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REVIEW ARTICLE

Ex-Centric Hermeneutics in Stephanus Muller's *Nagmusiek*

Willemien Froneman *

School of Music, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

In this review article the author reads *Nagmusiek* – Stephanus Muller's monumental metafictional biography of South African composer Arnold van Wyk – as an extended allegory on the geopolitics of academic writing. She argues that the book articulates, through its unusual physical apparatus, narratological techniques and metafictional hermeneutic deconcealment, a valuable theory-in-praxis of the aporetics of peripheral writing. In so doing, Muller materializes Walter Mignolo's notion of 'epistemic delinking' in radically original and risky ways.

Keywords: decolonial hermeneutics; delinking; peripheral writing; biography; Arnold van Wyk; South African art music; geopolitics of academic writing

Stephanus Muller, *Nagmusiek* (Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2014). 3 vols. ISBN 978-0-9922263-2-9.

Volume I: *Arnold van Wyk: Katalogus en werklys van musiek 1925-1983* [Arnold van Wyk: Catalogue and work list of music, 1925–1983], 228 pp.
Volume II: *Eindnotas, Bladwyser (algemeen), Bladwyser (Van Wyk werke)* [End notes, Index (General), Index (Van Wyk works)], 148 pp.
Volume III: *Nagmusiek* [Night Music]. 540 pages including 1 foldout, 2 photographs, 1 typescript, 1 pocket size score. Afrikaans and English.

Surprising for a biographical project on a South African composer, Oxford – as physical site and allegorical setting – is present throughout Stephanus Muller's *Nagmusiek*. 'I had only recently arrived in Oxford', the narrator recalls, 'when David Gombrich[1] enquired about my study':

> 'Musicology,' I tried to cut the conversation short. I always cut conversations short, but back then it was almost pathological.
>
> 'But what?'
>
> 'The institutionalized discourse about music,' was my well-rehearsed response.
> In retrospect it sounds preposterous and uncharacteristically impudent of me. I did not know who Gombrich was. I did not know academics like him. Indignation resounded in his eyes. He held my descent in his sustained gaze, and calculated it to the nothing it meant in a place like Oxford. This was, I realized then, a place where people know what musicologists do.[2]

*Email: willemien.froneman@gmail.com

1 The allusion is to Sanskrit scholar Richard Gombrich, but the usual disclaimers for fiction apply.
2 Stephanus Muller, *Nagmusiek*, 3 vols. (Johannesburg, 2014), iii, 30. Translated from the original.

In another incident the narrator, buttressed by the requisite academic dress, makes his way to St Catherine's College for his doctoral defence. He had spent the previous evening formulating lengthy responses (in Afrikaans) to questions about the identity and function of musical works of art in his reading of Arnold van Wyk's *Missa in illo tempore*. But his examiners do not interrogate him on any of these matters. Later that year the degree DPhil is conferred to him in the Sheldonian Theatre with a thesis entitled 'Sounding Margins: Musical Representations of White South Africa'.[3]

These misfirings – one dramatic, the other archetypal in its dreamlike parapraxis – illustrate the breach between the things that matter in a place like Oxford and those that matter elsewhere; say, in a place like South Africa. It is not a breach of the institutional discourse of music *per se*, or a lack of disciplinary proficiency on the part of the narrator. Rather, the breach becomes discernible only through the subaltern's reluctance, or incapacity, to take up the role of universal participant in that discourse – a role ostensibly on offer to him in each of these episodes.[4]

Upon his return to South Africa, and despite his intimations of a professional breach, the fresh graduate attempts to reinstall Oxford in his immediate surroundings. At night he labours on his new project – a biography of Arnold van Wyk – by the light of a Headington lamp. A jacket of soft Scottish tweed, bought in Oxford, but wholly unsuited to the South African climate, becomes essential to his elaborate interviewing kit. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is always at hand. (Who, he wonders, writes a 1000-page book and pretends someone else has written it?) And, in the most sustained allegory of the process of becoming unmoored from the discourses of the centre, he moves into a ground floor apartment in the heart of the Cape Winelands, where he obsesses over cultivating a square of lawn: 'perfect turf in every way … my small patch of Christ Church in Stellenbosch.'[5]

These are some of the story points of the metafictional frame Stephanus Muller has devised to narrate the process of writing the life of Arnold van Wyk. *Nagmusiek*, meaning 'Night Music' and referencing one of Van Wyk's most accomplished compositions for piano, is told from the perspective of fictional musicologist, Werner Ansbach, who stands before the dilemma of fashioning a story out of an excess of archival material, perspectives, opinions and nuances that are increasingly spinning out of his control. Parallel to the proliferation of his intellectual predicaments, described in underground metaphors of 'burrowing', 'digging' and 'blind tunnelling', a labour of moles colonizes and starts upheaving his perfectly maintained turf. As he tries to repress the invaders, exhausting every humane mole deterrent in the process, things start going south for Ansbach in every other way.

At the very least, books sold in bookstores are expected to have a front and back cover and a spine. *Nagmusiek*'s three volumes enclosed in a slipcase hover suspended in a 360-degree field of vision as if the art of bookmaking had especially to be reinvented for it.

In some sense this is indeed what Muller is proposing. In the first instance a biography of the South African composer Arnold van Wyk, *Nagmusiek* was awarded several South African literary prizes in 2014 – in *both* the fiction and non-fiction categories. Volume I is a painstakingly compiled catalogue of all Van Wyk's works and sketches, including programme notes and reviews. Cross-references to letters and other documents housed at the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at Stellenbosch University, in which the individual works are discussed, are also included. Volume II comprises the notes and index, and Volume III is the biographical

3 Muller, *Nagmusiek,* iii, 210–11.

4 See Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London, 2011), 52. '[T]he universalism of a Western liberal society does not reside in the fact that its values (human rights, etc.) are universal in the sense of holding for *all* cultures, but in a much more radical sense, for individuals relate to *themselves* as "universal," they participate in the universal dimension directly, by-passing their particular social position.'

