

Conflict, otherness, and the Afrikaner

Louise marié Combrink, Vaal Triangle Technikon, South Africa

I would like to begin by quoting a modified graffiti slogan found in Sandton, an elite suburb of Johannesburg. The original slogan, chanted by black liberationists, went *One settler, one bullet*. Its contemporary version as noted in Sandton goes *One settler, one Prozac*.

Being a South African these days is not necessarily easy, no matter which side of the colour divide you find yourself. In particular, a great deal of water still needs to run into the sea before the Afrikaner can be said to have found peace with the past and can face up to the future. Rian Malan, confronting his own Afrikanerness in his unflinchingly honest book *My traitor's heart* states unequivocally: "I am a white man born in Africa, and all else flows from there". This confession is indicative of the inner conflict that is, I suggest, present in a more or less pronounced way in the minds of many Afrikaners.

Graham Leach asked in 1989, in a book entitled *The Afrikaners*: "Who are today's Afrikaners - these stubborn and often infuriating people who defy the world? One hundred and fifty years after they mounted their journey (the Great Trek) in search of liberation, the Afrikaners are still in many ways a homeless people - still seeking that elusive final and secure resting-place which prompted their exodus from Europe and their flight from British rule" (1989:xii).

What is the Afrikaner? We can't say for certain, since there are so many definitions of this term - based on language, race or personal preference, one could arrive at various possible groupings that would constitute the "Afrikaners". In its more general usage, it could refer to white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, and this is where my focus today lies.

As early as 1992, Elsie Cloete has remarked in an article entitled "Afrikaner identity: culture, tradition and gender" that "Afrikaners had always been fairly certain of what they were. Nowadays, they are no longer so sure". In fact, having recently relinquished its

long-held position of power in South Africa towards a more democratic and independent situation, the Afrikaner's position today has been complicated further. Richardt Strydom - the artist under discussion today - puts it thus: "By the summer of 1994, South Africa had seen the dawn of a new age. Under the glare of a democratic rainbow, huddled under a multicultural umbrella, South African society suddenly found itself to be post-everything: ... post-modern, post-Apartheid and post-colonial". The pertinent question is: what is then the position of the Afrikaner in contemporary South African society? In order to negotiate such a position, it would be necessary to address a number of issues, which will be some reference to the historical position of the Afrikaner and post-colonial re-positioning, with the resultant questions regarding settler/invader issues, the mutated nature of Afrikaner identity and otherising processes which result in a feeling of a loss of space. The position that I will postulate as a possible one for the Afrikaner would be that of a post-colonial cultural hybrid construction which negates simple binary positioning regarding coloniser/colonised and insider/outsider discourse. In a sense, the search for a new identity for the Afrikaner is inextricably bound by the confessional mode, which has emerged as a salient feature of recent white cultural production in South Africa, and particularly among Afrikaners, and which can be related to the confessional nature of the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many of the ideas presented here emerged as part of Richardt Strydom's personal search for identity and should be read concurrently with his artworks, which I will discuss during the course of the presentation.

Some historical aspects

The construction of Afrikaner identity since the later half of the nineteenth century and particularly since turn of the twentieth century has been a conscious one which involved notions of Afrikaner homogeneity, unity and predestination, which would culminate during the later half of the twentieth century in a systematic attempt to claim a dominant position for the Afrikaner in the spirit of Afrikaner Nationalism. It has been postulated that the creation of the Afrikaner "volk" was an attempt to unify a large number of scattered non-English speaking European settlers who shared the Afrikaans language, previously referred to as "kitchen Dutch". In this attempt to create a unified Afrikaner volk a number of historical events (such as battles) and figures have been rescued from historical obscurity

and given mythological status in order to suggest a sense of predestination for the Afrikaner. This was further reinforced by notions that the Afrikaner was in some sense a chosen people, which resulted in a certain affinity with the Israelites of the Old Testament. Parallels were found between the Israelite's epic journey through the desert towards the promised land and the Great Trek of 1838.

Further parallels with the Israelites can be found in the Afrikaners' unshakeable obedience to its leaders (*volksleiers*) in their pursuit to defeat all that threatened them - the British, the threat of Roman Catholicism (Roomse gevaar), the black people of South Africa (swart gevaar) and communism (rooi gevaar). These echo the Israelites' unrelenting resistance against Egyptians, Philistines and other threats to their nationhood.

Nonetheless,

The creation of the Afrikaner volk, despite popular myth, was not an instantaneous occurrence. In fact, so diverse were the social and political opinions and so large the gap between rich and impoverished white non-English speakers (especially after the Anglo Boer War of 1899-1902), and so drastic the mass urbanisation of largely unskilled young Afrikaner men and women, that the path to *volkskap* was an erratic and often tempestuous one until well into the 1950's (Cloete, 1992-46).

