

HANNEKE STUIT

The Bastardisation of History

Mythology and Transculturation in Tertius Kapp's *Rooiland*

Abstract – This article analyses Tertius Kapp's play *Rooiland* (2013) from the perspective of mythology and transculturation. The play takes place in an unspecified South African prison during an immanent gang war within its walls and relies heavily on prison gang histories, which are often referred to as mythologies. Instead of reading the content of the different versions of gang history offered by the characters as mythological in the traditional sense of the word, Stuit asks exactly what the 'mythical' entails in the context of Kapp's play and focuses on mythological processes as the transmission of ideology (Barthes). It will be argued that the play foregrounds mythology as a complex and gritty process of violent interaction that can be better understood by seeing it as a transcultural process of simultaneous renewal and loss of individual attachments (Ortiz). In this way the play helps to understand the profound mixing of cultural strands at moments when ideology is solidified in shared narratives about what counts as a communal origin.

'[M]yth is speech *stolen and restored*. Only, speech which is restored is no longer quite that which was *stolen*: when it was brought back, it was not exactly put in its place' (Barthes 1991: 124, emphasis in original).

1 Introduction

When four men live in one prison cell, and one of them is new, relations are bound to shift. Especially if a gang war is going on inside the prison walls. This is the setting of Tertius Kapp's award-winning play *Rooiland* (2013), which takes place in a present-day South African prison.¹ Where exactly the prison is located, or what the stakes in the gang war are, is largely kept out of sight in the play. Instead, it focuses completely on the prison cell shared by the four main characters and the fluctuating power relations between them as they struggle over the fate of newcomer Fransie van Nieuwenhuizen. Fransie's immanent initiation into one of the prison gangs by Adidas, a dangerous and threatening gang member from whom radiates an often overtly sexualized threat to the other characters, largely drives the narrative energy of the play. However, in the lacunae of Adidas' aggression, which, in the confines of the tiny prison cell the men share, means he is either asleep or seriously incapacitated by drugs, a powerful bond develops between

1 The play premiered at the KKNK festival in 2012, directed by Jaco Bouwer and with music by Braam du Toit. The actors were Wilhelm van der Walt (Fransie), Charlton George (Pastoor), Brendon Daniels (Adidas) and Leon Kruger (Chris). The play was published in 2013 and appeared as a film (the play performed without an audience) in the same year, produced by the same team. *Rooiland* has won 4 Fiesta Awards (2013), was nominated in 3 categories for the KKNK Kanna Awards (2013), and has won 5 prices in the 'Fleur-du-Cap' awards (2014).

Fransie and Pastoor. Pastoor is a mysterious character who tries to protect Fransie and teaches him how prison logic works. Like Chris, the fourth character who is a converted religious fanatic, he warns Fransie to not 'walk alone' in the prison and to choose his friends wisely.

Large parts of the plot rely on the history of a South African prison gang called the Number ('die Nommer' in Afrikaans). As Jonny Steinberg suggests in his book *The Number. One Man's Search for Identity in the Cape Underworld and Prison Gangs* (2004), the Number gang is an extremely violent, highly structured subculture that is more than a century old and has played a crucial role in South African prison life since the gang's inception in the nineteenth century. The image of the gangs emerging from Steinberg's journalistic rendition is that this culture has always been present, but has so far remained largely below the radar of institutionalised history. Indeed, the gangs have only recently become increasingly visible in South African popular culture, for instance in the film *Four Corners* (2014) or in Die Antwoord's song and video 'Cookie Thumper' (2013).

In Steinberg's account, former gang member Magadien Wentzel, to whom the character of Pastoor in Kapp's *Rooiland* shows telling similarities, explicitly places his personal history in the tradition of the anti-apartheid struggle. He does so by claiming that any violence committed towards police officers in jail has always been motivated by the wish to be treated in a more humane fashion, thus effectively framing ritualised gang violence as a political force of emancipation for black and coloured people in prison (Steinberg 2004: 18). In this way, Wentzel relies on what Daniel Roux calls 'a kind of parallel, mythologised and orally transmitted prison history' (Roux 2009: 241), in which the origin of the gang is explicitly linked to a group of bandits fighting colonial law and its exploitation of a migrant labour force in the emergence of the mining industry in the Johannesburg area.

Roux also points out that, in this way, Steinberg's work on Wentzel provides a perspective on prison life 'that manages to deconstruct some of the premises of canonised anti-apartheid political memoirs' (Roux 2009: 242), which mostly rely on what Roux calls a mythologized distinction between the criminal and the political prisoner. Yet, Roux is also critical of blurring the lines between the ritualized violence that seems to be part and parcel of gang culture and political resistance because it renders the rhetoric of the anti-apartheid struggle available for cynical abuse. According to Roux, it is because of appropriative gestures like Wentzel's that

the tropes and myths of national history start to function as indices in the construction of individual lives. Concomitantly, communal history becomes reduced to a somewhat disjointed collection of mythologised events (Roux 2009: 241).

