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“Paradys” after the Fall: Mark Behr’s Novels and the Genre of the *Plaasroman*



Aesthetic and political discourses in South Africa have always been closely intertwined, during and after apartheid, the representation of the land for instance, as in *plaasromans* or farm novels, being thus used to reinforce racial divisions in the country. Nevertheless, anti-*plaasromans* also abound, as illustrated by Mark Behr’s three novels, *The Smell of Apples* (1993), *Embrace* (2000) and *Kings of the Water* (2009). Warping traditional depictions of the enclosed space of the farm or the garden, Behr’s tales are always, however, like *plaasromans*, narratives of loss. His use of spatial and temporal distortions and displacements undermines any claims to the land and highlights the unreliability of discourses on the landscape, be they in English or in Afrikaans; but simultaneously, in a post-apartheid and post-9/11 context, his novels may themselves fall prey to a not too dissimilar nostalgia, tinged in his case with autobiographical concerns.

The land and the landscape have always been of paramount importance in South Africa, during and after apartheid: the regime indeed combined a vertical, hierarchical ranking of races, as well as a horizontal, spatial division between groups of people, who were allocated a place to live according to a series of laws, all stemming from the first segregation law passed a little over a century ago, the 1913 Land Act. This Land Act figures prominently in Mark Behr’s latest novel *Kings of the Water* whose protagonist, Michiel Steyn, discovers Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa* when he moves to London at twenty. Behr’s novel was published in 2009, but the main plot takes place in September 2001, and most of the remembered events which form the subplot in 1986, during the State of Emergency and the secret war waged by South Africa in Angola, Namibia and Mozambique. Michiel, sent to the front, ends up going into exile to escape a personal, sexual scandal, but also the war and the acts of torture against the local population which he witnesses in the bush. He is expelled by his father from “Paradys,” the family farm, to which he only comes back fifteen years later, for his mother’s funeral.

Behr’s latest novel thus presents itself as a farm novel or *plaasroman*, as the novel opens with the opening of the gate which leads Michiel once more within the enclosed space of the farm, yet under very different circumstances since the end of apartheid. The farm, however, remains a symbol of the tensions which still pervade the country, and Behr thus both contributes to and rewrites the genre of the *plaasroman*. The farm indeed stands as an epitome first of colonization, then of apartheid, a miniature replica of the country with its enclosed, strictly delimited and tightly controlled space, and its fences marking clear divisions between white owners and black workers. In the nineteenth century, it led to the birth of a specific literary genre, the *plaasroman*, particularly favoured by Afrikaans writers, and which symbolically prolonged, on the page, the very real struggle, on the ground, over the possession of the land in South Africa.

This variation on the genre of the *plaasroman* is not new when it comes to Behr’s work: it can already be perceived in *The Smell of Apples*, his first novel, as well as in his second novel, *Embrace*, where the motif of the farm is duplicated by the enclosed wilderness of the nature reserves. The geographical displacement characteristic of the third novel seems to have replaced the greater temporal distortion which occurs in the

first two. The time gap between the date of publication and that of the plots is wider, and the retrospective look more profoundly marked in *The Smell of Apples* and *Embrace* (both take place in the 1970s) than in *Kings of the Water* which is mostly set in the same decade as that of its publication. What defines all three novels, however, is a similar sense of loss, as patterns of escape and exile – from Tanzania, from the reserves to the city, from the paradise of innocent childhood – are to be found repeatedly in each of them. This may be a way for Behr to walk in the footsteps of someone like J. M. Coetzee, who both theorized the genre of the *plaasroman* and subverted its codes in several of his novels, although one might ultimately ponder the real value of narratives imbued with nostalgia in Behr's case, in particular when it comes to their autobiographical nature in a post-apartheid and post-9/11 context.

Colonisation, Apartheid and the *plaasroman*

At the time of colonization, it quickly became important for colonizers to establish fixed frontiers so that white people could start exploiting the land. In South Africa, this first stage in turn gave way to a mode of representation which helped reinforce the system of spatial divisions: once the wild populations and beasts had been tamed, tales of exploration were replaced by farm novels – also called *plaasromans* in Afrikaans, the main language in which they were written – which provide the vision of a domesticated land and landscape (Sévry 20). Representing the land as such also encouraged the settlers, and then white people in general, to take possession of a land they were shown to be able to put to good use – although it must be added that most of those representations actually came much later, for a large part in the 1930s, and mostly provided a backward glance on those times, once the economic situation had shifted to a more capitalistic system of exploitation of the land, which threatened small, generally Afrikaner, landowners. The genre of the *plaasroman* is thus immediately characterized both by a tone of nostalgia and by identity claims (Chapman 192-3).

