



'Speaking' and 'silence' in the memoirs of Petronella van Heerden



Author:

Lizelle Smit¹

Affiliation:

¹Department of English Studies, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Lizelle Smit,
lkattekatte@gmail.com

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Petronella van Heerden's memoirs have received little academic attention. This article aims to contribute to the limited archive of research on her work to highlight women's involvement in South African and Afrikaner (de/colonial) politics. It will also explore her manipulation of the autobiographical genre to impart what she considered as important to the Afrikaner youth. My investigation considers Van Heerden's paradoxical shifts between 'speaking' and 'silence' regarding feminist issues and her lesbian sexual identity. The article illustrates Van Heerden's employment of certain writing strategies to critique gender inequality implicit within hegemonic and patriarchal discourses - a central issue of her young life that arguably formed her dissident identity. An examination of the 'opacity' pertaining to her portrayal of a lesbian identity in the memoirs is also considered.

'Uitgesprokenheid' en 'stilswye' in die memoirs van Petronella van Heerden. Gegewe die beperkte akademiese navorsing aangaande die memoirs van Petronella van Heerden, poog hierdie artikel om 'n bydrae te lewer tot die gesprek rondom haar werke. Dit belig ook verder vroue se betrokkenheid by die (de/koloniale) politiek van Suid-Afrika en Afrikaners. Van Heerden se manipulasie van die outobiografiese genre om sodoende gekose inligting betreffende geslagongelykhede oor te dra aan die Afrikaansprekende jeug, word ondersoek. Verder oorweeg ek Van Heerden se teenstrydige wisseling tussen 'uitgesprokenheid' en 'stilswye' met betrekking tot die onderwerp van feminisme en lesbiese seksuele identiteit. Hierdie artikel illustreer Van Heerden se aanwending van sekere skrywerstegnieke om sodoende genderongelykhede, implisiet in hegemoniese en patriargale diskoerse, te kritiseer - 'n sentrale aspek van haar jong lewe wat moontlik aanleiding gegee het tot die vorming van 'n andersdenkende identiteit. Van Heerden se 'vaagheid' met betrekking tot die uitbeelding van haar lesbiese identiteit in die memoirs, word asook bespreek.

Introduction

This article examines the memoirs the Afrikaans-speaking de/colonial subject, Petronella van Heerden, and the formation of her dissident and counter normative identity to hegemonic Afrikaner nationalist and colonial discourses, as narrated in specifically *Kerssnuitsels* (1962) and *Die 16e Koppie* (1965). These memoirs serve as one example of South African women's struggles for equality 'in a divided colonial culture' (Showalter 1981:ix) and in subsequent periods following Afrikaner de/colonisation (1910–1961).¹ I conduct a feminist reading of these texts, but as I will illustrate, the very nature of Van Heerden's self-representation calls for a queer reading and an examination of what Judith Butler (2005:2–40) describes as the ethical difficulties or 'failure' of 'giving an account of oneself'. Structurally, this article is divided into two main analytical sections that highlight a paradox in Van Heerden's self-representation: the subject's depiction and voicing of the development and realisation of her feminist consciousness, and the 'opacity' (p. 40) of her narration of the self that guides a queer reading. I propose that Van Heerden's 'quest' (Gilbert & Gubar 2000:76) for self-definition, in the post-South African War context of a 'scarred' nation (re)inventing itself, was (in)formed by an opposition to the dominant ideologies of the political and cultural arena at the time of her publications, especially since 'Afrikaner nationalism [became] synonymous with white male interest, white male aspirations and white male politics' (McClintock 1995:369). During this time (especially from 1961 onwards), prime minister Verwoerd and his

1. Decolonisation 'refers literally to the actual political processes set in motion in various geographical locations before and during [the twentieth] century' (Smith & Watson 1992:xiii), and in this study refers to the political discourses (in this study mostly race, ethnicity and gender related) and arguments of nascent Afrikaner nationalism reaching its peak with the formation of the Republic in 1961. Smith and Watson (1992:xix) explain their use of the term de/colonial written with a 'slash' that 'symbolizes the exchange between the processes of colonization and decolonization and the issues inherent in the process of neocolonization'. Like Smith and Watson (1992:xix), I am also interested in the subjects produced by and in de/colonial 'site[s]' and therefore employ their use of de/colonial in this article when referring to Van Heerden.

