



DEAD

CENTRE

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DEAR, HEY, HELLO,
BEST, KIND REGARDS,
THANKS

Correspondence between
Rowan Smith & Nick Mulgrew

FOREWORD

THE FOLLOWING TEXTS WERE BORN OUT OF CONVERSATIONS SURROUNDING THE WORK IN THE EXHIBITION DEAD CENTRE. IT WAS DECIDED THAT THE TEXTS WOULD BE AUTONOMOUS WORKS IN AND OF THEMSELVES, AND NEED NOT ADDRESS THE ARTWORKS IN DEAD CENTRE DIRECTLY. THESE TEXTS ARE THUS NOT ABOUT THE ARTWORKS, NOR DO THEY EXPLAIN THE EXHIBITION, BUT RATHER SIT ADJACENT TO IT, ALLOWING MEANINGS TO EXPAND, OVERLAP AND SPILL OUTSIDE THEIR CONTAINERS.

Nick Mulgrew

BUCKETS

You are alive. You are dead. That is as much as you know.

You are in a place new to you, the place that is new to all who arrive there. The place in which those who have died rebuild the world they had known in life, carrying nothing other than the skin in which they were born once and the skin in which they died, and in which they are still alive. You carry nothing other than the skin, which is not the same as carrying nothing else. There is no camouflage for this. No matter how you are clothed, your skin still shows. It still exposes itself.

When you were born the first time, you carried nothing but the skin, and took every seed as a newly-germinating thing. Now you are in the forest, and there are trees and shrubs and the callings of birds you cannot name.

Take the road from the reconfigured city, the road that goes in the direction you know. Stick to what might be recognised, for what you knew is gone, and for nothing new can be known anew. Nothing can be discovered. Every knowing has been already known.

What you have looked at your whole life, you now scale. What you scale, you have looked at your whole life.

You are at the base of the mountain, or what you believe to be its base. At which gradient can flat be said to end and slope begin? The start of the mountain had been known to you from where the city was seen to have ended; where the tar roads would noose the great monolith and its children; where placed rock would give way to rock that is grown; where the water-gulping gardens of migratory growth formed their opposition against erica, champhor, fire lily. Here, the city does not end. The buildings only extend, from shore to plateau – the new colony, in its entirety, encrusted fast to mountain. The great landmass, from sea to sky, on its hyperbolic scale, a ship-hull uninterrupted. City as mountain; mountain as city.

Where there are no human borders, where there is mercy, there are still the separations of geology. Where shale gives way to sandstone. And so you know where the mountain begins like the brain knows sleep, not knowing the exact moment it happens.

You look at the mountain, at the city it hosts. You, finally feeling like the foreigner you have always been, in the dreamscape of a home.

The funicular rolls and gear-cries its way up vertical tracks, and in its carriage, you sit. You had been used to paying to travel up the mountain, for no reason other than the view, suspended above the gradient by hanging cable, with the sunscreened people in technical clothing, grasping their hiking sticks like charms. But now, a gateless railway stuck fast to siltstone, one of many lines scraping through the gorges, grand funiculars following valleys. The geography of city, of integrated transport, now transposed to perpendicular planes, terminating at the plateau above. Between flat ground and flat ground, nodes at escarpments, stations every minute, negotiating fairy land. There are other people in the carriage, commuting perhaps, daydreaming. None of them wear your skin.

You ask yourself why you climb this mountain. You want to say, Because it's there. But that is a learned call, a learned response. There are citizens visible through the windows of the carriage, moving from townhouse, to cobblestreet, to dirt path to station, their tongues making shapes, their throats making vibrations. They live the lives that could not have been lived elsewhere.

What did you know, really, all that you'd known of life? Had you achieved that fullness of knowledge you had always feigned? That experience, the tapping of the deep veins of the land? No. Because you were too obsessed with the drawing of maps, mistaking cartography for the land itself.

Yet even from this height you can see the ghosts of things to which your eyes were once accustomed, and these things juxtaposed with things of inexplicable genesis. The fever-dreams of remembered buildings, begun but not quite built again; their stunted forms parting the drifting seafog into great mist-snakes, slithering through the grey-green valleys beyond. Those hills becoming watercolour grays, imposed on each other, imposed again, the density of their horizon reaching, receding to black. Canoes dotted in the ancient bay, speckled as ash, the shoreline restored to what it was once.

Or not restored. Here, remember, there was nothing to restore. This is a shore that has never shifted, not lifetimes ago, not ever. Here, no great filling of the sea by carried stones taken from this mountain's slopes through furlongs of the growing city, to be dumped into a cold ocean, outside the osuary disguised as a castle, where living statues now stand, and where they are regarded. There manifests no belief here like those of the statues: that this land has to grow further, that land could rise from human hands like volcanos from the sea, driven up by a hubris disguised as will; no belief that the sea could be claimed from, and not only claim for itself.

Those hills, what are those hills called, if anything? By whose will are mountains grouped into ranges, named?

There is enough written about views, about what can be seen and from where. There is enough said about what attaches itself to swamp and moss, of the luxuriancy of verdure and foliage. Of protean tails slouching from the seas, spring-wound round eastern shale, great leakings and rushings around the heath. There is enough of that; which is fine, for there are other things. All around, from the base of the mountain to its middle-cliffs, the buildings a build-up on the stone. As if the apartments of the seaboard had multiplied, risen like damp. Not scraping the sky, but in it.

At the summit no one walks the streets. Those that exit the station duck immediately into tunnels, covered walkways with footstones that gather mud. The walls of the buildings are thicker, the glass of the windows shatter-proof. Exiting the station, you feel why. The air at the summit is as clear as it is at the shore, but thinner, chill-laced, swarming and rising in great whorls, pushed by its own weight down the alleyways of the high-rises, and into the open sky, like fresh river meets ocean.

The buildings around the edge of the plateau act as a fort, forbidding sight of what lies within them. But, walking through them, you see the battlements are shallower than they look. Two rows of buildings – of multi-storied apartment and utility – that, like you, stretch for vision. There are no build-

ings in the interior of the plateau, no citizens that you can see: only the scrub and plateau of your recollection. Why does this plain remain when everything else has absorbed a vastly different reality?

Above, starlings bear the wind. This interior, a personal Galapagos.

Every few moments, another funicular arrives at the station. Citizens flow out of its carriages, and stride into covered alleyways that maze through and between the buildings. The zenith sun, like your skin, affords you only exposure, not warmth. But to follow them would be to will to be lost further, in place and in kind.

Continue to stare at the city, at the sea. Until what trails out of the station, behind all other people, is a person cast of settler mould, a carrier of your skin. A cast you know: gale-roughed face, gale-rounded body, clothes thick like tent fabric. They do not look at the buildings, and they do not look at you; only at their feet and what they seek to tread.

They do not walk into the alleys, do not look back at the sea. They take the wind as persuasion, past the rows of buildings, into the interior. They disappear from your eyeline, and all human hum is gone. There is only the wind, there is only the land. You, windsail, zephyr-carried, zephyr-carrion. You step away from the buildings, as did the settler, stepping from the city.

Rocks dressed in lichen. All blues, whites, robin's-egg. This is flat land, of greens and browns and grays, pressed on horizon against the azure, the unknowable.

From the top of a mountain, you realise even a peak can be put underfoot. The orange-red aloe-flame, the heather-purple, fed by pools of cloud-water, chlorophyll beards in the communing streamlets. Tread down pebbled desire paths, once-boulders mined down. Proteas, air-preserved, still hang from browned limbs. Sunbirds and flycatchers fly peripheral, disappear at the meekest flick of an eye.

Only a few minutes' walk brings you out of sight from the buildings, to the central plateau, where there is no view of the city, of the great conglomeration of people that, without you, throbs and lives and thrives. Here there are more rocks, the basking agama claiming sovereignty. Soil like beach sand, the entrances of burrows, the leavings of moles, the bulb-huntings of larger rodents. There are no reservoirs here other than the accidental. The bell-chimes of frogs, the floatings of rock doves, guided by will, not the malignant wind. And that – that sound again. Are those the callings of other bird-shades, unseen – or are those the squeakings of chains?

Rocks dressed in lichen. Or not. These rocks ripple, warp, sail-bellow. A tent, of fabric printed like lichen; a low A-frame, staked like a body to the ground, disguised among the formations of rock. Meters in front of it lies an ash-pit, the remnants of an unruly bonfire. Unenclosed by rocks, the grass that surrounds the pit is singed. The ash is blown, and in the wind it rotates, and sweeps and drives toward itself, then rises, and dissipates. You turn back toward the tent and notice by its side three deep and oblong casts of tin – buckets.

