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**The Image of America in
Southern African Literature**

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Synopsis

This dissertation is an attempt to trace and explain the image of 'America' in the Southern African literature from a psychoanalytic — and, more specifically, from a Lacanian — perspective. The paper argues that whereas in the works from the 1950s there was a wholly positive imaginary identification with the African American other, with its music, its political struggles, its achievements in the sports arena, in later works there is a symbolic renunciation of all things American. It is argued that these shifts in identification were also a response to the political events taking place both in the United States and in the region.

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CHAPTER ONE: Mirrors and Cross-Country

Connections

In truth, in the period following the Second World War, not many Southern African poets and fiction writers wrote about 'America.' What is more, where there are literary references or allusions to America, these have come from either Mozambique or South Africa—with Angola as a type of after-thought. Writers from the rest of the region seem to be silent on the topic of the USA. But Mozambique and South Africa were very different countries in that period; the one was a colony until 1975, the other had been independent since 1910, even if power was in the hands of a racial minority. The perceptions of and responses to America by the writers from these countries were, likewise, very different. South Africans rarely wrote about 'America' as a concept, but that may have been, as we shall come to see, because aspects of its culture were already sufficiently Americanized. Mozambicans, on the other hand, would write about America as a concept, but it is also true to say that their version or view of America was largely coloured — or, better, mediated — by what was occurring in South Africa. Ironically, the corollary also holds: for some South Africans, Mozambique was seen as an 'exotic' and 'carefree' location free of racial bigotry largely because it was so unlike the fast-Americanized urban culture of South Africa. In this chapter I would like to trace some of these intersecting perceptions by focusing on texts by three writers writing in the late 1950s: José Craveirinha, Nadine Gordimer and Rui Knopfli. Coincidentally, all the texts under discussion were either written or published in 1958.

Nadine Gordimer had literary contacts with the USA as she was a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*, although she visited the country for the first time only in 1959 (“Less”). In other words, she would have had some sort of conception of America. Her novel *A World of Strangers*, published in 1958, is the only one of her works where there are consistent references to ‘America’ or ‘American’ things. To be fair, these references are few, which makes them no less significant, even if only for the fact she seems to have been the only person mentioning ‘America.’ (The ‘Drum’ writers also wrote about America, but indirectly. These are discussed in Chapter Four.) In her novel, the references to America are ironic commentaries on how South African society (both black and white) had become ‘Americanized.’ For example, township gangsters are said to drive “big American cars” (162), smart blacks have “American-looking trousers” (100) and white children wear “violently jazzy American shirts” (114). In the novel there is even reference to the diction of (black) township dwellers, which, according to the narrator, is said to have been borrowed from an earlier generation of Americans, and obviously copied from the speech of Hollywood movies:

They spoke to each to each other in the monosyllabic, subdued way of an audience, and threw in a few words of dated American-English, as if that were the fashionable thing to do. ‘Doing all right, there, Dan?’ ‘Sure, boy. How’s it with you these days?’ ‘Hullo, baby—’ ‘You in good shape, honey?’” (127)

These few references made in passing to America do not constitute a critique or assessment of American culture, but they do give a rough idea of how some

South Africans perceived their society in the 1950s. Ironically, in the same period that she was writing *A World of Strangers*, Gordimer wrote a travel article on Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) where she contrasted that city's exotic 'Latin' decadence and exuberance with Johannesburg's Americanized obsession with work. She marvelled at how, unlike in Johannesburg, in "Lourenço Marques work and play *do mix*" ("Riviera" 168) and how men and women of all races "eat, drink and dance around you" (171). This was an almost idyllic society, where even the nightclubs — she calls them "*boîtes*" — look like something from a pleasure dream. We are told that one of these is "hung with pink silk, like a cocoon" (168). It is in one of the *boîtes* that she encounters a fado-singer who sings to her these words:

Long, long ago, when I was young in years
 My mother sometimes allowed me
 Red cherries to hang on my *ears* ... (171; my italics)

It is obvious that Gordimer concocted these words herself, for fado, an urban music, does not as a rule speak about hanging cherries on the ears. It reads like a pastiche of Lorca, whom she had been reading at the time, and whose words she uses as the opening quote of the novel from that period:

I want the strong air of the most profound night
 to remove flowers and letters from the arch where you sleep,
 and a black boy to announce to the gold-minded whites
 the arrival of the reign of the ear of corn.

In Gordimer's novel, this excerpt from the "Ode a Walt Whitman" has the function of signalling Gordimer's critique of white civilization — which in South Africa, at least, was built on the profits of gold-mining—and how blacks, exemplified by the figure of the black boy, are bearers of a natural order.¹ Although it is not stated in the novel, the inter-textual indicators — the idea of the natural (ears of corn, cherries at the ears), Latinity, Lorca (the pastiche, his own words) — suggest that, for Gordimer, South Africa ought to have become less American to become more like Lourenço Marques.

José Craveirinha and Rui Knopfli, who lived in Lourenço Marques, never wrote about nightclubs such as these where fado-singers sang versions of Lorca; when they wrote about the bustling nightclub in downtown Lourenço Marques, it was the jazz clubs they were talking about.² In fact, Rui Knopfli, a great jazz aficionado, was acquainted with the jazz scene *both* in Lourenço Marques and in Johannesburg, where he lived for a few years. His most famous jazz poem "*Kwela para Amanhã*" [Kwela for Tomorrow], which was translated into English by the poet himself, is about the South African 'kwela' jazz of the 1950s. The poem was included in *O País dos Outros*, which came out in 1959. The poem is largely an account of the oppressiveness and morbidity of life in apartheid Johannesburg, yet it ends in the high note of hope provided by a kwela tune by Spokes Mashiyane:

¹ Of course, this use of Lorca's words is also profound misappropriation and misreading of the poem, which is a long poetic reflection, addressed to Walt Whitman, on what it meant to be homosexual in the 1920s.

² Some of Craveirinha's "crónicas" (chronicles, accounts), collected as *Contacto e Outras Crónicas*, tell us about nightlife in Lourenço Marques, viz., "Samuel Dabula" (35-36) and "Despedida de Daíco" (53-54).

*Apesar disso,
 com a nostalgia verde do veld
 e do rebanho da montanha,
 Spokes Mashiyane, dum pedaço de lata,
 faz um kwela para amanhã.
 (País 81)*

In spite of this,
 with the longing green of the veld,
 and of the herds in the mountain,
 Spokes Mashiyane, from a piece of tin,
 makes a kwela for tomorrow.

(Gray, *Penguin* 242; translated by Knopfli)

The world of jazz is a constant presence in Knopfli's work, and it is a presence that very often harks back to America, although in a very different form from the way America is viewed in the work of more 'nationalist' poets like, say, Noémia de Sousa and Agostinho Neto. Fernando Martinho, in article on the figure of America in Rui Knopfli's poetry, argues that for Knopfli jazz functions primarily as a 'cultural reference' and as an index to Anglo-American culture ("America" 119), as a sign of high culture, in other words. Despite this very individual appropriation of the concept of jazz, it certainly is true that the idea of jazz — and, by extension, America — was widely disseminated through Knopfli's poetry. But this interest in jazz was also mediated, as we saw from the kwela poem, by the South African township reinventions of jazz (marabi, kwela, etc.).

Perhaps it is this mediation of South Africa that accounts for the recurrent interest in the idea of America in José Craveirinha's poetry of the 1950s.

Craveirinha never actually visited the United States and neither could he speak English, or so he would claim. Yet it is obvious from a reading of his poetry that he reflected on what America signified for him and for his country; and it is also clear that he was keen observer of the historical events that were taking place in the United States. In a sense, this interest in the USA should not surprise us since this country has dominated the film industry, and its music (jazz, blues, rock) has influenced the musical styles in many countries. It should be expected that any recipient of American culture should have developed some sort of image of 'America.'

All the same, in the same period that Craveirinha was writing about America he was also wrote frequently writing about South Africa. We think of all poems on the *magaíças*, the Mozambican workers who were contracted to work on the gold mines in the Witwatersrand; later, at the end of the decade, there is his eloquent elegy on the Sharpeville Massacre. Perhaps Craveirinha's leap to America was made via South Africa; it was because there was an industrialized, racist society on its door-step that Craveirinha would write about another society that was industrialized and racist, America. In many ways, South Africa was a replica — an imitation, an imago — of America, for many of the developments in that society, although home grown to an extent, were also reworkings of American models. (This, we recall, was also one of the points of Gordimer's novel from 1958.) José Craveirinha would also have been familiar with what was this American-inflected South Africa culture through the work of Rui Knopfli. "*Kwela para Amanhã*" is dedicated to none other than José Craveirinha.

Knopfli's poem may have provided the model for Craveirinh's long, 110-line poem "*Quando o José Pensa na América*,"³ which was written in 1958 (roughly at the time of Knopfli's poem). Like the kwela poem, Craveirinha's poem is a dissection of society. The method Craveirinha uses to explore American society is by creating an outsider's 'image' of America. This image of America is really the constellation of other – usually visual – images. These images are derived from the cinema, cartoons, music, architecture, literature. The poem "*Quando o José Pensa na América*" can be read as a concatenation of the signifiers that circulate around the concept of 'America.' There are the film stars, from Charlie Chaplin (101) and Laurel & Hardy (60) through to the pornographic portraits of Marilyn Monroe (79–80, 106). There are the cartoon heroes: Popeye (5), Donald Duck (59), Mickey Mouse (61). There is the music that America has given the world: the 'negro spirituals' (8), jazz (32–34, 43), the blues (65). There is also an overview of some of the most emblematic urban images: the flashy billboards on Broadway (4), the modernist architecture of Chicago (16). There are the symbols of American commercialism: the names of American cars (18, 35) and the 'tons of chewing-gum packages' (42). But the underside of the American success story is also made evident. There is the poverty and squalor of Harlem (50). There is also the violence perpetrated against African Americans in the name of democracy, and which is so senseless that the poet compares the actions of the police truncheons to paint brushes making red the sweat of black Americans: "*os efeitos da excessiva pintura dos bastões / pincelando de vermelho a suor / dos negros democraticamente*" ("the visual effects of the wild

³ The poem has never, as far as I could ascertain, been published before. My copy of the poem was obtained from Craveirinha himself in 1992; the poem was transcribed by Fátima Mendonça, the Mozambican scholar.

paint strokes of the police truncheons / democratically painting the sweat of blacks / in red”; 44–46). Finally, there is a roll-call of the most significant African American figures in the first half of the twentieth century: Louis Armstrong (23), Marian Anderson (26), Duke Ellington (27), Lena Horne (28), Paul Robeson (29), Richard Wright (30), Nat King Cole (43). Singled out for the most praise are two notable African American sports figures: Joe Louis, who defeated Max Schmeling, the boxer from Nazi Germany, in 1938 (91–92), and Jesse Owens, the sprinter who won four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics in 1936 (88–90), right in the heart of Nazi Germany or, to use Craveirinha’s more metonymic phrasing, in “Hitler’s armoured heart” (*blindado coração de Hitler*; 90).

This image of ‘America,’ created as it is via other images, reveals both a certain amount of contempt or hatred (capitalist, white, racist America) and also of love (the struggles of African Americans). The poet/narrator’s strange relationship with a country that is loved and loathed has the hallmarks of what Jacques Lacan would have described as an ‘imaginary relation.’ It is to the imaginary relation that we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: The Specular Image of the American 'Negro' *or* Prolegomenon to the Lacanian Imaginary

To understand the function and overall-importance of 'America' in Southern African literature work, we have to take note of two important events that took place in the 1930s: the first was when Jesse Owens, the black American athlete, won four gold medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics; the second was when Joe Louis, the black American boxer, defeated the German boxer Max Schmeling in a first-round knockout at Yankee Stadium in June 1938.

These events were important because they showed, for the first time, that black sports figures were capable of defeating whites in the sports arena, that the 'black race' could not be considered inferior, and was capable of all manner of human achievements. This lesson was taken to heart by many of the subjugated black people of Southern Africa, and the literature of the region is a testimony to a decades-long *identification* with the African American. It is an identification with what the blacks from Southern Africa could be like, with their 'better selves,' with the ideal image of themselves.

2.1 Jesse Owens and the Mirror Stage

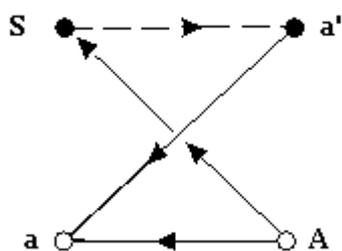
Lacan's idea that human beings develop a sense of self through an identification with a specular image was first rehearsed in his well-known paper "Le Stade du Miroir Comme Formateur de la Fonction du Je," which dates from 1948, and which was later to be included in his *Écrits*. The first version of the paper, then entitled "The Looking-Glass Phase,"⁴ was delivered at the 14th Psychoanalytic Congress in Marienbad, in Nazi Germany. It is known that the young Lacan left the conference soon after giving his paper, this so that he could attend the Berlin Olympics. The fortuitous and close connection between the contents of his paper and what was actually being enacted at the Berlin Olympics has been noted by Philippe Julien in his book-long study of Lacan's mirror stage (15-16). The self-image of Nazi Germany, its specular other, demanded a certain type of athletic build and beauty, a certain skin colour and eye-colour. Germany could not identify with those who did not conform to this physiognomy; Jews, blacks and other equally lesser people could not offer up a mirror that would function as Germany's self-image. When Jesse Owens, the black athlete from the USA, won four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics he not only showed the fallacy of Nazi notions of racial superiority, he also broke the mirror of Germany's self-image (Julien 15). A black man could not be an alter ego for what is German; he could not stand in place of the stereotypical Aryan male.

In other words, this specular image that the human being first *identifies* with is not the self, but someone who is somehow like the self, a *semblable*, an alter ego. Lacan talks about this identification as a "transformation that places in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image" (*Écrits* 76). This alter ego is a

⁴ No version of this paper survives, except for some notes taken by Françoise Dolto (Roudinesco 214).

narcissistic image of the ego, a ‘good’ version of the self. Without the mediation of language and culture — what Lacan would later term the ‘symbolic’ — this imaginary relationship would be wholly narcissistic. This is another way of saying that the imaginary rarely exists as an absolute pole; it is never fully divorced from the symbolic.