5 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 81.

Figure 1. *Nagmusiek's* physical apparatus.

narrative proper. When grabbing the wrong end of the case the individual volumes tumble out along with every conventional sense of academic turf maintenance (Figure 1). It soon becomes clear that the book's ambition as a serious, multi-volume reference biography – which it is – is only half the equation. Equally determining of Muller's concept is the audible grinding of gears as he writes this complicated, interlocking and disturbingly self-aware text into existence.

It is the book's metafictional narrative depth, catechismal both in form and dimension, that lends itself to all sorts of allegorical readings. For Chris Walton the book is 'an engrossing allegory of South Africa and Afrikanerdom in the 20th century' that asks 'troubling questions about the relationship between art, academia and fascism',[6] while Juliana Pistorius reads it as using the example of one life 'to examine larger questions on the construction of biography, on music and its role in a discriminatory environment, and the sometimes blurred lines between life and fiction'.[7] To this one might add that it shines a rather desultory light on the current state of South African academic life, and on music studies in particular. *Nagmusiek* captivates because its fictional allegories are so obviously workings-out of real and painful professional experiences: a late coming-of-age story of a South African academic who, trained in an English tradition of disinterested tolerance, has to confront the challenge of holding together an ambitious intellectual project in a very different political and academic environment. This environment is rarely addressed directly; rather its outline and effects are sketched through the private psychological and libidinal investments of the book's protagonist, of which his obsession with maintaining a patch of Oxbridge lawn is a pertinent example.

Considered in the wake of the polemics surrounding Fredric Jameson's much maligned words that '[third-world texts] necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory',[8] I read *Nagmusiek* as an extended parable on the geopolitics of academic

6 Chris Walton, 'Something of the Night', *The Musical Times*, Winter (2015).
7 Juliana M. Pistorius, 'Nagmusiek [Night Music]', *Fontes Artis Musicae,* 62/2 (2015), 130.
8 Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 69. See also Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"',

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writing. In particular, I argue that it articulates a valuable metacritical position on the hermeneutics of peripheral texts. From the outset, then, it should be evident that my own project is essentially paradoxical. In considering the place the book might find in international discourses by arguing for its importance as peripheral text, and by addressing you, an international English-speaking audience, I am at risk of merely confirming the geopolitics of periphery/centre that govern the global business of academic writing. Viewed from this perspective, the best I can hope for is to theorize *Nagmusiek* into the margins of the Anglophone mainstream. Such are the anxieties of every peripheral writer, and unpacking the reasoning behind this anxiety – especially the implicit assumptions about academic canonization – is particularly important to my argument.

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'You South Africans are so fixated on theory, because that's all you have,' a Cambridge professor once told me. He was right, of course. At least in the sense that the geopolitical locations we write from and the academic currency of the topics we choose to write about fundamentally determine our theoretical and methodological approaches – and that is true enough for all of us. But according to this centric vision the efforts of geographically peripheral writers (like me, or like Stephanus Muller), should we choose to engage with 'ex-centric' material (like *Nagmusiek*, or the life and work of Arnold van Wyk), are inevitably directed towards alignment with a centric ideal. As a result of the theoretical prerogatives of this directive, marking the material as peripheral even while ostensibly providing an avenue for opening it up for absorption into the mainstream, such writing is forever doomed to the margins. This view dictates, in other words, that where scholars of the centre can use theory – playfully, lightly – to embellish their work with intellectual predicaments, scholars of the periphery can only ever use theory to illustrate centric relevance. Put yet another way: where scholars of the centre can focus on the characteristics and landmarks of the academic-theoretical landscape, the basic prefiguration of peripheral writing is attentiveness to the 'mappiness' of the world map of theory – its folds, flaws, tears and errors of scale. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the strategy customarily used by scholars of the periphery to make themselves heard in the global arena is to capitalize on the 'internal contradictions, gaps, loopholes, and niches in the structures of the dominant groups to initiate a resistance from the inside'.[9] This approach, however, only confirms the *telos* of Western capitalist modernity, which decrees, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's well-known formulation: 'First in Europe, then elsewhere.'[10] Any attempt to canonize peripheral knowledge therefore presents a rather intractable scholarly problem, not to mention displaying an almost inevitable tendency to sound whiny, hagiographic or both.

These constraints form the basis of the very first discussion of Van Wyk in the biographical narrative of Volume III. Speaking from the knowledge economies of the centre the existence of *Nagmusiek* is highly implausible – and not only on account of its odd structure or expensive minimalist exterior. There is no international scholarly trend or corpus of writing whose logical trajectory would inevitably have pointed to the gap in our knowledge of the life and works of this largely unknown composer, born, as Walton writes in his review of the book, in 'a tiny nowhere place in the midst of a much bigger nowhere'. Despite the lure of wine and mountains, a tribe of Van Wyk scholars is not about to descend on Stellenbosch. 'Fact is', discloses the biographer in the opening chapter, 'few people outside South Africa knew about Arnold van Wyk or his music – even in 1983 [the year of his death]', 'internationally it is only a small group of older

Social Text, 17 (1987), 3–25; Julie McGonegal, 'Postcolonial Metacritique', *Interventions*, 7/2 (2005), 251–65.