One key idea is that the farm, and within it the motif of the garden, become epitomes of the country and models for a controlled, strictly enclosed space, which can stand for South Africa as a whole – besides providing resources which further ensure the colonization and settlement of the land, formerly seen as a hostile territory. *Plaasromans* thus insist on fences and all types of demarcation, as exemplified in all of Behr's three novels. Fences and gates act as frontiers on a small scale, keeping the country in shape, punctuating the landscape and the narratives at regular intervals, in an endless duplication. In *Embrace*, Bokkie even sets up a fence around the family garden in Mkuzi, within the property which is itself enclosed. As for Karl, he is impressed by the barbed wire fences which surround the van Rensburgs' farm, and associates in his mind the "sprawling paddocks with cross-pole fencing" and the perfect, "shipshape" organization of Lukas's farm (*Embrace* 453). The situation is not any different in *Kings of the Water*: the novel lays the stress on the numerous fences which already existed fifteen years before, around the farm but also within its enclosure to keep apart places like the orchard, Michiel's mother's own territory, or the house, and clearly separate them from the compound to which the black workers are relegated, beyond a barbed wire fence. Fifteen years later, the changes recorded at the beginning of the novel insist on the fact that such fences have merely become more numerous and impassable, as they have been electrified and redoubled, the *stoep* around the house being now entirely surrounded by

a system of locks and bars (*Kings* 12, 14-5, 20, 52). The spirit of the *laager* has indeed been replaced by an obsession with keeping things in shape and under control, thanks to a tight grid of spatial divisions and fences, and this spirit prevails even after the end of apartheid – or can be perceived in the very fear of the consequences such a lack of control might induce, as “dilapidated” fences (*Embrace* 587; *Kings* 11) are always in the novels a sign of political trouble or change.

Such representations of farms and gardens in *plaasromans* collude with an aesthetic representation of the land which borrows from the picturesque and favours the dominant position of the eye (Collot 194, 204), of the narrator, of the settler or the farmer whose control over the land is shown in turn as strong and firm, the aesthetic discourse thus reinforcing the political one. That is what an episode in *Embrace* brings to light, as Karl, the young protagonist, and his mother Bokkie visit the Therons’ farm and their garden, an enclosed space within this enclosure. “Herder,” Bokkie exclaims (559). The adjective is left in Afrikaans in a dialogue which is otherwise reported in English, to emphasise both Bokkie’s aesthetic judgment (as *herder* means “beautiful”), but also how she relates it to the ideal of the farm, as it is also synonymous with “picturesque” and “pastoral.”¹ The enclosed garden is the sign of the perfect control exerted by white people, and here, by Afrikaners, who have managed to set up fixed frontiers and boundaries, and to make it possible to hold a picturesque perspective on the country and its landscape. Indeed, once the land on the frontier has been cleared, the characters can enjoy the beauty of the landscape and the view of Mount Meru from the farm, which is even painted and framed and put up on the wall for decoration: “‘And that was our view from the farmhouse,’ [...] ‘Mount Meru.’ Pointing to the painting above the never-used fireplace” (*Embrace* 447). It is no wonder that, when Michiel and his brother Benjamin discuss the future of the farm in *Kings of the Water* some thirty years later, the latter should be reluctant to the idea of setting up a cooperative where the black employees would have a say. Rather, he considers turning the farm into a boarding house which would offer its lodgers stunning views of the countryside (52, 160, 166-7, 217-8).

