

# **“A white fly on the sombre window pane”: The construction of Africa and identity in Breyten Breytenbach’s poetry**

Louise Viljoen  
Departement Afrikaans en Nederlands  
Universiteit van Stellenbosch  
STELLENBOSCH  
E-pos: lv@maties.sun.ac.za

## **Abstract**

### **“A white fly on the sombre window pane”: The construction of Africa and identity in Breyten Breytenbach’s poetry**

*This article explores the way in which the construction of Africa interacts with the construction of identity in the poetry written by Breyten Breytenbach. On the one hand, Breytenbach’s use of the name Jan Afrika, his attempts to emphasise the African-ness of the language Afrikaans as well as the construct Afrikaner indicate a desire to locate his origins in Africa and fix his identity in relation to Africa; on the other hand, it is clear that he constantly problematises the idea of a stable identity. Imposing a narrative on Breytenbach’s poetic oeuvre, it becomes clear that the ‘story’ of his poetry coincides with the order of events in his personal life and that his construction of Africa interacts with and determines the construction of his own identity. In conclusion it becomes clear that Breytenbach locates himself against the background of Africa from which he derives his sense of self, but at the same time takes the position of the nomad, exile, migrant or outsider because it provides him with a unique perspective and the possibilities of transgression and renewal.*

## **1. Breyten Breytenbach alias Jan Afrika**

The well-known South-African poet Breyten Breytenbach has recently added the name Jan Afrika (which can be translated as John Africa) to the long list of names and pseudonyms that he has used for himself in the past. After using the name once or twice in public appearances in

South Africa, he published his most recent volume of poetry titled *Papierblom* [*Paper Flower*]<sup>1</sup> under this writer’s name in 1998. It was not the first time that Breytenbach published under an assumed name: in 1970 his volume of love poetry *Lotus* appeared under the pseudonym Jan Blom [John Flower] and in 1976 he published the travelogue *’n Seisoen in die paradys* [*A Season in Paradise*] under the pseudonym B.B. Lazarus. The use of the name Jan Afrika can be read as an indication that the poet wants to identify himself with the common man (a kind of Everyman or John Doe), ridding himself of the exclusivity of an individual writer’s name. Through the use of this name the poet achieves several things simultaneously: to declare himself indigenous to Africa, to state his origin and to identify himself with the oppressed of the past (according to historical sources the surname Afrika was sometimes given to slaves at the Cape to indicate where they came from – Combrink, 1986:52-54).

This use of the name Jan Afrika becomes even more significant when read against the background of the writer’s personal history. Breytenbach was born into an Afrikaner family in 1939. He left South Africa in 1959, having finished his studies at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town. In 1962 he married the Vietnamese Ngo Thi Huang Lien and settled in Paris. Because his marriage was unlawful under the Mixed Marriages Act of Apartheid South Africa and his wife was refused an entry visa into South Africa on more than one occasion, the writer virtually became an exile in France (see Galloway, 1990:1). Breytenbach returned to South Africa in 1975 with a false passport, intending to join the struggle for political liberation inside South Africa. He was arrested, charged under South Africa’s Terrorism Act, convicted and sentenced to nine year’s imprisonment in 1975 of which he served seven, being released at the end of 1982. Whereas he published mostly in Afrikaans up till then, he published the prison memoir titled *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (1984b) in English two years after he had been released from prison. Subsequently, he has written in both Afrikaans and English although his poetry is mostly written in Afrikaans. Breytenbach remains stationed in France and has become a French citizen although he frequently visits South Africa and also travels extensively in Africa because of his affiliation with an institute

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1 All translations are my own. In the case of the titles of volumes of poetry the Afrikaans title is placed first, followed by the English translation in square brackets; in the case of quotations from the poems the English translation will be placed first to preserve continuity in the syntax, followed by the quotation in the original Afrikaans in square brackets.

working for democracy, culture and development, located on the island Gorée off the coast of Senegal.

The importance of space (in interaction with other factors like gender, race, sexuality, culture, language and ethnicity) in the construction of identity has been hinted at both by postcolonial theorists (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1995:391-392) and feminist geographers (Blunt & Rose, 1994:1-25). It has, however, also been argued that places can no longer be the clear supports of identity in a world marked by exile, migration and diaspora (Morley & Robins, 1993:5). On the other hand, it has been claimed, especially with regard to postcolonial literatures that “the development or recovery of an effective relationship to place, after dislocation or cultural denigration by the supposedly superior cultural and racial colonial power, becomes a means to overcome the sense of displacement and crisis of identity” (Nash, 1994:239). Although Breytenbach occupies an ambivalent position within the context of postcoloniality as an Afrikaans writer and the descendant of white settlers in Africa, he has experienced displacement as exile, activist, political prisoner and world traveller. On the one hand, it seems as if his use of the name Jan Afrika and the persistent exploration of Africa in his writing indicate a desire to locate his origins and fix his identity in relation to Africa. On the other hand, it is clear throughout his oeuvre that he continually problematises the idea of a stable identity. Concentrating mainly on Breytenbach’s prose, painting and philosophical essays, Sienaert (1999:84) refers to the images of masks, mirrors, moths, butterflies, chameleons and references to the nomad, exile and drifter which suggest the “concept of a shifting identity”. This is also evident in his poetry, which consistently reflects on the instability of the language in which identity is constructed. An analysis of Breytenbach’s poetry shows that he constructs Africa in such a way that it can be used as “a shifting strategic source of identification” (as has been argued of the work of feminist landscape artists – see Nash 1994: 239) rather than a fixed site of origin. Space and identity are co-terminous in this process; the one does not initiate or precede the other. In my attempt to trace the way in which Breytenbach constructs Africa and through that his own identity, I will take a line from the poem “en dit: curriculum mortis” [“and this: curriculum mortis”] (1993:186-189) as an important pointer. Surveying his own life in the act of confronting death, the poet<sup>2</sup> concludes: “too much have I written about Africa / a white fly on the sombre window pane” [“te veel het ek oor Afrika geskrywe / ’n wit vlieg oor die somber ruit”]. This metaphor foregrounds his own whiteness

