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## 'Reterritorialising' the land: *Agaat* and cartography

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In this article, I look at the ways in which Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* re-orders the ideas of stewardship and land ownership in the South African *plaasroman* by invoking notions of cartography. I argue that cartography is particularly important for postcolonial theory because writers may project spaces other than, or position themselves in the spaces between, those endorsed by dominant cultures. This is particularly significant for feminism. I argue that the story of mapmaking is important both in Jakkie's frame narrative and in the central narrative dominated by Milla de Wet and her servant Agaat. Together the female protagonists' participation in mapmaking and their use of the alphabet chart through which Milla originally taught Agaat language enables them to escape phallogocentrism. This process of liberation climaxes in their joint involvement in Agaat's embroidery. By embedding Milla's and Agaat's stories in the story of maps, van Niekerk brings about 'a new relationship to the land, to other people and to the tradition of Afrikaans literature' (Gerrit Olivier, "The Dertigers and the *Plaasroman*: Two Brief Perspectives on Afrikaans Literature"). **Keywords:** *Agaat* (Marlene van Niekerk), cartography, feminism, *plaasroman*.

#### Introduction: Why cartography?

In this article I look at the ways in which Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* re-orders the ideas of stewardship<sup>1</sup> and land ownership in the South African *plaasroman* by invoking notions of cartography. Long associated with surveillance and control, cartography has recently come to take on new significance for postcolonial theory, since writers may project spaces other than, or position themselves in the spaces between, those endorsed by dominant cultures. Graham Huggan (407) writes: "The prevalence of the map topos [...] and the frequency of its ironic or parodic usage [...] suggests a link between a de/reconstructive reading of maps and a revisioning of the history of European colonialism."

The story of the relationship between Kamilla de Wet, owner of the farm Grootmoedersdrift in the Overberg and her servant Agaat demonstrates this de/reconstructive reading of maps both in the novel's frame narrative and in its central narrative. I will argue that this story of collaboration in mapmaking is essential to both women's escaping from the constraints of a patriarchal culture. Huggan points out cartography's importance for feminism:<sup>2</sup> "a feminist cartography [...] dissociates itself from the 'over-signifying' spaces of representation" (409). Instead, "it produces an alternative

kind of map characterized not by the containment or regimentation of space but by a series of centrifugal displacements" (409).

The relationship between Milla and Agaat in this novel may be read in terms of such "centrifugal displacements". These work on both cultural and narratological levels. As readers we are limited to Milla's narrative, since she tells the story. But this narrative is problematized by the fact that, incapacitated by motor neuron disease, she is unable to communicate with Agaat except through eye-contact. It takes 400 pages of her narrative before she succeeds in achieving her objective of getting Agaat to bring her the maps she yearns to see. Milla's story is further problematized for the reader because it is skewed by what French feminists have called the discourses of phallogocentrism.<sup>3</sup> Her narrative based on her diaries is both authoritarian and incomplete. We first meet Agaat as the fully adult helper on whom Milla is totally dependent, and remains dependent throughout. But the stories of Agaat's adoption and her childhood, centrally her acquisition of language, are only told towards the end of the novel. Why is this? Could the asymmetries of Milla's storytelling be explained by her entrapment in a patriarchal way of thinking? I will argue that *Agaat* is centrally preoccupied with maps and the cognitive results of mapmaking, and that this mapmaking is a key to both protagonists' development of a language free of phallogocentrism. Milla learns to see the world differently because of maps, centrally the 'maps' of Agaat's embroidery. And Agaat, whose story is omitted from Milla's diaries, begins to tell her own story when the two women interpret maps together.

The story of maps starts in Jakkie de Wet's frame narrative in the Prologue and continues, in the central narrative, in Milla's frustrated and anguished efforts to get Agaat to bring her the maps. Once Agaat finally brings the maps, both protagonists become involved in an exploration which allows them to create a new language. Their need however to create a semiotic space outside patriarchy is complicated by their embattled and ambivalent relationship to each other, and by Agaat's skill in manipulating the discourses she has been taught. These she quotes verbatim in order to escape having to answer Milla's questions directly. But this complex imbrication of language with subjectivity in the protagonists' mapmaking should not surprise us. Maps, postcolonial theory tells us, must not be understood in naively realistic terms. What is important is less their relation to a reality outside a perceiver than their reflection of that person's experience. Simon Ryan writes:

The rejection of the reflectionist or mimetic model of cartography renders irrelevant the question of whether certain maps are accurate. Instead of reinscribing the old dialectic of subject/object in empiricist terms it is more useful to see mapping as temporarily embedded and transformative of previous discourses, rather than as an innocent inscription started afresh on blank paper. A critical move of this nature avoids comparing maps to a pre-existing normative "real", but instead interrogates the mimetic assumptions they embody (Ryan 116).