It is useful at this point to introduce ‘Schema L,’ which is really a diagram Jacques Lacan devised in order to explain, in an abbreviated manner, our own ego’s relation with our unconscious and with those others that somehow represent ourselves to us. The original diagram is found in his “Seminar on “The Purloined Letter””:



(*Écrits* 40)

The letter **A** stands for ‘Autre,’ French for ‘Other’. The small **a** on the bottom left is the ego, our own self. By attributing the symbol of **a** to the ego what Lacan is really saying is that our self is really alienated; it is an ‘other,’ as it were. We think — because we inhabit our own self — that we know who we are, but so often our ego or self is what others have made us to be: our teachers, our parents, society, tradition. But, worse still, we are alienated because we think we know what our real self is. Lacan would say that the ego is not true self. It is our false self.

If, on the one hand, the ego or false self (**a**) cannot connect with the core of our being unless it is via an Other, this, on the other hand, is not true of the alter ego (**a'**), which has a direct connection with the self (**a**). The term **a'** can stand for an alter ego, often a real-life person who is our 'better half.' But what this also means is that the **a'** is an idealized version of our self. It is the **image** we have of our ourselves — and that is precisely why Lacan called the relation between the **a** and the **a'** as an imaginary relation. 'Imaginary' also has the connotations of 'imagination,' and this also makes sense because in our 'imagination' we see ourselves as better, bolder, more formidable people.

But because this imaginary relationship is between the ego and its object modelled on its own image — an image, an imago — it is fundamentally a narcissistic relationship. Maire Jaanus writes that the semblable (the self-likeness) is "libidinally chained to the narcissistic image of the ego" ("Civilization" 323). This also means that the ego cannot be conceived as a self, but rather as the totality of images through which we are constituted.

The real core of our being is the subject, designated by the letter **S**. The subject is not the real ego. The subject refers to the subject of subject of language. We could say, with Colette Soler, that the "subject is the one who speaks" ("Hysteria" 256). Language is something which predates us as humans — when we are born there are already people speaking our language and we born into the language, as it were. It is also what makes human. We speak: We are members of a cultural (or symbolic) order. For that reason it is more appropriate to refer to the subject as the 'subject of speech'. Soler explains: "It is

better to say 'the subject of speech' because when you say that you are not saying that the subject is the *agent* of speech. The subject of speech is obviously the subject who speaks, but the point is that he is *determined* by speech" (257).

The subject can only communicate with the self only through an Other (the **S-A** axis), through a symbolic relationship, in other words. 'Other' can mean many things. The mother, for example, is our first Other. Or it can be some Other person. But usually the Other represents those things in our symbolic or cultural world, those things which envelop us and of which we are part: the institutions for whom we work; the ideal towards which we aspire; God, whom we aim to serve. Writing, which is really outside of our own bodies, is also an Other. Writing is a symbolic activity, *par excellence*.

The subject refers also to the subject of our unconscious. The unconscious does not refer to some hidden topographic region; it merely stands, quite literally, for that which we are not aware. The importance of understanding unconscious motivations literary works is that the authors might not have been consciously aware of what they were doing, or, better still, they might not have been conscious of all the implications or permutations of their writing. The **S** in our schema is the subject of language and of the unconscious because the unconscious comes into existence with the acquisition of language. We might recall Lacan's frequently-repeated statement that the unconscious is structured like a language. The unconscious communicates, as we shall see, in an eminently rational and logic manner, as though it were a language.

In his seminal works on the unconscious, *Traumdeutung* and *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten*, Freud had identified two basic mechanisms through which the unconscious communicates: condensation (*Verdichtung*) and displacement (*Verschiebung*). Lacan recognized that these poles of unconscious communication coincided with the distinction between metaphor and metonymy. His discovery borrowed from the work of Roman Jakobson's work on aphasia. Jakobson had postulated that the two types of errors in aphasia occurred along either of two axes: a metaphoric axis or a metonymic axis. In the case of the metaphoric pole, a word would be substituted by another word because of some sort of analogy or similarity in concepts; for example, the movement of car could be substituted by the movement of a beetle. If the error was a metonymic, the substitution would have something to do with something that was adjacent to or contiguous with it; White House could substitute the President of the United States.

I would like now to explain how we use these concepts of metaphor (condensation) and metonymy (displacement) since it has some bearing on our analysis. I begin with what Freud called 'displacement' Lacan preferred to see Freudian 'displacement' as an example metonymy, for it works along similar lines to that figure of speech. Metonymy literally means a 'change of name.' We use metonymy all the time in daily speech. We use one thing refers to another thing to which it is associated; the use of a part of or an aspect of something may refer to the whole. A 'sail' might refer to the navy. A 'knife' may refer to murder and guilt. A 'crown' might refer to a king or kingdom. I quote from the closing lines of Craveirinha's "Excerto," a poem about American atrocities in Vietnam, and which we will be discussing in Chapter 7: "E os iatagãs / emergindo no

carcás da noite aliciada” [And the yataghans / arising from the quiver of the alluring night]. At one level, the word ‘yataghans,’ traditional weapons, seems to be out of place since it has nothing to do with the mechanized destruction of Vietnam. But the reader is quickly to realize that ‘yataghans’ is in place of ‘an army of yataghans’ and, more indirectly still, of an army that will resist the foreign oppressor. The word ‘yataghans’ and ‘resistance army’ are associatively linked; they are connected by what Freud, in his discussion of displacement, called a “chain of connections” (“Repression” 155). Lacan would have preferred to use the phrase ‘signifying chain.’ He once described the signifying chain as “links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links” (*Écrits* 418). ‘Resistance army’ is the first signifier in the chain and the ‘yataghans’ would be the signifier further along. The formula for this operation would look like this: **(S¹...S²)**. One of Lacan’s greatest insights is that there would be no metaphor if there were no metonymy in the first place; the signifying chain is metonymic by nature (*Livro 5* 80). We shall understand this as we proceed.

The other way the unconscious communicates is by means of metaphor. This was the way Lacan preferred to read Freud’s notion of ‘condensation,’ which he originally identified in dream analysis. ‘Condensation’ refers to when two or more ideas or images are merged into one or, alternatively, when one idea or image is distributed along various others. Now, metaphor, as we know from Aristotle, compares two (or three or four) things in terms of their concurrent similarities. Let us take as an example the title of Craveirinha’s 1997 collection *Babalaze das Hienas*, which literally means the ‘Hangover of the Hyenas’ (or maybe even ‘Drunkenness of the Hyenas’ since the meaning of *babalaze* also

depends on the context). The hyenas alluded to in the title of his book are ‘the armed bandits’ (*bandidos armados*), the phrase by which RENAMO operatives were known through out the 1980s. The similarities would be that both armed bandits and hyenas are vile, cowardly creatures. The metaphor does not take into account the concurrent dissimilarities, which is why philosophers down the ages have been so suspicious of the metaphor. The metaphor is also a lie. Hyenas are animals who do not speak and who because they belong to no society are under no obligation to obey any moral code; armed bandits do not have fangs, fur, etc. But there is also an element of the truth in the assertion: armed bandits are people who have renounced moral laws and are at the level of animals. If, when writing a story, I perceive two things — or two situations or two people—as similar I might condense them into one. Lacan would prefer to see to as one substituting the other.

Let me explain, in more detail, how this operation takes place. We begin with the signifier **S** (hyenas). This **S**, the word we see in print, the text we read, signifies another signifier, **S¹** (i.e., those who are like beasts; those who have renounced the moral law). This signifier, in so far as it exists along a signifying chain, would be connected to **S²** (armed bandits) because it would have something in common with it: armed bandits are like those who renounced moral laws and have turned to savagery. This is a metaphorical process. This process that we have been talking about can be conceptualised using the formula set out below. It is taken from Lacan’s (as yet unpublished) *Seminar XIV*⁵. It looks daunting, but it really is quite easy to handle:

⁵ There is a slightly different version of the formula for metaphor in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” in *Écrits* (429); there is also a yet different version in

$$\frac{\mathbf{S}}{\mathbf{S}_1} \cdot \frac{\mathbf{S}_2}{\mathbf{x}} \cong \mathbf{S} \left(\frac{1}{\mathbf{s}} \right)$$

Let us go back to our examples of the Craveirinha's hyenas. The hyena is our main signifier (**S**). What it signifies and substitutes (**S¹**) is below the bar (—), which is to say, it is below consciousness. We can retrieve it only with the help of metonymic associations. We already have some of these associations, but they revolve around the same idea: bestiality, savagery. **S²** is the second signifier (armed bandits); the **x** below the bar means that **S²** represents or signifies **x**. The sign of equivalence in the middle merely says that the left part of the equation is equivalent to the one on the right: the signifier **S** consists of a signifier that has substituted another signifier.

2.2 The Poetic 'I' and the Social 'We'

It may appear from our brief introduction to a Lacanian understanding of language concepts that we shall be 'psychoanalyzing' the work of Southern African writers. It would of course be possible to attempt that; such a study would consider a writer's diction and the sort of representations his or her work makes about himself or herself as a person, and, then, tease the implications of such representations; such a study would be fundamentally psychobiographical. There is a role for such a study, although it does not tie up with the

The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (248), the name by which Seminar XI was published in English.

task I have set for myself: which to explore the image of the United States in South African literature and the purpose of this image.

Still, it may also seem that I am using a tool of analysis that is geared towards the discourse of the individual (the I, the self) to consider the representations of something that is social (a country): I am using Lacanian tools (psychoanalysis) to see how a writer (I) writes about America (country). I am aware of the apparent contradiction. The first answer to the objection is that any sort of representation is done through language and that language is not neutral; metaphor and metonymy, more than tropes or figures of speech, are essential poles in linguistic communication; and what is more, language is a social instrument, the product of a cultural order and the means through which the entire social system operates. The second answer is that while it is true that some writers write from the perspective of an I, it would be a fallacy to assume that the I is always the poet/writers him or herself. More often than not the I is a poetic persona. But more than that, in the work of the 'nationalist' poets of the 1950s the 'I' usually functioned as a social 'I.' For example, in Craveirinha's "Poem of a Future Citizen" the 'I' stands for the Mozambican people, the Nation itself, the country in the process of formation, the nation-yet-to-be: "I have come from all the parts / of a Nation yet to be. / I have come and here I am!" (Travel-Writing 69; translated with Stephen Gray). Fátima Mendonça in her analysis of the theme of the nation in Craveirinha's poetry talks about how the poet-narrator's notion of a country yet-to-be serves also to unify the disparate tribal and linguistic groupings that colonialism had tried to divide (388). The purpose of the 'I,' especially in nationalist poetry, is to speak with everyone's

voice, with the voice of the nation, to unite the voice of the self (the poet or the poetic persona) with the voices of the multitudes.

It is in the context of this discourse of 'I,' this discourse that attempts to speak with the voice of everyone, that the image of the country America is particularly interesting. Admittedly, this image of America would probably tell us much about the writer's own personal preoccupations, but because this poetry sets out to construct a social (not a private) discourse, and harness the preoccupations of his countrymen within his public-minded discourse, it is not strange that this social 'I' would be talking on a big scale, about 'big' things like entire countries. When a poet talks through 'I' (the **a** in Schema L), they are talking via a poetic persona, but they are also talking through an 'I' that was valid for many people.

CHAPTER THREE: Harlem and Ancestral Blood

An interest in America is also evident in the work of other Portuguese-speaking poets from the 1950s, notably Noémia de Sousa and Agostinho Neto. The work of these poets can be seen as ‘nationalist’ poetry. This is not to say that their work should be read as propaganda or as example of ‘committed literature’; the formal and linguistic complexity of much of this work shows that it has a value beyond the purely occasional. At the same time, their work — which arose in the period following the Second World War — certainly attest to the need to articulate a national consciousness and a sense of pride and to create a literature (writing) that was specific to the land, its topography, its people, its idioms. It is in this sense that these poets can be considered ‘nationalist’ poets.

It may seem strange, at first, but it is in the work of these ‘nationalist’ that there that there are references to ‘America.’ What is purpose of America in the work of Noémia de Sousa and Agostinho Neto?

3.1 ‘Black, Savage Blood’: The Poetry of Noémia de Sousa

Noémia de Sousa’s poem “Deixa Passar o Meu Povo” [Let My People Go] was written in 1950. The poem is a description of someone, an ‘I’ (the poet, a poetic persona), listening to Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson singing over the radio and how this act of listening to a song becomes an inspiration for this person to

write and, through writing, to resist the false civilization that had been imposed on her. The song she hears on the radio is “Let My People Go.” We know that Marion Anderson and Paul Robeson both sang versions of this spiritual. It is a spiritual about the words Moses uttered to the powerful Pharaoh, words which are recorded in the book of *Exodus* (10:3). It is understandable why this theme would be taken by the slaves of America, for it is an allegorical representation of the situation and hopes of black Americans: Moses, the leader of the enslaved Israelites could be a stand-in for black Americans, and the all-powerful Pharaoh could stand for whites. Moses, of course, was able to bring a number of plagues on the Egyptians and, eventually, lead the enslaved Hebrews to the Promised Land of Canaan. This is also the story told by spiritual “Let My People Go.” The spiritual is also known as “Go Down, Moses,” and these words, God’s order to Moses, are repeated over and over again in the chorus:

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt’s land.
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

The messianic words of “Let My People Go” and the voices of Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson are taken up by the poet as words directed to her, words which she must integrate within herself. Twice the poet describes the words as being inside her, as though she had appropriated them, internalized their meaning:

*Dentro de mim, soam-me Anderson e Paul
e não são vozes de embalo [...]*

*Dentro de mim,
deixa passar o meu povo,*

Inside me, I hear Anderson and Paul
and they are not voices to lull me [to sleep] [...]
Inside me,
let my people go,

This message from America that she hears on the radio is a message that speaks to her, and of her reality. When she shouts out this message that she hears on the radio, she knows that it is with the knowledge that Robeson and Marian are shouting together with her (“*gritando comigo*”) in an act of trans-continental, mythical solidarity. These voices from black America show her the way forward:

*E enquanto me vierem de Harlem
vozes de lamentação
e os meus vultos familiares me vistarem
em noites longas de insônia
não poderei deixar-me embalar pela música fútil
das valsas de Strauss. (lines 45-50)*

And as long as Harlem’s
voices of lamentation
and my all-too-familiar ghosts visit me
in the insomnia of long nights,
I will not allowed myself to be lulled by the worthless music
of the Strauss waltzes.