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cabinet's apartheid policies coalesced with conservative cultural and religious de/colonial and neo-colonial formulations of nationhood. As political scientist De Klerk (1975:xiv) claims, '[t]he key to the Afrikaners is Calvinism' and the strict doctrines enforced by the state and church can be said to have inhibited Van Heerden's self-defining quest in her writing since she might have been ostracised (or imprisoned), in my opinion, if she imparted her more radical political opinions or openly discussed her sexuality as 'mannish [lesbian]' (Newton 1984:558). However, as I illustrate throughout, she traverses these ideologies in her narratives by relating some events regarding First Wave Feminism as experienced during her youth, and her publications also coincided with the rise of Second Wave Feminism in South Africa (Du Pisani 1996:224–225). Furthermore, I argue that Afrikaner hegemonic discourses produced this renegade subject and illustrate the writing strategies Van Heerden employed to convey her criticism of Afrikaner patriarchy and politics. I also propose that her subtle textual slippages reveal her lesbian identity to her reader and that the 'opacity' regarding her sexuality is negated by these hints to events and 'textual' performances.

Anna Petronella van Heerden was born in Bethlehem, the then Republic of the Orange Free State, on the 16th of April 1887 and passed away in 1975. Van Heerden was the first Afrikaans-speaking woman who qualified as a medical doctor and the first person to write a medical dissertation in Afrikaans (she later specialised in gynaecology). Her parents were Francois Willem van Heerden and Josephine Ryneva Beck Horak. She had an older brother by 3 years, Alexander Charles (Alec), and a younger brother by 9 years, Frankie; she was the only daughter. What one can garner from Van Heerden's memoirs is that her mother, a housewife, was an archetype of female domesticity, ascribing to conventional gender roles assigned to women during the Victorian Age and early 20th century; essentially, a *volksmoeder*: the mother-figure of self-sacrifice, virtue and integrity (Devarenne 2009:632–633) that served as an example of decorum to young white Afrikaans women.² A well-read and educated man, her father served as magistrate in various rural towns.

Apart from her two memoirs, *Kerssnuitsels* (1962) and *Die 16e Koppie* (1965), Van Heerden published two articles under the title 'Waarom ek 'n Sosialis is' (1938b), a book, *Fascisme – Italië! Duitsland! Suid-Afrika?* (1938a) and compiled the *Geslagsregister van die Familie Van Heerden, 1701–1968* (1969).³ *Kerssnuitsels* (1962), published as a youth memoir ('jeugherinneringe', see anonymous introduction), deals primarily with her reflections on her childhood. In *Die 16e Koppie* (1965), she reminisces about her experiences as a young medical student in the Netherlands as well as her life

as the first Afrikaans-speaking female doctor in South Africa. Although both texts reflect on her life before 1948 (the year the National Party came to power), the memoirs were written when she was a septuagenarian and published when she was, respectively, 75 and 78 years of age. These facts bring interesting dimensions to a reading, given the complexities of narrative representations on issues such as memory, truth, authorial intent and reliable narration in a life writing analysis (Viljoen 2008:188). Through focusing on childhood experiences in *Kerssnuitsels*, marketed as a youth memoir, Van Heerden succeeds to convey her gradual awakening to the discriminating binaries imposed on women of her cultural and historical context in late 19th century and early 20th century South Africa. At the heart of this awakening lies the issue of equal rights for education. Although this article examines both texts in subsequent subsections, the analysis primarily focuses on *Kerssnuitsels* in the first section of this article to highlight Van Heerden's resistance against gender norms and how the sociocultural discourses of her youth produced a self-identified feminist. The focus then shifts to *Die 16e Koppie* to conduct a queer reading since this is her only memoir in which I, in agreement with Viljoen (p. 192), can glimpse evidence – events or vague references – of her sexual orientation. In her memoirs Van Heerden claims three traditionally masculine terrains to assert herself: medicine, farming and politics (and to a lesser degree archaeology [1965:134–138] and the military [pp. 156–157]).

