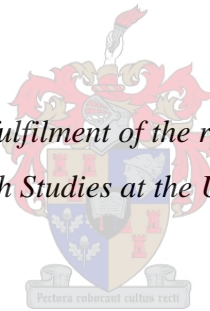


**Absence as narrational trope in the fictionalised transliteration of
experience: a discussion of Dominique Botha's *False River***

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

Dominique Botha's *False River*, published simultaneously with the rewritten Afrikaans text *Valsrivier* in 2013, is a fictionalised memoir presented as a novel that is written into the tradition of the *plaasroman*. The text follows the lives of the Bothas of Rietpan in the Free State and spans the years between 1980 and 1997. In this thesis I discuss the novel focussing on questions surrounding narration and its affirmation or negation of agency, embodiment and subjectivity, the narrative construction of the Botha family's isolating liberalism in its present post-apartheid context, and the perception of the author and the novel by Afrikaans and English literary communities. I explore the text's relationship to genre, drawing on J.M. Coetzee's examination of the literary pastoral in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. It is through this theoretical lens that I argue that *False River* depicts a conflicted, inconsistent and perforated view of Afrikaner identity and its relationship to gender, notions of landed belonging, Afrikaans-English linguistic co-habitation, and black subjectivity, in an agrarian landscape that dominates through anthropopsychism and primogeniture.

Opsomming

Dominique Botha se *False River*, tegelykertyd gepubliseer met die herskryfde Afrikaanse teks *Valsrivier* in 2013, is 'n geromantiseerde memoir wat as fiksie aangebied word en is binne die tradisie van die plaasroman geskryf. Die teks beskryf die lewens van die Bothas van Rietpan in die Vrystaat vanaf 1980 tot 1997. In my tesis bespreek ek dié roman met die fokus op vraagstukke rondom die vertelling se bekragtiging of ontkenning van bemagtiging, beliggaming en subjektiwiteit; van die verhaalkonstruksie van die Botha-familie se isolerende liberalisme in die huidige postapartheid konteks, asook die persepsie van die outeur en die roman deur Afrikaanse en Engelse literêre gemeenskappe. Ek ondersoek die teks se verhouding tot genre, na aanleiding van J.M. Coetzee se behandeling van die literêre pastoraal in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, om aan te voer dat *False River* 'n strydige, inkonsekwente en geperforeerde beskouing van Afrikaner-identiteit toon. Die verhouding van dié identiteit tot geslagtelikheid, grondbesit, Afrikaans-Engels linguistiese samebestaan, en swart subjektiwiteit word ook uitgelig binne die milieu van die agrariese landskap wat deur eersgeboortereg en die natuur-in-simpatie-procédé die karakters domineer.

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*If life itself is story-shaped, then the choices presented by story cannot be denied or avoided,
as they coincide with the choices of life.*

André Brink¹

Introduction

False River (2013) is a fictionalised memoir that starts out from author Dominique Botha's childhood on their family farm, Rietpan, in the Viljoenskroon district of the Free State. The reader follows her early adult years, which are punctuated by her oscillating departure from and retreat to this original refuge, and the pain affected by illness and exposure to sordid lifestyle enclaves, ultimately concluding in a moment of familial tragedy. The novel is focalised through a character also named Dominique Botha, but deliberately and assiduously focuses on the seminal events in the life (and then continuing degeneration) of her brother Paul, while Dominique's own interior existence remains comparatively veiled. In *False River*, Botha's debut novel, Paul is revealed to be gripped by addiction and crippled by his radically antagonistic opposition to the social norms of interpersonal engagement, material self-enrichment, employment and the duty to submit to governmental tyranny through compulsory military service, in a time of pre-democratic societal unrest in South Africa and violent interference in the politics of neighbouring countries. The novel spans the years between 1980 and 1997 when apartheid was drawing to its desperate close and South Africa was taking its first steps as a democracy, following the elections of 1994.

The novel was first conceptualised and completed (in English) when Botha was studying for a Creating Writing Master of Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and subsequently published in Afrikaans and English simultaneously by Umuzi in early August of 2013. As part of this, Botha self-translated or 'rewrote' *False River* as *Valsrivier*, aided by her editor Francois Smith. Botha refers to *False River* as a "translitera[tion]" of her Afrikaans childhood which entailed a "physiological translation [...] from experience to memory to English" (Visser "Intimate Relationship") in the writing of the primary text, a transformation she then had to craft in reverse for *Valsrivier* when she (re)translated her story back into Afrikaans. Botha's process of (re)translating *False River* could therefore be posited as a re-experiencing of her past through the re-visitation of memory which is reinterpreted through the language of her childhood and therefore also revised, providing on its course an opportunity for a "decontamination of language and

¹ From "Stories of history: reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative" (41).

² See too Nicole Devarenne's discussion of the complicity and contamination of Afrikaans (62).

subjectivity” (Strauss, “From Afrikaner” 189).² The result is a narrative which is rewritten rather than simply being transported into another language. Afrikaans is the language of Botha’s experience of their farm and her youth; is a language which is inseparable from her family, her politicised upbringing and the process of her maturation into adulthood which included acquiring English as an additional language, and it would therefore follow that the rewriting of *Valsrivier* required a re-examination of the autobiographical foundation of the text. In terms of the structuring of the texts, Botha says that the strongly autobiographical impetus of the novels necessitated a predetermined chronology which she then enfolded in the lingering, but ultimately imaginary spaces and faces of her pastoral childhood and the unearthing of a profoundly intimate loss (Visser “Intimate Relationship”).

Since their publication, *False River* and *Valsrivier* have enjoyed resoundingly positive reviews and critical success. To date, *False River* has won the University of Johannesburg (UJ) Debut Prize and was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize, while *Valsrivier* has been awarded the Eugène Marais Prize, as well as the *Rapport* Jan Rabie Prize, the latter as a part of the 2014 Media24 Books Literary Awards. As the novels have generated so much interest, it would be useful to interrogate how they raise issues of authorship, genre, identity, language, and translation, against a backdrop of (recent) South African history and politics. Taking into consideration that, as yet, no scholarly research on the novels has emerged, my reading of *False River*, in my first chapter, will be framed predominantly by publically contextual and paratextual material as I discuss,³ in particular, the narration of the text. I will focus on the correspondences and points of contrast of a representative sampling of reviews of the novels as well as interviews with Dominique Botha, both in Afrikaans and in English, and the relationships the literary communities of these two language groups establish with the texts. In my second chapter, I will consider the complex implications of the presented classification of *False River* as a work of fiction using a theoretical framework structured by the South African literary tradition of the *plaasroman* as examined by J.M. Coetzee in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Through my discussion, I will suggest that the text interacts with the conventions of this genre erratically and problematically, even more so when the politicised discursive context into which it was written is considered. Following on from this analysis I will show that despite the historically liberal slant of the novel, black as well as feminine narrative agency and subjectivity remain a troubling vacancy.

² See too Nicole Devarenne’s discussion of the complicity and contamination of Afrikaans (62).

³ Paratext is the material that surrounds the main text, such as the cover, which is not supplied by the author.

Chapter One

Narrative acquiescence, witnessing and triumph: Dominique/Botha's inscription of her speaking past

In this chapter, I take as my starting point the responses of reviewers of *False River* and *Valsrivier* in order to discuss the literary-public construction of Botha, the author, and Dominique, the character and narrator. Through an examination of the novel and its paratexts, I will demonstrate the refraction of the narrative voice into familial reportage and deference, consciously politicised curatorship, secrecy and silence as presences which obscure Dominique's speaking of her subjectivity. I will show that the concluding elegy, lauded as the pinnacle of the narrative and reclamation of Botha's voice, brings the narrative to a full circle in the following of Paul's story at the expense of her own.

False River and *Valsrivier* pose a challenge to the (critical) reader given that the novels are comprised primarily of material which most resembles stylised cathartic memoir. The effect of this is that the equivalent plots or storylines, as they are presented, cannot be judged within the same criteria as novels wrought solely from the imagination. Readers of Botha's novels know the subject matter of the books to be the traumatic personal (hi)story of the author herself. This confronts the readers with the choice of either remembering the texts' factual origins, thereby allowing for the possibility of painful empathising and the resurfacing of their own injury, or of forgetting; of suspending knowledge of the narrator's lived experience; of reverting to a reading mode which so often accompanies fiction which may discomfort: the refuge of disbelief.

It appears that this may have influenced the reviewers – reviews of the novel have focused predominantly on Botha's style of writing, including the tone and rhythm of the narration, and how each reviewer considers this style as supporting or reflecting the content. They have also focused on Botha's command of both languages and the novels' correspondingly striking vocabulary, as well as the author's evocative descriptions of a moment in South African history of which the pastoral haven of her childhood is the nucleus. When entering into this increasingly public exchange, it seems the reviewers want to soothe themselves, future readers and even the author herself; to offer delicate condolences. The above considered, a pertinent question surfaces: how would one critique or evaluate such a tragic (hi)story which is known to be (principally) true, even if it presented as fiction? Or, to

put it differently, which conventions of genre and its companion analysis would or should take precedence when considering a text that is an amalgamation of (auto)biography, (misery) memoir, novel, *plaasroman*, *Bildungsroman* and junkie narrative; a text in which there is no signalling when the content is fact or fiction? Helen Malson provides the critical reader with a contextually embedded approach that is accommodating of the domain of the text while retaining the analytical integrity required for the fissures, pressures and frictions of the text to remain accountably legible:

Texts are analysed, not as a means of revealing the ‘truth’ about the speaker or writer (their attitudes, cognitions, traits or whatever) or about the events or experiences they describe. Rather, texts are analysed in order to explicate the culturally specific discursive resources that have been drawn upon in order to produce a particular account of ‘reality’ [...] with the interactions and dilemmas that may be created for the speaker in taking up particular constructions of themselves or others [...] or with the functions or effects (whether intended or not) of the particular discursive resources used and the power relations embedded therein. (153)

In interviews with the author, the respectful caution demonstrated by reviewers is mostly discarded and instead there is a sensationalist hunger and even an expectation, one could argue, for Botha to perform a keenly tangible grief; to render her sense of loss consistently while retaining the immediacy of the original severance which is its source. It is in these eagerly attentive spaces that Botha divulges her profound disquiet around the inevitable waning of memory as it advances, almost imperceptibly, to claim her brother with its gradual permanence.

Both Afrikaans and English reviews have praised highly Botha’s poetic style of prose, or, as Finuala Dowling refers to it, her “[writing of] prose in a way that honours the poet within” (“Haunting Phrases”). In a comment which I would argue most likely stems from a frustration with the inconsistent narration rather than the style, Johannes Comestor of *LitNet* adds his voice to this otherwise all-admiring collective, but with derisive reservation: “In hierdie prosa is daar 'n neiging na poësie. Soms is dit 'n bate. Ander kere wek die teks die indruk van pogings tot mooiskrywery” [In this prose there is an inclination towards poetry. Sometimes it is an asset. Other times the text creates the impression of attempts at purple patchery] (“Boekgesprek”).⁴ Although Comestor concedes that the novel is undoubtedly worth reading, he states in an unbecomingly mordant tone:

⁴ All translations by the author unless stated otherwise.

Die teks wek die indruk dat die verhaal sterk (outo)biografies is. Ook asof die outeur alles waaroor sy literêr beskik het in die teks neerslag laat vind het; dermate dat ons hier met 'n een-boek-outeur te make kan hê. Sy kan dit moeilik vind om so 'n kragtoer te herhaal; waarmee ek nie volmaaktheid aan die werk toedig nie. [The text creates the impression that the story is strongly (auto)biographical. Also as if the author has poured into the text everything literary she has at her disposal; so much so that we could be dealing with a one-book-author here. She could find it difficult to repeat such a tour de force; by which I am not attributing completion to the work.] (“Boekgesprek”)

Comestor implies that there are literary devices present in *Valsrivier* which signal the text's constitutively componential life-writing; that there are narrative markers which expose the transposal of Botha's lived experience into her fiction. It is nevertheless problematic that Comestor collapses the figure of the author into the fictionalised protagonist of her novel; that he limits Botha's literary skill and further authorial potential through equating and indeed defining it only in terms of Dominique's narration. In addition, I would argue that the 'incompletion' of the novel(s), or rather their deliberate elusion of closure, resonates in their form with the continuing process of coming to terms with loss. Comestor's principal focus in his review is, however, emphatically and critically political. He quotes excessively from the novel with the sole objective of revealing conflicting points of view for each prominent character before abandoning his readers, without standing on ceremony, to extricate their own conclusions from his review. In so doing, Comestor demonstrates an unwillingness to make allowances for the co-existence of contradictory traits within a single character which, as I would argue is often the case, is what renders a character's subjectivity with convincing identifiability.

Other more appreciative Afrikaans reviewers have focused as much on the writing style itself as on the tragedy of her brother's death and Botha's textual honouring of his memory; the novel as homage and instrument of healing. In both these approaches to the novel, however, Dominique/Botha is in fact denigrated to remain either in the position of powerlessness implicit in witnessing, recalling and testifying, to a (hi)story she can never alter, take ownership of or conclude; or to remain in the position of the devoted, long-suffering sister and confidant who grieves for her lost sibling, and who, even in her own telling, perpetually trails in the wake of her brother. In *False River*, Dominique herself states pensively, “I was no longer instructed to walk thirty metres behind [Paul] in public, like he had made Christiaan and me do sometimes when we were little, but I continued to lag. A

credulous Gretel trampling the undergrowth” (Botha 105). To follow this trail, the opening exchange of the novel compels emphasis:

“You are too close to the water,” Paul whispered. “There are barbels in the mud. They will wake up if you step on them.”

He pushed past towards the sweet thorn shade.

I saw a dead carp with its eye rotted away. Finches were chattering in the reeds. The water in the pan stank.

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true. Barbels aren’t like normal fish. They grow as big as men and they eat mud. When it’s dark, they crawl up to the house on their shoulders to graze on the lawn.”

I ran to catch up with him. “Ma says if you feed silkworms beetroot, they weave threads of crimson. Is that true? I mean, what does crimson mean?”

“It means red. Hurry up you spastic.” (Botha, *False River* 7)

It is not simply Paul actively “push[ing] past” Dominique and her running after him “to catch up” which is of interest here, since in the novels there are several major instances where Dominique ‘follows’ Paul. The most evident example is that Paul is Dominique’s older brother. Another is that when Paul is transferred to the private boarding school Hilton College in Natal to address behavioural problems and to be released from the detrimental prejudice of his teachers at the local school (Salomon Senekal Primary), Dominique is sent to St Anne’s Diocesan School for Girls nearby which acted as “[a] satellite for sisters of Hilton boys” (Botha, *FR* 63),⁵ despite her having been rewarded for her exemplary adherence to normative modes of conduct regarding discipline and authority. Later, Dominique also moves first to Johannesburg and on to Cape Town after Paul, resulting in a brief stint in chaotic cohabitation in the latter city. This literal pattern of pursuit is however secondary to the manner of following it gestures towards and underpins: an expressively developmental following revealed through the narration which occurs both emotionally and intellectually. This is noticeable in the extract above through Dominique’s inquiry into what the word ‘crimson’ means since it demonstrates that Dominique looks to Paul for answers, to explain her world and the world of adults, while alluding to his inclination towards and affiliation with language and writing in the novels. One could also argue that Paul’s movement to find respite in the shade of the tree (implying that Dominique is left behind in the sun) invites a figurative reading of the shadow as his struggle with addiction for which death is his only

⁵ Henceforth the abbreviation *FR* will be used for *False River*.

escape, which is emphasized by the dead carp Dominique remarks on in the following line, its “eye rotted away” implying lack of vision or perspective.

Dowling conceives of this dynamic between the siblings as being somewhat more innocuous since she considers it to be applicable to and in keeping with the text’s novelistic form, writing that “[t]he rapport between defiant brother and compliant sister gives Botha’s memoir the symbolic and weight-bearing foundation that fiction demands” (“Haunting Phrases”). The energetic inequity as well as the closeness of Dominique/Botha and Paul’s relationship is however portrayed quite apparently and un-ironically even before the reader need open the book since on the front cover of the novel is a photograph of a laughing little girl, who we know to be Botha herself (La Vita “n Gesprek”), running after, or being held back by, a taller boy who is her brother Paul. The cover of the novel thus becomes a poignant visual metaphor since it is apparent in the reading of the novel that although Dominique is the narrator, it is Paul who is the main character. Jane Rosenthal reiterates this in *Mail & Guardian* when she writes: “The book’s centre is Paul, but it is also about Dominique and their life in the country” (“Comfort”). Rebecca Davis of *The Times*, for whom the novel is “easily one of the best South African novels in recent years,” observes too that “Paul is the character at the centre of the book: an individual seemingly born to be immortalised in literature. He is brilliant, handsome and rebellious, and from the outset his light shines with such manic brightness that one suspects it may burn out” (“An Idyll”). Botha most certainly does depict Paul with an unstable intensity of character which is exceptional within the realm of the novels. Yet the possibility would have to be considered that this (deliberate) imbalance between Paul’s story and Dominique’s focalisation is a ruse to excuse Botha’s withdrawal from a narrativized engagement with her own traumatic experience, the sincere examination and exposure of which could be potentially excruciating. Paul’s characteristic magnetism is best encapsulated by the following excerpt from a conversation between Dominique and Paul’s friend Lew, whom he met while (briefly) attending the University of Cape Town:

He sat up, struck by a sudden insight. “But that is the amazing thing about him. He has the courage to relinquish the middle-class institutions that no-one else is prepared to let go of. To abandon accredited validation, as it were.”

“You mean to drop out of university?”

He stood up and cocked his head sideways at my bookshelf.

