featherstone (1995:9) comments: "The ease with which people can slip in and out of ethnic identities has been remarked on by a number of commentators. In contrast to the assimilation, or melting pot, models which worked off strong insider/outsider divisions in which identity was seen as fixed, today there is a greater acknowledgement that people can live happily with multiple identities". This is the case, I would argue, because identity is complex.

So when we speak about the boundary of a group identity, precisely what do we mean? If we say that it is neither entirely natural nor merely a description imposed by the observer, then the debate amongst Afrikaners about the boundary of their group misses the point: the boundary is neither that drawn by a bloodline, nor can it be whatever the group names it to be.

And yet, this debate remains useful.

It is argued that a boundary is an emergent property of the system; that it is a function of the process of self-organisation by which the system re-organises itself in order to adapt to and survive in its environment. It could be argued that the boundary of a group emerges every time meaning – and therefore, difference – proliferates. In other words, a boundary emerges when the system is confronted with that which it is not. In the case of a group identity, this means that the system, when confronted with its environment (to the extent that it must differentiate itself from the environment in order to survive, in order to self-organise), allows a boundary to emerge. As a practical example, let us imagine a dinner party with members of different cultural groups present. As long as the conversation is restricted to the mundane, the boundaries between the members of different cultures will in all likelihood be invisible. But as soon as the conversation turns to an issue of contention between different cultural groups, as soon as a member of the group feels the need to differentiate herself from other systems present, she will do so by taking a position, by giving herself meaning in the situation. The more meaning she creates in defining her position, the stronger she differentiates herself from her environment and the clearer the boundary between her and her environment becomes.

The argument is then that boundaries emerge where meaning proliferates. Meaning proliferates where difference multiplies – for example, when the system is confronted by its environment and needs to maintain itself. It could be argued that this understanding of boundaries resonates with our experience of belonging to a group identity. We do not always feel our membership to the same degree; in fact, at times we have no experience of our membership at all. At other times, however, we are intensely aware of such membership – think of the sudden burst of patriotism surrounding big sporting events, or the renewed interest in and passionate defence of a historical figure such as General De la Rey, simply because his status has become the subject of dispute.

This complex understanding of boundaries is not the same as saying that boundaries are fluid, as some cultural theorists claim (see chapter one). Perhaps we are dealing with a

difference in emphasis: in complexity theory, boundaries emerge and disappear; they have more meaning and then less meaning. This does not make them fluid in the sense that they are always equally visible, but ever-changing. It does mean, however, (as would be the case of a fluid boundary), that it is often difficult to 'find' the boundary of a group. It may be visible at times, but it might very well be invisible at others. The boundary is always provisional.

The importance of difference should be underlined once again. Only when there is difference, can a boundary emerge. This not only emphasises the importance of difference between the system and its environment, but also the internal difference of the system. The more meaning the system can generate internally, the more potential exists for the system to maintain itself in its environment by differentiating itself from the environment.

### **3.5 Do we choose who we are?**

There is another tension central to the philosophical debate not only on personal identity, but also group identity. This tension concerns the presence of agency in the construction of identity. The influence that psychology has had on this debate should not be underestimated. Many scholars in this field have attempted to establish to what extent personal identity is influenced by circumstances on the one hand, and by genetics on the other.

According to Frueh (2003:23), the influence of psychology has reached even further. He writes that while the notion of identity was initially reserved for describing the core of the individual, it soon became a metaphor for describing elements of a state. The West generally reified Freudian descriptions of individual identity, and explained social dynamics through reference to personal characteristics. It was not long before politics took over from psychology (24). This meant that, as individual traits were translated to the public sphere, psychological notions became politicised in metaphors. According to Frueh, the significance of this development cannot be overemphasised: the importance that identity politics assumes today stems directly from this move.

Taifel's "Social Identification Theory" (Frueh 2003:24) marks the beginning of this development. Group membership and the value of such a membership became an important component of identity – albeit that the group was still a general description and did not refer to specifics such as ethnicity or race. One of the implications of this development was that identity became a less stable and more temporal notion, since it

now involved external elements that were quite mobile and unpredictable (a development that, as we have seen, was echoed in poststructural philosophy). Associated with the new emphasis on membership of a culture as a component of identity, was the tendency to translate characteristics of individual identity to the level of groups.

At this early stage, writes Frueh, group membership was seen as subjective, with the individual actively interpreting his environment in the process of forming his identity. "The process, however, only includes using the group labels to which they have access in the existing, essentialised social environment. There is no theory of social change or of agency" (24).

At around the same time (1958) the famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz (2002) documented his study of a Balinese village. In his description of his encounter with the village, he attempts to formulate a universal definition of the Balinese temperament. Such an attempt certainly suggests that he understands the group as a unit of meaning. His analysis is restricted to their behaviour towards strangers, and in particular their obsession with cockfighting. The Balinese were of course born into this culture, they did not 'choose' to become members of it. There is no indication from Geertz's analysis that they are coerced into participating in the cultural events, apart from the social pressure of proving your manhood in the case of cockfighting. And yet, his study indicates that all Balinese men participate. It is clear how essentialist analyses like this one led people to believe that membership of a group identity is completely determined.

One would expect the work of a border writer such as Gloria Anzaldua to stand in sharp contrast to the analysis of Geertz. She operates in a discourse that not only acknowledges that hers is a voice of anger and therefore self-consciously subjective, but also disregards the idea of culture as a unified and self-identical whole. And yet, her writing does not reflect this. Anzaldua, like Geertz, sees culture as that which forms our beliefs and our perception of reality by communicating unquestionable concepts to us. What is more, she believes that this culture is formed by those in power, which to her means men (1998:888).

Anzaldua (889) elaborates on her culture's insistence on the virtue of humility – which makes ambition and even achievement, evil. When she laments the women's lack of ambition in the face of these 'cultural truths', she seems to echo Taifel's position, articulated by Frueh (2003:24) as follows: "individuals strive to change their identity in

order to construct the best position relative to those around them”. This is a popular conception.

Hughey and Vidich (1998:196) treat choice in quite a similar way. According to them, an individual can choose her own identity, but this choice is dependant on the personal interests of the individual, the self-esteem provided by a certain group or the group that offers “the greatest victimisation status”.

Nagel (1998:242) makes a similar point when she states that ethnic identity is *both* optional and mandatory. Her point is that, even though we have a choice of identities, we can only choose from the options that are socially and politically defined. In the case of Mexican women, the options defined by their circumstances are so limited as to actually give them no choice. Nagel writes that the limitations on options can be enforced officially or unofficially – in the Mexican’s example, it is enforced both officially by the leaders of the community and unofficially by husbands and fathers. In this regard, Van der Merwe (2003:65) warns that, “the acknowledgement and promotion of the value of cultural diversity should be accompanied by a critical awareness of the way(s) in which cultural differences are often entangled with asymmetrical power relations of oppression and exploitation”.

Most theorists seem to be in agreement about one thing: people find themselves in societies where only a limited set of identities or groups are defined. Identity formation is a matter of choosing one of these identities, or at least, choosing an identity that would place one in an advantageous position towards the established identities and structures.

The relational model of identity, it can be argued, helps us to accommodate this tension between determination and agency in perhaps a more optimistic way. When identity is described as a complex system, it is not at the hands of an external agent for its creation, but the system is equally not in complete control of its own nature. Identity is seen as dynamic. We organise ourselves in order to sustain ourselves in our surroundings – we cannot have meaning in isolation. The elements with which we interact and that contribute to the self, do not work in a deterministic way. As we saw earlier, elements of a system are not aware of the workings of the system as a whole. Rather, the elements of the self and its environment interact and merge as the self adapts to changes in the environment (Cilliers and De Villiers 2000:239).

The crucial point concerning complex systems, however, is that it does not have a centre of control. Self-organisation – which the writers discussed above might identify with the idea of placing oneself in an advantageous position towards the social structure – is not driven by a rational and autonomous agent (not even an internal rationality as Hegel understood it). Of course we use our heads when making decisions. But one should be careful not to assume that we can step outside the system and make ‘objective’ decisions based on our knowledge of the external. This seems to be the position of Nagel, Tajfel and Hughey and Vidall. We don’t have an internal centre that remains unaffected, or less affected by interactions with the environment. Yes, we can think for ourselves, but the very way we think, is constituted through interactions.

This may seem a very pessimistic position. Do we then have no control over who we are?

By way of illustration, I want to quote another piece of writing from Anzaldua. One’s participation in a culture (rather than mere membership) is mostly regarded as *choice*, especially in multi-cultural societies, but one’s sexuality is often regarded as *genetic*. But Anzaldua not only turned her cultural identity upside down, she exercised choice even where choice is regarded as out of the question:

For the lesbian of colour, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behaviour. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent) (Anzaldua 1998:890, author’s emphasis).

Anzaldua made an ‘independent’ decision when she chose to become a lesbian. But the way of thinking that resulted in the choice was constituted relationally. She can make decisions and thereby exercise control, but her mind that makes these decisions is not an autonomous unit unaffected by her engagement with the environment. This is not being pessimistic; in fact, this approach means that through our interaction with the world we can create *and* become more than what the established social order prescribes. Anzaldua is proof of that. She did not merely assume (or ‘choose’) an identity from those on offer in her society – as the previous writers would have it – she became something ‘more’. But she would not have been able to do so had her identity not developed relationally to allow her to make such decisions. Her choice is not an act of absolute subjectivity.

She calls her choice of sexuality an act of rebellion. Why don't all Mexican women react in this way? Because, "the influence that something has on us is not only determined by the size of the cause, our context and history also contribute to the outcome" (Cilliers and De Villiers 2000:239).

Why are so many Mexican women submissive to the dominant culture, then? Because their environment is one-dimensional (in Anzaldua's account – controlled by men), the identities constituted are also one-dimensional. It should be remembered that the process of interaction between elements is always guided by the system's attempt to adapt to its dynamic environment. If the environment is one-dimensional, the adaptation of the system will be limited. The same phenomenon would explain why the Balinese men share an identity seemingly without having any choice in the matter. The argument made in chapter one that complexity and diversity is important is reinforced by Anzaldua's dilemma. If hers was a more complex environment, more women would have been able to adapt in a way which would free them from the constraints of their culture.

Anzaldua's identity probably developed in a different direction because of what she describes as her escape from reality through books. Of course, one cannot decipher and explain the exact development of an identity – "Much of what makes us what we are is not available to consciousness" (Cilliers and De Villiers 2000:240) – but this model certainly provides us with a clue as to the dynamics of our identity. Relationality also explains why different people react differently to similar circumstances and, inversely, why people with similar genetics develop very differently in differing environments.

### **3.6 Identity and complexity**

In addition to helping us to understand boundaries and agency, a complex systems perspective can help us formulate a prescriptive argument. Of particular interest is the relationship between complex systems and their environment. Cilliers (1998:232-233) describes this relationship as follows:

The relationship between the two involves a dialectic which is neither active nor passive. The environment is usually complex in itself, and in order to cope, a complex system needs to do two things: it needs to be able to store information about its environment (memory), and it needs to be able to adapt its structure to changes around it[...]In order to deal with contingencies, the system has to be able to organise *itself*. This self-

organisation relationally incorporates the history of the system (memory) and elements external to it.

This process of representing information and self-organising has been described as the ability of a complex system to construct its future by reconstructing its past (Stacey 2003:327). It is a process of change, and therefore represents continuity and transformation at the same time. In complexity theory, this process is understood as being made possible by the iterative and non-linear interactions which characterise it. These interactions make it possible for small differences to be amplified into major transformations in the system. But difference is necessary. "Transformation is possible, then, only when interaction is characterised by difference", writes Stacey (327). This point follows from the argument (related in the previous chapter) that difference is constitutive of meaning. Transformation is only possible when new meaning is created. And transformation is necessary, because a system needs to adapt in order to survive in a changing environment. In chapters four and five, these two abilities (representing the past and transforming itself) will be tested with regards to group identities. To this end, we will now attempt a description of group identities as complex systems.

An important consideration when modelling complex systems, as Cilliers (1998:5) points out, is that one needs to *frame* one's description of the system. This relates to the question of the descriptive and prescriptive notions of identity. In the light of the fact that an observer must necessarily frame his description in one way or another, a description can never be purely descriptive. A normative element is implied by the very description itself.

In the case of the Afrikaner, the description is first of all framed around the group identity which forms around a cultural community. The elements of the system are the individual members of this group. The elements, or members of the group are simple relative to the complexity of the system as a whole. If I were to step closer and limit my frame to one member only, that member could be a complex system in itself, however. In the context of this description, they are mere elements, but their own complexity should not be disregarded. In the same way, if I chose to frame the discussion around a multicultural society, each group identity would become an element in a larger complex system.

Empirically, the definition of the Afrikaner group has been a highly contested issue. The question seems to be whether the group should define itself in terms of the use of the

Afrikaans language, in terms of a racial classification or simply on the basis of voluntary membership – whoever regards himself as an Afrikaner, is an Afrikaner. I would suggest that the argument here should steer clear of these very political issues. What is more, the reinterpretation of boundaries that is supported by the complexity argument, renders an exclusive decision unnecessary. It was argued earlier that boundaries emerge as a result of the meaning generated by interactions in the group. The following description of this group will attempt to trace these interactions, rather than try to define the group in terms of its boundary.

Let us now consider the Afrikaner group as a complex system in terms of the ten characteristics offered by Cilliers (1998:3-4).

*(1) Complex systems consist out of a large number of elements.*

This point seems quite self-explanatory in this context. At least one could argue that if a group identity for some reason consisted of a small number of members, it would probably not constitute a complex system. Examples exist of group identities that have been reduced to a mere handful of members, but these identities are often treated as endangered species and their traditions and characteristics sustained in an artificial way – the San group would serve as an example. It could be suggested that within such a group the possibility of change as it occurs in a complex system is minimised, partly because of the lack of sufficient difference that exist between a small number of elements, and partly because of the artificial efforts to sustain the group's memory. The system would therefore be relatively static, which leads us to the next characteristic of complex systems.

*(2) A large number of elements are necessary, but not sufficient. The elements need to interact dynamically. The system, therefore, must change over time.*

A complex system must be dynamic, since its complexity lies precisely in the continuing process of interaction. Such interaction, in turn, necessitates change. Because the system is dynamic, the interactions themselves also change continuously. As Stacey (2003:327) explained, however, change only occurs if the interactions are characterised by difference.

The point for a group identity would be that merely to have a large number of members would be insufficient if the members were all very similar – for instance if they were all taught to 'think' in the same way. This is the case because dynamic interaction which can effect change over time, is only possible between elements that differ from each other. Of

course differences between elements of the system could never be eradicated completely – even if it is attempted to close the system. But in order for the system to be truly dynamic and for a group such as the Afrikaner to emerge as a complex system, it needs to cherish internal difference as a source of differential interaction. Reinforcing the argument made in chapter one, one could suggest that it would be dangerous for this group to pursue any form of homogeneity.

*(3) The interactions are rich – elements do not merely interact with a few fixed elements.*

Throughout this thesis, interaction has been described as ‘rich’. Cilliers (1998:3) uses the term to refer to elements that both influence and are influenced by many other elements. The interaction is not fixed. It is in the nature of our world that individuals interact with many other (and different) individuals on a daily basis. The same phenomenon is evident in group identities. Members to the Afrikaner group may interact more with other members of their group, but they certainly interact with elements of different systems on a regular basis. This was the basis for Cilliers’ argument cited in chapter two, that a complex understanding of the world precludes the possibility of isolation, because elements of a system at the same time participate in many different patterns and interact with many different elements.

*(4) The interactions are non-linear. This means that a seemingly insignificant cause can have a significant result, and vice versa.*

This phenomenon is evident in the way in which small events – a cultural artefact<sup>29</sup> or a single controversial figure<sup>30</sup>, for example – can have a major effect, such as stimulating wide-spread debate among members of a group identity and in some cases even compelling members to re-evaluate their very membership. It also means that huge orchestrated efforts of transformation can have a minimal effect.

This will not *always* be the case within group identities. The cultural production orchestrated by the Afrikaner Nationalist movement briefly described in chapter one, is an example of a cause and effect which were ‘similar’ in magnitude, or rather, was *symmetrical*. By managing to close the system of meaning around the Afrikaner group –

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29 The release of Bok van Blerk’s song, “De la Rey” is a case in point.

30 This is a reference to Dan Roodt’s appearance at the 2005 Stellenbosch Woordfees, which ignited a major academic and popular discussion on issues such as Afrikaner identity and freedom of speech.

thereby denying the system its complexity – the movement successfully created the meaning of the group as a homogenous unity. This is the case because, as Cilliers (1998:120) explains, the principle of non-linearity is connected to the principle of asymmetry. “Non-linearity, asymmetry, power and competition are inevitable components of complex systems. It is what keeps them going...If the state had no power, it would have no reason to exist”. The problem arises when these asymmetrical relations are exploited, as they were in order to create a homogenous Afrikaner identity. Such exploitation leads to a symmetry in cause and effect. The solution is not, however, to create a space where asymmetry is neutralised, because such a space cannot be a complex system. Rather, the challenge lies in ensuring rich interaction which prevents such symmetry in cause and effect to emerge. The “remarkable homogeneity” (Louw-Potgieter 1988:1) of the Afrikaner group which sociologists have commented on, is perhaps less remarkable when understood in the context of the lack of internal diversity and therefore of rich interaction which characterised the group during that era.

*(5) Information is usually received over a short range.*

The exchange of information is a result of interaction. In a complex system, the elements are arranged in a way that makes interaction with close neighbours far easier and therefore more frequent than interaction with elements at a distance. It doesn't mean that far-reaching interaction is impossible or, as we have seen, that an interaction cannot have far-reaching influence (Cilliers 1998:4). Within a cultural group, the bulk of information exchange concerning the group's identity happens between closely related members. This is perhaps evident in the way that cultural understanding is often transmitted from parents to children or between members of a community.

*(6) The interactions are such that it can feed back on an element causing a loop. Both positive and negative loops appear in complex systems. This is described as recurrency.*

Even though members of a group do not intend to form a group identity as they interact, it has been argued that it is these interactions that constitute the group identity. In chapter one, Stacey (2003:238) was quoted as explaining that the “I” and the “we” identities are so closely intertwined – in development and content – that they cannot be separated. If this is the case, one could deduce that, while elements are responsible for the emergence of the group identity, group identity in turn influences the identity formation of the element. Indeed, we can observe that the members of group identities share certain characteristics.

This is only possible if the process of individual and group identity development is a recursive process. In other words, an element not only gives information: the information finds its way through the system and at some point it returns to the element, albeit in an altered form. This recurrence is what causes the element to develop its own identity with traces of the identity of the group. In the same way, a group identity as such is not only constituted by its interaction with the environment, but also in turn relationally influences other systems with which it interacts. This idea is best illustrated by the example of language and the world previously used: neither language nor the world can be understood as a separate unity. They are rather systems which influence and are influenced by one another.

*(7) Complex systems usually interact with their environment to such an extent that it is difficult to define the border of a complex system precisely. For this reason, complex systems are normally described as open systems.*

In the introduction to this section, mention was made of the difficulty of defining the boundary of the Afrikaner group. This is, of course largely a political issue, but it is a function of a group identity in general that it cannot easily be separated from that which is outside of it. This is the case because members of a group identity necessarily engage frequently and closely with elements that are not part of the group, such as friends or colleagues, although the measure of interaction with 'outside' elements will always vary significantly. In addition, members are not clones of each other; in fact, they constitute complex systems in their own right. They have many characteristics, therefore, that would entitle them to membership of other groups. In chapter one it was explained that one of the most poignant effects of globalisation has indeed been the emergence of hybrid identities. Such diversity makes clear boundary descriptions much more problematic. It was noted that it used to be much easier for the Afrikaner group to define itself, while the system of Afrikaner identity remained a closed system.

A complex system and a group identity must be open, it will be argued, in order for it to be able to allow traces from the outside to infiltrate the system and affect its transformation – this will be explored in detail in chapter five. It should be remembered, however, that this does not mean that the system can have no boundary and be absolutely open – the points made in the previous section apply.

*(8) In order for complex systems to self-organise, they can never be in a state of equilibrium.*

We understand self-organisation to be a function of the system's interaction with its environment, as well as the interactions within the system. But as was argued, these interactions must be characterised by difference. A system in a state of equilibrium is a system without difference, without tension. In such a system, the creation of meaning is impossible, and therefore self-organisation and the ability to adapt is impossible. With the example of the San-group it was argued that the group's identity is to a large extent artificially sustained. This means that the identity has in effect reached equilibrium – all difference or tensions within would need to be eradicated in order for this nostalgic identity to be sustained. The identity is no longer a process, it is defined simply in terms of its origin. It still exists, but not as a complex system.

At the same time it could be argued that group identities must be dynamic in order to 'exist'. In other words, the nature of a group identity means that if we are not aware of activities as the manifestations of the identity, we would not be aware of the identity itself, and, at least practically speaking, it would cease to exist. This is the case because an identity does not exist without its members: its existence is never tangible in itself, but only in the activities and characteristics of its members. If the members stopped 'practicing' their identity, the identity would disappear.

*(9) It was said that complex systems change over time. For this reason they have a history which should be acknowledged as an integral part of their description at any given point in time.*

There is an intuitive understanding of this characteristic amongst most members of a group identity. This is the reason why groups often engage in activities where a nostalgia for tradition is captured. The critical point is not only that the memory of the group is important, but that we have to find a way to deal responsibly and ethically with memory, because it is an important part of our description of ourselves. As Cilliers (1998:122) writes in the context of postmodern societies: "the history of a complex system is not an objectively given state; it is a collection of traces distributed over the system, and is always open to multiple interpretations". This issue will be explored in detail in chapter 4.

*(10) No single element has knowledge of the system as a whole. Each element only responds to the information it receives.*

This should mean that a complex system could never be designed or controlled by a single force, because no one element has knowledge of the system as a whole. However, some can certainly know more than others and have more power than others – a result of the status which an element can gain from its position in the network.

This does not mean that one would not be able to imagine a group identity being created by a designer. Again, one is returned to the example of the early production Afrikaner identity. It should be reiterated, however, that an identity constituted by design, must be a closed and isolated identity in order for the meaning created by the designer to have the desired stability. This hypothetical system, it could be argued, would not be a complex system: difference would be limited as far as possible and therefore the potential for transformation would be minimised. That would, of course, be the point. It would not be impossible, however, for a complex system to emerge from such a system.