Roux's moral concern is certainly valid, since it is, of course, often necessary to separate the criminal from the political. However, the phrasing of his critique of Wentzel's interpretation of the role of the gangs during Apartheid also raises a number of questions. For instance: do not most communal histories run the risk of becoming a 'disjointed collection of mythologised events'? And in deeming both prison gang history and 'untrue' representations of national history as mythological, would it not be pertinent to ask what the word 'myth' refers to exactly in this context?

Steinberg is very clear about the fact that one of the earliest members of the prison gangs, Nongoloza, is both a historical and mythological figure, the latter referring to the version of events ‘invented and transmitted by thousands of South African prisoners’ (Steinberg 2004: 35). In reference to *Rooiland* too, there is a discernible tendency to refer to prison gang history and the mystery surrounding it as ‘prison mythology’ (Roux 2009: 241; Ndlovu 2010; Schoombie 2013; see also Kapp’s article on prison gang narratives in this volume).² This is, to a large extent, apt and helpful in the context of the prison gangs, since the familiar meaning of mythology refers to a system of stories reflecting a particular belief system held by a particular group of people that often revolve around the origin or early history of the community in question (like Greek or Norse mythology). This article seeks to address, however, how a more detailed reading of the concept of mythology is helpful in analysing this specific play, but also in what ways the play helps to think about the concept of mythology in greater detail. It will be argued that *Rooiland* makes a reading of mythology as transculturation possible, which is understood as a violent process that depends on the displacement of history in order to ‘work’. In referring to the conceptual aspect of this argument, I will use the words ‘mythology’ and ‘mythmaking’, while reserving the word ‘myth’ for the stories and histories that structure prison gang culture.

By focussing on the effect the prison myths rendered by Adidas and Pastoor have on the character Fransie, it will be suggested that mythology is not merely a repeated story about some sort of imagined genesis, but revolves around the effort on the part of the *recipient* of myth to determine his or her relation to this imagined origin as a claim on power and survival. By referring to Roland Barthes’ conception of mythology as the communication of a double layer of meaning, I aim to interpret Fransie as a *reader* of myths, and to open up a discussion of mythology and myth as a site of negotiation and conflict. Through a close reading of a number of inter-textual references in the play, it will be argued further that not being able to understand the prison myth itself is paradoxically crucial to the plot, both on the part of Fransie, and the audience itself, in a spectacular reversal of dramatic irony. Fransie’s response to the myth will be further analysed through the lens of Ortiz’ notion of transculturation, in order to make clear that the workings of mythology force Fransie to accept that certain aspects of his own identity will be irretrievably lost, while the things that will replace them are fundamentally unknown to him. Thus, by keeping one if its main characters in the dark, the play inscribes a gap at the core of the personal history of the individual and places volatile and violent processes of transculturation and cultural appropriation at the core of prison gang history.

2 Mythology and Transculturation

The meaning of the word myth, especially in Western discourse, is rather ambiguous. Usually, mythology is regarded as a system of interconnected stories or myths,

² See for instance Artslink.co.za (http://www.artlink.co.za/news_article.htm?contentID=32589), and Kapp’s own comments in his ‘Skrywersnota’ (2013: 5) and a short interview in *Die Burger* on March 4 2012 (<http://152.111.1.87/argief/berigte/dieburger/2012/04/03/SK/5/Tertius%20Kapp.html>).

which explains matters that are beyond the control of the specific cultural group keeping the myth intact and alive (Abrams & Galt Harpham 2012: 230). As becomes clear from Robert Segal's introduction to the concept, myths are actually a specific type of story, described by Segal as 'a conviction false yet tenacious' (Segal 2004: 6). As Segal points out, this view is a remnant of anthropological accounts of mythology as 'primitive', dating mostly from the early nineteenth century (Segal 2004: 13). From this perspective, myth is treated as a story that will be replaced by a more objective version, as soon as an upgrade becomes available in the evolution of society.