“Paul epitomises the archetypal beat person. He embodies the nature of the natural outlaw. They are always photogenic. Outlaws always know how to hold a cigarette. He’s the guy who does actually get to fuck all the waitresses.”

He lit another cigarette, and rested his elbows on the open window as he spoke.

“Paul is obsessed with the material consumptive universe that is currently being refined into common discourse. How corrosive it is to your soul to equate purchasing to personal happiness. Paul wants people to live their subjective truth. He encourages that in everyone he meets. He almost wants to force people to live in a true way.” (Botha, *FR* 113-4)

Here the connection between Paul and literature, as well as his rampant drug abuse and general debauchery, is expressed explicitly through Lew’s reference to the hedonistically bohemian Beat Generation of the 1950s. It is interesting to note that when Dominique (somewhat naively) questions the sensibility behind Lew’s statement on “abandon[ing] accredited validation” he “cock[s] his head sideways at [her] bookshelf” as if he is assessing the potential gravitas her argument could carry according to what she has read or the books she owns; as though the books Dominique reads are a direct indicator of her discursive temperament. Lew’s gesture points towards an alternate form of ‘validation’ which, paradoxically, is an authentication based on societal legitimisation through publication (standards). While the reader does not witness first-hand the acts of inspirational influence Paul exerts on others, we do, however, have access to an exchange between Dominique and Paul in which he ‘encourages’ Dominique, but only in so far as this is aligned with his own (im)morality:

“What are you going to do without an education?”
 “If you are going to be bourgeois, I would rather sleep.”
 “Paul,” I asked as he was drifting back to sleep, “is it normal for people to kiss each other down here?” I pointed to between my legs.
 “Are you asking me if it’s normal, or if it’s normal to like it?”
 I blushed in the dark.
 “You are almost eighteen years old. Everyone does it.”
 “Well, how am I supposed to know that?”
 Paul sat up.
 “Are you sleeping with him, whoever he is?”
 “Of course not.”
 He lit a cigarette.
 “For whom did you write that poem in Ouma’s recipe book?”
 “It doesn’t matter.”
 “Surely you were writing it for someone, whoever she is?”
 “Whether it’s her or someone else is immaterial. I don’t believe in monogamy. In poetry or in life.” He put his cigarette butt in my water glass. “So, this boyfriend of yours, does he know what he’s doing?”
 “What do you mean?”
 “Does he know how to undo your bra?”
 I laughed.
 “As long as it feels good and you like it, then enjoy yourself. Is that not the point of your body?”

I didn't know the answer. It's different for girls. You are not as free. (Botha, *FR* 115)

As with the aforementioned conversation between Dominique and Lew, Paul's literary panache is associated with his promiscuity. Dominique's concerned yet reasonable inquiry into the implications of his decision to abandon his studies is ignored just as her subtle subversion of Lew's discourse was before, but Paul's attitude quickly shifts toward attentiveness as he realises that his demurely conservative younger sister is sexually active. While this exchange between the siblings recalls the opening scene of the novel in which Dominique yields to Paul for clarification and guidance, the nature of this more personal conversation also reveals an intimacy between them; a bond of trust which has endured despite their independent movement towards oppositional stances. Botha herself admits: "’n Ouer broer is op ’n manier ’n mitiese figuur. ’n Besondere mooi, charismatiese mens. Jy is byna op ’n heldevererende manier verlief op die persoon" [An older brother is in a way a mythical figure. An exceptionally beautiful, charismatic person. You are in love with the person in a way which is almost hero-worshipping] ("Hartseer Toegevo"). It is unclear from the brief moment of interiority which concludes their conversation – "I didn't know the answer. It's different for girls. You are not as free" – whether Dominique approves of Paul's affirmative attitude towards pleasure, but it is apparent that she feels a disengaged envy for the liberties Paul can seize simply on account of his masculinity; that she feels a dispirited and resigned sense of confinement in the permitted channels of expression afforded to her gender by provincial patriarchy.

Alongside, or perhaps despite this youthful admiration, Paul is also still Botha's *boetie* – a diminutive form of 'brother' in Afrikaans connoting endearment, protectiveness and possessiveness. Botha speaks of this tender aspect of her relationship to her brother in an article entitled "Ter wille van Paul" [For Paul's sake] which was published in *Rapport* quite soon after the release of the novel. In the article, Botha clarifies circumstances around Paul's death, contextualises the pastoral spaces represented in the novel(s), and laments the 'lost country' of childhood and the fallibility of memory. It transpires that when this article first appeared Botha was left sickened by her candid emotiveness and she rebuked herself for exposing both her life and that of her family ("’n Gesprek"). It is also in this *Rapport* article that Botha discloses that, for her, writing is a dialogue with the dead and a one-way conversation with readers; that life-writing, at its best, is a vague melody thinned out from the

full orchestra which was once a life, and that her book is (but) Paul's echo of such an already-faint tune ("Ter Wille").

*

False River and *Valsrivier* are not written solely 'for Paul's sake' however: Botha destabilizes this popular yet reductive reading of (her relationship to) the text when in an interview about her novel(s) she states: "Ek moes êrens begin, ek wou iets doen, en dit is waar dit begin het. So, dit was nie heeltemal net 'n onselfsugtige behoefte 'ter nagedagtenis aan' nie; dit was ook 'n manier vir my om 'n skrywer te word" [I had to start somewhere, I wanted to do something, and that is where it started. So, it was not just a completely unselfish need 'in memoriam'; it was also a way for me to become a writer] ("n Gesprek"). Joan Hambidge, a prominent Afrikaans-language poet and academic, also interviewed Botha, remarking to her that "[j]ou broer se lewe en dood is die tema van *Valsrivier*. Jy 'voltooi' as't ware sy kreatiewe impuls wat deur sy dood gekortwiek is" [your brother's life and death is the theme of *Valsrivier*. You 'complete' his creative impulse, so to speak, which was cut short by his death] ("Protes Vergetelheid"). Hambidge's assertion attributes a champion conclusiveness to Botha's writing of the novels, but by implication also succeeds in subtly reinforcing the notion that even while Botha was penning her own story of loss she was concomitantly acting on behalf of her brother. Botha agrees with Hambidge:

By nabetraging sou 'n mens kon sê dat die kortwiek van my broer se kreatiewe impuls uiteindelik vleuels gegee het aan my eie stem. Ek neem die vertelling oor. Baie versigtig in die begin, maar soos die verhaal ontplooi, so beweeg die susterstem geleidelik weg uit die skadu van die ouer broer se talent, asook uit die skadu van verlies. [Upon reflection one could say that the clipping of my brother's creative impulse finally gave wings to my own voice. I take over the narration. Very carefully at the beginning, but as the story unfolds, so the sister-voice gradually moves out of the shadow of her older brother's talent, as well as out of the shadow of loss.] ("Protes Vergetelheid")

From this it would seem as though Botha's bereavement, even after many years, could have functioned as an inhibitor to potential acts of her own imaginative articulation due to a paralysing process of psychological memorialisation of her brother's esteemed literary prowess made manifest by her dutifully continuing reverence for Paul and his work. This subservience in memoriam could also be indicative of an interiorised Afrikaner-patriarchal bias towards feminine inferiority. It follows that the impression Botha gives the reader is that

the permission she granted herself to share of her own burgeoning creativity in some sense necessitated that her brother be absent before this could take place, but if that is indeed so, how does her triumph echo?

In a moment of possible meta-textuality, Dominique is depicted by Botha as being daunted by writing, especially when she is in close proximity to her brother. In the novel(s), Dominique (already in her mid-twenties) is sitting on the balcony of Paul's flat in Cape Town finishing a letter to her boyfriend Adi when she is overcome with lassitude: "I drew pictures in the margins of stars and moons and tears falling onto the page [...] Ballpoint pen comets trailing over half-truths. My pen lay limp on the page. It is hard for me to write, not like Paul, whose words and thoughts came like eager whores" (Botha, *FR* 189).⁶ Note that Dominique writes "half-truths" as Botha is writing an autobiographical novel; a fictionalised memoir. Her would-be instrument of articulation, the pen, "lay limp" over juvenile illustrations substituted for a verbalization of her agonised disheartenment while Paul's unruly inspiration and its impassioned materialised expression are compared to whores who are drawn to him, but for whose company he ultimately pays a price. This small sampling demonstrates how Dominique's predominantly overly-feminised, almost concubinary voice is surmounted and 'marginalised' by Paul's assertive creativity; is immobilised by Paul's visibly literary virility, underscored by his performed social transgressions, and reinforced by Botha's textual inclusions of his writing. In addition, I would assert that as Botha has come into her own through the composition, publication and acclamation of both *False River* and *Valsrivier*, so too has there been a diminution of self; an un-becoming: Botha stated that "[s]kryf is ook 'n dissipline waardeur 'n mens geleidelik van die sin van uniekheid van die self verlig word; 'n bevrydende gestrompel in die rigting van nederigheid" [writing is also a discipline through which one is gradually relieved of the sense of the uniqueness of the self; an emancipatory stumbling in the direction of humbleness] ("Protes Vergetelheid"). As I will discuss below in relation to the narration, Botha's relinquishment of ego through the act of writing is present in the text itself as a much more comprehensive removal of self where the reader is denied access to Dominique's innate interiority.

False River and *Valsrivier* are illustrations of the *Bildungsroman* exemplar, given that their intention is to sketch out the development of Dominique and the devolvment of her brother Paul up until his passing. When discussing the novels from within this framework,

⁶ Dominique's figure of speech is unusually crass (for her), demonstrating that she has been influenced by the surroundings of the flat. Paul is 'friendly' with the prostitutes who work nearby (Botha, *FR* 186) and the day before Dominique returns to the farm a prostitute steals some of Paul's clothes after he failed to pay her for "a blowjob on credit" (Botha, *FR* 191-2).

however, the novels are brought into confrontation with the conventions and expectations associated with the genre, especially in terms of narration. Dominique is eight years old and Paul is ten as the novel sets out with the siblings on their way to collect mulberry leaves in the family graveyard, shrewdly foreshadowing the suffusion of ruminations on family, death and loss in the texts. The focalisation is awkwardly staggered, halting, tentative, at times precious, and presents uncomfortably. Hambidge takes note of this rhythm she describes as “hortend” [jolting] and “rukkerig” [jerky], and accounts for it by contending that Botha’s style of narration

behoort tot die genre waarin Carson McCullers en Truman Capote so uitgemunt het: Die ouer verteller wat terugkyk asof hy/sy steeds die kind is wat alles beleef het. In hierdie soort vertelling skuif die ouer persoon en kind se waarneming ooreen en die verlede word herbesoek. [belongs to the genre in which Carson McCullers and Truman Capote so excelled: The older narrator who looks back as if s/he is still the child who experienced everything. In this kind of narration the older person’s perception shifts over the child’s and the past is revisited.] (“Aangrypende Debuut”)

Initially Botha’s portrayal of the ‘perception’ of a child as young as Dominique is inconsistent, creating the impression that the narrative transference into her subjectivity is incompletely realised. The inhabitation of young Dominique’s perspective is also unsustainable given the present cathartic pulse that paces the progression of the narrative and which, by its very nature, persistently draws the narration back to the presence of pain (fictively located in the novel’s future). The focalisation of “the child who experienced everything” (Hambidge “Aangrypende Debuut”) therefore cannot be separated from everything that has been experienced; from the presence of apperception.⁷ The ‘shifting over of perception’ Hambidge refers to is unsmooth and renegotiated with every paragraph, sometimes from sentence to sentence. This is in part due to the literary and political signage which dots the textual landscape of the novels as well as the conspicuous inclusions of metaphorical mirroring. Dominique closes the first chapter of *False River* with: “It started raining softly. Paul was crying now. In the end he always cried more than me” (Botha 17) through which Botha appears to suggest a harmonic affinity, a resonance between Paul and the (natural) environment of the farm (which is emphatically reiterated later in the narrative

⁷ apperception *metaphor*. 1. The mind’s perception of itself as a conscious agent; self-consciousness. 2. Mental perception, recognition. 3. *Psychol.* The action or fact of becoming conscious by subsequent reflection of a perception already experienced; any act or process by which the mind unites and assimilates a particular idea (esp. one newly presented) to a larger set or mass of ideas (already possessed), so as to comprehend it as part of the whole. (*OED*)

and discussed in detail in Chapter Two). Dominique's delivery of this insight (or hindsight) carries with it a tone of finality which forecloses the reader's uncomplicated absorption in the narrative; their deferment of discerning fictional incredibility with regards to the narration. Inconsistencies in the narration are especially evident through Botha's use of irony and the subtle mockery which is directed towards characters that, in post-democratic South Africa, are unfashionably politically incorrect:

The last time I went to the NG church with Elsabe, the dominee threw a clay pot from the pulpit and shouted, his voice growing louder and louder, "God scattered the races after the iniquities of Babel. Forever separated by the Lord himself like the shards of this broken vessel. Who is man to question His Word?" He sounded like a demented slaughter pig. Then he stared at us and there was not a sound in the church except for doves roosting in the clerestory windows. Elsabe had to write in her Sunday school book that Catholicism was a religion of idolatry and Romish perversion. The dominee shot pigeons off the church roof through the telescopic lens on his gun. I watched him taking aim while I waited in my piano teacher's garden. She lived opposite the church and played the organ there on Sundays. Ma said doves were a symbol of love and peace and it just goes to show. (FR 23)

Around the time of 1980, just four years after the June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising of 1976, South Africa was in turmoil as the foundations of the brutal apartheid government were being shaken by violent civil opposition from the oppressed black majority. It is in this context of increasing threat to white Afrikaner privilege that the conservative *dominee* [minister] is depicted as flaunting such anger and mounting frustration in the sermon that Dominique attends. There is no attempt at feigning narrative neutrality as Dominique is made to recall that the *dominee* "sounded like a demented slaughter pig," and that he "shot pigeons off the church roof through the telescopic lens of his gun" seemingly in farcical retaliation for the doves that undermined the efficacy of the silent glare he inflicted on his congregation after ranting. In the above extract the *dominee* is shown to be brandishing an apartheid-Afrikaner religious discourse which was based on exclusionism and upheld by segregation, as a weapon of intimidation in the battle for white supremacy. In keeping with Ma's reported comment on the symbolism of doves, the cruelty of the NGK minister thus illustrates his aggressive resistance to the stirrings of imminent reform (roosting doves) as well as his own narrow-mindedness (telescopic lens).

Dominique's stance in relation to the church is however more complex than it would seem from this passage. In the preceding paragraph to the extract Dominique confides in the reader: "Ma would not go church on Christmas Day because she did not believe in God. That

was the worst secret I knew” (Botha, *FR* 23), while a few pages later, Dominique is asked by Paul’s educational psychologist what she would wish for if she had three wishes and she admits to herself: “I wished that Ma and Pa would vote for the National Party and go to Dutch Reformed church. I wished we could be the same as everybody else,” before mulling over other possibilities such as “real pointe ballet shoes, finding the willow fairies and playing the violin” (Botha, *FR* 43). Notably, Dominique decides to declare to Dr Cohen instead that “[she] would like peace in the world. [She] would like nobody to starve” (Botha, *FR* 43). With prompting, Dominique adds her aspiration for violin-playing as an afterthought from which she deduces that the psychologist “seemed happy that [she] had made a selfish wish” (Botha, *FR* 43). This incident demonstrates that the narrational discord is also reflected at the representational level of interiority when Dominique/Botha is mindful of her audience. It is following this visit to Dr Cohen in Johannesburg that Paul is sent to boarding school.

I offer as an aside a scene in which Dominique herself comments on the concept of irony after attending the annual April agricultural fair in their town:

For many years the church prevented the show dance on the Friday evening because they were worried about moral decay. Pa gave us pocket money to buy tickets for the fairground swings. We were flung in circles above the black children crowding outside the fence and they waved and smiled. I felt sick from too much spookasem [candyfloss] and I closed my eyes. Pa said the irony is those contraptions were death traps and no-one should be allowed on them. Paul said he bet I did not know what irony meant, but I did. It meant something made of iron, like those death traps. (Botha, *FR* 34)

In this selection Botha contrasts Dominique’s simple perception of the crowd of black children who are benignly smiling and waving, with the inhospitable political climate which is gripping the country – the revolutionary movement in which even young children have been compelled to participate. While Dominique’s recognition of the racial segregation motions towards a more politicised consciousness, when she closes her eyes to stave off nausea from (guilty) overindulgence, she is also inadvertently shutting out the black children who have already been excluded from the excitement of the fair. As I will argue more rigorously in the chapter that follows, there is, in the novel, a discernible and generalised imaginative failure in the portrayal of black characters, despite the exhibition of the family’s liberalism, which contributes towards the formation of a trope of narrational absence. In the narration this dichotomy of absence and visibility correlates with the coexistence of divergent points of view, especially with regards to politics, which indicates that Dominique’s political

conscientization is in obeisance to authority figures, and therefore a passive process of assimilation in which she has not yet developed her own critical acuity. Importantly, this narrative disjuncture also suggests that what Dominique observes (as a young child) has been reinscribed with a broader political understanding which is temporally as well as experientially extraneous, perhaps even authorial.

