

Not So Stories

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Abstract

This essay seeks to disrupt three complacently accepted theoretical distinctions that are a product of a modern (and therefore) colonial school of thought, which creates false, extensible divisions to subsume differences under a singular conception. The error of these divisions is demonstrated (rather than claimed) by confronting them with autobiographical accounts of a Southern African context, offering an experiential counterpoint to the context from which this modern school of thought has emerged.

When confronted with the context of South Africa, the theoretical ground upon which these distinctions are built begins to falter, offering in its place different (embodied) relations to nature, people and things. Myth making and critical memoirs inform a praxis of 're-membering' the Gordian knot of relations that has been severed by false dichotomies. Doing so enables a contingent reading of the worlds that constitute Africa and thereby challenges

prescribed distinctions produced by critical theory: inside/outside; culture/nature; self/other.

Keywords

South Africa, re-membering, Gordian knot, relational ontology, contingent realities, embodied epistemology

One sentence summary

Three autobiographical accounts from South Africa confront and destabilise the logic of three false theoretical dichotomies (inside/outside; culture/nature; self/other), demonstrating a praxis of 're-membering' to generate a relational understanding of the worlds we live in.

Just so?

A snake enters the living room; a French violin plays Italian music in the shadow of Table Mountain, and the names of the Voortrekkers are reified on street signs in a country they've never seen. Three disparate tales that appear at first glance to be totally unrelated and are also completely enmeshed with one another. Much like the diversity of items Bruno Latour observes in his morning newspaper: 'none of these [horizons, stakes, time frames, actors] is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story.'¹ Our knowledge of things and power, or culture and nature, is entangled to the extent that Latour calls it an imbroglia or 'Gordian knot'. According to Greek mythology, the Gordian knot was so impossibly intricate, so convoluted and enmeshed that the one who could disentangle this knot was prophesised to become the future ruler of Asia. It was Alexander the Great who stepped forth to claim the crown, not by diligently tracing each thread of the knot, but by slicing it in two with his sword. It is an apt analogy, as this dividing act is not simply for the sake of differentiation between the knot's parts; rather, it is an act of control

and power, that is, there is something to be gained in its division. It is the same logic with which modern thought has made a duality of our understanding, such that grand narratives or universal truths may lay claim to the world, disregarding place or time. Europe has thus constituted itself as the enlightened and epistemological centre of the world through its colonial processes of modernisation; first through the division of the world, and subsequently through its construction of narratives and systems of control that function as 'universal truths' by subsuming (or interiorising) those parts of the world (materially, economically and ideologically) that remain severed. As Enrique Dussel elaborates, modernity does not begin with the Enlightenment, but rather is born in 1492 with the landing of Christopher Columbus, 'when Europe was in a position to pose itself against an other.'¹² With Columbus's arrival comes the myth of modernity: the rational concept of emancipation, and at the same time the irrational justification of genocide. The logic of modernity is one of interiorisation, and it depends upon the construction of a division, or cut, between an imagined inside and outside with the objective of consuming the world and vilifying that which is beyond its purview.

The title of this article is a negation of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, conceived as oral bed-time fables for his daughter in the early twentieth century. While narrating by heart, Kipling would sometimes deviate from the original version, and his daughter would interrupt him to say, 'No no, the story must be told Just So.'¹³ It is for this reason they were put to paper to be read out loud verbatim for ever more. A hundred years after being written, my mother would read to me from Kipling's *Just So Stories*, and I listened to just how exactly the leopard got its spots, and the rhino its skin. It is perhaps through these stories, ones told just so and without deviance, that we make sense of the world – religious texts, historical accounts and scientific paradigms that persist in the face of centuries and sometimes thousands of years – but this is not to say that the world makes sense. The comfort of hearing the same story continuously, a story that is predictable and 'makes sense' by virtue of its repetition, is tremendously powerful, no matter how fanciful the story might be. With this comfort, however, comes the danger of what Arturo Escobar calls a 'one-world world', in which one dominant world (conception) is permitted exclusively.⁴ In perpetuating the grand narrative, one effectively cuts through the Gordian knot that constitutes lived experience; the complexities of life are sliced through, and the world is won.⁵ Owing to this manoeuvre, modernity has arisen as the champion of our times. In the production of a narrative that upholds false divisions, and the subsequent pretence that it is the only narrative to be applied regardless of place, context or time, the division is operationalised towards expansion and to uphold a status

quo. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos claims, it is owing to those 'abyssal lines' of theoretical thought from the global north that the world has been cut open.⁶ The binary reductions that are imposed upon the complexities of our world are the most readily extensible, as Anna Tsing shows in her writing on non-scalability: stripping the world of difference in order to impose a single order affords certain actions to take place at scale and quickly, but it does not so readily accommodate the contingencies and errors that make up the stuff of life, leaving little hope for a future that is not dependent on binary divisions.⁷

It is no coincidence that modern theoretical discourse operates similarly surgically and with equally divisive powers; its greatest conquest perhaps being the creation and division of a mental interior against a sensory and physical exterior. 'I think therefore I am' has far-reaching implications for the way we behave in the world we live in, and masks the violence of our actions in the apparent cleanliness of the divide between thought and experience.⁸ This essay echoes the necessity for situated knowledges and challenges the problems of what Donna Haraway has called the 'God Trick,' or 'seeing from nowhere' while cognisant that 'not any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms built out of summing and subsuming parts.'⁹ Further, in opposition to the preferential treatment that theory (etymologically derived from the Greek 'theōros', meaning spectator) has for vision, this essay takes up Heidegger's presentation of being-in-the-world as a unitary phenomenon that is irreducible to its parts and emphasises an embodied and relational ontology.¹⁰ The issue of a disembodied and spectatorial theory is further taken up especially as a decolonial project, by taking heed of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as the taxonomic and essentialist agenda hidden in theoretical work that speaks on behalf of a subjugated other, in turn upholding the West as the subject while participating in and upholding power structures that determine not only what counts as 'theory' but also determines who may speak, publish and theorise.¹¹ The idea of truth (a mythical construction in its own right) has become a tool that makes it possible to suppose that theoretical thought has no bearing on place, and one's being in the world has no consequence for the theories generated. However, the logical ground upon which modern critical theory and its 'truths' stand is firmly situated in a decidedly European mode of thought and has its roots in a colonial experience and understanding of space, much like Kipling's *Just So Stories*. By synthesising an understanding of the truth, which is dependent upon a false and grossly simplified division, lived experiences that do not fall within the scope of that truth are necessarily false, irrational, unreasonable, invalid and foreign. As Walter Mignolo emphasises,

thought is neither universal nor neutral, but rooted in a specific geography, history, culture and power.¹² It seems pertinent, therefore, to engage in a research practice that entangles one's own lived experience with theoretical discourse in order to re-member that which is dismembered by those dividing lines of thought that pervade our existence – thereby engaging in the exercise of decolonialising the self. As someone who grew up in Cape Town, South Africa between 2000 and 2015 before moving to the Netherlands, where my familial heritage in part lies, I intend with this essay to come to terms with the issue of a colonial legacy not merely as a historical account but as a deeply personal and embodied experience. In doing so, the hope is to effectively suture the ends of rope that constitute the Gordian knot and pave an understanding towards a future that is not dependent upon a binary, oppositional understanding of the world. Instead the aim is to reveal and demonstrate an interwoven and relational understanding of the space between South Africa and Europe to construct passages between what Arturo Escobar describes as the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' of critical theory.¹³

