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Histories of the Everyday

Domestic Workers in the South African Literary Archive

Abstract – This article departs from the premise that the South African literary archive has many gaps concerning the experiences of black people and argues that these gaps can perhaps be partially filled by ‘mining’ old and recent literary texts by white Afrikaans authors which feature domestic worker characters. Domestic workers have a pivotal role as ‘outsiders within’; as people with an exceptional knowledge of both black and white culture. Because contributions by black authors to the South African archive covering the twentieth century are limited, this article argues that interactions in the intercultural contact zone (Pratt 1992) of ‘maid & madam’ situations as described by white authors can be studied in an effort to extend the existing archive. In addition, the literary works under discussion here allow for a focus on the relations between people as well as different responses to historical change. Ways in which historically important events such as voting day 1994, the Rebellion of 1914, the assassination of prime minister H.F. Verwoerd in 1966, Soweto 1976, township violence and ongoing post-apartheid rural poverty are represented, serve as ‘raw material’. A few older and more recent literary works are discussed in ‘pairs’ or ‘groups’ in order to make comparisons. The works discussed include novels by J. van Melle and Jan van Tonder, André P. Brink and J.M. Coetzee, as well as work by Elsa Joubert and Antjie Krog.

1 Introduction

The Rebellion of 1914, the death of prime minister H.F. Verwoerd in 1966, the aftermath of the Sowetan student uprising in June 1976, political violence during the late 1980s on the Cape Flats, violence and poverty in the townships and rural areas in post-apartheid South Africa: these are some of the socio-political situations which are mentioned in the interactions between ‘maids and madams’ in South African texts featuring domestic workers. The fact that such events are referred to in these texts – all grounded mainly in the realist tradition – is not surprising in view of the fact that all South Africans have a shared and mutual, even a ‘unifying history’, as is convincingly argued by Attwell and Attridge in the Introduction to *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*:

To say this is not to assert a uniformity of experience, nor a consensus, not to mention a common identity, but it is to affirm that South Africans generally understand what they disagree about. A shared history has produced politicised discursive reflexes that are commonly understood. South Africa might be radically heterogeneous in linguistic and cultural terms, but a common history has been imposed on it, a history which is the product of its violent absorption into the modern world-system (Attwell & Attridge 2012: 5).

It would take me far beyond the scope of this article to go into particulars about the spread and consumption of information about this common history, but it is

important to take cognizance of the fact that although the writerly skills and the social and economic status of employers and employees differ extensively, both black and white, especially in the cities, invariably tap into a shared flow of information regarding the main political events and circumstances. Although many African women still cannot read and write, for instance, they are avid radio listeners and watchers of television, preferring programmes in their own languages. As such they are well-attuned to the issues that circulate in the public sphere.

According to Attwell and Attridge the 'peculiarly aggressive form of modernity that was imposed on the region – racial capitalism abetted by the state in successive forms – has had the effect of creating pan-ethnic forms of association in the fields of labour, the economy, political life and cultural expression' (Attwell & Attridge 2012: 5). The relation between cultural expression and labour relations lies at the core of my interest in the entanglement between black and white, specifically in the highly personal interaction of domestic work done mostly by black women in white suburban homes (see Jansen 2015). For generations, the master-servant relationship has been the main meeting point for black and white South Africans. Cities were even built with the expectation that the average middle-class white family would have live-in black servants and many otherwise modest homes in the suburbs still include maid's quarters in the back. The most popular post-apartheid comic strip in the country actually concerns a white houseowner and her black maid. 'Domestic servants are ubiquitous in South Africa', said Harry Dugmore, a co-writer of the comic strip, 'Madam and Eve' which appeared for the first time in *The Weekly Mail (Mail & Guardian)* in 1992, in the interregnum between the release of Nelson Mandela and the first democratic elections. 'If you have money, you have a servant. It is the South African way'.¹

In this article, I am particularly interested in how these relations are represented in the archive of South African literary imaginations, the nature of which is, as is the case with many archives (in particular in colonial settings), a 'vexed one', as Carli Coetzee (2012: 139) reminds us: it is dominated by a white perspective. This is, of course, in keeping with the fact that white people enjoyed without any doubt far better education, resulting also in white authors having much easier access to publishers and a reading public than black writers could ever dream to attain.