Comestor attributes the incoherence of the narration to a lack of authorial systemisation of ideas excavated from memory. While at the same time acknowledging Hambidge's review of the novel, Comestor remarks of *Valsrivier*: "Soms is dit moeilik om die funksionaliteit tussen 'n sin en die volgende een te bepaal. Selfs die woordorde in 'n sin maak die leesproses soms 'hortend'" [Sometimes it is difficult to determine the functionality between one sentence and the next. Even the word order in a sentence sometimes makes the reading process 'jolting'] ("Boekgesprek"). I would argue that the conflation of the voice of the child's perception and the voice of the adult's perception is more complicated and heterogeneous than Hambidge's earlier statement would suggest; that the voices are even potentially internecine. In both texts, rather, there seems to be a mistrust of the child narrator's voice in its ability, alone, to carry and drive the narrative and its development. Typical consecutive paragraphs of the novel may include a disturbingly frank historical contextualisation of life in (rural) South Africa under apartheid, poetic descriptions of the indigenous flora and fauna, as well as sardonic remarks made by Ma, Pa or Paul which are reported by Dominique with humour which is practised at retaining its distance. This compaction bears forth a rapid turn of tone which, as I will illustrate below, suggests that the narration is alert and mature while endeavouring to re-inhabit child-like naivety:

"Who is this?" My teacher bent down, took my hand and smiled. She said I had a beautiful name. Her name was Juffrou. She wore a yellow skirt that hung in pleats below her knees. Her toenails were painted pink and a slender gold chain hung around her neck. Ma said what a woeful collection of haasbekkies.

No need arose for soft and serious conversations between Juffrou and Ma. Juffrou's chalkboard hieroglyphs revealed their secrets. Words and sentences followed. Numbers made sense. I found a friend. My report card said *Diligent, obedient and neat*. Ma and Pa were proud. Juffrou was pleased. She called me Dominique, not Nonsense like they did at home, because at school I spoke less. (Botha, *FR* 32-3)

Exceptionally, in the above extract there is a noticeable and typographically demarcated 'shift in perception' between the extenuating self-consciousness of "[h]er name was Juffrou" and a

more aloof sentence such as “Juffrou’s chalkboard hieroglyphs revealed their secrets” in the second paragraph. This is perhaps more problematic when consideration is given to Dominique’s initial illiteracy, the fact of which is volunteered seemingly without reflection on the incompatible narrational context. *Juffrou* [teacher] is a standard form of address denoting respect which is used by younger pupils, and it is highly unlikely that Dominique would mistake this for her ‘name.’

It follows then that I would have to disagree with Jane Rosenthal’s assertion in her review, that “[readers] are shown the linguistic development and consciousness of the Botha children, in the ability of eight-year-old Dominique to quote her Pa on ‘Phoenician trading blood’ and use phrases like ‘in perpetuity’ and ‘provisioned the whole district’” (“Comfort”). There is clearly a second, older, initiated voice in the novels which projects the younger voice; which intercedes and describes what the young Dominique Botha sees or experiences with an incongruent elegance. This older, ordering voice also comes to take on the role of a social ‘filter’ or an editor, as it appears to choose quite deliberately what the child-voice reveals to the reader. It thus comes to function as an author surrogate. At times, the rhythm of the narration trips and lapses under the strain of supporting these two discordant subjectivities and their respective styles, that especially in the beginning of the novels, jostle awkwardly for distinction. Since it is the older narrative voice that edits or selects the memories to be related, it is this voice which becomes the narrative consciousness which grazes the mantle of memory and produces the fictive thread which is woven through it and from it.

This relationship or, indeed, conversation would perhaps be best thought of as textual or narrative chaperoning (which is itself a kind of following). I would offer that it is especially through the vocabulary that is used to describe the landscape, objects and people (in addition to the slightest of forward glances readers are given access to) that the presence of this older voice is made evident, since the perspective demonstrated is beyond the scope of the young narrator’s experience; is temporally discontinuing. The older narrative voice does also draw back, however, when young Dominique’s impressions are related with more immediacy (especially when dialogue is included) which can be noted in the simplification of the narration. Below is an extended excerpt from *False River* where the narration shifts between the modes of perception most prevalent in the novel. The older narrative voice leads with studied descriptions and amused detachment:

The midday sun drew the scent of eucalyptus from fraying barks. Water was the bounty of our farm. Rietpan was named after a vast pan that came and went. Lions used to stalk from the bulrushes before the game was driven off. Pa said Rietpan lay at the end of the Voortrekker trail like a sigh of relief, following Allesverloren, Vergenoeg and Bitterfontein. We undressed and Paul dived in. I held my nose against the stink and waded through algae towards the bulrushes. I was pulled under and came up choking on silt. [...]

Notably, the peaceful moment of play (as well as the flow of the narration) is interrupted when Paul pulls Dominique down below the surface of the malodorous water. The child-voice in the conversation between Paul and Dominique which then follows is plainer in construction, also because it is placed directly in the mouths of the characters:

“You thought I was a leguaan, I know you did.”

“I knew it was you. Leguaans live on the other side of the dam and never come here. Pa said so. So there.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “I am going to tell Pa you did that.”

An underground spring kept the water close to our house, even in the driest years, when the rest of the pan withdrew underground and up into the sky. Paul swam closer and picked up a feather stuck in the fronds of a bulrush. He held it out to me. “For your collection,” he said. It was the colour of red bishop eggs. Paul called it whispering blue. “The colour is so faint, it can’t say its name out loud.” [...]

The two passages above demonstrate, as is often the case, how Botha has Dominique quote other characters (both directly and indirectly) when the scope of knowledge or experience, vocabulary, tone or subject matter of that moment in the narrative would be too obviously out of keeping if narrated by her child-voice. Paul is also repeatedly the vehicle for what Comestor refers to as Botha’s “attempts at purple patchery” (“Boekgesprek”). While the manner in which Dominique relates what Paul has told her about the act of conception in the excerpt below is again unnecessarily childish, the first few lines of speech in the final paragraph of the extract are delightfully successful at portraying Dominique’s child-like mentality:

“Let’s pretend we are crocodiles,” I said. “We must only let our eyes stick out. We can watch the bishop birds make their nests.” Ma told me that Paul and I used to be vervet monkeys that lived near the vlei. She sent Ou Piet down to the water with a hessian sack to catch us. They cut off our tails and boiled us clean in the vegetable stockpot. Paul said Ma and Pa sex each other and that was how babies came. On the day Christiaan was born, I hid under the brass bed because of the pot. (Botha, *FR* 12-3)

This passage reveals the dissonant tones of Botha's foray into the amalgamation of discrepant narrational voices. Dominique speaks her innocence with varying degrees of accomplishment while her circumstances are described from a more secure and schooled perspective which aims to place the child-voice in the position of dutiful observer.

The narration itself is not simply in service of the (re)construction of Dominique's subjective experience, however. The episodes or memories portrayed in the novels mostly contain a strong political undertone making the motives behind the selection process of the older (authorial) voice quite clear:

Paul went back to the sofa and picked up *Black Beauty*. He said to Ma, "I can't believe they want to ban this." Paul loved using words that only grownups understood. After the expedition to Aandson that night Pa told Paul to stop showing off and imagining he was an adult. Ma agreed with Paul that the proposed ban was breathtakingly preposterous. I knew it was a story about a horse. (Botha, *FR* 45)

In instances such as these, the guiding-voice shapes the child-voice and is strongly involved in crafting a particular, directed opinion of especially her parents and the space of their farm for the reader. It then happens that the synthesized narration distinguishes and reinforces the Botha family's political isolation and exceptionality in their surrounding community through the events which are related, the everyday details of their life on the farm, as well as an awareness of the appropriately available vocabulary. Dominique's older voice is thus expectedly bolder, more knowing, conscious and wise. It reflects as it recounts and (re)constructs in its role of authorial surrogacy; as it transliterates Botha's autobiographical experience through an apperception which is detectable. In *False River*, therefore, narrative voice is crafted through the act of (fictionalising) (auto)biography as it brings the co-creativity of autobiography (fact) and narrative (fiction) to the fore. Karl J. Weintraub refers to such a constructional awareness with regards to life writing:

Real autobiography is a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experience. It may have such varied functions as self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification. All these functions interpenetrate easily, but all are centred upon a self aware of its relation to its experiences. (824)

I would also argue that the younger narrative voice seems less cautious in the Afrikaans text than it does in the English, very nearly as if this rendering of the child-voice trusts the reader

of the Afrikaans text more; as if a pact of safety in disclosure has been agreed upon. This is revealed through the slight change in tone of the narration (with its implications of familiarity, or complicity) and includes the differences between the texts at the level of minor content. Michiel Heyns writes of the narrative protection afforded to a younger narrational voice which, in the case of *Valsrivier*, is reinforced still more through (linguistic, and therefore perhaps even social and political) familiarity:

[T]he child's voice may have the advantage exactly in not needing "to demand absolution" in that it is granted absolution through the legal fiction that the child is not accountable, and the related fictional convention that children are "innocent" in a generally unspecified sense. There is, in short, a kind of absolution of form in the rite of passage novel, in its characteristic presupposition of the myth of prelapsarian innocence. (50)⁸

Interestingly, *False River* is narrated in the past tense, allowing the text to operate within a space of consolation in historical certainty as it practises its distance from actions already completed, while the Afrikaans text is narrated in the present tense. The comparative immediacy of the latter text opens up the possibility for the narrative to be read as a re-experiencing and re-immersion which imaginatively indulges nostalgia and retrieves it from the containment of the past.

*

It is noteworthy that it is on the cover of *False River* that Breyten Breytenbach is quoted as stating that the novel is "rooted in the soil, steeped in the complex ways of survival of her people" while the Afrikaans remains more neutral concerning the subject of the novel, presenting instead that it is "gewortel in die aarde, deurtrek van die ou-ou wyses waarop mense oorlewe" [rooted in the earth, permeated with the age-old ways in which people survive] (*Valsrivier*). The nuance of Breytenbach's description of *False River* (and this could also be attributed to the quandaries of translation) implies that the English reader would be at a remove from the account Botha gives in her novel which does indeed spring from her (distinctly) Afrikaans upbringing. It also posits Afrikaans speakers as an identifiable group separate from other groups in South Africa; a group of which Botha is a part and for which

⁸ Georgina Horrell reiterates this sentiment when she states that the "confessional writing" of white South African women "is filtered through the rose-tinted hues of a child-like self and managed via the defence identity of the traditionally innocent: the figure too young to be held fully culpable" (59).

she may speak; a group whose ideas of self are deeply embedded in that language, a tactile connection to land and its hereditary ownership, as well as in ostensibly legitimizing narratives of origin, suffering, belonging and tradition. In an interview with *Volksblad*, Botha emphasises: “Ons het altyd ’n baie spesifieke gevoel gehad van Vrystaters wees. Jy was eerste ’n Vrystater en dan ’n Suid-Afrikaner” [We always had a very specific feeling of being Free Staters. You were firstly a Free Stater and then a South African] (“Hartseer Toegevou”). Dominique’s rootedness in pastoral Afrikaner culture is in turn portrayed through her regular and willing participation in traditional past-times and practices such as the seasonal cattle slaughter at Wolwefontein (Botha, *FR* 50-1). So too during a period of melancholia, Dominique embroiders for an income, sourcing labour from women in the local farming community as a means of creating employment (Botha, *FR* 164-6).

Other passing references to a more recent manifestation of Afrikaans nostalgia include young Dominique naming her play-doll Sarie Marais (Botha, *FR* 29) after the traditional Afrikaans folk song about the South African War, and when Dominique in adulthood christens her two cats Trompie and Saartjie (Botha, *FR* 184) after characters from the series of Afrikaans children’s books from the 1950s by Topsy Smith and/or Bettie Naudé.⁹ In the extract below, Dominique (here in her adolescence) is preparing *waatlemoenkonfyt* [watermelon preserve] – a kind of *snoepgoed* or *lekkerny* [sweet treat] Pa, in particular, is terrifically fond of – while Martha, who works for the Botha family, is silently kneading dough for rusks:

Martha and I stood in the kitchen while Ma gave instructions on making watermelon jam before they left for town. [...] I had cut the rind into squares, discarded the green skin into the chicken swill and laid it in slaked lime overnight.

Ma showed Martha the Consol glass jars in the pantry. “It is important to sterilise the jars with boiling water, otherwise bacteria blooms in the potted jam and it has to be thrown away. Cut the watermelon into smaller squares and prick them with a fork. Holes allow the syrup to soak in. Boil the fruits until they turn tender. Only then do you make the syrup with three cups of sugar, enough water, some lemon juice and bruised ginger.” [...]

Making syrup is tricky because sugar turns moody as it melts. [...] To test the consistency, I poured a teaspoon of syrup onto a milk muslin. If it sank into the weft it was too runny. If it congealed into small balls it was ready. I folded the watermelon pieces into the pot evenly, dispersing the fruits according to the sloping cursives of Ouma’s recipe. When the opaque squares grew clear, the cooled jam was decanted and sealed with wax. (Botha, *FR* 102-3)

⁹ These are both nom-de-plumes of Mathys Gerhardus Smith.

Dominique's recitation of this established preparation is comfortably familiar and assuredly knowing while retaining an undertone of resignation attributable to her ailing health at this point in the narrative. The succession of this Afrikaner cultural custom, something that may even be referred to as this practice's hereditariness, is emphasised by Dominique's deference to *Ouma* [Grandmother] Koek's recipe book in which precise step-by-step instructions for the preserve are written in by hand. Amidst all the detail on the laboriously time-consuming process required to craft this emblematic Afrikaner delicacy, it is important to note too that which Dominique/Botha omits: the species of indigenous, wild watermelon used to make the preserve was distastefully referred to in vernacular as a *kafferwaatlemoen* [kaffir watermelon], hence this sweet also conventionally being known as *kafferwaatlemoenkonfy* [kaffir watermelon jam]. In addition to being used in a preserve, this juicy, gourd-like fruit was also fed to livestock during times of drought. At present the odiously racist term has largely fallen out of (public) use, and this species of watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*) is now more mannerly referred to as Tsamma Melon (horticultural), Wild Watermelon, *karkoer*, *bitterwaatlemoen*, or especially *makataan* (culinary) – a name which is from Tswana originally, but has been adopted by both Afrikaans and English (Xaba and Croeser 39). The mortality of currency and utterance of the former name however depends on the amnesic, apologetic or reparatory trajectories of the shifting *volksmond* [mouths of the people];¹⁰ on the collective (re)inscription of inclusivity, mutuality or neutrality through popular parlance.

As is intimated by the above, both novels are also at the same time an oppositional declaration to tradition, since they are aligned with an inclinational, at times corrective, mandate introduced into post-apartheid literary practice.¹¹ That is to say, a need has arisen to pull back the veil from the sanctified space of the farm in order to render it real beyond the narrowing idyllic representations of the past in an endeavour which could be termed reformative or redemptive re-writing. Dowling writes that Botha's novel is "a delicate tracing of the community and genealogical dynamics that can turn any loss, however personal, into a political parable, a national elegy" ("Haunting Phrases"). Seemingly in contradiction to this however, Dowling also asserts that Botha's "unsentimental nostalgia" in her rendering of the space of the family farm assures that "[n]one of this makes the book a heavy read [...] since the narrative is leavened by Botha's coolly ironic telling. She writes what she sees and hears, without apology or embarrassment for her own South Africanness, and without any of that

¹⁰ Botanical names containing this term, however, cannot be changed. See *Falling Into Place: The Story of Modern South African Place Names* by Elwyn P. Jenkins (106).

¹¹ See Rita Barnard's "Rewriting the nation" for a discussion of the revisionist trajectory of post-apartheid South African literature.

heavy straining after political significance that makes some novels such a bore” (“Haunting Phrases”). As indicated by my discussion of the novels thus far, I would argue that Botha is very much concerned with portraying “political significance” and post-apartheid acceptability, also demonstrated below in the Christmas-time tea gathering of the Botha family on Rietpan:

Selina brought a tray of coconut-and-apricot jam cookies into the sitting room. They were called Smutsies or Hertzoggies depending on which side of the Afrikaner political divide the baker’s sympathies lay. Pa asked for a Smuts cookie. Pa’s family were Bloedsappe. Ouma insisted on asking for Hertzoggies. Pa said some Afrikaners forget too easily the debt of gratitude they owe Jan Smuts. Ouma Celia said, “I forget nothing.” Ouma kept a copy of Jopie Fourie’s letter he wrote before his execution and always spoke about “our people” after some sherries at lunch. (*FR* 22)

In order to contextualise the contested name of the confectionary in question, a brief historic interlude: General Jan Christiaan Smuts was an academic, politician and Boer general who advocated reconciliation between Afrikaans and English-speakers after the defeat of the Boers by the British in the South African War. Smuts was involved in the drafting of the constitution of the League of Nations and the formation of the United Nations, was twice elected Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa and advocated bilingualism in the education system while holding contradictorily problematic views on issues of race and integration. Smuts and supporters of his South African Party, later the United Party, were referred to as the *Sappe*. In the novels, for example, Dominique’s parents’ decision to send their children to English-medium schools, the eldest two siblings still during the last apartheid years, therefore reinforces their (more) liberal political allegiances. The second historical figure referred to in the extract is James Barry Munnik Hertzog who was the Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa after Smuts. Hertzog implemented racially discriminatory socio-economic policies which led to the gradual disenfranchisement of Asian, Black and Coloured South Africans while also granting white women’s suffrage so as to strengthen white minority governance. It is under Hertzog’s leadership that Afrikaans was declared an official language. Hertzog headed the National Party, dubbed the *Natte*, whose pro-Afrikaner nationalism marshalled the implementation of apartheid in 1948.