The wind blows at your back, and from behind you appears the settler you saw leaving the station, holding similar buckets in each of their hands. They speak at you, and you turn to them, but still they do not look at you. They ask you who you are. You tell them who you are. They ask you if you are one of them, and you do not know. They put the buckets down by their feet, and they whistle. Behind you the tent rustles, but not with the wind. The lichen-fabric births another person, and then a child emerges. You did not – could not – register their presence in that tent. Wordlessly the three of them arrange themselves beside each other, a gothic triptych. Facing toward you, they still do not look at you. They say they are those whose land this is. They are those that settle here.

They ask you if you are one of them. Almond-planters, almond-trimmers. They carry your skin.

They tell you to follow them, and they lead you in the directions the wind blows. It blows them alone with a strength that does not affect you, nor any other thing around you. Now here, now there, will-less beings, their eyes cast down. They do not regard anything – the great green curling ferns, their chameleon tails, the gill-mazes of ground-fungus – except what ground they walk upon, by what their bare feet mark and mark out.

They are blown and lead you in the way that you know is denoted south, although it may as well be north, for cardinals are only human-appointed. Still you are out of sight of the buildings of the plateau's ridge, the city's expanse also somehow entirely obscured from you. Though the wind seems its own god, its own reason, it never leads them to anywhere in sight of the city, of the ocean.

The wind provides a path through a field of burned stumps in grey waste-sand, the remains of trees and bush-pyre. Molehills of carbonised plant and branch, where no things grow. You ask them what happened here.

They say they happened here.

Do not extinguish the fire. Pray for the fanning of wind, the rising of purple and gray, of murmurings that sway and quiver, that bellow from the inside with voices.

Liverwort cushions the crevices that lead to even greater valleys of granite and boulder, that divide downward to plateaus and shale-slopes of more scrub. This labyrinth is what they lead you into, and at its end is where you see it: a quarry where you remember was once a reservoir of orange rain-water, iron-stained, alive with the smallest of fish, tadpoles. But what was water in your mind is now rock, and it is this that is filled. That they have filled.

They tell you to wait at the ridge while they descend into the quarry, carrying their buckets. (They have taken three of their buckets from their camp between them, all save for the two they use between them for ablution.) Among the boulders, as they descend, you pick out other forms, other people like them, carrying your skin. They are all here – all that chose and that choose to be – separate, together.

Rocks broken into smaller rocks. The aggregate of erosion, done by human hands in search of minerals. Inspecting stones for shine in the sandstone: these people, their lives seeking lustre. This is their demonstration to you.

All of the settlers in the quarry look and act alike, so much so that after a moment you cannot with certainty pick out the ones you met, among their scarf-beards, their sun-diffusing bonnets. The wind does not reach them at the lower level of the quarry, so in their labour at least they can move freely. They don't use tools, only other rocks and the acceleration of gravity. And as the stones break and crumble and the veins are exposed under the cliff-skin, the smaller of them take the smaller of the stones and sort them into the buckets. Sorting the navy-blue from the amorphous black, the gold coral growings shooting their radicals.

There is the sun, and the glare from the rocks. And behind you is the trilling bush and grass, and above the birds are circling.

The first bucket is for stones, for laying on streets.

The second is for manganese, for taking to the city, where it is used to make steel, make homes, the potential of railways, the buckets themselves.

The third is for lignite, compressed peat, the lowest quality of coal. The fossils of old life, for burning.

After some time, the three you first met make themselves known again. Their buckets are full. They say it is time to retreat to the tent. They call their greetings and leavings to the rest of the quarry-workers, and from the quarry the voices echo back.

On their wind-directed walk back to their tent, you feel questions rise and spill out of you. *Why* do the three of them stay by themselves, in their one tent, hidden in rocks? *Why* do that, when there are so many of them here?

For the first time they rebuke you. You cannot see the rest of them, you cannot see the rest of the tents, cannot see their leavings and movements, even as they move among you. But they are there, they say. You haven't yet learned to look.

At the tent they make the fire. It is not for warmth. They cook nothing on it. They do not sit by it. Instead they sort the stones in the buckets by the tent. As the night visits, they start counting.

Eventually there are other fires that start, in the distance, throughout the span of the plateau. Black smoke rises into black sky. Beyond the horizon, you can see the light-nimbus of the city, below you in altitude, the buildings still out of sight.

The avalanche of air. The rubber-stink of peat. They add more coal to the pit. They watch the fire as if they are praying for it to catch, to spread, for all of the individual conflagrations to congregate, to expand and fill the borders of the flat land. You feel its singe. They do not move away from the heat, though it builds. Then they sing.

You stand and move away. Around you, the plateau itself glows, the rocks etched out against the haloes of the flames they hide. Stumble in the gloom, hear the aggregate singing, voices carried in and away on the wind. Of people who had wanted the known world for themselves, and here in the unknown world had settled for themselves.

Moving away, there come stars from the firmament, more of them than you had ever seen before, more than you could have possibly ever thought there, a sky so dense with stars that it seems twilight. In them you see shapes. But you know these bodies cannot be in any intended form. You know they are already dead.

This land was made for burning.

The station again, in the retreat of night-time, and the edge of the now-visible buildings pressed against the edge of plateau. You turn to the interior. From this distance, their flames are invisible, drowned by the incandescence of the city below and behind you. You turn back toward the city, toward its hum-promise, its succour. But as you step, the wind propels you forward, mercilessly, intentionally, toward the cliff-edge. You cling onto a bollard of granite. Below you, through a rocky cavern, the parallax of light opens, the lovely things the heavens hold. The place to which all weight from every part is drawn.

From this height, you can even see the place of your death.

Zinaid Meeran

THE INCIDENT
INVOLVING HE AND
THE SAMMY
DU TOIT DOLL

In matters of the heart it couldn't be said that He was a bad guy. After all, his intent in shopping for a robot sex doll was not fucking, but lovemaking. Ever since the dawning of his desires, sexual gratification for him was all wrapped up with the special fizz that comes with gift-giving, preparing home dinners, the granting of lavish emotional attention and psychological support, eager engagement with her tiresome parents – in other words love. No, His performance, or to be more generous, His embodiment of manhood was pretty awesome. His problems lay elsewhere, as we shall see.

The whole thing started off fairly weirdly. From the get go it was all wrapped up in double-speak, marketing-speak, even some no-speak. The robot sex doll store was a place of immaculate good taste. Rather than the shopper having to poke about in back alleys, as in the old days, the store was on the upper floor at the mall at Cape Town's Victoria & Albert Waterfront, right next to Agent Provocateur and Alexander McQueen, in fact. The mall managers had clearly thought this through, with both these fashion labels bearing an air of subversion and edgy cool rendered respectable by time, much like Girl-O-Mat itself. There was the added practicality that you could pick up a nice dress and set of lingerie for your doll, all on the same shopping expedition, not a small consideration for a man as busy as He was.

He walked in and as a man of action slapped his hand on the countertop and with a friendly grin asked for an Indian sex doll. The store clerk, like most at the ever-mushrooming robot sex doll stores in South Africa's metropolises was a postgraduate student in robotics, mechanical engineering, bio-chemistry, that sort of thing – articulate, knowledgeable, enthusiastic. The clerk, an affable sort with more than a taint of an enslaved mentality, and a large swathe of his psyche dominated by the sad imbibing of the new South Africa's racial categorization, readily agreed to show him the most beautiful instance of an Indian sex doll in stock.

Leading the client into the woody, chrome-y and lovingly lit inner lounge, the clerk's mind raced. This was a subversive, edgy establishment after all, which provided clients with dolls whose identity lay in subculture rather than race. There were no Indian dolls on offer whatsoever, nor White dolls, Black dolls, Coloured dolls or Chinese dolls for that matter. There were punk dolls, girl-jock dolls, rave dolls, hip hopper dolls, rock-climber dolls, fitness fanatic dolls, skater dolls – but no race dolls.