The aesthetic discourse on the landscape therefore buttresses a political discourse on the land to reinforce national imagery and nationalistic mythology. J. M. Coetzee has analysed this process at length in *White Writing*. The first volume of his autobiography, *Boyhood*, also testifies to the strength of the attraction for the land, and even more of the discourses around the land, which one constantly has to resist. This fascination can partly be explained by the proximity and often the confusion between “country” and “countryside” which, of course, exists in English but also in Afrikaans with the words “land” and “plaatteland.” It is indeed to a great extent in the countryside and on farms that a white South African identity was forged – and mostly a Boer identity, particularly so as the same word “boer” without a capital letter is used to mean farmer or peasant (*Kings* 216). The geographer Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch underlines that “territorial mythologies” differ from one white community to the other, the British favouring the city, the Afrikaners the country. At least, this is what Behr seems to play upon, as the descriptions of the sunset over the sea and the bay of the Cape differ slightly in the two versions which he provided of his first novel, in Afrikaans and in English (*Reuk* 127-9; *Smell* 121-4). The description of the colours of the sky is longer in Afrikaans than in

1. The word has the same root as “-herd” or “shepherd” in English, and “n herder roman” is the same as a *plaasroman*.

English, and the word “bloedrooi” in Afrikaans is much more heavily connoted than the plainer “dark red” in the English version. The Afrikaans version insists more than the English one on the fight the white settlers had to put up to conquer the land, and link it with the picturesque view which their dominant position, in all meanings of the word, now allows them to enjoy. Whereas only the rather vague word “place” is used in the English version, and is later taken up by a mere pronoun, the Afrikaans version uses several nouns which are repeated and more heavily stressed, in particular as “land” and “grond” are strongly connoted, the latter combining a literal meaning with the abstract one of “reason,” suggesting therefore the legitimacy of the Afrikaner presence at the Cape. Behr’s first two novels highlight how the farm is turned into what Jean Sévry calls “a microcosm of the apartheid regime,” (20) and how the discourse on the land or on the farm and therefore the *plaasroman* itself become a mode of discourse on the nation, a myth which is endowed with the task of conveying a national or nationalistic ideology, and a vision of the country limited to one side of the political fence, or of the farm gate. One cannot help noticing that it is the produce of Uncle Samuel’s farm, mentioned at this stage in the novel, which gives its title to Behr’s first novel. The use of the definite article highlights the smell of the fruit, thus suggesting that those are the quintessential produce of farm work and of the South African land, and therefore an emblem of the nation, of which they take up the initials, “s” and “a.” The discourse on the land and the farm and the discourse on the nation cannot be dissociated in General Erasmus’s speech to his son Marnus: once the control over the nation has been lost in Kenya, the first place of settlement, the departure from the farm is presented as inevitable (*Smell* 121-4). A similar process which fuses the two events is at work in *Embrace* in the stories about their life in Kenya and Tanganyika which Karl’s grandparents keep telling him at regular intervals in his life as well as in the course of the novel, such stories thus becoming a family *plaasroman* that is repeated and handed down from generation to generation. The definite article introducing Marnus’s father’s story in *The Smell of Apples*, at the top of Sir Lowries Pass, already had the same value: “And then Dad told me the story again” (122). The story has been repeated several times, transformed into a family myth, as an echo on a smaller scale of the official History of the white nation at a larger level.

The City and the Country: Displacement, Loss and Myth

Such a story, however, is first and foremost a story of loss and nostalgia. All of Behr’s novels insist on the fact that something has been initially lost: the farm in his first two novels, the mother and innocence, but also any claim to the land on the part of Michiel, in his latest. The characters in the first two novels all have or have had to leave the countryside for the city, and although in *Embrace* the arrival of the De Mans in Durban is initially seen as a way for them to escape poverty, it is also described as an experience of loss which tears them away from their roots in the reserve, in the wilderness, and further north, in the farm of Tanganyika for which the reserve had been a substitute. Even in *The Smell of Apples*, which is mostly centered on the city of Cape Town, the opposition between the city and the country is still very much perceptible and insisted upon, all the more so as once in the city, the characters are confronted with the threat of the growing “black spots” of the sprawling black townships. It is one of the first

things which Michiel notices again when he gets back, as if clearly marked fences no longer held:

The township – *the location*, they’d often still called it when he left – has grown further out as well as in. The once bare strip of veld, the train track running south and the tall screen of eucalyptus no longer keep things apart. (*Kings* 15)