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2 Because of the correspondence between the autobiographical facts of Breytenbach’s life and the enunciating subject in the poems, I will take the liberty of referring to the I in these poems as “the poet”.

against the darkness or sombreness of Africa, not forgetting that the fly is in essence black, feeds on decay and is here pictured as something of an outsider looking in (see Viljoen, 1995 about the relationship between the inside and outside in Breytenbach's work). Because of the vast range of Breytenbach's writing, which includes poetry, short stories, novels, travelogues, plays, autobiographical texts and philosophical prose, the focus will fall on his poetry.

## **2. Breytenbach and the Afrikaans language**

Because language is such an important factor in constructing identity, it is important to comment on the fact that Breytenbach writes mostly in his mother-tongue, Afrikaans. The language now called Afrikaans, a name that literally means "of Africa" or "African", was initially referred to as Afrikaans-Hollands [Afrikaans-Dutch] or Kaaps-Hollands [Cape-Dutch] to distinguish it from Dutch and gradually came into use from the late nineteenth century onwards (Scholtz, 1980:115). Because the Afrikaans language and the Afrikaans literary tradition were appropriated by Afrikaner nationalism to legitimate the existence of the Afrikaner nation, it came to be seen as the language of the oppressor. Afrikaans is, however, also the mother-tongue of the coloured people in South Africa who deliberately claimed it as an instrument in the political struggle during the eighties (see Willemse, 1987:239).

Breytenbach's relationship to Afrikaans is highly ambivalent. Although Afrikaans is the language in which he writes, he is conscious of the fact that it is perceived by some as the language of oppression. In his first volume of poetry, titled *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* [*The Iron Cow must Sweat*] from 1964, he states that he "wants to write poetry in Afrikaans convulsive language: womanly smell / of my first milk, grain of my father's fingertips" ["wil dig in afrikaans stuiptrekkende taal: vrouereuk / van my eerste melk, grein van my vader se vingertoppe"] (1964:20). Although he perceives of Afrikaans as convulsing or dying, presumably because of its close connections with the apartheid rulers, he still wants to write in Afrikaans because it is the language of his earliest experience and memories. The ambivalent attitude towards Afrikaans expressed in this poem concurs with public statements in which he expresses his love for the language, but also states his disdain for the connotations of oppression, fascism and racism attached to Afrikaans (see Galloway, 1990:121). In a public address in South Africa in 1973 he called it a "bastard language" ["bastertaal"] that must be freed from the shackles of "Apartaans" to become one of the languages of Africa as its name suggests (Breytenbach, 1973). Shortly after his release from prison in 1982 he distanced himself from Afrikaans, stating that it has become "a

language for epitaphs” [“n taal vir grafskrifte”] because of its association with the apartheid regime. He later nuanced this extreme view of Afrikaans, saying that its right to existence will manifest in the extent to which it is a tool in the struggle for political liberation (Galloway, 1990: 238-240). Since 1994 Breytenbach has become a staunch defender of the rights of Afrikaans as a minority language spoken by white Afrikaners, as well as by the previously disadvantaged coloured people in South Africa. This development can be seen against the background of the language’s diminished official status in post-apartheid South Africa.

### 3. Breytenbach and the Afrikaner

Breytenbach’s relationship with Afrikaners is as ambivalent as his relationship with the language Afrikaans. Although he distanced himself vehemently from the Afrikaner-nationalist definition of the term Afrikaner, he does not deny that he is an Afrikaner and tries to reinvent the term in his poetry. According to historical research the term was used until the second half of the eighteenth century for anyone of indigenous birth in South Africa, as well as for settlers of European descent born at the Cape to indicate the difference from those born in Europe. The term gradually came to be used for the descendants of the Dutch settlers in South Africa (a group into which settlers from other European countries were integrated relatively soon) (Scholtz, 1980:114). The feeling that the so-called Afrikaners constituted a separate nation on the grounds of markers like religion, race, culture and the use of the Afrikaans language developed from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards when Britain colonised the Eastern Cape (Scholtz, 1980:119) and was further developed by Afrikaner nationalism in the twentieth century. One cannot – and neither does Breytenbach – ignore the irony of the terms *Afrikaans* and *Afrikaner* (terms derived from its geographical placement in Africa) when read against the background of the history of Afrikaner-nationalism which tried to distance itself from Africa by emphasising racial purity.