These words suggest that the ‘lulling music’ of the ‘civilized’ world, here represented by Viennese waltzes, is futile when compared to the real value and “profound voice” (“*voz profunda*”) of the American spirituals, which the poet

had earlier described as music *not* to lull one (into sleep, into complacency). The contrast is between white/civilized music versus black music. We encounter a similar contrast in Noémia de Sousa's "Samba," written in 1949. The poem shows how the 'decadent' samba-inflected jazz played in the dance-halls of the then-Lourenço Marques was the answer to the falsity of white 'civilization':

*No oco salão de baile
cheio de luzes fictícias da civilização
dos risos amarelos
dos vestidos pintados
das carapinhas desfrizadas da civilização
o súbito bater da bateria do jazz
soou como um grito de libertação*
(*Sangue Negro*, original typescript, unpaginated)

In the hollow of the ballroom dance-hall
filled with the fictitious lights of civilization
and the false laughter
and the hand-painted dresses
and the frizzy hair
which civilization has de-frizzed,
the sudden sounding of the jazz percussion
soared like a cry of freedom

What is more, the almost orgiastic return to the 'barbaric' or the primitive was an act of exultation and of political freedom:

*Oh ritmos fraternos do samba,
acordando febres palustres no meu povo
embotado das doses do quinino europeu ...*

Oh, the fraternal rhythms of the samba,
 awakening malarial fevers in my people,
 long-dulled by a prescription of European quinine ...

The poem contrasts the sterility and subdued spirit of black Africans cowed down by civilization with the freedom of those who had rediscovered their ancestral energy and African spirit through the samba. The equation in the two poems is really the same, and ‘negro spirituals’ occupy the same position as the ‘malarial fevers’ in the earlier poem; the one term substitutes the other. We could say that ‘malarial fevers’ and ‘negro spirituals’ constitute the same metaphor along the metonymic chain. What this also means is that ‘negro spirituals’ and atavistic dancing are equal manifestations of an African ‘spirit.’ The word ‘spirit’ is probably not entirely correct; it is probably fairer to speak of African ‘blood.’ Noémia frequently uses the word ‘blood’ to designate, not only the race, but the awakening of African ‘qualities.’ For example, the music of Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson has “her blood in upheaval” (*sangue em turbilhão*). We think also of Noémia’s long poem “Sangue Negro” where black blood signifies a return to an ancestral source (“*origem milenar*”). We read her invocation to Mother-Africa:

Mãe, minha Mãe África
das canções escravas ao luar,
não posso, não posso repudiar
o sangue negro, o sange bárbaro que me legaste ...
Porque em mim, em minha alma, em meus nervos,
ele é o mais forte que tudo,
eu vivo, eu sofro, eu rio através dele, Mãe!
 (lines 46-52)

Mother! my mother Africa
 of slave songs in the moonlight
 I cannot, CANNOT deny
 the black, savage blood
 you gave me
 Because deep in me
 it is strongest of all
 in my soul, in my veins
 I live, I laugh, I endure
 through it
 MOTHER!

Translated by Margaret Dickinson (58)

Thus, the 'voices of lamentation' from Harlem in "Let My People Go" are really black voices; they spring from the same ancestral source as the music and dancing of the poet's Mozambique: and the metaphor for the source of this trans-continental unity is 'black blood.' But consider, also, the poet's choice of the word 'Harlem' to designate black America, the place whence Africa is returned to her. In all fairness, 'negro spirituals' did not originate in Harlem, but in the slave plantations of the South; if anything, blues and jazz might have originated in Harlem. The word 'Harlem' should not be read as an exact location, but as a locus around which all kinds of signifiers circulate: signifiers to poverty, squalor, to the idea of a 'black ghetto,' but also to a place of black achievements in literature and music.⁶ Harlem is, in effect, a synecdoche for black America, that is to say, a kind of metonym.

⁶ It might be useful to point out that poets in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa were generally quite familiar with the work from the 'Harlem Renaissance,' either in the original or through translations (see Laranjeira 105-154).

3.2 ‘The Voice of Blood’: The Poetry of Agostinho Neto

‘Harlem’ also figures in Agostinho Neto’s “Voz de Sangue” [Voice of Blood], as does the idea of blood. There are also similarities with Noémia’s poem in that Neto’s poem conflates the music of black Africa with the music of black Americans, as though these different sounds, the tribal sounds and the music of American cities, spring from the same source, as if the sounds are really one voice, the ‘voice of blood’ — and ‘blood’ could refer to both ‘black blood’ and the ‘blood’ of oppression and suffering. We read in the first stanza:

*Palpitam-me
os sons do batuque
e os ritmos melancólicos do blue (1-3)*

My heart beats
with the sounds of the cow-hid drum
and the melancholy rhythms of the blues

From this point onwards, the poem becomes an invocation to some of the representative black men of America. These are addressed with the great solemnity and dignity of the vocative ‘O,’ although these are also the poor and downtrodden of America:

*Ó negro esfarrapado do Harlem
ó dançarino de Chicago
ó negro servidor do South (4-6)*

O ragged black man from Harlem
 O dancer from Chicago
 O black servant from the South

The next stanza addresses the black people of the African continent: “Ó negro de África” (O black man from Africa). There are two ways of reading this, neither of which contradicts the other: The black people of Africa could be the concluding item in the poem’s list of addresses, which would suggest that the black people of United States, are ultimately connected to Africa. Alternatively, it could suggest that the black world of the United States — or, by extension, of the Americas — and the black homelands of Africa are the two parallel universes of the black people. Either way, the poem is speaking to “the blacks from the world over” (*negros de todo o mundo*).

The poem speaks of the black people as ‘one.’ The sounds of cow-hide drums and the music of the blues, the emblematic symbols of black music, are described as a single “song” (*canto*). It is to this vast and all-enclosing ‘song’ that the poet adds what he describes as his own “poor voice” (*pobre voz*). The narrator of the poem asserts his kinship with a wider, trans-continental community united by ‘blood.’ This is the ‘voice of blood’ of the title. ‘Blood,’ which denotes ‘blackness,’ is a metaphoric substitution for ‘skin’ or ‘epidermis,’ but it contains with it the added suggestions of ‘life,’ ‘vitality.’ The black people of Africa and America, because they share in the same blood, are ‘brothers.’ The achievement of one is the achievement of the other; the pain of one is the pain of the other.

This idea that the suffering and the achievements of black Americans had the value of achievements for all the black people of the world was clearly articulated in a speech Agostinho Neto gave in 1959.

Quando a música negra americana invadiu os salões da Europa, os negros de todo o mundo sentiram com os seus irmãos americanos a alegria de poderem ser ouvidos, mesmo através do trompete. Os murros de Joe Louis foram aplaudidos em todo o mundo negro. (“Introdução”53)

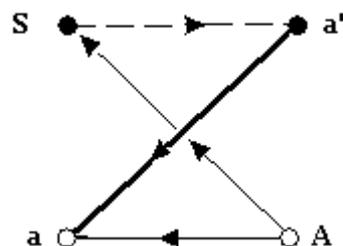
When black American music invaded the dance-halls of Europe, black people from all over the world felt, together with their black American brothers, the joy of being able to be heard, even if it was through the trumpet. Joe Louis’ punches were applauded all over the black world.

But what is the purpose of this imaginary identification with black Americans, the pain of their oppression and their achievements in music and sports? Could not tribal culture be an equally valid model — and did not much of Lusophone African poetry, influenced by the various negritude movements, often exalt the ‘original,’ the ‘primitive,’ the ‘barbaric’? Perhaps the key to this identification is the recurring word ‘Harlem’ in the poetry from the Portuguese colonies; Harlem was the black urban location par excellence. American culture provided a model for a culture that was fast becoming urbanized and which functioned according to Western/capitalist moulds. It is not incorrect to say that the poetry from the 1950s was produced by a new urban class; Noémia de Sousa and Agostinho Neto were city dwellers, and the list could be extended to almost all the other significant poets from the time, including José Craveirinha, whom we will discuss in Chapter 5. Even the occasional references to the American South and

the cotton plantations should be understood not as nostalgia for the rural, but as example of the exploitation that came with a market economy, and as such it could be used to understand the situation in Portuguese Africa where blacks were forcibly made to work in the cotton and sisal plantations and were 'contracted' to work on the gold mines in South Africa. Black Americans were the imaginary other who held the promise that it was possible to overcome the stigma of blood.

3.3 The Blood Source: The American Other

It is clear that for the narrators of these poems black America functions as a positive model of identification. Black America is where they would like to be, and they claim the achievements of black Americans as part of their inheritance, their 'blood' source, of a quasi-mythical genetic memory. This identification is an imaginary one, mediated as it is via the received images of America. We could, returning to Schema L, say that the dominant axis is the one going **a—*a'***:



In many ways the subject is missing, even though one of the features of these poems is that the authors consistently use the 'I' ('I write,' 'I feel,' 'I follow,' 'I listen'), but the fact is that the subject seems to have been subsumed by the

weight of an imaginary identification: *This is the 'I' they would like to be, this is their ideal-I.* The ideal-I is black American. The black American provides the image for African achievements.

While this identification might be valid at a purely psychological level, it does not try to grapple with the fact that the image of the American other (**a'**) was a multi-layered one. Black America never existed as a separate entity, as a world unto itself; it existed in a world dominated by white morals and cultural codes and by white political power. Black America cannot be understood except as part of a black-white binary. It should be expected that, with time, there would be fissures in this sort of identification.

CHAPTER FOUR: Harlem in Johannesburg

If the examples from the Portuguese-speaking African colonies showed that there was a need on the part of the intelligentsia to find some sort of cultural model to navigate through white-dominated society, the same is also true for South Africa, the only other country in the region whose literature has touched on the importance of America. There are, however, some crucial differences. In South Africa, writers rarely wrote about America in the obvious manner of the Portuguese-language writers. The identification with America in South African culture operates at an altogether different key. We will be discussing two texts: a novel about the marabi culture of the 1930s and 40s and a jazz opera composed and performed in the late 1950s.

4.1 Modikwe Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance*: The American-Inflected Marabi Culture of the 1940s

Modikwe Dikobe's novel on marabi music and culture, *The Marabi Dance*, was published in 1973, although it was written in the 1950s and 60s. It was serialized in *South African Outlook* between 1971 and 1972. The novel was not written in the period it describes, which is roughly the 1930s. We know this from the blurb, and also from references to films (74-75); the films mentioned in the novel include Chaplin's *The City Lights* (1931), *Tarzan the Mighty*, which was released in fifteen chapters from 1928 to 1929, and the various movies starring

the dog star Rin Tin Tin, which would have been released no later than 1931. The novel ends with the ‘clearance of the slums’ and the removal of the slum-dwellers to the new township of Orlando (which would later be incorporated in Soweto). The Slums Clearance Act was passed in 1934, and removals began that same year. Having said that, towards the end of the novel there are references to the war — the Second World War, 1939-1945 — and the clearance of the slums occurs at the end of the war (103). This could be a lapse on the part of the writer or it could mean that in his retrospective retelling of the past the writer’s imagination somehow combined two pre-war periods as a type of composite. This is akin to the process of condensation found in dreams and other unconscious formations. This need not be a problem unless one approaches the text as a valid historical account, rather than as a fictional re-creation of history.

The Marabi Dance has not received much critical attention,⁷ except for the reviews that came out at the time of its publication. Kelwyn Sole and Eddie Koch, in their assessment of the novel, cast doubt on whether the *The Marabi Dance* can be considered a genuine ‘working class’ novel and, by implication, a valid historical document (220). The acknowledgements in the novel make it abundantly clear that the novel was subjected to substantial editorial intervention. We read: “Much revision of the original manuscript of *The Marabi Dance* was necessary to make the author’s intention clear” (unpaginated). The author cites the help of, among others, Guy Butler and Lionel Abrahams, two distinguished writers, and Monica Wilson, the historian. Despite the obvious

⁷ Sources worth mentioning include Iris Berger’s recent essay on the relevance of Dikobe’s novel in the classroom, D. Pinnock’s article on the usefulness of the novel for the historian, and Isabel Hofmeyr’s early monograph.

question of 'authenticity,' and maybe for want of other literary sources, the novel is an interesting and valid testament to a culture that vanished altogether. And vanish it did, either because of the relocation of people to the newer townships or because, as Ballantine tells us, "not a single one of the many early marabi musicians was ever recorded" (307). Having said that, it is important to note that marabi influenced the jazz forms that would later arise, some of which we have make mention of, such as kwela.

Before turning to the novel I would like to provide some information about the backdrop or cultural context to the period the novel purportedly recounts. The examples of American blacks were ready-made models of how it was possible to operate in an urban milieu dominated by European cultural codes. In this respect, words spoken by Hugh Masekela, the distinguished jazz musician, in an interview with Christopher Ballantine are particularly instructive. He says: "The only example of how to exist as an African in a European lifestyle is to, ah, emulate the people that already mastered it, and those were the Americans" (3).

For example, is not surprising that boxing became an important lifestyle and recreational alternative for young black men. This is particularly true of South Africa which was fast becoming urbanized and where a boxing culture was becoming prominent in black townships. In Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance* boxing is associated with power, white power. For example, the 'Pretoria title' was the most significant of all boxing titles because Pretoria was the centre of white power:

... Then the two bulls faced each other. It was a fight for July's title as king of Pretoria. The malaitas believed that Pretoria was the most important place because the books of law of the white man were kept there. So the king of the Pretoria malaitas was considered to be the best fighter of all. (41)

For many blacks in Southern Africa the black achievement par excellence, and the most important import from America, was jazz. The syncopated rhythms of jazz created a link with the United States; the music of jazz was a trans-national language of solidarity and identification with black American culture. Conversely, jazz was the link or connection between the destinies of African Americans with other blacks in the diaspora.