This is precisely what motivates the prescriptive aspect of the present argument. In order to resist such strategies of power, it will be suggested, we must encourage complexity. It is the ability that complex adaptive systems exhibit to produce a certain sense of coherence in spite of the absence of an external designer (or, for that matter, an internal element with the ability to control the entire system) which attracts many complexity scientists to this model (Stacey 2003:50). “Their work demonstrates the possibility that both continuity and transformation can emerge spontaneously and that the process of interaction has the intrinsic capacity for patterning interaction in coherent ways” (50).

A theory that conceives of the system as being able to develop spontaneously, however, implies a lack of control which most theorists find unpalatable – driving them to other models. Two of these alternatives will be investigated here.

### **3.7 Challenges to a relational model of identity**

A theory that seems to position itself very closely to the relational model of identity is that of constructivism. Frueh (2003:11) defines constructivism in terms of the belief that humans are social beings who are what they are because of their social interactions. But this constructivism operates in both directions: not only are we constructed, but we also

construct the world by our interactions. Society determines what is important, and only that which humans regard as important, becomes 'real'. When it comes to explaining social change or transformations in identity, Frueh sees constructivism as a middle road between theories that privilege *structure*, and therefore a certain stability, and theories that privilege *agency* (such as the modernist theories), counting on human rationality to commit change (15). Constructivism attempts to let agency and structure coexist, and thus claims to accommodate the tension between choice and determination – in much the same way as the writers mentioned earlier.

Frueh does not do away with agency – which he defines as “the perceived ability to purposefully change some part of social or material reality in a creative way” (16) – but rather acknowledges the way in which agency is constrained by structure. It is his allowance for agency that makes his theory superior to Taifel's, he believes. An individual agent can act independently of his external surroundings and achieve change, but only if his position in the structure affords him enough power to have sufficient influence (15-16).

Frueh distinguishes between what he calls “personal identity” and “identities as systems of meaning”, or what might be called social identity (2003:2). The force of this distinction becomes even greater when he cites with approval Wendt's description of identities as roles (27). Frueh attempts to isolate the role an agent plays in society from his personal identity. He claims that this role, this social identity, is “a repertoire of descriptive *identity labels*, arranged in a continuously shifting hierarchy of importance” (28 author's emphasis). As a result his theory adds little to a discussion on the constitution of personal identities.

Frueh's interest in identity labels means he gives language a foundational role. Social identity changes as social context change, because each new context has a different “code” which determines which labels are appropriate. The labels themselves are all socially constructed. Every label carries the implication that the one who owns it is different from those who do not (Frueh 2003:29).

At first glance, it is hard to see the difference between constructivism and an understanding of identity as a complex system – especially with its shared emphasis on difference and the constitution of identity within a network of interaction. And yet, it is Frueh's dependence on structure and especially on a closed structure that is problematic. This dependence can be deduced from Frueh's strategy of opposition: labels that act as oppressive powers should be opposed by replacing the meaning of the label with a new

meaning. For a structure to have the constraining effect that Frueh envisions and to accommodate the notion of agency he supports, it has to form a closed system of meaning that does not allow for any other – otherwise an agent would not be able to change the structure in the same way a designer could not design it. He seems to suggest this himself, when he claims that agents can move ‘outside’ of the structure.

Frueh acknowledges the fact that the meaning of labels – and therefore that of identities – change. But he is not sufficiently clear that meaning can never be pinned to a label (because meaning is not present in the label/sign itself, but in the relationships between elements of a system of meaning). Constructivism, Derrida would argue, thus rests on the metaphysics of presence.

This might seem a rather weak point of criticism. There are things that might be called ‘identity labels’, and these often seem stable, therefore we might as well accept Frueh’s argument without questioning it on what seems to be a rather technical point. The reason the criticism is important, however, is that if we settle for this understanding of meaning (and the system within which it is created), we must also accept that the system can be dictated by power strategies such as the ones described in the context of the Afrikaner group, and that *there is little we can do to resist it*. The resistance that Frueh suggests, which relies on agents to create change, relies on these agents to somehow extract themselves from the determinism inherent to these closed systems. What is more – and this argument will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters – the change that is possible within a closed system, is necessarily dictated by the rules of the system. ‘True’ transformation is impossible. Rejecting Frueh’s interpretation is therefore of the utmost importance if we are to have any hope of resisting the abuse of asymmetrical relations of power.

Constructivism resonates with a particular interpretation of the structuralist tradition. As has been explained, structuralism uses linguistic models to explain social phenomena, which shifts critical thinking from the level of the subject to the level of discourse. The subject actually becomes an effect of the system (Culler 1998:222-223). Frueh claims that it is still the agent who produces change, change is not simply an effect of the system – this is exactly why he distances himself from theories that emphasise structure. Structuralism removed the subject or the agent from the centre, but had to replace it with something else in order to launch their analytical projects. Frueh did not remove the agent,

but he also needed something to explain how the agent's influence, his ability to generate change, is an effect of the system.

Enter meaning. Meaning is a foundation for the structuralist project and for Frueh's theory. Poststructuralism's destabilisation of meaning denies it the possibility of such a foundational position, however.

Does this mean that we should give up on meaning? It was explained that one of the most important characteristics of the complex system is that it can find meaning in the information it gathers from its environment. In other words, a system is able to represent information. Put yet another way, the complex system that forms out of elements that interact as a system must have meaning in its structure in order to be a system. Cilliers (1998:11) has argued that it is the relationships between the structural components of the system that enables the system to represent information and to be meaningful. This means that, even though the complex system is an open and dynamic system, it does have meaning and it is certainly able to represent information.

Similarly, we have seen that deconstruction does not disregard meaning. It is therefore not necessary to resort to an understanding of systems as closed in order to save meaning.

A second point may be raised in response to Frueh's theory. If the self is constituted in a network of meanings, as deconstruction and the relational model of identity claim, then the self cannot be separated from its context. If meaning does not reside in the identity itself, but in the interactions of the identity with its context, isolating an identity means destroying it. This means that one *cannot* separate personal identity from social identity<sup>31</sup>. Again, it is Frueh's tendency towards structuralism that allows him to make such a distinction. In chapter two, the critique that argues postmodernist projects allow for fragmentation and a certain relativism was described. Counter to these arguments, one could suggest that it is precisely a structuralist and closed approach to identity formation, such as that suggested by constructivism that would result in fragmentation, because the approach separates meaningful social interaction from interaction on a personal level. This

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31 Mirón (1999:81) is equally sceptical of such a distinction. "That is, there is no personal ethnic identity apart from a relationship to other identities. Furthermore, the processes of identity formation within the social context of ethnicity is inseparable from the broader social relations of power and material and ideological structures".

isolation is in fact a necessary condition for the generation of meaning within the system that Frueh describes.

Frueh deals with a similar challenge in his book, namely that of the poststructuralist critique by Campbell. Campbell believes that constructivism is guilty of either giving agency control over language, or language control over agency. In both cases, the control is supreme. The contrast with a relational model of identity formation is clear. Frueh (2003:26) responds as follows:

The most important distinction between Campbell's poststructural approach and the constructivist one I present is that poststructuralism seems to settle for the sterility of perpetual critique. There is nothing wrong with restricting oneself to the project of unsettling everything, including new identities that rise to fill the voids created by previous critiques, but poststructuralists should not be too surprised when actors choose to pursue logocentrism anyway.

The importance of resisting logocentrism was addressed above. In addition, it could be argued that poststructuralism hardly *restricts* itself to what Frueh calls "perpetual critique". Such critique is an articulation of what Derrida earlier explained as the never-ending nature of the ethical responsibility, the responsibility of decision. In opposition to perpetual critique one would have to support the possibility of the end of critique, and subsequently a form of closure. *That* would be restrictive.

But there are points where constructivism and complexity theory find each other. Frueh writes that "because identity is an aggregate of these intersubjectively defined codes, individuals are dependant upon the ideas and acquiescence of others for the meaning and power of their identities" (28). In other words, the constitution of identity is not dependent on others, just the meaning and power thereof. Consider the example of Anzaldua: she carries the labels of Mexican woman, homosexual and intellectual. The meaning of each of these labels is defined by the social code. Her identity might stay unchanged, according to Frueh, but the meaning of the identity will change according to social codes. She can act as an agent of change only because she has the label of intellectual, and in this particular social code, this label carries a certain amount of power. Another Mexican woman outside the circle of intellectuals would have been ignored.

That is a fair argument. Derrida also makes this point when he attacks the way in which the academic status of an interlocutor strengthens his argument. But Derrida is

critical of this point, and offers resistance in the form of deconstruction. Frueh's opposition comes in the form of replacing the meaning of a label with a new meaning (an approach also to be found in the work of Barthes as discussed in chapter five) rather than deconstructing the closed nature of meaning. 'Power' is opposed by 'power', leaving little room for the ethical to appear. Even if labels are given new meaning, they remain mere labels which constrain identities, rather than having an impact on personal identities themselves. It is argued here that it is our responsibility to resist such a project.

Where Frueh accuses poststructuralism of perpetual critique, Butterfield (2003:1-2) does exactly the opposite. She describes the difference between identity politics and post-modernism (neither of which she defines specifically) in terms of their views on *oppression*. Identity politics, apart from its problematic tendency to single out one form of oppression (economic, gender or race amongst others) as more significant than others, puts the responsibility for oppression in the hands of identifiable individuals. Post-modernism, on the other hand, locates oppression within the "forces of society" (5), a reference most likely to the notion of meaning being located not in elements themselves, but in the relationships between elements of a system. Her conclusion that "postmodern authors often fear that individuals will be completely subsumed by society – the oppression is understood to be so extensive and all-encompassing that the very possibilities of critique and of struggle are drawn into question"(4) is not as reasonable, however. Deconstruction certainly acknowledges the possibility of critique, and practices it accordingly, although it does not acknowledge the possibility of replacing the criticised methods with perfect alternatives.

Butterfield draws on the work of Crenshaw, who calls the different forms of oppression to which an individual is subject, 'intersectionality' (4). A person always operates within a multiplicity of spheres, she argues. There is no effort to reduce one form of oppression to a single universal. Once this is accepted, it is impossible to remain within the restricted view of identity supported by identity politics – where identity must be seen as fixed and decided – an argument which echoes the position taken here. Crenshaw does concede that postmodernism reflects the multiplicity of identity, but, according to Butterfield (5), its absolutist view of multiplicity inevitably leads to the idea that one can make no claims about identity, it is simply too complicated.

This is precisely where complexity theory helps postmodernism to accommodate this paradox. With a relational model of identity one *can* make claims about identity. "The self

is not fragmented into a multiplicity of selves, it is distributed over a network of traces, in which it can be identified, but never exhausted” (Cilliers and De Villiers 2000:241). A relational model of identity seen as a complex system does have structure, even though it is not a static structure. We can also identify this structure, even though it is not possible to separate it from its context or describe it exhaustively.

Butterfield (2003: 5) proposes a theory of identity that acknowledges that no form of identity is completely distinct from another – they are all interwoven. Even though this position seems to be an alternative formulation of the relational model of identity, it is Butterfield’s reliance on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre that makes her position problematic. Sartre believed that humans were composed of two factors, namely ‘facticity’ and transcendence. To reduce one of these to the other was to commit, according to Sartre, ‘bad faith’. Sartre believed that we all internalised an Objective Spirit that was the product of human praxis. Since the Objective Spirit is grounded in social relations and changes with every new social expression, it is not a complete whole. It also provides a context that helps us to understand the world and ourselves, and communicates both to others. But this does not deny the individual’s freedom. Each person internalises the Objective Spirit individually and uniquely: we literally change social meaning by owning it. So what Sartre calls the “dialectic of personalisation” is both the internalisation of the Spirit and the subsequent unique ‘exteriorising praxis’ (Butterfield 2003: 9). One can see very strong similarities with Taifel’s theory.

While Frueh’s theory lacked a sufficient explanation of how personal identities are constituted, Sartre’s theory provides a neat explanation. Because we all internalise the Objective Spirit in a unique way, we all react differently to similar circumstances. Even though the feasibility of the transcendental Objective Spirit is questionable in itself, Sartre’s dialectical theory also does not escape the idea of the self being an autonomous unit which can separate itself from its surroundings. Only if such a separation were possible, could we have the complete freedom of determining our own identities. Sartre knows that our surroundings influence who we are, but is not willing to give in to what he regards as absolute determinism. His alternative, however, denies the extent to which our identity is inseparable from its context.

Butterfield’s reading of Sartre may tend more towards a relational understanding of identity than Sartre intended. She regards identities as interwoven, but asserts, following Sartre, that people are “always free to respond to [their] situation, and to change the

meaning of categories such as race and gender” (2003:10). This freedom must be qualified, however, something Butterfield does not do. It is not the freedom of an isolated centre of control, but the freedom of a relationally constituted personality.

In as far as Butterfield’s analysis still betrays a longing for the autonomous agent, it will remain problematic. The only alternative is not, as Butterfield would suggest, to surrender to the multiplicity of human existence and ‘give up’. It is argued here that it is indeed still possible to make sense of the complexities of human existence and use this complexity to our advantage.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, the philosophical approaches to identity were outlined. Certain tensions proved to be central to the philosophical understanding: that between the inside and the outside, between determinism and subjective control and between the ethics and the politics of identity. It was suggested that these tensions can be resolved without choosing sides – which is preferable, since these tensions are indeed productive – by understanding identity in terms of complex systems. It was further argued that, while group identity exhibits characteristics of complex systems, we should not understand the attempt at modelling the system as an attempt at taming the complexity of it. Indeed, complexity should be encouraged. In terms of a group identity, this idea frequently translates into the notion of internal diversity which has been emphasised throughout.

One of the crucial elements of a complex system, it was shown, is the fact that the system has a past or a memory, and that it needs to deal with this memory – in other words, it needs to represent the information gathered from experience – in order to adapt to its surroundings. It was argued that this past is not objective but can be interpreted in multiple ways. As the past of any group identity is integral to its self-understanding, and as it is often a very sensitive and politicised issue, I will proceed to investigate this element in greater detail. When we say that the system has to ‘represent’ its past – which means to remember some things and forget others – what does this imply for group identity? More specifically, what does it imply for an *ethical* understanding of group identity? Is there a responsibility to remember? And if so, how does a group determine what to remember and what to forget?

In answering these questions, we should be able to move closer to an applied understanding of the theoretical approach outlined in this chapter. It was said at the outset

that this thesis intends to contribute to the identity debate raging in South Africa today. If this is to be a worthwhile contribution, the argument must prove itself in its application.

## Chapter 4

# Memory as inheritance

### 4.1 Introduction

Now that the relational model of identity has been established, the implications of such a model for group identity may be investigated. The point of this exercise is not merely understanding the constitution of identity, but to use this knowledge in order to help us 'think the difference'. Because this is not a simple application, the argument has followed something of a reverse pattern, as will be shown.

May (1997:12), in his book on four French 'philosophers of difference'<sup>32</sup> accuses these thinkers of being ambivalent about whether their claims about difference are to be read normatively or constitutively. Do they make claims about how different domains are actually constituted or how they should be constituted? This confusion was addressed in chapter three. There the constitutive argument was made in favour of understanding identities as complex system and their constitution as relational. The argument in this chapter will largely be a normative one. Perhaps it should be formulated as follows: even though identity *is* constituted relationally, the political and other domains of dominance that form an inevitable part of group identity often force this relational model into something of a closed system of difference. Therefore, we should have an 'active' understanding of the complexity of identity – we should continue to 'think the difference' – precisely because, as I will attempt to show, this offers the promise of new possibilities where other theories have failed. What is more, it is the only possibility of accommodating the ethical (which means preserving difference) in a discussion of identity.

This may sound very similar to the arguments of structuralists in the Foucauldian tradition: if only we could systematically expose all the relations of domination, peel away all the ideologies of difference, we could make our way to the 'true' identity of a group. It has to be kept in mind then that the relational model works with an understanding of meaning that doesn't allow for such a foundationalist statement.

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32 Derrida, Levinas, Nancy and Deleuze.

Even though it is argued that identity is constituted relationally, it is also submitted that understanding group identity in this way is counter-intuitive: surely something as strong and secure as the identity of a group cannot be at the hands of such an 'arbitrary' process; cannot, in fact, be understood as a process? In the following chapters it will be shown why it is indeed helpful to risk understanding group identity in this way. It will also be submitted that the promise of a *new beginning* which is offered with this understanding, and which we need in order to allow some cultures under fire to survive (in complexity terms, to self-organise), is only possible when identity is indeed understood as an open system. This will serve to undermine the all too human tendency of tightening our grip on group identity.

I have chosen to work with the notions of *history*, of *memory* and of *inheritance* as a way to explore the application of this argument. Engaging with the issue of the memory of a group may help us to determine not only how the group is to think about itself, even in the present, but even more importantly, it may help us to understand what is meant by the complexity theory that a system must adapt continuously in order to cope with its environment .

In the previous chapter the argument was made that a group identity as a complex system needs a lot of meaning in order to cope in a complex environment such as a multi-cultural society. On the basis of the arguments made previously, it is contended that for the system to be able to use its memory in order to self-organise, it must engage with memory in a way that does not reduce it to a single narrative. As the group's identity is greatly influenced by its memories, a single narrative of history will refuse the system the opportunity of transformation. The system would not be dynamic, and would therefore be unable to organise itself effectively in a complex environment. As was argued in chapter one, survival in this context means 'survival through justice'. The ethical dimension of memory, of not suppressing any aspects of the past, will therefore also be discussed. Furthermore it will be asked whether there can indeed be an 'ethics of memory'.

Derrida's interpretation of memory as inheritance will be used as a suggestion of how to deal with our history as something heterogeneous. It will be shown how he deals with the problem of not excluding any aspects of the past while at the same time necessarily forgetting the past – a process of active forgetting.

In the previous chapter, Cilliers and De Villiers were quoted as writing: "in order to cope, a complex system needs to do two things: it needs to be able to store information about its environment (memory), and it needs to be able to adapt its structure to changes

around it" (2000:233). In terms of the application to the Afrikaner group, the suggestions made here would seem to offer something of a middle road between two camps that have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa: on the one hand, those who beg or demand of the rest of the South African community to simply forget their history. This is generally the wish of the new generation, arguing that they had nothing to do with the sins of their fathers. The other camp – who argues for the survival and active memory of the past – is a divided one. Some want to remember the past because it still offers something of an origin upon which one can uncritically (or critically) base one's identity, because there is indeed so much to be 'proud' of. Others want to remember the past in order not to repeat its mistakes. I want to suggest that, even though the search here is for a 'new beginning', it is paradoxically not the effort to simply forget the past that offers such a new beginning, but indeed an alternative understanding of the effort to sustain the significance of history that provides us with this possibility.

Even though the Afrikaner is used as an example, these ideas resonate with the complexity of cultural and identity questions everywhere: the melting pot of the American community, the new cultural fundamentalism in Europe, even the formation of new identities in diverse African nations.

## **4.2 Addressing the difference between individual and group identities**

In chapter three it was explained that the theory applicable to the constitution of personal identity is here applied to group identity on the basis of the similarities between the two phenomena. There are, however, significant differences between a group identity and personal identity, one of which will become particularly relevant in this chapter and the next. In chapter one a Derridean deconstruction of Kant's ideal of a Society of Nations was encountered (Derrida 2002:76). The point was made that there is *always* violence in sameness, that to achieve a sense of nationhood, one cannot escape violence. One cannot ignore the fact that this insight leaves us with the theoretical impossibility of an ethical preservation of group identity. How can there be identification without sameness? If not, how can there be group identity without identification? What is more, there seems to be something of a logical problem here: group identity implies identifying with something. In chapter two it was argued that the old logical model of identity, where  $x = x$ , is not viable when meaning, and therefore the meaning of  $x$ , is understood as being deferred and incomplete (Eagleton 1983:130). It was explained how the effort to define  $x$  exhaustively is to commit the violence of reduction.

This problem is addressed in the re-definition of boundaries outlined above. Indeed, the identification of a member of a group with other members or with the identity of the group as a whole is necessary in order to have an understanding of a group identity. But the fact that the identity of the member is no longer a self-identical whole, means that identification is not an exhaustive process. In other words, identifying one's self with someone or some group, does not mean becoming identical to it. In the same way, the meaning of the group identity is in no way finally determined – we saw how boundaries, for one, emerge in order to identify the group *provisionally*, never exhaustively.

Some would perhaps argue that it is contradictory to employ the work of Derrida in an attempt to understand group identity. It could be argued, however, that Derrida would admit to the urgency of indeed speaking meaningfully about group identity as long as this is done in pursuit of an ethical understanding thereof (as this is) and that he would admit to such a possibility if one is willing to give up the myths usually surrounding identities. It was also shown in the previous chapter that a complex model of identity, which invokes Derridean notions such as *différance*, does not preclude giving (provisional) meaning to identity, with the all important condition, however, that we never become slaves to such an identity.

It goes without saying that such a position stands in opposition to all general conceptions of group identity. The latter is usually believed to imply that a certain number of people share something, to the extent that it can be contended that they 'identify' with something. The idea of group identity not only articulates a desire for some sort of stability – ingrained in, amongst others, cultural institutions, traditions and literature – but it is also generally assumed to have at least a certain sense of stability at the core of its definition. This is precisely why it is difficult to reconcile oneself with the apparent 'arbitrariness' of group identity as a complex system. This difficulty is perhaps exaggerated by the overwhelming importance that the origin of a group has for its identity. A group identity is often nothing more than the story of its past. Personal identity generally owes less to its 'origin' than group identities, and therefore we are often more acutely aware of the political turmoil and emotional upheaval that surrounds the efforts to sustain group identities. It is this perception that makes an understanding of group identity as a complex and dynamic system hard to accept.

It is important in this regard to recall the notion of *iterability* found in the work of Derrida. Derrida (1988:7) explains that, when I am writing, the receiver of the information is

absent. By the same token, the writer of a message is absent once the message is in writing. Therefore, writing is constituted by the repeatability thereof: only if the written communication is readable in the absence of both the addresser and the addressee, can it be seen as writing. If the writing cannot be meaningfully repeated in such an absence, it would not constitute writing. This repeatability of the sign which constitutes writing – rather than the implied presence of the writer – Derrida calls iterability (7).

But the notion is further used in an illuminating context when Derrida deconstructs the work of Austin. The latter attempted to formulate a theory of speech acts that did not rely on the traditional philosophical exclusion of false statements based on the belief that statements could only be used to state a matter of fact (Culler 1983:112). He did this by formulating a new system based on the categorisation of speech acts as either constative (statements of fact) or performative (statements that perform an action), and further showing that constative utterances are in fact special cases of performative utterances. Austin takes care to exclude the notion of the intention of the speaker from his theory: such a notion would of course rely on presence of the speaker and be guilty of the 'metaphysics of presence'. He does run into trouble, however, when trying to describe performative utterances that do not actually perform the task they 'normally' do, such as a promise an actor makes on a stage. These utterances he classifies as 'non-serious' utterances (116) – although he still tries to avoid resorting to intentionality.