It is apparent from his poetry that Breytenbach feels that Afrikaners should develop the link with Africa implied in the name that literally and historically means somebody from Africa. The way towards exploring this link with Africa and reinventing the name Afrikaner seems to lie in acknowledging one’s complicity in the history of colonisation and Afrikaner-nationalism as it manifests in the tension with Africa. In one of his early volumes of poetry *Die huis van die dowe* [*The House of the Deaf*] from 1967 he includes a poem titled “Die miskruier” [“The Dung-beetle”] in which he comments indirectly on the position of the European settler in Africa (1967:55). The poet identifies himself with the “white

beetle" ("wit tor" – the Afrikaans word "tor" can refer to a beetle as well as to a lout or boorish person) described in the poem. He goes on to comment that it is "a terrible animal / Like a missionary in Africa / With pithhelmet and dark glasses" ["'n verskriklike dier / Soos 'n sendeling in Afrika / Met sonhelm en donkerbril"] and also warns against its sting as well as the little bottle of poison it carries. In later texts like the prison memoir *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* he will again play with the idea of the white person as an aberration in Africa, something which does not belong. This sense of un-belonging will in fact become one of the major features of Breytenbach's sense of identity, together with the idea of exile, migration and nomadic wandering. In a poem like "die wandelende afrikaner" ["the wandering afrikaner"] (1967:79) he interprets being an Afrikaner in terms of wandering rather than being settled, also playing on the analogy with the Wandering Jew and Jewishness as a sign of homeless wandering or exile.

Trying to give new meaning to the term Afrikaner, Breytenbach also engages in a dialogue with the Afrikaner, trying to reason with him (sic) about the content of the term. The poem "bruin reisbrief" ["brown travel-letter"] (1995:107-109), originally published in 1970, is addressed to "Dear Afrikaner" ["Liewe Afrikaner"] and was inspired by a journey through Southern Italy. The poet refers to the ancient history of this region and comments on the different groups that have been "bastardised and have become brown/coloured to form this virile race" ["verbaster en verbruin tot hierdie viriele ras"] that lives there. According to him the Afrikaner has also been "filtered through the prism of seed" ["gesyfer deur die prisma van die saad"] of the Dutch, the French, the Malay and the Khoi-Khoi. In a passage, which is an intertextual reference to a poem by the canonised Afrikaans poet N.P. van Wyk Louw, he expresses the wish that the Afrikaner, whom he calls his "harsh brother" ["barse broer"], will become more human and "African" ["Afrikaans"]:

My broer, my dor verlate broer:  
iets wens dat mens weer in jou groei  
dat alles groots, Afrikaans, gaan word  
en jy ook in mensbruin mense bloei  
[My brother, my barren desolate brother  
something wishes that being human will grow in you again  
that everything will become noble, African  
and that you will also flower in humanly brown people again]

In this poem he uses the word "Afrikaans" to refer to being African rather than to the language Afrikaans; it suggests, with the economy characteristic of poetry, that the nature of being Afrikaans-speaking would lie in

an identification with Africa. The colour brown (which also refers indirectly to the racial group described as the coloured or “brown” people in South Africa, who are mainly Afrikaans-speaking but were excluded by Afrikaner nationalism on the grounds of race) is given the connotations of hybridity, virility, African-ness and also of being humane. The ideas expressed poetically in this poem were echoed by Breytenbach’s remarks in a public address in Cape Town in 1973 when he stated that Afrikaners were a “bastardised nation” with a “bastardised language” [“Ons is ’n bastervolk met ’n bastertaal”] (Breytenbach, 1973), a line of thought still pursued more than twenty years later (Breytenbach, 1999). From this it is clear that Breytenbach tries to give new content to the term Afrikaner by emphasising the connectedness with Africa implicit in the name and by resisting notions of racial purity.

#### **4. Africa and the exile**

Imposing a narrative on Breytenbach’s poetry, one can say that the “story” of his poetry coincides with the order of events in his personal life. His early poetry looks at Africa from the perspective of an outsider because he was exiled from South Africa on account of his marriage to the Vietnamese Huang Lien. By the late sixties he started travelling in Africa and by the early seventies he had a much more intimate knowledge of Africa, the continent that he first contemplated from the isolationist perspective of a white South African and then from the distanced perspective of Europe where he settled after he had left South Africa. At this stage his relationship with Africa was also strongly influenced by his political activism, which caused him to construct Africa differently than before. During his time in prison Africa and the whole outside world was again seen from the perspective of the “outsider”(who is literally shut off or in exile from the world because he is “inside”). Since his release from prison he has travelled between homes in France, Spain and South Africa. Looking at the narrative of his life and poetry, it becomes clear (as in the case of his re-interpretation of Afrikaans and Afrikaners) that Breytenbach prefers to take the position of the exile, migrant, the refugee or foreigner because it is a position which is – in the words of Elizabeth Grosz (1993:70) – “uniquely privileged in terms of social transgression and renewal”. Writing about Judaism and exile, she states:

The borderline position of the exile – not at home in one place or another, nomadic, meandering, indirect, yet not necessarily lost and abandoned – has, in spite of its difficulties, some strengths and qualities which the exile may be reluctant to give up. The marginalized position of the exile, at the very least, provides the exile with the perspectives of an outsider, the kinds of perspective that enable

one to see the loopholes and laws of the system in ways that those inside cannot (Grosz, 1993:69).