It was Michel Foucault who radically changed our ideas about the archive in 1970 and 1972 when he pointed out that the archive is not simply the sum of texts which a particular culture wishes to remember and deems worth their while to record and protect. Nor does it represent in any simplistic way the institutions which gave instructions for their recording and protection. Archives in the sense used by Foucault and postcolonial theorists, such as Ann Stoler (2002), speak to the imagination because they continue to call for interpretation, for translating configurations of power. The archive is a metaphor for the desire and longing which characterise the search for a hypothetical 'truth' and for an imaginary 'origin'. As becomes clear from *Refiguring the Archive* (Hamilton e.a. 2002), the archive is practically always and everywhere, and especially in South Africa, a sys-

1 <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/17/world/hard-life-is-getting-harder-for-south-africa-s-domestics.html> (31 May 2015, consulted 8 June 2015).

tem of inclusion and exclusion, of laws and rules which give shape to what may and may not be said and heard. So-called factual accounts make it possible for a nation to maintain its fictions; the range of philanthropic missions can be worked out in moralistic tales, but selection and manipulation always play a part.

In keeping with Walter Benjamin, who considers working class people as important 'depositories' for historical knowledge, this article argues that interactions in the intercultural contact zone (Pratt 1992) of 'maid & madam' situations can be 'mined' or 'excavated' in an effort to extend the existing archive. As Bruce Robbins writes in *The Servant's Hand*: 'The barest expository mention of a servant's existence is sufficient to place the protagonist's life in a problematic relation to the labouring community' (Robbins 1986: 123). Although the texts under scrutiny in this article which feature domestic workers are written by white authors and are therefore per definition restricted, biased and technically form part of the white input into the archive, one could also argue that such texts are a reflection and representation of the black experience as well, however dim and scant it might be. Such texts sometimes try to understand and imagine a black experience (e.g. in the novel by Jan van Tonder discussed further down), but even from texts which do not explicitly try (e.g. the novel by Van Melle) information can be gathered. In stating this, I take my cue from Antoinette Burton who in *Dwelling in the Archive. Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* (2003) convincingly argued that the Indian elite could have done much more to document the everyday lives of the servant class. She actually blames the upper class for failing to pick up on the stories of women and men who themselves had no access to writing and publishing, whose histories have remained in the shadows. Where stories have been passed on, though, they should be looked into. What Burton writes about colonial India, also goes for South Africa:

[W]e can see, if only by glimpsing, what their architectural imagination lost down the corridor of years as well as what it captured – with servants' lives the most dramatic and perhaps paradigmatic example of what can never be fully recovered (Burton 2003: 144).

I therefore argue that when information with regards to the lives of domestic workers actually has been captured in some way in literary works by the upper classes, it should be taken seriously, analyzed and even valued as an important substitute for what would otherwise be completely lost and forgotten. Despite racism and prejudice, an element of truth exists in such stories and there is little reason to suspect deliberate contortions of portrayals of the servant class, especially concerning factual matters. Of course, factors such as nostalgia and structural-aesthetic demands of stories should be taken into account and 'truthfulness' is in any case hardly ever attainable.

Situations in which historical events and social circumstances, such as rebellions and the death of a prime minister are represented, are selected as scenes to focus on. These events are chosen because they impacted dramatically on the lives of everybody in South Africa. However, information on how such events were experienced by 'ordinary' black people, is hard to come by. I therefore suggest that cognizance should be taken of scenes in literary works by white authors in which responses by black women are included. What domestic workers did in those loaded circumstances is therefore brought to the fore in an effort to recover some-

thing of ordinary black women's experiences of historical events. I will compare texts by J. van Melle and Jan van Tonder regarding prime ministers in 1914 and 1966 respectively, briefly mention texts by Elsa Joubert and André P. Brink published shortly after Soweto 1976, discuss the story 'Agterplaas' ('Backyard') by Elsa Joubert concerning the late 1970s, and in conclusion briefly focus on a series of poems by Antjie Krog published in 2014. I also include a fragment from an oral interview with a black domestic worker and short references to novels by J.M. Coetzee. The texts under discussion involve black domestic workers but the texts are invariably written from the particular point of view of white South African authors – and of course selected by me who also belong to this group.