This rather persistent and one-sided perspective on myth as primitive has, however, been waylaid by several philosophers. In *Work on Myth* (1979), for instance, Hans Blumenberg approaches myth, not as a narrative about a stable point of origin that needs to be emancipated from its primitive inception, but as a process, as labour, as *work*. The reason that myth persists is not because of the mystery that shrouds the primeval origin, but simply because 'what is subject to time's wearing away and slurring together can only have survived as a result of the capacity for impressing itself strongly' (Blumenberg 1985: 160). This is why, Blumenberg insists, myth cannot be invented from scratch; it can only rework specific stories towards a canonization of material that can hold its own in the process of reception and can withstand the 'dislike and reluctance on the part of apathetic schoolboys' (Blumenberg 1985: 154). As such, myth is actually a work in progress that resembles the survival of the fittest, 'a piece of Darwinism in the realm of words' (Blumenberg 1985: 159).

This natural selection, for Blumenberg, takes place through the 'agency of reception':

[T]he entire stock of mythical materials and models that has been handed down to us has passed through the agency of reception, has been 'optimised' by its mechanism of selection (Blumenberg 1985: 168).

The consolidation of myth, then, can become a matter of adjusting the content to such an extent that it works for the person receiving the myth. And in this manipulation of reception, Blumenberg suggests, myth precisely bars any kind of explanation of its 'usefulness in life', and veils its actual function, which is to withhold any kind of clarification 'from one who is precisely not supposed to think about anything except what is represented to him' (Blumenberg 1985: 166).

The idea of myth as a kind of naturalisation of knowledge is also central to Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), where he describes myth as a moment in which the literal meaning of an utterance is partly replaced and supplanted by an ideologically charged, symbolic meaning. Like Blumenberg, Barthes emphasises the fact that myth aims to impress the receiver in such a way as to foreclose critical scrutiny of what is being conveyed. Where Blumenberg speaks of 'hiding,' however, Barthes foregrounds the lack of scruple in myth:

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. We now understand why, *in the eyes of the myth-consumer*, the intention, the adhomination [sic] of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive but as a reason (Barthes 1991: 128).

In order to have an effect, then, myth does not have to hide its intention. In fact, the more disinterested the myth is about its own intention, the better it will work in terms of Barthes' theory. The myth's intentions are made to appear as if they were completely logical and natural. This is a crucial point, because in this moment of the naturalisation of history, myth frees itself from its actual historical circumstances. In other words, the material conditions, interests and cultural background against which the myth was uttered, become displaced. What myth is trying to say is clear, but the why and how of this utterance are lost in the fray. So where the common use of the word suggests that myth exists because we don't believe in it, Barthes, like Blumenberg, suggests that myth is a process of signification based on the fact that we are made to take the meaning of myth for granted.

Even more strongly than Blumenberg, Barthes further suggests myth 'works' by creating a particularly neutral impression because it hides nothing. This blatant openness on the part of myth foregrounds the possibility of focussing more closely on its *reception*. Indeed, Barthes delineates three types of response to myth, which he sees as a seemingly naturalised communication of a specific ideology. Firstly, the receiver can see the myth as an *example* of a particular ideological position, where the signifier used becomes a symbol for what is represented. The second possibility is that the receiver sees the myth as a distortion of a specific situation, considering the myth to be an *alibi* for an ideological position. According to Barthes, however, these two positions are analytical and static, destroying the workings of the myth. Barthes therefore offers the possibility of a more dynamic and ambiguous reception, which he calls the *presence* of myth. When the receiver sees the myth as present, he or she 'lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal' (Barthes 1991: 127). One goes along with the myth because it is ideologically charged knowledge that presents itself as natural, but at the same time, the reader lodges him or herself in the ambiguity of the myth as construction.

The process of mythmaking as 'at once true and unreal' is, however, much less neutral and orderly than suggested by the three-option model provided by Barthes. As a result, the potential of the in-between position of the myth reader remains somewhat underdeveloped in *Mythologies*. By analysing Fransie's attempt to read the myths offered to him by the other characters in *Rooiland*, I will argue that thinking the presence of myth can be usefully supplemented by the idea of transculturation. Transculturation foregrounds the fact that action is required once one is addressed by the myth. It highlights the fact that myths are not just specific cultural-historical stories of origin that one can choose to believe or reject, but are rather an active doing on the part of the myth reader in ideologically structured zones of contact.

First coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, transculturation refers to a transition from one culture to another involving both deculturation and neoculturation (Ortiz 1995: 103). As Ortiz points out, previous and familiar cultural 'moorings' are lost in the process of transculturation, but at the same time, it also involves the 'consequent creation of new cultural phenomenon' (1995: 103). Analysing these phenomena is, however, not a simple matter of assessing which cultural aspects come from where and which new ones arise. As Alisdair Pettinger has argued:

Transculturation is not a template for making sense of what happens when something or someone moves from one culture to another; [...] it insists on the range of possibilities, demanding that we attend to specific configurations and power relations that cannot be known in advance (Pettinger qtd. in Jobs & Mackenthun 2013: 11).