Derrida is critical of Austin's renewed exclusion of a class of utterances. Whereas Austin (and Searle) believe that a 'non-serious' utterance is only possible as the parody of a serious utterance, if the serious utterance can perform a task, such as a promise, Derrida asserts that, in fact, the 'serious' use of a promise is only possible if a promise can be made where it does *not* perform a task (119). Every utterance is a form of role-playing, with the utterance intended to perform a task, being a special instance of role-playing. "For the 'standard case' of promising to occur, it must be recognisable as the repetition of a conventional procedure, and the actor's performance on the stage is an excellent model of such repetition. The possibility of 'serious' performatives depends upon the possibility of performances, because performatives depend upon iterability that is most explicitly manifested in performances" (Culler 1983:119). This means that something can be a signifier only if it is repeatable in different contexts. Imitation becomes the condition of possibility of the original.

To drive the point home, Derrida uses the example of the signature. As Culler (1983:125-126) explains, a signature on a document is supposed to imply that the author of the signature intended his approval of the document at the moment the signature was made. A moment of full presence of consciousness is implied, therefore. But, Derrida points out, the condition of the possibility of the signature to perform this function is the iterability of the signature. A signature only has value if it can be repeated, “it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal” (Derrida in Culler 1983:126). The point is that, even though the intention of she who makes the signature does not disappear entirely, it does not govern the sign, also because it will never be fully present. This has the further implication that meaning cannot be tied to intention, but will always exceed it.

This also means that, while on the one hand there is violence in sameness which forces an identity into closure – such as a fundamentalist approach to group identity would entail – every singularity, every identity is already constituted – and corrupted – by its sameness, by the fact that it can be repeated. An identity is never singular, but always already differentiated – a point made in chapter three. Sameness is qualified here, however. Iterability is not mere repetition: it is repetition *with a difference*. A signature is never repeated identically, but is repeated in such a way that it can be recognised as an ‘imitation’ of the ‘original’.

What are the implications for group identity? The significance is twofold. In chapter one we saw that theories of group identity were divided into those that value such an identity as something ‘original’ and those that regard it as constructed and therefore fluid. Iteration provides an interesting alternative. On the one hand, it devalues the origin by showing that it is dependent on the imitation, and is therefore always already divided, and as such, no origin at all.

At the same time, however, the argument that group identity is entirely fluid also does not hold its ground against iteration: if an identity must be repeatable in order to have value, then it cannot be entirely fluid. An identity is never fully contained and definable in terms of its origin, but it can also not have value without some constraint to its meaning, which would make it iterable. The fluidity of meaning is curbed by the necessity that a sign be capable of repetition – with a difference.

The notion of iterability further helps us to accommodate the notion that will come to the fore in this chapter, namely that of 'deciding' one's memory or inheritance. Iterability, as we have seen, does not remove intention from a meaningful speech act, but it does preclude the possibility of intention being the deciding factor of an act or an identity – it remains a process.

In this chapter it will be argued, with the help of Derrida (and staying true to the relational model) that our inheritance is indeed "who we are", even though we still have the responsibility of interpreting, of *deciding* that inheritance (even while it is the undecidable) and, in the process, of transforming ourselves and our history.

The definition which Slootweg (2000:181) gives for ethics is helpful here. He calls it an always temporary interpretation of Being which becomes evident in the tension between the not yet and the not anymore; an historical awareness which changes reality by interpreting it. Even though the relational model demands the courage to let go of the stability of unified meaning, ethics and complexity provide us with a viable 're-entry' of the past as traces, and an understanding of what identity as a complex system would entail.

### **4.3 The ethics of history**

We are all aware of the fact that there is often little consensus about the facts and the meaning of certain historical events. But it is also the case that history itself is understood in many different ways by different people. It is very important that we establish a vantage point from which to judge history here, as it will inform our position regarding the history of the Afrikaner and how it ought to be dealt with.

Slootweg (2000:2), in his study of the ethics of history, makes an important distinction between what he calls *historical awareness* and the *past*. The past is that which happened, the facts that make up an historical event. He understands historical awareness, on the other hand, as an awareness of being that is determined and constituted by a certain 'historising', as he calls it. "The past itself is therefore not central [to this historical awareness] (even though knowledge of the past can provide one with a certain historical awareness), but central is rather a certain *presence of the mind*<sup>33</sup>, a

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33 This should not be read as an indication of the subject being fully present to itself. This will become clear as an analysis of Slootweg's work unfolds.

sense of reality essentially informed by an understanding of history”<sup>34</sup> (2, author’s emphasis).

This is a significant divergence from the traditional understanding of the facts of the past themselves constituting history separate from the observer's being. In other words, Slootweg is claiming that what we understand history to be, is not determined by what actually happened in the past – although our awareness may be informed by what happened.

Slootweg's position stands in opposition to the modernist account of historical awareness which sees the science of history as a medium of identity presentation. In an age where people have seemingly 'lost' their identity, they seem to grab on to historical reflection as a means of compensation. One’s history becomes one’s identity. This he calls the standard interpretation of historical awareness (12), and is evident in the Afrikaner and Zulu nationalist movements. Slootweg’s position and the modernist movement seem to oppose each other in terms of where the impetus of meaning comes from: the modernist movement understands history as creating our identities, whereas in Slootweg’s account, we ‘create’ (in a manner of speaking) our histories. Importantly, in Slootweg’s interpretation, history becomes an element of identity, rather than identity itself. When history is seen as that which defines our identities, identity inevitably becomes a closed narrative. Slootweg avoids this reduction.

It would also serve us well to overlap this idea with the relational model of identity. A knowledge of the past becomes an element of constitution without being the *only* constitutive factor. Slootweg himself positions this approach in the ethical paradigm as it has been used here. If we understand history in this way, he argues, then it becomes part of a learning process that situates us in a relation not only to the other, but also the others of the past (2000:2). It is therefore not a case of learning as many historical facts as possible about others in an attempt to bridge the unknown, in an affirmation of the *cliché* that we fear that which we do not know. This historical approach, in contrast, affirms the idea that we can never know the other sufficiently, and therefore any attempt to learn

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34 Own translation: “Centraal staat hier dus niet zozeer het verleden zelf (hoewel uit de kennis daarvan ook best een zeker historisch besef kan spreken) maar eerder een bepaalde tegenwoordigheid van gees, een soort realiteitzin die wesenlijk door een begrip van de geschiedenis is geïnformeerd”

merely by gaining knowledge of the past will always be in vain, and indeed unethical. This 'learning process'<sup>35</sup> is something quite different, as we shall see.

But this shift in emphasis between the standard interpretation and Slootweg's alternative, is given yet another twist when read through Derrida and complexity theory. History can indeed not be understood as the 'story of the past'. History, when referring to the history of the system, becomes all the traces of meaning which actually constitute the identity of the system. As was argued before, meaning is the result of a complex dynamic of interaction between traces that are never present. The system has no present meaning that can be separated from a 'past' meaning. This implies that all the traces playing through the system, creating its meaning, is the history of the system. In this sense, the history *will be* the identity of the system. This is not the same position as that of the standard interpretation which also argues that our history becomes our identity. In that view, history is still the narrative of the past, and it is indeed reduced to something singular in order to serve as a final definition of the identity of the group. In complexity theory, the history of the system is the traces of meaning constituting it, which cannot be reduced to a single narrative without fixing a present identity and thereby denying the system its complexity.

We must then be aware of these two understandings of history. Because this thesis is positioned within the context of a group identity with a problematic past, and because most of the arguments concerning history (both politically and academically) deal with it as the story of the past – and therefore separate from the present identity of the group – history will at this point be discussed in these terms. In the latter stages of the chapter, the implication of this alternative understanding will be investigated.

I will proceed to discuss Margalit's work as an example of what Slootweg calls the 'standard interpretation' of history.

#### **4.3.1 Margalit's *Ethics of Memory***

The work of Margalit offers interesting insights into the approach we have called the standard interpretation. In his book, *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), he describes memory as knowledge "from" the past rather than "about" the past (14). Our sharing of memory

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<sup>35</sup> Again, Slootweg's use of terminology points to something of a unified subject, or at least a subject with reason as its 'central control', which could facilitate such a learning process. It could be argued that he should not be read as suggesting such a unified subject.

makes thick relations (his formulation for ethical relations) possible, because, Margalit believes, we only care for someone with whom we share a past (35). In other words, where Heidegger connects caring (*Sorge*) – the activity that is "our way of living in time" (35) – with the future, because only she who has a sense of the future will take care of someone else, Margalit connects caring with the past. Only she who *shares* a memory with someone, will care for him. This understanding explains how the selfless activity of caring can in some circumstances become an egotistical and ethnocentric deed: in other words when one only cares for those with whom one shares a memory.

In explaining the significance of memory in general, and to ethics specifically, he writes that "memory is the cement that holds thick relations together, and communities of memory are the obvious habitat for thick relations and thus for ethics. By playing such a critical role in cementing thick relations, memory becomes an obvious concern of ethics, which is the enterprise that tells us how we should conduct our thick relations" (2002:8). It could be argued, however, that to speak of 'communities of memory', and thereby establishing ethics as the relationship between people who identify a sameness in each other, is precisely being unethical in the sense I have used the notion of ethics here. As May (1997:4) writes, "thinking of ethics in terms of the likeness or analogies of others to oneself refuses the insight that what is ethically relevant is often the difference of others from oneself". It is still worth investigating Margalit's position in terms of his engagement with memory, however.

As shared memories are shared synchronically as well as diachronically through the passing of generations, memories often become 'beliefs' rather than 'truths' (Margalit 2002:59), he writes. Such a generation of beliefs often (but not necessarily) occurs when there are no survivors of an event left, when the memory is, what Margalit calls a "closed memory". Whereas (scientific) history looks for alternative versions of an event in order to find a story with at least some critical integrity, closed memory disregards any alternative versions. Fundamentalists do this because they believe in the absolute truth of their version, traditionalists only "suspend[s] judgements as to the truthfulness of the tradition's event-memories" (61).

Tradition is one form of shared memory, one in which the line transmitting a version from the past is sanctified, authorised, or even canonised in such a way that it is immune to challenges based on alternative historical lines. The paradigmatic shared memory I have in mind is the memory of an episode. But shared memory can be expressed in a legacy – that is, a

memory of abstract things such as attitudes and principles – or in a heritage, which consists of concrete objects such as buildings and monuments. (Margalit 2002:61)

This analysis is much more nuanced than that of Paul (1998:2), who argued that all groups who claim cultural identity in any significant way are necessarily fundamentalist. And yet, this notion of tradition still relies on the idea of a memory being unchanging and closed and therefore remains problematic.

Margalit makes a great effort to differentiate between memory and traditionalism (2002:10). Where traditionalism concerns itself with the past advocating a (blind) loyalty to it, the project of the ethics of memory, in contrast, investigates what *should* be remembered, in other words what we can be loyal to when we approach the future. The past is not accepted without question. What is more, the concern of the ethics of memory is indeed not with the past, but with the future. Margalit (13) makes this point explicit. "Transitional justice – how to deal fairly in a newly-born or regained democracy that has an undemocratic recent past – is deeply involved with the ethics of memory. Communities must make decisions and establish institutions that foster forgetting as much as remembering".

A similar approach is found in complexity theory. The memory of the system is not significant if it is only to establish a past. The memory, and the system's representation thereof, is important in as far as it helps the system to self-organise and survive in a changing environment. The past is in the service of the future. This point helps us to understand why the past need not be a closed system of meaning; in fact, it cannot be that. The past does not perform the function of origin, as in traditionalism, where its unity of meaning is imperative. On the contrary, the past aids the system in achieving perpetual transformation in order to survive, even though the transformation is never such that the system loses its iterability.

As will become evident, a point of divergence between Margalit and Derrida is that even though Margalit agrees that our memories are our interpretations of the past, his analysis does suggest that the past is not so much a part of who we are, but rather a tool that we use in order to establish ethical relations. We are still, in an important way, independent of our memories, and as such able to use them in order to define our thick relations. For Derrida, our being is transformed by our interpretation of the inheritance with which we are laboured. Both see the ethics of remembrance as an active process, then,

even though that process of interpreting means different things to the different thinkers. For Margalit, it could be suggested, it entails sifting through the remains. For Derrida, on the other hand, interpreting would suggest a process of creating, as much as finding. What is more, Derrida would be weary of the exclusion which Margalit's process of forgetting necessitates.

I have already mentioned the heated discussion among Afrikaners as to how they should understand themselves in the light of their history. Most seem to follow Margalit's approach, affirming some memories and denying others. Perhaps the great bitterness that has emerged in these debates, and indeed the lack of clarity that it has produced, is an indication that this approach is not complex enough to deal with the problem at hand. In other words, simplistically denying certain elements of the past without engaging with them, cannot provide one with the tools needed to establish an identity complex enough to survive in a complex environment. We cannot remain untouched by our past, not if we understand ethics, like Slootweg does, as the historical awareness which allows us to transform reality. For us to live justly, we shall see, Derrida implores us to live with our ghosts, rather than to forget them as Margalit suggests.

Some argue, according to Slootweg (2000:13), that it is exactly the inability of this standard interpretation to answer the world's identity crisis which led to the so-called postmodern problematic. The argument is that it is the postmodern disintegration and fragmentation of history that has led to the loss of the self (Slootweg equates Baudrillard with this position), and that has made history irrelevant. In other words, if history cannot teach us the truth, and if it can't provide us with an identity, then it has no role to play in a postmodern world. This is rejected by Slootweg (15). He shows that an argument in which identity is compromised by change and differentiation, and hence by the postmodern fragmentation, is still bound to a modernistic metaphysics, an atomistic perception of time and 'reality'. But such an atomistic view has been found to be problematic (Slootweg 2000:17) – see also chapter 3. The notion of identity and that of temporality, of changeability simply cannot be thought together in a traditional way.

Before moving on to alternative positions, a last word on Margalit. He asks whether there indeed is such a thing as an 'ethics of memory', in other words, can we say that we *ought* to remember (2002:105)? His short answer is yes, but with the qualification that it applies only to those who *want* to live ethically (106). No-one is forced to live ethically, while we *are* forced – at least by society – to live morally. This is an important point in the

following context: diversity is often defended by means of what is sometimes carelessly called 'postmodernism'. The general argument then states that, since we have become sceptical of modernism's insistence on the possibility of single and measurable truths, everything becomes relative and 'equally true', or at least equally acceptable. Thus it is impossible, for instance, to value one culture over another.

This argument can be used to develop an ethical community of diversity where everyone accepts the value of the other and lives together in harmony and understanding. Unfortunately, the argument hinges on the belief that everyone involved *desires* to live ethically. If not, the very same argument can be used to defend, for instance, the creation of an 'Afrikaner volkstaat'<sup>36</sup>. If no one argument is superior to another, then there is no reason why people cannot attach themselves to solitary communities (based on racial antagonism) with no involvement whatsoever in the existence of the greater community<sup>37</sup>. This would be an unethical choice, whether one considers ethics to be "thick relations" (as opposed to the thin relations of morality), as Margalit (2002:8) would have it, or as a non-violent relationship which involves responsibility, as Cornell (1992:13) defines it. This is no counter-argument, however, because being ethical remains (unfortunately) a *choice*.

Sloutweg (2000:32) writes that for Derrida, as for Heidegger, accepting the weight of responsibility that rests upon us as humans – in other words to live ethically – is the *only* possibility for humanity, if hope is to be thought meaningfully.

#### 4.3.2 Prosthetic memories

Landsberg (2004:2) envisages another form of "public cultural memory", which she argues was made both possible and necessary by modernity.

This new form of memory, which I call prosthetic memory, emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an

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36 Visagie (2004:93) critically describes how 'radical' Afrikaners seek a "Boerevolk" state as a means of freedom from what they perceive as ethnic and cultural domination, in the same breath as "postmodernist intellectuals who despise the 'authoritarian' or the 'centrist' idea of the state itself, being drawn towards a (federal) model of a regionally-based constellation of 'politically autonomous' peoples and cultures".

37 Visagie's (2004:93) interpretation of identity as 'multiple', in the sense that one is at the same time equally an Afrikaner, a South African, a family man and an academic, for instance, resonates with the relational model mentioned. He uses it to argue that Afrikaners, for instance, cannot only engage in their Afrikaner identity and ignore their identity as South African. They must be involved in all these groups at the same time.

experiential site...in this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history...the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape the person's subjectivity and politics (Landsberg 2004:2).

This is not in itself a new phenomenon; we can imagine that certain people have always had the ability to take on others' memories as their own. Landsberg's important point is that, in the age of information, this phenomenon is much more common than we care to acknowledge and, even more importantly, she argues that it is indeed something to be embraced.

Her study focuses, amongst other things, on the American melting pot, and shows how many immigrants shunned their 'true' memories – both consciously and sub-consciously – to take on the 'new' memories of an American citizen, and thus become part of what Margalit would call the community of common memories. Most commentators find this appalling. Landsberg, however, sees herself as moving beyond the era of "organic memory", which equated memory with heredity, and which advocated the idea that memories were inherited like physical features (see Slotweg's critique of this modernist position above). It is this move which allows her to embrace the idea of prosthetic memories. The scientific idea of memories as organic caught on in the social sciences and became a way of thinking symptomatic of the fascination with origins that is also at the root of nationalism. Similar to Slotweg, Landsberg points out that, in postmodernism, history seems to be 'lacking'. In her analysis of the film *Blade Runner*, Landsberg shows how it establishes memory as the "locus of humanity" (39), and thus depicts the Replicants<sup>38</sup> as having no past, no 'real' history. In the director's cut of the film there is no differentiation between humans and Replicants, and thus between real and prosthetic memories. "Ultimately the film urges its spectators to question their own relationship to memory, demystifying the assumption that their memories are 'authentic'. Memories are central to a person's identity...but as this film suggests, it might not always be possible to determine whether those memories come from lived experience or are prosthetic" (41). The point is that our nostalgia for 'real' memories still betrays a dependence on origins. If we can manage to disregard this impulse, we will learn to see that prosthetic memories represent a positive possibility, and indeed for two very different reasons.

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38 A genetically engineered biological 'android'.

Firstly, if we can acquire the memories of, say, those who have suffered, we can learn a degree of empathy not possible otherwise. There is perhaps no greater example than that of the Holocaust. Today there are few survivors left of this ordeal, and yet we all, on some level, have a 'memory' of the Holocaust, and a sensitivity towards its legacy. In post-modernism, then, memories are not necessarily lacking, but 'real' memories may well be. And this does open up interesting possibilities.

Of course, Landsberg's analysis is not a simple answer to the question of cultural tolerance. Indeed, the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa could theoretically have had the same effect as some Holocaust films. It certainly didn't. Many (white) South Africans remained untouched by the hearings. Possibly it is the fact that real victim's stories are harder to assimilate than those of the fictional victims of a film; possibly too few were willing to listen, because many experienced the hearings as accusatory. The fact is that the notion of prosthetic memory *is* a very useful one – not least of all because it destabilises the mythical origins of memory and culture – but it is not an easy getaway.

Secondly, our understanding of identity is transformed by this notion. Landsberg (2004:46) writes, "if identity is largely a product of memory and if authenticity is no longer an essential component of memory, new possibilities are available for individual and group identity", and elsewhere (64): "Memories of the past do indeed structure identity, but no single 'real' memory determines identity". In this regard, Landsberg's analysis conforms to the relational model of identity.

So what makes her position important? It is the fact that she denies that memory as organic or even 'real' that makes her work significant. In other words, her embrace of memories even if they could be regarded as 'false', helps us to break the shackles of the essentialist idea of the past as something 'true'. From here, it is possible to analyse Derrida's position as an even more rigorous approach to memory. Derrida does not take Landsberg's position; he certainly does not, in principle, encourage us to discard our 'own' set of memories for a new set. His position, as we shall see, is quite more complex – it refuses to simply suppress any part of a memory. But he would encourage us to leave behind our idea of memories as organic in order to be open to an engagement with and interpretation of our memories that could transform them.

Landsberg also seems to take our ability to choose our inheritance, and therefore our identity, for granted. Agency was discussed in detail in the previous chapter, and therefore

it is enough to simply repeat here that choice, as a function of agency, is a rather more complex matter than she would have us believe. We cannot be the autonomous designers of our own identities.

#### **4.4 Time and deconstruction**

Before turning to Derrida's specific position on inheritance, let us first investigate his broader understanding of history. In doing so, I will attempt to illuminate some of the important notions in Derrida's thinking which are particularly relevant here.

Unlike other theories of meaning which invoke *history* in explaining meaning as determined by historical context, Derrida does not use history in this sense (Derrida 1976). This has led many critics to believe that he disregards history; however, according to Culler (1983:128), this is not the case. Derrida emphasises that meaning and deconstruction are absolutely historical, although their historicity should not be seen as their foundation. In other words, because *différance* undermines the present, and therefore the presence of meaning, and shows it to be a construct rather than a given, time cannot be promoted to being the foundation of meaning. He does use the word 'history', but not with its "logocentric set of implications" (129) – where texts are typically drawn from historical periods and reduced to narratives of 'greater' meaning – but rather uses it in a critical way. If history is used in the 'logocentric' way, it reduces all difference to identity, undermining precisely the role that time plays in the determination of meaning. Not only does Derrida show that philosophical discourse is historically determined, but also that historical narratives are manipulated and reduced by philosophical rhetoric. For Derrida, history is part of the larger general text – rather than its foundation. This is a text with no boundaries, which we interpret all the time for practical reasons. We have to decide meaning in order to say things, in order to have 'meaningful' conversations, even though we know that this meaning is not given, but decided. Thus we decide the *undecidable*. This is necessary precisely because history cannot and does not decide meaning (unless philosophers force it to play this role). "The combination of context-bound meaning and boundless context on the one hand makes possible proclamations of the indeterminacy of meaning, but on the other hand urges that we continue to interpret texts, classify speech acts, and attempt to elucidate the conditions of signification" (133).

Where does this leave the conception of 'reality' then? There where it is not transparent, not immediately available to our knowledge. That does not mean that as philosophers we give up on reality, or on the possibility of achieving some, however

insufficient, grip on it. The possibility of grasping a reality which is always not yet available is our hope, is a promise. Reality lies for us exactly in this hope.