Eric Worby and Shireen Ally argue that nostalgia is an act of the imagination which is a temporally dislocated reaction to the disappointment of the present; is the melancholic experience of (South Africa’s democratic) freedom which, in the case of the Afrikaner, is

performed through self-parody in pursuit of acknowledgement as an authentic post-apartheid citizen (458, 468-9). In post-apartheid South Africa an institutionalised culture of remembering righteous struggle is fostered so that both the individual and collective sacrifices demanded by the movement for democracy in prevailing over the country's political nadir may be honoured. In this milieu where an anti-apartheid conscience becomes the imperative legitimizing trait of South Africanness, the Afrikaner's loss and longing for a past which was blighting to the majority becomes inexpressible. Sarah Nuttall, in her discussion of post-democratic South African autobiography, states: "Memories, like stories, can never be 'free'. They will always be laden with meaning" (88). Nuttall also addresses the on-going sacrifices required for reconciliation:

The stories of the past that South Africans are telling try in one way or another to find a place between public resistance and private healing; and between private resistance and public healing. In 'speaking memory', they try to negotiate or recast the relation between the public and the private. Questions are also implicitly raised [...] about the extent to which a unified self is an ongoing prerequisite for political action and personal healing in the present – and whether one can find pleasure in the acknowledgement of a self disunified across history. (76)

Although I would disagree with Dowling that the nostalgia portrayed in *False River* is unsentimental, it is however still clear that Botha carefully negotiates the current national directive through her choice of genre, the emphasis on her parents' liberalism as well as Dominique's doubling, dissociative narrational voices. Botha's manoeuvring of narrative structure allows the author herself as well as the characters in the (hi)story she (re)creates in the novels to remain unassailable and unaccountable beyond the shadowy frontier of fiction, even when compromised. Quoted below is an example of Botha markedly "straining after political significance" (Dowling "Haunting Phrases") which also succeeds in provoking interrogation of the obscured and shifting process of acquiring societal approval, if indeed such acceptance ever could be conclusively determined, bestowed, exhibited or pronounced. Here, the Botha family's public validation is requested from the reader through narrativized, post-facto self-authentication:

[...] Today, the Prime Minister was going to give an important speech on television. Our neighbours the Swanepoels came over because they still did not have a TV. They were very religious and worried. Ma said they were decent people. Ma and Pa and Mr and Mrs Swanepoel sat on the sofa, Christiaan and I sat on the floor and Paul stood behind the sofa watching. Ma and Pa were hopeful that change was in the offing. Eventually Pa said, "Hierdie fokken Botha maak

ons hele familie se naam gat;” Mrs Swanepoel clutched the collar of her appliquéd blouse.

“There goes our currency,” Ma said quietly. [...]

“What’s a Rubicon?” I asked Paul.

“Do you know what the problem is with these fucking fascists? Even the ugly ones. They are stylish, man. Check the Nazis, those suits they wore were the thing. Those cunts understood how to dress. The right understands that violence is sexy. Lefties are just too soft cock. A Rubicon, Sliminique, is the vantage point from which you can only gain hindsight.” (Botha, *FR* 62-3)

The “important speech” in question is then State President Pieter Willem Botha’s address at the opening of the National Party Natal Congress in Durban on 15 August 1985. In this infamous ‘Rubicon Speech,’ President Botha reiterated his dedication to apartheid legislation and denied the release of Nelson Mandela amidst global expectations of political reform. The result was a sharp depreciation of the Rand and the imposition of international economic sanctions on South Africa, as Ma pre-emptively pronounces in the extract. Botha’s references to major South African events such as the above, assumes a familiarity of meaning in the reader, the presence of which would affirm emphatically the Botha family’s vehement opposition to apartheid which set them apart from other members of their community (such as the conservative but relatively innocuous Swanepoels).

Botha (re)produces numerous other political engagements and intersections to ensure the family’s favourable post-apartheid positioning: the ‘Rietpan Bothas’ are suspected of being communists who worship a statue of Baal in their entrance hall because they are not racists (*FR* 62, 124), they use the Blacks Only entrance at the local (bottle) store as an everyday gesture of protest (*FR* 18), the extended Botha family is familiar with provocative poet and journalist Antjie Krog (*FR* 83-4) as well as Die Sestigers poet Ingrid Jonker (*FR* 187-8), and Dominique teaches adult literacy classes in the nearby township (*FR* 127). Paul is aligned with liberal politics through repeated references to his left-handed writing which cannot ‘stay between the lines’ (Botha, *FR* 30, 35, 38, 52, 104). He gives a black-power salute at Hilton after winning a poetry prize (Botha, *FR* 77), goes AWOL while under conscription (Botha, *FR* 130), then attempts suicide when he is mandated to and begrudgingly returns to the army (Botha, *FR* 133), and after a psychiatric tribunal in which he is declared mentally unfit for service after defying authority (Botha, *FR* 140-1), he is dishonourably discharged. Also before apartheid is abolished, Ma is part of the Women’s National Coalition (Botha, *FR* 167), Terror Lekota and Pa watch the Free State play rugby every weekend in-between swimming lessons (Botha, *FR* 174-5), and likewise Oliver Tambo comes to stay at Rietpan for a night (Botha, *FR* 175-6). Ma and Pa are then honoured with an

offer of inclusion on the ANC electoral list as the 1994 democratic elections draw nearer (Botha, *FR* 176), and when the day arrives, Dominique works at a voting station inking thumbs and counting votes while Pa is an official observer (Botha, *FR* 183-4).

Paul's rabid, political lone-wolfing is corroborated by his stint in the military hospital where, as he says, "Anyone who doesn't comply is considered mad" (Botha, *FR* 140). In his tribunal before "a panel of white men in white coats" who are "macademics from the univershitty" (Botha, *FR* 140) he is accused of damaging military property by incising his wrists (Botha, *FR* 141). Paul brusquely defends his sanity and in the aftermath Ma advises him to be heedful: "Perhaps it's time that you see your perspective is that of the minority" (Botha, *FR* 142). His radical stature is however marred by drug abuse and undermined by futile acts of rebellion. These lapses include writing "SUPPRESS SHAKESPEARE" across his English literature paper, incidentally the only exam he attempted while attending UCT (Botha, *FR* 101), and prodigally taking five *bergies* [homeless people] to dinner at the Mount Nelson and insisting on the services of a wine steward while under the influence of cocaine (Botha, *FR* 189). Also, in one of a few ethically problematic episodes in the text which concern Paul, he uses racist slurs in a discomfortingly flippant exchange with Dominique and her boyfriend Adi which he justifies with the retort: "For God's sake Dominique, I have been a communist for twenty years. I have earned the right to use the word kaffir. [...] We must stop this absurd simplification of each other. It's boring. Let the struggle in this respect not continue" (Botha, *FR* 173). I would argue that Paul's variable political alterity is no justification for perpetuating the use of insultingly discriminatory language which is so historically charged with hate, perhaps even more so since Paul's empowered position of utterance as a white, Afrikaans, middle-class male and the intended referent of his remark, the black workers employed by him in Johannesburg, replicate a dynamic in which this explosive and divisive word would have been wielded in abuse. In keeping with the escalating recklessness of Paul's pursuit of the momentary but mirage-like possession of drug-induced rapture, so too has his societal dissent careered off beyond constructive channels of subverting racial prejudice that are now "boring" to him.

The political conscience of the novels lies, however, with a seemingly overlooked member of the Botha family who, despite being more mutedly mutinous, is respectably reliable. Admirably, it is Ma who remains blatantly and consistently outraged with the systematised and vicious discrimination of the apartheid government. Dominique recalls that "Ma hated the Nationalists so much, Pa said it was bad for her health. The Erasmus family

have weak hearts” (Botha, *FR* 164). Ma’s opposition is confrontational and she displays it publicly:

Ma always used to speak out when she could just have walked away. She always bought from the black side of the shop and told the Indians across the Vaal that they must not call their help “stupid kaffertjies” in order to impress her. It was always very embarrassing when Ma made a fuss. She once told me that was one of the things she first liked about Pa. That he was not a racist. “He used to be a very good-looking man, your father. He still is.” I often wondered what they had in common other than an interest in universal franchise. (Botha, *FR* 128)

In this passage, Dominique’s placatory conservatism, which comes to function as an informal and tempered mouthpiece for the prevailing Afrikaner ideology for much of the time-frame of the novels, is contrasted with Ma’s nonviolent yet ardent acts of challenging social injustice. Ma’s individualism, atheism and equalitarian politics rack the relationship between Dominique’s parents, especially since Ma’s values are required to co-exist with the constricting expectations of Pa’s patriarchal dominance. Ouma Celia remarks to Ma one Christmas, “You drift along the relentless flow of instructions like a sleepwalker, my child,” to which Ma replies, sighing, “It is the price I have to pay for peace” (Botha, *FR* 23). Pa also reproaches Ma when her uncompromising principles come into conflict with Pa’s more moderate liberalism, such as when Ma confronts the *dominee* who has called at the farm on a *huisbesoek* [house visit] with, “If you believe in apartheid you are either criminally ignorant or just plain criminal,” as Pa cautions, “Now you’ve gone too far, Sandra” (Botha, *FR* 23). Arguments between Ma and Pa transpire chiefly outside the scope of visibility of Dominique’s focalisation, but as calamities continue to befall the family, the parental tension can no longer be concealed. On one such occasion, after visiting Paul in the military hospital in Pretoria following his psychiatric tribunal, Dominique and Ma arrive at the farm after dark and in heavy rain which ignites an argument between her parents. Dominique “le[aves] them to the sparring they had substituted for love” (Botha, *FR* 142) and locks herself in the upstairs bathroom. Also, in an earlier incident which takes place after the family receive the news of Paul deserting the army, Ma falls over their Labrador puppy while carrying a tea-tray and spills their wedding china. She is inconsolable while Pa is apathetically dismissive, but after Ma uncharacteristically shouts, cries and flees outside, he does attempt to fix the broken crockery. In the concluding image, Dominique conjures up “[y]ellowing arteries of glue [that] crisscrossed bouquets of burgundy roses on the mended teacups, drying on the windowsill” (Botha, *FR* 132) which confirms the fractured fragility of Ma and Pa’s relationship.

Hambidge, making reference to Breytenbach's quotation on the dust jacket of the novel, reiterates that despite the convention of disregarding bravery as a critical feature of literature (here referring specifically to the bold disclosure of intimate, familial experience which is strongly autobiographical), the courage demonstrated by the novel should, in this case, be highlighted as an outstanding attribute ("Aangrypende Debuut"). The weight of reverence such a declaration carries would be better understood when consideration is given to the assumed or (mis)perceived custom of silence and secrecy within conservative Afrikaner culture, conspicuously with regards to domestic affairs. By this prejudice, to speak of, to speak up or to speak out against would be deemed to be in violation of codes of decency and respect for privacy that are socially specific. Rosenthal recognizes the incapacity that can accompany such possible openness when she writes that "Botha's depiction is honest and heartbreaking, sometimes exasperated and helpless" ("Comfort"). Dowling similarly acknowledges this negotiation between effectuality and fragility when she states that "*False River* is memorable precisely in its exploration of the very concept of memorability: what we have before us is a feat of recollection, yes, but also of imagination, evocation and, paradoxically, of submission. In order to write powerfully and unforgettably, a skilled writer bows her head and becomes utterly vulnerable" ("Haunting Phrases"). I include below a citation from a 'memorable' occurrence in the novel which is achingly tender, adoringly loyal and raw. Paul has come home for a few days after his attempted suicide before he is due in military court:

I placed the candle in front of the bathroom mirror and turned open the taps. It set off a volley of clacking shots that scattered pigeons from the roof. The sound transfigured into a looping song of whistles and sighs. Pa said it was the excessive pressure setting. Or maybe the washers were worn through. As the copper warmed, the voices in the pipes trailed to a whisper.

"I remember the singing pipes. I haven't bathed here for years," Paul said.

I watched as Pa undressed Paul.

"I am still going to fix that bloody noise," Pa said. "That idiot from Klerksdorp who installed the geysers was a charlatan."

"Don't fix it. I like it Pa. The house has its own voice," I said, looking up at him.

He sighed. "Women can talk a lot of nonsense."

Paul laughed. [...]

Pa methodically removed Paul's shirt not to aggravate the dressing. "Fixing the pipes should not be a priority, Andries," Ma said, holding Oupa's flannel pajamas and a jug of boiled water to add to the bath.

"Fetch some fresh soap," Pa told me and chucked the sliver of Pears into the dustbin. Paul sat on the edge of the bath and Pa pulled thick-soled boots off his feet. Pa complained that his socks stank.

Paul laughed, "I wasn't at finishing school. I'll just get into the water like this." He got up and stood barefoot next to the bath, wearing only army pants.

"Don't be bloody ridiculous, son. Let's do this properly." Pa loosened the buckle of Paul's belt and pulled his trousers down below his knees. Paul stepped out his browns and stood naked next to the bath. His chest was pale and smooth like a child's, but the outline of his body was that of a man. [...]

He climbed into the water with his arms above his head. I held his hands to lessen the strain while Pa scrubbed his back. The doctor said not to get the dressings wet. Pa washed Paul's underarms and he pulled away laughing. "Don't move, dammit," Pa said.

"Then don't tickle me," Paul laughed, but there were tears on his cheeks.

Pa said, "Get out now." Pa dried him and helped him into Oupa's pajamas. (Botha, *FR* 135-6)

In this passage, Dominique's narration cedes to Pa's patriarchally instructive authority allowing the masculine voices of Pa and Paul to try to dominate and distract from the family's awkward, intense vulnerability. To Dominique, "the voices in the pipes" sing, whistle, sigh and whisper the story of their home, and through this the narrative bonds the oppositional beingness yet analogous wistfulness of the two siblings together through the quixotism of this "looping song" that Paul hears too. This sharing between Dominique and Paul is exclusory, as is evidenced by Pa's grumpily rational annoyance with, and practical explanation for, "that bloody noise" the pipes emit, as well as his ensuing dismissal of Dominique's percipience as 'womanly nonsense.' After Dominique 'looks up to' her father for affirmation with the submission of her shrunken, cloying request and she is dismissively disregarded, her account retreats into humour recorded with remoteness which salvages the scene from presenting as saccharine. Paul laughs throughout his scrubbing; laughs at the intrusive disturbance and shame, perhaps too in an attempt to appear unstirred. The family's affection for one another is bared as they congregate around Paul, a naked adult in the presence of his parents and younger sister, bracing himself at the limits of exposure. Dominique's unselfconscious yet respectful description of Paul's figure indicates that despite their maturing differentiation, she still recognises the child she knew him as from when they had their keenest attachment in their youth. Dominique holds his hands as she also supports him in living; as she struggles and suffers with reorienting him later in the narrative when he is even more self-destructive, brandishing unconditional acceptance as her tool of persuasion. Paul also cries out of humiliation, emotional overwhelm, as release, or from physical pain, but tries to mask his defencelessness with laughter to maintain the appearance of superciliousness with which we have come to associate him in the novels. After the bath, Paul is dressed in his grandfather's pyjamas which are symbolic of his reincorporation into

the protective fold of the family. The pyjamas are also an allusion to hereditariness since they belonged to his grandfather, are put on him by his father and it is then Paul who last wears them. All through Dominique witnesses and focalises, fetches new soap and runs the water while Ma keeps the pyjamas and a jug of boiled water, but apart from Dominique holding Paul's hands, neither women closely participate in this cleansing ritual as they are relegated to the shadows of silent observance. Here the narrative's essential focus is on preserving the perceptual and structural integrity of the (already tensed) egoistic component of Pa and Paul's production of their own identities; is on maintaining the ideal of Afrikaner robustness for the reader's impression of Pa and Paul's masculinity.

It is still somewhat worrying that Hambidge, in her review, is uncritical in her acceptance of Dominique's narrative subservience and reinforces it still more by repeatedly referring to Dominique/Botha only as 'the sister' ("Aangrypende Debuut") since it renders Dominique/Botha's identity as exclusively derivative. In a disquieting moment in the novel, it is Dominique herself who effaces her own agency and individuality when she is asked by Paul's beatnik friend Lew how she would describe herself and her reply is, "[p]robably as Paul's sister, I suppose", after envisioning "[her] years stacked up like an anaemic résumé of conformity in [her] mind" (Botha, *FR* 113). Distressingly, Lew's response is simply: "Fully. Paul Botha is a legend" and when he says goodnight he calls her "Paul's sister" – he adopts her self-inflicted secondariness (Botha, *FR* 113). Hambidge's adoption of this secondary form of address for Dominique/Botha implies that the most noteworthy aspect of Botha's 'bravery' in revealing sensitive information of her family history is the detailed exposition of her brother's drug abuse and inflammatory political views. In the novel, Dominique's own trauma and battles are allowed to withdraw to the protection of an authorial distance.

This lack of interiority also forecloses the possibility of empathic mediation by the reader. Indeed it happens that it is from Dominique/Botha's silences around her own experience that the reader identifies how deeply she is wounded. It is important to note that only two reviewers mention Dominique's eating disorder unambiguously and that both reviewers are women and also English-speaking. Rosenthal calls it by name, 'anorexia' ("Comfort"), while Dowling writes that when Dominique is desperately unhappy at boarding school "[she] adopts the mode of protest most favoured by teenage girls: starving herself" ("Haunting Phrases"). By way of contrast, Hambidge considerately adheres to the approach Botha herself exploits in the text, that of avoidance, insinuation and shadow-puppetry. Hambidge cites Dominique's "ervaring van menstruasie" [experience of menstruation] and her "lyflike aftakeling" [bodily decline] as examples of her 'ellendes' [miseries] without

providing a specifying cause or symptomatic expression for her illness (“Aangrypende Debuut”). Arguably the most important aspect of this mention in Hambidge’s review is that it is done within the protection of parenthesis. Hambidge, with shrewd literary poise, does however point out directly after that “[h]aar kat, Lietjebet Lotriet, speel in op ’n kinderverhaal van ’n brandmaer weeskind” [her cat, Lietjebet Lotriet, plays into a children’s story about an emaciated orphan] (“Aangrypende Debuut”). Hambidge thus requests the (Afrikaans) reader’s inference as to the more precise nature of Dominique’s difficulty, while subtly and tactfully imploring this reader to take pity on her.