Maps, then, far from being unproblematic representations of a pre-existing reality, reflect the historical fears and needs of a community. Paul Carter comments on maps' rhetorical rather than empirical orientation. He argues that they embody 'the traveller's directional and territorial ambitions: [the] desire to possess [...] as a preliminary to going on' (Carter 406).

Writing about Australia, Barbara Bender talks about how cartography as an instrument of mercantile control is undermined by the alternative maps of indigenous people. These produce local resistance to western technology by fusing topographical detail with the sites of memory. The question of indigenous versus Western modes of cognition is particularly fascinating for *Agaat*. In what ways can the story of Milla Redelingshuys, a privileged white farmer's wife in apartheid South Africa, be "indigenous"? Can the worldview of her adopted racially subjugated coloured servant be "indigenous", given the class conditioning to which she is subjected? I would argue that the story of Milla's adoption of Agaat enacts multiple paradoxes. When Milla first adopts Agaat the child is four years old—abused, neglected, and unable to talk. In teaching Agaat language, and thereby offering her a new world, Milla is enabled to reconnect with ecologically powerful aspects of her own experience which have far more to do with "indigenous" than "Western" worldviews.<sup>4</sup>

The story of mapmaking which this article explores involves a number of the novel's central motifs. It offers escape from the gender constraints of an oppressively patriarchal culture.<sup>5</sup> It reverses the power hierarchy in which Milla first inducted Agaat into language since Agaat can now draw on the discourses she has been taught.<sup>6</sup> And it foregrounds the unstable balance of power between the two women. Reading maps together replays the tensions between reparation and persecution, mistress and servant, empowered and powerless<sup>7</sup> which their past relationship has created. But the arduous new language initiated by maps and by Agaat's use of the alphabet chart cannot continue for long. Soon the escalation of Milla's illness makes it necessary for the women to return to eye signals only. When they can no longer communicate in the newfound semiotic freedom initiated by their reading maps together, Agaat's activity of embroidering, and Milla's interpretation of her work, take over. Embroidery supplants mapmaking as the new language in which the protagonists communicate an alternative vision of reality.

### **Maps in the frame narrative**

Although the story of maps in the central narrative only starts on page 397 when Agaat brings the maps to Milla, maps are important from the start of the novel. In the Prologue which begins Jakkie's frame narrative, the reader is drawn into a reterritorialisation of topographical and cultural space framed by the history of apartheid. The story of places, names and maps is told by Jakkie de Wet. An

ethnomusicologist who now lives in Canada, he is returning to the Overberg for his mother's funeral. The book opens with his nostalgic reminiscences of his childhood on Grootmoedersdrift: "In two places at once, as always". He registers the impossibility of telling his Canadian colleagues about his recollections "of the Overberg haunting me" (1), and his ambivalence towards it: "Took me years to fashion my own rhymes to bind the sweetness, the cruelty in a single memory" (4). He is overwhelmed by the inflooding of memory:

The rivers of my childhood! They were different, their names cannot tell how beautiful they were: Botrivier, Riviersonderend, Kleinkruisrivier, Duivenhoks, Maandagsoutrivier, Slangrivier, Buffeljagsrivier, Karringmelksrivier, Korenlandrivier: rivers burgeoning, rivers without end, small rivers crossing; rivers redolent of dove-cotes, of salt-on-Mondays, of snakes; rivers of the hunting of the buffalo, rivers like buttermilk, rivers running through fields of wheat. Winding, hopeful, stony rivers. What can have remained of them? (5)