In many ways these statements are broad categorizations. Paul Gilroy in his influential study *The Black Atlantic*⁸ alerts us to the need for a more nuanced and demanding understanding of what 'black Atlantic' music really is:

Examining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying the self-understanding articulated by the musicians who made it, the symbolic use to which their music is put by other black artists and writers and the social relations which have produced and reproduced the unique expressive culture in which music comprises a central and even foundational element. (74-75)

⁸ Gilroy's book is a study of black identity as a dialogic exchange between Europe, North America and the Caribbean. It considers music only in chapter 3, "'Jewels Brought from Bondage': Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity", and the focus of the book is on black modernity in general. Africa is obviously excluded from this analysis.

Gilroy suggests the need for three things, neither of which is necessarily easy. While the first two points, although valid and useful, are probably of more use to the music historian, his third point is particularly relevant to understand the relationship of South African musicians to jazz. American jazz was heard, incorporated, and, in the process, it was transformed. It was not a static instrument, a *clear* sign of identification with the other, in this case the black American, the American Negro. Yet this modified jazz continued to function as a signifier to 'America.'

The jazz form which was to develop in South Africa in the pre-war years is known as *marabi*. Probably the most important work to date on marabi music is Christopher Ballantine's *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville*; Ballantine defines marabi as a dance music "which drew its melodic inspiration eclectically from a wide variety of sources, while harmonically it rested — as did the blues — upon an endlessly repeating chord sequence" (5). According to David Coplan, the word 'marabi' may have been derived from the Sotho *ho raba raba*, 'to fly around,' or from plural of *lerabi*, gangster (94). The word may have been the result of mixed etymology; marabi was not only a very fast dance music, it was also associated with crime, with vice and with liquor. Marabi grew and developed around the shebeens (liquor dens) of the black slums in Johannesburg.⁹ This is the world recounted in Dikobe's *The Marabi Dance*.

⁹ Es'kia Mphahlele claims, in his autobiography, that marabi came from the Pretoria township of Marabastad. "From there," he writes, "it went to the Reef" (96). The 'reef' (or 'rand' in Afrikaans) refers to the Witwatersrand, the reef of gold-mining towns.

The novel tells the story of 'Martha' (Moipone) Mabongo, a girl/young woman growing up in a slumyard in Doornfontein, a mixed-race area near the Johannesburg business district. Endowed with a fine singing voice, Martha is drawn into the marabi world through her boyfriend George, a marabi piano player. George plays for Ma-Ndlovu, the "Marabi queen" (2), a resourceful woman who sells beer, runs marabi dances and is, also, a fah-fee (gambling) runner for a 'Chinaman.' Early in the novel we are introduced to Martha, then a Standard Five pupil,¹⁰ singing one of George's hits at one of Ma-Ndlovu's dance parties. The song is an invocation for the 'marabi girl' to satisfy her man, and where, interestingly, the designations 'girl,' 'prostitute' and 'marabi girl' perform the same semantic function and are conveyed through the same syntactical structure, suggesting that 'girl,' 'prostitute' and 'marabi girl' are ultimately the same thing. The novel provides the translation:

Tjeka-Tjeka messie.
 Tjeka-Tjeka sebebe.
 Tjeka ngoanyane,
 Tjeka-Tjeka ngoam wa Marabi ...

Give give, girl.
 Give give, prostitute.
 Give girl,
 Give, give, girl of the Marabi ... (6)

But if the sexual innuendos in the marabi suggest a suggest a dissolute life or one untempered by morality or conventions, the author's description of the dance that is performed to Martha's song is expressed through the language of

¹⁰ Standard Five, the seventh year of school.

tribal tradition and uses images from nature (maize cobs, leaping buck). Added to that, the description alludes also to gold-mining, probably the backbone of the South African economy, and the central motive behind the rapid urbanization of black South Africans. We read:

The dancers swayed from side to side like mealie [maize] stalks; the right and left feet moving forward and back like springbok crossing a river. They sang as loudly as they could, singing for joy to the spirits of their forefathers. George ran short fingers over the black and white keyboard as if they were moved by an electric charge. He sang with his face pitched to the ceiling. Martha moved like a cocopan full of mine sand turning at an intersection. Her round female baritone voice filled the hall and made it vibrate with sound. (6-7)

The profusion of registers suggests that *marabi* would make sense as an attempt to navigate around the contradictory and conflicting realities and demands of urbanization and tradition, between a natural order and a fast-industrialized world. Michael Titlestad in his analysis of the novel, in his larger paper on the representations of township jazz, makes the point that this “use of *marabi*, as a site for the figurative mediation of hybridity, is common in representations of jazz” (11).

At the same time, although *marabi* does function as a sign of hybridity, all along the novel *marabi* is posited as the opposite to tradition and respectability. The glamour and freedom is contrasted with the demands of tribal tradition. Much of the novel is devoted to Martha’s resistance to the arranged marriage to the son of her father’s cousin, a village boy. In a sense, the tension is between

tradition and modernity —and where jazz functions, as Paul Gilroy has alerted us, as a black representation of modernity.

The figure in the novel that most clearly stands for marabi the world is George, Martha's boyfriend, the father of her child, and her future husband. The manner in which George — and, by extension, marabi culture — is represented suggests that the text reveals a progressively ambivalent attitude towards marabi culture. Early in the novel George's association with marabi culture implied a change in his appearance and the importance of outward symbols, the "shiny, decorated bicycle," the "white flannel trousers with two flat pockets at the back," or the "turn-ups measured twenty-four inches in width"; Martha wishes she could keep George away from "his Marabi company" (27). A little later George comes to be associated with gangs and knife-fights; when Martha warns him about picking a fight with the malaitas, the formidable boxers who "have had medicine incised into their blood," George replies that his gang "will stab them with a knife" (43). Similarly, George is said to be a philanderer. Martha admits this to herself: "I was quite happy with George, but he is a crook. He has lots of girls, in Sophiatown, Newclare, George Gogh" (65) — locations at different ends of Johannesburg. Later still in the narrative, as if to show the negative progression, George is described as the "boy who had girls in almost every residential yard" (102). As if to emphasize his spiral downwards George spends some time in prison, and later moves to Durban, where the scheming and corrupt Ma-Ndlovu had also fled to. The overall picture is one of dissolution. Titlestad, in his discussion of the novel, writes that the word 'marabi' "is a metonym for a 'disordered domain of desire, corruption and violence that absorbs George" (11).

If marabi, the early South African jazz form, was a sign of modernity, it was sign of a modernity that was to be rejected.

For one, black intellectuals at the time did not look very favourably on marabi. Many (or most) of the black intellectual class had been trained at mission-schools. Ballantine in his book discusses R. R. R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy*, originally published in 1928, where the city dance functions as a signifier to moral corruption. We read: "At one end an organ was being hammered by a drunken youth. Couples—literally fastened to each other—were swaying giddily wildly, to this barbaric time. In this mood young girls are deflowered in their youth" (qtd. in Ballantine 76). Dhlomo's choice of the very loaded word 'barbaric' is particular interesting because, for whites, 'barbarism' was the opposite of 'civilization'; blacks, in their natural state, were the original barbarians. In Dhlomo 'barbarism' cannot be considered a return an original Africa, a primeval Africa, source of tradition and inspiration. It probably took another generation for the black intellectual class to reclaim what others saw as 'barbarism' as something wholesome and positive. These views would probably have been alien to the more 'respectable' members of the black working-class. In his autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, originally published in 1959, Esk'ia Mphahlele recounts how his parents had warned him how the 'Columbia' dance-hall in the Marabastad of his youth was "an evil place where immoral practices went on behind the cloak of a dance or a concert" (95). Yet the allure of marabi was there. He describes the pink or green or white handbills on the walls:

THINGS ARE UPSIDE-DOWN!
AND WHY? CAUSE THERE'S GALORE SENSATIONAL,

FANTASTICAL, SCITILLATING, REVERBERATING
 JAZZ EXTRAVAGANZA
 BRING YOUR GAL, SPIN YOUR GAL FOR THE
 PALPITATING MARABI RHYTHM OF U-NO-MES
 AT A DAYBREAK DANCE AT COLUMBIA EVERY NIGHT. (96)

Interestingly, it is not only the name of the dance-hall which is American, the very expressions used to sell this ‘jazz extravaganza’ are American borrowings: ‘bring your *gal*, spin your *gal*’ (my italics). The idea is that marabi is somehow linked to ‘America,’ and, through the connection of signifiers, to dissolution, crime, gangsterism and speakeasies (shebeens) — ideas also suggested by stories of Al Capone and Hollywood films.

The fundamental sub-text in *The Marabi Dance* is the idea of marabi as an American-derived urban culture associated with gangs, ‘fancy clothes,’ films and jazz. Boxing followed at a close distance, not as an aspect of marabi culture per se, but a parallel culture, but one where boxing fans cried out “Brooklyn!” (41), in other words, where the (black) American model predominated. Despite the nostalgia for a bygone era, and zest and verve of the narrative, the novel itself does not seem to endorse these tendencies in society; or, rather, the ending of the novel suggests the triumph of respectability and white middle-class (‘civilized’) values — this despite the fact that Martha cannot understand why she, a civilized person, can be excluded from this society. What she aims for is respectability.” I have had enough of Marabi,” she says (103). The new house in Orlando is a sign of that respectability, as is her marriage to George. Of her marriage we read:

The musicians played their best tunes. The school choir sang their best songs. *There was however a lone marabi dancer who was asked to leave the church.*" (118; my italics)

Dikobe's text in many ways reflects the ideology of an earlier generation of mission-trained writers and is revealing of an essential ambivalence about American influences on South African black culture. The idea seems to have been that they were decadent and not quite 'civilized.' But the 1950s was an altogether different period. Here things 'American' were embraced with exuberance.

4.2 Todd Matshikiza's *King Kong: Elegy to Sophiatown and America*

The interesting thing about South African texts, especially when compares they to the poems written by Noémia de Sousa and Agostinho Neto, texts composed in the late 1940s and early 50s, is that although they are full of references to things American, they never really considers America as a country, as a site of struggles, as a place out there. American influences are internalized, made natural to the vibrant urban culture of black South Africa. In a sense we cannot speak of an imaginary identification with the American other in the rather obvious way we see in the work coming from the Portuguese-speaking countries. Rather, there is a wholesale appropriation, where the locals become the Americans 'other,' where they are the Americans. This is identification taken one step further. America does not exist because the locals have become American.

This process was accelerated in the 1950s – and it is important to remind ourselves that Dikobe’s text, although published in the 1970s, deals with the 1940s. In the new decade the flowering of black urban culture really took place in Sophiatown, a black freehold enclave inside white Johannesburg. Sophiatown became the centre of new developments in jazz culture – with the substitution of the now old-fashioned marabi into other forms of jazz, such as kwela. Many of the world-famous jazz musicians such as Hugh Masakela were from Sophiatown. Gangsterism was also common in that place of poverty and squalor. All in all, as we had observed from Gordimer’s observations, there was an interest in American clothes. There was also the role of cinema. (There were two theatres in Sophiatown.) Bloke Modisane, the Sophiatown writer who died in exile, pays tribute the all-pervasive influence of Hollywood when he writes that “if Hollywood had intended to influence the development of a particular type of person, I am that product; the tinsel morality, the repressed violence, the Technicolor dreams” (“Situation” 68).

An exceptional number of fine black writers grew up or lived in Sophiatown. They are also known as the “Drum Generation” because most of them were associated with *Drum* magazine; they either worked as journalists or contributed pieces. *Drum*, although it was owned by Jim Bailey (son of the mining magnate Sir Abe Bailey) and consequently a product of the mining capital, was intended to serve a black readership. Unfortunately, by the end of the decade, as result of the tightening of the political restrictions, most of the *Drum* writers had either been forced into exile, suicide. Michael Chapman argues that the thwarted potential of that era made the Drum Generation (or the

“Drum Decade” as he calls it) “a failed renaissance” (222). The allusion is to the Harlem Renaissance and, in a sense, the idea is that Sophiatown was like Harlem.

Although the Drum writers were clearly interested in American writers – and Drum published American fiction – they did not, as rule, write about America. What we saw in Dikobe’s novel, the incorporation of the American other, had become full-blown by the 1950s. The background to their stories is the gangster-ridden culture permeating with jazz, American dress styles and the presence of cinema. The full flowering of this interest culminates with the ‘jazz opera’ *King Kong*, which premiered in Johannesburg in February 1959.

The name of the musical had nothing to do with Edgar Wallace’s gigantic simian, although the story behind the name is interesting and revealing in itself. *King Kong* was based on the true-life exploits of Ezekiel Dhlamini (‘King Kong’), a star boxer originally from Zululand who took on his name from a film poster. With his stardom came the drink, violence and even murder; he knifed his girlfriend when she arrived at a nightclub with rival gang members. We see how the signifiers to American cinema, boxing and gangsterism combine in the same real-life person. In court, Dhlamini asked for the death sentence, but was instead given 14 years hard labour. He drowned himself in 1957; he was aged 32. *King Kong* tells the story of Dhlamini’s rise and fall.

The music for *King Kong* was composed by Todd Matshakiza, who was also a journalist working for *Drum*. Although the cast and musicians were entirely black (and it included Miriam Makeba in one of the lead female roles, and this it

was that launched her career), *King Kong* was in many ways of black-white partnership. White personnel working on the jazz opera included Leon Gluckman (producer), Stanley Glasser (musical director), Harold Bloom (writer; father of the actor Orlando Bloom), Clive and Irene Menell (facilitators), all of them Jewish. Loren Kruger correctly points out that this group “constituted a dissident class fraction at one remove from the Anglo-Saxon economic elite and several from the overtly anti-semitic Afrikaner political class” (“Drama”).

But Kruger also adds: “If Jewish South Africans were the catalyst that brought about the fusion of Africa and Europe, America was the base” (Ibid). She argues that *King Kong*’s production was largely influenced by the American Broadway hits of the 1950, especially *West Side Story* (music by Leonard Bernstein; book by Stephen Sondheim, 1957), even if there was also the influence of *Threepenny Opera* (music by Kurt Weill; adaptation of Brecht’s text by Mark Blitzstein, 1956). She notes also the influence of *Porgy and Bess* (1935), ‘another jazz opera’ which toured the world in early 1950s. Kruger notes that “*Porgy and Bess*’s influence can be seen in the subtitle and heard in the overall orchestration of *King Kong* as well as the echoes of ‘Summertime’ in the overture.”