It could therefore be assumed that, based on a number of Afrikaner myths and the moulding of "distinctive features" of the *volk*, that the creation of the Afrikaner was by and large an ideological project. Its premises were based on three core beliefs: that there has always been a sense of belonging to a group since the earliest European settlement at the Cape; that this belonging would prove that the Afrikaner volk has been in existence for centuries, and that the volk has always existed because destiny or God willed it. This sense of a God-given task in Africa justified many of the questionable endeavours of the Afrikaner, most particularly Apartheid.

However, quoting Cloete, "the Afrikaner's fears, anxieties, feelings of predestination, and the need to 'bear the lighted torch of Christianity and European civilisation to the African continent' are not exclusive to the Afrikaner and echo directly the opinions and slogans of all Europe's colonising nations, whether they were active in Africa, America or the orient"

(1992:43-45). However, with the introduction of the discourse of colonialism and post-colonialism into the present discussion a rather complicated situation emerges, but more about that later.

From the settlement of the Dutch at the Cape in 1652 up to the nineteenth century the *trekboers* who would become the Afrikaners were mostly rural; scatterings of people based on a subsistence economy. As such their lifestyle tended to echo that of their indigenous co-habitants - they favoured pastoralism over agriculture in the fashion of semi-nomadic cattle herders. They tended to live in temporary dwellings similar to those of the black tribes of South Africa. The English explorer-artist Thomas Baines, who came to South Africa in 1842 bringing with him all the imperialist assumptions and self-righteousness of Victorian England despised the “Dutch” farmers or trekboers as much as the Africans - for their lack of education, for living in unpainted mud-walled houses or transportable reed huts and for drinking brandy at breakfast-time.

Sparks (1990:69) has suggested that the early trekboers became a “white tribe of Africa”, echoing the indigenous peoples of the country also in the sense that they for the most part lived in partnership with their environment rather than trying to tame it as British imperialism would. This process, which could be coined self-othering or self-deculturating, constituted a distancing process by the Afrikaner - a self-imposed difference from the European homeland that meant that the invaded land was embraced as the new home. The Afrikaner differed from most of the British colonists in that they could not go “home” - it is remarkable that generations of English South Africans would talk of England as “home”.

The trekboers’ association with their new country can be seen clearly in the words of the Xhosa war-prophet by the name of Makanda who stated the following after being captured by British forces during the fifth frontier war in 1819:

When our fathers, and the fathers of the Boers, first settled in the Suurveld, they dwelt together in peace. Their flocks grazed on the hills; their herdsmen smoked together out of the same pipes; they were brothers ...

Having said this, however, the warming notion of brethren sharing a land in peace should be regarded also in light of the fact that the Boers viewed themselves as racially superior to the indigenous Africans, and that their identification with the African continent as such took precedence over the people of Africa. In any event, the numerous battles of the Great Trek and the slaughter of seventy-odd men - among whom Piet Retief - by the mighty Zulu King Dingaan while trying to negotiate land rights with the Zulus - testify to the fact that the peaceful co-habitation was always tainted by severe struggles for power and land.

These struggles were of course not limited to the indigenous peoples, but also included resistance against British colonisation of South Africa and the concomitant Anglicisation policies (the Afrikaans saying “nou is die Kaap weer Hollands” attests to this). One could suggest that the Afrikaner was occupying two positions: that of “the colonised” under British Imperialism (final independence was only attained in 1961 when the Republic was proclaimed) and that of “the coloniser” of the indigenous black population. Seeing the Afrikaner as *colonised other* complicates postcolonial discourse in which self/other and coloniser/colonised binaries are structured around the Manichean black/white division, and begs the question of the extent to which the Afrikaner had become fully “indigenous” to South Africa. The Afrikaner thus walked the almost impossible line of being both self and other, both insider and outsider. It could therefore be argued that it is precisely this position of uncertainty that sparked and fuelled the mobilisation of Afrikaner Nationalist ideologies and Grand Apartheid in order to proclaim a sense of space for the Afrikaner that would be more stable and secure.

Within this project, the homogeneity and unity of the Afrikaner were projected as truisms. However, this unity has long been contested - Afrikaners are, actually, a “bastard race” but it is proclaimed, rather ironically in the Groot Trek Gedenkboek (the Great Trek Memorial book) that “ons is trots op ons Hollandse, Duitse en Franse oorsprong, en wil hierdie bloed suiwer hou” (we are proud of our Dutch, German and French origins, and want to maintain this purity). Furthermore, as early as the Great Trek (1838) there are numerous accounts of fierce disagreements which resulted in trekker parties splitting off to pursue their own routes towards the promised land. More recently, the schism among Afrikaners

is even more pronounced, with reformist, centrist and reactionary stances assumed by different elements within the larger Afrikaner contingent. Apartheid, and with that Afrikaner Nationalism had run out of currency, and this is where we find ourselves today - in search of a sense of space and identity.