2 Voting Day: 27th April 1994

Before focusing on the literary archive, I want to briefly refer to a watershed moment in South African history, an event which produced a huge variety of public images about a common historical event: 27th April 1994. On that day black and white went to the polls together for the first time. It is perhaps not surprising that many visual and oral testimonies (see Brink 1994) of experiences on voting day in the urban areas focused on images of black and brown domestic workers standing in endless queues together with their employers. Many white people apparently had the urge to share the day with black people but realized that they knew no other black person besides their domestic worker and gardener intimately enough to suggest to them to be together on that momentous day. The reason why some domestic workers did actually share the day with their employers had perhaps to do with their own uncertainty. Thinking back on that day, one could indeed pick up strains of discomfort of both employers and employees at being together outside the home environment for such a length of time, but also witness the relaxed happiness which was such an amazing feature of the day. Many children were also in the queue, for on that day their nannies were equal participants in the 'grown-up' world of their parents, not left behind at home to care for them there.

Although I sketch a mainly positive picture of voting day 1994 as I had witnessed it in the progressive middle-class neighborhood of Melville, Johannesburg, there were also strained interpersonal relationships during and after the elections; both in Johannesburg and in many parts of the country. The *New York Times* reported the following case:

A hard life has gotten harder since the campaign last April. A few days before the election, Delsie Sedibe recalled, her employer showed her a copy of the ballot and pointed to the picture of F.W. de Klerk, the former President, and gave instructions: 'This is what you vote for. Don't make a mistake. There is de Klerk. There is Buthelezi below him. You must be careful. Mandela is light in complexion. Don't confuse him with de Klerk'. The employer took her maid to the polls, as many did, and warned her again about what she must do. Mrs. Sedibe nodded and stepped inside. She took a deep breath. 'When I was in the voting booth, it was only me and my God', she said. 'So I put an X next to Mandela'.

Afterward came the questions. 'Are you sure you didn't make a mistake and vote for Mandela or Buthelezi?' the employer asked her after she got home.

'She asked me so many times, she was so worried', Mrs. Sedibe said.

Some time after Mr. Mandela won, Mrs. Sedibe was watching the news, after finishing the ironing, when she was asked what she was doing.

'I want to hear what Mandela is saying', Mrs. Sedibe said.

'Why are you listening?' the master said. 'That means you like him'.

'He's the President', she said. 'He was voted by the people'.

'Oh, that means you voted for him, too', the master said angrily.

A few weeks later she was dismissed.²

In view of the fact that the maid-white family relationship has for generations been the main meeting point of black and white South Africans, comparisons between patterns of decorum and behaviour within the average middle-class white family conveys much of the historically-grown entanglement between black and white. As C.W. de Kiewiet (1957) already suggested, the deepest truth of South African history is that the more dispossession occurred, the more blacks and whites depended on each other. Sarah Nuttall sums up De Kiewiet's views on this entangled relationship in the following way:

There was an intricate entanglement on the earliest colonial frontiers: accompanying whites' search for land was the process of acquiring labour, and in this process, whites became dependent on blacks, and blacks on whites. Precisely as this dependency grew, so whites tried to preserve their difference through ideology – racism (Nuttall 2009: 2).

This is the kind of racism which 'legitimized' the employers of Mrs Delsie Sedibe to think that they could, even on the 27th of April 1994, expect of her to obey their orders, that they could dictate to her for whom she should vote. Due to a newspaper interview her story of 27th April 1994 and its aftermath can, however, be added to the archive.