Van Heerden's character and political convictions bear remarkable similarity to a group of renegade women described by Newton (1984:564) as the quintessential second-generation New Women (born between 1870 and 1880) because she too 'drank, [...] smoked, [and] rejected traditional feminine clothing, and lived as [an expatriate]' and was a 'mannish lesbian'. New Woman was a descriptive term used by 19th century British and American feminists and the larger public to describe a social movement of women who advocated for political, social and economic equality for women. As Angeliue Richardson and Chris Willis (2002) note:

Victorian feminism is not a simple story of a radical break with tradition [...] many New Women wanted to achieve social and political power by reinventing rather than rejecting their domestic role. (p. 9)

Likewise, white Afrikaner women appropriated the idea of the *volksmoeder* (the domestic ideal) and revolutionised the concept to allow them respectable entry (as mothers and wives) into political and professional terrains (e.g. the suffrage movement and working as teachers and nurses). Van Heerden, although South African, in many ways exemplifies the second-generation New Woman, which could partly be attributed to the fact that she lived abroad in Europe and was educated in England and the Netherlands. Much of her thinking regarding feminist and woman's issues were influenced by European authors and Eurocentric ideas. I also consider ways in which the phenomenon of New Woman manifested and facilitated a construction and representation of her identity that she could and wanted to embody.

2. Elsie Cloete (1994:38) asserts that Afrikaner women's morality and ascribed position 'echoes a particularly Victorian sentiment' in the early 20th century.

3. *Candle Snuffings* (Annemarié van Niekerk's translation) as a title, Viljoen (2008:188) argues, seems to indicate that the text is being treated dismissively by the author and is to some extent 'disposable'. A translation of the other titles in order as mentioned above: *The 16th Cup*, 'Why I am a Socialist', *Fascism – Italy! Germany! South Africa?* and *The Family Register of the Family van Heerden (1701–1968)*. All translations of Afrikaans texts to English (Van Heerden's and other authors) are my own, unless otherwise indicated.



'NAUGHTY girl' and 'Mr. Right'

Kerssnuitsels follows the structure of a chronological memoir. It is narrated in three parts, 'Young Child' (Van Heerden 1962:15), 'War' (p. 75) and 'Afterwards' (p. 129), resembling the form of a *Bildungsroman*, tracing the systematic growth and awareness of the protagonist's consciousness. The memoir opens with Van Heerden contemplating her confusion as a young child about why certain immediate social and familial structures had such power to shape a child and consequently one's sense of self. She explains that by looking back at youth, the mind has to confront a gamut of adults and other children to understand how their influences congeal to shape one's 'form' (1962:199) where the 'self is the only reality' (p. 10). In this regard, she continues, '[i]t's regrettable that the grownups have so much authority' (p. 10). With this reflection, the narrator foreshadows certain thematic concerns of the text, emphasised by an anecdote included in the introduction: if one climbs a tree the grownups will come and 'say you are NAUGHTY' (p. 9). The word 'naughty' resurfaces throughout the narrative; significantly so in relation to key moments which shaped the subject's sense of identity and her rebellious nature.