This brings me to the particular position of Richardt Strydom and his search for identity as an Afrikaner. I will discuss a selection of his artworks from the early 1990's to 1998 in order to demonstrate some of the questions, commentaries and negotiating stances that his works present as criticism from within. (Safari suit) - **Untitled: Drag**

Amblyopia (early 1990s) (Slide 1)

This work was executed in his first year at the Vaal Triangle Technikon. Amblyopia means “loss of vision in one eye”. It is a medical condition which is used to comment metaphorically on the loss of vision he associated with mainstream Afrikaner society and its nationalist preoccupations. The skyscraper represents high ideology - the toppling Afrikaner right wing - as opposed to the people in the street. He represents himself as the masked carnival figure in the background. The crudely fashioned “mythical” gun is an image of cultural and ideological weaponry - (as recently as 1998 a right wing political poster read: Afrikaners, olie ook julle geestelike wapens). The Afrikaner stereotype, used ironically and cynically, questions and challenges both the right wing Afrikaner and the commonly held stereotype of all Afrikaners being militant fascist clinging to the dregs of past ideologies.

Communist – 1994 (Slide 2)

In this photograph Strydom represents himself with red paint on his face, tongue literally in cheek. The work, which is presented as a pun, refers to an Afrikaner tendency, especially during the mid-eighties, to call anyone who questioned Afrikaner ideology a communist or a “pienk boetie”, referring directly to the “rooi gevaar” (pink being the colour one gets by mixing white with red). What is being addressed is not communism as such, but the issue

of in-group self-othering. The individual who rejects the master-symbols and bastions of Afrikanerdom is sure to be exiled from the confines of the group.

Tweespalt - 1998

(Great discord over volkstaat) - the envisaged all-white state for Afrikaners - a right-wing project)

Strydom calls this an “appropriated newspaper poster” or a “found print” or a “stolen object” - he found it on a lamp-post. The poster in question is one of a Pretoria newspaper called “Afrikaner” and the caption refers to the long-standing inability of Afrikaners to be unified. The constant schisms opening up between the Afrikaners make it impossible to typecast them as a group, and as such it is liberating that one needs not identify with all aspects of Afrikaner culture in order to be an Afrikaner.

Born and Brewed in Africa (1997) (Slide 3)

(the slogan used to sell Lion Lager)

This is a digitally manipulated photograph where the dramatic background has been added to recreate the feel of gimmicky advertising photography. It is both an affirmation of the African identity to which many white people lay a claim, and an ironic reversal of what one would expect when reading the words “born and brewed in Africa”. Lion Lager is a popular South African brand aimed mostly but not exclusively at the white consumer.

Strydom consciously plays with notions of racial purity in this work. It has been noted that the Afrikaner has always been a bastard race - consisting of various European ancestries, and assimilating a number of other bloodlines into its present composition. Strydom therefore does not use models with racially pure Aryan features, but rather features himself (an Afrikaner with some Jewish ancestry), a Portuguese lesbian, a bilingual South African and an English South African who has strong ties with the English motherland to suggest hybridity. All this said, the rather lily-white complexions of the

sitters comment on the absence of indigenous South Africans and invites the viewer to ask questions about the construction of an African identity. The absence of people of colour also comments on the attempts by the media and government to represent South Africa as a “rainbow nation”, in order to erase the old all-white images that were prevalent in the media and government organisations. Currently, one would often find advertisements for cigarettes, the post office or voter’s education which present a neat package of one or more blacks, an Indian, a white person and possibly a coloured person - the rainbow nation. Strydom subverts the new stereotype, and in so doing he reverts to the old one, to draw attention to the contrived nature of all image-making and to present his doubts as to how much has really changed since the advent of the rainbow nation.

WWJD (What would Jesus do) (Slide 4)

This work shows an image of yet another battle (an appropriated image referring to no particular battle) between indigenous Africans and white settlers with a found sticker superimposed upon it. The artist expresses his concern with the way in which religion has been used by the Afrikaner to justify oppression and Apartheid. Strydom questions whether anyone really asked what Jesus would do, and accuses his forefathers of having twisted religion to suit their purposes. He feels that religion had literally become, during the oppression years, an opium of the people, obliterating white guilt and justifying black subservience.

Surrogate (1996) (Slide 5)

This is the first work in which Strydom distances himself consciously from his own people’s Eurocentric ties. Africa as represented by the black woman becomes the surrogate for her white child. Like the embryo of a surrogate child invades the body of its mother, the white man in Africa has invaded the continent, grew in her and was reared by her, learning to love her as its own. The image above the mother figure shows the physical difficulties encountered by the trekboers in the process of entering the land and making it their own. Africa has become a surrogate continent with a hybrid child.