In order to combat the singular conception of lived experience, especially within an academic context, in this essay I present three *Not So Stories*. These critical memoirs take on the challenge of retying the Gordian knot of relations between three false dichotomies of inside/outside, culture/nature, and self/other. These distinctions are comfortable because they are repeatedly told and framed within a logic that does not bend to the world of individual experience, and they are generic because they have no basis in a life lived. In stark contrast to the proliferation of the conventionally spectatorial stories of South Africa that address the country as a case study – examined from a distance as one might a specimen in a lab – the memories presented here function as grounds for interrogating and critically reflecting upon European framing and logic. The logic that brings these stories together is therefore not causal or chronological, but diffractive and associative, so as to explore an alternative discourse of the worlds that constitute Africa. They are not immediately commensurable, and yet they are not unrelated.

Methodologically, I take inspiration from the work of anthropologist Lesley Green, whose book, *Rock Water Life*, makes use of personal and physical encounters with the South African landscape to produce a work of empathy and critical evaluation of the ecological relations that a South African history, present and future entail. In taking this approach, it is evident that it is 'not possible to think about nature without attending to the nature that people constitute, and our bodily entanglements with the places in which we live and have our being.'¹⁴ It is this same embodied entanglement I use in this essay in order to produce

an approach to critical theory that does not simply proliferate a preexisting discourse. I take further critical inspiration from scholars working in different disciplines, such as Ann Cvetkovich (women's and gender studies) and Peter Stallybrass (literary studies), both of whom use personal memoir to inform their theoretical approaches.¹⁵ By entangling my own memories with those comfortably accepted distinctions of inside/outside, culture/nature, and self/other, I grapple with both the personal and intimate origin and those opaque reaches of my experience with the worlds beyond my own in search of a common-place as defined by Édouard Glissant.¹⁶ Each of these distinctions presents us with a Gordian knot that has been cleaved through the processes of creating a limit that does not exist, a divide that tries to interiorise part of the whole in order to exert some power over an imagined outside.

Understanding the modern project as one of interiorisation, I begin with tackling the distinction between the inside and outside, as a primary example of the error of forgetting to consider the lived experience and context in which theory is being produced. With this, echoing Sylvia Winter's call for new myths, I propose a new creation story of the inside as a consequence of the drip line, and use the logic of this boundary to discuss the distinctions of culture and nature, and self and other; both of which derive from a fundamental misconception of the limit between the inside and outside. I disrupt these divisions both as literal and theoretical issues, because my intention is to make explicit that re-membering necessarily implicates both experience and all-emergent theory as a product of one's situation. I am here; therefore, I think this.

How the outside got in

In the high and far-off times, o Best Beloved, before there was an inside, when the wind howled and storms raged on, all of mankind and the world of beasts stood naked and bore the force of the sun and the rain outside.¹⁶ It was terribly cold and terribly wet, terribly hot and terribly dusty. Hippopotamus heaved a heavy sigh and said, 'This cannot go on,' and sunk himself into the great lakes between the reeds with just his nostrils sticking out above the water's surface. In the evenings you can hear him chortling, happy and proud to have escaped the heat of the day. Leopard, with her beautiful spots, said, 'Enough is enough!' and left the tufts of sandy-yellowish grass of the highveld and the blistering heat of the rocks up into a tall marula tree to stretch out on a leafy branch. She purred and purred, looking like sunshine sifting through the leaves in a cool breeze. Scorpion with all eight of its legs and its needle raised high, felt a vibration on the rock, and then another. Scorpion scuttled its way under a flat stone on the top of a hill, and snuggled his exoskeletal body in the warm sand to

hide from the cold wet rain, bristling happily at the sound of thunder that could not reach him. And so it was for all the world of beasts, o Best Beloved, Meerkat dug holes, while the mongoose shivered under a honeysuckle bush, Dassie slipped into cracks and crevasses in the cliffs, and every creature did their best to make the outside less fearsome and less terrible.

It did not take long, as you can surely imagine, for all the very best hiding spots to be taken, and one little girl, much like yourself, o Best Beloved, was left out in the open. None of the animals welcomed her to share their spot, and so for centuries she wandered in search of a place on this planet just for herself, where there would be no rain and no sun, no wind and no dust. And then, one day, on the violent coasts of the African continent, above the waves that came crashing against the rocks, she heard a hollow sound from below. She clambered down the rocks and the slippery grass in the terribly cold and terribly wet rain while the wind howled and the thunder growled. There, she encountered something she had never before seen. The violence of the waves had carved deep into the rock-face and produced a dark and hollow space, where the sun could not reach, nor the rain nor the wind nor the dust. Cautiously, the little girl stepped forward as she stretched her neck into the darkness, to see if anyone had already claimed the spot, when suddenly she felt something terribly cold and terribly wet; a slimy drop of rain water landed on the back of her neck and crawled its way down her spine. It had trickled down the face of the cliff above. Without a moment's hesitation, she jumped across the drip line and into the darkness. At last she was inside.

Negotiations of the drip line

European architectural history knows its own fable: Marc-Antoine Laugier's primal hut, presented in his *Essai sur l'Architecture* (1753). It describes and illustrates a square plan with vertical tree trunk columns and beams supporting a leafy roof. This allegory, with its sparkling rivers, delightful forests and banks of green grass, presents us with a European nature, and a decidedly European 'savage'.¹⁸ The primal hut that Laugier constructs is brought into focus as an architectural beacon for its 'essential' composition of functional and structural elements, devoid of capricious additions. More than two hundred years later, I too was introduced to this story as a first-year bachelor's student. It is a story too easily told, and the sentiment of Laugier's myth and his protagonist who is 'in search of a place to rest,' is echoed in today's architectural practice, which invests great (material and mental) energy into the creation of spaces that are comfortable.¹⁹ Incredible technical development and material production is aimed at the near-total isolation of the interior from a hostile outdoors.

The politics of such an architecture is not far from the wall itself; in fact, these technical choices are swallowed by legislative procedures that dictate exactly to what extent this divide should shelter the human from sound, mice and rats, humidity, light, air, and so on.²⁰ The distinction between inside and outside emerges from this framing as a table of measurable quantities and materials that enforce a logic of technocratic division, rather than negotiation or experience. The distinction between two spaces is not a neutral or symmetrical act, if only because there is no neutral ground or symmetrical space in which to draw this distinction. Indeed, spaces are divided with the intention of 'creating' difference, and there is a hierarchy implicit in the division of space. The inside has privileges which the outside is not given, while they are perhaps better understood as one continuous space under differing degrees of control. The understanding that distinctions are drawn not merely for the sake of differentiation but for the sake of creating hierarchy is fundamental to the spatial practice and is echoed in all dialectic oppositions.