For his Canadian friends Jakkie "Took a sheet of paper and a pencil when people here questioned me. Drew a map, lifted out a little block from the map of Southern Africa, from the lower end, from the south-western Cape Province, enlarged it freehand onto a sheet of paper." (5) But this 'map' cannot convey anything of the associations that Jakkie's commentary on the names of 'the rivers of my childhood' is designed to communicate. Essentially his experience and his memories must remain untranslatable to Canadians, as he recognises:

Translations for *wolfneusgewels*, *rûens*, *droëland*, *drif*: jerkin-head gables, ridges, dry farming-land, crossing. Prosaic. Devise something: wolf-nosed gables, hump-backed hills, dryland, drift. Always the laughter at the office, good-natured, collegial, at my attempts: grove of whispering poplars. I romanticize, they say. Quite a fan of the homely hymn, that's true. Homesick for the melody and so on. But that's only the half of it. The rest is granular precision, unsingable intervals. (8)

Here we, the South African readers of *Agaat*, have numerous advantages over Jakkie's Canadian audience. We may recognize the landscapes described in both languages' place-names.

And we may perceive that Michiel Heyns' translation of van Niekerk's novel brings in new linguistic and territorial dimensions because as he says:

A translation is a licensed trespass upon a rich but relatively unknown territory, upon which the translator has to report back to people to whom the territory is not only unknown but foreign. The translator, to continue this somewhat ad hoc analogy, may not have explored this particular tract of land, but he is intimately acquainted with the territory, its flora and fauna, its inhabitants and their habits and peculiarities. He must give as accurate an account of this territory as he can, to enable his audience

to understand something of this territory in their own terms, but *without losing the sense of foreignness*. If all countries looked the same, nobody would travel. (125)

Heyns' translation of *Agaat* extends the physical and metaphysical maps which the novel makes us see. He finds that Eliot's evocations in *The Waste Land* of spiritual barrenness expressed in the barrenness of the land "has its equivalent in *Agaat*'s diagnosis of spiritual ills through human dealings with the soil". This equivalence he feels licenses his transposition of *Agaat*'s South African setting to the wider context of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, allowing him to add to a description of Milla's chair the line from Eliot 'the chair she sat in, like a burnished throne' because "the allusion creates a connection with the neurasthenic woman of Eliot's poem trapped within the artefacts of a highly civilized but decadent society". Heyns further remarks: "By almost subliminally citing Eliot (and also, elsewhere, Shakespeare and Donne) I could establish links between *Agaat* and an English cultural context enriching to both" (132). Leon de Kock makes the same point, insisting that *Agaat* is "a big South African book" precisely because it subsumes European traditions within an African language. De Kock cites the books *Agaat* has arranged for Milla as "a conscious act of revisionism" of the Afrikaans *plaasroman* (140).

Long before we reach the central narrative dominated by Milla and *Agaat*, the novel's Prologue has drawn us into the relationship between culture language and geography. These will climax in the next section, which tells of the protagonists' collaborative involvement in maps.

#### **'Because the map I must still see'**

For nearly four hundred pages, the reader is constantly reminded of what Milla is trying to communicate to *Agaat*: that she wants to see her maps. The narrative juxtaposes the helplessness of Milla in the present with her vivid memories of the past. In this constant alternation are two central motifs: how in the past patriarchy damaged her, and how in the present maps offer her the promise of control over her world. What makes the damage of the past more oppressive is Milla's collusion in her own victimization. In this she is joined by her mother and by Beatrice. Milla's first diary entry reads: "The first time you slept with Jak, was the day after he came to declare his intentions to your parents. He was eager to get away that morning after the engagement, eager to get from under your mother's eyes [...] and especially eager to get his hands on you." (23) Unexpectedly, the young Milla has her mother's approval: "Because you [...] would at last be complete. Somebody's wife. In the normal course of events, somebody's mother." (23) Matriarchal power is asserted in the way Milla's mother takes out the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, making it clear to Jak that "It had been her ancestral land for generations [...] from the Steyn and the Spies lines." (28)

Milla comments that she knows the map by heart: "Ever since you were a little girl your mother had slid it out of its long sheath to show you the farm that would be yours one day." (28)