Similar to Mary Louise Pratt's use of the term, transculturation thus comes to the fore as a way to describe the complexity of 'the contact zone', which is the 'space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (Pratt 1992: 6). Attending to transculturation as formulated by Pettinger here, therefore means attending to the fact that transcultural things, people and phenomena are subject to a network of power relations that is continuously emerging, rather than 'in place'. As such, transculturation also involves an inevitable surrender to the unknown.

In what follows, I will focus on the complexity of the contact zone between Pastoor, Adidas and Fransie and read mythmaking through the lens of transculturation suggested here. From this analysis, it becomes possible to interpret the reception of myth as a work that jumps over borders, rather than as something that occurs within one particular culture, as the common habit of assigning specific mythologies to particular cultures seems to suggest. Myth can thus be read as a murky process of disadjustment and readjustment to the power relations of a new situation (Ortiz 1995: 98), which has far reaching consequences for the reader of myth, but leave him or her in the dark with regard to the outcomes.

3 'Two Roads Diverged in a Wood': The Bastardisation of History

Before moving to an analysis of how *Rooiland* leans on and reworks prison gang myths and how this reworking relates to the concept of mythology, the context of the gangs itself bears some explanation. The Number consists of three separate, yet closely related gangs, the 26s, 27s and the 28s, which form one larger system. One part is responsible for offering logistical support in accumulating wealth through cunning rather than violence (26s), another guards the laws of the gangs (27s), and the third is what could be called the gang's army (28s) (Steinberg 2004: 53). This system and the distribution of authority in it, is mostly invisible for the outsider. Members speak their own language, Shalambom, which is a mixture of, amongst others, Afrikaans, Nguni languages like isiZulu and isiXhosa, and some English. It is characterised by military and religious metaphors (see Kapp 2015, in this volume 311). These metaphors are a remnant of the political situation in which the gangs emerged, namely the early phase of Johannesburg's development as a mining town (see Kapp 2015: 309). At the end of the nineteenth century, a group of bandits organised itself and turned against the oppression of brutal labour conditions in the mines (Roux 2009: 241; Steinberg 2004: 38). This history is passed on orally within the gangs when a new member is recruited and is also used for purposes of determining position and rank between members. The more a particular member knows about the gang's history, the higher their rank will be (Kapp 2015: 314).

In *Rooiland*, the history of the prison gangs is renegotiated over the head of Fransie van Nieuwenhuizen,³ a young man convicted to six and a half years in prison for drink-driving and accidentally killing a young woman. Frans shares his cell with three other men, one of whom, Adidas, is a member of the Number gang, a 28. Much of the play revolves around Adidas' tangibly sexual intimidation of Frans, through which he tries to force Fransie to decide whether he will join the gang or not. The other two prisoners, Pastoor and Chris, repeatedly try to distract Adidas from harassing Fransie.

A second plotline is formed by the development of the bond between Fransie and Pastoor, who slowly reveals his personal history as a former gangster to Fransie as the play progresses. These plotlines alternate with each other constantly: when Adidas' storyline is dominant, Fransie and Pastoor try to attract as little attention as possible from Adidas, and Pastoor's story about his 'true' identity can only take place when Adidas is out of earshot. Fransie and Pastoor can only talk when Adidas is either asleep or drugged up. As a counterbalance to both Adidas' aggression and the friendship between Pastoor and Fransie stands the fourth cell-mate, Chris, who is a converted religious fanatic.

Although seemingly separate, Adidas' threat and Pastoor's story are related to the same issue, which remains mostly hidden from Fransie, the reader, and the viewer. The main question, as it turns out, is not *if* Fransie will be initiated, but how, when and by whom this will take place. The resolution of these questions is, however, continuously blurred and postponed. What does become clear, is that despite the fact that Pastoor repeatedly tries to distract Adidas' attention from Fransie at his own peril, he cannot prevent Fransie from eventually being raped by Adidas. Still recovering from a beating he got at the hands of Adidas, Pastoor tries to wake up Chris. But Chris sleeps straight through the disastrous incident. When Frans has somewhat recovered, and Adidas is still stoned and lying in a corner, Pastoor finally relates the full story of his gang past to Fransie, revealing himself as 'die hoogste Nommer in al die huise in die land' ('the highest Number in all the houses in the land' (Kapp 2013: 73)). When Adidas finds out about this, a final struggle ensues between them, in which Fransie intervenes to kill his rapist. He now has no choice but to choose Pastoor's side as a 27 and assume an authoritative place as the new leader of the 27s in order to protect himself from being punished by the gangs for killing Adidas.