Breytenbach's early work is characterised by feelings of nostalgia for South Africa and the African continent. His first volume of poetry *Die ysterkoei moet sweet* [*The Iron Cow must Sweat*] (1964) gives several indications that he writes from the perspective of Europe, more specifically Paris, and that he thinks back longingly of South Africa. His feelings of nostalgia for South Africa is often linked to the figures of his father and mother who are placed in the South African landscape (1964: 39). Negative images of Paris or Europe abound whereas the homeland is envisioned as painfully beautiful in poems about the South African town in which he was born (1964:30-31) and towns in which he spent his childhood (1964:59). This trend is continued throughout the rest of his work as evidenced by the poem "Septembersee" ["September sea"] in the volume *Kouevuur* [*Cold Fire / Gangrene*] from 1969 in which he compares the seaside towns of his youth to those of Europe. In his love-hate relationship with South Africa, it is conspicuous that he reserves his scorn for those sections of the South African population that oppress others rather than the South African landscape. In some of these poems Africa is idealised by the exile as an exotic fantasy associated with the dream of spiritual growth, freedom and independence. In a dreamvision of the future (1964:32) he sees himself as a castaway on a new coast that he calls "my Africa" ["my Afrika"]. This Africa is constructed as an exotic space with "clicking palmtrees full of monkeys and parrots" ["klikkende palmbome vol ape en papegaaie"] and a "playful sea" ["speelse tong van die vlak see"]. At the same time it is a world that will enable "the ripening" ["die rypword"] of his head and give him the confidence to be fully independent: "I allow nobody to sit on my head" ["ek laat niemand op my kop sit nie"]. In another poem (1964:48) he refers to his longing for Africa in terms of a childlike dream which constructs Africa as a model or toy: "I / also lie and stroke an Africa of / green clay in the map of my brains" ["ek / lê en streel ook 'n afrika van groen / klei in die landkaart van my harsings"].

The condition of exile also manifests itself in the many poems in Breytenbach's oeuvre which chart his migrations or wanderings; the most significant of these being the journeys from Europe to Africa and back. It is in the act of crossing the border between Africa and Europe, of experiencing the relationship between inside and outside that the poet experiences intense moments of identification with Africa. His identity as an African is therefore constructed out of displacement and transition, rather than being settled and at home. The poem "Toe Suiderkruis toe" ["Then towards the Southern Cross"] from the 1969-volume *Kouevuur*

[*Cold Fire/Gangrene*] (1969:10-12) describes the poet's feelings while flying over Africa in a southerly direction. The poem ends with a rhetorical outpouring of his feelings about Africa which is full of contradictions: on the one hand he calls it "Land that is also God" ["Land wat ook Gód is"]; on the other hand he deliberately undermines his own tendency to aestheticise, romanticise and idealise Africa by reminding himself that Africa is not an abstraction but a complex reality. He also subverts the colonial tendency to feminise Africa, identifying the continent with essences like his own plasma, his marrow, his semen, even his penis (the word "peul" which he uses in the final stanza can be read as a pun on a crude Afrikaans word for the male organ). Africa is thus tied up with his sexuality, virility and masculinity whereas Europe is feminised by describing it in terms of being well-tended, mild (the word "douceur" is used), innocent, soft, willing and compliant. He also uses the images of a Flower, Giant, Spider and Heart of the Pain (all capitalised) for Africa that he equates with himself, concluding: "Africa: my I" ["Afrika: my Ek"]. These images represent an almost desperate attempt to concretise Africa and his own identity at the same time; the feverishness of this attempt, the hyperbole inherent in the poetic metaphors suggests that the attempt to capture the essence of a complex entity such as Africa is as futile as trying to fix his own identity. The fact that this is spoken while the poet is flying over Africa also suggests the transitoriness of identity; it is an attempt to fix identity in the process of movement. It is significant that when Africa is gendered in Breytenbach's poetry at all, it tends to be as a male rather than a female or mother (the image so often used). This could perhaps be related to the fact that he comes from a patriarchal system and that his ambivalent relationship with Africa is an extension of his ambivalent relationship with the different father figures in his work.