It is in the city that the changes brought about by the new dispensation seem the most visible (62). And it is somehow no wonder that the Oubaas, as Michiel’s father is still called, should “believ[e] the world ends where Paradys meets the N2,” (84) a divide which keeps him reasonably safe from too close a contact with the outside world. It is no wonder either that the novel itself should entirely be based on a return to a farm in the Orange Free State (the full former name is used in the novel), near Bloemfontein, the cradle of Afrikaner identity and “the heart of the country,” as it were, to take up the title of one of Coetzee’s own *plaasromans*. It is indeed tempting for writers to go back to the genre of the *plaasroman* in such moments of tension, the farm standing as a model held like a mirror to the black Bantustans which the white authorities would like to keep watertight, as it offers a refuge from the tensions of the city where one constantly runs the risk of coming into contact with members of the other communities (Sévry 23). That is one of the reasons why Behr chose to constantly alternate the setting of all three novels between the city and the country, to highlight their opposition, and even more the myth which lies behind the characters’ preference for the latter. The final inversion of this pattern in *Kings of the Water* seems to suggest as much: its protagonist is turned away from the farm of his childhood and initially finds it hard to adjust to London, but he later becomes the perfect citizen of San Francisco – “one of the great cities of the world” (*Kings* 90) – so much so that he has not ridden a horse for fifteen years (155). Back on the farm, he now refuses to play at farming and help his brother repair the damage the hail did to the property (188). The refuge of the farm is but an illusion, as he learnt fifteen years before: it is at the dam, the heart of the heart of the farm and of the country, the place associated with the innocence of childhood at the center of “Paradys,” that he hears of his disgrace and banishment by his father (58). Behr’s anti-*plaasromans* thus denounce the discourse that would make of the farm a secluded place which could remain isolated from the tensions of the conflict, since that very place actually rests upon a perpetuation of such tensions and of the divisions which lie at their root: “I am the rule the game depends upon, he thought years later” (58). The alternation between images of the present farm in 2001 and Michiel’s reminiscences from fifteen years before highlight how much of a mental reconstruction the latter are: more a mindscape than a landscape, more a subjective reconstruction, therefore never a neutral picture of nature, they have indeed comfortably erased from the frame all the elements which actually helped to make the farm what it looked like: “Servants” (83; Coetzee *White Writing* 63-81).

Likewise, Behr’s earlier novels play on a system of narrative juxtapositions which bring to light the constructed nature of such representations of the farm, which are in fact merely a form of discourse, a myth, a story, a lie. As was seen, in *The Smell of Apples*, the words which qualify “the story” of the peregrinations of the Erasmus family in Kenya, Tanganyika and South Africa, and in particular the use of the definite article, create a proximity between the family history told by the General to his children and the national History which they learn at school in their history books. But the definite ar-

ticle is actually more ambiguous than initially meets the eye: it refers to something which is already known, as the story has been told before (“again,” 122) and many allusions to it are scattered throughout the novel. But the definite article also reveals that it is merely a “story,” which has achieved the status of a myth although it has been almost entirely made up, fabricated, and does not correspond to Johann Erasmus’s direct experience, as another character in *Embrace* later denies him any right to call himself a farmer: “[T]he Erasmus [...] you met [...] were cowards and left Tanganyika early, before things really started looking bad. They were business people, not farmers. Farmers always stay till the last” (207). The remark is all the more ironic as the De Mans in *Embrace* claim in turn that they stayed till the last and that *their* “story” is “the truth,” as is underlined at the beginning of a paragraph when Karl comments on one of the first of his grandmother’s tales to be reported in the novel:

Listening to Mumdemman was better than any occasional movie or the fairy-tales and fables that so addicted me. Movies, like fairy-tales, I told myself, *were* only stories. But, what Mumdemman said was all true, absolutely true. And, what was true was real. (149)

The punctuation marks and the use of the tag “I told myself” suggest, however, that this is only Karl’s attempt at self-persuasion. Even though so far no one contradicts him nor questions Mumdemman’s version of the family’s story, both will be contradicted quickly enough, as already suggested by the conclusion of the very same paragraph, a praise of Mumdemman’s gift for telling stories: “No one in the world, I was sure, could tell a story as well as Mumdemman.” Karl is brought back to the world of fairy-tales, despite his claims to the contrary. A brief analysis of how Mumdemman structures her narrative shows that what she says about life on the farm is but a family myth, a “story” which she has constructed and repeated or rehearsed several times to please her audience, as she openly does at the end of the novel when she tries to captivate her listeners before the school’s end of year’s concert:

S]he began reeling off tales of her own girlhood as daughter to a pioneer farmer in East Africa. [...] “All in one lifetime,” she said as a group began gathering around the De Mans in the foyer, spellbound by Mumdemman’s stories. She told what Karl had never tired of after hearing them a hundred times in a hundred different versions. (641)