Up to the moment when Fransie is raped by Adidas, however, he seems unaware of the possibility that sexual violence is actually part of his initiation, even though both Adidas and Pastoor repeatedly allude to it throughout the play. Where Adidas suggests that rape will be inevitable if Fransie does not choose a group like the 28s that can protect him from prison violence (Kapp 2013: 30), Pastoor implies, on the other hand, that the only way to escape rape is to avoid being recruited by Adidas. When Fransie explicitly asks Pastoor how gang initiations work, Pastoor tells him that he will have to stab a prison guard first. After which, of course, the prison authorities will come down hard on the inmate. If he cries out, the new member will become a 'wyfie,' who lies with the 'ndodas'.⁴ If he does

3 'Frans' is Shalambom for 'uninitiated person' (Kapp 2013: 49).

4 *Ndoda* is Shalambom for 'adults, soldier, initiated person' (Kapp 2013: 36).

not cry out, the inmate will be put ‘agter die berge’ (behind the mountains (Kapp 2013: 35)), in solitary confinement. If the inmate gets through this ordeal without complaining and crying out, he will become a part of the bloodline. At least, Pastoor adds, this is the way things were done in the ‘good old days’ (Kapp 2013: 36).

The hidden ideological difference between stabbing (Pastoor) and rape (Adidas) as forms of initiating new members comes up again shortly before Fransie is victimized by Adidas.⁵ When Fransie tells the story of how he kills a young woman in a drink and drive car accident in the middle of the night, Pastoor interjects as follows:

- F: Haar boyfriend het haar seker gedump of iets. Alleen gestap, oor die natgedoude sypaadjies. En soos ek vir die regte CD soek, ry ek oor die sypaadjie. Oor die gras. En oor haar. Die kar het teen ’n lamppaal gestop. Wou nie verder nie. Ek het uitgeklim. Haar tights was vol bloed, en ek het net geweet, ek kyk vir ’n lyk ...
- P: Two roads diverged in a wood ...
- F: Toe fok ek die bosse in (Kapp 2013: 55-6).

This seemingly random remark by Pastoor, which on first sight refers to his status as a well read character and could also be read as a sign of Pastoor’s anticipation of and engagement with Fransie’s story about fleeing into the woods, gains additional significance when read intertextually. Firstly, this could be seen as a reference to Robert Frost’s poem ‘The Road Not Taken’, from which the line is a literal repetition. This poem is characterised by its ironic treatment of the trope of the fork in the road as a symbol for having to make life-altering decisions, as familiar from Dante, for instance (Montiero 1988: 46). In the poem, the lyrical subject comes to a fork in the road, having to choose between two paths that ‘both that morning equally lay / in leaves no step had trodden black’, suggesting that both roads are actually the least travelled one (Frost 1997: 136). Indeed, as many critics have remarked, the poem is deceptive in its apparent admonition in the final stanza to choose the ‘road less travelled by’ because it makes ‘all the difference’ (Lentricchia 1995: 71-74; Montiero 1988: 45; Pritchard 1984: 127). As such, the poem foregrounds the necessity of having to choose one road over the other (‘sorry I could not travel both / and be one traveller’), while being unable to discern exactly where they lead (‘[I] looked down one as far as I could / to where it bent in the undergrowth’). Next to the impossibility of saying how the roads differ, it is also not possible to alter the decision once it has been made (‘yet knowing how way leads on to way / I doubted if I should ever come back’). Thus, Pastoor’s remark in the midst of Fransie’s story ironically underlines Fransie’s blundering onto the road to crime.

At the same time, however, the remark not only foreshadows Fransie’s lack of a conscious decision (besides drinking and driving) in causing a fatal accident, it is also a transcultural gesture on the part of Pastoor: the quote refers to the inevitability of Fransie’s initiation in the prison gangs when read as an allusion to the initiation ritual of the 28 gang. In Jonny Steinberg’s book, Magadien Wentzel, a former general in the 28s, explains parts of this initiation ritual to Steinberg, who

⁵ Notably, ‘steek’ in Afrikaans can refer either to stabbing someone with an object, or to sexual penetration.

interviewed him in prison. The story of 'the long road' of initiation explicitly refers to a 'dark forest' where the to be initiated member is asked to choose between the silver and the gold line of the 28 gang (Steinberg 2004: 216). Only members of the gold line have to stab in order to become part of the bloodline; they choose an assegaai, instead of a knobkerrie, to carry with them through the forest. As Wentzel also explains, however, the initiation story changed in 1987, when a war broke out between the silver and gold line in the Cape prisons and the silver line changed the ritual from stabbing to initiation through sex (Steinberg 2004: 217-8). In referring to the way the initiation story has changed over time, Pastoor's comment thus foregrounds a moment in which the gangs themselves have come to an ideological fork in the path. The fact that he makes this remark in the middle of Fransie's story thus bizarrely inscribes this ideological conflict at the heart of Fransie's completely unrelated criminal experience. By placing gang initiation at the heart of Fransie's crime, Pastoor in fact suggests that Fransie's initiation has actually already begun and became inevitable, the moment he accidentally drove over the girl. Even before Fransie comes into contact with the prison gangs, the pull of their myths is already inscribed in Fransie's personal life. The economically privileged and relatively innocent Fransie is basically being ripped out of his own context and culturally appropriated by both Adidas and Pastoor.