The poem "Ek is Afrika" ["I am Africa"] (written for Poetry International in Rotterdam in 1972 – Breytenbach 1995:145-146) charts another crossing of the border between Africa and Europe. This time the poet returns from Africa to Europe: "at 15h34 Friday the 23rd of July 1971 / I move over the precipice of Africa / (like a chameleon over the lips of language) / in the north of Libya, next to Benghazi" ["om 1534 uur Vrydag die 23ste Julie 1971 / skuif ek oor die afgrond van Afrika / (soos 'n verkleur-mannetjie oor die lippe van die taal) / bo in Libië, skuins langs Benghazi"]. The image of moving over the precipice of Africa and falling into nothingness – he writes: "heaven is above and below" ["die hemel is bo en is onder"] – is reminiscent of the early voyages of discovery when explorers setting off from Europe feared that they will reach the ends of a flat earth and fall off its side. This poem constructs Africa as the point of departure, the centre of the poet's experience and being, not Europe as was the case with the voyages of discovery. In the act of crossing the

border of Africa, he interprets the continent as his reality and the ground he wants to hang on to; at the same time he sees it as the place where his comrades will be able to rise in all the "boundlessness" ["grensloosheid"] of being human. According to him the physical space of Africa sets standards for its people, which in turn set standards for others: according to the poet "we" must be high and strong like the mountains of Africa, dense like its forests, hard and untameable like its deserts, rich like its coasts, fertile like its waterways, free as its animals, responsible like its wounds and humane like its people. It seems as though the poet projects the attributes of strength, freedom, humanity and revolutionary potential, that he wishes for himself and the Afrikaner, on Africa and its people; in this sense Africa becomes idealised and thus dehistoricised in his rhetorical flight.

In the poems written during the seven years that Breytenbach spent in prison, the construction of Africa is predicated upon the fact of his imprisonment, on the difference between outside and inside. In a sense this is a perpetuation of the state of exile, experienced before his imprisonment in 1975 and expressed in the poetry written before that date. Whereas the state of exile implies being on the outside; the state of being imprisoned implies being on the inside. The poet fully exploits the ironies of this paradox of the outsider-exile now being on the inside, in destabilising any notions of fixed identity and pure origin, also integrating it with the presence of Zen mysticism in his work. One of the poems in ("yk") ["gauge"] refers to jail as "kwaDukuza: / – precisely the place of the lost person" [kwaDukuza: / presies die plek van die verlore persoon] (1983:24). Several poems written in prison construct Africa from memory, enumerating places that he has seen ("Credo", 1985:82-86), listing journeys that were undertaken ("Monoleeg", 1984a:160) and experiences that have made his life worthwhile ("Vroeë oggende", 1984a:17-20). In all of these poems Africa is a significant feature of the experiences that he can salvage from his memory; the same kind of nostalgia he felt as an exile becomes manifest in these poems.

Because he is forced to fall back on his imagination inside the prison, the way in which the landscape outside the prison is constructed is strongly influenced by his inner state. In the poem "droomwaak" [dreamwake] from the cycle of poems called "(my land in die winter)" ["(my land/country in winter)"] in *Voetskrif* [Footwriting] (1976:87-97; see also 1985:9) the darkness of the prisoner's mental state is projected onto the space outside the prison, creating an image of "a wild and untamed region" ["'n wilde en woeste geweste"] and "a black and wild land" ["'n swart en wilde land"]. The conventional image of "dark Africa" originates in a sense of bewilderment and loss, rather than in a colonial stereotype. The outside

world also becomes less and less real. In *Lewendood* [*Lifeanddeath*] the poet writes: “I suspect / but I cannot bet on it / that there is a country / behind the solid walls of this labyrinth” [“ek vermoed / maar ek sal nie my kop op ’n blok sit nie / dat daar agter die vaste mure van hierdie labirint / ’n land is”] (1985:34). At times he is not even sure that the outside world exists anymore and writes: “through the prison goes the rumour that the world has been destroyed / that the catastrophe has taken place yes that the bushwar has ignited the dark continent / and the corpses are smouldering in the backyards” [“deur die gevangenis gaan die gerug dat die wêreld tot niet is / dat die katastrofe volbring is ja dat die bosoorlog die donker kontinent / laat ontvlam het en lyke smeul in die agterplase”] (1985:38). The poet not only doubts the existence of the outside world, but also his own existence on the inside. In the poem “Die swart hond” [“The black dog”] (1984a:167) he hears a dog bark and presumes it to be at the moon; if there is a moon, he reasons, it must circle the earth on which there must be imprinted an Africa (“and on that ripened / out of glaze there must turn an Africa / with silent predators and borders of blood”) [“en dáár-op moet daar tog geryp / uit glasuur ’n Afrika draai / met stil roofdier en bloedgrense”] and somewhere in that Africa there must be a city in which there is the prison in which he exists. In this perspective from outer space caused by his feelings of alienation in prison, Africa locates him and defines his place on the sphere of the earth. Constructing Africa in this way seems to be necessary for his survival as prisoner.

## 5. Africa and the political activist

Writing about Rimbaud (a poet whom Breytenbach often refers to in his poetry and prose), Ross (1993:365) argues that Rimbaud set himself against the literary tradition of his time by “enacting a definition of the poetic that embraces sociopolitical (sic) themes and practical, utilitarian concerns” and that his “comprehension of space allows social relations to prevail: space as social space, not landscape” (1993:366). The same can be said of the poems in *Skryt* [*Write/Shit*], published in 1972, three years before Breytenbach was imprisoned. Some of these poems were inspired by a visit to Tanzania (see Coetzee, 1980:29) and show an increasing awareness of the ambivalence of Africa as a social space that displays great cultural, historical and political diversity.