9 A. Suresh Canagarajah, *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing* (Pittsburgh, 2002), 30.

10 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000),

musicians and academics, primarily in Britain, who still recognizes the name', and even in South Africa Arnold van Wyk is known only within a small academic circle.[11]

These disclosures about the composer's relative (un)importance are anchored to a transcript of an obituary read at his funeral service. Here Muller highlights the stark difference in the assessment of the centre and periphery respectively. Where John Lowe of the BBC wrote in 1951 about Van Wyk's First Symphony: 'I do not feel able to recommend it for a broadcast, but, of course, you may have special Overseas policy events for it – it is quite interesting and well scored and should not offend any wavelength,' the obituary reads:

> Arnold van Wyk, who died [on March 27, 1983] in the Jan S. Marais hospital in Bellville, was not only the first South African composer to win international recognition on our behalf, but our foremost composer, the doyen of our music. He placed us on the world map of composition.[12]

In what he calls a series of 'intuitive, loose, playful deconstructions' the biographer offers several readings of the claim that Van Wyk was the 'first', the 'foremost' and the 'doyen' of South African composition. This is aimed not only at contextualizing the historical particulars of Van Wyk's influence, but as a means of thinking about the different angles the biography might have taken and the alternative stories it might have told. Implied in these shifts of perspective is also the question of the reception each of these approaches might be expected to have in a broader scholarly context.

On the metaphorical world map of composition Van Wyk's local and global importance vacillates with each iteration of the argument. Is the claim that Van Wyk was South Africa's foremost composer to be deconstructed by the fact that he could hardly be seen as representative of the whole of South Africa in 1983, or should the statement be seen as a 'more general and universal ideological viewpoint' in a modernist clash between 'high' and 'low' culture? Is the claim indicative of Van Wyk's embroilment in a nationalist drive for the 'own', or does it mostly reveal the provincialism of South African art music discourse?[13] Should the biography make room for localized socio-political inquiry, or is it the fact that Van Wyk was an exponent of a 'notated, learned, Western musical tradition' that should occupy the biographer?

Rather than in the particulars of each approach the biographer is primarily interested in the ironic counterpoint between them:[14] in the *fact* that the image of Van Wyk grows and shrinks and mutates from whichever angle one views him. Such questions about perspective and scholarly strategy, one could argue, are common to all academic inquiry, but in this instance the tension is explicitly (if ironically) anchored to the obituarist's evocation of a 'world map of composition' and its imagined musicological corollaries. In other words, it is not only Van Wyk's relationship to the Western musical canon that occupies the biographer. He is also interested in considering the institutions, theoretical discourses and methodological approaches that would best assist the biographer in 'accompanying [Van Wyk] past his death to immortality'.[15] How, the subaltern biographer is asking oxymoronically, can I canonize what is essentially peripheral?

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Nagmusiek can be seen as part of a larger body of scholarship proposing alternative approaches to the problem of canonizing peripheral knowledge. Walter Mignolo characterizes the ethos of

11 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 10.
12 Muller, *Nagmusiek,* iii, 18. Translated from the original.
13 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 10–11.
14 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 18.
15 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 92. Translated from the original.

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this work as 'epistemic delinking'. Mignolo's point of departure is that the 'rhetoric of modernity' and the 'logic of coloniality' are two poles of a power differential between the West and its Others that has marked entire parts of the globe as mentally and economically backward in order to sustain the West's ideology of progress.[16] The first aim of delinking – a 'de-colonial epistemic shift [that] brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economies, other politics, other ethics' – is to understand the geopolitical situatedness of knowledge production.[17] Mignolo refers to this as the *locus of enunciation*, which, in the case of Western knowledge production, is assumed to be universal. Mignolo outlines the factors involved in the authorization of knowledge as a function of hermeneutics that engages every aspect of the process of understanding and interpretation:

> [T]he audience addressed and the researcher's agenda are equally relevant to the construction of the object or subject, as are the information and models available to the understanding subject. Thus, the locus of enunciation is as much a part of the knowing and understanding processes as are the data for the disciplinary (e.g., sociological, anthropological, historical, semiological, etc.) construction of the 'real.' Consequently, the 'true' account of a subject matter, in the form of knowledge or understanding, will be transacted in the respective communities of interpretation as much for its correspondence to what is taken to be real as for the authorizing locus of enunciation constructed in the very act of describing an object or a subject. Furthermore, the locus of enunciation of the discourse being read would not be understood in itself but in the context of previous loci of enunciation that the current discourse contests, corrects, or expands. It is as much the *saying* (and the audience involved) as it is what is *said* (and the world referred to) that preserves or transforms the image of the real constructed by previous acts of saying.[18]

If one takes Mignolo's constructivist approach to knowledge seriously – that is, if knowledge cannot be separated from its locus of enunciation – canonization, too, must take on an expanded meaning. The 'canon', then, is a complex hermeneutic system wherein the world of the researcher, the world as described in academic language, and the interpretative horizon of scholarly audiences, intersect according to a logic of scholarly authorization that mirrors and sustains the unequal distribution of global power. Yet Mignolo's hope is that the delinking project will not result in the existence of a 'major' and a 'minor' canon, or in a set of alternative canons, but in 'heterotopic' bodies of knowledge that operate according to their own idiosyncratic rules, thereby breaking through the modern/colonial binary.

This idea – that peripheral knowledge relies for its proper articulation on a hermeneutic system that has to be reconstructed as if from scratch – is powerfully demonstrated in *Nagmusiek*. In explaining his approach to cataloguing Van Wyk's archive, the result of which is included in Volume I of *Nagmusiek*, Ansbach has the following exchange with one of his interlocutors:

> 'A page by page commentary and description. It will take me many years to complete.'
>
> 'But surely you don't need to do all of this just to write a biography?'
>
> 'I'm not just writing a biography, if I may say so. I'm discovering a lost world. And my sense of fear, my suspicion of the violence inherent in cataloguing is, I have come to realize, the result of the unwrought and confused richness of the territory I'm mapping. And my desire to control it.'[19]

16 Walter Mignolo, 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of de-Coloniality', *Cultural Studies,* 21/2–3, 453; 464.
17 Mignolo, 'Delinking', 485.
18 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, 2003), 21.
19 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 248.