Only by this hope can the mortal person finally see more reality than is possible in the everyday existence[...]This true hope is not dependent on that which is given, but exceeds it[...]The revelation of the apocalyptic – unlocked in hope – end of time means the absolute moment of the (everlasting) beginning of things (Slootweg 2000:175<sup>39</sup>).

Earlier, it was argued that we cannot prevent our past from transforming us, we cannot remain untouched. Slootweg's definition of reality underlines this point. Because reality is merely a promise, because it does not lie in the given but in that which exceeds it, we must allow the system of identity to be open to the promise of reality – that is the ethical motivation of the system.

As soon as we try to understand reality by means of a rational approach, she loses the fullness of her being, writes Slootweg (2000:175). He insists that interpreting Derrida – as so many commentators do – as denying the existence of reality, is simply a crude misinterpretation (200). Instead, Derrida emphasises the unwillingness of reality to bow to our efforts to interpret and name her.

The tradition of differentiation has taught us that identity presupposes difference. In order for the 'sovereignty' of identity to be realised, one must differ from oneself (Derrida 1978; Slootweg 2000:212). The sovereignty that identity strives for is paradoxically made possible by an openness to that which is other. This openness is founded on the *original difference* of one with one'self and without this difference openness would be impossible. But it is, of course, a risk. It is a risk for identity to open itself up to this original difference.

For Derrida, to open one'self up to history is exactly to open one'self up to the original difference. This does not entail enlightenment historicism; we are not independent of history and therefore cannot study it from a neutral position. History, which is the deferral of the original difference, is for Derrida a *gift* (Derrida 1991:407), and as such, aporetic. The possibility of the gift is caught in an impossible economic circle. The gift which one

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39 Own translation: Alleen door de hoop vermag die eindige mens uiteindelijk meer te zien van de werkelijkheid dan gebruikelijk is in het leven van alledag[...]Die ware hoop hangt niet aan gegevens maar stijgt daar bovenuit[...]Die openbaring van het apocalyptische – in de hoop ontsloten – einde van de tijd betekent het absoluut-ogenblikkelijke (het eeuwige) begin van die dingen.

brings in order to 'fulfil an obligation' deconstructs itself. True giving shows itself to be manifested not in the gift which is presented and therefore present, but in that which is absent, impossible. The moment that the giver becomes present, she who accepts it becomes obliged and therefore the possibility of the gift is neutralised. In order for true giving to be possible, the giver would have to forget the gift. The impossible gift, therefore, implies that the giver forgets both himself and the gift as such. It is therefore not a case of the gift never having existed or never having been named, but rather that it would have to be forgotten. She who accepts, need not be grateful towards anyone in order to disrupt the economic circle.

The time of giving is what Derrida calls 'messianic time' (Slootweg 2000:215). He understands *tradition* in this sense, as that which comes to us from history but will never present itself. In other words, they who leave an inheritance should not present themselves, should stay anonymous. This is why they present themselves through spectres. In the same way the receiver should respect this difference and *forget* the gift. The gift always draws itself out of the chain of circular time which is necessary for trade exchange. Trade exchange, in turn can only produce the same over and over again (215). The economy of a time which always repeats that which exists so that nothing goes to waste, is disrupted by the time of the pure gift – because it can never be present. At the same time, the gift is that which is not reciprocated, and therefore there is no exchange. This causes a disruption of the economy that relies on exchange for its existence.

From this logic it follows that the historical awareness has nothing to do with debt, or with paying a debt, because paying a debt would be a means of reciprocating, of restoring a trade exchange economy. It could not be a true gift. Even though we have the responsibility to mourn the dead, and therefore to have an historical awareness of sorts, Derrida is careful to distinguish this responsibility from debt.

#### **4.5 Derrida, Hamlet and the Afrikaner**

The focus in the following sections will be on Derrida's text, *Spectres of Marx* (1994), in which he investigates the relevance of Marx after the fall of communism as an example of his understanding of tradition, inheritance and our relation to memories. Keeping in mind Culler's assertion that Derrida wants us to interpret history as part of the larger text, and thus continuously decide its (undecidable) meaning, this text proves to be a valuable application of this insight. An application that may open up a new beginning in the context of group identity.

The relevance of Derrida's attempt to "learn to live with ghosts" (Derrida 1994: xviii), therefore to live with our inheritance and live more justly, is clear when he writes in his exordium: "And this being-with spectres would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generation" (xix author's emphasis). This text on Marx becomes a rearticulation of *différance*. Derrida does not only see Marxism itself as 'ghostly', but indeed finds many ghosts in the work of Marx himself. This is how spectres reflect *différance*: just as reason tried to suppress its other, so the visible world tries to suppress that which is invisible, the world of the spirit, and so Europe tried to suppress the ghost of Marx. That is why living with ghosts means living justly, because it refuses to suppress difference. Both Margalit and Landsberg seem to be insensitive to this notion: for both, memory, or a part thereof, is something that could easily and ethically be suppressed or discarded. This would separate them fundamentally from Derrida's position. In terms of identity, living with ghosts entails living with the original difference inherent to identity. Derrida shows us again that that which is believed to be absent, is always present. But, one could add, living with ghosts also means living with that which is uncertain and therefore requires courage.

For Derrida, the point of his undertaking (as with almost all his work) is the responsibility required for the very possibility of ethics, of justice.

Central to the argument is the notion of time, of the moment. "Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question "where?" "where tomorrow?" "whither?"" (Derrida 1994: xix, author's emphasis). To be hosts of the things of the past is to find ourselves being hosted by that which we cannot fully comprehend. This is why our time is 'out of joint'. We are dealing with forefathers who are absent, with spectres, therefore. Our responsibility is towards our memories, towards those who are absent. This responsibility to interpret the past, that which is no longer present, is driven by our responsibility towards the future, towards those who are not yet present. If not for those to come, why would we engage with our memories?

It is only in this moment of the present being confronted by that which is absent, that we can be truly responsible, that is, that we can 'abandon' reason enough to not trust our calculated decisions, but to interpret the inheritance in a way which leaves that which is

interpreted *as well as ourselves*, transformed.<sup>40</sup> This is the case because reason cannot fully grasp that which is absent to it. In its very attempt to do so, it creates closed narratives of the past which stifles group identities – all in the name of the myth of organic memories and origins. This is not an apology for the irrational, but rather an attempt to push the limits of what reason can grasp, to open up the possibility of a reality beyond reason to enter. To at the very least accept that reason is, in this case, inadequate. Because reality is indeed the promise beyond reason.

Perhaps it is more useful to understand this argument in terms of complexity. In a complex system, one can make decisions, but these decisions cannot fully determine or predict the outcome of the decision. In such a system, as we saw, there are too many factors at play to allow for one element to dictate an outcome. When we decide an interpretation, it is not for our decision to determine the interpretation. This does not keep us from making decisions, however. When we speak about ‘deciding’ our inheritance, it should be understood as this modest form of decision-making which does not dictate its own outcome.

Hamlet himself was faced with the possibility of a new beginning (because his moment was out of joint); and with the ultimate responsibility that it entails. Hamlet had the responsibility to answer the call of his absent father in order to open up the possibility of the future. It is not so much a question of Hamlet avenging the death of his father, as of him engaging with the memory. The future will not begin once Hamlet has killed his father’s murderer, the future will begin once Hamlet has engaged with his inheritance, once he has allowed it to transform him. Failing to do this, he remains caught up in the precise details of the past and of his duty. The beauty of using Hamlet as an example here, is the fact that we associate Hamlet with an effort to deal with his past and his future in a reasonable way. His problem is precisely deciding what the reasonable option would be. Derrida’s point seems to be that such inaction is the result of our futile attempts at grasping the meaning of our memories through reason, rather than learning to live with its inadequacy.

Derrida is writing here after the fall of communism, at a time when Europe was forced to ask, whither? As Hamlet was forced to follow the ghost of his father, so Europe needs to follow the ghost of Marx, he says (Derrida 1994:10). And so, perhaps, as the Afrikaner

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<sup>40</sup> The reader may remember that in chapter two it was argued that, for Derrida, deconstruction as method, therefore as reasoned analysis, would be irresponsibility itself.

stands at the end of apartheid and the beginning of a new democracy, she too must ask, whither? What ghost are we expecting? The one that has come before and that beckons us from the future. This is the ghost that we must find through the work of mourning. As with Hamlet, this does not mean tracing the historical facts and equally it does not mean carrying the weight of duty and debt. It means, in Derrida's words, *inheriting* a gift that will not present itself.

An inheritance is necessarily heterogeneous, says Derrida (16). "An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the *injunction to reaffirm by choosing*...If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we could never have anything to inherit from it" (16, author's emphasis). The fact that it defies interpretation is what allows for the other, for the spectres to 'haunt' the inheritance and disrupt it. It is also what makes it a gift, because Derrida's gift is precisely one that does not present itself, that remains a secret. It is thus precisely because our inheritance defies interpretation, because it is not a unit of meaning that we have the opportunity of deciding its meaning and thereby inheriting from it.

This act of interpretation should take place with the knowledge, says Derrida (1994:22), that the original meaning can never be found. This does not preclude the possibility of filling the inheritance with meaning, or rather, different meanings. In fact, we have the task of interpreting, which is an inescapable task. Inescapable, because "(t)hat we are heirs does not mean that we have or that we receive this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but *that the being of what we are is first of all an inheritance*, whether we like it or know it or not" (1994:54, my emphasis).

Let us refer back to Margalit and Landsberg's notions of choice or decision. Margalit wants us to decide which aspects of our past to affirm and which to deny. Landsberg wants us to decide almost completely arbitrarily what our memories are. Both these notions of decision presuppose memory as a unity of meaning, even if Landsberg acknowledges it to be an inorganic unit. For Derrida, it is precisely because an inheritance can never be a unit, can never be transparent, that we have the responsibility to choose it, even though the decision is always provisional. That is not an arbitrary choice, nor is it choosing to keep some aspects of a legacy and to forget others.

There is another aspect of Hamlet and of post-communist Europe that Derrida illuminates strikingly and which is relevant here. In order to think the heterogeneity of an

inheritance, and therefore in order to "hold together that which does not hold together" (Derrida 1994:17), the time *needs* to be 'out of joint'. Hamlet opposes the time being 'out of joint' to the time 'being-right', and moreover, that destiny has ordered him to put time back on its hinges (20).

According to a paradox that poses itself and gets carried away by itself, Hamlet does not curse so much the corruption of the age. He curses first of all and instead this unjust effect of the disorder, namely, the fate that would have destined him, Hamlet, to put a dislocated time back on its hinges – and to put it back right, to turn it back over to the law. He curses his mission: to do justice for a fault, a fault of time and of the times, by rectifying an *address*, by making of rectitude and right a movement of *correction*...He swears against this misfortune, and this misfortune is unending because it is nothing other than himself, Hamlet. Hamlet is "out of joint" because he curses his own mission...and what he curses in his mission is...first of all that it is *inborn* in him, given *by* his birth as much as *at* his birth. Thus, it is assigned by who (what) came before him... (Derrida 1994:20, author's emphasis)

Derrida emphasises that Hamlet came *after* the crime. Like the right, which *can* only come after the crime. Only if one is originally 'late', therefore second generation, is one destined to *inherit*. And, significantly, "one never inherits without coming to terms with some spectre, and therefore with more than one spectre" (21). Only if you inherit (tragedy) at birth, can you be called 'out of joint', and only the moment of being 'out of joint' allows for a new beginning, because it is divided from its own presence. Whereas Hamlet sees this position as his ultimate misfortune, Derrida interprets it as a unique opportunity, the opportunity to engage with the spectres, be transformed by the past and thus put time back on its hinges. Perhaps it should be explained thus: as long as Hamlet remains untouched by his past, as long as he regards it as that which is absolutely other to him and therefore denies the identity inherent to the difference between him and his past, the past will not be allowed to 'pull' time out of joint. Because spectres of the past are not allowed to inform the present, because the myth of the present as self-enclosed unity is retained by Hamlet, Hamlet remains unable to answer to his responsibility and to his inheritance. Even though the responsibility is to put time back on its hinges, this can only happen if time is in the first place, out of joint.

This is also the unique position the Afrikaner finds herself in. She came after a tragic crime, she will inherit the ghosts from the past if she is willing to do so. The past will put her out of joint, and she will remain thus if she regards the past as of no concern to her, and that which must simply be suppressed. But there is a responsibility on her to put time 'back on its hinges'. The responsibility is hers, because the ghost is that of her father, and she is forced by the call of those who are to come.

To agree to this inheritance is not enough, however. Putting time back on its hinges does not mean restoring the trade exchange economy. It was said that inheriting is a gift that must disrupt the economy. Our inheritance should not be reduced to a manageable commodity. It is in this moment of disjunction, of being out-of-joint, that we have the possibility of achieving justice. The possibility is limited to this moment, because the justice that is sought here is not a calculated justice: "If right or law stems from vengeance, as Hamlet seems to complain...can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance?" (Derrida 1994:21). Vengeance is an economic notion, it achieves only calculable justice, calculable equality. For "justice as incalculability of the gift and singularity of an economic ex-position to others" (21) to be achieved, we need a moment that doesn't belong to history. We need, therefore, a moment that is out of joint.

Is this point not made explicit in the case of post-apartheid South Africa? Is it not clear that calculable justice was achieved with the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, with the promulgation of a new Constitution, with the very ascension of a democratically chosen government? But is it not equally clear that the justice that would resonate with our intuition of what justice is, that indescribable and yet very real notion, is still but a promise?

In the context of this study, one should be careful of placing too much emphasis on the crime, as one could become too involved in apartheid rhetoric, and especially in making value judgements such as the very use of the word 'crime' implies. Rather, what should be emphasised is the fact that an individual, Hamlet for that matter, or a group, the Afrikaners in this case, can find themselves by the 'destiny' of their birth in a position of being 'out of joint'. This should not be a position to curse, as Hamlet does, but to embrace. It should be seen as the singular potential of a new beginning.

To speak of the responsibility of the Afrikaner in such a moment, is not to speak of some duty. Derrida's logic of the gift precisely entails no restitution – and "the question of justice, the one that always carries beyond the law, is no longer separated, in its necessity

or in its aporias, from that of the gift" (Derrida 1994:26). The economics of restitution, as of vengeance, we saw, is a closed form of economics. The justice Derrida envisions cannot be bound by closure. This justice, which is at once *undeconstructable* and the condition *for* any deconstruction and *within* every deconstruction, must remain out of joint (Derrida 1994:28). For when it is conjoined, it is somehow closed, finished, it allows one to rest after "having done one's duty...(I)t loses the chance of the future, of the promise or the appeal, of the desire also [for justice]" (28). Elsewhere he writes that "the demand [for justice]" can never be always present, "it *can be, only if there is any*, it can be only possible, it must even remain a *can-be* or *maybe* in order to remain a demand" (33 author's emphasis). This means that putting time back on its hinges does not imply dealing with ones past with finality. It can never be finalised. That is why our identities – as complex and dynamic processes – cannot remain untouched by our past.

Significantly, Sloopweg also calls Derridean responsibility "a passion for the secret of Nothing" (2000: 225). The inheritance, as the debt, remains a secret as it must remain incalculable, undecided. In Derridean responsibility one needs to give up the self-consciousness which calculates decisions, one needs to give up one's self, in order to answer the call of the other. Otherwise, responsibility becomes the payment of a debt. Responsibility is thus fed by the uncertainty of not knowing, not calculating and at the same time mourning the death of the history of the self (229).

What is therefore asked of the Afrikaner? At the very least, to abandon the idea propagated by Verwoerd that 'we', the Afrikaner, must be able to say exactly 'who we are'. On the contrary, it is demanded of the Afrikaner to untie itself from all myths and memories that were believed organic, that defined who it was. This does not mean destroying the myths and the memories, it means interpreting them, deconstructing them in order to transform and be transformed. It means having the courage to open up one's identity to the original difference.

#### **4.6 Derrida on Fukuyama**

Perhaps Derrida's critique of Fukuyama will provide us with another approach to the same problem. The latter writes in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the vision of the French Revolution for a free and equal society has culminated in the modern liberal democracies of the late Twentieth Century. Fukuyama envisions this process as working towards the homogenisation of all human communities, which would end in one rational unity. Traditional social structures will be replaced by rational economic structures.

Derrida not only points to the eschatological nature of such a teleological analysis, but systematically criticises Fukuyama's argument, showing it to be incoherent, and specifically pointing out that Fukuyama is caught between *fact* and *ideal*, while claiming to rely on empirical analysis only.

Unexpectedly, Derrida wants to make the point that it is exactly in this interval, this tension between fact and ideal, where we find the promise of something 'new'. This 'new' understanding cannot be grasped, but it can be said that this concept carries spectres of both the future and the past – and that makes this moment ethically significant. Why? Where Heidegger sees the future as the condition for the possibility of *die Sorge* (as an ethical notion), and Margalit sees memory, the past as its precondition, Derrida connects responsibility, his ethical notion, with both the past and the future. The question, 'whither?', can only come from the future but already stands before us, behind us. And it must go beyond our "living present" (Derrida 1994:xx), beyond our lives. In the interval between fact and ideal, spectres of the past and the future emerge, which makes the new beginning possible. If we resort to fact, and indeed to a factual understanding of history, we suppress the possibility of the unexpected, the incalculable, to infiltrate our understanding. Similarly, if we reduce our understanding of history to a mythical and ideal narrative, confidently claiming that *this* is who we are, the spectres will again be denied entry.

Derrida's understanding of meaning illuminates this notion of the instant or the interval. Meaning is a special continuum of silence which accompanies the absence of every possible meaningful difference which represents an absence (Slootweg 2000:194) – because, as we have seen, meaning resides in difference. The interval carries with it a difference which has no meaning, because as soon as it obtains meaning, it is taken up by the system and the interval is closed. Indeed, Slootweg contends, meaning should not be the operative notion here, we should rather speak of an internal experience – once we assign meaning and break the silence, meaning escapes us. Of course, it is very hard to understand what such an internal experience would entail. At the same time, it could be suggested, we do have experiences which we cannot assign meaning to.

But this absence belonging to the silence needs to be signalled. This is what words do. We must speak in order to be silent. We must allow the meaning of words to slip away – as we allow the meaning of identity to slip away for difference to be signalled. If we do not allow the meaning to slip away and create silence, we end up fixing meaning within signs and in the process, destroy the meaning. The temporal structure of this "sovereign

operation" is the instant (a moment that is "out-of-joint") (Slootweg 2000:194). This moment is not a point of undivided presence; it is not a "bei-sich-selbst-sein". All the differences in the text which is our inheritance preclude the possibility of such an undivided moment. Again, inheriting, and being transformed by the inheritance does not entail becoming a new, final identity. One unity of meaning is not simply replaced by the next – that would mean finally putting time back on its hinges, closing the economy so that nothing from outside the exchange (including the past and the future) is allowed in. The transformed identity must remain heterogeneous, divided; time must remain hinged between being out of joint and being on its hinges. If not, the system will reach equilibrium, will lose the ability to adapt and self-organise, and finally implode.

This instant between fact and ideal, this silent moment of speaking which allows meaning to slip away, is sovereign as it does not bow to the logical rules of language. This requires courage. But taking up one's responsibility, being ethical, always requires courage. Courage to allow for that which is singular and unexpected, unplanned.

Can we find another analogy here? Is group identity not always and inevitably caught up in an interval between fact and ideal, 'reality' and 'myth'? Margalit describes fundamentalists as accepting the myth (ideal) of their cultural origin as truth (fact), while traditionalists admit to suspending fact ('reality') in order to sustain the ideal. Discourses that attempt to explode these constructs, base their criticism on what they believe to be the 'reality' of human existence – as if they had access to a reality that was more than merely a promise.

Over and against Fukuyama's messianism where history culminates in a rational and liberal state, where the challenge of reconciliation is met by the notions of 'equality' and 'humaneness' and the state rests on the economy and recognition as its pillars, Derrida's '*messianiek*' (Slootweg 2000) is somewhat more modest. It would be easy to turn one's ear from him here. Does Fukuyama not provide us with an acceptable answer to our questions as to the possibility of an ethical community? Can we not trust rationality to lead us to the state as he describes it, where equality and humaneness will be the simple yet mighty foundations carrying the complexities of a multi-cultural society? If we can think it, why can reason not be trusted to take us there? Do we have to adhere to the never-ending warnings of the poststructuralists, or can we not write them off as perpetual pessimists?

The logic of the ghost, Derrida believes, is important here precisely because it "points towards a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the

logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity* or *actuality* and *ideality*" (Derrida 1994: 63, author's emphasis). It is important, because the event, the instant, will not let itself be thought as long as one is caught up in this form of dialectical thinking which opposes fact and ideal, which is equal to thinking temporality as the mere succession of presents each identical to and contemporary with itself (70). "This law [the law of the law] would signify the following to us: in the same place, on the same limit, where history is finished, there where a certain determined concept of history comes to an end, precisely there the historicity of history begins, there finally it has the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself" (74). It is indeed an object of deconstruction, not to think a new history or even an ahistoricism, but to open history up to singularity, in which the promise of reality lies.

One should therefore not understand his interpretation of Fukuyama as a mere acceptance of a position *between* fact and ideal, but rather *beyond* it, beyond the very dialectic which posits them as opposites. Likewise, we should stop analysing group identity in terms of that which is fact (the historical) and that which is ideal (the mythical), as structuralists, posthumanists and historicists often do. It is precisely the reliance on this opposition that poses problems for our understanding of group identity. Only when we move beyond this opposition, can we understand what it means to inherit. Again, however, Derrida would acknowledge the impossibility of moving beyond these oppositions that are the foundations of Western philosophy. He would rather employ his 'double strategy' of remaining within the opposition while looking for every opportunity to transgress it.

Derrida's thoughts are messianic in that they are aimed at the future, but not at a future that can be realised precisely. Time is simultaneously the expectation, the promise of reality, but without the fulfilment. This is not a pessimistic or even negative vision; in fact, Derrida's modesty about what can be said of the future always leaves us with an opening. It is important that we are not left out of the equation, as in Fukuyama's analysis. It might be human rationality that drives his eschatology, but it is an inevitable movement all the same. The ethical responsibility of dealing with each other does not lie with individuals in Fukuyama's state – the ethical relation is supposedly 'written in the stars'. When Derrida envisions the promise of the future, it is a promise that is never fulfilled, it is a responsibility therefore, that needs to be taken up in every moment. The ethics of interaction still and always requires our decisions, our actions. And crucially, our acceptance of the responsibility of making such decisions. Derrida's analysis is therefore not negative, but indeed positive and full of promise.