The poem “Vlam” [“Flame”] (1972:10-11) imagines Africa in terms of flame, fire, heat, fierce sunlight and ash, one of the most prevailing sets of images about Africa in Breytenbach’s poetry. The images of flame and fire are initially evoked by the African sunrise perceived while the poet is once again travelling over Africa in an aeroplane. The reference to flame

starts off as a language game rooted in Swahili riddles and proverbs. For example, the first four lines of the poem is a literal translation of Swahili riddles about fire and flame; the first being "the fly cannot settle on the lion's blood" with the answer fire; the second being "the lady's veil is waving" with the answer "flame" (see Coetzee, 1980:35). These allusions to fire and flame are followed by references to the heat of the African desert, as described by Sir Richard Burton, the traveller and explorer who together with Speke searched for the source of the Nile in the mid-nineteenth century. This reference to the rigours imposed by the African landscape on travellers is then followed by a reference to General Gordon, representative of the British government who was beheaded during the fall of Khartoum in 1885. The poem's conclusion emphasises Africa's relationship with fire and flame: "Africa, so often plundered, purified and burned! / Africa stands in the sign of fire and flame" ["Afrika, so dikwels geplunder, gesuiwer, gebrand! / Afrika staan in die teken van vuur en vlam"]. This poem roots the use of fire and flame as symbolic of Africa in the physical reality of the continent, its culture and also its history of conflict, suffering and oppression.

The use of these images with regard to Africa prevails in Breytenbach's poetry about political oppression and struggle into the nineties. One of the poems in *Soos die so* [*Such as the such*] comments on the death of the activist Tiro, who left South Africa for Gaborone in Botswana and was killed by a letterbomb. The image of fire associated with the freedom struggle becomes an attribute of the African landscape ("desert / with small flames of the struggle-for-freedom everywhere") ["woestyn / met oral vlammetjies van 'n stryd-om-vryheid"] (1990:47). The image of flame is also connected with blood: the freedom fighter Tiro lies in his own blood, like the "inner flame within the red" ["binnevlam binne die rooi"]. Several poems in the volume *nege landskappe van ons tye bemaak aan 'n beminde* [*nine landscapes of our times bequeathed to a beloved*] which dates from 1993 refer to political events in South Africa in the eighties and carry forward the image of Africa as the domain of fire, flame and blood (as representative of Africa's struggle for freedom and justice). The poem titled "9 Junie 1983" ["9 June 1983"] (1993:43-45) refers to the hanging of three freedom fighters in Pretoria. In the last stanza the poet states that the bodies of these men and their sacrifice will "remain burning like a wound / growing to resistance, and freedom fires" ["bly brand soos 'n wond / bloei tot verset, en vryheidsvure"]. In the poem "hasejag, September 1984" ["rabbit hunt, September 1984"] from the same volume (1993:46-47) a South African protest marcher cries: "Africa cries the smell of justice and blood / without a pass" ["Afrika skreeu die geur van geregtigheid en bloed / sonder 'n pas"]. In another poem (1993:48) the poet questions the value of his poetic words in the

freedom struggle, adding his voice to those who want to burn down the country to achieve political freedom: “burn, burn this land black! / a thousand words do not close one bullethole” [“brand, brand dié land swart! / ’n duisend woorde maak nie één koeëlgat dig!”]. The image of fire, so closely associated with suffering and the struggle against oppression, is also used to explain the hold that Africa has over the poet: “he repulses you, pulls you in / holds you close, paralyses you / with love in the magic circle / of sand and poverty / and fire that lives under the burning: / you stand with coldfever in the enchantment of Africa” [“hy stoot jou af, trek jou in, / hou jou vas, lê jou lam / van liefde in die magiese sirkel / van sand en armoede / en vuur wat lewe onder die brand: / jy staan met kouekoors in die ban van Afrika”]. Again Africa is constructed as male: it is an almost oedipal love-hate relationship (much as one would have with a father) because he is repulsed even as he feels extreme love.

Africa is also home to the freedom fighter as becomes evident from the poem “Dar-es-Salaam: hawe van vrede” [“Dar-es-Salaam: harbour of peace”] (1972:16-17) which contrasts the tranquility of a day in this African city with references to the dire circumstances of Africa’s freedom fighters. Dar-es-Salaam is described in terms of peacefulness, sweetness and youth: the earth is “sweet”, the sea is full of young white shells and the coconut palms are “proud and slim with small, firm breasts” [“trots en slank met klein-stewige borsies”]. This contrasts with the circumstances of the freedom fighters, whom the poet calls “brothers in exile” [“broers in ballingskap”]. Again Swahili sayings and riddles (see Coetzee, 1980) are used to make the transition from the peacefulness of Dar-es-Salaam to the ominous situation of the freedom fighters. The translation of these Swahili sayings and riddles into the Afrikaans of Breytenbach’s poetic discourse also comments on his desire to make Afrikaans an African language. The use of phrases in Swahili can also be read as signs of Breytenbach’s resistance against the exclusivist interpretation of Afrikaans.