In *Nagmusiek* this 'lost world' is shown to consist not only of the experiential world of the composer, but also, among other things, the theoretical frames, the literary apparatus and the idiosyncratic intellectual space its author has had to devise to bring the book into being, and, in this sense, under his control. Through the formal structure of the book, and its physical and literary apparatus, Muller shows how the veracity of the image/s he is constructing of Van Wyk, and, hence, their canonical potential, are intertwined not only with perceived correspondences to what is taken to be real, but, perhaps more importantly, with 'the authorizing locus of enunciation constructed in the very act of describing an object or a subject', as Mignolo puts it.

Taking his cue from Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative,* Muller explicitly materializes in *Nagmusie*k the three overlapping worlds of Ricoeur's model of interpretation. In the context of a biographical project, $Mimesis_1$ refers to the life-world of the biographical subject, available to the biographer only in its chaotic material deposits. This is most convincingly portrayed by the catalogues of Van Wyk's works in Volume 1, but also by the photographs, lists of insignificant facts, and other archival material embedded in Sebaldian fashion within Volume 3. $Mimesis_2$, the emplotment of the material within a narrative, corresponds with Muller's configuration of the factual data of Van Wyk's life into a story. The three extensive chronologies of Van Wyk's life best materialize this stage. But Muller also complicates Ricoeur's model with an additional layer: the mimesis of process. He works out the third hermeneutic world, where the biographer's horizon of understanding merges with and is transfigured by the story of the composer's life by creating the character of Werner Ansbach, who inserts himself as agent in the invention of all three hermeneutic worlds.

At the start of the narrative of Volume III, the fictional biographer's self-deprecation reminds strongly of Julian Barnes's Geoffrey Braithwaite in *Flaubert's Parrot.* His 'listless list-making', the three extended life chronologies of Van Wyk around which the narrative takes shape, and the inclusion of writing in a range of registers and formats also recall Barnes's text. On the surface the function of the metafictional conceit seems similar too: the fictional narrator serves to portray the interpretative violence of bending the excessive documentary remains of a life into the constraints of a narrative biography, questioning notions of completeness, significance and the accuracy of historical understanding.

But, as the narrative progresses, the brutality of Ansbach's self-derision points to something more than a postmodern literary-technical problem circumvented by resorting to metafictional conceit. What sets it apart from other texts that could be classified, following Linda Hutcheon, as 'historiographic metafiction',[20] is that *Nagmusiek* makes a serious claim to knowledge; it is an attempt at 'metafictional historiography'. In his radical departure from the safety nets of academic writing, of which its ascription to real authors and its status as non-fiction were hitherto incontrovertible values, Muller transforms the playful deconstructive intellectualism of postmodern fiction into a form of scholarly self-reflection directly related to the problem of peripheral writing. The metafictional mirror in *Nagmusiek* is not only that of a Narcissus, but also of a Ngũgĩ.

Through metafictional techniques Muller gives form to the hermeneutics of doubleness that arises inevitably from working outside the lines of the Western canon. J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, another fictional character used to examine peripheral authors and their writing, articulates this doubleness as follows:

> The English novel … is written in the first place by English people for English people. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians. But the African novel is not written by Africans

20 Linda Hutcheon, 'Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History', (1989) available at <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10252/1/TSpace0167.pdf>

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> for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experience, but they are glancing over their shoulder all the time as they write at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have assumed the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to the world. How can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders?[21]

Being a peripheral writer means embodying an essentially paradoxical position. Mignolo characterizes the position of the peripheral writer as 'thinking from his or her body and experience, subsuming the imperial reason that makes an *other*, an *anthropos* out of him or her', writing 'with one's body on the border', or 'dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs'.[22] This paradoxical position engenders a conflicting 'need' and 'challenge' in peripheral writing: the need to explain itself in relation to the asymmetrical distribution of power, and the challenge 'to detach itself from the presuppositions of the established methodological and philosophical foundations from which it departs'.[23]

However, Mignolo's instructions on 'delinking' from the philosophical foundations of the West are mostly dehistoricized, and, by his own admission, 'somewhat messianic'.[24] It is equally impossible for the peripheral author to escape the fact that: (1) questioning the epistemological assumptions of the West relies on that same epistemology for its subaltern articulation; and (2) that texts refusing to play along with the methodological and philosophical foundations of the West will remain unread and ineffectual. Beyond theoretical musings and a play on words and their meanings, Mignolo offers no specific strategies for how writers at the margins should negotiate the aporetics of their compromised positions.

Nagmusiek does.

Not only does Muller enact the dividedness of peripheral understanding by exposing the text's own hermeneutic arc in the book's apparatus and metafiction, but the double consciousness of peripheral hermeneutics is also part of the internal plot development of Volume III. Muller develops within the biographical narrative a hermeneutics of the inside that is defined in constant struggle with that of the outside.