The narrator’s choice of words (“reeling off,” “spellbound”) recalls the films and tales Karl previously evoked, to which Mumdemman’s “tales” therefore seem uncomfortably similar, their veracity being thus called into question. What follows are indeed mostly nominal sentences. Almost all of them are structured along the same pattern, as in the first episode of the family tales narrated by the fireside. The use of the adverb “how” points out that what matters is not so much the truth of the facts being narrated as the manner in which they are presented, preferably in a favourable light. The adverb introduces a summary of Mumdemman’s narrative, a catalogue which enables the accumulation of adventures in which the action is presented as if it were realised in front of the audience through the use of –ING forms to reinforce the impression of a truly eventful life (“All in one lifetime”). What one finds here in fact is the same pattern as in classic adventure stories, which are but fabricated. And indeed one notices that the narrator drops the already ambiguous word “story” to fall back on even more problematic terms such as “tales,” fables which are altered and falsified and presented in “different versions.” The family story on the farm, the De Mans’ *plaasroman* in Behr’s second novel, is no truer than that of the Erasmuses, but the spell of its charm is harder to break

for the protagonist Karl who cannot, earlier in the novel, accept what his Uncle Klaas imparts to him about the lies it relies upon. The dialogue between the two characters hinges upon the notion of story-telling, which is once again closely associated with the issue of land ownership and the right to claim possession of the farm:

“Our land. [...] In Tanganyika they stole our land.” [...]

“Is that *the story*? That they took your father’s farms? That’s why you left?”

“It’s not *a story*, Uncle Klaas. It’s *the truth*.”

“Your father and mother left before their farm was taken. They ran because they were afraid their farm may be taken. [...] Your parents were afraid that the people of Africa would take back what had been taken from them.” (500, emphasis added)

The opposition between the “story” and the “truth,” or between the family (hi)story (as it has been so far seen and narrated by the parents) and History is reinforced here by the interplay of definite and indefinite articles. Karl understands the criticism conveyed by his uncle’s use of the word “story,” which suggests that what he has heard so far may be just one possible version of History,² a fabrication which has been given the sheen of truth to be passed on to younger generations. This family story then becomes no different from any other invented fable or tale,³ as the way the boy picks up the word with just the indefinite article reveals. Even though he seeks to pit against it “the truth,” the one and only valid version of the facts, the modals in the next sentence underline again that the loss of the farm was just one among many possibilities, a feeling which Bok does not quite dispel when he later recalls the events: “We left when we saw there was no hope. Our farm was next on the list. One and the same thing” (595). This list, of course, never physically existed and cannot therefore be either proved or contradicted. With its many internal echoes and the allusions to Behr’s previous work, the construction of the novel highlights the fabricated nature of the narrative of the loss of the farm, and therefore how much of a lie the family *plaasroman* is. Similarly Mumdeman’s tales of her conquest of the bush are but a delusion. The family story and the national myth, handed down from generation to generation within the family circle or at school, are but one arranged version of the facts, among other possible narratives which are left untold and unheard, just as Plaatje’s version of the Land Act⁴ is carefully left out of the History syllabus in *Kings of the Water* (95-8).

Between Rewriting and Reviving: Temporal and Spatial Displacements and the Issue of Nostalgia

All three of Behr’s novels play on the juxtaposition of versions of the truth to highlight the constructed nature of any such discourse, and in particular the ideology conveyed by the *plaasroman* which they contribute to rewriting. All point to possible other versions of the history of the country, differing visions of the land lying outside of the

2. A “story” in the sense of “a *recital* or *account* of events that have or are alleged to have happened; a series of events that are or might be *narrated*,” “the development or past existence of a person, thing, country, institution, etc., *considered as narrated or as a subject for narration*” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, emphasis mine).

3. A “story,” this time, in the sense of “a narrative of real or (usually) fictitious events, designed for the entertainment of the hearer or reader; a series of traditional or imaginary incidents forming the matter of such a narrative; a tale, an anecdote; a (short) work of fiction” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

4. The Land Act serves as a background to Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa*, which Michiel reads in London, as mentioned in the introduction.