3 Prime Ministers and Domestic Workers: 1914 and 1966

Two novels form the basis of my first set of comparison: scenes in which South African prime ministers and domestic workers are described in some relation to each other. The first text is *Bart Nel* (1936 and 1942) by J. van Melle (1887-1953) in which Louis Botha, the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa is involved. The other is *Roepman* (2004) by Jan van Tonder (born 1954) in which the assassination of H.F. Verwoerd (1901-1966), prime minister of South Africa from 1958 until his death, is described in one of the chapters.

At the core of the *Bart Nel* text lie anxieties concerning the fictional character Bart joining the rebellion of 1914.³ The rebellion was a reaction by some Afrikaners to the government of the newly-formed Union of South Africa which was lead by two former Boer War generals: Louis Botha and J.C. Smuts. A few of Bart's neighbors agree that Botha and Smuts know what they are doing by fulfilling their duties now that South Africa is part of the British Commonwealth, but others, in-

² <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/17/world/hard-life-is-getting-harder-for-south-africa-s-domestics.html> (consulted 8 June 2015).

³ See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/responses-south-africa-outbreak-wwi-afrikaner-response-and-1914-rebellion>.

cluding Bart, are dead against the participation of South Africa in the First World War. It would mean fighting on the side of the British who only a few years before were the sworn enemies of the Boers.

A particularly poignant scene occurs when a neighbor arrives with the newspaper to inform Bart that Louis Botha has definitely decided to join forces with the British. All able South African men will be ordered to partake in the invasion of German South West Africa. Bart is absolutely devastated when he hears the news. His neighbor Pieter taunts him with the words: 'What do you say now, my brother? What do you say?'

But Bart says nothing. He sits and stares at the newspaper and gives no answer. Then he stands up and goes to the wall where a portrait of Louis Botha hangs and takes it down. He walks with it to the kitchen and they hear him calling for Sara. 'Take it', he says, 'break it and put it in the fire'.

Upon returning to the room, he despondently sits down on the bench. Everybody sits and stares at him. His dark face is pale and his hands tremble as he takes out his tobacco pouch and starts filling his pipe.

There is a long silence before anyone starts talking again (Van Melle 1988: 10).⁴¹

No insight is given by the narrator into Sara's thoughts upon being ordered to fulfill one of the most interesting tasks I have come across in South African literary texts: to destroy the object of her master's disgust. Her presence had already been acknowledged in a previous scene when she was ordered to come and take the baby called Kleinbaas to play outside; the usual type of task. She is now asked to do something completely different. Bart's disappointment is so great that he cannot even bring himself to destroy the image of his beloved Botha himself. His utter disgust and contempt for Botha is expressed by the fact that the demolition of Botha has now become dirty work. It is therefore the task of the servant to 'clean up', to mop up her master's grief and in this way to even start doing *Trauerarbeit* on his behalf. J. van Melle makes no attempt at describing Sara's feelings. What she is ordered to do happens back stage and no cognizance is taken of her reactions to the changes about to happen, not only on a national scale, but also in the household where she works: Bart and his wife Fransina will separate and divorce because of his role in the rebellion.

Many years later Dutch-born H.F. Verwoerd (1901-1966) was South Africa's prime minister between 1958 and 1966. He is considered the 'architect of apartheid' and was greatly admired by many white South Africans. In *Roepman* (2004) a photograph of Verwoerd takes centre stage in the 'showcase' in the small Durban sitting room of a poor working class Afrikaans family. One of the tasks of their maid Gladys is to regularly dust the portrait. On the day when she returns from her 'homeland' after having been ordered by Mr Rademan to take her two year old son Boytjie away because of a law prohibiting more than one person to live in the maid's quarters in the yard, Timus, the 13 year old narrator, tells her that Verwoerd has just been assassinated. Her shock is described vividly but with-

4 All translations of Afrikaans texts are by me unless stated otherwise. Quotations from Antjie Krog's work are from *Synapse*, the English edition of *Mede-wete*. Information concerning all references to political events can easily be found on internet.

out any direct interpretation of her feelings. Whether she is crying or overjoyed, is actually hard to tell.