This painting is one of the last of its kind in terms of technique and process. Strydom would hereafter reject easel painting as a Western tradition in search of a more hybrid technique that would communicate his search for a hybrid identity more clearly.

The box paintings

This series of paintings were produced after “Surrogate”, and have become the signature style of Strydom. The artist’s desire to rid himself of the conventional European mode of easel painting lead him towards the exploration of an unconventional surface (boxes) on which he paints with oils, in order to achieve a hybrid superimposition of a high art medium on a crude throwaway everyday surface.

Whitewash (Slide 6)

While living in crime-ridden Brixton, a racially mixed suburb of Johannesburg, Strydom found the Omo box one evening lying in the street, after a rather windy Highveld afternoon. Realising that this box could have been a homeless person’s bed before, and seeing the traces of human contact in the form of footprints and smudges, he was confronted with his own rather cushy lifestyle as white South African. Having recently moved himself, he was reminded of the fact that he used boxes as containers for his possessions, after which they were discarded. It was the implication of rejection and litter that triggered in him the possibility of a new surface that would serve as a convening point for all classes in society. As such the box surface became a field for Afrikaner mythology to play itself out: both trashy and elevated, the surface embellished with oil paint seemed like a meaningful inroad towards his own construction as post-colonial hybrid.

The images he typically selected for the boxes were generic “precious” landscapes appropriated from anonymous artists. These landscapes portrayed the Afrikaner trekboers and their romantic sense of connectedness to the land; images that had indeed assumed a certain kind of “holy cow” status - which were newly interpreted by placing them onto a surface that alluded to the evanescent nature of both the surface and the ideological content of the images. As such his work approximates an iconoclastic dimension as it

attacks not only Afrikaner imagery, but the notion of Afrikanerdom itself. This results in an othering process in which Strydom self-exiles himself ideologically from constricting notions of what it means to be an Afrikaner. His self-othering further implies a painful process of distancing himself from his roots in order to search for a new identity while coming to terms with his own history.

In terms of the surface Strydom employs one finds a number of clues regarding this process of facing up to his own demons. The box displays the name of Omo, perhaps the most frequently used detergent in South Africa which is promoted for its ability to make whites whiter - in fact, a recent advertisement on national television asserted that it would elevate your whites to new heights (related by a black woman). The superimposition of Afrikaner imagery opens numerous possibilities for an intertextual semiotic play which demands a great deal of participation from the viewer, and in fact requires that the viewer be knowledgeable about both Afrikaner culture and the social realities of contemporary South African society.

The work further demands a post-colonial reading, for the content and technique are informed by the discourse of postcolonialism. In the first instance, the hegemonic position of the English language in contemporary South Africa, at the expense of both the indigenous African languages and Afrikaans is reflected in the English type on the box. The text is manipulated in that bits are typed over, so instead of “micro powder” one reads “micro power”. Words like “brothers” were left to suggest both the patriarchal nature of Afrikaner culture and the difficulty in establishing a South African brotherhood of people. Certainly, an allusion to the clandestine *Broederbond* would also be appropriate. This could also be associated with the physical application of white paint in thin layers - a literal whitewashing that seeks to cover up the text beneath, much like many atrocities in the country’s history have been covered up, leaving only traces of untold stories behind. The ambiguity of this device of whitewashing could also be read as a pun on white trash, given the throwaway nature of the surface.

The play of type against image in “black” and “red” alludes to notions of binary opposites but also refers to the rooi and swart gevaar. Numbers were left on the box and are open to

interpretation - they could refer to racial ratios or casualties in battles. By leaving unfixed interpretative clues, Strydom wishes to communicate his own unfixed position. As such, this highly wrought work is both confessional and confrontational.

To conclude, I would like to give Strydom the second last word: “No degree of second language academic muttering can explain the great sense of displacement, the careful tiptoeing as to avoid every utterance acquiring the ring of a victim cry. This makes the admission of guilt seem like an easy politically correct manoeuvre to shortcut a self-proclaimed position of moral amnesty. The admission to inherited Apartheid privilege presents an essential starting point in the process of deconstructing my own past, present and future, but also threatens to present a quick exit or to become an emotional and spiritual endgame. In the absence of tenable answers, guilt melts into fear, insecurity mutates towards paranoia and honest sentiments tend to slip into cliché.

Having arrived at the realisation that the Afrikaner will have to redefine him and herself from within, the search begins in which a new identity needs to be negotiated; an identity that would resist hi-jacking postcolonial discourse for self-righteous purposes, but would transcend the Manichean divide of fixed boundaries between self and other. In so doing, the myth of the Afrikaner nation will have to be further deconstructed, so that individuals may begin to earn identities, that of Africans.

The slides appear in numerical order at the back of the volume – this had to be done in order to retain the colour prints.