Now, helpless in her sickroom, Milla wills Agaat to rehearse all the letters of the alphabet containing a downstroke: p, h, f, m, n, l, t, i, j, k, and reflects: "It will take time to make clear that the downstroke is the beginning of an m and that m stands for map, that I want to see the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, the maps of my region, of my place." (40) A few pages on Milla tries again to put the "m" for "map" in Agaat's mouth: "Find it, Agaat, find the word in my mouth, find the impulse from which it must sprout, fish it out as intention, as yearning. The outlines of Grootmoedersdrift, its beacons, its heights, its valleys. You cannot deny me that." (43)

From recollections of the day before Milla's wedding, when Jak attacked her so viciously that she had to adjust her mother's wedding dress so that it would cover her bruises, we return to the sickroom where Milla tells us: "I want to see my ground, I want to see my land [...] I want to send my eyes voyaging" (58). Maps enable escape: in the past from Jak, now from Agaat: "And you may have dominion over my hours that you count off there [...] But there is also space, cartographed, stippled, inalienable ..." (65). From the ignominy of pissing in the pot for Agaat, Milla contrasts the splendours "of the water map [...] of the underground water-chambers in the mountain [...] of the springs in the kloofs of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices" (81).

The next transpositions between Milla's sickroom hunger for her maps in the present and the violence of her experiences in the past are particularly striking. What she wants to see now is "the map of Grootmoedersdrift and its boundlessness" (104). Paradoxically there follows an impassioned recitation of boundaries: the "blue waverings on paper of the Korenland River to the west, from the Duivenhoks and the Buffelsjag on the east, the dense contours [...] of the Laangeberg in the north and the Potberg in the south" (104). From physical helplessness in the present we move back to the psychic victimization of the past. Milla comments on the way in which the farmers' wives idolized Jak de Wet: "You saw how they fell for him, the flocks of twittering wives [...] You recognized yourself in them, in the way they couldn't get enough of him. You could see what they were thinking. How did she contrive it? How can a woman be so lucky?" (106) But to Milla Jak makes no attempt to hide his contempt and anger. He insists that he has a perfect right to abuse her as she is his property: "If you want to be my soil, I'll do on it as I want to.<sup>8</sup> Slapping is nothing! Shoving is child's play!" (115) There follows Beatrice's irrational jealousy: "Ai, Milla, what a wonderful man you married, if only Thys were like him". When Milla asks Beatrice what's wrong with Thys and hears that "he is [...] hard" (119) she tells Beatrice about her abuse at Jak's hands, "the dragging across the cement and the scratches and the bruises and how it had gone on for years" (119) But Beatrice blames Milla not Jak:

“And then you saw it, how she clammed shut, how the defensiveness came over her, over her mouth and into her eyes. More than defensiveness, disgust, judgement. Of *yóu*, not of *Jak*.” (120)

There follow the sequences in which *Jak* shoots at the workers’ kids with an air gun because they steal pumpkins, and kicks his dogs because as *Milla*’s mother says “they can’t flatter him in full sentences and because they can’t tell anybody what a two faced churl he is” (144). Now *Milla* remembers, with a startling lack of fidelity to chronology, *Jak*’s violent accidental death. She orders *Agaat* to take out and burn all *Jak*’s possessions, retaining only the maps: “Just roll up the maps nicely for me”. (155) *Agaat* is to destroy all *Jak*’s “law books and action novels, his piles of magazines and photo-books” (156). But the maps are to be kept, particularly “the one that I’d found amongst my heirlooms after *Ma*’s death, with the little painted pictures of all the special places on the farm” (156). Significantly, *Milla*’s memories of *Jak*’s death, the destruction of his property and the retention of all the special maps that empower her, come two hundred pages before we read of *Jak*’s violent accidental death. When eventually we are told about this, it is prefaced by his breakdown, which explains the vicious “fairytale” he constructs. “There’s another story here” he starts (373). At the end of his “fairytale” he admits “manhandling his wife when she nagged. Slap, kick, shove” (358) because “he was unhappy. But in truth he was angry. His heart was bitter.” (358) In her reordering of memories *Milla* kills *Jak* off long before we hear of the full circumstances of his death. Imagining her maps gives her the power to alter the stories of *Jak*’s life and death as well as lending her courage to face her own death. She needs her maps “So that I can be filled and braced from the inside and fortified for the voyage. Because without my world inside me I will contract and congeal, more even than I am now, without speech and without actions and without any purchase upon time.” (105)