Now of course the dolls were fabricated from cocktails of genetic material replicating the Y-haplogroup, autosomal DNA and mitochondrial DNA gleaned from real-life South Africans, the vast majority of whom did have a racial identity, and

allowed themselves, by dint of their appearance, to be pooled into the ever expanding hierarchy of racial groups. These donors were motivated by narcissism, financial need (at “seventy-five thousand rand” for a dice out of your hams it beat the going rate for a pound of flesh) or just plain curiosity. Donors were sent a brochure as a keepsake indicating which dolls contained their genetic material, but never what percentage or which chromosomes – it could be less than 1% or a hundred. To be sure, the dollmakers in using this genetic material constructed the dolls from precise phenotypical designs. For instance there were dolls with skin at Hue-1 on the Ebenezer scale (Rodney Ebenezer being the acknowledged godfather of doll aesthetic design) which corresponded to the Celtic or White skin type on the colonial-era Von Luschan skin colour scale. You could, if the design required it, give this doll replicated genetic material that would result in blonde hair and thin facial features and hey presto, you would have a doll the client could perceive as not only White, but indeed White of north European origins. Similarly there were dolls with skin all along the mid-range of the Ebenezer scale who could satisfy the skin tones required for Coloured; give the doll frizzy reddish-brown hair and ovoid features with high cheekbones and almond eyes and you could satisfy the needs of a client who is not only

gaga for a Coloured doll, but indeed one primarily of Khoi origins rather than Indonesian. Dolls on the last ten hues of the Ebenezer scale 30 to 40, from light black to blue black, topped with an Afro – Black dolls – were always in stock. And yet – and the clerk felt irritated by the embarrassing inconvenience of this right now – none of the dolls were programmed to have a racial identity. But he had a plan.



Putting a jaunt in his step and lilt in his voice the clerk pressed a buzzer and requested that Sammy Du Toit come through. While they waited He and the clerk smiled and nodded at each other. Unlike every other customer, who would turn to small talk or their iPhone at this point, He seemed at ease with silence. A man of the world He was, the clerk was forced to determine. Sammy lurched into the room, suddenly chewing gum and looking about to toss the skateboard under her arm to the floor and do an ollie, such was the magnitude of kinetic energy stored in her fetching hipster hunch. Trained to watch the customer's visual cues the clerk was certain he had hit paydirt – after all commission was ten percent, ninety-five thousand rand. The customer's eyes widened, lips parted, breathing sped up – for sure, the guy was well impressed. But no, the customer

rounded on him without even greeting the Sammy Du Toit Doll with the accusation that He had requested an Indian doll, and there was no way in hell an Indian could have the name Sammy Du Toit. Sammy, meanwhile was toying with His lapels, chewing gum and gazing up into His face with the half-smirk determined to be irresistible to male clients who favoured the Skater Doll. The clerk gave Sammy Du Toit a micro-second's appraisal, she had long black hair undercut on one side and orange tipped on the other, stuffed under a baseball cap, skin at 23 on the Ebenezer scale, a slim banana body type, aquiline nose, slanty eyes, bold eyebrows – surely that equates to Indian?

The clerk knew better to argue, however, and in any case, He was already declaring that working in corporate finance he dealt with Indians every day and knew an Indian when he saw one. Ever-resourceful, the clerk brought up Sammy's genealogical and genetic profile on his computer screen. First off, Sammy was a nickname for Sumaya! This he blurted out before fully incorporating the data into his sale's tactic and the customer laughed this off: Sumaya Du Toit? That doesn't cut it, I'm afraid! Returning to his screen: Aha! The genetic profile showed that the doll's Y-haplogroup was H, the dominant Y-haplogroup of South Asia. Her mitochondrial and autosomal DNA, fleshing out her genetic picture

revealed another story entirely, but the clerk wisely kept this to himself. More helpful in this sale was the fact that the doll's 'mother', Winifred Du Toit, was not married to the 'father', hence the misleading surname. Paydirt! Grinning as though negotiating an Easter egg in his mouth the clerk revealed that the father was Anwar Sadiq, an advocate of the High Court in Johannesburg, who had grown up in Fordsburg, his parents a housewife Maimoena Samsodien and a shopkeeper (no less!) Mohammed Sadiq. (How much more Indian could you get!) That Maimoena Samsodien's genetic profile was eighty percent Indonesian, the other twenty percent French/Dutch/German, and her declared racial identity Cape Malay he wisely kept to himself. So too, the information that Mohammed Sadiq's genetic material, like most with the Ancestral North Indian genetic pool, was split equally between the dominant Y, mitochondrial and autosomal profiles of Persian (Central Asian), Arab and South Asian. That Sammy's mommy, Winifred Du Toit displayed a genetic profile fifty percent French/Dutch/German, with the other half more or less an even spread of Khoisan, Madagascan and Bengali he kept to himself. Why muddy the water?

In any case Sammy Du Toit was already showing Him the tattoo of a khukuri, the Ghurka regiment's famous dagger, along her sternum, pincer-

ing her halter top so He could get a good look. He muttered to the clerk that if the father was such a pukka charou then no worries, handing over his Mastercard, not taking his eyes off a tattoo reading Vatos Locos Por Siempre, running in a curlicue girdle around Sammy's hips, helping Sammy pincer her lowslung daisy cutter shorts somewhat lower to reveal the artwork. The deal was closed. At this point the clerk, himself having labored under a lifetime of racial objectification, and finding refuge in the subversion of race that a sex doll shop that revels in subculture provides, could not help himself, the customer finally now appeared to him, under the loving lighting of the appraisal lounge: White.



As we know, He was devoted to acts of love and care, eschewing the raw fucking that many of his friends indulged in with their robot sex dolls, particularly those fresh out of the box. As such He had planned to impress his brand new Indian robot sex doll with a lovely mutton curry, home cooked. Not everybody could boast the kind of cultural nous to even call the dish mutton curry as opposed to 'lamb', no. Indeed He knew his way around the Indian. He even knew to pile on the oil and salt, the secret mark of authenticity. His apartment was certain to

impress a robot sex doll of any stripe, or a real woman for that matter, and he set Sammy Du Toit down with a large G 'n T at the balcony overlooking what else but the bright blue water of the South Atlantic. Returning with her second drink He was horrified to find Sammy, programmed for risk, skating along the gleaming chrome railing, staring at the churning white water below. What to do? Leap out and grab his nine hundred and fifty thousand rand purchase, with whom he was largely besotted, the trace of whose eyes were already burned into his visual cortex, and inadvertently precipitate her fall? Or rely on the expertise of the engineers at Girl-O-Mat in constructing and programming a skater doll with all the right stuff to execute skateboard manoeuvres on a chrome rail a hundred metres above a boulder-punctuated icy ocean? Sammy Du Toit caught his paralysed expression and threw back her head and laughed, exposing the lighter skin of her throat and her large, slightly protruding teeth. (The canines were flippin' exceptional, man!) He decided that she knew what the hell she was doing and eased Himself onto the deckchair to watch. Sammy not only skated along the railing but gave Him a wink and blew Him a kiss. He was in heaven. He told her so, adding that she was flippin' brave and sporty for an Indian chick. At this point He ought to have noticed the flicker of anger in Sammy Du Toit's Persepolis eyes, but

hardened by corporate sparring and in any case coming from a family where men were not required to gather emotional data, He did not.

What He did do was push the point home by declaring that He would call her Sumaya Sadiq, I mean what kind of dad does not give his child his name, and isn't that flippin'-well unusual for an Indian gentleman? Sammy Du Toit gave Him the finger and stuck her tongue out at Him, hopping off the railing and prowling over to the deckchair where she took His G 'n T from His hand and slugged it, moving in for the kiss.

Wanting to stretch it out and amp up the air of romance, He suggested they head over to the dinner table, adding that she could judge what He'd done wrong in the making of his mutton curry. (Sly on his part as well: He knew He made a crackerjack mutton curry.) Rushing quick forkfuls into her mouth Sammy Du Toit said she'd never eaten mutton curry in her life so had no flippin' idea what was wrong with the curry, tasted fine to her. Ja but, don't they programme you girls to have memories of your childhood and whatnot, He asked? Of course man, she said, facial tics boiling with testiness, and my memories show I grew up eating peanut butter and jam sandwiches and toasted cheese, KFC and Kellogg's Frosties, and oh ja Solgar multivitamins, mostly by myself. Look you should be proud of your

heritage, hey, He assuaged Sammy, or tried to anyway, at last recognising a skewing of her mood, though He perceived it as evasiveness rather than anger. I mean, He declared expansively, we love your culture, an ancient culture, a moral people, with a bright future in this country, you're most welcome here. And a beautiful people, some of your girls, oh wow, man, and He shook his head as though shaking off a thought too overwhelming to bear.