King Kong, then, not only reflected a culture whose iconography (jazz, boxing, cinema) was borrowed from American culture, formally it also borrowed much from the musical forms of that culture. But ‘jazz opera’ also appeared at a critical juncture in South African history: it is tribute to a culture that was no more, for by 1959 Sophiatown had ceased to exist. The population of

Sophiatown had been forcibly removed to 'black' areas in 1955 and the area was converted into the white working-class suburb of Trimof (lit. 'Triumph').

Ironically, in retrospect, the vibrancy and exuberance of Matshakiza's music, which adapted African-American (and, in the case of Brecht/Weill, European) influences with the more local-grown marabi and kwela music is an elegy to a bygone area and also an elegy to the cultural influence of America. The Sharpeville Massacre would take place in 1960. Sharpeville was not the only example of political repression, but it was to become the great symbol of the ferocity of the apartheid state, one that signals the end of an era. In South Africa, in the new era of Verwoerdian apartheid writers and artists would cease to look to America as a positive model. This is not to say that the opposite of America—and, in the context of Cold War politics, this would have been the Soviet Union—was ever chosen as a model. Certainly from the 1970s onwards much of the poetry and fiction produced in South Africa, even when it was not propagandist, was leftwing in sympathy, but if there was some of identification with an other (or Other) it was a level of ideology or principles and not with countries and their cultures.

It is with the hindsight of history that we can see *King Kong* for it was: a celebration, to be sure, but also an elegy for Sophiatown and its American-crazed culture. It is impossible not to 'read' — in the sense of 'decipher,' 'make sense of' — *King Kong* without reference to that most eloquent testimony to have come out of the Sophiatown removals, Trevor Huddleston's *Naught for Your Comfort*. Huddleston's was not a work of fiction, but an autobiographical account of his life as an Anglican priest in Sophiatown and also his involvement

in the campaigns to stop the removals. His work, written shortly after he was 'recalled' to England to avoid being forcibly deported by the apartheid government, is a stylistic *tour de force* brimming with thinly disguised indignation, but the persistence tone is elegiac. I quote from the opening lines of his book:

It is told of Smuts that, when he said farewell to any of his old friends or distinguished visitors leaving South Africa, he quoted in that high-pitched of his the lines of de la Mare:

*Look thy last on all things lovely,
Every hour.*

I have no doubt that to Smuts the loveliness of South Africa was its natural beauty and grandeur: its wild flowers and grasses, about which he knew so much: the great emptiness of its skies above the silence of the veldt.

But, since I knew of my recall to England by the Community to which I belong, those words have haunted me: and this book, written from the heart of the Africa I love, would be incomplete if I did not somehow set it in the context of this sudden, unwanted, but inevitable departure: "Partir, c'est mourir un peu" ... and I am in the process of dying: in the process, "every hour." (13)

Huddleston was writing about himself, but his words were prophetic. By the 1960s most major black writers had either been silenced or where in exile. The story of what happened to *King Kong* is revealing enough. The 'jazz opera' opened in London in February 1961—and it would continue in the West End for two more years—but most members of the cast, because they were black and did not have passports, had left on a way-one ticket and were not allowed to return.

For example, Miriam Makeba, the female lead in *King Kong*, was to remain in exile for 30 years. She was to become known the world over, although generations of young South Africans would grow up without having listened to any of her recording because all her music was to be banned.

CHAPTER FIVE: Imaginary Negroes versus White Civilization

We have, so far, encountered two types of identification with America: in Noémia de Sousa and Agostinho Neto there was an imaginary identification with black America, and in South Africa cultural production reflected a generalized identification with American culture. The work of the Mozambican poet José Craveirinha is slightly different. An identification with the American other is also present in his work, but there is also a clear sense of critical distance, so that his work becomes, in a sense, also an exploration of what it means to choose America as a source of identification.

5.1 'I, the American Negro'

We see the workings of this imaginary identification with an *other* in the poem "*Joe Louis Nosso Campeão*."¹¹ Craveirinha's narrator – the 'I' that commands this long narrative poem – first informs us of the news that had been relayed in the *Notícias*, the local white newspaper: that Max Schmeling had beaten Joe Louis, 'the black man.' The news is a jab at the heart of the narrator, who feels for Joe Louis, and identifies with the dejection and humiliation of the boxer, to

¹¹ I am using the 1952 version of the poem, which although it is based on the version the poet wrote in his youth, might not be the same as the original version; the original version is no longer extant.

the point that he becomes Joes Louis himself. It is worth noting how the use of the English word ‘groggy’ and the Anglicism “*ringue*” (boxing ring) give added emphasis to this identification with the American other:

*no centro das miseráveis lonas do ringue humilhante
eu pobre Joe groggy de luvas no chão
palavra d’honra eu Joe groggy
mais groggy de solidão
mais groggy de amargura
mais groggy de fel.*

(4–9)

in the middle of the wretched canvas of the humiliating ring
I, poor Joe, groggy with my gloves on the ground
‘strue’s bob, I, Joe, groggy
groggier still with loneliness
groggier still with bitterness
groggier still with the gall.

It might be argued that the ‘I feel’ – “I, poor Joe” – structure is an example of narrative characterization and is not necessarily an example of the narrator’s identification with an other. This would be particularly true in the stanza that follows, where the description of the famous fight where Max Schmeling was knocked out during the first round, is followed by Joe Louis’s own thoughts on it:

*para eu negro Joe Louis bater mais forte [. . .]
eu suando o moer Goebbels seco no pilão até ouvir
desmornorar a soco o Reichstag nos maxilares
do Max Schmeling em chamas.*

(20–25)

for me, the blackman-Joe Louis to beat the stronger one [. . .]
 I sweating with the grinding of Goebbels
 into fine powder in the pestle
 until I hear
 the Reichstag falling brick by brick in Max Schmeling's
 jaw-bone on fire.

Two things need to be said. Firstly, the “I, Joe” – ‘I, the narrator, feel’ – structure is typical of José Craveirinha’s poetry from the same period. In “*Oh! Carmen de Diego*” (1957), an uncollected poem about the Spanish Civil War, written in the same period as the poem about Joe Louis, the constant refrain is the construction: “I, José.” (At another level “I, Joe” could also be a metaphoric substitution of “I, José” since Joe and José mean the same thing. “José” stands for the poet José Craveirinha, *but* ‘José Craveirinha’ as poetic persona.) Secondly, the nature of the language that supposedly conveys these thoughts of Joe Louis is wholly metaphorical – the knock-out *is* the narrator’s destruction of the Reichstag and the grinding of Goebbels as if he were peanuts being pounded – which again suggests that this internal monologue of Joe Louis’ is primarily a poetic reflection on the fallacy of Nazi notions of racial superiority.

But if this identification with the other is not made altogether clear at this stage, it might appear so retrospectively. The narrator tells us that after the white newspaper had ‘confessed’ that Joe Louis had in fact won, he, the narrator, very seriously begins to consider taking up boxing himself (26–30). He thinks of the young (white) man who is who is always tripping him during football games. He plots his revenge:

*e agarrei na esquerda do nosso Joe Louis
e dei-lhe no fígado!
Agarrei na direita do nosso Joe Louis
e mandei-lhe no crânio!*
(44–47)

and I took hold of the left flank of our Joe Louis
and I gave it to him in the liver!
And I took hold of the right flank of our Joe Louis
and I gave it to him in the skull!

Here the idea is made more obvious: the narrator identifies with Joe Louis to the point that he literally incorporates the Joe-object at an imaginary level. Joe Louis not only becomes “our Joe Louis,” the narrator himself becomes *our* Joe Louis. The function of this is of course to show that blacks can fight back and that they can win. What took place in the ring in 1938 can also occur in the backstreets of the poet’s own city.

5.2 ‘My American Family’: Love and Hate of America

It may appear from our discussion so far that what is at stake is an imaginary identification on the part of the narrator with some of the great African American figures, best exemplified by Joe Louis; a personal identification, in other words. While this may be true at one level, readers familiar with the work of Craveirinha will also know that in his work the ‘I’ usually functions as a social ‘I’: the ‘I’ stands for the Mozambican people. In the context of Craveirinha’s

poetry this 'I' that wants to be like Joe Louis and actually incarnates his qualities is an allegorical representation of the Mozambican nation.

This other the Mozambican nation identifies with is not the lone hero, the single individual. The identification is with the suffering, with the joy, and the achievements of all African Americans. When, in his poem "*Quando o José Pensa na América*" Craveirinha talks about all the great African American figures, from Louis Armstrong and Jesse Owens through to Richard Wright, he adds that they have come out with their "five-hundred thousand families" (30–31). This is another way of saying that the famous names are merely some of the exemplary figures who metaphorically stand for (or in place of) the rest. But he also adds that included in this number is his own family: "*todos com as suas quinhentas / mil famílias incluindo a família do José*" (31; my emphasis) ("all with their five hundred / thousand families, *including José's own family*"; my emphasis). This is a tacit admission that at an imaginary level the narrator *is* a black American, this same narrator who writes "I, José Craveirinha," the narrator who is the voice of Mozambique, the nation-yet-to-be.

This identification with the struggles and the music of black America coexists with a contempt for and cynicism about white America. We read:

Doreen:

*Na Mafalala quando o José pensa na América
 não inveja nem um só arranha-céus de Manhattan,
 não deslumbram José os feéricos letreiros de Broadway
 e não convencem José as vitórias do marinheiro Popeye
 só depois de ingerir uma lata de espinafres de publicidade.*

(1–6)

Doreen:

In Mafalala when José thinks of America

He does not envy a single of Manhattan's skyscrapers

the spectacular billboards of Broadway don't dazzle José

and neither is José convinced by the feats of Popeye the Sailor Man

after he'd consumed a tin of publicity spinach.

There is no textual indication that these lines refer specifically to white America. However, the second half of this stanza is connected with these initial lines through an identical syntactical structure – “*Na Mafalala quando o José pensa*” (“In Mafalala when José thinks of America”; 8) – and these lines refer to the other America where the tears of ‘negro spirituals’ make the waters of the Mississippi salty (6–7), and the America where an innocent (black) worker is caught in the Chicago crossfire. The syntactical equivalence highlights the difference between these two worlds: the shallowness and material wealth of white ‘civilization’ versus the deep roots and also the grief of black America:

*Na Mafalala quando o José pensa na América
velhas lágrimas de “spiritual” salgam os encardidos
asfaltos de água do grande Mississippi com muitas recordações
e numa alegre avenida central da cidade Chicago
uma farra de tiros desconsidera a camisa
de um cliente [. . .]*

(7–11)

In Mafalala when José thinks of America

old tears from negro spirituals laden with memory

add salt to the dirty tarred roads of the great Mississippi

and in a lively central avenue in Chicago
 a shoot-out has no respect for the shirt
 of a customer [. . .]

It is through the signifying image of Marilyn Monroe that white America is most derided. Marilyn Monroe is the “*pobre milionária da América do Norte / a descontar os e [sic] as insónias / dos outros o ano inteiro / toda nua*”⁶ (North America’s pauper millionaire / all naked / giving others time off their insomnias / the whole year round) (107–110). In a sense the idea of the naked Marilyn Monroe in a pinup calendar is an image of loneliness and sadness. Although it is not made obvious in this poem, in Craveirinha’s poetry the iconic function of the pinup of the female film star is usually masturbatory. In “Metamorphosis,” one of the poems from *Cela 1*, Craveirinha’s book of prison poetry, we read:

*Em dois anos
 meus dedos metamorfoses
 de Sofia Loren e Cláudia Cardinale
 voluptuosamente só traíram
 a minha ex-querida Ava Gardner
 outro nome que não digo
 e minha esposa Maria.*

(4–10)

Over the last two years
 my changed fingers
 have voluptuously betrayed
 only Ava Gardner, my former beloved;
 not Sophia Loren nor Claudia Cardinale,
 the name I won’t mention,
 or that of my wife, Maria.

(translated with Stephen Gray)

Perhaps it is the function of Marilyn's photo that would explain why it would be described as "uma *terrível* foto feminina" (my emphasis) ('a terrible womanly photo' or 'the terrible photo of a woman'; 78). The photo is terrible not only because it serves the masturbatory fantasies of non-white men in the third-world, but also because it underlies the logic of profit of the American economy:

*mas o José da Mafalala quando pensa na América
por acaso não pensa nas hipóteses da Marilyn
a mostrar a toda a gente o lucro lógico
dos sistemas de propaganda que a América
U.S.A. . . . U.S.A. . . . U.S.A.!!!*

(80–84)

but when José from Mafalala thinks of America
it happens that he doesn't think of Marilyn's chances
at showing everyone the logic of profit
of the methods of propaganda that America
USES ... USES ... USES !!!

The *denégation* of irony of the words "*por acaso não pensa*" (my emphasis) (it happens that he *doesn't* think; my emphasis) alerts us to the violent critique to which Craveirinha subjects the United States. In Portuguese, the abbreviation 'U. S. A.' is a homophone of the word *usa* (uses), and although it is the word 'U. S. A.' which is used, it is the invisible verb *usa* which syntactically completes the sentence; the abbreviation in place of the usual verb has the function of a discordant scream rising over and above the level of the sentence, one that uses

America's best brand name, its own name, to call attention to the product it is selling: Marilyn's naked body.

This relationship with the United States is one of love and hate, such as is typical of the imaginary order. By that I do not mean to suggest that love and hate are two versions of the same thing – what popular parlance designates as 'two sides of the same coin.' Love can be symbolized, mediated through language; hatred, on the other hand, is beyond the reach of language, it belongs in the region of primal trauma and it is very difficult for it to be assuaged. All the same, love and hate can coexist, such as they do in the imaginary order. America is loved because it is a *semblable*, but it is also loathed and despised because it is simultaneously a reminder of the cruelty, pain, and rapaciousness of 'Western civilization.'