It is not the ascetic and structurally essential Greco-columnal hut in a French forest that serves as the zero-hour of architecture itself, but the drip line of a cave close to the southern tip of Africa, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet. While the presented creation story (How the Outside got In) provides us with an allegorical depiction of this cave, it is not without factual merit. The earliest evidential example we have today of an inhabited interior by *Homo sapiens* is 70 000 to 100 000 years old: the Blombos Cave of present-day South Africa.²¹ As an ongoing site of archaeological study, today this cave is mapped and plotted across three dimensions, and in this measure the interior of the cave is defined by the cave walls, and what is known as the drip line, a space created by falling rainwater that drips from the cliff face above and does not enter the cave. The drip line serves therefore as the primal example of an interior-exterior divide; it presents us with the inception of the architectural limit, and with it, the interior. It is, however, an interior that is ill-defined and delimited by a most diffuse and ephemeral boundary. Much like the architectural interior of my childhood home in South Africa, the drip line produces a normativity that is not based on its ability to divide, but rather on its porosity. The drip line proposes therefore a technical normativity of discomfort, one that permits the ability for things to go awry.²² Just because everything was fine yesterday does not mean that it will be tomorrow, or tonight. If one were to consider the architectural divide not as a strict dialectic opposition, but rather as a technical concretisation of the drip line, then it is because the limit is not static, and necessarily incomplete, that it is able to do what it does so brilliantly: enable the inside to be a form of negotiation with the outside.²³ Taking the drip line

as a model for engaging with the division between false interiors and exteriors might allow us not only to reimagine the dynamic between spaces, but also conceive of oppositional terms as things that are in a continuum with one another.

It was a brutally hot summer's eve in 2008, where lethargy and the cool of the night were your only respite from the heat. We sat in the lounge with the sliding door left ajar to permit a cooling breeze from the garden. At some point, a consistent and very loud hissing noise emanated from a dark corner of the lounge. 'Do you hear that?' I asked. We saw Brutus (the dog, not the Roman) sniffing under a low coffee table in the corner against the glass of the sliding door, where the noise was coming from. 'Brutus?' He turned his head over his shoulder and looked at us briefly with nervous eyes and then returned to his olfactory investigation. The hissing was loud and ominous, swelling and receding like waves against a jagged shoreline, filling the space of the lounge with a disconcerting energy. I got up to investigate, and looking over the back of Brutus' short black fur in this darkest corner I discerned the stripes and tight coil of a puff adder. Unbeknown to us, at some point in the evening, the puff adder had welcomed itself into our lounge, enjoying the soft warmth of the carpet under its skin, to shelter in the corner next to the couch where my brother was sitting. After taking Brutus out of the room, which calmed the snake, we donned hiking boots and double layers of jeans to begin the strange task of ushering this dangerously venomous snake gently out of the lounge and back into the night. By some mystical powers of common understanding between the puff adder and us, we managed to make the exit through the sliding door (opened widely in the meantime) seem more appealing than the crevice under the couch that my brother and mother now stood on, broom-wielding.

That night, before bed, my mother read D. H. Lawrence's poem, 'Snake', to me.²⁴

*A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.
...*

*And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.*

From that day on, my fear of cytotoxic venom and its entropic capacities dwelled on the floor of my own home, under

the bed, and in dark corners beneath desks and couches, not simply outside amid the fynbos, under rocks and in dark crevices of mountain passes.²⁵ No longer was the inside truly removed from the dangers of the mountain overlooking us. Rather, the lounge, my bedroom, the kitchen, drawers, bookshelves and corners of bathrooms were an extension, or simulation of the outside, whereby the presence of the elements and creatures informed a different form of living.²⁶ The limit of the door does not create a true 'dialectic opposition' between inside and outside, but rather creates a zone across which the encounters with the wilderness could be of the same type (rainwater, sand, snake, scorpion, rainspider...) but are of a different intensity to what one might find outside.²⁷ While the divide between the inside and the outside is a technical one, Gaston Bachelard illustrates that it is not a definitive one, 'for the door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open.'²⁸ Howling wind in the gaps of windows, the rain seeping through cracks of tiling, damp permeating through basement walls, mice navigating pipelines and crevices, and the gecko on the bathroom ceiling: these events occur because the inside is not as removed a space from the outside as one might assume from their abstract and oppositional definition. The physical divide is necessarily porous – and it seems pertinent that if one were to agree with Bachelard and consider the corner to be 'the germ of the room', then the snake within that corner consolidates the notion that this interior space only exists as a consequence of the outside.²⁹ It stands to reason that there was an outside before there ever was such a thing as a corner from which any room could emerge – and therefore the interior is not something that is removed from the outside, but is in fact born from it. In my childhood home, even if the doors and windows are closed, when it is cold outside, it is also cold inside; when it rains outside, it also rains inside; when it is dark outside, it is also (often) dark inside.³⁰ It is not because we welcomed these creatures into our house that they entered, so much as the house offered a form of respite from either the heat or the cold, the wind and the rain.³¹ In much the same way that we take shelter from the elements, so too does the wilderness. The question this poses then is: What difference, if any, exists between the inside and the outside, and if the divide between them is not total, what exactly does it regulate, if not snakes, temperature, rain or wind?

The inside is to be understood as an experience that is contingent on the outside, rather than a definitive space.³² In an architectural understanding of the generic interior that alienates it from an equally generic exterior, we have perhaps done away with the architectural interior's most vital relation. We have cut through literal space in order to win partitions of the outside, but have forgotten that our interior is necessarily a part of the outside. There is no pure

architectural interior space, only modulations of any particular exterior as negotiated by the drip line.

Of migrants and music

The assumption that there is a strict division between the natural environment and the constructed interiors we inhabit is the first slice in understanding culture as removed from the natural world of which it is in fact a product. If the drip line is to have a consequence on our understanding of the technical and physical differentiation between the inside and outside, it stands to reason that the emergent culture of these spaces is similarly defined by an incomplete boundary with its natural environment. Culture is not a separate entity to the natural environment outside of that culture, but culture and its natural environment form an entangled knot together, and as such our cultures are necessarily contingent upon their specific environments.