It looks as though Gladys has walked up against a wall. The bucket falls out of her hand. She looks over her shoulder at me. Her eyes are white. I'm glad that there is at least someone who hasn't heard the news yet.

'It was on the radio', I say.

'Woerwoerd is dead?'

'Ja'.

'How did he die?'

'He was bulalal-ed. Stabbed with a knife'.

'Are you sure he is really dead this time?'

'Jip'.

'Woerwoerd', she says and turns around and walks to her kaia. She walks shaking her head. The door bangs behind her. I hear her shouting: 'Woerwoerd! Wóérwoeeerd!'

[...] I go to the kaia and stand deadstill at the door. Gladys is still shouting, but it sounds as though she has a pillow pressed to her mouth. It is crying I hear. Over and over she shouts: 'Woerwoerd, Woerwoerd, Woerwoerd!' I don't know whether she is throwing something [...], but I hear something breaking inside (Van Tonder 2004: 164-65).

The death of Verwoerd on the 6th of September 1966 is the '9/11'-moment of South Africans from my generation and older. Everybody remembers what they were busy doing when they heard the news of his murder in parliament by a Greek messenger by the name of Tsafendas. I had never actually wondered what the reaction of black people was on that day until I read about Gladys' reaction in *Roepman*. I was 15 at the time Verwoerd was assassinated, the main character Timus was 13. During the night he hears drums in the distance, wakes up at four o' clock from the sounds of a woman screaming outside, sirens from police vans and footsteps of policemen in their back yard on their way to arrest Gladys. Apparently there was a huge round-up of domestic workers. 'One can't be careful enough', he hears a policeman telling his upset mother.

The whole of chapter 20 of *Roepman* (162-171) is devoted to the reactions of the Rademan family to the death of Verwoerd. Without appropriating Gladys's thoughts in any way, Van Tonder adds direct descriptions from the viewpoint of the 13 year old Timus: Gladys' first response at hearing the news and later how she is dragged half naked from her servant's room in the middle of the night. Timus' mother hands her own dressing gown to Gladys before she is pushed into the police van. The next morning Gladys returns, still wearing the dressing gown, crestfallen and with a black eye. She goes to her room to change and comes to the kitchen.

'Sorry I'm late, miesies'.

'It doesn't matter. What does the police say, why did they come and arrest you and the others?'

'They say its because doctor Woerwoerd was killed'.

'But what could you possibly have to do with that?'

Gladys shrugs her shoulders. 'They say the Communists killed him, and every kaffir in this country is a Communist, so we are all guilty'.

'What happened to your face – did they hit you?'

Gladys looks at Ma's gown in her hand. 'I will go and wash it for you, miesies'.
Ma shakes her head. 'No, throw it in the laundry basket, Gladys. And bring your mug, there's tea in the pot'.

In this short aftermath scene much of the intimacy and conventions of the servant situation in South Africa is demonstrated: the caring relationship, as well as the distancing. Gladys, by offering to wash the gown immediately, acts on the knowledge that it was absolutely not done to wash your own clothes together with that of the white family, but Ma – who had already done something amazing by offering the black woman her own gown – now accepts it back to be washed together with the family's own washing. Whilst the one convention of not mixing laundry is overruled, however, another one is upheld: Gladys is not given a cup, but asked to bring her own mug.

Whilst J. van Melle gives only a few lines to Sara and makes no attempt at describing her feelings or behaviour when she is ordered to participate in the destruction of Louis Botha's portrait, Jan van Tonder structures the whole chapter about Verwoerd around Gladys. Although the author does not attempt to give any direct access to Gladys' thoughts and feelings, the novelistic description of her experiences on the 6th of September 1966 can extend the existing archive of responses to South African historical events. The shocked reaction of Gladys to the death of the man whose 'native policies' determined the fate of her and Boytjie's lives, does not seem 'logical'. The intimacy of her position in the white household in which she regularly dusted and spruced up the image of Verwoerd, demonstrate the entanglement of black and white in the servant-master relationship.