traditional frame of the *plaasroman*, and one could think that the latest, with what its greater spatial distortion allows, the protagonist having left South Africa for England, Australia and then the United States, would offer a glimpse of those alternative stories. It is indeed in *Kings of the Water* that longer quotations from Plaatje's *Native Life* and its narrative of displaced black populations are to be found, while allusions to Alan Paton, for instance, remain only scattered and marginal in *Embrace*. However, one quickly notes that the overall perspective remains more or less the same, the narrative choices actually accentuating a gradual unsettling feeling of nostalgia which might ultimately bring to bear on the value of Behr's attempt at rewriting the genre of the *plaasroman*. Even though the protagonist himself seems repeatedly wary of such a feeling, it is ultimately what comes to dominate a narrative frozen in the present. *The Smell of Apples* clearly juxtaposes two different temporal perspectives, which allow cracks to appear in the narrative, revealing the distortions of the truth by the regime. By way of contrast, Michiel's return to Paradys in *Kings of the Water* triggers a stream of reminiscences which gradually shifts back to a general present tense. Initially the italics are retained to mark a temporal displacement, but soon all differentiating signs whatsoever disappear, and the narrative culminates in the seven-page confession which mingles Michiel's expulsion from the army and his sorry affair with Karien, putting them all on the same level. The transition is often operated by nominal sentences – for instance when Michiel evokes the landscape of the farm as he sees it on his return (147-8) – creating an effect Émile Benveniste characterises as “an absolute truth [...], outside of time and of a permanent value, acting as an authoritative argument [...] used to convince, not to inform. Timeless, placeless, outside of any relationship with the enunciator-descriptor or the narrator, it is a definite assertion” (Benveniste 162-5, translation mine).⁵

At other times, the shift is mediated by the recurring phrase “he sees” in the present of commemoration, which freezes the character's gaze onto a reflection of his own past self, in a Gorgon-like manner, and leaves out any figure of the other (Vernant 126). The third person used throughout the narrative does not allow for the same distancing as the alternation between the third and the first ones in *Embrace* did. In *Kings of the Water*, the only variation is the use of “you” in the confession in the middle of the novel which seems to act as a mirroring device for the protagonist (114), as well as towards the end of the novel precisely when he asserts his belonging to the land (215). Whereas mirrors figured prominently in *The Smell of Apples*, again to allow for glimpses into the evils of the system behind its shining surface, echoes and mirrors in *Kings of the Water* seem to act as screens which freeze the gaze and the mind, countering the effort to rewrite the monolithic discourse of the regime and of the *plaasroman*. Incidentally, the mirror is the one object which has been kept from Michiel's past in the otherwise fully refurbished bathroom (26). Michiel thus sees his own face in his brother's, Peet (75), or in his partner's, Kamil (137), as is revealed to him by his therapist, who happens to be called Glassman, in whom he sees yet again a reflection of his own relation with his former lieutenant on the front, Steven Almeida (73, 102). The latter, in a dizzying pattern of duplications, is a character from his previous novel *Embrace*, while the last literary reference is to Pasternak whose lines open *The Smell of Apples* (229). It is as if, like his own character who goes back to the mirror-like surface of the farm dam as he did to

5. I am grateful to Héliane Ventura for drawing my attention to Emile Benveniste's and Jean-Pierre Vernant's respective works.

the aptly called Gorgonian fans when on his trip in the Solomons (76), the writer were going back to his own work, and in it, to its autobiographical strain – doubling it back, as it were. Whereas Behr pointed out in an interview in 2003 (Anstey) how the juxtaposition of homoerotic and political episodes in his previous novels served to expose how the regime deflected attention from its abuse of black South Africans, it seems that in his third novel – particularly in the confession lying at its core – the homoerotic, and more autobiographical, matter, takes centre stage, always framing and thus obscuring allusions to torture. One cannot deny that the stakes may have changed in a post-apartheid context, but the reader is nevertheless left with a novel which uncomfortably takes up some of the hallmarks of the genre it claims to be rewriting, such as the episodes of comic relief provided by black characters (Chapman 192). Whereas Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* scattered its characters all over the world, geographically and emotionally displaced and unsettled, refusing them and the reader any easy, comforting solution in a post-9/11 context, Behr’s *Kings of the Water* offers as a closing image that of the farm turning into a “home,” (234) ready to provide a safe refuge to its prodigal son against yet another Other, in a passage again replete with reflections of the character in rear-view mirrors (225-6, 236). It is as if the *plaasroman* were coming back to provide once more some sense of bearings to displaced writers looking for some anchorage in a complex “global imaginary” (De Kock). In more ways than one, Behr may be right when he confesses that “*Kings of the Water* can only re-say what has already been said” (van der Vlies, 23).

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