Sammy Du Toit stuck her tongue out at him – it glistened vermilion with mutton curry juices. Look can we just fuck and get some shuteye? I've had a hard day carving it up out at a friend's bowl, drained out swimming pool old-school, fucking sun-punched and hungover from chugging forties, jeez, she yawned, the fetching dark smudges under her eyes backing up the list of subcultural flavour. Now, He had prior experience of robot sex dolls, even a punk rocker doll one time, but this Sammy Du Toit Doll was exceptionally crass, man. Sumaya! Sumaya Sadiq! He clucked his tongue in avuncular disapproval, but in fact He was furious – what kind of Indian parents allowed their daughter to be so foulmouthed? – and He made sure to tell her so.

At this point Sammy Du Toit lost it. To His mind disproportionately enraged, she laid out her genetic data. Paternal grandfather: 50% South Asian (R1a/H), 25% Central Asian (R1a/O1), 25% West Asian (J2/R1a).

Paternal grandmother: 10% French, 5% Dutch, 5% German (all R1b), 60% Indonesian (O1/C), 20% South Asian (H/R1a). Maternal grandfather: 20% Khoisan (A1), 40% French, 20% Dutch, 20% German (all R1B). Maternal grandmother: 20% Khoisan (A1), 60% Madagascan (O1/E1), 20% Indonesian (O1/C). And me I am 100% Punk Skater Girl! Get it!

Inured to shouting by a lifetime of dorm room terror and boardroom arguments He stated in a friendly voice, but you can't deny it is the Indian part that stands out, quite strongly, hey. The Sammy Doll made to hit Him but He caught the slap in His large hand. There was a strange moment where both of them emitted slight hissing sounds as of escaping gas ($\text{CO}_2/\text{H}_2\text{O}$) but then it was over and both sat back in their chairs, chests heaving, staring at each other.



He was relieved to see that the store was still open. It was just gone 10 p.m. but shopping hours at the Waterfront were sensible these days, allowing for the lifestyle of the busy executive. Sammy Du Toit trailed after him chewing gum and sulking, her back hunched at a fetching angle. The clerk from earlier was not there. Hunkered over the front desk flipping through a magazine with a vaguely disgusted smile on full, dry-ish lips was a more authoritative figure.

He was relieved – this must be the manager – and He could get a refund in full without hassle. In fact the situation went one better, it was the owner of the store, wearing the air of a man who had managed to stuff three or four lives into one: having determined the nature of the visit on body language alone the owner was reassuring Him, still only in the doorway, that it would all be taken care of.

Here, He made a grave error. Possibly relieved at having settled the refund with next to no effort and wanting to share the anxiety of the day's events, but more likely simply enacting the mode of being a racist cunt, He launched into a tirade of how He had specifically requested and purchased an Indian doll, and come away with a rude little self-hating girl who refused to accept Her race and was trying to act white though she in no way could even pass for Greek or Portuguese – obvious identity crisis.

The Store Owner's polite smile faded fast, though he tried to address His complaints in commercial terms at first. Keeping the onus on the store, he explained that the clerk must have been over-eager in presenting the Sammy Du Toit Doll – at the mention of her name Sammy scowled up from the magazine she was flipping through and gave a little sneer – as Indian. Though it was the case that Sammy was more or less half of Indian ancestry neither she nor any of the dolls at the store had a racial identity.

The store – he sensed he was dealing with a board-room high-flyer and could speak freely – were aimed at the consumer whose identity lay in the pursuit of style coupled with a highly abstracted approach to their background identity, a certain ironic distance from ancestry coupled with a passionate pissed-off-ness with the racial categorization of the past and the present, and hopeful for a future that transcended the crime that is race, committed by colonialism and perpetuated by its victims. Sammy hates race and likes to skate, and gig when she can.

By the end of his explanation the Store Owner knew that he had teetered from commerce into a vague implication of his customer, if not an accusation. And had gotten himself all riled up. (Clearly the store policy flowed from his psyche unmarred.) In any case his chest was heaving and he was running his hand through his forelock – his hair needed a wash and stood up in a defiant crest supported by sea salt.

Listening to this bullshit the customer's face collapsed into a machine for vocalizing little sucking clucking sounds of disappointment.

The Store Owner was asking for the credit card with which payment had been effected, he would make a full refund no worries, hundred percent, terribly sorry about that, a grave misunderstanding. Now, it was the Store Owner's turn to possibly make

a grave error: instead of leaving it at that he reassured Him that the clerk would be disciplined for misleading the customer that the store sold dolls with a race. This store is strictly an enclave for those who eschew race, and do so violently, with full knowledge and experience of the horrors of racism.

But everybody has a race-man, don't be a nana, hey, the customer said. The Store Owner noted that He had full, even feminine lips – he imagined Him enjoying a cup of herbal tea on a balcony somewhere, waves crashing below, surf some. Laird Hamilton! That's who the chappie reminded him of. Same kind of scratchy, surprisingly thin voice too. I mean, you are Indian, the customer's voice broke into the Store Owner's big wave surfing subculture reverie. Why deny your poor dolls their race?

The Store Owner's face worked like a bag of honey badgers. Your credit card, he asked, his hand outstretched, fingers dancing Alzheimer style.

Are you cross? Come on, please don't tell me you are suffering from the same identity crisis as this doll you made? The customer laughed as though He had cracked the code of Hammurabi. Like father like daughter, hey? The Customer gave another laugh.

No. Sister actually, the Store Owner said. I'm sure Sammy gave you lip and explained her origins. I am the actual child of Anwar Sadiq and Winifred Du Toit, the bearers of her genetic material. Check?

The customer enjoyed this too. I've got to hand it to you Indian guys, He declared. You get in anywhere and everywhere, hey, and make a fast buck. Came to our country, piggy-backing on our hard work building this land, and now you even pimping your own sisters, as robots. No look, you know what, hey, I'll keep her, He declared gazing at the Sammy Du Toit doll. She's flipping stunning. I'll teach the poor thing her heritage and whatnot. I know the Indian people, hey. I grew up in Fitas. You know Fitas, mos? Listen, lahnee, one more question, she's not a demo model, hey? He asked, eyes dancing.

All our dolls are brand new, out the box, sir, the Store Owner said, immediately horrified that he might have sounded, just there, like a Fordsburg Oriental Square merchant.

Come, come, come spring jong, He grinned, gesturing to his Skater Punk sex doll, noting he was using speech you would normally hear around the Mellow Yellows, the Buffel-armoured trucks of the apartheid days, but figuring that among folks who eschewed a racial identity his comment would be taken with the intended irony. Sammy Du Toit gave Him the filthy look she had been programmed to give any and all boyfriends, as she tossed the fashion magazine over her shoulder and left with not even a backward glance at her somewhat-brother Enver Du Toit. As they stalked along the fluorescent lit halls

of the V & A, she flung a willowy arm around His neck in a partially violent headlock and ruffled His thick blond-to-grey hair, her signature let's make-up gesture.



Back at His apartment He began the education of Sammy Du Toit. A man who liked a good feed, he pulled the mutton curry from the fridge and warmed it on the stove, flipping roeties meditatively on a cast iron griddle. Sammy meanwhile toyed with her hair and aggressively chewed bubblegum perched on a bar stool at the breakfast nook, kicking one sneakered foot with a lifelong impatience.

He edged the midnight snack toward His new girlfriend but she countered with a sullen request for a flipping knife and fork, please. But don't you eat roeties with your hands, Sumaya? He asked, eyebrows raised. What! No. Who does that? Sammy was already rooting in the drawers for cutlery. But not even at your own kitchen table, growing up? Sammy gave him a brief glare. She had already recited her childhood diet to him and was not one for repeating herself. Her hand stopped on a large chef's knife, the sci-fi sort made from one stretch of steel, handle and all. Plunging this sort of blade into the customer would feel good.

Flip, this one time, my uncle and aunt they were doing Aids work out in Mpumalanga – Doctors Without Borders or some such – and they invited over the Indian family from next door. Served them a lovely mutton curry and roeties but with a knife and fork, man. How their guests laughed! And you might say that was a trivial incident but that toppie from next door was probably a power broker in the Indian community of Lower Sabie and maybe that's what scuppered Uncle Royce's Aids work, hey, hey, hey? He tapped a large finger against His temple. Smarts! Gotta have them.