Dominique consistently portrays herself as being victimised by her eating disorder with the corollary that Dominique’s responsibility (or indeed agency) in manifesting and managing her illness remains unacknowledged. Neither does she reclaim self-possession through narrating that which her corporeality impermissibly speaks for her (through embodied visual metaphor), to which the other characters as well as the reader are spectators. Judith Butler, through Adriana Cavarero, advances a theory of subject-formation employing the concept of physical noticeability in which the everyday experience of the powerlessness of interpersonal exhibition “is not precisely narratable” (25-6). Butler argues that

the “I” encounters the Other not as a specific set of contents, but as a being fundamentally exposed, visible, seen, existing in a bodily way and of necessity in a domain of appearance. It is, as it were, *this* exposure that I am that constitutes my singularity. I cannot will it away, for it is a feature of my very corporeality and, in this sense, my life, and yet it is not that over which I can have control. [emphasis in original] (25)

Dominique’s self-perception and psychopathology is, however, a wordlessly invisible scourge, as is the pilgrimage of her recovery. The reader is able to espy sporadically (for her infirmity is not often referred to) how Botha composes Dominique through narrational disassociation with her (hi)story, as well as through the perspectives of others. The reader first hears of Dominique’s sickness through Paul when he comes to visit her at her boarding house of St Anne’s Diocesan College for Girls adjacent to Hilton: “Paul arrived with two friends. ‘Jesus,’ he said, ‘why are you so thin? Ma is going to freak when she sees you.’ At least the bleeding had disappeared, I thought” (Botha, *FR* 72).¹² Dominique’s amenorrhoea

¹² Helene Strauss states that post-apartheid narratives of interracial rape “are marked by a reluctance on the part of their authors to disentangle themselves from the anxieties surrounding the female reproductive body that were enlisted during the apartheid era in the service of hetero-patriarchal discourses of racial, and ultimately economic, exclusivity” (“Intrusive Pasts”), a ‘reluctance’ that I would argue is also present in *False River*.

attests to the degree of her emaciation while demonstrating a conscious discomfort with and disdain for her womanness.¹³

This selection also illustrates how Dominique exploits the shelter of the voices of other characters in her focalisation to introduce and describe her appearance. Her declaration of self is in this way traded for the perception either of her father, her brother, her mother, her *Ouma* Celia, one of the cameo characters, an old flame or a new source of pain. Without elucidation, Dominique allows the reader to glimpse her wasting away, such as when, at the end of term while at St Anne's, she recalls: "My skirt fell over my hipbones and I pinned it in place. I had to go to the sanatorium twice a week to be weighed. 'More weight loss and you will be in serious trouble, girly,' the sanatorium sister warned" (Botha, *FR* 80). Dominique is shortly after met by Pa who takes her back to Rietpan for the holidays in their small aeroplane, but upon seeing her Pa is obviously alarmed, angsty and uncomfortable, possibly even more so because of the sudden onset of the negative conspicuousness of his daughter's body: "Pa saw me and said, 'Good God.' He pointed at my protruding ribs. 'What's this nonsense?'" (Botha, *FR* 80). The novel, in its absences, portrays the innately cruel contradiction stowed away at the centre of Dominique's illness: her eating disorder is a psychological imbalance, a mental illness, but it announces its presence physically through its indignant visibility. Her malady stems from a failure of (self-)perception which cannot remain concealed, despite attempts by Dominique to mediate (through literation) the disconcertion which stems from susceptibility and its ensuing judgement. Dominique appears to be most anguished by her father's gaze from which she withdraws into the (womanly) space of the kitchen:

I had not been at school since the beginning of the year. Ma took me from doctor to doctor, even the specialists were confounded. I had wilted like one of Pa's saplings. In the beginning I did all the work sent from school, now I mostly shadowed Martha around the kitchen. I felt ashamed. My illness was suspect, unlike the stroke that had lain Ouma Koeks low on her bed as an act of God. Pa said I had nothing to be ashamed of. (Botha, *FR* 102)

In the aforementioned exchange between Dominique and the educational psychologist the reader has access to the *modus operandi* with which (even a very young) Dominique tailors her answers to the questions she is asked, in pursuit of approval (Botha, *FR* 43). This casts doubt as to whether the reader can depend on what Dominique relates: does Dominique again

¹³ See too Dominique's references to womanly sorrow in Genesis, her submission to a male-chauvinist view of women's bodies as "leaky", "complicated" and 'flawed' (Botha, *FR* 53-6), and her attempted negation of her body's "swelling" (Botha, *FR* 63-4).

engage her awareness of how she believes she ought to present herself in order to mislead and manipulate the doctors, or indeed, the readers? Or, in other words, are “the specialists [...] confounded” simply in the service of guarding the narrator’s specified secrecy? Dominique/Botha’s inconsistently defective disclosure of her (fictionalised) experience therefore renders Dominique as an arguably unreliable narrator. Dominique’s eating disorder is represented by a narrative lack; by a *sub rosa* lacuna in the realization of her narrational interiority. In the excerpt above, Dominique’s ‘shadowing’ illustrates this want of substance, tangibility, presence and consciousness while reinforcing her intermittent disembodiment and disassociation. Linda Alcoff writes: “In speaking for myself, I (momentarily) create my self [...] in the sense that I create a public, discursive self, which will in most cases have an effect on the self experienced as interiority” (10). Dominique’s silence, her failure to speak (for) herself, is therefore a (self-)destruction through non-narration. While at home Dominique spends her time working with food, preparing meat for preservation, cooking jam or baking for the *tuisnywerheid* [home industry] (Botha, *FR* 139). The reader is however not given any suggestion as to the effect this creative and productive enclave has on her – did Dominique ‘take in’ anything of this space? – which then becomes a glaring omission since her (pre)occupation could heal or potentially aggravate her condition.

Another interconnected possibility does however exist for the germ of her malaise which reframes her eating disorder as symptomatic instead of primary: while Dominique is still attending boarding school she intimates, in a rare expression of narrational physical attentiveness with regards to her illness, that she struggles with depression: “I felt tired all the time. I lay in my bed, overwhelmed by weariness that held me by the ankles. For weeks every step had felt like it was taken through sinking sand” (Botha, *FR* 87). Dominique’s burdening exhaustion is expanded on in the excerpt below. Her exhibited self-perception is again mediated (and so concealed) by a masculine voice, specifically, Paul’s:

My body clock had tipped over onto its side. Every night I watched the evening star slowly swindling into the beacon of morning. Paul had told me about Eugène Marais and Hesperian depressions. Baboons got it when the sun went down and leopards prowled in the dark. Paul said that’s why humans like Pa drank whiskey at sunset, to assuage a primal anxiety about being eaten. (Botha, *FR* 122)

In the above, Dominique displaces the treachery of her body onto the “swindling” evening star that arcs across the dimmed firmament without guiding her towards sleep, finally slipping “into the beacon of morning” which signals her defeated reprieve from the trickery

of insomnia. On this night, Dominique sets out on an excursion, seemingly suspended in time as she slinks out of her window to drift across the spaces of their farm. She revisits landmarks on her way that the reader has been introduced to earlier in the narrative. Her wandering is reminiscent of the dreams of flight which beset her nightly while at St Anne's, where she tried, but always failed with the encroachment of dawn, to touch (down on) the soil of home (Botha, *FR* 74). Significantly, Dominique visits their family graveyard on her walk (Botha, *FR* 123), in effect prefiguring Paul's death and her elegy which concludes the novels (Botha, *FR* 196-202) with the infusion of a presagefully lonely and nostalgic tone in her rendering of the landscape. It is also of interest to note that Dominique, through Pa and Paul, contrasts the primitive 'fear of being eaten' with her probable and psychologically complex fear of eating. The reader is not privy to Dominique's recuperative path. It is only after some time has passed and the siblings are both young adults that Paul reassures the reader the condition of his "monastic" and "coy" sister has (apparently) improved: "'You look nice, by the way,' he said to me. 'Have you finally fallen out of love with the idea of being sick?'" (Botha, *FR* 179). Dominique does not respond.

As a result of the narrative's forbearance, Hambidge praises Botha for the 'utmost subtlety' she employs when rendering her own sorrows ("Aangrypende Debuut"), but does not question why Botha's self-restraint could be problematic when considered within the historic dynamic of traditional Afrikaner gender roles in which there is an accepted focusing on (the figure of) the first-born son in service of the reification of the patriarchal. Hambidge acknowledges that it is finally Botha's creativity that conquers, but then undercuts this assertion by including that this victory is what enables her elegy to Paul to transform into a laudation ("Aangrypende Debuut"). I would argue that Botha's creative success is predominantly perceived as the story of her brother and his destructive, impelling creativity; that the readers pass over Dominique/Botha unconsciously and apparently without discomfort; that the dimming of her brother's "manic brightness" (Davis "An Idyll") is a story for which she merely assumes the role of scribe. As a result, Botha fails to speak herself, a communicative collapse of which a part could be attributed to the function of the Afrikaans language itself (the language of her formative years) that traditionally privileges masculinity. Botha herself believes that "[d]ie skryf van hierdie boek was vir my amper 'n ekstatische terugwinning van iets" [the writing of this boek was almost an ecstatic reclamation of something for me] ("n Gesprek"). Indeed it is still so that the hesitancy, innocence and simplicity of the child-voice does demonstrate a gradual descriptive maturation as it is sharpened by the approaching loss of her brother. It is clarified by a pain which is not

imagined but proximally authentic which therefore also brings the two voices closer together towards the end of the novel.

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Two instances that I would argue interlink to form a watershed point in the tone, development and unbosoming confidence of the narration, inaugurated by the mythical interposition of Paul slitting his wrists and the sequential arrival of the long-awaited rain (Botha, *FR* 133, discussed in Chapter Two), have so far been entirely ignored in discussions of the novels. The first is the brief extract from Dominique's diary (Botha, *FR* 127-8), which is then sharply contrasted in the next chapter when Dominique is in the bath masturbating while reminiscing about her flawed first lover, John (Botha, *FR* 143). In the above-mentioned diary entry, which is also the only private writing by Dominique the reader is privy to, Dominique moves quickly from frustrated philosophical musings where Paul's influence is palpable to an angry one-line outburst: she writes of a trivially and restrictively ordered "delusional morality" in society with "an unquestioned belief in an absurdly partisan God" before, in the very next sentence, declaring that "Juffrou Cora is a stupid bitch" (Botha, *FR* 128). This flitting between distinct modes or moods is reminiscent of the tussle between the differentiated narrative voices in the beginning of the novels where these are further apart in time, comprehension and skill. In this entry, Dominique is straining against Paul's views as well as her upbringing. She is breaking with her youthful obedience.

The masturbation scene which follows shortly after again makes mention of her diary, but here, Dominique does not share what she has written. She keeps this material 'secret'. Dominique and Ma have just returned from visiting Paul in the military hospital in Pretoria:

The hospital ward made me think about John. All those men. Prowling. I was ashamed about mourning his indifference so keenly. In truth we had so little to say to each other. I wanted to kiss him. To feel his weight on me, his hands in the small of my back, lifting me towards him. I climbed into the bath and slowly swayed my legs, the water curling through my thighs where they folded into conclusion. I put my hand between my legs where John used to kiss me. On my sweet, wet cunt, as he used to say, until the dense pleasure broke and pulsed away. I laughed at myself. I never knew lust could be its own handmaiden. Coming. Too prosaic a word for that point of arrival that in men was an accessory to the creation of new life. John and I only did it once. My bloodied sheet anonymous in the drying yard of secrets.

It had triggered the loss of him. My sweet cunt of a first boyfriend. (Botha, *FR* 143)

This is the first instance in which Dominique narrates using strong language which she has selected of her own volition. In the last line of the excerpt, Dominique appropriates and thus reclaims the vulgar vocabulary John used to describe her body and inverts the word's referent in retaliation for his infidelity. Notably, Dominique is "mourning" John's absence. In this scene, Dominique demands acknowledgement of her maturation from her audience while she also prepares the reader for the intensity of the chapter which follows. This narrational potency is, however, demonstrated to be unsustainable: after the paragraph break her tone once again relapses into introversion. The next morning Ma and Pa come into Dominique's bedroom and she retreats "pull[ing] the sheet over [her] nakedness" (Botha, *FR* 143), thereby bringing the promising narrational interlude to its conclusion in concealment.

The chapter I alluded to in the discussion above, is an alarming and sinister moment in the text. It opens as Dominique finds Paul reading a newspaper in a filled Victorian bathtub in the overgrown backyard of the filthily dilapidated house he is renting in Yeoville, limp cigarette in his mouth, and an opiate drip in his arm which is strung up in a tree (Botha, *FR* 152). This chapter contains the third 'bath scene' in the novel. The three episodes follow a narrative arc which begins with vulnerability, builds to maturity and apperception and then pitches abruptly into degeneration, grotesquely mimicking the trajectory of development and decline of a life. While Paul and his friends are smoking marijuana with Mandrax, Dominique sits on the stoep of the house smoking a cigarette and thinking of Herman, a former boyfriend. Dominique anticipates the nadir of this chapter when she discloses that "[she] only became his girlfriend because he was so persistent" (Botha, *FR* 155). A few pages later, the doctor from former East Germany, who is not named and supplies Paul and his friends with the opiates, rapes Dominique (Botha, *FR* 158-9). The trauma silences her, and as he presses her head sideways Dominique shifts focus and escapes the burden of continued narration through a technique which mimics filmic conventions of discretion or censorship: "A canopy of rustling leaves was discernible in the street lamp's pale glow. I closed my eyes" (Botha, *FR* 158-9).

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Amidst the clamouring applause *False River* and *Valsrivier* has received, it is especially the wider Afrikaans literary community (Hambidge, *La Vita*, *Rapport*, *Volksblad*) which has been most moved to bedeck the novel, and specifically the elegiac ending, with brilliantly

burnished superlatives: Hambidge described the novel as ‘hártgrypend’ [heart-wrenching] and ‘beeldskoon’ [outstandingly beautiful; statuesque], and wrote that “die verhaal, wat as ’n elegie beskryf word, is in die werklikheid gebed” [this story, which is described as an elegy, is in fact prayer] (“Aangrypende Debuut”) when she reviewed *Valsrivier* in *Die Burger*. While the novel may have a supplicatory tone, Botha’s poem is incantatory; is a distillation of fervent nostalgia, sentimentality and overwhelming longing, both for Paul and for their particular pastoral childhood. Indeed Afrikaans and English reviewers concur that the pinnacle of the narration or indeed the ‘ecstatic reclamation’ of Botha’s repositioning of herself in relation to a shared, familial grief is the *roudig* or elegy which concludes the novels. Botha’s impactful linguistic confidence in these particular pieces of writing stands in direct contrast to the younger voices that struggled to carry the burden of their narrative; that struggled to witness her brother’s decline anew. The close of the narrative-proper concludes Paul’s story (Botha, *FR* 196), and the elegy is clearly separated from the rest of the novel through temporal dislocation, typography (italics) and textual form (poetry, as compared to prose). Dominique’s narration in the elegy is disembodied, echoing the narrative’s treatment of her dreams, her night-walking and her eating disorder. The poem is densely encoded; at times almost undecipherable in its symbolism. Dominique hides herself in its form and a narrative collapse of her own experience and Paul’s is depicted as Dominique searches for the intimacy of their bond: “*a man with a chisel/ flayed me/ gutted like a live fish/ the witch shook my scarred arms/ her eyes wide and auguring/ like a deer in a book/ she said let him go/ (I looked for you in the wrong places)*” (Botha, *FR* 198-9). Dominique tries, but she cannot follow him. She is left behind to speak. The anxiety over the inescapable seepage of memory is evoked in the elegy as “*a flaming wind sugars your words away*” (Botha, *FR* 201). The purpose of an elegy is to end mourning, but, instead, Dominique provides Paul with a ‘map’ of the farm so that he may find his way back (Botha, *FR* 199). Dominique’s map for Paul is a tracing of family and familiarity. She is ‘calling’ him through the poem (Botha, *FR* 200, 201); is ‘waiting’ for him (Botha, *FR* 201). The last line of the elegy, “*you always walked ahead*” (Botha, *FR* 202), is reminiscent of the covering photograph of the novels, discussed earlier in this chapter, in which Paul is pictured running ahead of Botha. It also evokes the opening scene on the first page of the novel in which the siblings are on their way to the family graveyard: “Paul walked ahead along the footpath that ribboned through the long grass” (Botha, *FR* 7). The elegy, even as an arresting literary device, therefore accentuates Botha’s relative narrative acquiescence by bringing the image full circle;

rendering it cyclical. This encirclement suggests an infinite orbital of entrapment (in grief), even as her definitive and conclusive contribution blazes with emotion.

Amongst English reviewers the preoccupation has tended towards the affective, lingering unsettlement which the novel can induce, compounded perhaps by an unfamiliarity with the cultural landscape: Rosenthal describes the novel as “[a] debut full of haunting poignancy” (“Comfort”), Davis writes of *False River*’s “hauntingly evocative images” (“An Idyll”) while Dowling’s engaging review on *SLiPnet* is entitled “The haunting phrases of False River”. As implied also by the responses of these reviewers of the novel, I would argue that the text is disturbed by spectres of the past such as the legacy of apartheid, the Afrikaans of Dominique/Botha’s childhood which intrudes into the narrative to stake its claim, the memory of Botha’s prodigal brother Paul, as well as the genre of the *plaasroman* at the level of composition. This produces what Leswin Laubscher, through Jacques Derrida, has referred to as “a ‘hauntology’ of the future” – a stance which does not consent to the past to be come to terms with, but rather allows the past to persist (qtd. in Worby and Ally 467) – of which the novel itself is an example. Indeed, in the elegy, Dominique invites Paul to ‘haunt’ the landscape of their childhood; the landscape of her interiority. This ‘haunting’ in the text, as well as the perturbation it stirs in its readers, is exacerbated by its basis in memoir since Botha’s catalytic pain may have attained cathartic utterance, but is denied the closure with which fiction is privileged.