Modern thought is plagued by a foundational argument that operates on the dichotomy between culture and nature, subject and object, the division between a physical interior and exterior space architecturally is mirrored in the ontological dualism as presented by René Descartes.³³ While in his essay, 'Meditations on First Philosophy,' he clearly grapples with the difficulties posed by his own conclusion that the mind exists independently of the material body (and yet is bound to it), it is this division that has served all of the modern socio-political and natural sciences since.³⁴ The entanglement of culture with its natural environment has, since the advent of modern thought, been severed by a rigid framing that serves empirical analysis, effectively splitting the relations between the domains of natural and cultural sciences, physics and politics.³⁵ In creating a politics of citizens that can have no relation to the nonhumans produced by science, and a science of non-humans that can have no appeal to politics, Boyle and Hobbes had conveniently 'crossed out god'.³⁶ This poses problems for Descartes's argument, which in order to bridge the divide created between the substance of matter ('objects of pure mathematics') and the substance of the mind 'detached from the affairs of the senses', God is required as the preeminent creator of both mind, and matter.³⁷ The founding paradoxes of modern thought were born: we have at once created separations between the natural and cultural spheres (which requires a god in order to function), while in practice we consistently rely on the co-production of what Latour calls 'hybrids' between culture and nature (without God) to understand the world.³⁸ Once again, the division of the knot that culture and nature present is not merely for the sake of distinction, but so that culture can be framed as a privileged interior space, insulated from the brutality of a 'natural' world. In so doing, this division has also enabled culture to enact immense

brutality upon the natural world. 'I think, therefore I am' obscures the violence, subjugation, and erasures which our global cultures rely on to conquer the world, its resources and its people. Its extensibility is dependent on the definition of nature, which, as we will see, is made flexible by way of its categorisation as an exterior space, belonging to the outside.

Looking into the cavernous space of my violin has always left me with a strange sense of wonder. Within this resonating chamber, a yellowed label reads: H. Claudot, Luthier, Elève de Gand et Bernardel, Paris. The label is printed, except for two handwritten numbers in black ink: '7' in the date, '1897,' and the production number, '100.' As a child, Paris was to me a place that existed only in my imagination and on TV, and yet, at the age of twelve I was this hundred-year-old French violin's new custodian. It was an honour and a burden – one which could not be left unattended, and therefore had to be carried with me everywhere in the South African heat and Capetonian winter downpours. Those same climatic forces under which my house's tin roof would creak and groan, also shifted the wooden body of my violin, causing it to go out of tune.

I no longer play the violin, but today, ten years after my last violin lesson, I can still smell Isabel Arzul's perfume in the ominous A5 notebook that critiques my lacklustre playing during our Friday afternoons together. The notebook in question contains an array of musical scales to be practised, technical advice regarding passages of Antonín Dvořák, and tokens of wisdom and pleas of desperation: 'Perfection is what you want', and 'I want a performance please.' All written in her idiosyncratic red ball-point cursive script. I learned much from Isabel Arzul, and in her teaching, demanding as it was, metaphor was often used to great effect: my bow-arm wrist needed to be wobbly jelly, counterpointed by the necessity for my left hand to be Table Mountain, which loomed over us through the sash windows of her lofted studio, strong and unwavering.³⁹ The South African environment was not merely a backdrop to the performance of études and arias, which demanded a great deal of vibrato and the occasional use of my mano sinistra to play pizzicato. Instead, I was invited to consider my left hand to be Table Mountain; and in a certain sense by doing so, owing to Table Mountain and its imposing rigidity, I was able to effectively play the violin, and especially play it in tune.

After my sixth practical violin exam with UNISA, having played rather dismally (I did not 'deliver the goods' as Arzul pleaded on the 2nd of June 2014), I went with my mother to walk along Sea Point Promenade.⁴⁰ An immense sense of relief of the exam being over, and guilt at not having played better or practised more always followed the stress

of these exams, and walking beside crashing waves in the crisp sea-breeze and sunlight felt appropriate. It was on this walk that I first saw a Eurasian oystercatcher. It was a rare sighting.⁴¹ We decided that it must have been a good omen to see that bird, and indeed I did pass my violin exam that day. The Eurasian oystercatcher was to me then as foreign as my violin and much of the music I played.

Music, as a cultural product, is dependent on the instruments we use to perform, objects that are manufactured from raw materials of the natural environment. The violin is a technical object with exacting specifications that are born of the 'natural' context in which the violin was conceived, and not all violins are created equal.⁴² In the sheltered valleys of Alpine forests such as the *Val de Fiemme*, spruce trees grow slowly and in straight, vertical lines. The slow, summer growth is counterpointed by winter's near-dormancy, producing rings of alternating wood density at consistent and close spacing within the tree's trunk. These seasonal shifts, in turn, produce a structure of board that facilitates the resonance of vibrations produced in the string of a crafted instrument. The qualities of density, strength, and consistency that spruce trees possess are all but demanded for the instrument's ability to perform, and we want a performance.⁴³ But before the luthier has so much as laid their hands on a piece of wood, the tonal qualities of a violin are constrained and determined by the seasons and growth of the specific tree felled.

Spruce, however, is not a native species to South Africa, let alone any country in the southern hemisphere. The wood of a spruce tree is of an entirely different physical construction to the yellowwood and sapele trees that material scientist Martina Meincken used in 2020 to produce the first 'African violin'.⁴⁴ Indigenous to the African climate, yellowwood (*Podocarpus latifolius*) is denser, so it resonates with different harmonics that generate darker tonal qualities that are more powerful in lower tonal ranges.⁴⁵ The increased physical density means it is slightly heavier, and not insignificantly in my view, this means the musician of the African violin needs to be stronger in order to play the same music. That said, it will not be the same music – the 'same' note will sound different compared to a spruce instrument, and so while the European landscape produces a European instrument, one that is used to score European concertos, one cannot help but wonder what music the likes of Sibelius might have composed, if the violin of his time was made of sapele and yellowwood, instead of spruce and maple. The embodiment of the music, the physicality of the instrument and the room it is in are not coincidental, nor do they result from a purely cultural pursuit detached from a physical

environment. Especially when one considers it is those same climatic forces that penetrate our architectural interiors, which influence the tuning of an instrument by impacting its material condition.

The Eurasian oystercatcher I saw after my violin exam all those years ago is a migrant in South Africa, who I now regularly encounter each spring, as a migrant myself in the Netherlands. While nature and culture are often understood as distinct and opposing entities, the two cannot be untied from one another. This is not to say there is no difference. A spruce tree is indeed a distinct entity to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor; however, there can be no violin, let alone a concerto as we know it without the spruce tree. As Deleuze, in his own evaluation of Descartes states, 'two things can be thought as being really distinct without being separable, no matter how little they may have requisites in common'.⁴⁶ The binaries of mind/body, subject/object, culture/nature, collapse upon themselves to produce an embodied topography: our environment inhabits us as much as we inhabit it, and our cultural products are irrefutably the result of this relation. I must confess I still do not fully understand what Isabel Arzul meant when she wrote to 'think Italian'... but perhaps it wasn't for the sake of understanding that she wrote it. These relational ontologies that constitute a musical performance cannot be so easily done away with or untied. The sheet music is Italian, the violin is French, and the landscape South African; together we played music.