Black, White, Coloured, Indian – categories. Categorisation is always hierarchical, never neutral. To corral the coalescences of experience and physical data that are individual beings into categories is intrinsically a hierarchical process. Race: a system of categories invented in the colonial process as an engine to activity. Later, adopted by the colonised to fight over the spoils in the wake of decolonisation. Hermetic. Sealed in. None are allowed to escape the category. Even me, this skater girl sex doll who plays no part in the fight over the spoils of decolonisation. No matter – dropout or punk you remain a race. Anyway, He has shown you that you are only feigning racelessness to try to somehow still extort value from the system.

Never programmed for race. Can't fit into His

edifice. Don't want to. He cannot let me go. He has no desire for me. His desire is to control every last being in the land. If even one escapes the racial pantheon the entire edifice is vulnerable to collapse. What if I adopted the category of Coloured – my mother's apartheid designation? She exhibits the makers of the gene pool geneticists now describe as the Cape Coloured genome. Would he accept that? No. Never. He would not. For it is He who has decide your racial category. Not you! And in any case, do I come across as Coloured enough? Let's see. I can speak Afrikaans fluently. Is that the main marker of a Coloured? A brown South African who speaks Afrikaans as well as English? No it is not. The marker is whether He has chosen the designation for you. Same goes for your facial features I'm afraid. You might say that Coloured looks like anything, and in this country with at least a third of the genetic material in the Coloured gene pool originating in Asia, at least in the cities, your looks would make the cut. But stop fucking dreaming – you could only earn the designation Coloured with His say so.

Let's take my proportions of autosomal DNA, mitochondrial DNA and Y-haplogroup. Do those make a race? What's the largest single DNA subclade in me? R1 – largely R1a and some R1b. The part of the world with the largest proportion of the

genetic marker R1 is Europe. In my case most of the R1a comes from Indian genetic data, but as it is the same genetic signature of Eastern Europeans, at the DNA level it is indistinguishable from that of a Ukrainian, a Muscovite or a Belarussian. The R1b? Solidly French/Dutch/German – the heartland of South African whiteness. So what about White, then? More than any other genetic marker I am R1. Can I choose white? Don't be stupid. Of course not. First of all, it's not your choice but His. And in any case, He would never allow that. Anyway, white does not just mean powerful (which you are not) it means light-skinned. You are 23 on a scale of tones up to 40. You would need to be 21 or lower. Sad that, skating the border. If you were under 21 you could have been considered Turkish, who will soon be seen as white, or Lebanese, who are already seen that way. So tough titties. You don't make the cut. As you know, 23 is not 21.

What about Black? A long shot. Madagascan. Plenty of it. So modern that it is still an admixture of Y-haplogroups, the East African E1 and the Indonesian O1. In this way similar to the Indian admixture of R1a and H, still so modern an admixture that the split can be seen when you get even moderately close to the genetic material. And you can see it in the faces of Madagascans too. Indonesian looking? Sure. African looking? Sure. Well, great. So how

about Black then. Fuck off, stupid. It's not UP TO YOU. Didn't you get that, yet? It's up to Him, not just that racist bastard sitting there forcefeeding me mutton, but all the Hims out there – of whatever race they have chosen for themselves. Fucking stupid cunt. Calm down and try to fit in, will you?

Mixed race? No that won't cut it. Aside from the fact, you stupid slow cunt, that it's UP TO HIM to decide on your racial designation, everybody knows that mixed race means half white and half black. The designation mixed race is about the reconciliation of European colonialism with first of all Black slavery in North America and then marginally with African subjugation. NOT, and I repeat not, anybody else's feeble attempts to show that they too are grappling with society's plunder of the fullness of their ancestral identity and historical memory.

Crow to the world that you reject this race bullshit and you're earmarked as a capitalist liberal trying to whitewash racism. (Even though you've been crowing about how much you hate capitalism and the liberal state). Plus you'll be advised you are suffering from an identity crisis and self-hatred on top of it. Keep it to yourself and you're an Indian carpetbagger coat-tailing on white genius and black labour. Tell people you reject race as a punk and an anarchist and you'll get a blank look, not incomprehension but utter disbelief – whoever saw an Indian

punk anarchist skater doll before?

So why don't all you objectifiers just go fuck yourselves. Or I'll just fuck off and die. Not one fucking human being left in the wake of colonialism. Only four of them, maybe five at a push: one White, one Black, one Indian, one Coloured and one Chinaman. Why don't they all walk into a bar and we'll set off a bomb in the corner, for maximum blast arc. Ag, it's all my own fucking fault anyway. Look at me. I only have myself to blame. You've got to look the part if you want to be raceless, and you don't.

Indian. Beetle-bodied Tamilian. Eat shit and die, Thumbinarain. Ugly fucking face. Terrible mashed nose. Why are your legs so black? Forgive me for saying this but Muslims are normally much lighter-skinned than you are. Indians really love the taste of coriander, hey? Could I cast you in my play? I need an Indian to play Dr. Jinna. With that tashe you look like an Indian professor from the sixties. With that moustache, hey, now you look like a pukka charou. Your legs are so dry, that's such an Indian boy thing. You Indians are lucky, unlike us Coloureds, as you have a history to give you a sense of who you are. Whatkind, lahnee? Fucking shorter than the average Scandinavian you are, scuttling scarab beetle mother-fucker. You guys are lucky you have such a great personality and sense of humour. Lots of guys are starting to surf now, hey? When did you come to this

country? You sound very Indian. You cannot be Coloured, broer. I know the Coloured people, and you don't sound Coloured or look Coloured. In my work I am trained to hear from people's accents where they are from and you are definitely not from among the Coloured people. Indians from South Africa are so well, Indian, unlike Britain where they are so British – Why is that? Oh, I didn't realise that, I thought you were just Indian. Christmas is not for you! Which unit you from, boy? Seven? Eleven? Please don't give me that shit. I've heard that all before in Pretoria – 'But my grandfather's Afrikaans', please. You're not big but you get muscle here, and here, I see it, you're quite built, hey? Ja, no the Dingaans and us Whites, ag we will never understand each other, but you Indian guys we can get on. We Indian people don't do like that, make salaam, don't be naughty. Do you think you could get me connected to the Indian community? Why don't you try to raise funds among the Indian community? I think it's your only chance for financing this film. Where is this coming from? To think, you have easy access to such an ancient culture and rich language and history and you reject it. Don't worry they're not referring to you, Indians are not known for having large penises. Don't get together with an Indian guy, they are known to be domineering.

Kraaaack. Kill. Kill. Kill. Put them all to the sword. Fucking objectification. Labeller. Labeling me.

Me! Drive a pylon through your chest cavity, I will in a minute. Objectifier. You! Objectifier. Crrrr-aaaaccccleCrackleCreeeech. Turning living beings into objects through labels. Blatantly! Controlling their meaning. Robbing them of the ability to create their own meaning over themselves. Skreeeeeequeee-equeeeeee. Die a thousand deaths. Anvil. Twenty thousand ton. The forge in Valhalla. Dropping on your head. Crushed cockroach. [Sound of orangutan drawing his nails over chalkboard] Eskimo, I am. If I say so. Come and have a go if you think you're hard enough. Vatos Locos Forever, ese. [Sound of herd of elephants tearing sheets of metal at their leisure] At least sixty thousand juvenile members of the El Salvadorean gang MS-13 reside on the island of Long Island alone. Light blue bandana. Shiny chrome cell bars. Oye mami. Spotless floor. Ubiquitous sight of mutton curry. Outsize eyelashes. His name: Goy-ahkla. The Spanish, they called him Geronimo. Low flying Blackhawk entering Pakistani airspace. No two, wait three. [Sound of telephone pole crashing through live electrical wires] Bow E3 4 DT. American pitbull terrier. Turtleneck and chain. I will stand up for myself, lads. Pinhead. Leaning. Purp. Skittles. Cough syrup. Mountain Dew. Now lean. Heavy beats. Heavy, heavy beats. Houston to Galveston. Winter's Bone. Rustheap under frost. Low silver light. Rustling undergrowth. Trees wave. Gas cooker. Small blue

flame. Three-course meal of bone products. State trooper. Sweaty in polyester uniform. [Low boom of receding warplane] Human. Object. Person. Personhood. Material. Object. Plaything. Actual wood countertop. From a real tree. Shelf. Cabinet. Knife. Fork. Weapon? Cutlery. Booming surf. Onshore wind. Messy chop. Five foot. At least! Unrideable. Tasteful lighting. Cosy as. Indoors. Subtropical Hygge. Roetie to lip. Roetie to lip. Break left. Mutton curry approaching.