This tension filled with promise can be compared to Derrida's understanding of justice as a promise that cannot be fulfilled, but yet as something that we reach for in every moment. Justice is not a calculation, but is a provisional end that needs to be found again and again in every moment where it is sought: in every courtroom and parliament, but also in every interaction that aims to be ethical. This is how we should understand the future: even though it is a promise that cannot find fulfilment, it is, like justice, a promise that we must and desire to fulfil.

[W]hat remains irreducible to any deconstruction, what remains as undeconstructable as the possibility itself of deconstruction is, perhaps, a certain experience of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism...an idea of justice – which we distinguish from law or right or even from human rights – and an idea of democracy – which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today: *where to lead it by interpreting it, which cannot happen without transformation, and not where it can lead us such as it is or as it will have been* (Derrida 1994: 59, my emphasis).

What is said here of justice, can be said of the inheritance, the inheritance that is the identity of, in this case, the Afrikaner.

#### **4.7 Poetry as inheritance**

But what would this inheritance mean? What can we meaningfully say about the event of the inheritance of the Afrikaner?

Perhaps we should consider another aspect of Derrida's understanding of debt. The call of responsibility that comes with an inheritance necessitates deconstruction: the deconstruction of the meaning of *Afrikanerskap*, of inheritance itself, perhaps even of 'truth and reconciliation'. But deconstruction is radicalisation, and "a radicalisation is always indebted to the very thing it radicalises" (Derrida 1994: 92). Afrikaners owe it to their *Afrikanerskap* to radicalise what it means to be an Afrikaner. The debt is not to be paid to those who believe they have been wronged by the Afrikaner. The debt is to be paid to the inheritance itself.

But,

one cannot *establish* the *state* of a debt...as one would a balance sheet or an exhaustive record, in a *static and statistical* manner...One makes

one's self accountable by an engagement that selects, interprets, and orients. In a practical and performative manner, and by a decision that begins by getting caught up, like a responsibility, in the snares of an injunction that is already multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory, divided – therefore an inheritance that will always keep its secret. And the secret of a crime. The secret *of* its very author (Derrida 1994: 93, author's emphasis).

To understand the inheritance in yet another way, Derrida turns to specific writings of Marx. When speaking of a revolution, which would translate as something of a 'new beginning', Marx – like Hegel and Hugo before him – is sensitive to the repetition inherent to it. From the fact that the revolution is a repetition, Marx concludes that "men make their *own* history, that is the condition of *inheritance*" (Derrida 1994:108, author's emphasis). They are not free to make of their history what they want (as Landsberg would have it), however, their choice is constrained by spirits from the past: "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and *borrow* from them *names*, battle-cries..." (Marx in Derrida, 108, author's emphasis). Again, it is an unbearably complex and paradoxical moment.

Marx compares the revolutionary moment with learning a new language. At first the learner translates everything back into his mother tongue. Only when she can express herself freely in the new language without referring back to her mother tongue, without, therefore, recalling the old, has she truly learned the new language. In the same way, revolutionaries use the battle-cries of the former generation to formulate their own battle-cries. When she has *forgotten* her native tongue, she can speak the new language. But forgetting here means forgetting that which was indispensable – not forgetting in the sense Margalit described. Learning a new language, says Derrida, is already an inheritance: the mother tongue is, therefore, the pre-inheritance. One thus forgets not the inheritance, but the pre-inheritance. If learning a new language is the moment of revolution, then "one must not forget [the spectre, the pre-inheritance], one must remember it but while forgetting it enough, in this very moment, in order to "find again the *spirit* of the revolution without making its *spectre* return" (Derrida 1994:110, author's emphasis).

This is an illuminating analogy for dealing with the memories of a group identity. It means one must remember at first, in order to inherit that new identity, the new language,

because it is only by using the memory of the old, that it is possible to learn the new. But at some point one must forget, otherwise one can never truly become the inheritance, or speak the new language as a native tongue. But forgetting only takes place when the pre-inheritance is part of the new transformed inheritance, because it is indispensable to our understanding of the new inheritance. This is Derrida's active forgetting: forgetting without excluding the spectres. This is ethical forgetting.

What does it mean for Afrikaner identity then? To give themselves to history, to open themselves up to their inheritance means also to become what they are because of the tradition into which they were born. And this demands of them that they take responsibility for that inheritance by remembering and engaging with their pre-inheritance – up to the point where they have been transformed.

It is not possible to close their history off in a totalising narrative, as they cannot bridge the gap between themselves and history through reason – if indeed they could, they would lose the undecidability that offers them the promise of a new beginning and they would remain untouched by their past. Thus, the problem of who they are cannot be solved by a single 'true' historic tale: history gives, but it doesn't present itself.

In short, Derrida is asking us to be willing to deconstruct history and thus to transform it. This cannot do other than transform who we are, because it entails transforming our inheritance. In terms of group identity, this means being willing to open one's identity up for transformation, a transformation that is only possible through engagement with our pre-inheritance. The point is to repeat, but repeat with a difference.

Earlier it was explained that, when dealing with a complex system, the history of the system can be understood either as the 'narrative' of its past and as such one element which contributes to the relational constitution of the identity, or it could be understood as the complex of traces that *is* the identity of the system. Derrida's analysis, which asks us to engage with our heterogeneous past, makes use of both understandings. We do inherit a past as narrative – but this can never be a single or closed narrative. In our active engagement with this inheritance, we transform the memory and we are ourselves transformed. In this sense, the engagement with memory becomes the play of traces which creates meaning within the system. Our inheritance becomes who we are.

Antjie Krog, in her book *Country of My Skull* (1998), relates an encounter she, as a Western poet, had with other African poets at a conference in Senegal.

[Krog:] “In my [Western] culture you are a good poet if you can say old things in a new way. We have been saying “I love you, but you don’t notice me” for centuries. The “newer” the way you say it, the better poet you are. In the culture of Senegal, what makes you a good poet?” [...]

The Senegalese speaks and Breyten translates: “In my culture you don’t just become a poet. You have to apply first. And the older poets come together and your ancestry is studied and your ability tested... And [the chief poet] teaches you the nation’s poetry. And your people’s poetry is your people’s lyrical soul, their history. And you may not say it in a new way, you may not change it, because then you forge what has happened. You change history [...] The more accurately you preserve the poetry, the better you perform, the better poet you are.”

The attention shifts to the nomadic poet: “In my culture the task of the poet is to remember the watering places – the metrical feet of the waterholes. The survival of the whole group depends on whether you can find the waterholes in the desert. You must remember them in such a way that other groups are none the wiser. The group will never cast you out or see you as mad – but the day you betray the position of the waterholes to someone else, that is the day they will leave the poet behind in the dunes (Krog 1998: 221-222).

All three these literary traditions represent encounters with an inheritance. The Senegalese define their inheritance, their history as poetry. This is a strong image which suggests that history is something that must be interpreted, even in a Derridean sense. But the important qualification is that nothing in their history may be changed. Interpretation cannot allow for transformation. Even though history as poetry would suggest a venture beyond the fact-ideal opposition, the closed interpretation of this poetic history puts the tradition back within the opposition. History, the ideal perhaps, is fixed as fact. Nothing new can penetrate this tradition, no responsible engagement is possible. Time is forced on its hinges, prohibiting the past and the future from truly disrupting this inheritance.

Does the Western tradition of saying old things in a new way fare any better? Doesn’t saying old things in new ways imply repeating with a difference? Only if saying here represents speech that allows for meaning to slip away. Only if, by speaking, these poets remain silent, rather than giving their history a fixed meaning. Only if they do no repeat old

things, in the name of 'origins'. This is done, one could suggest, by using poetry to proliferate the heterogeneity of one's past.

Perhaps there is also a sense here of learning a new language, of using the pre-inheritance of old sayings to learn new ways of speaking. Again, this could only be useful in the Derridean sense, if these old sayings do not determine the meaning of the new. If saying it in a new way does not merely mean choosing new words to fix the same meaning, the same tradition. If, in other words, the spectres of the past are allowed to roam free, which in turn is a reminder that saying something 'new' should not mean abandoning that which came before.

Finally, the nomadic poet may only speak so as to be understood by his own people. He may only speak of that which guarantees survival. It is the closed nature of this tradition that implies that their poetry, their inheritance, has no significance or meaning outside the group. Poetry is a tool which helps them to survive within their physical environment – a complex system self-organising within a rather simple environment. But such a system could not survive in a complex environment where waterholes are only one of many factors upon which survival depends. In a complex environment such as a multicultural society, making oneself unintelligible to one's environment, closing the system, makes it a lot more difficult for the system to create enough difference and meaning in order to cope in a complex environment. But the idea of using history as a tool of survival does resonate with Derrida. It can only be a tool, however, if it is complex and heterogeneous, because it must help us to create complex and heterogeneous meaning to answer questions more complex than simply finding the co-ordinates of the waterhole. What is more, making oneself unintelligible would preclude the possibility of co-existing ethically. The inheritance Derrida envisions is driven by the force of the ethical.

The Derridean poet, it could be suggested, would engage with his history and his inheritance by deconstructing it, but never fixing it. By telling the story of history while allowing it to remain a secret – to all, not only to the other, as is the task of the nomadic poet. By engaging with the spectres rather than abolishing them with totalizing narratives. This is possible, because this poet will seek less recognition for the identity of his group, less meaning, because of the awareness of the instability of meaning. In other words, identity will paradoxically be saved by shying away from saying "exactly who we are". If we keep Landsberg's analysis of prosthetic memories in mind, this becomes less counter-intuitive than it seems. It does not imply that the identity has no meaning, that there is no

difference between this group and another. Boundaries that constitute meaning do emerge, as has been discussed. The boundaries remain temporary, however.

The Derridean poet will say old things in new ways, without being shackled to the tradition, without having to say the same things. The shackles are broken; he does not engage with his history because he believes it to be an 'origin'. He will repeat his inheritance, but with a difference, as he is free to do so. He engages with his inheritance, because it pulls the time out of joint and allows for spectres of the past and the future to inform his present. It is a gift, and as such must be forgotten. But always, he will remain modest about how much he can say about who he is and where he comes from. That is how we survive through justice.

## **4.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, an argument was made in favour of the Derridean interpretation of history and memory which allows for our inheritance to remain heterogeneous. It was said that such an interpretation of history allows the spectres of the past to remain within the system and, in an instant, to disrupt the system. The possibility of disruption and transformation is what ensures the system's survival as a complex system.

Krog's interpretation of the Western literary culture cited above, betrays to what extent this culture values what is new, that which comes to us for the first time. I have also worked with this notion of the new, the other, being allowed into the system which is only possible if the system is not closed. In the following and final chapter, this argument will be investigated further. We will have to understand why allowing for the other to enter the system is vital to our survival and be willing to allow the meaning of our identities to "slip away".

Above, I have used the image of the poet in the context of a literary citation to illuminate how Derrida suggests we may deal with an inheritance. In the next chapter, the notion of saying the unsayable, of speaking in order to remain silent, will come to the fore. This is necessary, because it is exactly in the silence that we create the intervals where new meaning can disrupt the system.

This will lead us to a new understanding of the future, and in this case, of the future of group identities – especially now that we prefer an understanding of identities that undermine their recognition as static units of meaning. Our ethical motivation is driven by

the future, by that which is to come, and therefore our understanding of the future becomes central to the argument.

## Chapter 5

# The future as a possibility

### 5.1 Introduction

Arguing for an interpretation of group identity as a complex system carries with it the implication that identity is dynamic, but that, as a system, it differentiates itself from its environment (through self-organisation) and in the process creates meaning and boundaries around the system. In the previous chapter, memory was investigated as a form of information that the system uses in order to self-organise and adapt to its environment. It was shown that, in order for the system to be dynamic, it cannot resort to a notion of identity as something static and unchanging. With the help of Derrida, it was argued that this means the group must seek less recognition for the meaning it carries, which would allow for meaning to “slip away” in order for the identity to remain dynamic. Once we fix the meaning of an identity, we close the possibility of something truly new entering the system.

Change is not unique to the Derridean system. As we shall see in this chapter, a system of meaning such as those of Saussure and Barthes also has the ability to change. What these systems of meaning do not have, it will be argued, is the ability to allow for change that is not dictated by the rules of the system. The question that needs answering here is, is it indeed possible to admit something new into the system, to regain the beyond, without collapsing it into the system? Is Derrida’s argument for the new beginning viable at all?

The chapter starts with an investigation into Roland Barthes's theory of myths which is very useful when one is mapping cultural identity. What arises from this investigation, and a comparison of Barthes's theory with that of Derrida, is the fact that these two theorists both allude to the necessity of saying the unsayable, of speaking of the world without naming it, if one is to have any hope of finding the unique, that which has not been 'distorted' or 'violated' by being named. Their very different approaches to this problem proves useful in tracing the divergence between the structuralist and poststructuralist approaches (Barthes and Derrida respectively). It also allows us an angle from which to

approach Derrida's insistence on the possibility of allowing for the spectres, the outside, to enter the system.

Derrida's argument is followed along his reading of Hegel, and it becomes apparent that for Derrida, allowing for the new means employing a 'new kind of writing', a writing of the excess.

An alternative understanding of history, as the previous chapter suggested, of course has radical implications not only for our notion of time, but also for our notion of the future. Speaking meaningfully about cultural identity, of its history and its meaning, must include an engagement with what the future means for such a group. Particularly, once it is argued that the group must allow itself to find a 'new beginning', one will have to compare this idea with traditional philosophical interpretations of the future. As will be shown, Derrida's understanding of the future is indeed nothing other than precisely this 'new kind of writing'.

The argument has been made that transformation is what enables the (complex) system to adapt to a complex environment. It has also been argued that meaning is indeed not as stable as is often presumed, and therefore, if meaning can be perceived as stable it is the result of being violently forced into such stability. With the introduction of the notion of the future in this chapter, many of the arguments that have been made throughout this thesis will be drawn together and yet another perspective on the significance of transformation will become apparent. The importance of the undecidable, we shall see, is precisely that it ensures an openness to futurity. Without it, there is no future, and therefore no hope of surviving through justice.

Finally, it is asked whether this engagement with group identity leaves us with any hope for the survival of an identity as something recognisable. In other words, whereas it may be argued that it is 'ethical' to seek less recognition for the group's identity, such an understanding will remain naïve if it can offer no guarantees for the survival of the identity. On the basis of some of the arguments made in this chapter, it will be contended that, even though the identity cannot seek the stability that will afford it such guarantees, it can also not be said that the necessity or probability of the disappearance of identity is implied by this approach.

## **5.2 In search of a true invention**

By way of focusing the discussion I want to point out a formulation of Derrida's political thought by Paul Patton (2004) which has specific relevance here. It is an idea that has been discussed throughout and which has been formulated as the 'new beginning', but which can equally be read as a means to regain the beyond.

Patton (2004:29) refers to Derrida's assertion that "deconstruction is inventive or it is nothing at all". Derrida's point is that invention is traditionally understood as something new, something that has not come before. But in order for invention to be accepted by a practice or an institution, in order for it to be compatible with what is already in existence, it has to conform to the rules of the existent practice or institution. Therefore, invention, traditionally understood, is not something new at all. "Understood in this manner, an invention would not break with current institutions, laws or procedures. It does no more than make explicit that which is already possible within the 'economy of the same'" (29).

Invention, if it is to be truly inventive, needs to bring about that which is truly other, outside the system, and thus actually impossible. This is precisely the political function of deconstruction, opening the present up for the other to come. That would mean that, for a group identity such as the Afrikaner to be open to a 'new beginning', means to be continuously deconstructed. Reinventing a group's identity merely in terms of the rules articulated by the system of meaning already in place, is not an invention at all.

It should not be underestimated, however, to what degree Derrida sees such an arrival of the truly other as impossible (30). Consider Derrida's interpretation of hospitality (Derrida 2000): as a practice it is always conditional. Hospitality is offered by a host, who needs to keep her position as host in order for the act of hospitality to take place. It is offered only to those with a particular status, perhaps as friend or social dignitary. The notion of reciprocal duty is essential. But Derrida wants us to understand that this notion of hospitality is derived from an absolute notion, one which does not conform to these rules. An unconditional hospitality would be open to the absolute other. This hospitality remains heterogeneous and cannot be reduced to the known form. It is at the point of distinction between the possible and the impossible that something beyond, something truly other is allowed in. "It is this 'something beyond' that inspires the possibility of change in each determinate context" (Patton 2004:32).

The argument made in this chapter should be read in the light of the possibility of such a 'true' invention. If the truly new is that which does not conform to the rules of the system, that which cannot be interpreted within the structures of meaning inherent to the system, it must be asked, how can it possibly enter the system? Derrida of course insists that this is impossible, but at the same time it is the only possibility of change, of transformation that the system has. How are we to understand this very ambiguous notion?

### **5.3 Barthes's theory of myth**

The work of Saussure as discussed earlier, taught us that meaning is created within a system of difference, constituted in the relationship between the signs in the system (Saussure 1960). Because the meanings of signs are arbitrary, it is not possible for the community of speakers to change the meaning at will. But, significantly for the discussion at hand, change does occur within the system.

Change occurs because the system is not free of the influence of time (Cilliers 1998:39). As some elements change and interact with other elements of the system, it results in the entire system changing over time. However, "the result is not a new, completely different system, but rather a transformation of the old system" (40). The system is closed, not because there is no interaction with its environment – indeed the system self-organises to adapt to the needs of the environment – but because meaning and possibility is closed off within the system. Change, new meaning, can only be generated within the system itself according to the rules of the structure already in place.

Saussure's understanding of language is one of an independent system. Signs are arbitrary, they are not conditioned or determined by some external and natural meaning. As Bell (1998:155) explains, "we can see why Saussure claims that 'Language (versus Speech) is a system which admits no other order than its own'. That is, language is independent of both the individuals who speak the language and the concepts or objects that are referred to by this language. In short, Saussure will claim that language is an independent and self-contained system, or, as it is more commonly called, structure".

Roland Barthes (1993) explicitly relied on Saussure to illustrate how myths are created within such a system of difference. Barthes understands myths as the false 'truths' that are created around almost any group in society – women, actors, the colonised, et cetera. With his analysis he aims to expose these myths for what they are on his way to finding the truth distorted by these lies.

Barthes's analysis show that a myth is created when a signifier is emptied out and filled with a 'false' meaning. Barthes (1993:118) emphasises that a myth is not an idea, but a form, and therefore material. It also communicates a message. This implies that a myth is not *defined* by its content, but by its form. What is more, "one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history that converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language...myth is a type of speech [that] cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (1993:110). Barthes follows Saussure's emphasis on signs having no essential meaning, but rather unfolding in time through their interactions.

Barthes relies on Saussure's theory of the sign as something consisting of a signifier and signified. Myth, however, is a second-order semiological system. Myth builds on language (here referring to more than mere spoken or written language), by taking the sign from the linguistic system and using it as a signifier relating to a different (and, Barthes would say, false) signified, thus creating a second order sign. For the sake of clarity, Barthes wants to separate the first order signifier from the second order signifier: the terms he employs are significant. The first order signifier he calls 'meaning', while the second order signifier is 'form' (117).

The first order signifier, as meaning, already has a 'reading'; it is not empty. In fact, Barthes writes, "the meaning is *already* complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (117, author's emphasis). But through myth-making, the 'meaning' becomes 'form', by emptying itself from its history and its contingency. "The form has put all this richness at a distance" (118). The point is not that meaning is suppressed, but rather that it loses its *value*, that it becomes impoverished<sup>41</sup>. The function of the myth lies in the second order signified. This is not an abstract concept, it is filled with the "historical and intentional" (118). This concept absorbs the value drained from the form, but inserts a new and unstable history into the myth.

Van Wyk's (1995) description of the formation of the Afrikaner identity through its literature illuminates Barthes's theory. Van Wyk embraces Saussure's distinction between diachronic and synchronic language. He quotes different definitions of the Afrikaner in different time frames, and explains, following Lacan, how the diachronic view of identity of the Afrikaner "betrays" the mixed origin of the nation and serves as the unconscious of the

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41 It is interesting that Derrida's understanding of the general economy also employs this difference between the meaning of a sign and its value, as will be discussed in a following section.

nation. This unconscious is "an index of successive events that have been repressed" (Van Wyk 1995:112), in this case the mixed origin of the Afrikaner. "An unravelling of the history would at the same time be an unravelling of the unconscious, of the 'historical turning-points' which constitute an identity". This repression of the unconscious is equated with a suppression of the other in the Afrikaner identity in an attempt, according to Van Wyk (1995:113), to construct a European identity. Such a suppression of the other is indeed made possible by the Saussurean system of difference which stabilises a sign with a complete meaning, and is also described by Barthes in his analysis of myth. The suppression of time is needed to keep the meaning of the myth stable – time would necessitate change.

Novelist JM Coetzee described his experience of growing up in South Africa as follows:

I was eight when the party of Afrikaner Christian nationalism came to power and set about stopping or even turning back the clock. Its programs involved a radically discontinuous intervention into time, in that it tried to stop dead or turn around a range of developments normal in colonial societies. It also aimed at instituting a sluggish no-time in which already anachronistic order of patriarchal clans and tribal despotisms would be frozen in place (in Van Wyk 1995:vii<sup>42</sup>).

How successful this strategy was, is indicated by a study such as that of Afrikaner dissidents by Louw-Potgieter (1988). She claims that to uncritically accept the unprecedented homogeneity and organic unity of the Afrikaner, is to fall prey to the very ideologies created to form such an Afrikaner unity. Specifically, to view an Afrikaner dissident as something very rare is to neglect the empirical evidence which suggests a different story: the Afrikaner has always been a group with significant internal strife. Louw-Potgieter's suggestion that many researchers have overlooked this fact, is a strong indication of how successful myth-making around the Afrikaner identity was.

It is clear, therefore, that Barthes's explanation for the creation of identity as myth is useful as a critical theory. It also illustrates, however, that what Barthes understands as the stability of the first order signifier – that which would represent the 'true' meaning of the

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42 Wood (1989:351) explains that myth-making does not exclude time by an atemporal logic, "but by a temporally articulated narrative". He further explains that, for Barthes, structuralism has as its centre "the notion of the synchronic...which accredits a certain immobilization of time".

sign – is not as stable and homogenous as he imagines. Barthes's (1993:119) description of the myth is worth quoting in this context:

In actual fact, the knowledge contained in the mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must firmly stress this *open* character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function (my emphasis).