As my discussion of the paratexts surrounding *False River* has demonstrated, there appears to be a split in perception of the novels between Afrikaans and English readers. Despite the expectation that translated texts carry with them direct comparability, this indicates that reactions to the novels are influenced by the divergent literary political and cultural contexts they are written into. The novels are in conversation with these contexts, thus also affecting how the novels are received. In my next chapter, my argument will be that *False River* is a conflicted, inconsistent and perforated text; is a site of contesting ideas about Afrikaner identity complicated by the relationship of the novel to the genre of the *plaasroman*.

Chapter Two

Restricted access to an anthropopsychic landscape:

False River/Valsrivier and the plaasroman

In this chapter I discuss *False River* in terms of the text's tenuous relationship to circumscribed conventions and expectations of genre with a specific focus on the traditional Afrikaans *plaasroman* supported by secondary references to its complementary Afrikaans text, *Valsrivier*. I draw on J.M. Coetzee's seminal study of the literary pastoral in *White Writing* and refer to the manner in which the English (as well as the translated or rewritten Afrikaans) text, subliminally entrenches rather than creatively renegotiates certain core attributes of the genre with regards to gender, race, language and politics of habitation and belonging in the South African pastoral landscape. I argue that the texts disengage inconsistently from rather than elaborate further on the tendencies of the more recently emergent antipastoral in South African literature, pioneered in 1974 by Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* and brought to prominence once more by the "extended wake at the deathbed of the farm novel" (Olivier 322) of Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* in 2004, in order to pursue instead a flight of nostalgia which is in danger of presenting as uncomfortably exclusionary in a post-apartheid context.¹⁴ This troubling trajectory of Botha's novels seems hitherto to have passed unobserved. Rebecca Davis is not exceptional among reviewers in both English and Afrikaans when she writes: "The work recounts a rural childhood spent on a farm in the Free State. But if the thought of yet another idyllic-white-childhood-in-Africa bildungsroman leaves you tired, fear not: *False River* is unlikely to be quite like anything you've read in the genre before" ("An Idyll").¹⁵ It is not in negation of my aforementioned concern regarding the novels that I state clearly that the texts do differ from the traditional *plaasroman*, which presented most prominently in South African writing in the 1930s, in the challenge they throw down before selected areas of the genre as with, most distinctly, the depiction of the Botha family's socio-liberal, non-racist politics during apartheid as well as after.

¹⁴ See "Farm Novel and Plaasroman" chapter in J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing*, Gerrit Olivier's "The Dertigers and the *plaasroman*" and Caren van Houwelingen's "Rewriting the *Plaasroman*" for discussions of the antipastoral.

¹⁵ According to Horrel "[t]here has been in recent years a proliferation of texts, autobiographies as well as autobiographical texts presented as novels, which narrate white southern African stories from a profoundly personal angle, texts that resurrect childhood in order to construct a present truth" (60).

Nevertheless it must still be emphasised that there are imaginative lapses in the narrative that need to be foregrounded and then interrogated, since these compositional absences are not consistently filled with a conscientious fictionality that is more generous, recuperative and reconciliatory than the limited discourse of historicity allows – a possibility and indeed even a responsibility which Botha herself engaged through her adoption of the novelistic form for her personal (hi)story. In the aforementioned interview with Joan Hambidge for *Die Burger* (see Chapter One), Botha draws perilously close to downplaying authorial accountability in a remark laden with linguistic provincialism:¹⁶ “Vir ’n skrywer om te skryf kan die persoonlike nie ’n leibeurt ontsê word uit die gemeenskaplike sluis van geskiedenis nie” [For a writer to be able to write the personal cannot be denied a turn to channel from the communal sluice of history] (“Protes Vergetelheid”). In the comment cited above, Botha implies that the creativity of a writer is entirely reliant on the expression of the personal. While Botha appears to be acknowledging the imperative inclusion of the personal in the construction of history, it could, however, also be argued that Botha reductively posits history as mere context. This effacement of the perpetually participatory (re)construction of history polarises the personal and the historical instead of foregrounding their entanglement.

As I have stated in my previous chapter, the texts are a melding of genres with a strong grounding in autobiography that draws and then transliterates its material from the evanescent reservoir of memory into the language and devices of fiction. Botha recognizes self-reflexively that there is an interrelation between fiction and memory: “Om ’n herinnering op te roep is ook om ’n eerste daad van fiksie te pleeg” [To summon up a memory is also to commit a first act of fiction] (“Protes Vergetelheid”).¹⁷ Botha also contends that memory is elusive, itself lacks a fixedness, since “die onbewuste is ’n onveilige stoorplek met sy eie skeppende drange” [the unconscious is an unsafe storage space with its own creative urges] (“Protes Vergetelheid”). Hereby Botha acknowledges her sense of the intellectually detectable threat of the transfiguration of experience (which is applicable too, I would argue, to history) as it stalks while being simultaneously woven into the capacity for creativity of memory as well as the process of remembering. Paul John Eakin refers to this progressive, temporal decentralisation of lived experience when he writes that

¹⁶ According to Butler, “the ‘I’ cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility” (26). She also states: “I can tell the story of my origin and even tell it again and again, in several ways; but the story of my origin I tell is not one for which I am accountable, and it cannot establish my accountability” (Butler 26). Butler’s argument, rather than presenting a contradiction here, highlights the tautness between accountability, and conscientiousness or intention in narrativization.

¹⁷ Marc Augé proposes that the experience of time is fictional because it is narrational; is “a scenario that obeys a certain number of formal rules” (qtd. in Till 333).

“autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, [...] that the self that is the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). For Botha, then, narrative and memory seem to co-exist in perilous ephemerality, She performs her disillusionment with regards to the (in)vulnerability of memory graciously, yet she also appears to be providing this contention of creatively factual inextricability as a justification for the un-signposted fictionalisation with which she has augmented, and in the process screened, her texts.¹⁸

Joan Hambidge, in her review, employs water as a symbol (which she states is conjured up by the title and the opening scene of *Valsrivier*) with which to describe the slipperiness and changeability of the unconscious (“Aangrypende Debuut”), an inferable imagery which bestows a literary organicity rather than an innovative deviousness to the phantasmagoria which is memory. The comparison of memory to water (as well as the river in question) reiterates the sentiments Botha herself expresses as it suggests too that memory moves and changes paths; that it swirls, swells and ebbs in the obscured depths of the unconscious with an unpredictability. Hambidge avers that the titles of the novels therefore invite the ‘false river’ that runs through the landscape of the family farm in the novels, which is described by Pa as “dangerous” in its deceit (Botha, *FR* 150), to be read as “die ‘vals’ geheime van die geheue” [the ‘false’ secrets of memory], thereby implying that the reliability of recollection is itself a ‘falsity’ (“Aangrypende Debuut”). Her interpretation echoes Dominique’s recounting of her first coital relationship – “My bloodied sheet anonymous in the drying yard of secrets” (Botha, *FR* 143) – as discussed in Chapter One. These ‘false’ memories, these latently distorted reproductions, again allude to the fictionalisation (which could also be posited as a re-remembering or, indeed, a misremembering)¹⁹ that Botha has included in the telling of her account, thus enabling her to depict experience beyond the narrowing scope of memoir; to employ memory as a generous resource to frame up fiction. Botha’s experience and its subsequent textualization springs from her pastoral childhood home – “Water was the bounty of our farm” (*FR* 12) – and the spaces of Rietpan and Wolwefontein are so vividly rendered that both, more than simply being mute settings, become the cast for the shaping of the characters and move them with their cycles of growth, plenty, lack and corruption.

¹⁸ Coetzee’s concept of *autre*biography would be useful in unpicking the seams that hold lived experience and the construction of an other life in tension (*Doubling the Point* 394).

¹⁹ Angelo Fick applies “mis-memory” to the unintentional re-inscription of exclusion in contemporary debates on South African farming politics (“African Farms”).

Primogenitary (re)inscription of the pastoral landscape²⁰

Hier broei storms en daar is 'n atmosfeer wat amper tasbaar is. En hy [die Vrystaatse omgewing] is ook tasbaar omdat hy letterlik in jou gene is – hierso is lae en lae se teenwoordigheid. Alles is net so groot dat die mens baie klein word. Hier voel jy nog deel van die landskap, hy verwerp jou nie. [Here storms breed and there is an atmosphere which is almost tangible. And he [the Free State environment] is also tangible because it is literally in your genes – here there are layers and layers of presence. Everything is just so vast that man becomes very small. Here you still feel part of the landscape, he does not reject you.] (Botha, “Hartseer Toegevo”))

In contrast to historically prevailing narratives of colonisation which subject the (hostilely conjectured, African) landscape to feminisation solely for the purpose of rendering it cultivatable and thus (psychologically) conquerable,²¹ Botha fondly masculinises the pastoral in the interview with *Volksblad* cited above. Certainly in the novels, the farm of Dominique/Botha's childhood is persuasively associated with the patrilineal line of descent of the Botha family's habitation, husbandry and ownership. So too in the quotation, the unspecified ancestors of this land are seemingly in attendance through the “layers and layers of presence” Botha perceives, but the author's last-cited remark – “Here you still feel part of the landscape, he does not reject you” – implies a discomfiture within a more broadly inherited South African condition of dislocation. The overwhelming ambience of the landscape is imbued with a mighty yet magnanimous power which evokes the patriotic tradition in discourse of reverentially referring to a place of origin as a ‘fatherland.’ This omnipotently anthropopsychic landscape appears to dominate both Botha and the other dwellers of the space she speaks for;²² to dominate the novels, and even to dominate death as Dominique invokes these surroundings to trace a path of return for her brother in the elegiac dénouement. In *False River*, the adoption of a masculine territorialisation of the personificative terrestrial emerges prominently in the narrativization of Paul's suicide attempt:

²⁰ primogeniture, n. 1.a. The fact or condition of being the firstborn child in a family. b. right of primogeniture n. (also †primogeniture-right) the right of succession and inheritance due to a firstborn, esp. a firstborn son. †2. A firstborn child, esp. a firstborn son. *Obs. rare.* 3. The right of the firstborn child of a family, esp. a son, to succeed or inherit property or title to the exclusion of other claimants; *spec.* the feudal rule by which the whole real estate of an intestate passes to the eldest son. Also *fig.* (*OED*)

²¹ See “Farm Novel and Plaasroman” chapter in J.M. Coetzee's *White Writing*.

²² anthropopsychism, n. The ascription of mental faculties or characteristics like those of man to the Divine Being or the agencies at work in nature. (*OED*)

The day after Paul slit his wrists, the drought broke. Rain came as if seeking absolution. Lightning struck at the foundations of the house. Wind tore roofing off the shed. Felled cattle and blue gums lay in its wake. At first hardened earth resists the hammering rain but the bare veld is defenceless and starts bleeding between remaining clumps of rooigras. Slow streams grow into torrents that swallow roads, fords and livestock. The False River lived up to its name and broke its banks. Wolwefontein was mired. Inaccessible. (Botha 133)

Dominique makes explicit a direct relationality between Paul, the first-borne son and heir of Rietpan and Wolwefontein, and the environment of the farm. This congruence is, in effect, presented from the first chapter of the novel (Botha, *FR* 17, see Chapter One). In the excerpt above, the rain relieves the farm from the tyranny of a prolonged drought which is activated narratively by Paul slitting his wrists and letting his blood, in turn securing his own release in the form of a dishonourable discharge from the SADF. The army itself is a space in which Paul was “mired” during conscription and was “[i]naccessible” to his family so that intervention was impossible. The emotional turmoil of the Botha family following this incident concerning Paul is also emulated meteorologically (by proxy): the security and surety of Dominique’s family unit is dealt a blow (“Lightning struck at the foundations of the house”) and they are placed helplessly before external forces which, as the narrative later demonstrates (Botha, *FR* 132, 142, 164, 173, see Chapter One), uncover previously peripheralized intra-familial conflict (“Wind tore roofing off the shed”). Dominique/Botha reinforces this anthropocentric attribution of ecological intent still more by descriptively encoding the violence of Paul’s self-harming desperation in “the hammering rain” of which the runoff “bleed[s]” through the “*rooigras*” [red grass; *Themeda triandra* (Fish “*Themeda triandra*”). In the bath scene that follows (discussed in Chapter One) Dominique illustrates Pa’s power to pardon and so too the family’s capacity for affectionate forgiveness as Paul is (quite literally) cleansed and so granted the “absolution” that the deluge is portrayed as seeking. Paul has not yet “hardened” from beating against the pervasive societal injustice: his radicalism, though at times misguided, demonstrates that he is effectible, but ultimately remains “defenceless” in the face of the absurd, totalitarian prescriptions of the state. This passage demonstrates the emotive reliance of Dominique’s narration on the significant interrelationship between Paul and the pastoral environment in order to sustain his romantic characterisation. Therefore, to echo the argument put forth in my first chapter, I would contend that the surroundings speak for Dominique as they correspond with and respond to Paul. In the final chapter of the novel, the nuance of this kindredness is tempered as Dominique draws the reader’s attention to the collapse of the motific “natuur-in-simpatie-

procédé” [nature-in-sympathy device] (Minnaar 16); the absence of dramatic ecological paralleling when the family first receive the news of Paul’s suicide:

“It’s not true,” I whispered. “It’s not true.”

Christiaan made the first call to Oupa and Ouma. His words were apostate to mine in the dark dry September night. No lightning. No rain. Clarion lines. (Botha, *FR* 194)

This ostensibly stunned muteness, this lack of a localised biospheric response, serves to reinforce Dominique’s sense of disbelief in the incarnate mortality of her heroic older brother. Rietpan stirs again after Paul’s corpse is returned to the family house for the wake, and the narrative-proper concludes with the lines: “Outside small cloud shoals were forming. The season was turning” (Botha, *FR* 196). In the closing elegy which follows, Dominique’s anxiety around the betrayal of memory is reiterated (discussed in Chapter One) as she confides in Paul/the reader that she had intended to sleep at the graveside after the funeral, but “then rain came as closing prayer/ out of the turning season/ [and she] went without proof or keepsake/ into a dank descent of night” (Botha, *FR* 198). With this act, the commiserating rain displaces her. The farm is persuading Dominique to move on.

Despite the demonstratively preferential patriarchalism of this pastoral milieu, Dominique, like Botha herself, is thus unmistakably not excluded from or unaffected by the gravitational power of the landscape (in the novel), and it may even be proposed that a feminine counter-sphere of being is permitted by the narrative which, while it is subconsciously and stereotypically gender-divisive in one regard, still affords a few of the female characters a subversive undercurrent of mystically perceptive agency. The construction of this realm of perspective is however passive since it merely shapes the space left over for womanness after patriarchy has staked its claim. The alternative form of linkage and beholding which distinguishes this domain is discernible through its receptivity; its nuanced and holistic grasp of the space of the farm which stands apart from an examining gaze compelled by necessity and usefulness. Alongside Dominique, another character who is portrayed as possessing an intuitive acumen is Eunice – an employee of the Botha family who is also a consulting “witchdoctor” and dreams “portentous things” (Botha, *FR* 111). Primarily however, this narrative offset may be observed through Dominique’s intuitively ecocritical comprehension of the environment and attuned descriptions which pervade the novels:

A Mahem is a rare crane with a scarlet throat, powdered cheeks and a spiky crown. It was our town emblem. Mahems [Grey/South African crowned cranes] used to forage in the vlei looking like ladies with lace headdresses stopping for dropped handkerchiefs. We never saw them anymore because farm workers weren't the only ones being poisoned when crop sprayers flew over the fields in spring. When Ma said that, Pa got very cross. (Botha, *FR* 31)

In the excerpt above, Dominique demonstrates a matrilineally inherited awareness of the interconnectedness of the farm ecosystem which resists patriarchal dominion. In the text, the narrational consciousness extends to include a spiritualistic ecology which is represented as accommodating and even emphasising the expression of a penetralian resonance between the environment and the characters. This rendering in turn interiorizes the landscape so that, through its distinctly literary construction, it interacts and reflects the human exploits Dominique is describing (as is the case in the prior extract concerning Paul). The text's divergently feminine embeddedness is underscored by Dominique's un-pin-downable existence in the realm of the liminal rather than the physical, as the reader is able to glimpse through her dreams of suspended longing for the farm, her starvation-cum-insomnia-induced night-meanderings across the landscape and in the family graveyard, the disembodiment and dislocation demonstrated by the elegy, as well as the tendency of her narration to straddle two temporal spaces (discussed in Chapter One).

While the landscape is narrativized to react conspicuously to Paul, thus reinforcing the masculinised governance of the terrestrial, it is also through Paul that the gender-based spatial binary of the novel's pastoralism is destabilised. In contrast to Pa's obligatory, utilitarian attachment to the land which is bordered in by hereditary patriarchalism and is at the mercy of the unpredictable natural cycles of the farm, Paul's engagement with Wolwefontein and Rietpan is more fluid, more mobile and he exhibits a calmativ, lucidly detailed and enduring bond with the landscape which is given expression through the earthy lyricism of his writing (Botha, *FR* 65-6, 98-9, 104) as the environment bends to him. From what may be deduced of his fragmented, literatized interiority included in the novel, Paul's connectedness to the landscape appears to tend more towards the feminine perceptive sphere suggested by the text, but with a crucial difference afforded by primogeniture: Paul's claim to belonging is established through the chance incurrance of his first-borne status and then historically legitimised through his familial naming. Through a similar example of Paul's elusion of a constrictive fixedness, he also comes to challenge the narrative's heteronormative gender dynamic: while still preserving Dominique's narrational reservation, Paul is depicted as bi-

curious (Botha, *FR* 157, 179). In the following extract, Dominique is in conversation with the sexually predatory doctor from former East Germany (see Chapter One):

“Do you think Paul might be gay?”