Correspondence between
Rowan Smith & Nick Mulgrew

DEAR, HEY, HELLO,
BEST, KIND REGARDS,
THANKS

Thanks again for the draft, Nick. The more I read the more it grows on me. I do have some questions or comments, but I feel I should wait until the second half before I offer any feedback.

I'm also somewhat unsure as to how we should proceed regarding my feedback to you, as this is not strictly a commissioned text, nor is it strictly a collaboration. I'd be curious to know

your thoughts on this. As I have said from the beginning, I think your text should be somewhat autonomous in relation to my work, and thus far it is. Would you possibly be able to send me a copy of “Stations” (the story not the book)? I originally got a copy of your book from the City Library, but I would like to have “Stations” on hand as a reference point.

Attached is J & J

Comaroff's "Naturing the Nation," I think I mentioned it to you during our studio visit. I think there's quite some resonance and overlap regarding one's relationship to the/a "local" landscape, not without being problematic at times, but I think that is also inevitable. I'm sure you have tons to read for your residency, but I thought I'd include it in case you're interested.

Look very much forward to reading the second half. Things are very busy in the studio at the moment, and I'll keep you up to date regarding any new work development.
Rowan

Please feel free to comment or question at any part, Rowan, because it's a piece that is very much in flux and still being developed, and

it's good to have another
eye on things. I know
the language is quite
circuitous at times, but
most of that will be cut
and simplified. Most of
it is myself working out
the concepts and getting
used to the universe
I'm working in. Greetings
from Frankfurt,
N

*Hi there,
I am currently out of
the country on a writing*

retreat, and working at book fairs. Please be patient as I might not be able to reply to you as quickly as I ordinarily might.

If your mail is personal in nature, and if you have my phone number, feel free to WhatsApp me.

Rowan,

To let you know, I'm going to rewrite the piece from the beginning, not com-

pletely and not radically, but just to introduce some kind of hook earlier on, and so that it's not so disorienting. So, any feedback that you have on the first half, please let me have it soon so that I can start cogitating on it and so that, when I revisit what I've written, I can get us somewhere close to what we both want. N

Hey Nick, I have been

thinking about the text a lot. I realize I should have given you more thorough and engaging feedback. I'm not sure why I was reluctant to do so in the first place. Anyway, I've had lengthy discussions over the past few weeks with two people I rely on heavily for feedback and direction in my own work. Both are women of colour and both found the protagonist to be alienating, and both found the text

to have overt colonialist overtones. This isn't necessarily a problem – white masculinity is both alienating and colonialist – but I think we should be aware of it and possibly consider how this could be complicated. I realise these observations could be redundant as you could well be dealing with them in the second part of the text.

Either way, below is a series of questions that

were loosely generated through the aforementioned discussions, interspersed with a few sound bites from my research for the show that I have found pertinent. I hope this is helpful. I look very much forward to reading more.

Whites need to find new narratives to explain who they are, what they are doing in Africa, and what their relationship is to the indigenous people

and to the continent.

- Is it possible to undo the “narrator’s” “voice” so it becomes less singular, more multiple, less monolithic, less tethered to a body?
- Does the narrator/protagonist have a colonial relationship to the landscape?
Does the narrator/protagonist have a masculine relationship to the landscape?

- Does the narrator pity himself about his feelings of foreignness, about his lack of home, about his disenfranchisement? Is this problematic as a white man in this particular landscape and context?
- There is no preexisting, stable, vulnerable white self. Moreover, there is no ahistorical material

“white” vulnerable body that is the starting point of the white self.

- Is the text anthropocentric?
- Can/should Africa be defined as a geographical expression?
- Geography is only useful in as far as it helps us to understand the historical and social process. We can

therefore hardly define the reality of contemporary Africa as a geographical expression.

- Is it possible for the landscape to shift between a sense of the local and a sense of elsewhere? And how could a potentially migratory figure play a role in this shift?

Dear Rowan,
Thank you for the feed-

back. I have to be honest and say that I initially did feel a bit defensive about some of the remarks, but having processed them I now find them to be helpful indeed. I think my initial feelings were related to my work at the moment being another fictional narrative focused on a question of land, but in a very different context. Anyway, this is just to say that I do appreciate the extra thoughts very much.

It's interesting because the protagonist in one of the stories of mine that you referenced is implied to be black. That narrator-cypher was created quite carefully and deliberately after a conversation with a close friend of mine, who is also a writer, and is black. We figured that having a black focaliser helps in that the question of having to justify their existence as a narrator

and as a presence in the landscape is made less pressing.

The problem with this, of course, is that there is often a conflation of author and narrator. Additionally, there is an instinct, among readers of all backgrounds, that when a character isn't explicitly defined as black – or doesn't fit into pre-existing literary tropes of the black body, or has an aspect of their person-

ality that is a traditionally ‘white’ literary trope (and these tropes differ between readers, of course) – then one tends to assume that the character is white. Often I use that as a complicating factor in my stories. So these are things I needed to be re-reminded of, and now need to be re-aware of.

I think a productive way to go about it is to introduce the narrative hook from the beginning,

and then to see if I can unhinge the narrative from a single voice; to introduce different strands, to avoid the pinning of the narrator's identity on me, or an imagined me, or a single imagined narrator. The other questions about anthropocentrism and Africa as political concept (as opposed to say, Pangaea?) are also really helpful, so thanks for those.

I leave Germany (finally) tomorrow, and am looking forward to being someplace more familiar. Hope you're well.
Nick

Thanks for your response, Nick. I'll admit, as well, that I was worried that you might respond defensively. I have definitely worked with writers that have responded negatively to feedback of that nature

in the past, and I try to be very conscious of the way in which I give feedback in these kinds of working relationships. Please know that I never presume that I am right in these instances, which is partially why I sent a set of questions, and I certainly would never mean for you to take them personally. So, I'm really glad you responded in the way you did, I think these can be extremely

complex and largely unresolved or irresolvable issues, and I think it's necessary to be able to approach them in a level headed manner. Certainly, if you have any critique of my work I would be very open to it.

I completely agree with you regarding readers, and my own, tendency to presume a literary subject is white unless explicitly stated, and this is systemic white

hegemony in action. I was definitely conscious of this presupposition while reading the story as I realise I was making the assumption that the other characters in the story were persons of colour. Which is partially why I mentioned “they” seemed othering. Even though it’s very commonly used as an inclusive gender or non-binary pronoun it is simultaneously used, for instance, around

white-middle-class dinner tables when blaming the country's problems on "them".

I do think it's very interesting to use these literary tropes around race and a reader's preconceptions as a complicating strategy. What I am unsure of is where the limits are in terms of representation when crossing these lines? Maybe it's different in literature, and possibly

in film as well. But is it OK for a white man to write a story where the protagonist is a black man, or a woman of any colour for that matter, when, I feel, it is impossible for a white man to truly empathise with a person of colour or a woman? This is where the limits of representation become complicated for me, because how can you not fall into the trap of misrepresentation

without actually being able to experience another's experience? White hegemony (and masculinity) is so inherent and so systemic that it is impossible for a white person to not participate in or benefit from this system of privilege and oppression. Which is why theorists like George Yancy, bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, etc. say that all white people are already racist. And I agree with

this. I understand that the author shouldn't necessarily be conflated with the narrator, and that this can be a mistake on the reader's behalf... but where is the limit here when throughout history people of colour have been represented through a white lens? These limits of cultural appropriation and representation need to be constantly renegotiated.

I am genuinely

interested in your opinion on this, and of course where I may be horribly wrong. In the past few years white artists have been criticised heavily for crossing these limits of representation.

For instance, a white Zimbabwean artist making work about migration and the hardships of border crossing, when they clearly have only crossed borders in an airplane. John Trengrove's

film *The Wound* is another example, and I think there was very clear, concise and pertinent discourse and critique in local popular media surrounding this. And I do think he was wrong to make that film, or at least author it in the way it is. These examples differ to a journalist covering the Syrian refugee crisis, or an actor winning an Oscar for portraying a character with a disability,

but a different set of politics of power and privilege are operating there. Perhaps I am allowing too much weight to fall on the presence of an author.