This is particularly evident in the allegorical depiction of how Ansbach comes to understand Van Wyk's world. The hermeneutics of the inside becomes a one-to-one collapse of the psychological and material space dividing biographer and subject. Crucially, aspects of Ansbach's biography merge with those of Van Wyk's in the first chronology of Van Wyk's life. 'I must get to know you [Van Wyk] in a relationship in which I am important, otherwise you slip out of my visual grasp, my field of hearing, out beneath my hands,' Ansbach writes.[25] After the first chronology the narrative retraces its steps. The second incarnation of the story pivots on much the same themes and documentary evidence as the first, but the world of Ansbach and that of Van Wyk show increasing overlaps. In the first part, for example, Ansbach describes Van Wyk's dietary preferences and evening routines objectively; in the second, Ansbach incorporates them into his own daily routine: eating what Van Wyk ate; doing as Van Wyk did. As the narrative develops, this allegory of understanding becomes so literal that it begins to parody the hermeneutic process: Ansbach works in the same office once occupied by Van Wyk; Ansbach dreams Van Wyk's dreams; Ansbach finds that

21 J.M. Coetzee, 'The Novel in Africa', *Occasional Papers of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities*, 17 (1999), 17.
22 Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, 'On Pluritopic Hermeneutics, Trans-Modern Thinking, and Decolonial Philosophy', *Encounters,* 1/1 (2009), 17. Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing', 137.
23 Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, 19.
24 Mignolo, 'Delinking' 452.
25 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 234.

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his hand is the same size as Van Wyk's; Ansbach smuggles Van Wyk's tuxedo out of an archival holding, and wears it in the evenings when playing the piano; on the last page of Volume III Muller/Ansbach's hands strike the same pose as Van Wyk's on the cover.

The parodic element indicates that this is no utopian vision of peripheral knowledge. 'I've lost my orientation towards my own text,' Ansbach laments. 'Perhaps it started when I could no longer distinguish whether I were reliving another's life, creating it, or exorcizing it.' The process of Ansbach's understanding of Van Wyk's world correlates inversely and starts depending on his loss of control over other aspects of his life, depicted in similar seemingly naive allegories of forgetting and the loss of intellectual innocence: Ansbach's mother is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and dies; Ansbach suffers a series of violent over-the-top sexual encounters: the first bringing him closer to understanding gay desire; the second, at the mercy of the aggressive Cecile with whom he enacts as dialogue extracts from Van Wyk's lectures and radio talks, leaving him particularly humiliated, confused and aroused. At the same time Ansbach's entire intellectual project is allegorically anchored in exaggerated scale to the mole activity he is struggling to contain below the small patch of grass outside his apartment.[26] The content of these allegories, the latter in particular, suggests that getting to know Van Wyk's world and writing his biography in a 'de-linked' way depend on the psychologically harmful double consciousness of peripheral understanding (unmoored from Western academic discourse, but focalized through it nonetheless). But more importantly, the allegorical structure itself implies and strategically exploits the hermeneutics particular to peripheral texts.

I have already referred to Jameson's theory of allegory in 'third-world' texts in the opening of this article, but his exposition on the hermeneutics of peripheral texts is pertinent too:

> As western readers whose tastes (and much else) have been formed by our own modernisms, a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read. We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share. The fear and the resistance I'm evoking has to do, then, with the sense of our own non-coincidence with that Other reader, so different from ourselves; our sense that to coincide in any adequate way with that Other 'ideal reader' – that is to say, to read this text adequately – we would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious to us and acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening – one that we do not know and prefer not to know.[27]

The double consciousness engendered in Western readers by allegorical texts from elsewhere is the mirror image of the anxiety-inducing double consciousness of the subaltern, even though the Western reader is in a position to ignore the Other in a way the subaltern is not. Julie McGonegal has argued convincingly that Jameson's notes on 'national allegory' should be read from a metacritical viewpoint, in other words, that Jameson's essay says very little about 'Third World texts' and more about 'how these differences are maintained and reproduced by a First World literary criticism that remains blithely unaware, for the most part, of the ways its own historical and social conditions impart various givens to the interpretive situation.'[28] The strategically naive allegories of *Nagmusiek* are metacritical in this sense: they invite the West's entrenched responses to peripheral writing and augment the anxieties aroused by encountering the unfamiliar. By deconcealing the hermeneutic system within which *Nagmusiek* has been conceptualized, and within which it is embedded

26 Muller, *Nagmusiek,* iii, 271.
27 Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', 66.
28 McGonegal, 'Postcolonial Metacritique', 253.

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and finds its meaning, Muller invents – albeit precariously – the conditions for Arnold van Wyk's canonization.

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In 2002 the prolific Afrikaans author Karel Schoeman (1939–2017) titled his autobiography *The Last Afrikaans Book*, for, he argued: 'The publication of another large-scale work of Afrikaans non-fiction in traditional format and through the traditional commercial press seems highly improbable.' Schoeman continued:

> Writing these notes was a personal endeavor, but as the work progressed I had to acknowledge that it had unwittingly grown into a record of the end of an era in the history of the Afrikaans language and culture of which I am a product, and now also a survivor and witness.[29]

The problem Schoeman articulated is not about the commercial viability of Afrikaans writing, as such, but about the inevitably flailing trajectory, in a liberated South Africa, of a literary tradition that has focused almost exclusively on canonizing the lives and work of white, male, Afrikaans writers. Under the patronage of white-owned media enterprises a generation of Afrikaans non-fiction writers enjoyed the freedom to work on large-scale projects, largely unencumbered by concerns for readability or for how well their books would sell. Although musicologists' contribution to this tradition was minimal – limited to the odd academic journal article – previous writing on Van Wyk and his contemporaries adopted the formal register, dry positivism and implicit nationalist agenda of their literary counterparts – an aesthetic that allowed twentieth-century Afrikaans academics to focus on their subjects without questioning the political structures that enabled their work to continue in the way it did.

The need to 'delink' from this tradition should be as obvious to the contemporary South African biographer as the difficulties of doing so.