4 Responses to Soweto 1976

Another milestone event in South African history to which Afrikaans authors reacted was the student uprising in Soweto on 16th June 1976. On that day black scholars marched through their neighbourhood protesting the teaching of some school subjects in Afrikaans. Many other grievances came to the fore and the police reacted with the full force of open gunfire. At least 23 students were killed, most probably many more. Two of South Africa's most committed authors, Elsa Joubert (born 1922) and André P. Brink (1935–2015), shortly after the events of Soweto 1976, published influential political novels in which domestic worker characters have important roles. Elsa Joubert's novel *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena* (1978) revolves around the effects of the pass laws. As from 1956 all black women had to carry passes regulating their position in urban areas. The position of married women was determined by the status of their husbands. When Poppie's Xhosa husband who originally came from Hershel in the Ciskei dies, she is considered an illegal migrant in Cape Town and together with her children exiled to a township near East London. The novel is based on experiences which Joubert's domestic worker Eunice Ntshatha shared with the author and which she meticulously documented and shaped into the rhetorically impressive novel. Many interactions between Poppie and white people are described, for example when Mrs Swanepoel escorts Poppie to the pass office and quite easily arranges

for some leniency in the conditions of her pass. The second part of the novel is situated mainly in the Ciskei starting towards the end of 1975, and ending after the students' uprising in 1976. Fights between the so-called 'migrants' and the 'city-borners' in the townships during Christmas 1976 are described. Poppie's grandchild Vukile is killed and her brother flees to Lesotho.

Thanks to *Poppie* many white South Africans realized for the first time how inhuman the pass laws were and how much structural violence was being done to black people. Whether there is any connection between Joubert's Poppie character and the abolition of pass laws in 1986 is difficult to prove. However, many years later the historian Hermann Giliomee (2003: 594, note 28) was of the opinion that the life story of Poppie as told by Elsa Joubert played an important role in making white South Africans aware of the cruelty and injustice of the pass laws (no one could any longer say 'we didn't know') and even helped to smooth the transition to post-apartheid South Africa. The novel provides comprehensive information about black family life which was at the time practically unpublishable by black authors. Texts written by black authors came under much more close scrutiny by censors; that's why so much less information about the black experience was available in a published form by black authors than in this novel by a white novelist. Not only does *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* belong to the cultural memory of all who read it, but it is an important extension to the archive of black South African experience.

André P. Brink's novel *'n Droë wit seisoen* (1979) was also inspired by the events of 1976. The main protagonists are a white teacher Ben du Toit and Gordon, the black care taker and messenger at the school where he teaches. When first Gordon's son disappears and then Gordon himself dies in police cells while being interrogated, Ben realizes that the state apparatus and security system which he had respected up until then, are despotic and need to be questioned and opposed.

The fact that the politically highly effective novels by Joubert and Brink both had black characters who were very familiar to all white South Africans, a domestic worker and a care taker, played a huge role in making the content of the novels so convincing and politically explosive. Until 1976, very few images of townships circulated in the newspapers. Whilst many black people moved between their own townships and white neighborhoods on a daily basis, whites were mostly ignorant about what happened on the periphery of their own lives, next to the highways and behind the bushes.⁵ With the publication of novels like Joubert's and Brink's, readers realized that experiences of people like Poppie and Gordon could not be unique – they themselves knew such black people in their own homes and work places. Knowledge about people like them and their circumstances is kept alive in the archive of Afrikaans, and, more generally, South African literature.

5 The revolt of students in Soweto and other townships as well as the fact that television was introduced a few months before June 16th, dramatically changed this ignorance, partly because the coverage was amazingly in your face and harshly realistic in a way which was unthinkable before television.