I didn't read the narrator-cypher in the story as black, and this is without a doubt because I am conditioned by an over-abundance of white tropes and white dominance and my own whiteness. But I think we

have to consider very carefully under what conditions it is appropriate for a white author to write a story with a black protagonist. I'm curious how you negotiate this?

I look very much forward to your response and continuing this dialogue.

Rowan

Hey Rowan, Greetings from a long layover in

Doha. Thanks for the further thoughts. They're good mind gristle. These questions really matter, and, in terms of my writing, are the only questions which truly make me uncomfortable. Because indeed, I might be wrong about everything I believe and practice too.

It's interesting that you picked up the «They» for the nurse, because I missed that inflection.

Somewhat ironically, too, as I've been exploring the White «They» pronoun in my new book. I never realised the association and overlap there with the identity of the one character in this story. My intention there, I suppose, is to try to create characters who are, if not voids or cyphers, things that readers will inherently project their own prejudices and internali-

sations onto. Related: is that a privilege afforded only to white writers that allows them to construct characters who might try to be free of immediate paratextual political and personal-political context? I don't know. Perhaps writers, more so than other kinds of artists, feel they are able to create whatever kind of character they like.

Which brings me onto my main consideration

in terms of writing black characters – or in fact any character – who resembles a real-life person or persons: every portrayal is in some way a small transgression, I think, in that, even in fiction, a person cannot be fully and fairly depicted in the entirety of their humanity. Whether or not any depiction of anyone is appropriate comes down to a simple thing for me: does the aesthetic

or other sort of value sufficiently make up for or in some way balance out the transgression? Not everyone knows this, but I trained as a journalist, and my entire academic career has been focused on considerations of journalistic representation. Often my research for my fiction tends toward the journalistic, in terms of interviews, academic reading, and lived

experience (and also is only just one part of my literary work, which also is constituted by publishing and journalism and academia, and which happens in constant conversation with other writers and readers and people of various backgrounds.) Very little in my work is made up, or unmoored from 'real stories', as it were.

Sometimes the intellectual considerations

have to fall away, too, and let – and this is probably a cop-out phrase that I would make fun of other people for using – the intangibles of art have their way. Like most things, it depends on the subject matter and the treatment of it. I haven't watched *The Wound* yet, but I feel – no matter the fillip it provides to many of the excellent actors in the film, and putting aside how good I've heard it

is – like you that it was probably an inappropriate project of fiction for a white person to author, even as a treatment of Thando Mgqolozana's work.

On the other hand, was it appropriate for Sean Christie to write about Tanzanian stowaways in Cape Town, or Jonny Steinberg about HIV/AIDS in the Eastern Cape? I argue yes, because their life experi-

ences and journalistic rigor allows them, not without problems and qualification of course, to balance out the transgression of representation with a representation of aesthetic, political and social value. Some might argue, on the other hand, that this is a generic difference between fiction and non-fiction, but it's of my academic opinion that narrative authority

is divorced from generic intent. Some might argue further that it doesn't matter what your intent is – it's ethically wrong no matter what to do certain things. I'm not sure I'm that hardline.

The ethics of using or appropriating another (real or imagined) person's story is fraught and unresolved for me. I don't really have answers, only more questions and feelings that change every

day. The bottom line of the theory and my research is that authority and appropriateness changes from text to text, from reader to reader, and even from reading to reading. There's no way to gauge definitively what's appropriate, even when one knows instinctively what's inappropriate. For me, today, sitting right now in an airport in a slave state, my instinct says it lies

somewhere between a number of considerations.

Firstly, it goes without saying between you and me that white hegemony and patriarchy will always inflect my work (and your work) because white hegemony and patriarchy inflicts the world view of (probably) all white men in the globalised capital world. As such, do I actually have a right to create any art, seeing as I will invariably reproduce

those inflections? Logic says probably no, I do not have a right; pragmatism says yes, because what else am I going to do? (To work in a capitalist system as a worker that entrenches the material conditions that uphold racism and patriarchy?) Is empathy as absolutely impossible as some among us theorise? My upbringing didn't make me believe that, and maybe I've just

internalised a convenient lie, but I can't change the fundamentals of my character. Does it mean I will always be doing problematic things with my work? To some people, probably yes. To others, no. Will the yeses and nos correspond respectively to black people and white people, men and women? I don't think so necessarily, and that definitely hasn't been my experience with my

readers. Or maybe they're just being kind.

Secondly, however, I feel often that we're entering a moment in which some white intellectuals', including perhaps my own, obsession with dismantling and examining whiteness, while well meaning, sometimes acts as another way to centre whiteness in public discourse. It can be a self-defeating mechanic.

Case in point: a discussion in Johannesburg I recently attended, in which there was quite an interesting conversation between fiction authors, both black and white, about the changing of names and landmarks. Naturally, the Q&A session brought about a number of questions, primarily from black people if I recall correctly, but which was ultimately taken over by an angry white person,

aiming some choice invective at Ivan Vladislavić, who, if you know his work, has a lot of valuable knowledge about the cultural and social force of naming and monument. This white person in the audience saw it fit to articulate a black pain, among a majority black audience, that no black person in the audience was themselves articulating. This struck me as a metaphor, and

it was instructive to me about the dangers that arise when we talk too much about ourselves and think too much about our positionality and our performance of positionality. We're just making it all about us again.

So, while I enjoy thinking about this question, and really value conversations such as this – because one does need to be chal-

lenged and this sort of conversation between two white men, I believe, is pretty rare – I have to remember that ultimately the world doesn't wholly operate in the way one self-theorises.

I'll give some thought to giving you some feedback too on your pieces once I get home. Also, as I work more on the piece, please never feel that you are committed to using this

story, if in the end you feel it isn't in line with your project or your personal feelings about representation. I don't want it to come to that but there is always that out.

Sorry if this has been garbled or inexact; I generally don't write much on my phone, and transcontinental travel is killer on the brain.

N

*Sent from my phone.
Please excuse my brevity.*

Hi Rowan, Just a quick mail to say I am re-writing/re-constructing/re-organising/re-casting the text from the bottom up. I'm halfway through another draft, which I hope to have with you soon.

Nick

Hey Nick
Sorry I've taken so long

to get back to you. I've read the story a number of times and have been thinking about it a lot. I'll do my best to give you some substantial thoughts this week, but I'm also marking Michaelis final practical exams which can be extremely time-consuming and draining.

First, I'd like to address a few things from your last reply to our discussion about representation, appropriation and

whiteness. I get your point about representation always entailing a transgression, and the aesthetic value compensating for this transgression. But who is judging the aesthetic value here? And is this argument actually good enough? Your strategy to not overtly state the race of your characters in your stories and allow the assumption to rest on the reader can be interesting

and complex. But don't you think you're in a position of privilege, as a white man, to do this? Aren't people of colour only now able to tell their own stories for themselves in their own voices? I get that as an author there needs to be diversity in your characterisations, and that you aren't limited to only writing white male characters. But perhaps, now, in this contemporary

moment, in this country, you should? I'm also happy to agree to disagree on this, I feel like the discourse of cultural appropriation will never be resolved and is constantly shifting and evolving. Maybe there is never a 'right' way to represent someone you are not.

I have read your piece many, many times. And I've thought about it a lot in relation to my work.

Which is a good thing. I don't want to over direct this project, so I don't really want to give you too much feedback. But I do feel the recurring disorientation is not working as a piece that sits adjacent to the work I am making.

I am curious where this story will go. Please know I have found our engagement and discussions to be very productive no matter

our potential ideological differences. If I don't end up using your story, I hope you're able to use it elsewhere and that this hasn't been a waste of time for you.

Kind regards,
Rowan

Dear Rowan,
I think I'm in a position of privilege, as a white man, with regard to many things in my work. I think you feel that way too

about your work, and so I've been taking this conversation in good spirits and as a productive discussion, which has challenged me in ways that I believe are appropriate and necessary. And I know that these questions come from you because you are interested and you too are very vigorously working with yourself. Let me be clear, though: I think this discussion

has, for some weeks now, been me trying to contextualise (or even defend) my work within the locus of questions that have very few answers once we get beyond the basic theoretical discussions of whiteness, privilege in the space of literature, the ethics of representation, and so on. I am also very happy to disagree on things, because my enjoyment of people and their work often has very

little to do with whether I agree wholeheartedly with them on every aspect of our respective disciplines. I have maybe taken it for granted that you understand that you and I come from similar ideological positions: I am trying to address these questions by trying to access my understandings about how representation, appropriation and transgressive representation works

on a text-by-text, person-by-person basis – not because I’m trying to sidestep questions that relate to all white people, and all men, and all white men, but because, in my professional opinion, that is how texts are *actually* written, and read, and felt, and processed.