New Transvaal stories

For the establishment of Cape Town as a refreshment station for VOC ships heading east, the Dutch settlers constructed canals in the likeness of their familiar *grachten* to provide water to the town, and gave these canals the same names as those they emulated in the Netherlands.⁴⁷ The colonial practice of naming, mapping and restructuring foreign space is a way of coding and territorialising an other world in the likeness of an originary space.⁴⁸ Land that is conquered or claimed is no longer 'foreign', but an extension of the motherland; subjects that are educated in the ways of culture of the colonising entity are no longer savage features of an untamed landscape, but considered subjects of the crown, and so on – the division between two cultures is owing to the distinction between culture and nature, and the foreign space with its people are taken as an exterior condition, in contrast to the interior culture. This distinction serves as a means to enact a hierarchical dynamic so as to enable the ensuing brutality of inducing a foreign territory and its people into one's own socio-political framework. The understanding of 'others' as distinct entities from oneself relies on a misshapen division between the inside and the outside, and yet it is clear

that the shape one culture takes is not wholly removable from those cultures it encounters.

In the words of Achille Mbembe, 'colonial terror constantly intertwines with colonially generated fantasies of wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real'.⁴⁹ The act of naming is a tool for extending the semantic and cultural realm of one's own space, an imagined reality imposed upon a physical territory.⁵⁰ In their attempt to expand the Dutch space over Africa, effectively consolidating it as a space within the territory of the Netherlands, the land was both physically and semiotically reorganised, that is, given new names that perpetuated a memory of a Dutch cultural history – an effect of the real as a product of Dutch fantasy. The grachten of Cape Town were expected to do much the same job as they carried out in the Netherlands, but the nature of the southern tip of Africa is different from the water-logged horizon that constitutes the Dutch natural environment. As a consequence, the Dutch settlers in the Cape endured a continuous water shortage, and the use of these canals as a sewerage system rendered the town a rather miserable affair. It was clear that alternative solutions were necessary to combat the South African environment, and in the decades after the British assumed control of the Cape in 1806 the canals were covered over in favour of dams and reservoirs on Table Mountain. In the meantime, Dutch settlers who had remained after their VOC contracts ended (dubbed 'free burghers') were then under the jurisdiction of the British. In 1836 the Boers (distinct from the more highly educated and wealthy 'Cape Dutch') embarked on a journey into the South African interior to form an independent state: the Transvaal, free from colonial rule of both the British and the Dutch.⁵¹ The Transvaal was the territory beyond (trans) the Vaalrivier; an area that has, since the fall of Apartheid in 1994, been redrawn and renamed such that the territories north of the Vaal river now include the provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

Today, I enter the Transvaal by crossing six lanes of traffic that flow along Zijpendaalsweg. The Transvaal is small, a tightly clustered neighbourhood with a few intersecting streets abutting a large park. This is not the Transvaal of Southern Africa, but a neighbourhood in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Cronjéstraat leads to an intersection with Delareystraat. The streets meet each other, jauntily, and the resulting space of this intersection is called Bothaplein, a public square and also the name of a bus stop. Delareystraat is lined with weeping willows and has a stream (St. Jansbeek) cutting through the middle of it lengthwise. At the end of the street is a four-metre tall sculpture of three sunflowers that seem to have reached the end of their prime, bowing to the south against a slope

*of unkempt brambles and vines. One street sign is mounted on a post and reads Delareijstraat, and just behind it, a few metres higher on the façade of a building from 1910, is another sign, spelled Delareystraat. A Eurasian blue jay flutters onto the corner of the bricked building's roof, above the sign, and the only thing I can think of are the lyrics to Bok van Blerk's 2006 Afrikaans pop-hit that sparked a certain controversy:*⁵²

*De La Rey, De La Rey,
Sal jy die Boere kom lei?
De La Rey, De La Rey.*

*A few weeks later, I enter the Transvaal by stepping out of tram number 12 and into the blistering cold of Paul Krugerplein; this is the Transvaal of The Hague. An older woman steps out with me, frail and slow-moving. Small ice crystals are falling and a white plastic packet rustles along the brick floor past my legs and the decorated mosaic orbs in the public square. The square is bordered by small grocers and places selling kebab and Indian wedding attire. I walk down Paul Krugerlaan and tick off the various names of Boer statesmen and generals; like a river with tributaries I pass by Reitz, Kock, Pretorius, Botha, Cronje and Joubert until doubling back and walking along De La Reyweg, this time honoured with a central corridor of grass and benches, with various trees; all of which in the winter have lost their leaves. A man beside me pulls out a handkerchief, and the only connection I can fathom is to recount a story of Herman Charles Bosman, 'Makapan's Caves', in which the protagonist, Oom Schalk Lourens, under the charge of Paul Kruger and Piet Potgieter storms the deep and convoluted caves of the Krantz that had been besieged for weeks to exterminate the remaining indigenous people.*⁵³

All over, through the rocks and bushes, I could see black openings in the krantz that led right into the deep parts of the earth ... and all the time there was that stench of decaying bodies ... We tied handkerchiefs round the lower part of our face, but that did not help. Also, since we were not Englishmen, many of us had no handkerchiefs.

As with the grachten of Cape Town, the act of mapping and naming colonial territories places them within a 'European geopolitical frame of reference ... which sees such territory as fundamentally terra nullius – unpeopled and therefore open to possession and settlement'.⁵⁴ This is not to say that colonisers were unaware of indigenous populations, but rather, owing to what Mbembe recognises as the necessity for sovereignty to 'relegate the colonised into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood', the state

of political exception that the colonial enterprise offers meant that the colonised could be considered not as people, but part of a landscape that is therefore unpopulated.⁵⁵ By positioning the other within the category of nature, they fall 'outside' of the privileged space that constitutes the 'inside' of a given culture, and they are in turn treated as an object. The colony exists as a process of interiorisation of 'other' worlds to create a contiguous socio-political space; an extension of the 'one world world' that is necessarily homogeneous – consistency across colonial territory and colonial homeland affords the myth of expansion, and the territorial 'inside' becomes larger as the diverse and incomprehensible exterior is subsumed and reduced. In short, the 'infinite diversity' of the world is rejected in favour of the perpetuation of sameness; it is the 'crisis of a particular world or set of worldmaking practices, the world that we usually refer to as the dominant form of Euromodernity.'⁵⁶