In the same period that Craveirinha was writing these people extolling the achievements of African Americans he was composing a number of poems on 'civilization,' most of which make reference to the industrial and technological achievements of America, and also to the power of its cinema industry. These poems are revealing of the fact that the poet was much concerned with that other side of America, and he never could forget the country where these notable figures were from was also a country of false promises. In "Milagre" [Miracle], a poem from his collection *Karingana ua Karigana*, originally published in 1974, contrasts the natural miracle of childbirth with the Hollywoodesque miracle of children socialized into a civilization with its belief in the progress of science and the efficacy of war:

*E nos cinemas
bombardeiros de altitude
e desintegrações do átomo
civilizam as crianças.
(22)*

And in the cinema
children are civilized by
by high-altitude fighter bombers
and the splitting of the atom

Another short poem from the same collection is appropriately entitled “Civilização” [Civilization]. We should note that ‘civilization’ is one half of binary term; the other side of civilization is ‘barbarism’ or ‘backwardness,’ the terms which colonialist discourse had used to designate African culture and justify the political and economic subjugation of African people. The poem incisively shows how the grandeur and high achievements attributed to a civilization coexist with the terror and the barbarity that are the underside to that civilization. The example he provides alludes to ancient Rome. The only difference between that sort of civilization and modern-day civilization is not that we have progressed, but that nowadays there are also (the appropriately American-made) Cadillacs have been added to the measure:

*Antigamente
(antes de Jesus Cristo)
os homens erguiam estádios e templos
e morriam na arena como cães.

Agora...
também já constroem Cadillacs.*

(24)

In ancient times
 (before the time of Jesus)
 men erected temples and stadiums
 and died in the arena like dogs.

Now ...
 they're making Cadillacs as well.

The poet seems to argue that the idea of progress — and the civilizing mission of progress — is a false one. The ‘progress’ offered by Western civilization consists, in essence, of bestial acts. The poem entitled “Suelto,” also included in *Karingana ua Karigana*, was originally entitled “Progresso” [Progress], and here we read:

No laboratório
o lobo dirige a radioactividade
e concentra o cobalto.
 (25)

In the laboratory
 the wolf directs the radioactivity
 and concentrates the cobalt

In Craveirinha’s poetry the figure of the wolf is associated with the deceitfulness of white power. We see this, for example, in the poem “Lobo Calabouço e Crown Mines” [Wolf, Prison Cell and Crown Mines], also included in *Karingana ua Karigana*, which deals with the false promises and also the exploitation of

Mozambicans working on the Rand mines. The emblematic figure of the scientist, the figure of progress, is ultimately a wolf.

How do we account for this love for black America, this constellation of images that give back to Mozambique an image of itself? Perhaps we should premise our comments with Lacan's observation that an imaginary identification also operates as a function of misrecognition (*Écrits* 96). Mozambique was never like 'black America'; blacks in Mozambique were the majority, for one. Culturally, Mozambicans and black Americans probably had little in common and their histories were radically different. But there were points of contact: the late 1950s were the beginning of the civil rights movements, which coincided with the nationalist stirrings that were blowing across Mozambique; the achievements of black Americans in sports, music and literature were examples to be admired and maybe emulated. Black America functioned as an image of where Mozambique would have liked to have been.

All the same, it is very difficult for an alter ego to satisfy an ego's narcissistic needs when this other (**a'**) is perceived simultaneously as an object of revulsion and admiration and when, although present in the same identification, that contradictory feelings arise from different sources. This sort of identification carries with it the danger that, at some point, it will cease to be a satisfactory one. This, as we shall see, is what occurred during the time of the Vietnam War, when these negative tendencies overshadowed the ones that were perceived as worthy; in that period America came to be seen as an altogether 'bad' object. But such things had not been dreamed of in the 1950s. It was still possible to hold these contradictions in tension.

CHAPTER SIX: In Marilyn's Country

Most of the writers who have written about America — either directly or through the appropriation of influences — have been either black or of mixed-race, although, in the latter category, the clearly political identification with an 'African' cause makes them 'black' to all intents and purposes. There are historical reasons for this and the most obvious one is the identification with the achievements of the American 'Negro.' This interest in things American lasted all through the 1950s. In South Africa it came to an abrupt end in the early 1960s, which coincides with the period when the establishment of the Republic and the implementation of Verwoerd's grand apartheid. In Mozambique we have the lone voice of José Craveirinha still writing about the USA all through the 1960s. The rest of the region is silent on faraway America. In 1975 Mafika Gwala published a long poem about Vietnam.

White writers had never seemed drawn to America or seem particularly interested in America. The exceptions, as we learnt in Chapter 1, were Nadine Gordimer in the 1959 novel and Rui Knopfli, particularly in his poems from the 1950s. Then in 1974 J. M. Coetzee published "The Vietnam Project," a novella in his two-part work published under the title of *Dusklands*, where the reference was to the Vietnam War. The novella has been treated as something of an oddity and has, generally speaking, been ignored by critics, who have preferred to deal with the second novella in his work, which deals with Dutch colonization in the

18th century Cape. As if to prove that Coetzee's work was indeed an oddity, interest in America disappears altogether from South African literature. In 1990 P. J. Haasbroek published the novella "Time Out of Time," a story about Vietnam, which begins at the time when the Americans were still there but which is more concerned with the period that followed and the atrocities in neighbouring Cambodia. Thereafter, references to America (if it could be said that Haasbroek's novella refers to America at all) disappear.

In retrospect, Coetzee's novella appears like a bolt from the sky, unannounced, unheralded, and, then, mistaken for a mirage, is quickly forgotten. Yet Coetzee's work is important, not only because it is a relevant document that arose at a particular historical junction, but also because it is a penetrating and disturbing exploration of what 'America' was all about.

6.1 Paranoid Fictions

"The Vietnam Project," the first part of *Dusklands*, is an account of an American functionary's attempt to write an American propaganda "mythography" for the soon-to-be-vanquished Vietnamese people; "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," the second part of the work, is ostensibly a translation by Coetzee of an account by a putative ancestor detailing the barbarity and savagery of Dutch contact with the 'Hottentot' people (now more generally referred to as the Khoi-Khoi). Although *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first published work, has not received the same critical attention as his other works, there has developed a general consensus in the scholarly literature that the

juxtaposition of the 18th century colonial narrative and the mythographer's account of the Vietnam War function as a commentary on Western imperialism and on the different forms of colonization imposed by Western civilization. This reading of *Dusklands* has been influenced by Teresa Dovey's influential essay, "Coetzee and His Critics," originally published in 1987, and which was a review of the literature available then, much of it critical of Coetzee; she argues that "The Vietnam Project" needs to be read as "continuation of the colonizing activity of the West," and that "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" is revealing of this colonizing activity in its "incipient stages" (17). Allan Gardiner's essay, also published in 1987, argues that the two narratives "are episodes in the same story of playing out of the fatal contradictions within European imperialism" (174). Subsequent critics, among them Debra A. Castillo (in 1990), Julian Gitzen (in 1993) and Sheila Collingwood-Whittick (in 1996) have echoed these propositions. Much of the critical work on *Dusklands* has, however, focused on the "Narrative" to the detriment of "The Vietnam Project."

While it is reasonably clear that the two narratives do, in fact, constitute a commentary on Western imperialism and barbarity, I would like, for the purposes of this study, to focus more specifically on Coetzee's Vietnam narrative. The story is a study of the myths used to justify the rapacity and barbarity of military conquest, but it is also a story told from the context of an America perspective and it is revealing of how an outsider, such as Coetzee, understood this American 'perspective' to be. We should not forget that during the time of the Vietnam War Coetzee was studying in Texas. He has said, in an article published in 1984, that 'complicity' was not a problem at the time, that the problem 'was knowing' too much about what was happening. He writes: "It

was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge” (“How” 9). In many ways, Coetzee’s novella is an attempt to make sense of that terrible knowledge.

The novella, the exploration of that terrible knowledge, is not, however, narrated according to the parameters of realism, which has been the dominant mode of fiction writing in South Africa — and by ‘realism’ I am referring a largely unproblematic attempt at verisimilitude, an attempt to render the voices and stories of the time without, at the same time, recognizing that voices and stories are always mediated by form, convention and ideology. Coetzee’s work does something altogether different. The narrative quickly establishes its pedigree as a work of metafiction, in other words, a work that reflects on its own status as fiction. The narrator of “The Vietnam Project” takes orders from none other than Coetzee:

Coetzee spoke. In a series of compliments whose ambiguity was never less than naked he blighted the fruit of a year’s work. [...]

“I never imagined that this department would one day be producing work of an avant-garde nature,” he said. “I must commend you. I enjoyed reading your first chapters. You write well. It will be a pleasure to be associated with so well-finished a piece of research.” (*Dusklands 2*)

While convention does not allow us to regard “Coetzee,” the “Coetzee” who figures in the narrative and works for a secret American military institution, as Coetzee the author, the provocation is certainly there, especially since J. M. Coetzee does something similar in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” which is purported to be a translation “by J. M. Coetzee” of a text by a Coetzee ancestor originally published, in the original Dutch in 1951, by the translator’s

(imaginary) father, “the late Dr. S. J. Coetzee” (59). Coetzee the author seems intent on creating a veritable confusion around the figure of the author.

The idea of a narrator involved in a secret project — sometimes called the “Vietnam Project,” sometimes the “New Life Project,” sometimes “New Life for Vietnam” project — subject to the control a ‘cynical’ boss who actually understands nothing of the project mimics the idea of an author having control over his fictional world. The fact that the two are conflated in this narrative adds to the sense that this is ‘paranoid fiction,’ that the central character and narrator inhabits a world over which he has no control and where his freedom is illusory. The narrator, already on the first page, complains about the man directly above him: “Coetzee has asked me to revise my essay. It sticks in his craw: he want it blander, otherwise he wants it eliminated. He wants me out of the way too, I can see it.” (1) Or, later: “I am mistaken if I think that Coetzee will save me. Coetzee made his name in game theory.” (34) Ironically, the aptly named Eugene Dawn — and ‘dawn’ has the obvious connotation of ‘new life’ — is working on a programme for psychological war through which the Vietnamese people will become more pliable by being made to believe in a new set of myths; and the actual report, written in quasi-academic language, makes up a considerable portion of his narrative. The narrative structure with its metafictional ploys, which suggests the sheer idiocy of an empty faith in ‘freedom,’ points in the direction of an analogy with ‘America,’ which cannot be in control of its own destiny, trying to control the destiny of others.

The other purpose of the metafictional devices is act as a signpost for the reader to avoid a realist reading of the text. For in fact, the fictional world of “The

Vietnam Project” is wholly metaphorical. Names and place names all seem to have been chosen for their values as signifiers — or even as indices — to the idea of ‘America.’ The place where the narrator works is known as the Kennedy Institute” or, better, the “Kennedy” (3); the place where he conducts his research is the Harry S. Truman Library; the choice of presidential names, while in keeping with patriotic fervour, is probably not random. Then again, Dawn’s wife is called Marilyn and, appropriately enough, like the other Marilyn (that traditional symbol of the American soft porn industry), she looks like a pin-up model worthy of *Playboy*. The narrator is describing a photograph of his wife:

[...] but there blossomed in late February a nude pose of Marilyn herself. She reclines on a black satin Playboy sheet, her legs crossed (the razor spots come out clearly), her pubic beard on display [...] (13)

The signifiers point, not to an America of ‘realism,’ rather they offer up a mirror to ideal image that America has constructed for itself through by its most representative and iconic figures. The world Eugene Dawn inhabits is not a fictional ‘slice’ of America, such as we would see in realist fiction, but, as the narrator himself calls it, “heart of America” (51). The ‘heart of America’ cannot be a real place; it can only be a synthesis made through the images of America, its rhetoric, its contradictions and, even, its own forms of the language. (It is perhaps not a coincidence that the Vietnam narrative, uses American English spelling — for example: “My carrel in the library is *gray*, with a *gray* bookrack and little *gray* drawer for stationery” (7; my italics)—whereas the English ‘translation’ of Jacobus Coetzee’s narrative uses the British spelling that is standard in South Africa. The edition I am using was published in South Africa.)

But if Eugene Dawn's fictional world is a synthesis of 'America,' then what does it tell us about America? What does his report on Vietnam tell us about America?

6.2 American Madness

Eugene Dawn is a "mythographer." The narrator defines 'mythograph' in these terms: "The science of mythography teaches us that a subtler counter is to subvert and revise the myth. The highest propaganda is the propagation of a new mythology" (26).¹² He is working on propaganda myths that will serve in the United States' war efforts against the 'rebel' North Vietnamese.

At the centre of Dawn's propaganda myths is the idea of the United States as the Father before whom all compliant children submit with bended knee; unless they submit to the will of the Father, the Father cannot love his children. Eugene Dawn writes: "The father cannot be a benign father until his sons have knelt before his wand" (28). In practical terms, what this involves is the replacing the father figure or the "father-voice" that had existed in Vietnamese society with a newer one that is of American provenance; since it would have

¹² At around about the same time that *Dusklands* came out, Coetzee published an article where he spoke about the "mythographic revision of history" made by Afrikaans writers ("Man's Fate" 17). This suggests that Eugene Dawn's myths for Vietnam are no different, in essence, from the myths created by colonizing powers to justify, in retrospect, their rapaciousness and the terror they inflicted on native populations. Once again, this establishes a closer link between "The Vietnam Project" and "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee."

been impossible to totally obliterate the older voices of the Vietnamese, these would be cast in the role of brothers who have declared enmity against their Father. Eugene Dawn again: "I suggest the division of responsibilities, with the Vietnamese operating the brother-voices and we ourselves taking over the design and operation of the father-voice" (22-23).

One of the sub-sections of "The Vietnam Project" is entitled "Programming the father-voice" and it provides a concrete example how the United States can appropriate for itself the role of father-voice: "Thus, for example, we have justified the elimination of enemy villages by calling them armed strongholds, when the true value of the operations lay in demonstrating to the absent VC menfolk just how vulnerable their homes and families were" (23). The idea is that the Vietcong should be made to see themselves as the weak brothers who could not resist the power of the Father whose ire was destroying their families.