Derrida's aim is to find a way to speak without using concepts, precisely because the unity of a concept forces the unity of a discourse and therefore allows for no other (Derrida 1981a). For Barthes, the instability of these mythical concepts, and therefore their openness, is what makes them 'dangerous' (note the use of negative adjectives such as 'confused', 'yielding and shapeless').

Contrary to Barthes's suggestion, Potgieter describes the Afrikaner as 'in fact' being a heterogeneous group that was suppressed into homogeneity by the myth-making surrounding their identity. The Afrikaner was no "abstract, purified essence" – that is precisely the myth. For Barthes, the apparent lack of unity is what makes concepts like myths dangerous; for Derrida the lack of unity is what makes these concepts (such as *différance*) useful in allowing for their negotiation, and thus for the new. This is the critical difference between the two.

The question remains whether Barthes's understanding of the constitution of meaning (and therefore, in this case, the meaning of cultural identity), which is Saussurian and therefore independent, accommodates the possibility of change. Of course new meaning is created in Barthes's system, his analysis of myth is proof of that. But these myths are created within the rules of the system itself, and form new unities of meaning, even if he regards them as unstable due to their lack of essence. Barthes's analysis makes this point quite explicit: the new meaning is literally parasitic on the meaning already present in the system. In a sense, change is intelligibly structured in as far as it remains within the rules of the system.

The only form of language that cannot be mythical is 'true' revolutionary language, according to Barthes. Such language aims to create the new, rather than consolidate and naturalise established reality. "There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to *transform reality* and no longer to preserve it as an image...myth is impossible" (1993:126, author's emphasis).

Two things seem to be important about this type of language: first, it is meaning that does not create images, it doesn't describe or name, it acts. Any use of language that merely names things, is meta-language. And second, revolutionary language stays political; it never pretends to be natural.

It is clear from both these points that Barthes clings to something of an essence when it comes to the meaning of things: when we name them, we distort their true meaning (rather than close off the meaning). We will see, however that this notion of speaking without saying is equally important in Derrida's work. At the same time, when we use meanings and pretend that the meaning is natural (and not political) we are also distorting true meaning, Barthes contends. Human intervention, in the form of language, is always a distortion. The only way to make myth impossible, therefore, is to admit to always being political – because myth's power derives precisely from the fact that it pretends to be natural.

What would such an argument mean for the identity of a group? Barthes's insistence on the importance of always admitting to the political nature of one's language is important. It could in fact be argued that Barthes, like Derrida, knows that we cannot do other than name things in order to speak, but when we do, we distort them. These distortions become myths that are in turn naturalised when we are not willing to admit to the political nature of our speech. Indeed, admitting to the political nature of your assertions, means taking responsibility for them; admitting, even, to deciding the undecidable in the Derridean sense.

Perhaps the divergence between Barthes and Derrida should be seen in the light of the opposition between ethics and politics that was discussed in the third chapter. We saw how Derrida reinterpreted the traditional opposition between that which is timeless and essential – the ethical – and that which is contingent and timely – the political – by showing that they both have a rhythm of urgency in their responsibility. The belief in origins, it was argued, denies responsibility, or at least unloads it.

Barthes wants to hold on to that which is original, ideal, timeless (and ethical) as opposed to that which is political and revolutionary, even though he admits that we can only sustain the ideal by not naming it. In his work, the ethical and the political cannot collide. Both philosophers claim that we should learn to speak without naming things, without using concepts. For Barthes, who functions within a system of meaning where units are stable and closed, the only way this can be achieved is by always admitting that

everything said is merely political (and not ethical, not 'true'). For Derrida, the instability of meaning as he understands it allows him to speak without naming things by allowing the concepts to be exactly as ambiguous and heterogeneous as he believes them to be (Derrida 1981a). In other words, by naming things without finality. This is why, for Derrida, there is no difference in 'essence' between the political and the ethical – both are similarly unstable.

In this regard, Grosz (1998:192) writes:

What makes Derrida's work at once intensely political and ethical, while he remains acutely aware of the problems involved in any straightforward avowal of one's commitments to political and ethical values, is his readiness to accept that no protocol, no rhetorical or intellectual ploy is simply innocent, motivated by reason, knowledge or truth alone, but carries with it an inherent undecidability, and repeatedly that recontextualises it and frees it from any origin or end. His politics is not the espousal of a position, but rather, an openness to a force, the force of *différance*.

It is generally believed that deconstruction is a critique of Saussure's system that denies its validity. Not so, writes Harvey (1986:38): Derrida's interest was in the *limits* of Saussure's system, rather than in the system itself. As we saw in chapter two, Derrida displaced structure as the centre of the system dictating meaning. As the system loses its centre, the limit becomes more and more important in order to demarcate the meaning of the system – what is in and what is out – as the centre no longer fulfils that role. Deconstruction, as a gesture, is in fact always concerned with the limits, with that which divides the inside from the outside. When one speaks of true change, of allowing for the new, then the reference is precisely to this 'outside'. In a system such as Saussure's and subsequently Barthes's, the limits of the system are fixed by the structure as centre, and therefore the outside remains absolute and impenetrable.

In Derrida's work, the play of *différance* which reverberates through the system allows for space between elements of the system. These spaces are not dictated by a centre, as the centre has been destabilised. Nor are these spaces comprehended by the system – they are, in fact, the outside on the inside. It has been argued that we need to understand group identity as such an open system in order for the group to survive ethically in a complex environment. The problem that faced both Derrida and Barthes in confronting the system is the possibility of saying the unsayable, of naming things without drawing them

into the system and thereby distorting them. In order to understand Derrida's argument in this regard, we need to turn to his reading of Hegel.

#### **5.4 The disruption of the Hegelian economy**

Bertrand Russell (1996: 700-706) reads Hegel's work as symptomatic of his scepticism of separateness, a notion that developed early in his thought. The world, according to Hegel, is not a collection of separate units each complete and self-sufficient. The only unit that is completely real is the whole.

In Hegel's view, what empiricism traditionally regards as the real, is not rational: only when facts are viewed as composites of the whole, the Absolute, can they be seen in their true nature, and are they rational. Hegel's systems theory has two important elements, namely logic and dialectics. Concerning logic, his important enquiry is into the possibility of stating a predicate about the existence of the whole. In his view, such a predicate must be self-contradictory, because a statement about the whole necessarily implies a beyond to the whole (similar to the earlier assertion that a system necessarily has a beyond). The same idea developed into his notion of dialectics: any thesis implies an antithesis. As only the Absolute is real, both the thesis and the antithesis must be the Absolute. The conclusion is that the Absolute is both the thesis and the antithesis: which he calls the synthesis. But every synthesis implies a new beyond, and thus becomes the thesis of a next triad. "In this sort of way, so it is contended, we can be driven on, by the mere force of logic, from any suggested predicate of the Absolute to the final conclusion of the dialectic, which is called the 'Absolute Idea'" (Russell 1996:703). The assumption that only that which is complete in itself, is real, underlies this theory. This means that Hegel assumes the Whole to have no relations to an outside – that would deem it unreal.

It is interesting that Russell (1996:702) calls Hegel's conception of the whole that of a "complex system" or an "organism".

The apparently separate things of which the world seems to be composed are not simply an illusion: each has a greater or lesser degree of reality, and its reality consists in an aspect of the whole, which is what it is seen to be when viewed truly. With this view goes naturally a disbelief in the reality of time and space as such, for these, if taken as completely real, involve separateness and multiplicity (Russell 1996:702).

The important point here, when Hegel is brought in relation with Derrida, is precisely that Hegel denies the 'reality of space and time', although this understanding should not be oversimplified. Russell (1996:706) argues that even though Hegel regards time as merely an illusion that is created by our inability to see the Whole, the logic of the dialectic is intimately related to time, as is evident in his philosophy of history. Hegel regarded history as an *illustration* of the dialectic, which means that the later stages of history were regarded as of a higher order than the earlier stages. "The time-process, according to Hegel, is from the less perfect to the more perfect, both in an ethical and a logical sense".

The time that Hegel's system has no space for is 'real time', because of its necessary multiplicity. In economic terms, this would be excessive time, time that cannot be calculated – in the Derridean system, the time found in the spaces between signs that is a result of the force of *différance*. This excessive time interrupts the economy that relies on everything being calculated and of use in the system. But, as Grosz's (1998:191-192) excellent formulation of *différance* points out, *différance* is not only that which disrupts the possibility of self-presence, but also that which always wants to return to the presence of the deferred:

As 'active' moving discord of forces, or differential forces, one which precedes the opposition between the active and passive or moving and stationary, *différance* is the originary tearing of that which, unknowable and unspeakable as it is, was always amenable to inscription, was never 'full' enough to retain its self-presence in the face of this active movement of tearing, cutting, breaking apart. Which is also a bringing together, a folding or reorganising, and the very possibility of time and becoming.

Derrida is careful to point out that the play of difference is both active and passive, the production of space is not only an activity: difference creates meaning, but differences are themselves effects (Van den Adel 2001:19).

Derrida himself offers an explanation with an analysis of the sign. "The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present[...]The sign in this sense, is deferred presence" (Derrida 1978:9). The sign, then, is both secondary and provisional, he writes. It is secondary, because it derives its being from that which it represents, but it is also provisional, because in its act as mediator, it moves towards the deferred presence (in other words, the always already of the never has been). Whether the sign is secondary

or provisional, it is never present. This formulation illustrates Derrida's deconstruction of the traditional privileging of the present. In fact, he writes:

Thus one comes to posit presence – and specifically consciousness, the being beside itself of consciousness – no longer as the absolutely central form of Being but as a “determination” and as an “effect”. A determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of a presence but of *différance*, a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination (Derrida 1978:16).

In another illustration he invokes the work of Freud and specifically his notion of the pleasure principle (Derrida 1978:19). The pleasure principle, according to Freud, is replaced by the reality principle: this does not entail the abandonment of the pleasure principle, but merely its postponement. It is the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a means of gaining pleasure. The reality principle *demands* such a postponement in order for pleasure to be obtained. The desire for pleasure, therefore, never seizes. This point offers an important allusion to Derrida's concept of the future as the messiah who never arrives, who is always postponed, a point we will return to in the following section.

In other words, when the sign mediates meaning, it tries to return the self-presence of the deferred meaning. In the same way, when Freud describes the pleasure principle as based on the deferral of the presence of pleasure, it does not change the fact that the desire for the self-presence of that which is deferred, remains. Derrida's question, then, is how can we simultaneously think *différance* as the “economic detour”, as that which always aims to return to the presence of the deferred and on the other hand, *différance* as “the irreparable loss of presence...as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy” (Derrida 1982:19)?

As Alan Bass (1986a:20) points out in his translator's notes to *Glas*, Derrida uses an array of economic terms in *Glas* in order to illustrate his divergence from the work of Hegel at this point. In Hegel's economy (as in Fukuyama's), nothing is lost, it is possible to make sense of everything and therefore, there is no other to meaning. Derrida wants to move philosophy into a general economy, an economy which affirms that which exceeds meaning and from which no profit can be made (Derrida 1978). This is the effect of *différance*, it is the effect of words with double meaning. Without writing, there can be no double meaning and therefore no other to meaning. Therefore, Derrida wants Hegel's

*Aufhebung* – and as we saw, history – to write itself (otherwise). This is the opportunity to produce openings.

The excess in the system exceeds meaning because it cannot be utilised by the system, it is a senseless loss (Derrida 1978:268). This loss of meaning Derrida calls sovereignty. The new kind of writing that Derrida envisages, puts us in relation to this sovereignty, rather than ever becoming the sovereignty. "Sovereignty dissolves the values of meaning, truth and a grasp-of-the-thing-itself". This is why the discourse that it opens above all is not true, truthful or "sincere" (1978:268). This is again where Derrida differs from Barthes, who finally did conceive of a true grasp of the thing itself, which is always distorted by our naming of it. For Derrida, the sovereignty of that which is senseless (and therefore sovereign as it does not bow to the rules of rationality) is not 'truth'. But it is that which the system cannot comprehend, it is the outside on the inside. Its effect must be thought, as it is the only possibility of the system to allow for the new.

Derrida's (1986a) discussion of the preface in Hegel's work reflects on this notion of the outside that somehow finds itself inside the system. When Hegel added prefaces and introductions to his works, something that he was quite known for, he acknowledged unwittingly that his system was not complete. The preface has to be outside the system in order to be a preface, but the fact that it is outside means the system is incomplete, that it needs something to supplement it in order to be. Derrida's argument is that this preface thus has to be neither absolutely inside nor absolutely outside the system. The preface is therefore not part of a binary opposition or a dialectic. That means the preface is what Derrida calls, the *undecidable*.

This is not the first reference to the notion of the undecidable. In this context the undecidable is that which the system cannot comprehend, but it is not therefore outside the system. If it were outside, it would simply be part of another oppositional structure and would then be decidable. The undecidable is a necessary condition for the system even though as a particular exteriority, it disrupts the system's completeness. "This 'outside' which is 'inside', exposes the openness of every system that seems to be closed. Unlike the exteriority Luhmann attributes to autopoietic systems, this openness is not extraneous but is "*within*" the system itself" (Taylor 2001:97, author's emphasis). This makes it possible to imagine a system that is both open and operates far from equilibrium.

Ormiston (1988:43) writes, "the a of *différance* forces philosophical literacy to the boundaries of comprehension, where the economy and order of comprehension are

marked by inequality, instability and inversion". The boundary of comprehension is where we will find that which is senseless and sovereign. *Différance* does work to support discourse, however inarticulately, Ormiston insists. This silent writing, this new kind of writing, creates heterogeneity. This means, Ormiston explains, that *différance* enacts simultaneously a closure and a breach: there is a binding, however critical, to what he calls a certain universe of discourse, but at the same time the boundaries (or limits) of discourse are exceeded, a reminder of Derrida's assertion that *différance* is "this sameness which is not identical" (1991:129). It is this economy of *différance* that constrains and therefore frames meaning, because to be sure, *différance* 'cuts up' the text, but also 'sews' it back together. This new kind of writing is precisely Derrida's understanding of the future, as will be argued.

Harvey (1986:153) agrees that, for Derrida, writing is an expansion from language which therefore creates excess. The term 'writing' usually denotes a derivative notion that must lean on the intentions of the author, an author that is supposedly fully present to itself. Once the possibility of such a fully present subject is deconstructed, writing itself needs to be redefined. With his use of the term 'writing', Derrida wants to go where 'language' cannot go, he wants to comprehend and even describe what language cannot do (152). This is a necessary project because for both Barthes and Derrida, as we have seen, only if it is possible to say what language cannot say, can we venture to speak about change.

But how do you say the unsayable?

By retaining (but not incorporating) the excess, therefore by not employing terms that would immediately give the discourse a meaning and thereby eliminate the excess – this is clearly the function of *différance*. The point, of course, is never to be meaning/less. It is, rather, to step outside metaphysics, and one should therefore remember Derrida's insistence on the *impossibility* of such a project, his insistence also that his own project cannot make such a transgression.

Derrida's own explanation is helpful here: "the writing of sovereignty...is not the loss of meaning...it opens the question of meaning. It does not describe unknowledge, for this is impossible, *but only the effect of unknowledge*" (1978:269 my emphasis). He goes on to argue that the general economy folds the "horizons of knowledge and figures of meaning" (Derrida 1978:269) so that they come into relation with a basis. But this basis is not the telos of meaning, he writes, but the "indefinite destruction of value". These are again

economic terms that might provide us with a clue to what he is getting at when he describes this new writing: it is a writing that pushes concepts beyond the meaning/non-meaning opposition – as it must, otherwise overturning meaning would simply mean displacement by a new identity, that of non-meaning. Derrida wants to move beyond such oppositions, and he does so by talking not of the *meaning* of notions in a system, but of their *value*. Sovereignty is senseless because it has no value, rather than no meaning. The system cannot comprehend it and therefore has no *use* for it. Once the system does understand it, even if it understands it as a negativity, as an other to meaning, it can be put to use as difference constitutive of meaning. It will have value again and be drawn into the restricted economy.

This is what Derrida's general economy, his new kind of writing, wants to transgress. It can only achieve this by describing not unknowledge (and therefore its meaning) but the effect of unknowledge. This is how the outside disrupts the inside, not by a 'meaningful' intervention, but by having an effect upon the system even though the system cannot – and must not – comprehend it.

Harvey (1986:154) emphasises the fact that Derrida calls his new writing a "rationality" in quotation marks, because it is not rationality as we know it. What is at stake here is finding a means to articulate the conditions of the possibility of the "as such": not of the constitution of the object 'as such' as the phenomenologists sought to explain it, but of the 'as such' as constituted by reason itself, not that of a subject. "The limits of writing are inscribed in its relation to speech (as other than speech) and in relation to the subject (author) as the "writer of writing"". It would seem that there could be no room for reason itself in this venture, because reason cannot do other than eliminate excess. In Harvey's words, "it is a journey that paradoxically requires that reason be invited to come along – but always and necessarily *a posteriori*"(155).

This notion is also expressed in Derrida's use of *arche-writing*. Similar to the shift from rationality to "rationality", the move from writing to arche-writing denotes a move from writing that *is* writing to arche-writing which is *like* writing. As Derrida understands it, it is the as-structure which precedes the is-structure – hence the term *arche-writing*. "For Derrida," writes Harvey, "the opening of the battle is the concept in struggle with itself" (156). This means that within an identity that should be understood as closed, there is duplicity, there is a notion of the concept folding back on itself in a struggle. The realisation that this struggle within the concept is "essential" to the being of the concept is what

destroys the nameable concept, and therefore that which eliminates excess, without destroying meaning.

Once we accept this destruction, it is possible to move beyond the limits which the 'concept as name' (or even 'as meaning') imposes, and thus beyond reason.

Arche-writing, which is also the trace and which is also *différance* is described by Derrida as follows:

Arche-writing, at first the possibility of the spoken word, then of the "graphic" in the narrow sense, the birthplace of "usurpation"...this trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of the inside to an outside: spacing (Derrida 1991:42-43).

And elsewhere:

To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance (Derrida 1976:112).

But thinking the unique in the system, thinking the thing in itself, is impossible; therefore it is the loss of what has never taken place. We must differentiate; reason must be invited along if we are to speak meaningfully, because meaning resides in difference. This is the as such constituted by reason rather than by the subject. We transcend reason, Harvey would argue, by acknowledging this originary violence of reason which enables us to speak.

In the previous chapter, the argument was first introduced that, in order for a group to have a future, to have something new enter the system, it must engage with its inheritance in such a way as to transform it, knowing that this transformation can never be reasonably dictated by the system. Now that an argument has been made for the possibility of the transcendence of reason, it is time to discuss an appropriate conception of the future.

## **5.5 The future as a new kind of writing**

Wood (1989:364) points to two ways in which the future can be seen as significant for the entire tradition of philosophy: hermeneutically and ethically. Explaining the hermeneutical importance he draws on the work of Heidegger and his notion of understanding taking place within a "triple horizontality" of the past, present and future. "The future is the horizon of possibility in the *strong* sense. And it is a horizon that is essentially *finite*..." (author's emphasis).

The ethical importance of the future is based on the notion that no account of human life and human values, no description of how the world 'ought' to be, can be intelligible without a conception of the future within which such a vision or description could potentially be realised. We need a future dimension if we are to believe that life can be improved. "If philosophy is thought of as having a telos as yet unrealised, then the future will be projected in such a fashion as to allow for this. If the improvement of life can come only through, or with, the co-operation of philosophy, then these two futures fuse" (366). Such a vision of the importance of the future is sometimes equated with the culmination of the human race in a truly rational society, as in dialectical systems discussed shortly. This conception of the future must be a possible future (that reproduces the present), otherwise it would have no sense.

Much greater caution is employed when the future is allowed into the equation today. Wood (1989:367) identifies a number of important reasons for this new approach, some of which are quite relevant here. One is a critique of the future as an extension of the critique of the possibility of meaning being complete and closed. In other words, if the future is regarded as a utopian idea where we might be free from 'deficiencies', and therefore, in Wood's words, free from the effect of *différance* and thus a relation to the outside, it will be an unacceptable idea for poststructuralists.

But nor can the future be seen as that which is absolutely other. If we understand timeframes such as the 'present' and the 'future' as mere paradigms, then we find ourselves within the 'present' paradigm and will it be impossible to project what the 'future' paradigm might hold – unless, of course, we could step outside this framework. Wood refers to this notion of the future as "unintelligible discontinuity". The third reason for caution involves the critique of logocentrism. Whether the future is understood as a general concept in the greater historical discourse, and therefore, metaphysical, or as a

deconstructable notion – and both are possible – the future would still be a logocentric concept (Wood 1989:368).

He subsequently sums up the poststructuralists' caution with respect to the future in terms that echo much of what has been said so far: poststructuralism namely views the traditional understanding of the future as an effort to reduce the unknown to the known, and to project the value of presence onto that which is not present, by positing the future as an extension of the present. It is clear that such a conception of the future, which reduces the other to the same, is caught up in a restricted economy that would not allow for the moment of otherness, that Derrida envisions as the space where the 'new beginning' is indeed a possibility. This future is *possible* in as far as it is an extension of the present. For Derrida, we saw, the future must remain *impossible*, in order to be the call that breaks in on the system. But how do we speak about this future, this impossible trace that disrupts our system, this call that drives us. What more can we say about this future?

By understanding the future, once again, as a 'new kind of writing', as something that cannot be represented (Wood 1989:369), we are perhaps able to speak about the *effect* of the future rather than the future itself. This kind of writing entails, it was argued in chapter four, understanding a concept such as history not as a unit, but as a plurality of histories, which means "inscribing" the term continuously in his text and at the same time always transforming its meaning. The general economy (which is this new kind of writing) brings us into a relation with the future as the transgression of founding oppositions.

Wood argues that this is possible because of Derrida's unique topology. His analysis of Derrida's critique of traditional understandings of the future takes up the theme of the third chapter, namely that of boundaries. Derrida is cautious about the future precisely because he understands boundaries, or the separation of the inside and the outside, in a new way – as an understanding of *différance* dictates. When dealing with invaginated topologies, the distinction between inside and outside is at times undecidable. In other words part of the outside is also inside. Such a topology allows Derrida "to displace the metaphysical paradigms of circle and line, or unity of direction" (370). In the same way, the only possibility for going beyond metaphysics – which could be seen as the poststructural articulation of the future, Wood argues – is within metaphysics itself. This attempt at going beyond metaphysics is part of Derrida's 'double activity': a strategy that involves undermining texts from a position inside the texts themselves, rather than from the outside (Derrida 1991:108).