For example, while visiting her mother's family in Durbanville, Van Heerden's Aunt Anne's parrot mimics from the corner: 'You naughty girl' (Van Heerden 1962:29). This indicates the frequency with which the parrot (and female children) must have heard this phrase. This recollection heralds the subject's gradual awakening to manifestations of a 'naughty' girl as enforced by adults who upheld the status quo of discriminating gender norms but also her realisation of the ways in which she could manipulate this labelling as a form of empowerment against gender inequalities. The 'naughty girl' trope (or anecdote) is but one of the narrative strategies Van Heerden employs to create a framework in which she voices personal concerns and skilfully critiques hegemonic ideologies in the form of a 'youth memoir'. Writing retrospectively, the narrator deliberately utilises past events and situates these historically and critically to elucidate socio-political concerns; she not only analyses the ills of society, from her perspective, but also her own life and sense of self. As Butler (2005:8) postulates, the 'I' necessarily becomes a 'social theorist' in the act of giving an account since it requires reflection on 'the conditions of its own emergence'. As the narrative unfolds, one finds more and more evidence that Van Heerden uses her memoirs as a platform from which to address not only issues pertaining to gender discrimination but also other socio-political quandaries of the time, such as the exclusionary policies of the National Party and ethnocentric tension in South Africa.

As the reader infers, Van Heerden was an especially spirited, boisterous, enquiring and rambunctious youth. She was often labelled a 'naughty and wild child' (Van Heerden 1962:67). The realisation that this derogatory label was because of her biological sex provoked her to wilfully disobey. She adamantly refused to do anything her brother was not also required to do – whether housework chores or

specifically gender-based conduct. Van Heerden (p. 67) colourfully describes these discriminating occurrences as 'all sorts of nauseating things' she had to do but her brother Alec 'escape[d] unscathed'. Her dislike of these practices is conveyed by her arresting imagery and comparative descriptions. For example, she remembers:

If he climbs on the roof, no rooster crows, but if I do it, heaven falls down. He can go and swim whenever he pleases, but I have to ask first and regularly my mother says no. He can say if he wants to learn the piano, but I *have to*. (p. 67, *[emphasis in original]*)

She also relates that she was indignant when she was not only required to darn her own socks but Alec's as well. In protest she walked around with gaping holes in her socks until someone else, to prevent familial disgrace, repaired the socks (Van Heerden 1962:67). Van Heerden (p. 67) makes it clear that her considered wilful obstinacy caused a rift between her and her family: 'I was a pariah and completely alienated from my family'. Viljoen (2008:189) also notes that '[Van Heerden's] older brother is afforded certain privileges, because he is a boy and is therefore resented by his sister'. Her brother's 'privileged' position seemingly cements her disillusionment with her gendered position in the family and broader society.

Another example of the protagonist's growing awareness of gender discrepancy is relayed in relation to events surrounding the South African War (1899–1902). Impoverished after this war, the Van Heerden family was forced to move back to the family farm, Brandkraal, in the Little Karoo. There, Van Heerden was deployed to harvest corn along with the men and she recalls a particular incident. Cutting the corn with a sickle is hard physical labour. When the group returned to the *opstal* (farm house) one evening, the men ordered her to bring them coffee. She 'walked out by the kitchen door and into the poplar bush' and said to herself that '[t]hey could wait another week before [she] would bring them coffee. By all rights they should bring [her] coffee since [she] worked just as hard' (p. 96, *[emphasis in original]*). Despite her age, the young girl, incredibly, was affronted by the subtext of their supposition that she had to bring them coffee because of her gender. Considering the men's gendered expectation, although she worked just as hard as 'any man' that day, made her livid. She did not bluntly refuse to do their bidding, since it would be considered even more inappropriate of her to question men's supposed authority and inherent right to be served. Although she does not appear to critically analyse this event or even consider it retrospectively after its inclusion, she concludes the recollection, noting: 'I was very angry' (p. 96). This experience incensed her and possibly made her question even further the patriarchal power structure of her society. As a young girl, she did not actively object to society's gender discrimination (but rather opted for running away from the 'troubles'); her mutiny manifested in withdrawal and silence. In narrating this event at a later stage in her life, it appears that Van Heerden is deliberately active in voicing her rebellion against normative gender discrimination and discrepancies (in the past and present historical contexts).