The technical chapter of "The Vietnam Project" (the second chapter) which deals with the 'science of mythography' is written in a dry style of a military manual, although the narrator had earlier described photographs that would have illuminated the various sections of his project. One of these is a photograph of Clifford Loman, "onetime linebacker for the University of Houston, now a sergeant in the 1st Air Cavalry," having sexual intercourse with a Vietnamese woman/child. The narrator writes:

Loman shows off his strength: arching backwards with his hands on his buttocks he lifts the woman on his erect penis. Perhaps he walks with her, for her hands are thrown out as if she is trying to keep balance. He smiles

broadly; she turns a sleepy, foolish face on the unknown photographer. Behind them a blank television screen winks back the flash of the bulb. I have given the picture the provisional title “Father Makes Merry with Children” and assigned it a place in Section 7.” (14)

The caption for the photograph makes explicit the nature of the tyrannical Father’s hold over his children: pure rape.

But if the technical chapter of “The Vietnam Project” is an exposé or dissection of the myths America had created to justify its bellicose ambitions, it also follows that that chapter is merely one level in a narrative framework that attempts to tell an altogether more complex story. Eugene Dawn, the narrator working on the “Vietnam Project,” is himself a father. The child, born out of his union with Marilyn, is Martin.¹³ Later in the narrative, when Dawn is consumed by his Vietnam Project and reflects on the ‘soldier boys’ who trod upon the Vietnam that for him had merely been a place he had discoursed about, he imagines that his child, sleeping in a hotel bed, his thumb in his hand, is a grotesque creation of the war eating at his insides:

It is a thing, a child not mine, once a baby squat and yellow whelmed in the dead center of my body, sucking my blood, growing by my waste, now, 1973, a hideous mongrel boy who stretches his limbs inside my hollow bones, gnaws my liver with his smiling teeth, voids his bilious filth into my systems, and will not go. (40)

¹³ I have already suggested that work Coetzee’s novella around floating, disembodied signifiers, and it would not do to read Martin as kind of stand-in for any particular figure, but the choice of name does hint at the original Martin Luther, the rebellious son who rebelled the tyranny of his father (the papacy), and Martin Luther King, the murdered son of the land.

To seek out his deliverance Eugene Dawn tries to stab the boy with a knife and, as a consequence of that act of attempted infanticide, he is hospitalized in a mental institution. The novella in fact ends with Dawn at the hospital. It concludes with these words:

My mother (whom I have not hitherto mentioned) is spreading her vampire wings for the night. My father is away being a soldier. In my cell in the heart of America, with my private toilet in the corner, I ponder and ponder. I have high hopes of finding whose fault I am. (51)

At the end, Eugene Dawn seems himself in the role of the son, the child, as his father's son. He becomes the son, and this occupies the role of the son whom he has tried to kill. That, the novella seems to be saying, is *the heart of America*, the self-murdering heart of America.

6.3 The Symbolization of the Empire

J. M. Coetzee's text differs from the other texts we have been studying in that it does not set up, intentionally or at a representational level, some sort of imaginary identification with the other (*petit autre*), in this case, the American other. Most of the texts we have encountered reflected, in some sense, the exigencies, fears and hopes of a largely black culture that looked to another black culture as a model for its own achievements. The issue is not that Coetzee is a white writer and, consequently, looks at white America with certain kinship, for that would have implied an equally imaginary relationship with the American other. Rather, "The Vietnam Project" is an attempt to symbolize the

American imperial project and work out the enduring matrix that connects that project to other imperialist projects from different eras and different locations (such as the Dutch colonization of the Cape hinterland in the 18th century).

If anything, Coetzee's text attempts to eschew all forms of imaginary identification with the American other. This is not to deny that Coetzee recognizes (a) that as a white South African he would have been heir to a similar imperialist project or (b) that as a resident in the United States during the time of the Vietnam War that he would have been in some sense implicit—'complicit' would have been the wrong word—in the culture whose underbelly was war and destruction in Indochina. I think it is a recognition of these facts that pushes his narratives to adopt the form of metafiction: he does, after all, make the author of "The Narrative" his supposed ancestor and, in the Vietnam work, he makes "Coetzee" the director of the fictional "game"—and the fictional Coetzee, as I have pointed out before, did make his name in "game theory"—around the Vietnam Project. It is this recognition of his cultural implication in the great imperialist projects of the Western world that allows him to stand back and record it with irony. At this level, Coetzee's text exhibits an imaginary relationship with America (identification), although the sheer distance that separates the knowledge about from the actual practice is the direct result of a symbolizing action and efforts of intelligence. We could say that Coetzee's text operates at the intersection of the symbolic and the imaginary.

In many ways, this is reflection of the times. Like other writers from the region who wrote about the Vietnam War (and we shall encounter them in the next chapter), Coetzee was not indifferent. But unlike the other writers, Coetzee

recognizes the inheritance of the past was a complex thing and that America itself — the father/son who devoured his own sons — was much bigger than the Vietnam War, that there was space in America for other forms of actions and other forms of being. Eugene Dawn writes, for example, about his wife Marilyn's 'false conception' of America:

Marylyn's great fear is that I will drag her out of the suburbs into the wilderness. She thinks that every deviation leads into the wilderness. This is because she has a false conception of America. She cannot believe that America is big enough to contain its deviants. (9)

Coetzee recognizes that while the matrix of colonialism/imperialism still remains intact and very much the same, it would be equally insincere to reduce a country (or a culture) to one of its aspects. If Coetzee was exploring one aspect of America, he certainly recognized that.

CHAPTER SEVEN: America as the Bad Object

If the reaction to the Vietnam War by J. M. Coetzee was cerebral, the reaction by the black writers from the region was much more visceral, and this also points to a profound shift in the perception of America. In this chapter we shall be discussing the Vietnam poems of Mafika Gwala and José Craveirinha.

7.1 The Ideological Rejection of America (1)

Mafika Gwala's "Vo Nguyen Giap," written in 1975, included in his *No More Lullabies* (published in 1982), is long, declamatory *pièce de occasion* hailing the defeat of the Americans at the hand of the Vietnamese. Vo Nguyen Giap [Võ Nguyên Giáp] was the North Vietnamese general who masterminded many of the American defeats in Indochina. The poem functions both as a reflection of what America was all about and as a statement of political act of solidarity with the people of the Third World. These aspects are closely connected in the poem, but I would like, for now, to discuss them separately.

Firstly, how does Gwala's poem see 'America'? The image of America is gleaned from the many anti-American lines and made-up slogans that constitute the body of the poem. Thus we read:

Go home, Yankee.

Yankee, go home.
 Go home to your hotdogs and hamburgers
 Go home to your TV slops
 Go home to Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse
 Go home to the frigid heart of Juliet Jones
 Go home to Uncle Sam's consumptive coughs [...]
 (lines 50-57)

The image of the USA presented by the poem is made up of the predictable images of Hollywood (Walt Disney, Mickey Mouse), cartoon strips (Juliet Jones), and the fast food culture (hamburgers, hotdogs). The poem's rejection of American culture is also a rejection of white-dominated South African culture, which had become Americanized, as it were:

Go home to the stomach illusions of your pasty meals
 — that I find so distasteful in my own country (lines 69-70)

If this rejection of American culture is also a rejection of white culture, it is also because the culture of black Americans suggests the remnants of an oppositional cultural space. The poet hears the music of Charlie Parker on the radio. There is no condemnation of this music simply for the fact of its being 'Amerian,' but the context suggests that jazz, as we shall also see in Craveirinha's poems from the same period, is becoming the site of some ambivalence. We read:

In the stillness of a Sundaymorning night
 I heard the horn of Charlie Parker
 being interrupted by the Sunday's paper news: (181-183)

Significantly, what interrupts Charlie Parker is the news of the bombardment of Haiphong, the North Vietnamese seaport, by the Americans. These lines are particularly significant because they introduce a particularly clear identification on the part of the poem's narrator:

News says Haiphong harbour shelled,
 News says the bombings of North Vietnam begins.
 Then I remembered I am one of the wretched of the earth (lines 184-186)

The identification is not with black Americans, but with Fanon's "wretched of the earth." In other words, the identification is no longer with blackness — an imaginary identification, an identification with a *semblable* — but with the victims of imperialism and capitalism, who do not necessarily share a common ancestry or even a common history. The identification with the new Other operates at the symbolic axis; it is an ideological identification.

7. 2 The Ideological Rejection of America (2)

Something similar seems to have been happening in Mozambique in the same period. If black America functions as Mozambique's imaginary other in the 1950s, this is less true of the period after the late 1960s. (The colonial war started in 1964 and perhaps the optimism of an earlier generation had given way to a more hardened anti-imperialist position, something which not unrelated to the perception of America by Mozambicans.) In chronological terms, this new, altered understanding of America in Craveirinha's poetry coincides with Craveirinha's imprisonment. Craveirinha was detained early in 1965, charged with belonged to FRELIMO (the liberation movement) and in 1966 he sentenced by the courts serve a prison sentence. Part of his sentence was served in the 'Cadeia Civil' and part in the prison in Machava maximum

security prison, where political prisoners were housed. He spent much time in solitary confinement — in “cela 1” (cell number one). On appeal he was allowed to serve the remainder of his sentence in the psychiatric hospital in Infulene. His prison poems, many smuggled out, were later collected in *Cela 1*, which came out in 1980. In 2004 Fátima Mendonça brought out a critical edition his remaining prison poems, *Poemas da Prisão*. When the America does figure in his prison poems it is usually in the context of the Vietnam War.

We cannot know what the precise nature of the news Craveirinha had access to in prison, but it is also true that the war in Vietnam had started a while before. The Gulf of Tonkin incident (which is mentioned in Craveirinha’s “Excerto”), when two American destroyers were allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats, took place in August 1964. Two poems in *Poemas da Prisão* deal specifically with the war in Vietnam.

“Pergunta a Ernest Hemingway” [Question to Ernest Hemingway] rehearses many of the themes and images which we encounter in his later “Excerto.” The question begins with a question:

*Por quem os sinos dobram
 por quem dobram os sinos, Ernest?
 Pelas asas de anjo coladas
 a fita gomada nas costas dos meninos
 alguns na comunhão
 ou pela estátua da liberdade em Nova York? (34-5)*

(For whom the bells toll,
 for whom toll the bells, Ernest?)

For the angels' wings
 stuck with glue on the backs of some kids
 in their first communion
 or for the Statue of Liberty in New York?)

Ernest Hemingway was the great American writer, the author of *For Whom the Bells Toll*, a novel about the Spanish Civil War, always a great interest to Craveirinha as evidenced by his very long poem "Oh! Carmen de Diego" which we have already made mention of. But Hemmingway, the widely travelled American author looking for troubled hot-spots, had twice visited Africa on safari; his travel book, *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935) is the fruit of his experience in Kenya. (Hemingway also wrote two short stories inspired by his experiences in Africa, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", but we cannot be sure that Craveirinha was aware of them.) Although the poem makes no attempt to disparage Hemingway as a person, Craveirinha would have understood the morally ambiguous role of Hemmigway the writer: for he was the outsider coming to Africa to see the exotic landscapes with natives and wild beasts. Hemigway, the man of letters, the man whom it is possible to dialogue, provides a vehicle to talk about Americans on more insidious safaris. This is not to suggest that Hemigway is somehow a stand-in for an American imperialist project, but rather that his moral ambivalence makes him the appropriate person to speak to. The real Ernest Hemigway was of course dead; he had committed suicide in 1961. Unlike so many of Craveirinha's poems addressed to living people (Nelson Mandela, etc.), which create a semblance to real communication, it is quite clear that Craveirinha would not expect a reply. The question the poet is really asking is why the children are dying, if it is for the same freedom — here represented by

that beacon of liberty, the Statue of Liberty in New York — that Americans profess to fight for?

Before continuing with our discussion of the Hemingway poem, I would like to talk about this image of the Statue of Liberty. In *Cela 1*, the first collection of prison poems to have come out, there is in fact a short poem entitled “Estátua da Liberdade” [Statue of Liberty]. The poem is dated 1954. This appears strange and one would wonder why this poem was included with the prison poems, written after 1965. It may be that it had originally been written in 1954, but was rewritten in its present form in prison. I quote the entire poem:

*Em
Nova Iorque
há um gigantesca
estátua da Liberdade à vista.*

*Lá dentro da pedra
o coração de Al Capone
extraordinariamente muito pequenino
vende à grande os Estados Unidos.
(29)*

In
New York
there's a gigantic
statue of Liberty in sight

Inside the very stone
Al Capone's heart
extraordinarily very small

sells the United States

The idea is a remarkable one since it turns on its head the traditional conception of the Statue of Liberty as the emblematic image of America, the one that sells America to the rest of the world. The heart of this woman, this image to Liberty, is not the heart open to freedom, but it is the heart of that famous of all gangsters, Al Capone. What is more, the way Craveirinha describes this petty heart (“extraordinarily very small”) is also revealing; ostensibly ungrammatical, the phrase gains strength from the fact that what is used to qualify the noun ‘small’ is both an adverb and adjective. It is this minute, petty heart that ‘sells’ the United States. The phrase in the original (“*vende à grande*”) is a colloquial one and it has the connotations of cheap bargain sales. The distance between what the Statue of Liberty purports to represent and what it actually stands for is also the nature of the allusion in the Hemingway poem.

The Hemingway poem enumerates those for whom the bells could possibly toll. The poem asks if they toll for the screams of the thousands driven mad by the swift B52 birds, or for the ‘play-boy’ helicopters between land and sky, or for the menstruating swamps, or for children camouflaged as dead. The questions, up to this point, are to an extent, entirely rhetorical since the examples provided constantly pit the dead against those that perform the deed, and only by a perversion of logic could the bells toll for helicopters and B52s. But it not as if Craveirinha does not understand that Americans also suffered losses, had casualties. He asks:

Por quem os sinos dobram

*por quem dobram os sinos, Ernest?
 Pela mãe americana que não viu o filho
 crivado numa emboscada vietcongue
 ou pelo filho vietnamita que viu a mãe
 ir aos céus de Buda numa granada «yankee»? (34-5)*

For whom the bells toll,
 for whom toll the bells, Ernest?
 For the American mother who did not see her child
 riddled with bullets in a Vietcong ambush
 or for the Vietnamese son who saw his mother
 go to Buddha's skies with Yankee grenade?)