But Derrida's conception of the future does have a second strand, in that it stands *outside* philosophy – with the full acknowledgment of how problematic a position that is. Derrida writes that this second strand attempts "to determine from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy – what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid...by means of this simultaneously faithful and violent circulation between the inside and the outside of philosophy – that is of the West – there is produced a certain textual work that gives great pleasure" (in Wood 1989:371). Critchley (in Reynolds and Roffe 2004:128-129) was quoted in chapter two as explaining that this is what deconstruction is: it writes the limit or margin which philosophy cannot represent in an effort to find that which is other to philosophy and cannot be reduced to the same. "In question is an other to philosophy that has never been and cannot become philosophy's other, but an other within which philosophy becomes inscribed".

It was held in chapter four that Derrida's messianism (which refers to a messiah that will never arrive) stands in opposition to that of the teleological messianism of Fukuyama. The latter employs a form of Hegelianism in his project of showing how the world is moving towards an inevitable state of universal democracy – what he calls the end of history. This is a form of dialectical thinking. As Wood (1989:323-324) explains, "dialectical thinking is legitimate wherever patterns of development and transformation occur that can intelligibly be said to have some sort of "logic", and that are the consequence of some human involvement". It is now possible to approach the divergence between Derrida and Fukuyama from a new angle, namely that of time and the future.

The problem with dialectical time, at least when one is seeking the possibility of a new beginning, is that nothing is possible outside the logic of that particular dialectic. In other words, even though transformation may occur, it can only result in a state that is possible within the logic of the dialectic itself. When Wood claims that "what we call the "logic" or the "necessity" of a dialectical development is in fact a product of the events or thoughts or theories working themselves out within a 'closed system'", he is articulating this very idea.

A dialectical view of history, Wood (1989:364) argues, can only understand the present with an acknowledgment of the possibility of (self)transformation always at work within it. This is the contradiction inherent to the system. "Understanding a state of affairs is to grasp its possibilities of change. Here, it might be thought, the future is only logically or abstractly required; but in another sense, of course, this transformed state *is* the future". Through Hegel, this understanding becomes vital for the very existence of the

philosophical project. The future becomes important playing its reflexive role. Wood himself divides this view into an understanding of the future as fulfilling the ideals of philosophy in a way continuous with the past and alternatively that of a clean and necessary break from philosophy itself. The argument here critically subscribes to the second view.

It is argued here that an openness to transformation is an openness to futurity – which suggests a similarity with the dialectical conception of the future. The difference is, first, that the dialectical system believes in an inherent logic to the transformation of the system. The transformation of the complex system, as with a Derridean system, cannot be dictated by reason or by the dialectics of the system, and therefore cannot be predicted. It is driven by the promise of a messiah who will never come, rather than the dialectical messiah who is the necessary outcome of the system's logic.

Wood remarks on Derrida's reliance on what he calls an ateleological motivational structure. The future is not a mere projection of the achievement of our goals. Derrida, expanding on Heidegger's notion, writes of the desire to "get to a point at which he does not know where he is going" (in Wood 1989:371). To allow one's memory to be transformed and as a consequence be transformed oneself, is exactly to be at a point where one does not know where one is going, where we cannot reduce the unknown to the known. If the path could be dictated, if this point was not riddled with uncertainty, the transformation would have to be limited to the rules of the system within which it finds itself: that, perhaps, of rationality. A transformation that transcends the system, a true new beginning, therefore, is necessarily unknown.

Explaining the significance of undecidability to questions of ethics and politics, Grosz (1998:198) writes that undecidability is another name for iteration: "for the openness of destination of any articulation, any object or any event, the propulsion of any 'thing' to a future context or scene where its current meaning, value and status is reread, rewritten, transmuted". The emphasis that has been placed on the danger of naming identities with finality, with closure, now becomes truly significant as it becomes apparent that the openness of the concept, of an identity, is what makes the future possible. Without the possibility of being reread at a future time, iteration becomes impossible and therefore the concept, the identity loses its value (see chapter four).

Undecidability dictates that the signification and effect of events or representations can never be self-present insofar as they always remain

open to what befalls them, always places them elsewhere: in other words, it dictates that it is only futurity, itself endlessly extended to infinity that gives any event its signification, force or effect [...] What the principle of undecidability implies is that the control over either the reception of the effect of events is out of our hands, beyond a certain agentic control. This is what an openness to futurity entails: that things are never given in their finality, whatever those things might be. That whatever is made or found, whether it be nature or artefact, must be remade and refound endlessly to have any value (Grosz 1998:198)

Secondly, the complex system can never be finally transformed, but is always in a dynamic process of transformation. For Derrida, it is the present – and not the future – which is always delayed. The future (which is already past, as the ghosts encountered in chapter four) indeed breaks in on the system through its call of responsibility; it is the ethical call that forces the system to act.

This ethical call at the same time points to the *impossibility* of the future. Patton (2004:33-34) reminds us that deconstruction orients itself towards an *impossible* future – in the same way that the true invention is impossible. This openness to an impossible future is articulated in the notion 'to come'.

By this phrase Derrida means the future understood not as a possible future present but rather as something that can only ever remain in the future because of its aporetic character. This is an absolute or structural future, a messianism without a messiah, *but it is also the condition of the possibility of change in the present*. Even though this absolute future will never be actualized in any present, it remains capable of acting in or upon the present...It is this structure of action in the present in the light of an impossible future that Derrida calls the 'to come' and which he distinguishes from the possible future that only reproduces or continues the present (Patton 2004:33-34, my emphasis).

When we speak of the future of a group identity, then, we are not speaking of such a 'possible future' that is an extension of the present. We are rather speaking of the future as that which is already breaking in on our (deferred) present. In other words, it is the call of the (generations) to come, which drives us to engage with who we are today. We struggle with our ghosts, with our debt, because we have a sense of what is to come. If there were

no call from the future, we would have no reason to engage with the past. And engaging with the past, it is argued, means transforming who we are, means an openness to futurity.

In Derrida's later work, the future is described in "apocalyptic discourse". There is great significance in the invitation implied by the apocalyptic gesture, a gesture which invites the listener "to 'come', to follow, to open himself/herself to the light" (Wood 1989:381). These words, to come, not only indicate the future, but also a position where a new kind of writing could exist.

As I understand Derrida, the apocalyptic "viens"(come) has the force of a primordial event in a Heideggerean sense, with a fundamental ethical flavour superimposed on it...Every event, as such, marks a rupture with the past, has its own temporal integrity...they open up a whole world of possibilities. Such an idea could be used to understand the activity of philosophy itself – as an opening on to, the opening up of possibilities of thinking, indeed, of living (Wood 1989: 381-382).

If a critique of the traditional theories of the future is their valuing of the present, then this notion of the fundamental event implies a future which is an opening of possibilities, an opening to the other, and therefore not a continuation of the present.

But the notion 'to come' also implies an ethical dimension, there is something personal in such an invitation. Wood (1989:382) believes Derrida is evoking Levinas here, and is showing that it is the radical discontinuity of the other which is precisely the discontinuity of time. "It suggests that [philosophy] will rest ultimately on the invitation that we each extend to the other to open ourselves to the adventure (ad-venture) of thinking, without the prospect of completion, and without aiming at some prescribed destination".

This means for philosophy as for identity, to get to a point where one does not know where one is going.

It must be remembered that, for Derrida, the mere textual use of a term does not make it metaphysical, but rather the work that it does (Wood 1989:369). In other words, to merely 'predict' the course of the future is not dangerous in itself. To use the prediction in order to legitimate an argument or a course of action, is. We can speculate about the future, then. We can try to predict the outcome of our decisions. We can even try to predict what the identity of a group will look like at a future time. What we cannot do, Derrida would argue, is use this prediction in order to claim legitimacy for the decisions that we

make. This point has been made in terms of complexity theory, where it was argued that we can never know enough about the system to know how our actions and decision will pan out. But Derrida is further arguing that, legitimating an argument on the basis of a future projection, passes the buck. The decision-maker avoids the responsibility of the decision.

## **5.6 A short intervention**

Before finally applying these arguments to the Afrikaner group, I want to shortly discuss Wood's effort to ground *différance* in the present. Wood (1989:270) claims that Derrida's work allows for no conception of time, because an alternative to the metaphysical conception of time is impossible. Wood finds this unacceptable, and therefore attempts to "show the vital role of time in the development of the terms *trace* and *différance*, and how they in turn then absorb that very same temporality" (271). Wood explains that, whereas the notion of the sign represents a meaning that is potentially present, the trace refers to a meaning that is already past and cannot be 'brought back', not even potentially. The trace can never be a part of a series of 'now' moments. This leads Wood to conclude that the trace allows for no "experiential evidence", the trace can never be experienced, as experience takes place in the present. Therefore, Wood contends, there can be no phenomenology of the trace. An alternative understanding of time that is phenomenological, is therefore ruled out.

*Différance*, says Wood (273), is a movement that does not take place in time. If it did, we would have been able to take a snapshot, to stop time for a 'moment' and in that moment trace the movement of *différance*. But the movement cannot be traced. Nor does it constitute a different time, Wood continues, but simultaneously, it makes time possible. "So the argument is that *différance* precedes time understood through presence – for example, as made up of a series of now-points, or as the living present – in that it is only on the basis of *différance* that presence is possible" (Wood 1989:273). This is the case, because, as we saw earlier, presence, like consciousness, is not the basis of the system, but an effect of it. It was argued that the first violence, arche-violence, is that first differentiation, the first marking which makes meaning possible. Without it, no self-presence can be possible. This is the working of *différance*: difference and deferral (of meaning). Without it, traces play through the system without constraint, rendering meaning and self-presence impossible.

There can be no 'unconscious' time, in other words, a time that underlies the present, because such a time would have to be without the working of *différance*, it would be a system where one could "think the unique within the system" (Derrida 1976:112) and that is, in Wood's reading, simply impossible for Derrida. It is precisely here that Wood wants to disprove Derrida.

Where Wood believes he moves outside Derrida's argument, is in his willingness to admit that, in fact, *différance* is in some way an 'origin' of presence, even a foundation, without allowing *différance* to be bestowed with all the metaphysical privileges that philosophy normally affords such terms.

The level...at which presence and *différance* meet without privilege, I would call the level of human finitude. We are satisfied with partial answers to questions, incompletely fulfilled meanings, good enough cases of immediacy. We do have a tacit knowledge of contexts, we construe situations, we know what it is to see a piece of paper, to go for a walk, and so forth. Derrida would not dispute this. What I think he forgets is that it is from these everyday securities, and our tacit grasp, however vague and average, that we necessarily start when considering, say, the contribution of *différance* to their constitution. The always-already present is the condition for *différance* being thinkable (Wood 1989:274-275).

What Wood is saying, then, is that even though *différance* is what makes the presentation of the being-present possible, it is in our experience of the being-present – and indeed in the most mundane examples of it – that we perceive the working of *différance*. Only then does *différance* become thinkable, according to Wood. He seems to be suggesting that our experience of everyday presences is the origin of an understanding of *différance* precisely because *différance* is the origin of these experiences (or at least to the presence which is experienced).

Wood's argument could be countered by Grosz's (1998:193-195) reading of Derrida. Grosz articulates the constitution of meaning in terms of 'levels' of violence. The first level of violence is that level at which meaning is first constituted by the original differentiations that make self-presence and consciousness possible. This is the original violence which the effect of *différance* has on the play of traces, the process described above. But this original violence needs a second level of violence to 'compensate' for the first violence,

the violence whose function it is to erase the traces of this primordial violence[...]This is a malignant inscription that hides its inscriptive character, that de-materialises and de-idealises itself, that refuses to face up to its own dependence on, and enmeshment in, the more primordial structures. This is a violence that describes and designates itself as the moral counter of reason. This is the violence that we sometimes name the law, right or reason (Grosz 1998:193).<sup>43</sup>

The third violence, finally, is the violence that we perceive as everyday enactments thereof, the violence of war. This level of violence is a result of both the first and the second level: it is a result of the fact that we have no grasp of the thing in itself (as the phenomenologists would have it), but only come to consciousness through the first violence which makes the structure of consciousness possible through its differentiation. Reason, in turn, is the second violence which pretends not only that the first violence is indeed no violence at all (it is entirely 'natural'), but also denies its own violent character. The third violence can be understood as the conflict between different 'schools' of the second violence. In other words, there are different interpretations of the world, even though every one of these interpretations claims to be 'natural'. The third violence is the clashing of these opposing schools of reason, or law or the right.

Grosz's reading highlights two important points: first, when Wood tries to ground *différance* in our everyday experience of the world, could it not be argued that he is falling in this trap of de-materialising the second violence? Is he not trying to use our everyday experiences that are conscious, and therefore necessarily made possible by a first violence, as the basis of the first violence? And is he not somehow driven by a desire to deny the violence inherent to this experience?

The second important point that Grosz makes relates to reason. It was argued above that reason can only be 'abandoned' if we are willing to admit to the original violence inherent to it. Grosz formulation emphasises this fact: reason becomes the second violence that aims to deny the fact of the first violence. Reason, seen in this way, cannot be uncritically trusted to calculate and ensure the future, or indeed to determine the meaning of our inheritance and of our identity as a group. If we know that reason tries to hide the fact that every 'natural' meaning, every differentiation, is a necessary violence

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43 It could be argued that for Barthes, this second violence represents the myths that he describes, that form of language that aims to describe everything and to naturalise it.

enacted on the world, so as to make it meaningful, we cannot use reason to find such 'natural' meaning any longer. Rather we accept that we are at a point where we do not know where we are going.

Why, then, is this move so important to Wood? Perhaps the answer lies in this section from his text:

The recognition that change can be intelligibly structured results, I would argue, from the absence of an enormous burden that Western philosophy has had to carry – the task of discovering necessary truths. To the extent that time is the source of changing circumstances, it poses a threat to necessity. And it is no accident that in one of the most self-conscious and dedicated attempts to rescue time from the intellectual wilderness – I refer to the writing of Hegel – it can return only in the form of necessity. *The more it is recognised that there is a middle ground of intelligibility between necessary truth and bare contingent facts about the world, the more plausible becomes the project of providing some sort of account of temporal structure and the less this phrase will provoke howls of mental anguish* (Wood 1989:335, my emphasis).

The notion of the 'middle ground' sounds Derridean, and might even be read as a rearticulation of the similarity between the ethical (as necessary truth) and the political (as bare contingent facts). It seems to be vintage Derrida to seek for the intervals where, for instance, the possible and the impossible meet. But it is not. Derrida himself wants us to understand *différance* as, amongst other things, bound to the logic, the singularity and the urgency of the interval. For this interval to be productive, for it to provide us with the possibility of meeting with the other, it has to go *beyond* that middle ground; it has to surpass the opposition itself.

In the previous chapter we saw Derrida's assertion that meaning lies in silence. It is a silence that is created by speaking, but at the same time letting the meaning of the words slip away. This makes the interval sovereign, because it doesn't adhere to the rules of language, to the rules of the economy of the same. When Wood looks for a middle ground between 'bare contingent facts' and 'necessary truth', is he not also caught up in the dialectic between fact and ideal, as we saw Fukuyama being accused of (Derrida 1994:xx)?

It was mentioned earlier that Derrida wants *différance* to be the space of tension, of being at the same time constitutive of the system and constituted by it. Perhaps Wood lacks sensitivity here for Derrida's all-important stylistic approach. If the deconstruction of the present allows for the system to open itself up to an impossible future, this is perhaps a more important move than the need to ground *différance* in our present experiences.

## **5.7 The economics of *Afrikanerskap***

The argument has been made throughout that the identity of a group must be an open concept in order to allow for change and, in complexity terms, to be able to survive. Particularly in terms of complexity theory, it was shown that this openness is not the same as the fluid understanding of culture popular in cultural theory today (see chapter one). Understanding identity as a complex system provides the system with the necessary constraint necessary to have meaning. In chapter four, the argument was reinforced with Derrida's notion of the iterability of the signifier: only if a signifier can be repeated in different contexts, can it possess any value. An entirely fluid concept is not repeatable, and therefore loses its value as signifier. A stable concept, on the other hand, can be repeated, but not with a difference. And repeating with a difference, it was argued in this chapter, is the singular opportunity of opening oneself to futurity.

This is the case because the future is not an extension of the present, whether ontologically or hermeneutically. Rather, the future is that which comes before the always deferred presence, and as such has an ethical dimension as the call of the other which beckons us to engage with our past.

But how does one argue that the Afrikaner, as a group identity, should get to a point where they do not know where they are going, or get to a point 'beyond reason', without thereby arguing for a complete surrender of the autonomy of the group? How do Afrikaners allow the meaning of their identities to "slip away", how do they seek less recognition, without destroying the group's identity? Understanding group identity as a complex system may be enough to provide it with meaning, but if we have no control over its meaning and if meaning is always deferred, can this group's identity survive at all? Does "surviving through justice" not reduce the chances of survival as an identity to a very slim margin indeed?

A number of points in this regard emerged in this chapter. First, the force of *différance* has repeatedly been mentioned in terms of the effect it has in cutting and tearing up

presence, and therefore, meaning. In this chapter, however, we saw that *différance*, while always disrupting the present, is at the same time always wanting to return to the deferred presence. While *différance* breaks up the possibility of full self-presence, it is at the same time the condition for the possibility of the present. Presence and meaning are effects of *différance* (as difference). The sign, Derrida (1978:9) explained, is both secondary as representation (and therefore defers the meaning) and provisional, since it moves the meaning towards presence when it is signified (and therefore *allows for* the meaning). Therefore, the force of *différance* may be seen as that which keeps the identity (of a group) from ever being 'full' enough to be self-present and complete and therefore stable – in other words, which ensures that it remains open – but it is also that which creates the very possibility of the identity having meaning. When the force of *différance* is emphasised as that which makes the stability of meaning impossible, it should not be forgotten that this force is always moving towards the presence of that which is deferred (while never 'reaching' it). The play of *différance* is not free, rather, it is constrained by this very tension. This economy of *différance* is what makes it possible for a signifier to indeed be repeatable, but with a difference. This means that surviving as an open concept is not nearly as 'risky' as a superficial understanding of the play of *différance* would indicate.

It has further been argued that the system must be open for something truly new to enter. The notions of the excess and of a new kind of writing were used to illustrate this idea of something from the outside residing within the system without being comprehended by the system and therefore becoming a part of it. It was shown that the other within the system can have an *effect* on the system, even without the system comprehending the meaning of this other. Even though that which is truly new is able to affect the system – and thus enables the system to change – Derrida's argument does not suggest an effect which radically transforms the system so as to have no resemblance to the system's former identity. The working of *différance* precludes this possibility. Therefore, it could be argued, surrendering control of the meaning of the system or group identity to the working of *différance*, does not mean leading the identity to its inevitable demise – although such a possibility can not be excluded.

These arguments are supported by the ability of the complex system to self-organise. The system, like the play of *différance*, is not chaotic. On the contrary, it was argued that meaning and even boundaries are emergent properties of complex systems.

Finally, the question of autonomy remains. If the Afrikaners must get to a point where they do not know where they are going, does this mean that the members of this group identity have no autonomy what so ever, that they might as well remain completely passive when it comes to the process of identity formation? This question was addressed in chapter three, where the notion of agency was discussed. It was shown that we do have a role to play in creating our own identity and the identity of our group. What we don't have, is the control to dictate exactly what this identity would be. In chapter four, it was further argued that we have to engage with the heterogeneity of our inheritance, in order to open ourselves up to the future – an idea further explored in this chapter. Finally, another argument for the relative autonomy of the individual and the group emerged in this chapter. For this argument, we return to the comparison between Derrida's work and that of the dialectical thinkers.

It could be argued that the path that Afrikaner dissidents followed as outsiders during the apartheid era and the path that many members of the Afrikaner group are following today in an effort to re-establish their identity as Afrikaners, are both symptomatic of an approach that grounds itself in a dialectic, which in turn translates into an economy of the same. A dialectical system is based on the notion that all meaning within the system can be described in terms of the pairs of opposition that constitute the dialectical structure. These dialectical oppositions therefore dictate all meaning in the system: anything not part of such a dialectic is excluded from the system.

After the Second World War, theologian F. W. Marquardt (1999) argued that, after the Holocaust, any given person who survived the war could only be either a victim or a culprit. If you did not suffer as a consequence of the horrors of the Second World War, if you were not persecuted as a result of your identity, you were necessarily a culprit. It could not be argued that, even though you were no victim, you were not responsible for these atrocities and therefore no culprit. These notions of the victim and the culprit, one might argue, have become part of the Afrikaner subconscious and have become even more significant in the post-apartheid era.

The significance of this dialectic is that it leaves nothing undecided. The (restricted) economy of the same implied by a dialectic means that meaning, in this case the meaning of an identity, cannot exist outside these two poles. The spectres, the unsayable is taken up in the rational structure of the system: it becomes meaningful in this restricted economy as part of the dialectic, but it loses its value as that which may disrupt the system and

create something new. It is further significant because it allows for the surrendering of responsibility, which is exactly what Derrida wants to undermine by creating strategies without end. When we differentiate between identities exclusively in terms of this dialectic, a truly ethical interaction – where justice is sought in every instant with an awareness of the responsibility which that entails – becomes impossible. Negotiation and the responsibility of decision is neutralised when the system is allowed to dictate meaning.

It could be argued that, even though dialectical thinking relies on reason to predict the outcome of the system, and therefore seems to support the autonomy of the system in deciding its identity, this is a very restricted autonomy. Of course, even in such a system, identity formation would be more complex than merely referring to 'victim' or 'culprit' – the dialecticians acknowledge the productivity of the tension between these opposites – but it would still not allow for an entirely new identity to be negotiated. An open system does provide such an opportunity, precisely because it allows for the excess.

Perhaps one or two examples from South African literature may illustrate this point. In J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (2000), set in post-apartheid South Africa, Lucy, a white woman, finds her identity in her membership of the privileged minority and thus, to her mind, as an accomplice to the horrors of apartheid. She identifies herself as culprit. The whiteness of her skin demands of her to carry the burden of the guilt of her forefathers, she believes. This is how she chooses to inherit: by paying for the sins of her group, thereby remaining within the exchange economy of traditional notions of 'justice' and 'forgiveness'.