Van Heerden, already alienated from her family by resisting her ascribed position, internalises her anger towards society (Driver 1992:459). She suffers from acute anxiety (p. 459) because in her view, 'everything that [she does], is wrong'; even if she 'did nothing', she was still labelled 'a wild child' (Van Heerden 1962:67). An alternative explanation for her silent rebellion is that she is a young girl who, for doing 'nothing' wrong, is chastised and therefore open rebellion does not seem a viable option. The sociocultural historical period also provided no evident podium from where she could voice her objections. Before and after the turn of the century, women as *volksmoeders* were expected to be 'silent' nurturers. Yet, I read her memoirs and the construction of her identity by including chosen memories as evidence of a deliberate act to break these culturally enforced silences imposed on women. Her writings gradually reveal that Van Heerden blames her mother for the gender injustices she endured as a child. The mother emerges as a perpetrator of patriarchal gender spheres, as illustrated below.

The author recalls numerous examples from her youth that yet again convinced her that 'grownups' (1962:45) were untrustworthy. She explains that she discovered at an early age that others not only endorse what she perceived as maltreatment; they actively participate in the ritual performance of convention. I analyse one such particular anecdote where Van Heerden remembers her fear of the dark, damp pantry at night. As a precaution, she always prepared a candle and matches before dusk to avoid entering the pantry in the dark to retrieve the items (pp. 44–45). One evening, her brother confiscated her candle (possibly to pester her) in the presence of their mother. Despite her protestation against this bullying, her mother's only response was one of indifference, telling her to fetch another candle from the pantry. This kind of apathy from her mother incensed Van Heerden (p. 45), who viewed the injustice as a sign: 'And ever since then I knew that grownups could not be reckoned on'. In this instance, and other similar instances narrated in the memoir where authority figures were involved, Van Heerden did not then complain about unfair treatment, again remaining silent about the injustice (at least until the writing of her memoir). Moreover, authority figures like her mother, who witnessed the 'injustices' (from Van Heerden's point of view), failed to protect her. Readers are informed that her brother was treated like a 'man' and her mother would often side with him against Van Heerden or simply avoid disciplining him for victimisation or harassment.

This is also an example of the reinforcement of the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990:47); the mother 'views' the boy as a man and adjusts her behaviour according to societal norms to privilege the man. Butler's (1990:35) term, the 'heterosexual matrix', in my own simplistic formulation, refers to the visual 'reading' of biological sex, assuming a gender, where a viewer also assumes sexuality by gazing at an individual. For example, if an individual looks like a man and 'appears' to be masculine, he must therefore be heterosexual; but if he 'looks' (or acts) like a 'dandy' or more

'feminine', the viewer assumes that he is homosexual. The heterosexual matrix is enforced by its reliance of heterosexuality as normative and natural, and mostly constructed by the male heterosexual gaze that attaches meaning to what is viewed through the discourses (with its implicit power) that support their dominant subject positioning. Thus, in Van Heerden's retrospective gaze, this event signifies incidents where her mother 'failed' her and she harshly proclaims that '[she] never forgave her' (p. 45). The anecdotes further reveal that Van Heerden's childhood experiences had an imperative influence on her adult propensities on the subject of gender since she was discriminated against for being a girl, and the adults (authority) endorsed and perpetuated the discrimination. Van Heerden's childhood realisations – an integral part of her *Bildung* – that adults participated in the ritualistic performance of convention (supported and sanctioned hegemonic heteronormative discourse and social inequalities) caused her to question, not only adults but also systems of authority and power. These discriminatory and exclusionary systems of authority and power in turn produced the dissident subject, Petronella van Heerden.

Kerssnuitsels also centres on the protagonist's determined quest for education. The narrator coalesces thematic treatment of gender discrimination against women during the late Victorian Age with their right to education. As a magistrate, Van Heerden's father accepted commissions to work in several different towns. When they moved from Fauresmith to Jacobsdal, Van Heerden's (1962:62) father would regale his family at night by reading English classics such as *Oliver Twist*. It was in his office at Jacobsdal that she discovered what was considered as a treasure trove: books and what their content revealed to her (p. 63). In her mind she could not fathom any reasonable explanation why her father would conceal these books from her, since 'he knew how much she loved to read' (p. 63). She later discovered it was the town's public library and not her father's property. Her 'indignation' (p. 63) towards her father is important since this is the first instance where she realises that her educational pursuit is a private desire, not shared or encouraged publically or, in this instance, by a man. As a child, Van Heerden (pp. 62–63) read all the books she could locate and assimilated the English language in this manner. The introduction to this store of information propelled Van Heerden's (p. 62) life-long obsession with education and female emancipation, as well as her involvement to improve and promote the Afrikaans language so that '*Boerekinders*' (Boer children) would have their 'own' literature; a dearth she experienced as a child.