5 Links Between the City, Townships and Rural Areas

In Elsa Joubert's short story 'Agterplaas' (1980) situated in Oranjezicht, Cape Town a first person narrator, a white employer, describes the anguish she experiences when realizing the impossibility of knowing more about the life of her domestic worker Flora and doing something about it. The story was written shortly after the publication of *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*. Soweto and the brutal ways in which unrest in the country was suppressed, were still starkly remembered. The narrator says of Flora who lives on the 'periphery' of her own existence: 'She is closer to me than a sister, knows my intimate life on a deeper level than a sister would know me. But I don't know her' (Joubert 1980: 59). The story revolves around the servant's room which 'bulges and moves' with many unknown family members and friends visiting Flora. The narrator is desperate to do something about the pain and suffering which she senses is happening in her own back yard, but she is paralyzed by her own powerlessness in the face of pass laws and the gaping difference between herself and the black people on her door step.

Ten years later, in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990), Mrs Curren, just like Joubert's first person narrator, also hardly knows how to respond to her domestic worker Florence during the period of violence which flares up in the black townships surrounding Cape Town during the winter of 1986. She realizes, however, how important Florence is in her effort to obtain information when she writes: 'What I know about events in Guguletu depends solely on what Florence tells me and on what I can learn by standing on the balcony and peering northeast' (Coetzee 1990: 39). Descriptions of what she hears from Florence is reported with painstaking honesty in the face of her own nearing end. Whilst the Cape Flats are burning, the backyard of Mrs Curren's house is inhabited now by not only the small daughters of Florence, but also by her teenage son Bheki and his friend John who are both later killed; Bheki during violence in Guguletu whilst John is shot dead by the police in the backyard. Due to these people on her doorstep Elizabeth Curren is directly confronted with the interregnum, the violent political climate of the late 1980s and dragged into the events. What is described in the novel about Florence and her husband and other family members was not unique. The novel offers an estimation and indication of what most probably was happening in the family lives of many ordinary black women at the time.

Nearly twenty five years later, in 2014, Antjie Krog publishes a volume of poetry containing a section called 'bediendepraatjies' in the original Afrikaans edition and 'servants talk' in the English edition. A sign of how important *Age of Iron* still was, is the fact that Krog twice refers to it in her poems. As in *Die swerfjare van Poppie Nongena*, 'Agterplaas' (Backyard) and *Age of Iron* a domestic worker character is once again a hinge between white lives and black experience, a way by which inequality, unrest in the townships and economic deprivation in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape is addressed. Whilst Elsa Joubert's stories and Coetzee's novel offer descriptions of the politically hopeless situation of apartheid South Africa, the situation in Krog's series of poems is much more mundane but still desperate: it concerns the small but important talk between a white husband and wife discussing the fact that they hardly ever see their black domestic worker, that she's always sending 'missed call' messages, that she has HIV/Aids but pretends it's

tuberculosis, that everything is askew after 'she blows through every room like a whirlwind' (70) on the days when she does come to work. She asks for money all the time: 'ten thousand rand for her father's tombstone' (61), 'wants to borrow twenty thousand rand twenty fucking thousand!!' (68) for her son's initiation. Her employers know that Victoria considers them to be 'the white people tree' (68) which can be shaken at any time. There is no apartheid government to blame any more for inequality. The ANC has been in power for two decades. Apartheid laid the foundation not only for Victoria's small chance of ever doing a better job than charring, but also for their feelings of hopelessness and guilt. In post-apartheid South Africa the poet continuously talks and worries about Victoria who is the sole breadwinner for six people in the township and many more people in the rural Eastern Cape. The black woman actually strategically blackmails her employers with their bleeding hearts to financially support her and her extended family way beyond the wage prescribed in the post-apartheid Labour Act.