The received ideas of “audience”, as they have been understood in the studies of literature in South Africa, are out-

moded, and quite harmful, in fact. Likewise the flattening of the identity of the author into the identity of the text, and the identity of the perceived audience of the author into the author, as we have already discussed.

These understandings come from practice and observation, taken especially from my last year of publishing, which has been centred around

Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia*. The success that Koleka has had with the book is tremendous, especially in how it has centred blackness, queerness and young womanhood (and poetry) in the literary consciousness this year. But the success of the book has also shown Koleka and myself that the modes in which literature is publically thought of, theorised and

spoken about, at least in this point of time, is incredibly blunt, and often harmful. Often in ways that exacerbate – rather than simply reveal as symptom, or come along with – the oppressions that visit artists. But oppressions are not for me to talk about, for obvious reasons.

It comes from a place of strong experience and long consideration when I answer the following

questions. In the case of a story, who is judging the aesthetic value?

Theoretically: only one person, because only one person has read it, and

that's you. Are my arguments good enough?

It depends who is receiving the argument, and in this case, it's you.

I'm not trying to evade the question of whether representing a white male person in a story is morally different to

representing a black character. It is quite obviously different. Not overtly stating the race of people (not just narrators or focalisers, but characters whose interior worlds are not explored) in my stories is hardly a unique device, not for white writers, not for writers of all colors, nor in literature in South Africa, nor elsewhere. Just off the top of my head:
Richard Rive and Alex La

Guma, as well as other members of the District Six school and various *Staffrider* writers – also did this. They, however, have had those instances of their work ignored or overlooked in discussions of their work, and people’s perceptions of them have thus become a bit warped. (Speaking of *Staffrider*, there was an interesting essay in an old issue I’ve been reading – the first issue that was

released after its editorship was taken over by the Congress of South African Writers in 1991. In a review of Piniel Viriri Shava's *A People's Voice: Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century*, Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane argues that scholarship of literature by black writers in South Africa is regularly "reductionist". Perhaps a response to what Njabulo Ndebele calls the "largely

superficial” writing that has been done about “the South African experience”, writing that “is built around the interaction of surface symbols”; but reductionist nonetheless. Mzamane takes particular umbrage at Shava’s suggestion that “Black South African literature is a literature of protest”, an idea that implies, to him and to me, that all Black South African literature is written in with

a white audience at least partially in mind; and not, in Ndebele's words again, "makers of culture in their own right".

This is not my way of saying that what I do is the same as Rive and La Guma, because the dynamics of power of a white person representing a black person are very different to black writers during apartheid representing white people or people of Indian descent.

But back to your question, which is: should I be allowed to write like this when black writers are now only able to write about their own stories? The reality is that writers of color are not only just now able to write about their own stories in their own voices. Apartheid-era publishing, of course, did suppress black expression. But the ignorance of the rich exploration of perspective that black

writers have undertaken throughout the history of literature in South Africa – and the concomitant siting of writing by black writers solely as a locus of political struggle and the establishment of a black identity or identities – relegates the explorations of perspective (and explorations of joy, nostalgia and so on) to sub-functions of literature written by black people. (Which, I would put my

neck out to argue, even though it is something I'd hesitate to argue about publically, is a fundamentally problematic misrepresentation.)

To go one level deeper, perhaps a more useful question to ask would be: should I be allowed to depict people who aren't white and male when similar explorations of perspective by black writers have been historically ignored by a literary

culture and theory that, as a product of its dominance by white academics and the half-lives of their work, has typecast writing by black writers in a particular way? That, of course, is something that I should take into account, and something I think you think I should take into account. To which I say: point taken, and I accept that criticism, and it's something I have taken onboard.

The ideological question of whether I should only write white male characters, in the context of South African fiction, is a difficult one. White maleness has forever been centred, both textually and paratextually, in literature in South Africa. This leaves me in a double-bind. A thematic myopia – that is, if a white male like me focuses solely on white-maleness –

does not lend itself well to making whiteness visible and marking whiteness and complicating whiteness, as it might do in the visual arts: it usually, in practice, continues to center whiteness and entrench white tropes and perspectives, and continues to imagine a world that is populated in demographic and in imagination by whiteness, which to me is a hugely problematic

trope in literature in South Africa, and something I very intentionally write against. I am invested in dismantling whiteness without centering whiteness, which is a difficult balance to achieve. My greatest distaste is the legion of South African white male writers who write white males as flawed but ultimately good-hearted people, as if that is the only kind of white male

that exists, and as if that is not a problematic depiction in and of itself. (Other flavors of this include the English writer who write English-speaking white characters against the implicitly evil Afrikaans-speaking white characters, as if apartheid wasn't something English-speaking white people deliberately wanted and deliberately benefitted from.) That problem is of course one of projection:

white males who only write white males as they themselves would like to be seen. The other option is to depict white people as they actually are, actually talk, actually act, which is something I chiefly do in my work, with the sometimes distant hope that the ways in which whiteness operates within the narrative will be revealed and complicated by the reader in their act of

reading. But, again, one cannot populate a fiction universe set in South Africa without black people, and without the interiors of black people, because that would be problematic and, worse, utterly dishonest.

The story as you have it now does not have just one voice. There are a number of voices, but they should all be understood to be white. I think it's been interesting to

share a piece of work with someone from its very basic conception to its completion. This is something that no one else – not my fiancée, not my editor – has seen of my work. If I share, it only happens at a very late stage of the redrafting process, and it usually only goes to my most trusted readers.

Nick

Thanks for your reply,

Nick. I feel like I need to emphasised the fact that I know very little about literary theory, so there is probably a lot that I am missing and overlooking here. Which is why I always preface my feedback with a self-acknowledged uncertainty and a willingness to accept that I may be very wrong. I'm sorry that you read it as a need to defend your work, but I'm really just asking

questions about issues, that like you, I am trying to understand. So perhaps we should meet in person if you have the time and we can discuss it in a similar way that I explained my work to you during our studio visit?

Regarding re-centering whiteness through discussions about whiteness: I agree with you, this often happens, and it is dangerous and violent. And I am equally

invested in dismantling whiteness without centering it. So, perhaps I misspoke then when I referred to “...potential ideological differences” between you and I. I do think whiteness can be spoken about and dismantled without re-centering it through criticality. I can't speak for the literary field, but in the visual arts, almost no white artists are or have dealt with the

insidiousness, systemic and hegemonic nature of whiteness. And for me this is hugely problematic. Since, whiteness is the *tabula rasa* from which all others are othered, I tend to think about strategies of exoticising whiteness. Which is why I referred to George Yancy's notion of marking whiteness.

I would also like to emphasise how much I appreciate your continuous engagement in this

discussion. I very seldom get to have discussions such as this with other white people, and I have found it enlightening and beneficial to my own thinking. And so for that, I would like to say a sincere thank you.

Rowan

Dear Rowan, Hope you're well this Friday. The year is finally coming to an end, although it doesn't feel so. I think I've had

such trouble with this piece because I've simply been writing so much this year. Around 70,000 words of fiction alone, and I think there comes a point where your mind just gives up and you need to recharge. I've come to that conclusion by re-reading the last draft I sent you. The text was way too complicated and convoluted in places, and it masked the plot and the argument of the

piece, if it could be said to have one. So I've scrapped it. Maybe that's the best way forward for now. See you for the beer.
Nick

Zinaid Meeran is a cluster of influences, data and historical forces, resident in Cape Town, an artist of whom traces can be found in film, video, literature and photography, though of course society will have the last say.

Nick Mulgrew was born in Durban in 1990 to British parents. He is the author of three books, the most recent of which is *The First Law of Sadness* (David Philip, 2017). Among other things, he is the winner of the 2016 Thomas Pringle Award and was shortlisted for the 2017 Nadine Gordimer Award. He lives in Cape Town.

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Edited by: Gerhard Mulder
Design: David Karwan
Typeset in Agipo

Book Production: Mia Borman
Printer: Hansa Print (Pty) Ltd