Towards the end of the narrative, Van Heerden (1962:135) recounts her mother's objection to her return to the Seminary in Wellington to complete her standard six and thereafter the rest of her high school diploma. Her retort, as Van Heerden later imparted to Bouwer (13 April 1960), was: 'You are too stupid and naughty [...] and for what does a girl now have to study?'. This comment incensed Van Heerden, who decided to prove to her family the extent of her intellectual



proWess. Narration here sheds light on her emotions and decisions. Initially elated at the thought or prospect of not having to return to school, she then rebelled against this suggestion because of her mother's rebuke to her inquiries. She insisted that her parents acquire the text books and continued to pass standard six. When the telegram arrived with her results, her mother cynically retaliated, '[a]g, this is such a flicker of hope' (1962:136). Van Heerden (p. 136) remembers how she wanted to 'shake her senseless' and decided there and then that '[she] will make Matric, [...] go to college and then [...] to Europe to become a doctor'. The mother's admonishment could be read as an indication of her own suppressed hope or desires, especially since she later also started to question gender discrimination (p. 145), but Van Heerden's determination to undermine maternal scoffing suggests (displaced) anger directed towards the mother; a deliberate attempt to avoid becoming what the older woman represents – a prototypical *volksmoeder*. This anger is never directed towards the father, whom she seems to adore. Her mother, *not* her father, ordered her books for Matric and she completed her exams in 1 year, studying diligently for hours on end (p. 136). Both parents thought that this would be the end of her obstinacy, but Van Heerden's recollections convey a sense of her resolve and anger. Once she had informed her parents of her desire to study and become a doctor, they replied that it was an 'improper thing for a girl' to aspire to and asked her if 'she was crazy' (p. 143). Van Heerden (1962) elaborates:

[T]he longer I festered about it, the more irritated I became with the ever present 'a girl this a girl that', and became more determined not to go through life with a halter around my neck. And my mother would even add onto that that the right man would pitch up, and I could burst with anger. Mr. Right, they would call him. [...] I have to make a plan. I'll make myself impossible to live with so that they'll be grateful to get rid of me. I didn't talk anymore and only ate dry rice. If my mother put other food on my plate, I just let it stand there. [...] Finally, my parents threw in the towel: I may go to Stellenbosch. (p. 143, 147)

In this excerpt, she voices her anger and revulsion at the supposition that she 'has to marry the right man' and stridently decides to challenge societal norms. Her youthful mutiny, mostly presented in the form of refusing food or conversation, later morphs into voiced opinions. Physical atrophy here seems to be a manipulation mechanism rather than a disease (as is the case with anorexia or bulimia): since she is not allowed to speak, she uses her body to rebel. She thus revolts in terms of 'refusal [and] passivity' (Halberstam 2011:129). Furthermore, she views the ritualistic gender performance expected of and ascribed to 'a girl' as a 'halter around' her neck. By planning to make it 'impossible' to live with her and refusing compliance to norms such as marrying 'Mr. Right', she suggests that marrying is equal to 'marring' ambition and desire; a symbolic form of 'haltering'. Relating these events at a later stage in her life, she narrates these memories in a consciously constructed way, elucidating on gender inequalities and the perpetuation of a heterosexual discourse in the context of her youth. By telling her story she gives public voice to the concerns that remained central to

gender behaviour in the sixties in South Africa (the publication decade of her books), a time when Second Wave Feminism debates also penetrated the boundaries of the apartheid state.