On the one hand, Muller's biographical text does an admirable job of pointing out the ambivalences and contradictions at the borders of the modern/colonial divide, having as subject matter a white, male, apartheid-era composer; someone with little formal musical training, who, despite growing up in a South African rural backwater, went on to compose to some acclaim in a Western late-Romantic idiom; a composer who clearly benefitted from the structures of high apartheid, but who, perhaps due to his reticence towards the regime, or due to his homosexuality, never found the institutional recognition he deserved; a man who felt himself perpetually displaced and uprooted, whether he lived in England or in South Africa. But, inevitably, *Nagmusiek*'s window on the nuances of colonial aesthetic production (and with that, Muller's attempt to canonize Van Wyk) is obstructed by the Afrikaans biographical tradition that Muller, by implication, is extending. It should be unthinkable to attempt to canonize someone like Van Wyk as if it were 1980s business as usual, and the metafictional depth and idiosyncratic approach allows the author to wonder out loud about how to write about a peripheral figure (and one who lived on the wrong side of history, at that), and to question his own work in relation to local and global antecedents.

Muller treats his difficult relationship with the Afrikaans biographical tradition by creating a character foil, 'The Great Biographer', who works alongside Ansbach in the archival section of Stellenbosch University's main library – an underground structure dug out below the central square of the campus. Ansbach describes this 'bunker' where he ordered Van Wyk's estate, in words that could be applicable to the sheltered literary space of Afrikaans non-fiction more broadly:

29 Karel Schoeman, *Die Laaste Afrikaanse Boek: Outobiografiese Aantekeninge*. [The last Afrikaans book: autobiographical notes] (Cape Town, 2002).Translated from the original.

> But for my work it was from the outset an amiable space: lily white and artificially homogenous, given the broader context of the country, but one in which – maybe as a result thereof – the money, attention and time I dedicated to Van Wyk were not questioned in principle.
>
> I've never lost sight of the fact that, should I lift my chin to take a peek at the world outside the bomb shelter, and look beyond the minutiae of the biographical project towards the context out there, it would be clear that I'm busying myself with an ideologically conservative project. Especially given the time and place in which it unfolds. Of course, biography is traditionally an anointment of priestly oils on the fine lives of selected 'great figures'. A conservative project, if ever there were one.[30]

Whereas Ansbach is perturbed and overwhelmed by Van Wyk's archive, burdened by questions of interpretation, and affected by every document he picks up, the Great Biographer proceeds with discipline and persistence, having perfected a method that sacrifices interpretation for productivity. The tension between the two biographers mounts throughout, until they face off in the chapter *Oedipus Rex* over their many intellectual and methodological differences. This treatment of the anxiety of influence illustrate how Muller both accepts and departs from Mignolo's reasoning, focusing not on writing himself out of the dilemma of delinking as both a 'need' and an 'impossibility', but on dramatizing the aporetics of his position within the text itself. Broadly, his narrative strategy is inspired by Ricoeur's dictum that the relationship between time and narrative culminates in a dialectic between an aporetics and a poetics,[31] which is to say that narrative 'does not solve aporias, but only resolves them poetically (and not theoretically)'.[32] Whereas aporias are by definition covert points of possible deconstruction where a text turns against itself, Muller overtly writes these points of dissolution into the text, sometimes in very disconcerting ways.

An important case in point is the introduction to Volume I, which contains the complete catalogue of Van Wyk's music. In a tenor at odds with the self-effacing style of the biographical narrative of Volume III, the author explains the possible impact and importance of the project. By again referencing Van Wyk's marginality, he unambiguously identifies the project as an 'act of canonization':

> a gesture on the part of its compiler and funders and institutional supporters that says: Through the scope of this labour we confirm Arnold van Wyk's importance to all our people and his unique contribution to expressing our position and humanity in South Africa in sound. … This is clearly an ideological project which, through its weight and scope, stakes its claim to canonization.[33]

This all sounds like regular – if particularly eloquent – funding application stuff, but these statements about canonization are hollowed out by the book's confusing chronology. Nagmusiek's three volumes follow no single linear trajectory, the book's pagination contradicting its volumetric designations. Volume III starts on page 1 and Volume I on page 611. On an experiential level the retrograde pagination suggests at least two ways of navigating through the text – each with its own implications for authorship, intent and monumentality. Read by volumetric chronology the work catalogue was compiled by Stephanus Muller. But read by page chronology (as most readers would), the work list becomes an appendix to Werner Ansbach's aborted biography of Van Wyk. It is possible, in other words, to read the work list as part of the fictional metabiographical conceit of Volume III – the documentary

30 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 83. Translated from the original.
31 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 2012), i, 79.
32 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 394.
33 Muller, *Nagmusiek,* i, 612. Translated from the original.

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remains of a failed project – and when read in this way it is impossible to take the author's words on canonization at face value.

Alongside *Nagmusiek*'s canonization drive and the implicit monumentalism of the biographical genre there is another agenda at work: a deconstructive one that allows Van Wyk's biographical edifice to unravel in a controlled way, and one in which the author strategically vandalizes the idea of the magisterial biographical project. 'Exclusions and remainders, it would seem, inherently accompany any attempt to generate a canonical form,' writes Colby Dickenson:

> The fundamental aporia of a canonical text, one that seems inextricably intertwined with its authoritative claims, is that it is a text divided from within, by its messianic (prophetic) and canonical (Pharisiac) tensions. There are some memories which must be forgotten, and, inevitably, a sort of ideological script of history takes form around those remaining particular memories. Yet, these are memories which are capable of being contested by the tensions present within the canonical text itself. Any (canonical) authority is consequently beset by the aporias which linger interminably at its core.[34]

Nagmusiek is animated by the aporias of canonization. By working *with* the aporetic logic of canonical texts rather than against it Muller allows forgotten memories to resurface and exclusions and remainders to assert a counter-authority over the text's canonical claims. Superficially, this double agenda is visible in the book's highly stylized packaging. It is at once an imposing and fragile artefact. Its loose parts (two photographs, a reproduction of a letter on thin typewriter paper in which Van Wyk describes the day he received an honorary doctorate from University of Cape Town, and a pocket-sized score of *Nagmusiek*) easily get lost and come undone from their original contexts within the collection. The aporia is also visible in the exposed bricks of the fourth wall. Scattered throughout the text are incomplete or discarded authors' notes, or ideas for planned sections that were never finished. The index, too, hints at both the authority of a canonical text and its secreted loose ends. Although it is bulky and consumes half of Volume II, it is strangely opaque to the book's many metatheoretical concerns.