Twelve of the series of poems have the same format: the first part of every poem is written in either Afrikaans or English and contains the employers' conversation about Victoria, the usually longer middle section is in isiXhosa and therefore not understandable to most of the probable readers, whilst the latter part in small print is an effort at a translation of the isiXhosa section. Victoria gets a very distinct piece of the text and therefore a voice, but she is not understood. Two meta-poems, 'the snail as chimera on the sleeping subaltern cheek' (66) and 'Victoria and the poet' (74), are expressions of the poet's impotence. This is poignantly expressed in lines such as 'she is one big empathy-thudding/ tear through which the cheek echoes before burning with human/ sweat everything fails and she shrinks back into her white coils' (66) and 'distressed the poet stands at the study window he believes/ in the snail the persistent effort of the snail but actually/ now he should die from self-loathing impotence and sorrow' (74).

6 Conclusion

It became very clear to me in my research for *Soos familie. Stedelike Huiswerkers in Suid-Afrikaanse tekste* (Jansen 2015), that the function and use of servants in literature has a long history in South Africa: it has always been a troubled relationship, and needs to be represented in troubling ways (Shefer 2012). Just how little knowledge white people had of the political situation in the country for the greater part of the twentieth century is reflected by the fact that authors who did try to give some representation of the seriousness of the political situation practically without exception used domestic worker characters as sources of information to link what was happening in the townships and the rural areas to the relative calm and safety in white urban neighborhoods. The use of domestic workers as characters during especially the 1960s until the 1990s was a guarantee that political events from the everyday would be reflected in a recognizable and realistic way. Progressive authors knew that white readers would in this way be able to empathize much better with 'the struggle' than when activist characters would have been used. Did readers not all also have a Poppie, a Flora and a Florence in the kitchen?

Bart Nel, the first novel mentioned in this article, concerns political events in 1914. The domestic worker Sara has absolutely no voice and the entangled relationship between her and her employers is not discussed in any way. That her employers expected her to do all their dirty work, is made absolutely clear when Bart orders her to destroy Louis Botha's portrait and in this way mop up his disgust and grief. In 'servants talk', published a century later by Antjie Krog, the entangled interdependency between Victoria and her employers is relentlessly focused on. Quite tellingly, in a section where the couple discusses the fact that they will be retiring soon and soon won't need Victoria's services any longer, they use a word which belongs very much to vocabulary reserved for the task of servants: 'in any case two people can't mop up the poverty of a whole extended family'.

Political unrest during the 1970s and 1980s was directed at the Nationalist Party government. During the twenty-first century this has made way for a different kind of unrest: strikes and violence directed at the ANC government which is seen as having failed 'the people'. Although many whites try to shrug of responsibility, insisting that 25 years after the change of power, the apartheid government cannot still be blamed for everything, this is often still done during strikes and violence directed against failed delivery promises. Even today, domestic workers are often the only links between white city dwellers and black people in the townships and rural areas who for a great deal are dependent on the wages of domestic workers. This is expressed quite succinctly in Krog's line 'Victoria says her mother says thank you for the money for the roof' (Krog 2014: 65).

In the course of research done for *Soos Familie* literature often proved to be a reflection of the socio-political and socio-cultural concerns of the public and it became very obvious that in novels and other literary texts in which domestic workers have a part, the history of everyday relations between black and white is told in often profound ways. Patterns of behavior come to the fore concerning styles of address, 'dress code', power relations, attitudes towards children, sex and the communication via the domestic worker between urban neighborhoods, townships and rural areas. Because of the 'realistic' part black characters, mainly as domestic workers, have had in literary texts written by white Afrikaans authors, this extra information concerning the interaction between 'races' and 'cultures', however biased and incomplete, should still be considered as part of the archive of South African history giving insight into the entanglement between black and white. At the time of writing, more than a million black women still work as domestic workers in the 'new' South Africa. Such women continue to feature in post-apartheid stories which still are important depositories of inter-racial relationships and socio-economic events. Compared to the twentieth century when white authors dominated the literary scene, the abundance of texts published by black authors such as Kopano Matlwa, Zukiswa Wanner, Zakes Mda, Zoë Wicomb and Imraan Coovadia now guarantee a much more accurate and direct insight into experiences of black people than was possible before.

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