When she is raped by a victim of apartheid, she does not turn him in to the police. Even when she becomes the victim, and he the culprit, she cannot release herself from the burden of being a culprit. She cannot identify herself as the victim, because that would entail being victim and culprit at the same time. She is caught in one of the only two possible identities within this dialectic. It is interesting that Coetzee's novels, and in particular *Disgrace*, are often interpreted as suggesting that political revolution does little or nothing to ease the misery of people's lives in private. It could be argued that this is because a character such as Lucy, chooses to engage with her inheritance within the rules of this dialectical system, where there is no ambiguity or tension, and indeed where the economy operates on the principle of exchange. She must give herself in exchange for

forgiveness of her inheritance<sup>44</sup>. Because her identity is caught up in this dichotomy, in a system of meaning governed finally by the reasonable rules *she has inscribed upon it*, the political revolution within which she finds herself does nothing to enrich her identity. She is never truly changed, because she is unable to engage with the complexity of her situation. Her decision to take her inheritance, like Hamlet, as a burden and deal with it reasonably, was a decision not to engage, but to submit.

But not all white South Africans, certainly not all Afrikaners, have had a problem with shifting their identities from one opposition to the next.

Chris Louw (2001) depicted the Afrikaner man as a victim of his preceding generation in a book which had Afrikaner men celebrate his bravery, largely because he had the courage to shake off – with finality – the yoke of the ‘culprit’. His book described his generation of Afrikaner men as the victims of their elders’ distortions of the ‘truth’ of apartheid South Africa and of their duties as Afrikaner men. Many Afrikaners today seem to be uncomfortable with the label of culprit, often rightly so. Some Afrikaners who were prominent critics of the apartheid government now cast themselves in the role of victim as a member of a minority group. The argument is not that Louw and other Afrikaners should keep quiet and wear their label as culprits with dignity. The argument is precisely that the situation is far more complex than that, and only if one ventures beyond such dialectics, is it possible to engage with this complexity and with an inheritance and in the process negotiate an identity that is equally complex and ethical.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

In chapter four it was argued that Derrida wants us to acknowledge that reality is that which is always not yet available, and therefore impossible to grasp. In this chapter, it was investigated how we deal with this reality that cannot possibly be grasped. It was contended that this entails a new kind of writing, a writing that does not exclude or include the excess of the system, that which the system cannot comprehend, that which is unknowable, but that nevertheless has an *effect* on the system. This writing does not include the excess by taking it up in the logic of the system, but it also does not exclude it

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44 Alternatively, Lucy’s action could also be interpreted as an effort to disrupt this economy of exchange, by forgiving her attacker without demanding retribution. She could, in fact, be presenting him with a true gift of forgiveness. The rest of the novel, it could be suggested, does not support such an interpretation however.

by banishing it to the outside. It allows the excess to remain the outside within the system, by not naming it or giving it meaning, but only by describing its effect.

In the same way, we saw, the future must be understood as that which is impossible, at least in the sense of it being an extension of the present. The future is rather that which comes before the always deferred present and as such has effects on the system. The effect of the future is the call of the other which urges us to act. But this call resonates in the spectres, the unsayable, residing within the system.

We can only be open to this future, therefore, if our identity remains undecidable. If it is decided, final, it cannot be reiterated, it cannot be repeated with a difference in a future context, and therefore it loses its value. Such a closed concept cannot be open to futurity. This is why, for a group identity to have a future, it must remain open and iterable. It can never be finally determined.

It is when we try to grasp reality by reducing it to a rationally intelligible concept, that we close it off from its fullness. Reality is the hope of grasping the thing in itself, even though that is impossible: the messiah that does not come. This means that we should be wary of fighting battles of identity – whether it takes the form of a language war between insiders and outsiders or a power struggle within the group itself – with simplistic arguments based on rationally reduced versions of reality. This is the violence of reason that pretends to be the moral other to reason. What we can do, is to admit to the unnaturalness of meaning, of identity, and accordingly invite heterogeneity in to neutralise the homogeneity of dialectical opposition. That is how a group identity remains dynamic and indeed survives through ethics.

In conclusion, the dynamics of contemporary Afrikaner identity politics are re-examined in the light of some of the important arguments made in this thesis. It is investigated to what degree the three levels of violence that Grosz (1998) identifies in the work of Derrida, can be found in Afrikaner rhetoric and how we might engage with this violence as we speak of the future. The question is posed whether the new definition of the Afrikaner in terms of its language is indeed one that encourages diversity and complexity, as we have argued is desirable.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I attempted to redefine group identity in terms of the theory of complexity – in order to accommodate some of the ambiguities that are inherent to this notion. Identity as a system is thus understood as a network of interactions, with the meaning of the system/identity residing in these interactions between elements, rather than in the elements themselves. This means that the system is dynamic – in fact, it *must* be dynamic. In chapter one it was shown that the two traditional notions of group identity struggle in opposing ways with the problem of the *stability* of the system: a notion of identity as essential claims full stability, whereas a notion of identity as fluid disregards stability entirely. Both were found to be inadequate in dealing with the tension between change and continuity that characterises group identity. A complex system that is dynamic, but at the same time constrained by the interactions in the system, accommodates this tension. Derrida's notion of iterability (chapter four) and the working of *différance* (chapter five) were shown to have similar advantages.

In chapter three, Stacey (2003) claimed that the history of the identity discourse has been a history of attempting to deal with the inside/outside divide. It was argued in this thesis that the system must have boundaries (chapter three), but that it can at the same time not be an entirely closed system. It was suggested that a redefinition of boundaries accommodates this tension, rather than the attempts to either define the outside as absolutely other (Saussure, Barthes) or the system as able to incorporate everything (Hegel, Fukuyama, Stacey).

An important characteristic of complex systems, relevant to our understanding of identity, is the ability to self-organise (chapter three). Self-organisation, it was argued, allows for the boundaries of the group to emerge. This ability to self-organise is also what keeps the system from becoming chaotic. In order for a group identity to be able to self-organise, however, it must be able to adapt to its complex environment. This entails being open to interaction with the environment and being able to represent information from the environment in a meaningful way.

The ability of the system to represent information was translated to the group identity's engagement with its history (chapter four). It was shown that understanding the group as a complex system means that its history cannot be understood merely as the 'story of its past', and thus as a homogenous unit. The history of the system consists of all the traces

constituting the meaning of the system. At the same time, the memory of the system constitutes some of the information that the system must represent to be able to self-organise. In complexity terms, it was shown that self-organisation requires forgetting some things and remembering others (chapter three). This ability of the system resonates strongly with the engagement with memories that Jacques Derrida suggests. In his work, memory is seen as an inheritance, but one that must be interpreted, deconstructed. This deconstruction leaves not only the memory transformed, Derrida argues, but the very meaning of the one that inherits.

In chapter one, mention was made of Gregor Paul's (1998) argument that cultural identity should be discarded, because it is impossible to formulate a clear definition of such an identity, apart from groups who display fundamentalism. It was argued against Paul that even though it has become nearly impossible to describe a group identity precisely, we need to continue to deal with the notion for various reasons cited. After developing a poststructural and complex notion of cultural identity, it could further be argued that, in fact, cultural identity only has any hope of survival if it *cannot* be defined clearly. If the identity is to have a future, it must be unstable, heterogeneous and therefore able to accommodate the spectres residing within the system, if not by including them in the system's structure (chapter five). Paul is therefore correct when he argues against fundamentalist identities, but for the wrong reasons.

What do the arguments made in this thesis mean for the Afrikaner identity? One should be able to acknowledge that we have no access to the meaning of cultural identity as a thing-in-itself. This is not merely saying that cultural identity is a construction. It is often argued that myths are created around cultural groups by, for example, reducing their history to a single narrative or excluding time and its consequences from the development of the identity. These are all valid descriptions of what occurs when cultural identities are constructed. The argument here is different however: when Derrida (1976:112) argues that we never have access to the thing in itself, or the unique within the system (chapter five), he is making two important points.

First, constructivism – or any form of reason – is a second level of violence “malignant” (Grosz 1998:193) upon the first level which ascribes meaning to the world (chapter five). This is the case because meaning resides in differences, but these differences are not natural, they are inscribed upon the system in order to enable our conception of meaning. In other words, it is argued that there is no meaning or understanding that is not already

the result of a violent inscription of differences upon the world. Reason's subsequent classification of meaning in order to interpret the world, is already a second order form of violence dependent on the original violence.

Against both Barthes (chapter five) and Freuh (chapter three), one could argue that identities are not constructed either by distorting the thing in itself or by creating meaning where there is none. Identities understood as constructions simply hide the fact that even the perceived thing in itself is already an inscription.

This is, secondly, not an argument for radical constructivism. Derrida is not saying that there is *no* unique within the system, no thing-in-itself, but rather that we have no access to it and therefore have to create differences in order to speak about it.

The point is not that, because we have no access to a group identity as a thing-in-itself, that we should therefore stop talking about it as something 'real'. There is no meaning, no concept that is not already the result of a violent inscription upon the system. It follows that talking about cultural identity is just as viable as talking about any other concept whatsoever. The point of talking about it is no longer to get to its truth or essence, however, but to negotiate its use and meaning.

The theoretical battle between descriptions of cultural identity as construction, as transcendental truths or as dangerous myths, is a battle on the third level of violence. Once the first inscription is made in order to establish the possibility of meaning, reason articulates this meaning so as to hide its violent nature by pretending to be neither material nor ideal, but simply truth. It even claims to be the "moral counter to violence" (Grosz 1998:193) as that which is singularly able to truly represent the thing-in-itself. This is the level upon which cultural identity is studied and interpreted so as to decide its nature. Reason denies its dependence on the first violence and therefore denies its own deconstructability, which results in the third violence, namely this battle between different 'reasonable' schools of thought reaching opposing conclusions.

The same argument could be applied to the internal strife among Afrikaners. If it is true that opposing discourses of, for example, what constitutes an Afrikaner or how the past is to be dealt with, find themselves in a struggle, neither party would be able to claim superior legitimacy based on reason or fact, since both would have to admit that their interpretations are based upon violent arche-inscriptions. More importantly, no argument

could claim moral superiority, since violence is at the core of any judgement or interpretation.

Far from accepting this fact, the majority of Afrikaners have chosen instead to try and keep moral questions out of the equation. The most significant cultural battle fought by the Afrikaner group since the end of apartheid has been the battle over the recognition of their language (chapter one). This perhaps indicates that a group so used to a high degree of homogeneity, felt very threatened by the heterogeneity that emerged within the group as apartheid ideologies and myths were exposed. The most apparent foundation that remains for the group identity's survival is the language that they share. It could further be argued that, because of the moral ambiguity of the group's past, there is a desire to ground the legitimacy of the group's fight for survival as a minority in the new multicultural South African society, in a more 'neutral' aspect of their identity. Language is further appropriate as the catalyst of the group's struggle, as it is one of the more inclusive characteristics of the group in terms of racial membership. This does not change the fact that the Afrikaans language carries an immense amount of baggage: not only was it sometimes labelled the 'language of the oppressor', it was at times used as a tool of oppression<sup>45</sup>. On the other hand, the struggle for the survival of the language itself has a rich history, dating back to the struggle for Afrikaner self-determination against the English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The result of this focus on language has led the majority of the group to disregard both their past and their role as members of a multicultural society – a phenomenon that was discussed in more detail in chapter one. There Nash (2000:350) was quoted as writing, "In the context of the new South Africa, the defence of Afrikaans more often rests on denying the possibility of collective responsibility for the past, or on the view that 'what is past is done with'. Those defending Afrikaans have not done so by seeking, as Afrikaners, to develop a common project with other South Africans, nor do they seem set to do so". After engaging with the possibility of an ethical understanding of group identity in this thesis, one or two arguments could be made with respect to the battle over Afrikaans and the apathy towards the reality of both the old and the new South Africa.

Even though there is an effort to exclude moral judgement from the Afrikaner discourse, even the arguments for or against the development of the language will

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<sup>45</sup> The riots in 1976 where black schoolchildren in Soweto revolted against receiving education in Afrikaans comes to mind.

necessarily rest upon moral assumptions. In this case, these assumptions include the notion that the protection and advancement of a language is a fundamental right; that there remains a number of South Africans who speak only Afrikaans and therefore must receive education in this language in order to be able to claim their rights in a democratic society; and that without explicitly stating this case, some even seem to support the language as something sacred. The debate is further clouded by the difficulties that a group has in claiming their rights once they have been guilty of violating the rights of others. As it was shown that any moral argument rests on a number of violent inscriptions, however, these moral assumptions will necessarily be ambiguous at best.

This does not mean that these arguments should be abandoned. The fact that no position could claim recognition as being morally or hermeneutically unambiguous does make a willingness to be open to some form of negotiation, to engage with the other position even if it leaves one transformed, indispensable. An argument that denies its own heterogeneity, its own deconstructable nature, not only closes itself off from the possibility of transformation and therefore productive negotiation. Such a discourse is further forced to reduce its own complexity to a simple, homogenous unit, in order to be a force in a head to head battle. Once it has been reduced in this way, the discourse becomes useless in dealing with the very complex nature of, for instance, the Afrikaans language issue (chapters one and three).

This problem is further reflected in the group's representation of itself. The attempt to reduce the Afrikaner's identity to his language seems to be a noble project. Limiting the 'essence' of the group to something as simple as the shared language (rather than more complex or politically sensitive factors such as lineage, ethnicity or a shared past) makes the group more inclusive – a priority amongst Afrikaners following their history of extreme exclusivity. The implicit rationale seems to be that the simpler the terms used to define the Afrikaner, the broader the scope of the group and, importantly, the less responsibility may be pinned on the group in dealing with negativity traditionally associated with them. In other words, it becomes difficult to ascribe responsibility to the Afrikaner group for the legacy of apartheid, now that the group includes former victims of apartheid based on Afrikaans as their mother tongue. There is no longer any need to engage with other elements of their identity – particularly those that carry ambiguity and tension – since these elements are made irrelevant in a self-description based on language alone. This interpretation does not deny the fact that there are certainly Afrikaners who seek a more inclusive identity purely because they are appalled by exclusivity as an unethical notion.

But such a motivation does not change the fact that the Afrikaner is attempting to reduce her identity to a more homogenous definition.

Based on the arguments made in this thesis, this trend can be shown to be problematic in a number of respects. First, far from attempting to reduce the identity to an ever simpler notion, the complexity thereof should be encouraged. This may seem paradoxical in the light of the fact that limiting the definition of the Afrikaner to its language enables the group to include more diversity and thereby in fact to encourage its complexity. But such complexity is not productive if the system does not represent itself in such complex terms. In other words, the system's representation of itself must reflect its complex nature. If it understands itself in simplistic terms as merely a language community, then the complex interactions of its members become separated from the system as such. Instances of members who do engage actively and productively with the Afrikaner identity or the past are not taken up in the system's representation of itself. Such a system will remain a closed homogenous unit even though it may have a large number of diverse elements. In short, it will not be a complex system.

This is the case, it could be argued, because the system has established the Afrikaans language as its centre in structuralist terms (chapter two): a conveniently reduced essence dictating the meaning of the system. The interactions in the network subsequently do not constitute the meaning of the system. The memories of the group, the internal division and the interactions with other cultures in South Africa all leave the group's identity as a language community untouched; it is in fact explicitly argued that the battles around the language should be separated from these issues. The result is that many Afrikaners have become apathetic towards their past and their role in a multicultural society – because it is not part of their definition of themselves. If they were to give up on language as the centre of control, the interactions of all the elements of the identity would start to carry weight in the system. The Afrikaner group could become a complex system.

Consider the example of the recent debate that was ignited by the unprecedented popularity of an Afrikaans song, *De la Rey*, which hailed a former Boer general [from the Anglo-South African War] as a hero and lamented the fact that the group lacks similar modern day leaders. The song writers later admitted that they had no intention of writing a political manifesto, and in fact had very little knowledge of De la Rey as a historical figure. But they did have the foresight to predict that any song that tapped into the Afrikaner's search for a true hero who could represent the 'nation', would achieve massive success.

Support for the song emerged from all corners of the Afrikaner spectrum. Conservative right-wingers embraced it as a theme song and incidents of racially-inspired violence were even linked to the song. On the other hand, liberal Afrikaner intellectuals, such as Antjie Krog, showed that De la Rey was in fact a figure of some ambiguity and as such could be the ideal hero for the new Afrikaner. The general feeling amongst many moderate Afrikaners was that De la Rey reminded them of what was great about the Afrikaner and they insisted on their right to celebrate this in the face of their ever-increasing feeling of alienation in the South African society. The reach of the debate was such that it even made the front page of the *New Yorker*, where it was interpreted as the rise of a significant new right wing force in South Africa.

And yet, it turned out to be nothing more than a storm in a teacup. Once every opinion had been cited, once much of the Afrikaner anger at being cast as culprit had been vented, once De la Rey as a person and a phenomenon had been analysed to death, the debate disappeared. Much more significantly, however, it seems to have left little trace on Afrikaner identity. Instead of these widely differing opinions creating a platform for the negotiation of the nature of Afrikaner identity, instead of the Afrikaner being transformed by such a wonderfully ambiguous event, the group's public identity was not even rattled. The diversity of opinions that emerged reflected the diversity of *Afrikanerskap* and perhaps only confirmed the fear of the group to engage with this diversity. Instead, Afrikaners shrug their collective shoulders at any extremist positions within its ranks on the basis of the view that, in reality, it is only language that unites them.

The fear or unwillingness of Afrikaners to become a part of the multicultural dynamic of South African society is further indicative of the consequences of this reduced identity. It shows that the new-found diversity of the Afrikaner group has actually led to its isolation. Despite the fact that the membership of the group now empirically reflects the multicultural society of South Africa to a far greater extent than the Afrikaner group of the past, it does not follow that the group as a system engages with its environment. It is merely a language community, which means there is far too little content within the system's representation of itself, and too few constraints upon the vast diversity of what the definition includes, to enable the system to have rich and productive meaning and interaction (chapter three).

This is another important implication of a centralised system. The centre that dictates the meaning of the system at the same time dictates that the system has an absolute other or outside – that which does not correlate with the meaning prescribed by the centre. This

paradoxically implies that the system has no need for boundaries or limits (chapter five). In a system where meaning is absolute, boundaries become redundant. In terms of the Afrikaner, then, it is suggested that she who does not belong to the language community is the absolute other to the system and could never be included as long as the system is dictated by the centre. At the same time, there is no constraint upon the system's diversity (outside of the meaning dictated by the centre), which means that the meaning of the system can never be more than its centre (as meaning is constituted by constraints – chapter three).

Cornell's understanding of ethics (chapter two) implies that the (decentralised) system (paradoxically) has a limit, but is unable to comprehend this limit – because such comprehension would necessarily include the limit within the system. This is what makes the limit an ethical notion: its undecidability allows the system to continually renegotiate its own meaning. A system dictated by a centre fully comprehends its limit, and therefore leaves no ethical possibilities. The value of a complex understanding of identity, it was argued, is precisely that it allows for the system to be at the same time open and constrained, limited. It is this tension between being open and closed that allows an identity to survive in a multicultural environment.

When it is argued that an identity must engage with its memories and its inheritance in order to be transformed (chapter four), it is not the traditional argument for engaging with the past on the basis of a moral obligation or a duty. It simply states that, in order for the identity to be able to change truly while retaining its value, in order for it to be iterable, it must be open to the spectres of the past and the future breaking in upon its identity.

The efforts of the Afrikaner group to reduce the definition of its identity are symptomatic of the realisation by its members that they had to change in order to survive. They could not continue representing themselves as the mythical unit that was able to survive in the 'simple' environment of apartheid South Africa. The redefinition in terms of language is an attempt to deal with the much more complex environment of the new South Africa. Simplifying one's position in the face of a complex problematic, however, reduces one's chances of being able to deal with the complexity (chapter one).

A revolution, it was argued, is the learning of a new language (chapter four). The first step in learning the new language is translating all the new words into one's mother tongue. But one can only claim to speak the new language fluently once one has forgotten the mother tongue. The mother tongue *can never simply be forgotten* – we need its

slogans to teach us to fight in a revolution, says Marx, just as we need its meaning to learn a new language. Only once we know the new language by heart, may the mother tongue be forgotten. More than that, *it must be forgotten*, as the new language could never be our own if we continued to translate it.

Eliminating all the unwanted baggage and tensions from an identity is no way of creating a revolution. One cannot attempt to simply forget all the words that describe the unwanted memories, and operate on a reduced vocabulary. One must use the old vocabulary in order to learn the new. Therefore, when it is argued that the Afrikaner *must* engage with its memories as the traces of its identity in order to be transformed, it is an argument that provides the Afrikaner with the unique opportunity to deal with the ambiguities of its past without simply denying it. The opportunity is unique, as it is not born out of duty or guilt. In order to have this opportunity, however, the group must develop a willingness to engage with all the traces that constitute its identity. This is a willingness that can only be accommodated within a group identity as a complex and open system.

While Afrikaners may believe that they are successfully redefining themselves in order to be relevant in the new South Africa, they are arguably denying themselves this very possibility. It was argued that change is only possible when the system is open to the possibility of the *undecidable* outside to reside within the system (chapter five). A system with a centre of meaning does have the outside within: the centre is necessarily 'outside' the system as it remains unaffected by the system. This centre is by no means undecidable, however, as that would disable it from dictating the system's meaning (chapter two). At the same time, this is what enables the centre to deny the system the possibility of change.

It is imperative, therefore, for the Afrikaner to start representing itself not in terms of a single common denominator, but in terms of all the tensions and ambiguities and diversities that contribute to its complexity. This argument is not only applicable to the system's description of itself, but also to how the members of the group, the elements of the system, interact with these tensions. We must continue to interpret the past actively and deconstructively so as to transform ourselves. Not only because one must speak in order to allow for the unsayable, but also because *one must think the difference*. We must not only *allow* for tensions within the identity, but *engage* with these tensions, because these are the differences that create meaning. By not speaking, by cutting one's self off from

the past – as many Afrikaners do – the system is brought to a halt and isolation becomes the only possibility for survival. But this is, sadly, no ethical form of survival.

In chapter one, Hendrik Verwoerd was quoted as having said:

“Oh, if it could also be granted us as it was granted in the past to great nations in their hour of fame that those would come forward who do not hesitatingly ask ‘what is a nation’, but who will cry out: ‘This is my nation, my nation is like this, thus they can do wonders, thus it can create its own future’” (in Van Wyk 1995:ii).

On the contrary, it is argued that the Afrikaner should accept that it cannot create its own future. It can, however, allow for the possibility of a future precisely by admitting to the impossibility of saying ‘This is my nation, my nation is like this’. This position denies the mythical foundations of the group as much as it denies the adequacy of a simple definition of the group, both on the grounds that they are reduced interpretations. This is an optimistic position, that presents the Afrikaner with the opportunity to accept his uncomfortable past precisely because this is not what defines the group. Language, memories and even myths are all mere traces. So is the information gathered from the (multicultural) environment.

*Afrikanerskap* rich in meaning will be the reward of a dynamic engagement with all these traces.

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