### **The maps arrive: And... But ...**

Finally—on page 397—*Agaat* brings *Milla* the maps for which she has been yearning from the beginning of her narrative: “Yes I see. My eyes are open. I must believe them. With the rolls of maps held out in front of her on her arms she marches into the room solemnly. An offering. She stops just inside the door for me to take good note.” (397) Here, at the beginning of the mapmaking story which will lead *Agaat* and *Milla* into a new linguistic relationship, is the often repeated story of filial reparation versus persecutory phantasy which *Sanders* explores. As *Milla* in the past both nurtured and punished the child *Agaat*, so now *Agaat* rewards and punishes *Milla*. For the reward of seeing the maps at last *Milla* must submit to the punishment of *Agaat*’s physical mastery. She must excrete into the bedpan before *Agaat* will reveal the maps, a trade-off which *Milla* fully understands:

A poop for a peep!

A panful for a panorama of Grootmoedersdrift! (397)

Though the two women are about to enter into a new language, the power-balance between them remains precarious. Agaat is able to manipulate Milla's emotions: "I suspect somewhere on these maps is a spot, a weak spot that you want to visit again." (403) For her part, Milla realizes that the new language is fraught with risk: "[Agaat] knows she's transparent to me, she knows I can read her thoughts and express them too. It's no longer all that safe for her in this sickbay. She's decided to restore my voice to me. And she wants to honour her decision. She knows she's caught in her own snare." (441) From the moment Agaat brings Milla the maps this dangerous self-revealing communication can begin. It starts with both women's reliance on the alphabet chart. Previously Milla used this chart to teach the small Agaat the rudiments of language. Now Agaat decides to reuse the alphabet chart to enable Milla's speech. What led her to this decision, Milla wonders? She speculates: "Perhaps it was the maps that gave her the idea. The place names. The pointing at the dots of the towns till I nod, yes, tell me about Proteem, tell me about Klipdale, what happened there, what we did there, who we saw there." (434) But now the "tell me" command has changed. Milla can no longer omit or conceal Agaat's side of the story, as she did in her diaries. Now Agaat will speak the truth of her experience—the cruelty of the omissions and exclusions she has suffered.

Now, in the alphabet chart system of communication initiated by their sharing of maps, Agaat, telling her story for the first time, creates her own versions of the place-names on the maps. Just as previously Milla listening to Agaat reading aloud had no independent access to her texts, so we as readers have no access to the maps through which Agaat tells her story. We may suspect however that she is "queering" the place-names she reads on the maps so that they reflect her subjugation and denigration, "Everything that you forgot and never even noted in your little books." (405) So many of these place-names ("Uitvlugt", "Niekerksbog", "Skeiding", "Eigenaardigheid", "Laaste Liefde") reflect what Milla describes in their one-sided travels: "Such heights and flats, vleis here, kraals there, dams, spruits, drifts, fountains where she had to sit outside and hold the fort and got sheep's lung to eat." (406) Agaat first tells her story of betrayal through the maps' place-names. Then she visits upon Milla the shameful story of how she was turned from an adored child carefully taught language to a servant denied the right to emotions:



Mailslot! Lowroof! Candle-end!  
Lockupchild! Without pot!  
Shatinthecorner!  
Shatupon!  
Dustersstick on Agaatsarse ...  
Whitecap! Heartburied!  
Nevertold! Unlamented!  
Good-my-Arse!  
Now-my-Arse! Now's-the-Time! (407)

Perhaps it is this outpouring of anger on the part of her abandoned child that motivates the complex questions that Milla now asks Agaat. Agaat sidesteps these by quoting verbatim from the texts she has been taught and knows by heart. In this version of the Caliban story, the native's learning of language has not simply resulted in knowing how to curse. It has resulted instead in the colonized's deployment of rhetoric to guard against the threat of psychic exposure posed by the colonizer.