The construction of Africa in these poems are to a certain extent informed by or supplemented with his constructions of South Africa, whose apartheid rulers do not really see themselves as part of Africa. Images of purgatory and hell are used for the city Johannesburg that has the potential to explode like a grenade because of the capitalist oppression of blacks (1972:18); a poem about squatter camps like Dimbaza, Welcome Valley, Limehill and Stinkwater paints the image of an earth fertilised with the bodies of children who died of sickness, malnutrition and poverty (1972:19). The poet’s ambivalent relationship with South Africa is perhaps best exemplified in the poem “Tot Siens Kaapstad” [“Goodbye

Cape Town"] from the early volume *Kouevuur [Cold Fire/Gangrene]* (1969:23-24). The circumstances in which the poem was written explain the mixture of bitterness and affection with which he describes Cape Town. It was written as the ship he and his wife was travelling on to Europe was leaving Cape Town harbour on the 15th of February 1967; although his wife was not granted a visa for South Africa, they were allowed to disembark and spend a day in Cape Town. The poet's rage about this condescending treatment, surfaces in the conflicting images of Cape Town as he bids the city goodbye. Cape Town, often called the Mother City because it is the oldest city in South Africa and the point at which the European colonisation of South Africa started, is depicted as a woman. She is described as "beautiful" ("lieflik"), but also a "primal whore" ("oerhoer"), a "bitch" ["feeks"] and "a suicide in abortion" ["'n selfmoord in aborsie"]. Because he used the image of a woman for Cape Town he also wants to compare her with a rose; he can, however, only come up with the image of Cape Town as a rash (the Afrikaans words for rose and rash are homonyms) and a wound on the leg of the nation. Contrasting with these negative images, the refrain of the poem expresses an intense emotional bond with the city. This image of Cape Town as a perverted, but nevertheless loved, mother can also be linked to Breytenbach's ambivalent feelings towards the mother country, the mother-tongue, even the biological parents as inhabitants of the country he loves and despises so much because of its political system.

## **6. The history of Africa**

Breytenbach's poetry also indicates that his identity or sense of self is shaped by the stories that he tells about Africa's past and his own place in it. A poem like "Bagamoyo" from the volume *Skryt* (1972:14-17) evokes Africa's history of slavery. The title of this poem refers to a harbour on the Tanzanian coast about 80 kilometers north of Dar-es-Salaam through which slaves were exported to Zanzibar. The poem describes arriving in and getting acquainted with a strange country in terms of a series of Swahili proverbs and riddles (see Coetzee, 1980:36-37). It starts with an adaptation of the saying "if you lick the sand of a foreign country when you arrive on a visit, you will repel the evil spirits and diseases of that country". The poet then proceeds to metaphorically 'lick' the sands of the foreign country by using the Swahili sayings and riddles to unveil Bagamoyo to him. By the concluding stanzas he has, however, become aware that these proverbs, sayings and the romantic Swahili song about Bagamoyo he quotes, conceal the history of slavery. The sayings and riddles used in the first part of the poem are then changed so as to reveal a much darker and painful history than they had suggested at first. The poem ends with a vision of "the ocean washing

like blood against this land” [“die oseaan spoel soos bloed teen hierdie land”], again using the image of blood tied up with images of fire and flame in other poems about Africa.

Africa’s history of slavery is also referred to in other poems. In his pre-prison poetry the portrayal of slavery was connected to Tanzania in East Africa, more specifically the harbour of Bagamoyo and the island Zanzibar. In the volumes published after his release from prison the portrayal of slavery is connected with the island of Gorée off Dakar on the Senegal coast, which has become an important symbol of the slave trade. It gained this reputation because the Dutch negotiated an agreement with the local rulers to establish a trading post on the island Bir which they renamed Gorée (derived from the Dutch words *goede reed*, meaning safe anchorage) in 1617 and built a fort and slave-handling facility there in 1639 (Reader, 1997:404). Breytenbach’s connection with this island is also related to the fact that he is a member of the Gorée Institute that wants to promote democracy, culture and development in Africa. Reminding one of the description of a sea of blood lapping against the shores of slave-trading East Africa, one of the poems in *Soos die so* [*Such as the such*] (1990) uses the image of a sea full of blue and swollen corpses of slaves eating away at the African coastline (“Closely under one’s memory the many / blue-swollen corpses / damming up and eating away at the coast of Africa”) [“Vlak onder die geheue dobber en bloei die baie / blougeswelde kadawers / as uitkalwende opdamming van Afrika se kus”]. The island Gorée also features in the poem “eiland (2)” [“island (2)”] in *nege landskappe van ons tye bemaak aan ’n beminde* [*nine landscapes of our times bequeathed to a beloved*] (1993:98) which describes ghostly sounds that arise at night from the tunnels and cellars through which the slaves were taken to be shipped away from the quays. To capture the ugliness and perversity of the island’s history of slavery, it is compared to “running sores of consciousness / in the glittering vagina of the sea” [“etterende skeurtjies van bewuswees / binne die see se glimmende skede”].