Pastoor's version of the story of the initiation ritual in *Rooiland* contains important overlaps and differences with the version told by Adidas. In this story, Adidas relates how in a gang war in the recent past, his hero Johnny Baster (Bastard) cleaned the bloodlines of the gangs by murdering the king of the 'liegbekke' Tony America, who did not know his proper place in the order of the gangs. This is the same Tony of whom Pastoor speaks lovingly only minutes before the scene takes place, and whose name is tattooed on Pastoor's back (Kapp 2013: 48). Adidas story about Tony America goes as follows:

In die nag het Kilikijan 'n spreu geraak, en hy het deur die venster van die sel gevlie. Hy het in Johnny Baster ingeklim, hulle siele het geunite. Toe laat hy hom die bajonet point. Die ander ndoda in die sel wou nog keer; maar Kilikijan was te sterk. Hy het hulle allebei witbiene gemaak, verdala, onder die ribbes en tot in die hart. Hy het gewag tot die son opstaan, en toe die twee strale van die 2-7 deur die wolke skyn, het hy die nuwe wet in Tony America se bloed teen die muur opgeskryf. Hulle het hom agter die berge gestuur vir drie maande, die langste sentence nog ooit. Maar die oorlog was verby. Johnny Baster het die bloedlyne weer skoongemaak. Fondela. Die Nommer was weer vol (Kapp 2013: 51-52).⁶

This story about Johnny Baster performs a number of important repetitions and deviations from other accounts of prison gang culture, which are both internal and external to the play. Without a basic knowledge of gang culture, it is com-

6 This translation was taken from the subtitles of the dvd version of Kapp's play: 'In the night, Kilikijan became a sterling. He flew through the window of the cell and entered the body of Johnny Baster. Their souls became one! Then, Kilikijan made Johnny Baster take the bayonet. The other ndota in the cell tried to stop him but Kilikijan was too strong! He killed them both! Here, under the ribs, and into the heart! And when the sun rose, and the two rays of the 27 shone through the cloud ... he had written the new law on the wall in Tony America's blood. They sent him into solitary for three months. The longest sentence ever. But the war was over. Johnny Baster cleaned the blood lines. I say the number, it was full again!'

pletely unclear what these references are and why this is such a pivotal moment in the play's development. The fact that Adidas explicitly connects Johnny Baster to Kilikijan and explains to Frans that Kilikijan was the father of the 27s, is, in fact, a history lesson that involves an explanation of the origins of the gang.⁷ Since, as I have mentioned earlier, a particular member's knowledge of gang history reflects his status in the ranks, Adidas' revelations could be read as an indication of the fact that Frans' initiation has actually already begun. The progression of Frans' initiation thus occurs independently of him making any kind of conscious decision about the matter. He is practically being sucked into the gang structure unawares.

This interpretation is further underlined by the fact that the story about Johnny Baster replicates the structure of the initiation rituals as related by Pastoor earlier in the play. Yet, there is also an important difference between the initiation rituals as described by Pastoor and the way it is reworked by Adidas. Johnny Baster does not kill a prison guard, as the old habits would require of him. Instead, he stabs a general of another gang, the 26s. Even despite this anomaly, however, the murder of Tony America makes Johnny Baster a potential member of the gold line of the 28s, since they represent the army of the gang system. In Adidas' story, strangely enough, Baster's initiation into the gang actually takes place through a copying of the law, which he writes in Tony's blood on the prison wall. This action positions Johnny Baster – as Adidas also signals through his reference to the two sunbeams of the 2-7 shining through the clouds – as a 27, a keeper of gang law. From the gang's history as rendered by Steinberg (2004: 35–53) however, it follows that Adidas' hero should actually be a reincarnation of Nongoloza, rather than of Kilikijan, since Nonogoloza was the father of the 28s. Adidas' striking preference for Kilikijan thus posits Johnny Baster as a leader who mixes up the bloodlines of the gang (that of the 27s and the 28s), even as he ends the war between the 28s and the 26s. In this way, Johnny Baster's cleaning of the bloodlines, as his name also suggests, injects an element of bastardisation or, when phrased in less binary terms, of transculturation at the heart of the gang's most important story.