One of the most brutal instances of canonical desecration is found in the section supposedly containing a peer-review report of the text, close to the end of the biographical narrative of Volume III:

> The author plays with the novel, the biography, and the autobiography, and the risky rejection of the weightiness of all, some, or any of these genres, has everything to do with someone who has lost his faith in God.
>
> It pains me to have to say: The author could not find a satisfactory solution to the formal problem of how to approach a project like this one in a new way. In the end the work is neither fish nor fowl. The delicate internal motifs are not enough for integration, to hold the material together. The vast scale of the book is in some respects a sign of this unresolved problem. In the introduction to the catalogue the author expounds his reasons for including the weighty catalogue in the publication. He motivates it in more detail, but in short it comes down to the fact that he wants to make a gesture that could lead to the canonization of Van Wyk. I think this gesture, however commendable, is made at the expense of the possibility of the biography being published.[35]

The critique is devastating for the authority of the text and for the reader's trust in the authority of its narrator, for its inclusion jolts the reader irredeemably out of the

34 Dickinson, *Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought* (London, 2013), 162.
35 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 513.

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suspension of postmodern disbelief. The reader of a late work of metafiction like *Nagmusiek* expects to share in the author's creative act and in the burden of its production. Readers have learnt to make sense of the piecemeal and fragmentary nature of the genre. But Muller's uncanny ability to project himself into the position of reader and critic, and to imagine devastating receptions of his own text alienate him from his readers, who would at this point not only have sympathized strongly with Ansbach's futile attempts at creating cohesion, but would have taken on some of the responsibility for fashioning a story from the disjointed set of narrative facts. The narrator's hermeneutic omniscience may enable a form of self-canonization by dramatizing the arc of interpretation, but it comes at a cost.

*****

Nagmusiek not only undermines its canonical claims by violating them internally, but, more essentially, because it is not written in English. When a nervous and self-castigating Ansbach does present a paper in English at a conference entitled 'Composing ApARTheid'[36] he explains at length his decision to write the biography in Afrikaans:

> This decision to revisit the possibilities of writing in Afrikaans was not only prompted by the promise of a broadening of register, a change of style, a discovery of spaces hidden in the nuances of a different vocabulary and semantics. But I also found that when I wrote in Afrikaans I instinctively wrote for a different audience. This would happen without any intent or planning. Writing the language I grew up in, I found that I (also) spoke to people like my parents and siblings, my school friends, aunts and uncles, or rather: ooms en tannies. Writing in the language I have grown more proficient in professionally, I invariably found that I addressed learned colleagues. I wanted to see how my writing would change (the 'what' as well as the 'how') after an enforced change of tongue. […] But let it also be said that it is a painful process, bifurcating between an honest desire for communication with a broader scholarly community in which the lingua franca is English (and the flip-side fear of parochialism), and the desire to think and write and conduct verbal retrospection in the language of one's home and therefore inevitably coupled with the politicized responsibility of Afrikaans academics to maintain Afrikaans as an academic language, and ultimately as a spoken language, for future generations of South Africans. The responsibility I speak of is not a responsibility to a political idea, at least it is so no longer to me, but to all who might be driven out of themselves in future by finding the doors of the past locked in strange accents and unknown combinations of sounds. More controversially, I would claim, it is to keep the options open of positioning oneself in a discursive space with the potential to stake out in an authentic voice a postcolonial South African position in a global discourse shaped by English.

Here Muller further unpacks the aporetics of peripheral writing: it entails a painful splitting of registers, audiences, desires and scholarly responsibilities, culminating in the paradox that in order 'to stake out in an authentic voice a postcolonial South African position in a global discourse shaped by English', the line of communication with that global discourse needs to be shut down. *Nagmusiek*'s canonical potential is severely restricted because it is not written in English, just as its decolonial ambitions are compromised by its canonical aims.

Muller/Ansbach's reasons for writing in Afrikaans (I permit myself the intentional fallacy on this occasion, since Muller published part of this particular chapter under his own name elsewhere)[37] form part of the chapter's broader argument on the hermeneutics of peripheral

36 In line with the notes on audience above, it is perhaps no coincidence that this particular chapter is readily accessible, and indeed, addressed to English-speaking readers, although they will have to forego Muller's caricatured typology of South African academics.

37 Stephanus Muller, 'Arnold van Wyk's Hands', *Composing Apartheid* (Johannesburg, 2008), 281–9.

writing and theorization, in relation to global discourses and canonical understandings. Turning to a no less controversial subject than the meaning of apartheid, Muller/Ansbach takes issue with the conference's foregone conclusions that white apartheid-era composers 'were having a pretty good time, thanks to their … patrons … and the apartheid system itself'.[38] Muller attempts to qualify the paradigmatic view of a mutually profitable relationship between the apartheid regime and white composers by arguing that the agency implied in the title of the conference, Composing ApARTheid, 'rests perhaps more convincingly in the concerns and preoccupations of scholars today than in the hands of the creators of musics during the Apartheid era'. He goes on:

> Even though Apartheid, and in a broader sense colonialism in general, is destined to remain a paradigmatic conceptual framework for South African (musical) culture of the twentieth century and well beyond, I find myself at a personal junction where defining a position with respect to Apartheid – whether it be one of atonement or justification or revelation – can no longer be the sole reason for my visitations to my, and our collective, pasts. I find the Apartheid-framed skirmishes and debates directed at audiences gathered together by a global English-speaking consensus mentality – an Apartheid spelt but rarely pronounced in the Afrikaans fashion, as though English wishes to distance itself from the word even when using it to English-language effects: ApARTheid – to be indifferent, if not antagonistic, to my own research interests.