This is where I disagree with the analysis offered by Alyssa Carvalho and Helize van Vuuren. They state that "Agaat's mimetic means of expression, whilst unquestionably subversive, do not ultimately succeed in collapsing Milla's narrative authority over her." (50) They conclude: "The implications of her communication may be meaningfully explicated in symbolic 'language' only, and it remains a communication medium totally different from Milla's." (52) My argument has been that the two women together devise a language of question and answer which must be the same for both, whatever the frustrations of their indirect communication. This language is initiated by their joint preoccupation with maps, and taken a stage further in their communication through the alphabet chart. Despite all the evasions that Agaat's mastery of discourse permits, the communication into which the women now enter is significant because it is new to both and because it escapes the constrictions of patriarchal language. The story that began in Milla's and Agaat's participation in maps, assisted by the alphabet chart, takes a new turn as Agaat develops embroidery as an art form. Through learning to interpret Agaat's embroidery, Milla begins to move away from the patriarchal discourses that had first dictated her decision to teach Agaat embroidery as a key to feminine subservience.

### **Cartography and embroidery**

Frustratingly for the reader, the new language of secret question and answer between Agaat and Milla that has come about so slowly and torturously in their mapmaking closes soon after it opens. Milla's disease leaves her increasingly helpless, so that communication with Agaat must again be reduced to eye contact. For the rest of the

novel Agaat's embroidery will substitute for the cartography in which both women found a brief freedom.

The story of Agaat's embroidery starts in the Epigraph, where Betsie Verwoerd recommends *Borduur* because of its "refinement and beautification of the domestic atmosphere". Embroidery as presented in her manual guarantees both domestic harmony and state equilibrium because it is generated by women who accept their place in patriarchal society. Agaat, instructed by Milla, makes rapid progress learning embroidery skills; Milla remarks that her pupil can soon "add a few chapters to the embroidery book" (78). What Milla wants to teach Agaat however is not so much the skill of embroidery as her subjugation as a female within patriarchy. Where she succeeds in the first project she fails spectacularly in the second. Milla tells Agaat about "church embroidery at which thousands of nuns sat laboring day after day in poor light in their cells to the glory of God [...] & the great French tapestry of the walled garden in which a snow-white unicorn comes to rest with its head on the lap of the Virgin Mary' (169–70). Agaat is entranced by this story. But Milla replies: "the horse is a symbol of the wander-weary soul & the Catholics believe that the mother of God is also a mediator but it's a superstition JC is the only way to the Father & the mother is secondary." (170)

Milla's attempts to teach Agaat acceptance of her subservience through embroidery founder because Agaat makes of her newfound skill nothing less than an autonomous—and therefore a seditious—art form. In learning to apprehend this art form, and to communicate its power to her readers, Milla begins to let go of her own immersion in patriarchy. This immersion though unconscious has had a crippling effect on her development. The story of mapmaking glimpsed in the early parts of the novel, and dramatized in both protagonists' collaboration in reading maps, is taken further in the story of Agaat's embroidery. Where in the central mapreading story Milla and Agaat were equals, and therefore able to continue their power play, now only Agaat is powerful. Yet in learning to understand and to communicate the meaning of Agaat's embroidery, Milla empowers herself.

Embroidery as an art form is profoundly seditious because while it appears to endorse women's roles within patriarchy, it can be deployed to unravel patriarchy. Bozzoli's phrase "the patchwork quilt of patriarchies" quoted by Meg Samuelson (757) is particularly apt because it suggests this unravelling. Agaat's embroidery designs recognize no categories and therefore trespass equally against state, race, class and gender boundaries; they have the power to unpick existing discursive structures. Consider this description of one of her compositions, the Great Rainbow. Its creation of the colour spectrum imbricates the shades of the veld, as far as the horizon, the colours of "self-sown oats, water-green pineapple drink, lime peel, sunflowers, orange cannas, a dust-dimmed sun over stubble field, a harvest-moon blood red, a watermelon's flesh" (218). In this spectrum the sensory world flows into and feeds the

imaginary. Milla accesses the metaphysical dimensions of Aagaat's embroidery by entering into Aagaat's experience and therefore her mental states:

But here is neither place nor time. It's an embroidery of nothing and nowhere. What Aagaat must have imagined to lie behind the tender despair of defenceless creatures, behind the firefly, the evening star, the blond lad in his corduroy pants. Everything that slipped out of her grasp, Jakkie's whole childhood, replaced with this embroidered emptiness. (218)

In *The Great Rainbow*, Aagaat creates her own cartography. She reconfigures the topography of Grootmoedersdrift, the farm's flora and fauna, her own history, and particularly her love for Jakkie. Surely this embroidered mapping of her world is like the experimental mapping of which Deleuze and Guattari (12) speak:

The map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on the wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.

"Detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification." These are the characteristics of Aagaat's embroidery.

When asked about embroidery as an enabling trope in this novel, van Niekerk commented:

When I started thinking that this book might also be cultural critique, you know of Afrikanerdom and whatever, I first started with a knitting manual, but it didn't have enough of the right vocab, because I had to give Aagaat an attribute, and the knitting didn't have [...] when I found a book by Betsie Verwoerd about embroidery I thought, bingo! Because the term itself lends itself to allegorisation, *bordeur*, and then, you know, the whole idea of improvisation in the figurative meaning of the word "embroidery" and so on also could be used in self-reflecting on the novel [...] So it could be used self-reflexively, to indicate stuff about writing, that I needed and [...] embroidering your life story, and erecting—with the tool of the cultured nation—erecting something for yourself that makes you autonomous and sovereign ... (qtd. by de Kock 148).

Embroidery, van Niekerk asserts, gives her as author *carte blanche* to play with allegorisation and self-reflection. And it gives Aagaat a remarkable medium to fuse the natural and realistic with the imaginary.

Aagaat's masterpiece is the embroidery on her cap. This turns the uniform of a servant into a canvas which combines the natural with the mythical. Milla, staring at the designs on the cap, sees musical instruments, then animals, inhabiting the same space:

A design of musical notation I see, notes and keys and staves. As the light quickens and dims through the trellis on the stoep, through the panels of the glass door, through the gauze lining of the curtain, I can make out what is embroidered there. Am I seeing straight? A harp it seems to be, a syrinx, a tambourine, a trumpet, the neck of a lute [...] I can't stop looking. It's like looking into clouds. Everything is possible. Wings it looks like, angels' wings. They arch out gracefully from the backs of the musicians. But the trumpet-player has a pig's snout. And the beak of the harpist is that of a bat. A wolf, grinning, beats the tambourine. A baboon with balloon-cheeks blows the syrinx, a rat with tiny teeth hangs drooling over the lute (372).

This epiphany is remarkable for the shifts it registers in Milla's ways of perceiving. She has abandoned the hierarchies of the Christian Chain of Being for a fundamentally pagan/indigenous vision of a universe cohabited equally by humans and non-humans. No longer can she assert "JC is the only way to the Father & the mother is secondary" (170). A fundamentally different paradigm of creation now applies from that in which a male god and his male angels dominated the heavens while their creatures, ranked by species, inhabited the spaces below. This changed way of seeing—non-hierarchical, non-gendered—is the result of Agaat's influence on Milla. Of course this vision may be a dream, for both Agaat and Milla have been asleep: "Don't be angry. I saw nothing, I've also slept, I woke with you. We dreamt. All that I saw was a dream. See, I'm closing my eyes" (372). What is important though is that in this epiphany, whether real or imaginary, Agaat and Milla are together. As they will be for the last time when Agaat shows Milla the Big Cloth that is to be her funeral shroud.

### Conclusion

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this article is the importance of mapmaking or cartography for the story that Milla tells in *Agaat*. If postcolonial fiction uses cartography as a trope for reconceptualising the world, van Niekerk, by embedding her protagonists' story in the story of maps, can bring about 'a new relationship to the land, to other people and to the tradition of Afrikaans literature' (Olivier 322). First, in the Prologue, Jakkie tries unsuccessfully to impart to his Canadian audience the emotional significance of the geography of the Overberg to which he is returning. Then we meet Milla and Agaat in a sickroom where Milla wants, for hundreds of pages, to see her maps. They offer her escape from traumatic memories of abuse in which she has been unwittingly complicit. Then Agaat brings Milla the maps. Through the alphabet chart to which the discussion of the maps leads, Milla and Agaat design a new language that escapes the phallogocentrism to which they have both been subjected. But this "new" language inevitably replays power struggles between mother and daughter, mistress and maid, empowered and disempowered. It is only in Agaat's

creation of her embroidery, and in Milla's learning to interpret it, that both women become free and equal.