He almost choked on the slice of bread.

“Man, you are so naive. Christ, where has Paul been hiding you? No sweetie, Paul is not gay. Your brother is interested in every experience available. And every experience available is interested in him.”

“Is he a drug addict?”

“What’s a drug addict, sweetie?” (Botha, *FR* 157)

The escalating seediness of Paul’s flagrant, drug-thrust misconduct (in which I do not categorically include his erotic experimentation) presses Dominique’s narration to grow bolder in its unavoidable engagement with elements of her brother’s social existence which unsettle her. The potentially binary-disruptive element of Paul’s sexuality however remains un-interrogated as it is (re)constructed for the reader through the voice of a sardonically malevolent character such as the doctor, or by Paul himself in a flippant attempt to shock his younger and more conservative sibling (Botha, *FR* 179).

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In *White Writing*, J.M. Coetzee elucidates the Old World conception of farming which is at the root of the ideology portrayed in Afrikaans pastoral fiction. Coetzee explains that

the farmer has both rights and obligations. However absolute his ownership, he has duties to the land, to his heirs (as well as, to a lesser extent, to his forebears), and even to the ecology of the farm – that is, to the farm as part of nature. He is, in the language of myth, forbidden to rape the land. Instead he must husband it, giving it a devoted attention that will bring it to bear manyfold, yet keep it fertile for succeeding generations. In the logic of the myth, the sons who inherit the farm husband the same land; or, to put it in another way, the generations of husband-farmers are the same (mythic) man. (*White Writing* 65-6)

The passage above attests to the generic flaunting of the preoccupation with patriarchal supremacy, which is reinforced by primogeniture, in the genre of the *plaasroman*. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, the landscape is wedded to feminisation with the expectant duty of enduring luxuriant procreation in the care of the assumedly masculine farmer. In *False River*, Pa echoes this same “language of myth” through Dominique in the excerpt below:

The August winds blew past calendar boundaries across September into October. The rains are late. Pa must wait for the first downpour before rippers are sent in to turn the soil. A spare place setting at lunch awaits experts who might arrive to pronounce on the fertility of sand. Soil husbandry is discussed over coffee and cigarettes. Its composition, its allies and its enemies. White goosefoot, spindlepod, pretty lady, apple of Peru, cocklebur. All florid opportunists colonising the land and sitting tight in the corrosive wind, their leaves thin and impervious. (Botha 101)

Dominique utilises an agrarian language of crisis that is severe and in which she deploys a rhetoric of military strategy to combat the drought linguistically. In the passage, the protection of the soil from its “enemies” is discussed by “experts” in the field and the farmer – who is presumably one of the “allies” of the environment – is, in this time of scarcity, at proverbial war with nature. This hostility stands in direct contrast to the prescribed preservation of biospheric harmony for (re)productive longevity; the ‘ecological dutifulness’ expressed as a prerequisite for the genre in the Coetzee extract. The soil is analysed and assessed for its use-value instead of being fostered by the ‘husband-farmer’ Coetzee constructs. In addition, the land, which may not be ‘raped’ (by the farmer), lies bared before the impending threat of the “rippers” that will advance after the first rain and is invaded by stubborn, “colonising” plants that are alien to the region. These species disturb the ecosystemic ‘myth’ of balance in the idyll of the pastoral. Dominique’s use of the word “florid” is suggestive here: while it implies flamboyant defiance of circumstance in the non-indigenous plants, these “florid opportunists [who are] colonising the land” may also, in the bellicose context of the quotation, be a reference to the British colonists who were referred to as *Rooinekke* by Afrikaners.

While *False River* and *Valsrivier* largely revisit and in so doing inevitably reinforce bogged notions of heredity, bloodlines and tradition through a narrational homesickness manifested though narrativized nostalgia, the texts also interstitially succeed in circumventing and renegotiating these restrictions, principally through Dominique’s humour that mockingly undermines historically acceded-to stiffness of form. In the novels, it is repeatedly underlined that the name Paul Michiel is passed on through the first-born male offspring of the Botha family who also inherit the farm by primogeniture (Botha, *FR* 8, 49, 191, 196), invoking Coetzee’s assertion in the foregoing citation that the successive familial farmers become “the same (mythic) man” (*WW* 66).²³ Intriguingly however, this masculine nominal constancy is also in two instances understatedly subverted by the narrative through snippets of lineal

²³ Henceforth the abbreviation *WW* will be used for *White Writing*.

history Dominique shares with the reader. Firstly, Dominique's great-grandmother, due to a misdiagnosis of infertility by the district surgeon, named her supposedly first-and-only-child, a daughter, Paul Michiel. By a farcical turn, this same great-grandmother then bore twelve boys successively, thus ensuring the procurement of the stretch of land from the Republic of the Orange Free State in 1875 that was to become Rietpan (Botha, *FR* 8). In the second case, Dominique reveals that Pa, who is the second-born son of his generation and who is named Andries or nicknamed "Oorlog" [War] (Botha, *FR* 42, 64), was 'obligated' to "give up his dreams" after studying law and return to manage the farm after his older brother (named Paul) died in a tragic shooting at the hand of a friend (Botha, *FR* 43-4).

Pa's attempts at troubling the dictated Afrikaner preoccupation with the wholly artificial belief in a heritage of racially homogenous hereditariness are complex and at times contradictory. On one notable occasion, Abel Dlamini, the headmaster of Waaisand Primary (which is the local school for black learners), his wife Mary and their friend Ishmael Mabitle, come to call on Ma and Pa at Rietpan to discuss "friendship teas between the black and white communities" (Botha, *FR* 61). Abel warns that "young people [in the township] are suspicious of whites" and that Pa "must try to understand" at which Pa jumps up in protest to proclaim: "I am not white. [...] I am not even of mixed race, the Bothas are pure Griekwa!" (Botha, *FR* 61). At first Pa's statement would seem to be boldly opposing sanguinary Nationalist discourses of Afrikaner immaculateness, but even while negating his own whiteness, Pa unwittingly lapses into utilising the self-same rhetoric he aims to reject through his emphatic affirmation of the Botha family's racial 'purity.' The racially heterogeneous ancestry of the *Griekwa* [Griqua] people, who are descended from European colonists and Khoikhoi (slaves), also further problematizes Pa's declaration of dissociation. The segregational racial fallacy espoused by conservative Afrikaner groups is further discredited in the narrative by Emily, an employee of Dominique's mother. Emily gleefully informs naive Dominique of the white men of the local community, who she refers to as "the legua" or "[m]eidenaiers" (Botha, *FR* 125),²⁴ who are known to have intimate relations (and children) with black women of the township.

The Botha family's seemingly interminable, pastoral persistence through habitation, labour and (re)production is centred on the annual 'duties' performed on Rietpan and Wolwefontein. Dominique provides the reader with detailed accounts of the rituals of

²⁴ This is a probable misspelling of either *legoa* (*sl.*) or *lekgoa* (Setswana) that are both derogatory terms for a white person. *Meid* is a derogatory, racist term which is used to refer to a black or coloured woman who is usually in a position of subservience as a domestic worker or 'maid'; *naaiier* is a taboo term used in vulgar slang which may be directly, though inadequately, translated as 'fucker'.

harvesting and slaughtering (Botha, *FR* 47-51, 64), interweaving her descriptions of these practices with details of her family (hi)story – a narrational tactic of interjection which emphasises the softened rural traditionalism of the Bothas, and in the process ‘validates’ their conviction of belonging in/to the landscape. On Dominique’s insomniac night-pilgrimage she recounts for the reader how the land has been demarcated and named in order to render it domitable; how the family have staked their claim to the landscape through lineation:

I walked along the wenakker seaming the waterside lands. I could chart the boundary lines by heart from the maps in Pa’s workshop. All the fields had names. Block A. Block B. Block C. Vlei Block. Grens Block. Our land was divvied up and parcelled and made manageable. Only watercourses and cattle paths transgressed the parallelograms of planted soil. (Botha, *FR* 122-3)

In the above, Dominique relates how she discerns the differentiated spaces of the farm “by heart,” and the intimacy with the landscape she demonstrates thereby reinforces the internalisation of the environment in the narrative. As in the earlier extract concerning the drought, the farmland is subtly militarised through Dominique’s reference to the “Grens Block” which is marked out in these ‘transgressive’ natural surroundings since the term is connotatively and emotively charged with associations of the South African Border war, in Afrikaans referred to as the *Grensoorlog*.

Dominique and Paul’s separation from the farm while they are boarding in Natal or living in Johannesburg and Cape Town causes a continual yearning for the splendour of the Free State landscape in the siblings. In the dreams they share while at Hilton and St Anne’s they are drawn by a thread of deep attachment from the confinement of the English schools to the domestic paragon of the Afrikaans pastoral which is their home (Botha, *FR* 74). Paul’s desire to husband the land may be framed as a ‘love relationship’ of a kind in which he, the heir of Rietpan and Wolwefontein, (inherits and) inhabits the role of the farmer-intended. Dominique explains to the reader: “To farm on Wolwefontein one day was always Paul’s dream. There he was going to write books like Le Roux [Etienne Leroux] did on Koffiefontein, only better” (Botha, *FR* 187).²⁵ Dominique’s statement is reminiscent of an assertion Coetzee makes in *White Writing*: “By and large, the programme espoused by the *plaasroman* is one of a renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to the

²⁵ Through Greg, Paul’s flatmate in Cape Town, Dominique learns that “Paul always wanted to go to Wolwefontein when things got really bad. Once they even got as far as Beaufort West, but the car broke down and they hitched back. That was before Greg went clean” (Botha, *FR* 189). Impossibly, Paul wants to come home to the romanticised idea of Wolwefontein he has imbued with the power to provide protection and solace.

earth” (79). The most compelling presence of this notion of a “return to the earth” in the novel is morbid, however, and succeeds in reinforcing the ‘mythical’ nature of the idealisation of terrestrial belonging in the genre of the *plaasroman*. The narrative draws to a close after Paul has committed suicide on foreign soil, but through his death the text crafts a concretised illustration of this aspiration when he is buried on the farm (Botha, *FR* 196-7). While at the morgue to identify Paul, Dominique shares the following with the reader:

I knelt down. I ruffled my hand through his soft hair. Beautiful and healthy he lay under his death mask. Shoes laced up for walking. I undid the buttons on his shirt. There was stitching where they had cut him open. I lay my head on his silent chest. I kissed his cold cheekbones. I stroked his eyelids. Underneath, irises once bloomed in the water of life.

“Come, we must go,” Pa said.

“No, Pa. We’re taking him home.”

I spoke to the undertaker. After the soft organs are taken out, a body is sewn closed and embalmed. The rot is removed. The smell of decay deferred. (Botha, *FR* 195)

The attempted familial reconciliation through Paul’s burial is only partial since he returns purified, but not whole. Furthermore, Paul is returned to land from which he was rejected through disinheritance (Botha, *FR* 174, 187). It is therefore relevant to note that it is Dominique who insists that Paul be buried on the farm instead of being cremated overseas:

Ma wanted to burn him. “I will go to England to fetch his ashes.” I walked up to Ma and took her by the shoulders. “No. You will not burn him. You will bring him home.” (Botha, *FR* 194)

As these excerpts demonstrate, it is Dominique’s adamance that ensures Paul’s place of interment is the graveyard on Rietpan that holds generations of (Paul Michiel) Bothas who have been ‘returned to the earth’ upon which they lived, toiled and depended (Botha, *FR* 8).²⁶

Coetzee states that “in the Old World model the farm is naturalized by being integrated with the land, and in turn historicizes the land by making the land a page on which the generations write their story” (*WW* 66). The landscape of Rietpan and Wolwefontein may, in light of the quotation from Coetzee’s text, be viewed as a palimpsest: each generation alters (or perhaps modernises) the landscape while preserving traditions of the preceding familial inhabitants thus co-creating a manuscript on which the (hi)stories, the hereditary lines, remain

²⁶ The farm workers are denied this symbolic affirmation of belonging since their burial in a separate graveyard (Botha, *FR* 12) on land they do not own only reinforces their dispossession.

legible under their reinscribed markings. Pa keeps a leather trunk labelled “Private” in the sunroom, the contents of which illustrate this palimpsestic history of the farm and of the Botha family as it contains artefacts spanning generations that include possessions of Pa’s deceased brother, letters, tertiary education certificates in agriculture, and employment records (Botha, *FR* 9). Moreover, the ‘language’ of the environment of the farm is transliterated and thus rendered legible as Pa ‘reads’ rainfall patterns in the clouds (Botha, *FR* 11). Pa also recites lines from “the only poem he remember[s]” while standing on a hill on their farm (Botha, *FR* 123) – an instance of historically literary inscription onto the landscape which in turn inscribes the landscape internally onto memory (and into the text of the novel).²⁷ Paul, in turn, imbues his own poetry and prose with intimate recreations of the natural surroundings of the farm (Botha, *FR* 65-6, 96, 98-9, 104), and, like Pa, has the landscape (reciprocally) engraved in his consciousness through writing and manual labour. Dominique’s elegy (Botha, *FR* 196-202) is a linguistic mapping of loss, nostalgia and belonging that takes the shape of the landscape as its narrative structure and with which she attempts to locate Paul. Viewed holistically, the novel itself may even be regarded as a writing of a (hi)story of generations on this farm space (which extends beyond fiction). Keeping to the content and context of the novel, however, it must be stated that this hereditary inscription of the pastoral is not only applicable to the Bothas: the workers too have been on the farm for generations, but their (hi)story remains essentially unrecorded in the text. The lineage of habitation of the farm workers is mediated and only scantily referred to by Dominique (Botha, *FR* 31) which forms part of a more extensive disregard for black subjectivity, a concern I will address in the third section of this chapter.

Unsettled linguistic co-habitation

False River regurgitates an inherited, historically prejudiced attitude to Afrikaans and English influenced by the legacies of colonialism and the South African War in spite of attempts at linguistic integration through the education Dominique and her siblings receive at English private schools. Through Coetzee’s analysis provided in *White Writing*, Gerrit Olivier explains that the South African War is an integral component in the construction of Afrikaner identity in the genre of the *plaasroman*:

²⁷ Pa quotes from the iconic Afrikaans poem “Winternag” by Eugène Marais, published in 1905: “*Die grassaad aan roere, soos winkende hande*” (Botha, *FR* 123), which in English reads as “the seed grass is stirring, like beckoning fingers” (Butler “Winternag”).

Coetzee's contribution to our understanding of the *plaasroman* rests on the insight that this type of fiction represents a creative and symbolic appropriation; that it is, therefore, never simply a descriptive genre. Within a wider political and social framework, the *plaasroman* must be understood against the background of the dispossession and destruction brought about by the Anglo-Boer (or South African) War. From this perspective [...] the farm novel and related idyllic evocations of a 'Boere past' belong to the genre of restitution. (316)

As is also the case with the extract above, the misperceived absence of black habitation (exhibited as the myth of the 'empty' land) and therefore too even the possibility of black dispossession prior to Boer settlement registers as a generic absence in the traditional *plaasroman*. The 'restitutive' goal of this literature is pursued through the reassurance of familial succession in validation of land ownership and the steadiness of nostalgia in the face of the ever-present threat of loss.²⁸ As stated earlier in this chapter, *False River* places a strong emphasis on hereditariness and it is through the cultural and linguistic construct of heritage that Pa reveals his conflicting ideas about the dynamic between the Afrikaans and English. Before Paul goes away to Hilton College, Pa speaks to him:

"I don't want you to get any funny ideas about where you come from. You will have to go to Grey College for high school."

"Yes, Pa. I am grateful. I don't want to disappoint you. Thank you, Pa." (Botha, *FR* 47)

Pa's apprehension of the linguistic and thus cultural appropriation of his eldest son surfaces again in another conversation he has with Paul, this time while Ma, Pa, Paul, Dominique and Christiaan are already on their way to the school for Paul's first term there:

Pa lectured Paul about not forgetting his heritage. Pa said they always tried to build a bridge between the English and Afrikaans communities, just like his parents tried. There used to be great enmity and suspicion and very little mixing. Pa said he even used to believe, when he was at school, that English people did not know how to plough or ride a horse. When he thought about it now all the most successful farmers in the district have been English. Then Pa thought about his Ouma Miemie who was in the concentration camp in Bethulie. Her brother died there, but she held no bitterness. Pa muttered, "Those swine almost wiped us out and still expected us to fight on their side in the First World War." (Botha, *FR* 51-2)

²⁸ See Olivier (317).