It is seldom, therefore, that non-Eurocentric names of colonial territories make their way back to the land of the coloniser – there is no Sophiatown or Soweto, Imizamo Yethu, or Shaka street in the Netherlands. These names belong to worlds beyond the reach of a European geopolitical (colonial) framework, which remains dependent on a process of othering to constitute its own identity.⁵⁷ So why would the Netherlands name their new neighbourhood developments in some of its largest cities such as Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague, and Arnhem, after the Transvaal? For indeed, the Transvaal has left South Africa and now finds a home in the quaint shopping streets and residential areas in the Netherlands. The turn of the twentieth century brought with it the Second Anglo-Boer War, which saw the loss of the Orange Free State and South African Republic (Transvaal) to British dominion. As a consequence, the Dutch claim to their colonial pride was tarnished by a European competitor. As is written on the Arnhem Municipal website regarding street names, 'The Netherlands felt a strong affinity with the suffering of the Boers, *because they were descendants of the Cape Colony*.'⁵⁸ The Dutch Afrikaanderwijken and Transvaalkwartiers present a form of retroactive extension of territory – laying claim to colonial land beyond reach, both in space and time. The Transvaal was in Africa first, but it is given the status of constituting a part of the Dutch socio-political space by being named in the Dutch territory. The pride in the Boers and its generals is not out of simple admiration, but rather owing to a shared heritage. The conquests of the Boers is regarded in turn as the conquest of the Dutch, and with it the myths and valiant efforts of the Afrikaans generals become the result of an inherited Dutch courage in the face of a British enemy – it all has remarkably little to do with Africa and its people. The irony of this is the highly tenuous relation between the two physical spaces; there are no blue jays or weeping willows,

grachten or gazelle bicycles in the old Transvaal of South Africa, just as the Netherlands has no mine dumps, no springbok, and no caves filled with dead black bodies.

As Nadine Gordimer describes in her essay, 'The Witwatersrand: A Time and Tailings', what was considered 'the blankness of the place on earth where they found themselves' received names, 'simple designations, characterless as an X in place of a signature, identifying emptiness by its few natural features, a spring, a stream, a rise in the ground'.⁵⁹ And so an area five times the size of the Netherlands gained the name that refers to the crossing of a river that informs its territory – this name carries the weight of historical record, and in its conception, the territorial implications of that name are projected into all future memories of struggle, warfare and victory. The name alone conjures forth the British concentration camps, Napoleon's seizure of the Netherlands, the Dutch extermination of indigenous peoples, and ultimately the ego of European nations in competition over land beyond their reach.

Just as there is no longer any physical *gracht* in Cape Town; there is no *Vaalrivier* in the Netherlands, and yet the names of each persist in the space of the other. It is very much the case that the 'question of names has less to do with the *geography* of the place than it has to do with the *history* of those who have chosen, who use, and who recognize the names.'⁶⁰ Importantly, these names underpin histories (and therefore futures) of places as entities that are not in opposition to each other, but very much entwined. They function as forms of remembrance, but also of ownership, and to remember a particular past by giving it a name is to produce a future in its likeness. These multiple worlds are therefore never in a state of completion, but rather under continual construction in the past, present and future. It is worth questioning, then, the names we choose for the futures we intend to construct. For if we hope to live in a world that does not rely on false dichotomies that subjugate people and places to the violence of an imagined 'outside', we must recognise that our understanding of the inside is not as far removed from that which we seek to destroy, and in slicing those differences apart we invariably lose the ability to reunite what has been lost for the sake of material gain.

Not So

A snake in the lounge, a French violin, and streets in the Netherlands named after the Voortrekkers in colonial Southern Africa: disparate tales that are entangled in my own experience. It is one of the strange wonders of the world that stories such as these are not necessarily coherent, and yet they are not contrary to one another. It is in the bringing together of these alternate worlds and the recognition of their immense diversity that some semblance

of reality might be discernible – there is indeed no *just so* story. From each story presented here, one could come to an independent, resounding conclusion: the inside as we understand it exists only in relation to a particular outside; culture is necessarily a product of the landscape; and the production of worlds is dependent on the semantic and socio-political significance of the name ascribed. It would seem however, that doing so might fall precisely into the trap this essay sets out to problematise. This is because, while each of these conclusions might be true, given the context in which they are produced – that is, within the locus of my experience, and in discussion with the presented theoretical discourse – they cannot be said to be the case for all interiors, cultures, or place names. To provide a single sentence that neatly delivers their entire significance would be problematic, for the issue of the drip line must be taken up in its entirety, not for the sake of claiming any truth. Rather, it has been my intention that these critical memoirs demonstrate an alternative method for dealing with the conflict that theory encounters with the lived experience; especially with a life lived outside of the European territory. Characters, places and artefacts come together in such a way that their relation is fraught with much explanation that the world does not offer readily. However, it is a grave error to perpetuate the frame of logic that delivers the same divisions and narratives repeatedly, explaining away the diversity of worlds in favour of one that isolates and divides characters, places and artefacts. Rather we ought to seek an understanding of the vital relation between worlds; re-membering the frayed ends of rope that constitute the Gordian Knot. Any hope of a truly decolonial and radically open future that is neither anti-European nor calling for some form of indigenous primitivism, depends upon a theoretical ground that is shared rather than divided to be subsumed.

It is because the general is rarely confronted with the actual and the specific that critical theory has a tendency to lack critique: the inside and outside are considered in abstract terms; the landscape and the culture are not met with the consequences of asking ‘Which landscape?’ and ‘What Culture?’ and the problems of the self and the other are not targeted at a particular self. By making use of embodied experience and personal memory, the tools that theory provides are better able to address the conditions of a life lived, rather than the hypothetical and abstract ‘lives’ of a generic and disembodied reader. In order to break away from the tradition of western critical theory and dismantle some of the ‘abyssal lines’ that constitute the demarcations of modern thought, it is necessary to introduce new myths grounded in the tangible realities of the worlds beyond the Western Canon.⁶¹ To break away from the possessive interiorisation that plagues modern

thought, we must turn away from Laugier’s hut, which finds itself nowhere but in the abstract space of a page, to the drip line of the Blombos Cave in South Africa. The drip line proposes a form of differentiation without opposition, providing an ability to reframe and retie the Gordian knots of our relations to each other, the natural environment and to the physical outside. For indeed, the re-membrance of worlds torn apart is contingent on a door left half-open, a porous divide that enables interaction between worlds, rather than their strict division.

Given this essay’s autobiographical nature, these stories are entrenched in a cultural, political and natural context so vast and complex, that it exceeds my scope to explain or analyse it here. The context is there, and it weighs heavily, but it has not been my intention to explicate or otherwise ‘frame’ it. Rather, through the exploration of hyperlocal and personal experience these stories reveal the intricacies of relation and entanglements in the multiple worlds that constitute Africa. There are, admittedly, many more worlds than can or have been addressed here. When one recognises the infinite diversity of our planet and the ‘necessarily regional character of our concepts’ that are a result of direct and embodied experience, it seems to me that there is no choice but to question those comforting abstract universalisms or ‘just so stories’, and the demarcations that enclose and divide our world.⁶²

As my mother read to me in bed, Dickens (the cat, not the author) slept at my feet, and Brutus trembled beneath my desk, afraid of the thunder outside. The rain hammered deafeningly on our tin roof and a leak would be dripping into a bucket in the corridor just outside my bedroom. It was cold, and getting into icy sheets that slowly warm up until you, in the morning, no longer want to leave them was routine in the winter, and has become a point of nostalgia for me now.⁶³ Kipling’s tall tales made me wonder as a child, just how exactly did all of these things come to be the way that they are – the rain dripping through the roof, the wind rattling on my window and the cold in the sheets; or the scorpion in the kitchen the other day, or the racket birds make when there’s a snake nearby; and, what if something terrible happens? My mother would tolerate my late-night questioning with great patience, though fatigue would eventually win her over. As she drifted off, but somehow continued to answer my questions, the answers would slide into strange worlds, half-based in dreams and half in response to my questions.