The parallel constructions establish a contrast, but that contrast is not at the level of violence—the American boy riddled with bullets, the Vietnamese mother blown up in bits and pieces—but rather at the level of ‘seeing.’ Whereas the Vietnamese boy witnesses, sees with his own eyes, first-hand, his mother’s death by fire, the American mother cannot see her son’s death — because she is in far-away in America, not in the war zone, but also because she cannot *see* what is really going on, she cannot see that this is an unjust war. While the two images do point to universal despair and pain, the fact that they are not equal also points to disequilibrium at the heart of the poem. The poem ends with these words:

*[...] e na incógnita das megatoneladas
 libertas a protão
 dobram
 ou não dobram a finados pela humanidade?*

... in the unknown factor of the megatons

of liberated protons
do they toll
or do they not toll for—dead—humanity?

The great Statue of Liberty which introduced the poem has been reduced to what is really about: the “liberated protons” of a bomb. If the bells toll for anything it certainly is not universal pain, but the loss of a sense of humanity, of human-ness. It is America — with its small heart — that has lost its human-ness.

Craveirinha’s other significant poem on the Vietnam War, “Excerto de um Álbum de Autógrafos para um Menino Vietnamita,” was originally written in 1972. A version (under the title of “A Três Tempos e Dois Espaços”) was published in 1977, i.e., after independence. I have used Fátima Mendonça’s typescript, which differs slightly from the published version.¹⁴

Like much of Craveirinha’s great poetry, the force of the poem derives, from his unusual metaphors — “yoga of bombs”, “Made-in-USA screams”, “agrarian theories of the B52s” — which suggest travesties, the turning of what is positive into vehicles of destruction. These metaphors are thus indicative of the way Vietnamese reality has been disfigured by American aggression. When, for example, the poem uses the word ‘tricks’, with its association of the magician’s hat tricks, to describe the immolation by fire of Vietnamese peasants, the word jars, perhaps because it seems so heartless. But this is also Craveirinha’s point: the war was heartless:

¹⁴ The published version also includes two stanzas separately entitled “Amor em Pensamento.”

*todos às vezes apenas meros vultos
 subjectivos em truques autênticos
 de gente em adeuses fumegando
 a borracha dos braços*
 (lines 23-26)

and at times they all seem like bare shadows,
 yet liable to the real tricks
 such as smouldering arms of burnt rubber waving a last goodbye

The image of America is that of a devouring beast, but a beast that has become more mechanical than human. Unlike the Hemingway poem, America or Americans never figure in the poem except through metaphorical terms that allude to their function as machines of destruction: “*Giletes / em euforia esquartejam-nos / na ternura dos adjectivos de aço*” [Gillette razors which in their euphoria have us drawn and quartered / with the tenderness of their adjectives of steel] (lines 1-3).

This poem was also the last (or second-to-last) time that Craveirinha talked about America. (The poem discussed in the next chapter also seems to have been written in 1972.)

7. 3 The Symbolic Renunciation of America

What we see in these poems, Gwala and Craveirinha’s, is that the imaginary identification with America had given way to a more symbolic relationship, one mediated by ideology, by principles: America as *other* (a') had become America as the *Other* (A), the imperialist warmonger, the enemy. There is always a

danger in over-symbolizing what had previously been imaginary, because it leaves out both love and hate, both very powerful emotions capable of generating great passions. The symbolic order is not about emotion; it is the order of rationality, of ideas. Maire Jaanus, in her analysis of the imaginary order, has said that “whereas the pure imaginary may produce crimes of passion, the symbolic is capable of massive crimes of inhumanity” (326). This is not to suggest that these writers were somehow guilty of ‘massive crimes of inhumanity’ since it is precisely his identification with the innocent Vietnamese peasants that motivated him to use all rhetorical resources to criticize America. Nevertheless, I think Jaanus’ words help us to understand the great difference between a pure imaginary and a pure symbolic as two absolute poles. Even though the poetic discourse of the 1970s cannot be considered a purely symbolic one since it is born of a certain amount of hatred, it is by and large the discourse of ideology, and insofar as it is the discourse of ideology it treats the Other as a nameless, faceless entity. There is a reluctance to get under the skin of America, to imagine things as the other would have imagined it; equally, there is a refusal to see the American Other as anything other than monolithic, as if the great American edifice did not have its own fissures and was not subject to its own internal contradictions.¹⁵

¹⁵ The suggestion that it is possible to get under the skin of the Other as enemy comes, appropriately, from one of the many poems Craveirinha wrote about South Africa. The uncollected “Comunicado de Cuíto Cuanavale” [Communiqué from Cuíto Cuanavale] is a poem about the defeat of the South African and Unita forces in the Angolan town of Cuíto Cuanavale in 1987. Similarly to his Vietnam text, the poem is about the senseless stupidity of war. But unlike the Vietnam poem, there is at least an attempt, no matter how ironic, to consider the Other, not merely as a Beast, but as a victim of ideology. We read: “*Próspero destino é o jovem bóer / comprazer-se na sua ideológica / auto-imolação no Mirage / a gargalhá-lo / em chamas?*” [How fortunate is the destiny of

Having said that, it is important that we accept these poems on their own terms. This is particularly important in relation to “Álbum de Autógrafos.” The poem is meant to be a series of Mozambican autographs for a Vietnamese child, not an unbiased report-back from the warfront in Vietnam. The interest of the way the poet portrays America is only useful and valid insofar as the same poet had, two decades earlier, written as if he were an American, a black American, and black America was the image towards which Mozambique aspired. This view of black America becomes, as we have seen, increasingly cynical from the late 1960s onwards. Around the 1970s black American culture is no longer a model of identification — *despite* James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Angela Davis (“Quando” lines 42-45). The choice was no longer between black America and white America, but it was a question of America versus the rest. It was a choice between Nixon and the Vietnamese child.

the Afrikaner kid / who delights in his own ideological suicide / in the Mirage that traps him / in the laughter of its flames?] (lines 11-15).

CHAPTER EIGHT: Whites in Black Skins

We recall how in earlier periods Craveirinha often wrote about important black American figures. Martin Luther King, the civil rights leader murdered in Memphis in 1968, would at seem, at first glance, to be sort of leader to evoke respect and admiration. The undated (and unpublished) “Martin Luther King” is not a poem in praise of King or even an elegy on his death. Rather, it is a cynical reflection of how white civilization will appropriate the historical figure of Martin Luther King for its own ends and transform him into an Aryan-type Jesus Christ:

*daqui a uns dois ou três séculos
desconfio que Martin Luther King
terá uns lânguidos olhos azuis
uns longos cabelos loiros
uma nórdica tez branca
e o apelido de Deus.*

(ll. 3-8)

I suspect that in two or three centuries' time
Martin Luther King
will have languid blue eyes
long blond hair
a white Nordic complexion
and God' surname.

The idea is of a corrupt and corrupting white civilization that, at the same time that it appropriates black culture, also transforms black people into caricatures of themselves; the revolutionary valour and worth of Martin Luther King would have no consequence against the steamrolling effect of the power of white history. In a sense the institutionalization of the figure of Martin Luther King in the United States, where there is even a Martin Luther King Day (15 January), suggests that Craveirinha's irony was not altogether off-target.

This idea of black caricatures is central to the last (or next-to-last) American poem written by José Craveirinha, "*Elegia a um Ex-Trompetista Velho* 'Good Boy'" [Elegy to the Former Trumpeter 'Good Boy'], a 95-line elegy on the death of Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong, the jazz musician. Armstrong died of a heart attack in 1971; the night before had played a famous show at the Waldorf Astoria's Empire Room. Craveirinha's elegy on the death of Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong is an exercise in irony and ambivalence. The poem begins by saying that its intention is to make peace with the distinguished musician:

*... daqui prometo
que esta elegia estabelece definitivas tréguas
entre nós e o notável músico negro
e que a terra lhe seja a Mãe perdoando: Amen!*
(ll. 4-6)

and I promise
that this elegy will make peace once-and-for-all
between us and the distinguished noteworthy black musician
may the land be his Mother forgiving him: Amen!

Why would the poet want to make peace between Louis Armstrong and the people of Mozambique? We recall that Louis Armstrong was one of those African American people singled for praise in his long mini-epic poem about America. The elegy is fulsome in praise for Armstrong's talent as a jazz musician. The closing words of the poems talk about the "*solos implacáveis de trompetes / mesmo dentro do caixão*" [implacable trumpet solos / even inside his coffin] (ll. 93-94). But we also read that the person who delivers the *elogio* [panegyric] at the funeral was none other than President Nixon (l. 89). The words **e**legia [Craveirinha's elegy] and **e**logio [Nixon's panegyric], phonologically contiguous words, are also signifiers along the same metonymic chain. Craveirinha seems to suggest that there is an intimate connection between the elegy on the death and the panegyric at his funeral: in a sense Craveirinha's poem in praise of 'Satchmo' is precisely the panegyric (**e**logio) that ought to have been read by Nixon; likewise, it is Nixon who would more as likely mourn the passing away of the black performer (**e**legia). The categories have been ironically subverted, and we should expect more nasty surprises.

Armstrong is described as a type of Doctor Jeckyll (l. 12). For example, we are told that he wears two black smoking jackets: one that he was born with, and another that he wears so that he can look like an eternal 'boy' — boy servant. (The English word 'boy', which was often used to designate black male servants in South Africa no matter their age, was also used by the Anglicized white elite in Mozambique. The 'Good Boy' in the title functions as a representation of a fawning Uncle Tom.) The poem informs us that this 'boy' has a 'Colgate' smile (13) and his concerts have the polish of 'Nugget' shoe polish (l. 54). These signifiers seem to float needlessly without attaching themselves to any specific

meaning. We might recall that whites that imitated ‘happy’ blacks on stage often used Nugget black shoe polish to make themselves look black and the blackness of the polish often accentuated their foolish, buffoonish white grins—their Colgate smiles. The image of Armstrong presented by the poem is that of a living caricature of the happy black man. It is no surprise that Al-Johnson-types would make millions imitating precisely this kind of black man, with his “*camisa de ancião ‘boy’ de carapinha de algodão*” [shirt of an elder, the eternal ‘boy’ with his cotton crissy {kinky} hair] (16).

But worse still than being the ‘king of jazz’ who played for white audiences and who smiled the ‘happy smile’ of a black man, was Armstrong’s deafness to the real ‘hot-jazz’ of the F-111 planes bombarding the Gulf of Tonkin: “*e surdo às Páscoas de ovos da 7ª esquadra no golfo de Tonquim / com zunidos melodiosos F-111 nos corações esfomeados de ‘hot-jazz’*” [and deaf to the Easter of eggs of the 7th squadron in the Gulf of Tonkin / with the melodious whiz of the F-111s stirring the hearts of those hungry for hot jazz] (ll. 61-62) We know that in his later years Armstrong toured Africa, Europe, and Asia under the sponsorship of the US State Department; he was even know as “Ambassador Satch”. The poem tells us that the ‘old boy’ was not interested in politics: he went on a world tour instead (60) and then put on his ‘apron’ to serve his customers at the Rockefeller Center (64). He did not speak out against what was happening in Vietnam. ‘Vietnam’ and ‘Nixon’ are the crucial terms in this poem; they constitute the underside of this vision of America. The elegy on the death of Satchmo is, thus, in many ways one of Craveirinha’s poems on the Vietnam war.

What is also true that after having written about these poems Craveirinha would never write about America again. Much of his poetry in the 1980s was an international in outlook; despite the fact that he rarely left his Maputo suburb of Mafalala, he was a cosmopolitan in outlook and his vision was eminently ecumenical. We encounter poems — some in series, some of them three-page-long poems — about Israel and Palestine (“Terra de Canaã”, etc.), Mexico (“Mundial de Futebol no México”), and, with great frequency, South Africa (“Why?”, “Desde que o Meu Amigo Nelson”, etc.). But of America he did not speak; the great heroes of the past remained in the past.

While the ferocity of Craveirinha’s denunciation of the role of America in Vietnam War is understandable, it is surprising to see the same sort of ferocity and cutting irony in poems about Martin Luther King and Sachtmo. One way of making sense of this is to see the role of the figures as a betrayal — deliberate in the case of Armstrong, by default in the case of King. The rage would be the rage of someone who was betrayed, who invested love and respect to have it returned back to him in the form of caricatures. But how do we make sense of this rage?

This poet’s (or the poet-narrator’s) relationship with the United States used to be, as we have seen, one of love and hate. That relationship was an imaginary one, for love and hate can co-exist in the imaginary order, although there are two registers at work. But over and above the symbolic and imaginary orders, there is also something called the ‘real.’ These three orders exist simultaneously, and their domains overlap. The later Lacan will use the metaphor of the Borromean knot to explain how these overlap. A Borromean knot is a set three interlocking rings; the removal of one of the rings results in the collapse of the

entire structure. Thus, one ring stands for the imaginary, one for the symbolic, one for the real, but the ring is really one.

The symbolic order, as we have learned, is the world of language (a symbolizing system) and the law; it is concerned with our identification with groups, nations, with ideology or with God, and as such the symbolic order overlaps with culture, into which a subject is born and which predates him/her. The imaginary order, on the other hand, is concerned with our imago, the specular ego, our self-image and our alter egos; it is pre-eminently narcissistic, which may lead one to love another (because her or she is somehow like us); by the same token the recognition that 'you' as other as not 'my' mirror image may lead to rivalry, aggression and even hate. The real does not refer to 'reality' as we usually understand it, although it may refer a deeper reality; the real is the nucleus of our selves, and it precedes language (symbolization) or the self-image; it may be seen as a type of 'hole' where primal desires first erupted; it is a world of trauma, anguish, lack, violence.

What happens when these orders overlap in a skewed manner? Now consider the way these order overlap, and what this reveal about the relationship with 'America.' There are three key terms that I like to explore: love, hate and desire. Love belongs in the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic. Initially belongs in the realm of the imaginary, for love primarily narcissistic, which would mean love of one's self; but love can be symbolized, mediated through language: and spiritual love and love of one's country would fall in this category. Hate would fall in the intersection of the imaginary and the real: the recognition that 'I am not you' may lead to violence and to a desire to destroy the Other.

That Other must be dehumanized. There is no symbolization possible for hate. Because it belongs in the region of primal trauma it cannot be assuaged; it needs to be repeated over and over again. The outbursts of hatred — the sarcasm, the bitter irony — that we see in Craveirinha's later poems about America could perhaps be interpreted expressions of hatred for what was once loved.

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