It is noteworthy that Pa is the second generation of (liberal) Bothas to ‘try’ to reconcile members of these two language groups, but that no success in this endeavour is alluded to. In the extract, Pa, mindful of the audience of his children (and through Dominique’s self-conscious narration, the reader), re-examines his childhood prejudice, but is perhaps inevitably drawn back into traumatic familial history as he attempts to excavate and re-inhabit his own youthful subjectivity in empathy with Paul. Instead Pa, activated by anger, rather clumsily reinforces the lingering animosity which has inhibited the process of resolution of the historical conflict. In order to safeguard his new freedom, Paul heeds Pa’s changeable temper and Dominique later informs the reader that “Paul’s school letters were full of promises to Pa that he was speaking Afrikaans at his English school” (Botha, *FR* 120). Pa’s private Afrikaner pride also coexists with public Afrikaner shame, however, a tension which is reinforced by his effort towards disassociating from violently segregationist Afrikaner politics that commandeered the language as a tool for suppression. Paul’s introduction to Hilton reveals the underlying cultural hierarchization of and through language which divided spaces and communities:

At the entrance to the school Pa stopped the car and made Christiaan and me get out. He knelt down and said, “This is an important day for Paul. Don’t speak Afrikaans until we leave. It will be embarrassing for him if you do.” I was wearing closed shoes that pinched my feet and my favourite dress. It was made of pink Crimplene. There were many other boys and everyone knew each other. Christiaan and I sang “Bobbejaan klim die berg” to Paul when Ma and Pa were busy with registration.²⁹ He gave us each a lammie. A boy came past and said, “Check the rock spiders.” His friend sniggered. When we said goodbye to Paul on the steps of his new boarding house, I felt bad about “Bobbejaan klim die berg”. (Botha, *FR* 52)

In the novel there is also an instance in which this language-based power dynamic is inverted: Paul’s English-speaking friend Lew remarks to Dominique, after noticing her copy of the *Groot Verseboek* on her bookshelf at home: “At least you Afrikaners have this. The rest of us white South Africans live life like Europe with the sound turned down” (Botha, *FR* 114). Lew envies the guidance a text such this anthology provides in creating a canon and the sense of belonging it affords members of the Afrikaans language group through its South African specificity. The texts of *False River* and *Valsrivier* engage with the division between the languages as well as the underlying conflict between them divergently, however. In *False River* all the conversations and included pieces of writing are in English, while in *Valsrivier*

²⁹ Translated, “Baboon climbs the mountain” is a traditional Afrikaans song.

the exchanges or texts that are ‘originally’ in English are retained unchanged in the otherwise Afrikaans narrative.

Two notable examples, where the languages the characters are speaking are critically important to the content and context of the scenes but in which Afrikaans and English cannot be distinguished from each other in *False River*, are the conversation between Dominique and Lew (Botha 112-4, V 115-7), from which I extracted the aforementioned quotation, and a confrontational meeting between Mary and Abel Dlamini, Ishmael Mabitle and Pa (Botha 61-2, V 62-3). In the latter, the reader is cued belatedly as to the preceding dialogue occurring in Afrikaans, which, if it had been made apparent from the outset, would have affected the nuance of the scene dramatically. The effect of this disparity between the two novels is that *False River* effaces the differences between Afrikaans and English while *Valsrivier* reinforces the separation between the two languages.

The parodic, self-effacing rhetorical strategy of Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa which is present in the narration of the novel, as referred to in Chapter One, is reiterated in the excerpt following. After Paul renounces his piano lessons, he becomes a Voortrekker – a foreshadowing of his conscription to the SADF. Dominique explains to the reader:

They learnt skills that were useful during the Boer War. On Fridays they hoisted the National Flag at the parade ground and stood to attention in the sun in brown polyester shorts, long-sleeved shirts and an orange tie pinned down with medals. After one term he refused. He told me that Voortrekker means wanker in English. (Botha, *FR* 33)

The antiquated activities of the Voortrekkers are depicted as ridiculously misplaced through Dominique’s reference to the Boer War. In Paul’s ‘translation’, he derisively uses English to subvert the authority and pomp of the society and, by extension, of the Afrikaans language. The ritual on the parade ground thus becomes old-fashioned and irrelevant instead of proud, and the participants are figured as gullible and unsophisticated.

Dominique’s (narrative) voice is stifled by her inability to speak English fluently at the dinner table Pa institutes an English-only dinner rule in preparation for the private schooling they receive in Natal (Botha, *FR* 40). This expressive curtailment worsens exponentially, so much so that Dominique regresses from being a talkative child at home (Botha, *FR* 33) to a young adult who cannot narrativize the (failed) subjectivity which underpins her eating disorder that manifests while she is at the English boarding school (see Chapter One).

Dominique also feels her English is “inadequate” when she goes to St Anne’s: “My trunk was filled with an unfamiliar vocabulary of bloomers, blues, house ties, tuck and mufti” (Botha, *FR* 67). Dominique receives extra elocution lessons (Botha, *FR* 85), which could be viewed as attempted assimilation or homogenisation through the authoritarian language policies implemented at the school, but then feels guilty over her shame at her parents’ accents: “Ma and Pa’s English suddenly sounded strange to me. It fell into the category that at school would be considered awful. I felt ashamed for thinking it” (Botha, *FR* 83). It is following Dominique’s language conscientization that the reader is introduced to Eunice who has worked for the Bothas for fifteen years at their holiday house. Dominique notices and remarks to the reader on Eunice’s “accentless” Afrikaans and the beads and skins which are hidden under her uniform (Botha, *FR* 111). Read symbolically, this could be seen as the necessary, superficial but also successful adoption of a different mode of interaction for work purposes, a kind of temporary cultural translation, while Eunice maintains her own identity privately, almost invisibly, as she accommodates her employers linguistically. *False River* depicts the reciprocal attempts of the Bothas to offer this same linguistic generosity, but these attempts are revealed to be inherently flawed. The children are instructed to address the farm workers respectfully in Sotho (Botha, *FR* 11) and Ma learns Sotho through correspondence, but, as Pa cynically reminds her, the language she is learning is unable to reach its intended audience since it is not the Sotho that is spoken by the people (Botha, *FR* 10) with the effect that her efforts are not always received favourably (Botha, *FR* 139). There is also impaired communication (and translation) between the dominating languages of the novels. The lack of an Afrikaans glossary in the English text is linguistically unaccommodating, is a failure of textual hospitality, and seems to assume that, as Pa says, “a true South African” is bilingual (Botha, *FR* 8).

Absented black subjectivity

Coetzee writes that, in the traditional *plaasroman*, the “silence about the place of black labour [...] represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll [...] of African pastoralism” (*WW* 71-72). *False River* is portrayed as a novel inspired by Botha’s own childhood, but this does not excuse the fact that there is a marked lack of a more substantial intimacy with the black characters in the text. Dominique’s interactions with black characters are structured according to her parents’ politics and contained within the space of the farm. The characters of Selina and Martha, amongst others, illustrate Coetzee’s statement that “slaves/servants, though not absorbed

socially, were absorbed into the bottom of the family economy” (WW 73). In the novel, Martha, who is an ever-present if silent participant in the family’s day to day existence, replaces Selina as the Bothas’ domestic worker, but continues with the same rituals – rituals which are monitored and regulated by the family, especially Pa (Botha, FR 56). Alarming, this narrative substitution is made without comment by Dominique until some pages on it is revealed dismissively that Selina was fired ‘on principle’ when she “was caught with milk and cream and doilies in her bag” (Botha, FR 102).³⁰ It is a grievous error on the part of the narrator that the black characters are not fleshed out; are not fully realised characters; are reduced to stereotypes. It even comes to seem as though some of the black characters are made to perform as props placed on the stage of the novel in order to illustrate Dominique’s parents’ liberalism; that the black characters are instrumental. This one-dimensional portrayal does not appear to be deliberate as was the case in the traditional *plaasroman* genre, but rather, and perhaps rather worryingly, to be unconscious. Through this narrational myopia we are reminded of Coetzee’s assertion that “[b]lindness to the colour black is built into South African pastoral” (WW 5).

In the texts there are numerous racially problematic incidents, such as when Dominique instructs the black children of the farm workers to “abba” her (white) dolls on their backs when they play together and “[she is] the madam and they are the maids” (Botha, FR 29). In this scene Dominique is portrayed as recreating the world of adults in miniature. It is also notable that Dominique does not develop interracial friendships such as Paul does with Vusi and her youngest brother Boetie with Firi. Apart from in the space of the farm, neither Dominique nor Paul is shown to be interacting with black characters. Paul’s last love interest, after whom he goes to London and is prepared to attempt recovery in earnest for the first time, is from Kenya and is named Dudu, but no racial markers are attributed to this character who only enters the novel when she attends Paul’s funeral on the farm in the closing pages. If the reader is to assume that Dudu is black, it is perhaps even more discomforting that she is wholly mute. The relationship between Dudu and Paul takes place off the page and is curtailed by his suicide. This raises a potentially troubling question: what does the abortion of Dudu and Paul’s relationship reveal about the novel’s stance on reconciliation and reformation? I would argue that even as the novels achieve minor success in including black

³⁰ According to Horrell, white South African women’s identities are “often framed and nurtured by the deeply ambivalent figure of the ‘maid’ or ‘nanny’. [...] the figure of the black woman becomes a cipher for perceived and acknowledged injustice but also a source of privileged information, a ‘native informant’ who contributes significantly to the white child’s political awareness” (59). See too her discussion of Sarah Penny’s *The beneficiaries* for its striking similarities to *False River* (Horrell 64-7).

characters more than the traditional *plaasroman* genre would have, in spite of the problematic characterisation, this representation does not extend beyond the familiarly private to an imaginative inclusiveness in the other spaces of the novel which includes the public sphere – the space in which change is catalysed, denied or realised. The texts rely on a predictable shape and placement in visibility for the presence of the black characters in the texts without realising these characters beyond their superficial narrative usefulness.³¹ In this post-apartheid time period the novels are written from, the politics of the novels are therefore highly questionable. Perhaps, then, it is symbolic that Pa is building roads to nowhere in the elegy (Botha, *FR* 198) since this image suggests loss and being lost, but also a sense of pessimism about the future of South Africa's democracy.

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In the last few pages before the narrative takes its steep downward plunge to follow the path of Paul's escalating drug abuse, the two siblings are sitting on the banks of the False River in flood that has, significantly, swallowed the road. It is in these moments (Botha, *FR* 149-50) that contain the last vestige of the innocence of youth, that Paul turns his gaze backward and then takes his leave of the farm before going completely astray, and though he will return to the farm once more, this occurs after he has been disinherited:

“Ouma Miemie's father buried money over there before the War.”

Paul pointed in the direction of the Doorndraai graveyard. It lay lost in the veld that no longer belonged to us. Our land used to stretch to the horizon. Feuds and wills had pulled like a loosening thread, unravelling a blanket of ownership down to the last pocket of Wolwefontein.

“Which war?” I sat pulling apart my split ends away from Ma's disapproving gaze.

“Christ, you are ignorant. The Boer War,” Paul laughed.

“They dug up the money after the war. Ten pounds. That gave them just enough to start over. Even the English did not stoop so low as to go digging up graves.”

“I didn't know that about the English,” I said. “I do remember Ouma Miemie saying the years following the Boer War were the happiest years of their lives. When they had nothing.” I watched a fish eagle soar from the riverbank. “Why are you so interested in all that family stuff anyway? I find it boring.”

³¹ The black characters are visible, but race also “belies the skin”: we ‘skin’ each other to find “race on the tongue, in the mouth, down the throat, in the belly” (Ratele 121).

Paul stood up. “Your place of origin imprints on you. Writing is a relic of where you find yourself. Of how the seasons manifest. What you call all that family stuff is material to me.”

I raised my eyebrows at him.

Oupa Boetie used to say that there was no-one here when the first Trekkers arrived. The black people were wiping each other out. Kimberley created the economy. One could drive down to the diamond fields with a wagon full of fruit and return with enough money to buy a farm. North-facing orange orchards thrived despite the frost. Before the discovery of diamonds, people lived very frugally. The simple Trekker dwelling behind the Wolwefontein house bore testament to leaner times. Pa said we were lucky because the Boer War destroyed many farmers. (Botha, *FR* 146-7)

The narrative returns to the spectre of the family graveyard, circling back to the opening scenes of the novel, but here undermines the perceived security of belonging and the myth of origin inherent in the identity construction of the Afrikaner through hereditary land ownership. Paul uncritically repeats the historically anti-British sentiments uttered by Pa, as referred to in the second section of this chapter, while Dominique, through the lack of interrogation of Oupa Boetie’s views in her narration, effaces black belonging to and dispossession of this land. Paul’s sensitivity to the ‘manifestation of the seasons’ reinforces his harmonic affiliation with the environment of the farm in the narrative. Dominique later echoes his words in the elegy: “*I wanted so much/ to bind you with words/ to our place of origin/ to begin again*” (Botha, *FR* 201).

Coetzee, writing in 1988, acknowledges the progression of especially the antipastoral tradition in South African writing, but is cautious of burdening this accomplishment with the notion of closure (*WW* 81). Coetzee goes on to state (and this deserves quoting in full for the concluding warning that must be heeded in the shape-shifting pursuit of justice) that

the silences in the South African farm novel, particularly its silence about the place of the black man in the pastoral idyll, and the silence it creates when it puts into the mouth of the black countryman a white man’s words [...] speak more loudly now than they did fifty years ago. Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence [...] substantial silence structured by tracings of sound. Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities [...] It is a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn. Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds? (*WW* 81)

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate that *False River*, as an expression of the *plaasroman* literary tradition, unconsciously replicates the silences and absences which perforate the genre. I have shown that the novel presents a partial ecocritical revisionism as the landscape is rendered assertive and legible instead of passively conquerable, but expresses this with an anthropopsychic patriarchalism which peripheralizes womanly embodiment and belonging in familial narratives and spaces. Through the text's transference of the feminine to the liminal, the landscape comes to dominate moments of heightened emotion, thus reinforcing and facilitating the withdrawal of the narrative voice as it takes shelter behind the paternal history of the family farm. I have also argued that *False River* exhibits a linguistic co-habitation with superficial tolerance that is underscored by a historic animosity and deliberate separation. The omission of an Afrikaans glossary, while affording the English text an immersive feeling of South African authenticity, is also potentially exclusionary since it does not open the language to non-mother tongue readers through translation. The stereotyping of black characters is a disconcerting adherence to the tradition of the genre which, as I have stated in this chapter, is especially problematic since the novel was written in the post-apartheid period.

Conclusion

In Chapter One of this study, I have demonstrated that Dominique, the reader's focalising guide through the spaces of *False River*, is herself following the superseding narrative trajectory of her brother Paul's life and death. The tussling narrational voices reveal a deliberate political self-consciousness which is interrupted by nostalgia and undermined by unconvincing attempts at recreating youthful perspective. I have also argued that the narrational voices exhibit a patriarchal bias and are self-effacing despite being carefully constructed. Rather than confiding in the reader, these voices preserve curated intimacies and quieten trauma. I have proposed that the narrator's discomfort with her own womanness is influenced by a societal prudence imposed by insecurities residing in conservative Afrikaner masculinity. The novel concludes with an elegy which is a poignant attempt by Dominique to wrestle her brother out of the grasp of death and delay the slippage of memory by harnessing the full narrative power of a trans-generational, familial embeddedness as evoked by and grounded in the landscape of the family farm. My overview of a representative sampling of reviews of *False River* and its sister-text *Valsrivier*, both in Afrikaans and English, has shown that the divergent discourses into which the novels were written affected the perception of the novels and of Dominique, the narrator.

In Chapter Two, I have argued that the text reinforces the traditional primogenitary regulation of the romanticised pastoral landscape, as well as the continuing mythologization of the Afrikaner's relationship to the land, its ownership and consequent contentions of belonging. I have demonstrated that there is an anthropopsychic masculinising of the landscape as it is paralleled with Paul, thereby usurping and negating Dominique's narration in/of moments of heightened emotion. I have shown that the historic language animosity between Afrikaans and English speakers are reinforced through the text's rehashing of antiquated prejudices grounded in post-war bitterness, most prominently through the character of Pa. In addition, the English text erases language differentiation while the Afrikaans text reinforces linguistic separation and its corresponding socio-historical tensions. The omission of an Afrikaans glossary in *False River* forestalls an exchange through translation and is therefore linguistically exclusionary through its self-limiting textual hospitality. I have asserted that there is a problematic absence of black subjectivity in *False River* which renders the text complicit in the persistence of imaginative failures in the genre

of the *plaasroman*. The obscurity of Dudu and Paul's relationship is a conservative narrative technique which demonstrates a lack of faith in the possibility of intimate reconciliation and reformation.

I would state that *False River* is a 'haunted' text; a text that shelters its absences and silences systematically in a refracted and pardoned narrative voice that lacks critical engagement with its post-apartheid context; a text that employs (the author and) the narrator's apperception erratically in its (re)construction and fictionalisation of traumatic autobiographical experience. The slant of the laudatory reception of the novel suggests, worryingly, that the public literary-critical landscape is compliant in the continued reiteration of empathic non-occurrence with regards to socially pertinent issues such as the relationship between private and public memory and how this tension charges the on-going process of reconciliation, language and linguistic hospitality, land ownership, gender stereotyping violence, and (the invisibility and perpetuation of) racial prejudice through under-examined (historical) privilege. In South Africa's contemporary discursive climate of inclusive remembrance and memorialisation, a text such as *False River* reveals the ongoing and at times fraught negotiation of identity through its uncomfortably contradictory affirmation of Afrikaner nostalgia.

In closing, I suggest aspects for further study: a comparative analysis of *False River* with Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), or Nadine Gordimer's debut novel, *The Lying Days* (1953); an investigation of *False River* and *Valsrivier* informed by the work of Antjie Krog, in particular *Country of my Skull* (1998);³² a discussion of *False River* and *Valsrivier* focussing on translation; and an exploration of the echoes of Greek mythology, especially the figure of Antigone, in the thematics of *False River* and *Valsrivier*.³³

³² I would like to acknowledge Dr Mathilda Slabbert for her suggestions of the texts by Schreiner and Krog.

³³ My thanks are extended to Petra Müller for her engaging offering of insights into Botha's texts.

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