In order to register an alternative to the 'global English-speaking consensus mentality', he analyses a set of photographs of Van Wyk's hands, taken in 1954 (Figure 2). Again following Paul Ricoeur's model of threefold mimesis in *Time and Narrative*, Muller asks how the horizon of the world in which these photographs acquired their meaning (Ricoeur's mimesis_2) might intersect with the world of its present-day 'readers' (Ricoeur's mimesis_3). '[T]hese photographs in their coagulated state,' says Muller/Ansbach, 'was about communicating something to the future, my present, that was of some deep and not entirely intelligible significance.'[39]

Ironically, he interprets these photographs from yet another Western paradigmatic model of understanding, this time German in conception. '[I]t is undeniable', he says, 'that the photographs signify the kind of Romantic – with a capital R – adulation of an individual as something special, perhaps even genius, that the Beethoven death mask also communicates to us more than two hundred and fifty years after it was made.' By virtue, then, of the images' similarity to other canonic imagery of composers that symbolically materialize a Romantic aesthetic – busts, portraits, casts, death masks – the images of Van Wyk's hands exceed the logic of apartheid:

> It asserts the primacy of its agent and his music intersecting with our world – my world – in a manner, that, I maintain, I cannot approximate under a subject potentially assuming so much historically as 'Composing ApARTheid' within the context of a celebration of 'Ten Years of Democracy'.

I'm not as interested here in the merits of Muller's argument about composers and apartheid (he overturns, deconstructs and relativizes it in numerous ways, anyway) as in his unusual neo-romantic reasoning on marginal unintelligibility. At the end of his exposition on the meanings of the images, he concludes:

> There exist things from the past, sometimes incomprehensible and inexplicably significant, that cannot become part of the story this conference wishes to tell, and in this, constitute a crucial, discordant part of its plot.

38 Muller, *Nagmusiek*, iii, 379.
39 Muller, *Nagmusiek,* iii, 393.

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Figure 2. Arnold Van Wyk's hands, 1954.

The first part of this formulation articulates a standard Romantic position on the value of the unknowable: not only is the image of Van Wyk's hands incomprehensibly significant in 'our' hermeneutic world; the image attains its significance by projecting *itself*, in a Romantic short-circuit of empty meanings, as *signifying* incomprehensible significance. In the second part of his formulation, however, he uses the Romantic rhetoric of incomprehensible significance to argue for the importance of the marginalized in the geopolitical master narrative of what he earlier called the 'global English-speaking consensus mentality'. In a (dis)ingenious way, then, Muller/Ansbach uses universal concerns to elevate the incomprehensibility of the marginal into something essentially, but inexplicably, meaningful. In so doing he finds a provisional way through the problem of how to stake out in an authentic voice a postcolonial South African position in a global discourse shaped by English.

This mode of neo-romantic reasoning does not only pertain to Van Wyk's world, but, via its metafictional self-awareness, to *Nagmusiek*'s own status as object of interpretation. That the

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image of Van Wyk's hands is conspicuously embossed on the cover confers on the book some of the same qualities embedded in the photograph: the suggestion that Romantic representation is at work here, but also, that it attains its value precisely through putting itself forth as an unintelligible part of the geopolitical narrative. Muller/Ansbach's neo-romantic reasoning culminates in the decision to write in Afrikaans, as Muller explains in an interview:

> I gambled on the idea that a book like this cannot be written in English. I felt that if you really want to write books that do extraordinary things, really mad things, risky things, hugely risky things, then you must do it in a marginal language, in a marginal geography, about a marginal composer, about music that's marginal even in its own society. The benefit of all this marginality is the risks it enables you to take, the scale of the experiment it allows you to make.[40]

By not trying to remedy the book's marginality, its intelligibility to the West, or the tendency for peripheral texts to be read as national allegories, instead positing it on the edge with wholehearted excessiveness, Muller creates a theory-in-praxis of decolonial hermeneutics. As such, Muller puts into operation Mignolo's mantra that 'there is no rhetoric of modernity without the logic of coloniality', but he goes about it in a fundamentally new and different way. Instead of attempting to provincialize Western musicological discourse, or to posit Van Wyk's world as an alternative but equal centre of knowledge, tensions around canonization, marginality and the geopolitics of knowledge are worked out within the apparatus of the book, its formal structure, its metafiction, its narrative development, and its sheer bulk. These ex-centric hermeneutic horizons take shape in the shadows of Anglophone musicology and critical scholarship, even while remaining resolutely outside their frames of reference.

What accounts for *Nagmusiek*'s startling newness is the faith its author places in the value of peripheral knowledge, the lengths he is prepared to go to in order to demonstrate and to canonize this faith, and the sacrifices he makes in the process. *Nagmusiek* becomes canonical by proposing its own doctrine. It is a catechism for the marginal, and a lesson in how to theorize at the borders of intelligibility. And even then the text seems to be pointing derisively at its own catechismal and didactic impulses, which once more confirm the inescapable aporias of writing from the other side of the world.

Notes on contributor

Willemien Froneman writes about South African music and co-edits the journal *SAMUS: South African Music Studies*. Her work has appeared in *Cultural Geographies*, *Popular Music*, *Ethnomusicology Forum* and *Critical Arts*.

ORCID

Willemien Froneman http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7596-8866

40 Available at <http://www.netwerk24.com/Stemme/Murray-La-Vita/murray-la-vita-gesels-met-stephanus-muller-20160115>. Translated from the original.

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