The forest of intertextual references, rewritings and revisions does not end here, however. The story told by Adidas both overlaps with and deviates from Pastoor's version, who explains he used to share a cell with Tony America and was, as will become clear later in the play, actually Tony's lover, as well as the person responsible for Tony's death. The telling of the story by Adidas thus sets up the possibility of the power struggle between Adidas and Pastoor that will result in the climax of the play. In short, the telling of this story touches on a Gordian knot of possible plot strands, intradiegetic motivations and historical interpretations,⁸

7 For a more detailed account of the story of how the gangs originated and of the enmity between Nongoloza and Kilikijan, please see Kapp's contribution to this volume, or the third chapter in Steinberg's book.

8 Another historical narrative strand referred to in this scene is that of Doggy Dog, who managed to become an authoritative figure in the 27s in the 1990s without being officially initiated into the gang by a superior. In his analysis of Doggy Dog, Isaac Ndlovu shows how Doggy Dog managed to plan for a career in the Number gangs in prison by committing murder outside of prison. After murdering a white farmer and his wife, and using their blood to write the laws of the Number gang on the walls of their house, Doggy Dog (who was uninitiated) recreated the role of Kilikijan as keeper of

making the scene so complex as to be almost 'unreadable'. I have tried to make some of these possible strands clearer in the above, not in order to give a definitive interpretation of this scene, but rather to emphasise exactly how obscure and 'unreadable' it really is. As I will argue below, it is precisely the murkiness of the situation for Frans, as well as the reader, that constitutes 'the mythological' in Kapp's play.

4 Reading Myth as Transculturation

Although the story is a complex one, its mythical nature seems easy enough to understand. The transformation of Kilikjan's soul into a starling is a motif of transformation familiar from other mythical settings, ranging from Greek gods to South American or West African tricksters. Rather than Kilikjan's transformation however, it is precisely the fact that this moment is unreadable for Frans as an outsider, that refers to the mythological content of the scene. His response to Adidas' rendition of gang history is one of surprise, confusion, perhaps even disbelief. He glances at Pastoor as Adidas relates his account of Tony America as a 'liegbek' and responds with a disoriented 'Wat?' (Kapp 2013: 51). When Adidas becomes aware of the possibility that Frans has been influenced by Pastoor ('Wat het die ou vel jou vertel?'), Frans quickly tries to smooth over the situation by ensuring that he is on Adidas' side ('Ek glo jou, ek is saam met jou' (Kapp 2013: 52)).

Following Barthes, Fransie considers signals a failure of the initial function of Adidas' myth. A naturalisation of Adidas' ideological position is not achieved since there is no unquestioning transference of this content onto Fransie. This is partly due to the fact that Fransie considers Adidas' story as a possible distortion of Pastoor's version. But Fransie does not choose sides yet. He neither accepts, nor rejects the myth, suggesting that he reads the myth as presence, as 'at once true and unreal' (Barthes 1991: 127). In contrast to Barthes' suggestion that the presence of myth involves the reader seeing through the myth, however, Fransie's position points towards a much more obscure situation. The fact that Fransie feels the need to hide his disbelief here suggests that he realizes there is an important difference between the stories, but does not fully understand the consequences of this difference yet. Although the ideologies are rather blatantly communicated to him, he, as a reader of myth, postpones the action required in the transcultural space created by the ideological positions the men are trying to communicate to him.

As I have discussed above, this ideological difference consists of the nature of initiation into the prison gangs, where Adidas, who tells a story of stabbing, paradoxically stands for sex and rape, and Pastoor, who speaks of sex and love, represents the procedure of stabbing. At this point in the story, however, Frans does not know exactly what has happened in the prison cell where Tony was stabbed and none of the characters know at this point in the story that Pastoor actually is Johnny Baster. They will only find out *after* Fransie's rape by Adidas that Pastoor has killed the murderer of Tony America and has subsequently appropriated

the law. As such, he had already claimed a crucial role in the 27 gang before ever setting foot in their vicinity (Ndlovu 2011, Steinberg 2004, see chapter 4).

both killings to become the new leader of the 27s. This appropriation consists of presenting himself as a reincarnation of Kilikijan by writing the law of the gang in their blood on the walls of his cell. The scene discussed above thus stages a crucial moment of reversed dramatic irony, where Pastoor knows parts of the story still unclear to the other characters (Fransie, Chris and Adidas) *as well as* the reader/spectator.