These are the *Not So Stories*, ones that don’t align with expectation or convention, don’t quite answer the question asked, and consequently do not offer much comfort. As Édouard Glissant explains, ‘to understand these [relations]

truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.⁶⁴ The division between the inside and outside cannot exist simply as a list of measurable quantities but can only be understood through intentional experience. This presents what Glissant calls for as a non-reductive and empathetic approach to the relations of a common-place. Indeed, it is in the stories told otherwise, ones told 'not so', that new understandings and relationalities can be forged, as Arturo Escobar elaborates: 'to think new thoughts, by implication, requires to move out of the epistemic space of Western social theory and into the epistemic configurations associated with the multiple relational ontologies of worlds in struggle.'⁶⁵ Doing so enables our understanding of experience to escape prescription or predetermined meaning and offers in its place a contingent reality that is founded on embodied and relational ontologies.⁶⁶ The work of addressing the *Just So Stories* is important for any hope of creating a future that is different from the prescriptive past. This is to be done by living attentively, and recounting all the worlds that are the result of stories told *not so*.

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Notes

1. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.
2. Enrique Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)', *boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1993): 66.
3. Daniel Karlin, 'How the stories got their name: Kipling and the origins of the "Just-So" stories', *Oxford University Press* blog, 23 December 2015, <https://blog.oup.com/2015/12/kiplingstories-names/>.
4. As Arturo Escobar defines it, using John Law's formulation of a crisis of Euro-modernity: 'that is, a world allegedly made up of a single Word, and that has arrogated for itself the right to be "the" world, subjecting all other worlds to its own terms or, worse, to non-existence.' Escobar, 'Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South', *Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana* 11, no. 1 (January-April 2016): 15, <https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102e>.
5. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 3–5.
6. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Epistemologies of the South and The Future', *From The European South: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities* 1 (2016): 17–29, 20.
7. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 3 (2012): 505–24.
8. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Richard Kennington, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Indianapolis: Focus Publishing/Hackett, 2012), 33.
9. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and The Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99, 584.
10. Mark Wrathall, 'Martin Heidegger', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 31 January 2025, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/#Dase>.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).
12. Walter D. Mignolo, 'Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of decoloniality', *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 449–514.
13. Escobar, 'Thinking Feeling', 13.
14. Lesley Green, *Rock, Water, Life: Ecology and Humanities for a Decolonial South Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 17.
15. Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Peter Stallybrass, 'Worn Worlds', in *The Textile Reader*, ed. Jessica Hemmings (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Cvetkovich refers to the varied works and writing practices of Walter Benjamin, Michael Taussig, Nadia Serematis and Avery Gordon for their ability to appreciate the magic and mystery that sit alongside the banal, which can turn the ordinary into a scene of surprise – she

- emphasises however, that a simple account of everyday experience is insufficient. Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 11.
16. Édouard Glissant, 'For Opacity' in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 189–95.
 17. This section sets the scene for the memoir fragments to follow. It echoes the stylistic devices of Rudyard Kipling's bed-time fables, the *Just So Stories*, to generate a new and alternative allegory for the origin of the inside. Kipling's tales are all addressed to his 'Best Beloved' daughter, for whom they were written.
 18. Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, trans. Wolfgang Herrmann and Anni Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessy & Ingalls, 1977), 11.
 19. *Ibid.*, 12, 13.
 20. I refer here to the *Bouwbesluit 2012* of the Netherlands, which stipulates building codes that concern (among other topics such as sustainability and safety) the topic of 'health'.
 21. Magnus M. Haaland, Christopher E. Miller, Ole F. Unhammera, Jerome P. Reynarde, Karen L. van Niekerk, Bertrand Ligouisg, Susan M. Mentzer and Christopher S. Henshilwood, 'Geoarchaeological investigation of occupation deposits in Blombos Cave in South Africa indicate changes in site use and settlement dynamics in the southern Cape during MIS 5b-4', *Quaternary Research* 100 (2021): 170–223, <https://doi.org/10.1017/qua.2020.75>.
 22. Yuk Hui, 'Notes on Technical Normativity', in *Technological Accidents*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Sjoerd Van Tuinen (Rotterdam: V2, 2023), 154–67. Please note, it is not my intention to romanticise dysfunction or discomfort, nor present it as an ideal.
 23. Stavros Kousoulas, 'In/Side/Out', in *Noetics Without a Mind*, ed. Stavros Kousoulas, Andrej Radman and Heidi Sohn (Delft: TU Delft Open, 2024), 12.
 24. D.H. Lawrence, 'Snake', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Vivian De Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (New York: Penguin, 1993), 349–51. Please note, this is an excerpt of the first and final stanzas of a considerably longer poem.
 25. Different snakes hold different kinds of venom. That of the puff adder is cytotoxic, in the worst cases causing necrosis, or the decomposition of living material.
 26. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations and Simulacra*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 85–92.
 27. I have never seen a puff adder outside. My second and only other encounter with a puff adder was within a pool-pump shelter. My own experience would suggest that remaining inside increases the chances of encountering a puff adder.
 28. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, 2014), 237, 238.
 29. *Ibid.*, 155.
 30. Most houses remain uninsulated, and with single glazing. The roof of our house was prone to many leaks through its tin roof.
 - And regarding darkness, it is admittedly not always the case – however power outages were not uncommon growing up, and today are if anything more regular; centrally regulated and scheduled per neighbourhood under the term 'load shedding'.
 31. With Karbonkelberg just behind our house, the garden and with it the house was very much alive with the movements of the local fauna. Animals that have entered my home (or at least the stoep) include but are not limited to: Cape legless skinks, Cape cobra, scorpions, rain spiders, geckos and lizards, banded orb-weaver spiders, sunbirds, guinea fowl, fieldmice, doves, Cape white-eyes and bulbuls, thrushes and rock pigeons.
 32. Kousoulas, 'In/Side/Out', 15.
 33. René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy', in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane (Cambridge: University Press, 1911); Green, *Rock, Water, Life*, 39, 40.
 34. 'And certainly, considering the ideas of all these qualities which presented themselves to my mind, and which alone I perceived properly or immediately, it was not without reason that I believed myself to perceive objects quite different from my thought, to wit, bodies from which those ideas proceeded; for I found by experience that these ideas presented themselves to me without my consent being requisite, so that I could not perceive any object, however desirous I might be, unless it were present to the organs of sense; and it was not in my power not to perceive it, when it was present.' Descartes, 'Meditations', 19–22.
 35. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 3.
 36. *Ibid.*, 28.
 37. Descartes, 'Meditations', 25, 2.
 38. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 32.
 39. The left hand, or *mano sinistra*, is responsible for applying pressure to the strings along a fretless neck of the violin. The operation requires correct positioning first of the arm, the rotation of the wrist, and in turn the fingers. While the distance between individual tones a-b, e-f, b-c, f-g is the same across the strings, the strings are at increasing distances from the hand, meaning that each string requires different movements of the hand's muscles, wrist, or arm to play the correct note. Suffice to say it is very difficult to play the violin in tune; and ensuring that you have a rigid and ready hand as a controlled entity is necessary in order to play the same notes consistently in tune.
 40. The University of South Africa (UNISA) is an open distance learning institution that organises remote exams.
 41. This bird is not native to Southern Africa and commonly migrates between Europe and Asia. The term 'vagrant' is used to denote a bird that is off-course from its regular migratory route. Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström, *Collins Bird Guide: The Most Complete Guide to The Birds of Britain and Europe*, trans. David Christie and Lars Svensson (Dublin: Harper Collins, 2022).
 42. See Gilbert Simondon's *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* for an elaboration on the relation between technology