Africa’s history of colonisation is the topic of several poems in Breytenbach’s oeuvre. In the poem “Garden” [“Tuin”] (1984a:49-55) Africa is described as a wild and unrestricted garden and the European as the snake that invades this paradise to possess it, cultivate it, control it and “discover” its plants and flowers to name and categorise them, only to find that he has not conquered his own fear. This poem, that was written in prison, universalises the “story” of Africa’s colonisation to make a point about the human condition: the human being as the coloniser of a strange world which is finally inside himself and which he cannot fully master. Other images for colonisation are also used when the poet

compares the process of colonisation with setting fire to Africa: on one occasion he says that the whites carried a torch in Africa, not to light up the darkness, but "to set fire to the whole caboodle / and see how black the earth now smoulders" ["om die boksemdaais brand te steek / en kyk nou hoe swart rook die aarde"] (1990:196) – again evoking the image of Africa as a continent of fire.

The poem "op papier" ["on paper"] (1983:144-147) traces the poet's own place in the continent's experience of colonisation by turning to the history of colonisation in South Africa. The poem deconstructs the first settlement by the Dutch in South Africa and traces the history of Jan van Riebeeck who was elevated to "father of the Afrikaner nation" because he set up a refreshment station in the Cape in 1652, calling him a "commander of a roadhouse" ["kommandeur van 'n padkafee"] in the margins of the African continent. According to the poet this led to the founding of a colony "which would lead to seasons and centuries of bitterness and sorrow" ["wat tot seisoene en eeue se bitter en verdriet sou lei"]. He emphasises that the settlement at the Cape led to a "process of melting and bastardisation" ["proses van smelt en verkroesting"], a hybridisation of different ethnic groups for whom the mixture of Dutch, Malay and Portuguese (i.e. Afrikaans) was the language in which they could communicate. This reading of South African colonial history confirms Breytenbach's earlier view that Afrikaners are a hybrid group and that Afrikaans is a hybrid or bastard-language ("n bastertaal"). This poem also emphasises the constructedness of history, the fact that it can be seen as a play with signifiers that takes place "on paper" as the title of the poem indicates. It is clear that the poet's construction of his own identity is decisively influenced by the way in which he re-constructs the history of Africa and South Africa.

## **7. Africa and the mystical experience**

In the last instance the poet also experiences Africa from the perspective of a mystic. In the intensely introspective and mystical (but at the same time political) 1993-volume, *nege landskappe van ons tye bemaak aan 'n beminde* [*nine landscapes of our times bequeathed to a beloved*], one finds a poem that once more describes a flight over Africa and describes it as a mystical experience: "To fly over Africa is a topography / of surveying which borders on the mystical / the eye can never stretch far enough" ["Om oor Afrika te vlieg is 'n topografie / van landmeterskap wat aan die mistieke grens – / die oog kan nooit lank genoeg rek"] (1993:96-97). Whereas previous poems as well as other poems in the same volume construct Africa as a fully historicised and politicised social space, this poem dissolves the notions of time and space completely. It

also reinterprets the idea of Africa as a mystery: according to the poet this mystery of Africa has nothing to do with its so-called darkness (ascribed to it in colonial discourse), that which he calls its whitewashed history or even its alarming potential for dying. The essence of its mystery lies in the fact that its landscape has been burnt clean (a description evoking the metaphors of fire and flame used for Africa in his earlier poetry) and is so clear and self-evident that it cannot be rationally understood. Africa becomes the space where it is possible to escape the bounds of reason (what he calls the “stench of mental decay” [“die stank van verstandelike verval”]), to achieve a Zen-like illumination or insight into existence. It is the space where one can become aware of the membrane between inside and outside, of border-knowledge, of the fact that there is no beginning or end, only “naked existence” [“naakbestaan”]. It is also the space which is the end of poetry because it is where the mouth dies and the hands rot (images Breytenbach often uses about his own poetry). Thus for Breytenbach the mystical Africa is also the space which is the perfect non-space because of the bareness and burnt clarity of its physical presence. This mystical experience of African space as non-space also means the end of linear time with its beginnings and ends, reminding one of the fact that Breytenbach mysteriously stated in the introduction to an earlier volume of poetry: “The human being isn’t history anymore, only geography” [“Die mens is nie meer geskiedenis nie, nog slegs geografie”] (1990:134).

## 8. In conclusion

Returning to the line “too much have I written about Africa / a white fly on the sombre window pane” [“te veel het ek oor Afrika geskrywe / ’n wit vlieg oor die somber ruit”] (1993:188) after reading Breytenbach’s poetry, one becomes aware that this image summarises succinctly his sense of self in relation to Africa. Being a (white) fly on the (black) window pane puts the poet (a white South African who lived in exile for a number of years) in the position of an outsider looking in on Africa, a position which he seems reluctant to give up because it provides him with a unique perspective; the metaphor also implies that he locates himself against the vast background of Africa from which he derives his sense of self. Most importantly, it also places him on the interface between the outside and the inside, the liminal region from which transgression and transformation can most successfully be undertaken. Breytenbach’s life and poetry is ample proof that the hybrid identity constructed in exactly this space can form the basis for political transgression as well as for personal renewal.

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