The fact that Pastoor reveals his identity only after Frans is raped, throws crucial light on the workings of mythology. Although Pastoor's motivations for helping Frans are obscure throughout the play – maybe he simply enjoys Fransie's company? (Kapp 2013: 44–5) – he only reveals his prison gang status when Fransie can no longer be saved and the main drive of the plot falls away. This results in a final and physical struggle between Pastoor and Adidas, in which Fransie intervenes and stabs Adidas in the stomach. Fransie is forced to leave his position as a reader of myth and will now have to take up a position: either to be lynched by the 28s when they find out that he killed one of their members, or to trust Pastoor and rely on his status as a 27 general. He chooses the latter. If we consider this choice from the perspective offered by Barthes on the workings of mythology, which naturalises the specifics of historical circumstances, it becomes clear that the moment Fransie pushes the sharpened edge of the steel cup into Adidas' stomach, he is forced to leave the historicity of his actions behind. Whether Fransie stabs because he is exorted to do so by Pastoor ('steek diep, soldaat' (Kapp 2013: 74)), because he wants to protect Pastoor, or because he wants to execute revenge on Adidas for the rape, is not relevant. It does not matter that Fransie does not want to belong anywhere and abhors communal identity (Kapp 2013: 15–17). The history and context of who he was is pushed to the background and he becomes part of the naturalising force of the prison myth.

Pastoor's claim at the close of the play that Frans' initiation as king represents the cleansing of the bloodlines both restores one of the previous versions of gang history, and creates yet another version of it that is up for grabs. The precise strands of this story are impossible to trace. In this sense, the play actually foregrounds a reading of the process of myth that remains somewhat implicit in Barthes' description of it. *Rooiland* suggests that it is precisely the failure of the myth as Adidas tries to convey it to Frans that paves the way for the latter's possibility to act. As Barthes suggests, 'it is the reader of myths himself who must reveal their essential function' (Barthes 1991: 128). Differently from Barthes, however, Fransie is not a reader of myth who refuses to be impressed by its naturalised claim because he sees through it. On the contrary, in Fransie's case, the myth is totally inscrutable and Fransie acts, *despite* his lack of knowledge. He is, in that sense, not Barthes' sophisticated reader, but more like an improvised translator or transculturator of myth, who feels his way through the endless layers, inversions and reprints of history as he gets sucked into the vortex of the power structures that accompany it. Combining the concept of mythology with transculturation in the reading of this play suggests that it is not the prison gang's history itself that is to be read as mythological, but rather Fransie's struggle with the layers of the stories presented to him. Even if he does not fully understand the ideological subtext of the different versions, he is forced to reinscribe the heart of gang history with his own crossing over into gang culture. In doing so, he makes yet another version of

gang history possible and continues its lineage of transcultural conflict: Kilikijan, Johnny Baster / Pastoor, Fransie. A story to be retold over and over, until, as Pastoor would put it, 'ek hom nie meer glo nie. Dan begin ek weer van voor af, op 'n nuwe manier' (Kapp 2013: 53). The renewal of the myths of initiation and leadership in *Rooiland* are made possible, not because their content has arrived, but because their 'core' is bastardised out of sight. In true transcultural fashion, however, this failure also signals a possible new direction.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to suggest possible ways of approaching the mythological complexity in *Rooiland*. Although the tracing of the intertextual references to Frost and Steinberg might suggest otherwise, I have precisely not aimed to make the play 'readable' or to offer a decisive interpretation of it. Instead, I have tried to show how it opens up a line of thought about the relation between mythology and transculturation through a negotiation of the different discourses that make up the play's sub- and intertexts. Of course, the fact that the ways in which the play deals with these various traces remain unexplained and largely invisible to readers and viewers who are completely unfamiliar with South African prison culture, is precisely the point. In that sense, the reader or viewer shares Fransie's position in the play, where, in order to form an interpretation, one is triggered to become a reader of myth, a chronicler and organiser of the different stories in the transcultural space offered by the characters in the play.

What I have tried to argue throughout this reading of *Rooiland* is that the work of mythology does not lie in the content of prison gang myths, nor in a certain representation of events in retrospect. Instead, this reading of Fransie's position in the play suggests that mythmaking is actually what takes place in the gory entanglement of the subject with his or her circumstances. It is the actual telling, the convincing of the audience, the process of inscribing oneself, or a group, into the annals of history by negotiating conflicting versions of events. Frans is being appropriated by gang culture without his consent and knowledge, and is left very little choice but to appropriate this culture in turn. Mythmaking is, then, a matter of appropriation, of transculturation, perhaps even of translation, in which the point is precisely to negotiate the losses and gains of cultural displacement.

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Adres van de auteur

University of Amsterdam
h.h.stuit@uva.nl