Van Niekerk tells us that embroidery in *Agaat* offers her opportunities as a writer for self-reflexion. Embroidery is like writing in that it can unravel and rework patterns. It is thus no coincidence that, in the story of her involvement with Agaat's embroidery, Milla's narration begins for the first time to escape the traps of phallogocentrism. It moves from a hierarchically-controlled language embedded in the binaries of Christian theology to what can only be described as a pagan or indigenous worldview, as revealed in her description of Agaat's cap as creation story. Embroidery offers both Agaat as artist and Milla as interpreter of her work the chance to discover, in van Niekerk's words, "something for yourself that makes you autonomous and sovereign". Whether or not that autonomy and sovereignty can survive Agaat's taking over as mistress of Grootmoedersdrift after Milla's death is a moot question. What matters for the reader is that together Milla and Agaat, Jakkie's white and brown mothers, have collaborated in the making of a new reality. Struggling to encompass this reality, Jakkie changes the poet's description of the world as "Suddener than we fancy it, more spiteful and gay than one supposes, incorrigibly plural [...] soundlessly collateral and incompatible." For "soundlessly" he substitutes "full-sounding": "Full-sounding, rather, full-soundingly collateral and incompatible." Jakkie's tribute to his two mothers is a tribute to the complex language which their interaction has engendered.

#### Notes

1. See J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing*. Coetzee speaks of "the story Schreiner does not tell." In this story, "the farmer has both rights and obligations. However absolute his ownership, he has duties to the land, to his heirs [...] and even to the ecology of the farm—that is, to the farm as part of nature. He is, in the language of myth, forbidden to rape the land." (65) The rape of the land is precisely what Jak de Wet is guilty of. This abuse is reversed by Milla and Agaat in their implementation of ecologically-sensitive agricultural practices.
2. Gender realignments are a central feature of postcolonial cartography. José Rabasa writes about the historical significance of Mercator's Atlas, which defines Europe as a privileged site of meaning. But the male principle which transforms the world's continents—Asia, Africa, America—into flat feminine allegorized representations is seen by postcolonialists as symptomatic of the mentality of the European subject. Desiring omnipotence, he manipulates colonialist machinery.
3. This portmanteau term combines *phallogocentrism* and *logocentrism* and was coined by Jacques Derrida in his critique of Jacques Lacan in "The Purveyor of Truth". Jeremy Hawthorn (148) notes: "The term implies that both phallogocentrism and logocentrism have in common that they are both monolithic systems built round a single, ultimate determining centre (the phallus, the word), a centre which ends indeterminacy and play and imposes meaning by the imposition of its unchallengeable authority."
4. Lorraine Prinsloo and Andries Visagie comment that Milla and Agaat both take over Grootmoedersdrift from Bushman or Khoi ancestors: "Een van die prominente postkoloniale diskoerse in *Agaat* is grondbesit omdat Agaat as moontlike afstammeling van die Khoi, wat Grootmoedersdrift vóór Milla de Wet se voorsate besit het, die eienaarskap van die grond ontvang." (73)
5. J. Hillis Miller takes over the term "phallogocentrism" from French feminism. In *Reading Narrative*, he links ways of understanding texts with readers' ability to abandon nostalgia in preparation for a genuinely democratic future: "It would be best [...] to find ways to live within the ironic openness our tradition's stories engender. That task is one feature of the call to help create the

democracy to come. Such a democracy would do without the hierarchies affirmed by what I have called the phallogocentric way of thinking and storytelling.” (230)

6. Cheryl Stobie (63) notes that the four master narratives taught to Aagaat are “The Bible for spiritual matters, a handbook for farmers for agricultural matters, an Afrikaans folk-song book for cultural matters, and a book of embroidery for a practical—and appropriately feminine and domestic—form of aesthetics.” Aagaat is able to use the words of these discourses to avoid entrapment in the questions Milla poses; instead of answering directly she quotes from her master texts verbatim.
7. Mark Sanders (20) writes: “The making of [the] ambivalent mother—repaired and retributive, good and bad—is what the novel is all about. It is about how the drive of the mother, and her mother before her, in its complex markings, produces history.”
8. Sarah Nuttall (220) observes that “‘taking of the land’ borrows its phraseology from that other hallmark of masculine conquest, ‘taking a woman’”. This desire for violent domination both of the land and of the woman is evident in Jak’s speech here.

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