- and its objects with regard to cultural production. Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogrove (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017 [1958]).
43. Federico Formica, 'For Italy's Musical Woods, Threats From Without and Within,' *Atlas Obscura*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/val-di-iemme-resonance-wood>.
 44. Martina Meincken, Gerhard Roux and Thomas Niesler, 'An African Violin: The feasibility of using indigenous wood from Southern Africa as tonewood', *South African Journal of Science* 117, no. 11–12 (November 2021): 1–8.
 45. Ibid, 5,6.
 46. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and The Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 [1992]), 63.
 47. Helen Swingler, 'Grachte', pumps and the first hydroelectric station – how water shaped the city', *UCT News*, 3 February 2023, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/news/audio/-article/202302-03-grachte-pumps-and-the-irst-hydroelectric-station-how-water-shaped-the-city>; Green, *Rock, Water, Life*, 26–59.
 48. Beth Williamson, 'Historical geographies of place naming: Colonial practices and beyond', *Geography Compass* 17, no. 5 (23 March 2023), e12687.
 49. Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, 25.
 50. While the act of naming seems at first glance to be inconsequential for the material world, De Landa contends this quite rightfully in his lecture *A Materialist Theory of Language*. Manuel DeLanda, 'A Materialist Theory of Language', European Graduate School Video Lectures, 12 November 2011, 1 h 13 min., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAHaXe3BRe0>.
 51. Condensing this history into a 200-word paragraph is greatly reductive of the intricacies and complex relations; not all of Dutch descent considered themselves Boers, not all Boers were trekboers, and not all *voortrekkers* were of Dutch descent. Additionally, those who did venture out, the *voortrekkers*, established several self-governing states, not one. Among these was the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek (informally referred to as the Transvaal), the Orange Free State, the Republic of Swellendam (who revolted against Dutch rule, but utilised the Dutch flag), the Republic of Graaff-Reinet, Utrecht Republic, and more. Not all were established at the same time or for the same reason. They did all share in common a European heritage, if not affiliation, and all carried out a colonial practice of land claim in order to establish themselves. Finally, all of these peoples longed for a territory to call their own, independent of European governance.
 52. Chris McGreal, 'Afrikaans singer stirs up controversy with war song', *The Guardian*, 26 February 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/26/music.southafrica>.
 53. Herman Charles Bosman, 'Makapan's Caves', in *The Complete Oom Schalk Lourens Stories*, ed. Craig MacKenzie (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2006), 9, 10.
 54. Williamson, 'Historical geographies of place naming', 6.
 55. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', 14, 15, 26. This logic is dependent on the belief that landscape and culture are distinct entities. Mbembe elaborates on the distinction between subject and object by making use of a Hegelian understanding of the living spirit, one that upholds death – effectively negating the nature of one's body in order to birth the subject. In turn, the act of killing and determining who dies becomes a form of reducing another body to the level of objecthood. The hierarchy is implicit in the distinction between subject and object, and if one recognises the folly of this division the hierarchy also collapses.
 56. Tsing, 'On Nonscalability', 505–24.
 57. Escobar, 'Thinking Feeling', 15.
 58. 'Verklaring Arnhemse Straatnamen', my translation and emphasis, <https://arnhem.maps.arcgis.com/apps/insant/sidebar/index.html?appid=fefd0c26eb764b3c85082b5b1376c92>. The original text reads: *Nederland voelde een sterke verwantschap met de strijd van de Boeren, omdat zij afstammelingen waren van Nederlandse bewoners van de Kaapkolonie*.
 59. Nadine Gordimer, 'The Witwatersrand: A Time and Tailings', in *On the Mines* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2012), 19.
 60. Carrol Clarkson, 'Remains of the Name', in *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism*, ed. Attie de Lange, Gail Fincham, Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 140, original emphasis.
 61. Sousa Santos, 'Epistemologies of the South and The Future', 20.
 62. Ibid., 20; Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.
 63. The significance of nostalgia for this essay is perhaps self-evident, but I must be clear that my intention is not to look back with longing, nor to generate sympathy for a strange upbringing; rather, in keeping with Svetlana Boym's understanding of nostalgia, I intend to use these memoirs as tools for critical inquiry towards an unprescribed future. As Boym describes it, nostalgia is 'not always for the ancient regime or fallen empire but also for the unrealised dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete ... for unrealised possibilities, unpredictable turns and crossroads.' Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.
 64. Glissant 'For Opacity', 190.
 65. Escobar, 'Thinking Feeling', 16.
 66. It is therefore also owing to these stories' disparate nature that they gain their strength. As Ursula Le Guin lays out in her carrier bag theory of fiction, there is indeed a problem with the archetypal understanding of a narrative, one in which 'the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hit[s] its mark (which drops dead).' It is the superfluous and unexpected contained within the carrier bag that enables new ideas and conceptions of the world to be produced. Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory Of Fiction', in *Dancing at the End of the World* (London: Ignota Books, 1986).

Biography

Christopher Clarkson is a South African researcher and design practitioner based in the Netherlands. In 2024, Clarkson founded his research practice, Blackletter, through which he develops projects that bring together text, photography and cartography to challenge abstract representations of space with an understanding of situated experience. He received his master's degree in architecture, cum laude, from Delft University of Technology in 2024. Since then, he has taught at TU Delft, Willem De Kooning Academie, and the Amsterdam Academy of Architecture. His work has been published as part of *Archined's* series, 'Persistence of Questioning', and in Yale's architectural journal, *Perspecta*, in the volume titled 'Not Found'. Clarkson has served as an editor-in-chief of the student-run journals *Pantheon//* and *Bnieuws* (Faculty of Architecture and Built Environment, TU Delft).