My interpretation here strengthens the hypothesis that in her work Van Heerden skilfully conveys a feminist agenda to younger readers by tracing her struggles that led her to self-identify as intellectual and feminist. The strategies she employs in her memoirs provide her with a platform from whence she can address the above-mentioned issues by becoming a 'social theorist' (Butler 2005:8) in the act of writing. Her mother's subscription to gender norms, assigning women to the domestic space, and her 'relation to morality' (Butler 2005:10), although incensing her as a child, formulated her subsequent refusal to adhere to these norms, to negotiate her own morality and to eventually become involved in women's rights movements. To use Halberstam's (2011:125) formulation from another context, Van Heerden also:

refuse[s] to think back through the mother; [she] actively and passively lose[s] the mother, abuse[s] the mother, love[s], hate[s], and destroy[s] the mother, and in the process [she] produce[s] a theoretical and imaginative space that is 'not woman' or that can be occupied only by unbecoming woman.

For Van Heerden, thinking and imagining an identity shaped through the mother's example would ultimately construct a space of gender constraints she disavowed, and by becoming an activist, she refuses to think of Mr. Right or Mother's 'a girl this and a girl that' and represents her own becoming.

Van Heerden became an avid follower of renowned gender equality advocates – both Olive Schreiner and Emily Hobhouse, for example, are mentioned in *Die 16de Koppie* – and organisations such as the Fabian society. Van Heerden (1962) recalls:

When I took [*Aristotle's Ethics*] back, she (Emily Hobhouse) gave me *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill, and did I enjoy it! I became vocal at home again and repeatedly told my parents about the injustices women had to endure. Eventually my mother also became heated on the subject. I was already a suffragette. (p. 145)

Her engagement with this seminal text had a profound and lasting influence on her and she thus became involved in the women's suffrage movement before the First World War, one of the instances where she acted as an activist for women's rights. During the time she spent as a medical student in the Netherlands, she also joined the 'Women's Student Club' (1965:30). Van Niekerk (1998) mentions:

This [membership] prepared Van Heerden for her later involvement in the women's suffrage movement in South Africa. At the Women's Nationalist Party Congress in Malmesbury in 1925, Van Heerden gave a touching address pleading for women's suffrage in South Africa. According to Maria Elizabeth Rothmann (M.E.R.), the well-known Afrikaans author, Van Heerden's plea at this congress changed the minds of many Afrikaans women who were themselves still prejudiced against the vote for women. (p. 354)



Unlike the majority of white Afrikaner women, Van Heerden vocally admonished the political injustice regarding women and was a self-identified suffragette. In this regard, she was unconventional in her intractable refusal to accept her 'fate' dictated by a patriarchal society. She mentions though, in her description of this congress at Malmesbury, that the women's 'knowledge of the country's politics' (1965:125) astounded and impressed her and that none of them 'spoke nonsense' (1965:126). From these statements it appears that Van Heerden (1965:126) harboured her own prejudices against white Afrikaner women since she also states that she was astonished when the congress 'unanimously' accepted her proposed motion for women's right to vote. Furthermore, it appears she did not hold the average or 'normal' woman (like her mother) in high regard, a point I return to in the next section. I now focus on the queer silences in her narratives and textual slippages that divulge her sexual orientation. I argue, these slippages give agency to, and voices her 'alternative sexuality' (Butler 1990:28).

'You're not a man', but 'where are your pants then?'

A discussion of Van Heerden's sexuality, body politics and her performance of gender (Butler's term), calls for deconstruction of her memoirs for evidence of how she manages to convey, or act, her lesbianism since she does not always publicly address certain private aspects of her life. Her conveyance of her lesbianism is a writerly feat since no overt reference thereof or thereto is pertinent in her memoirs; and yet, critical readers somehow assume from her 'textual slippages' that she is in fact a female homosexual. A brief definition of terminology, drawn from the critical work of Foucault (1976) and Butler (1990), is called for at this juncture. Sex refers to the biological sex of a person – and the power (disempowered) dynamics implicit in being a 'man' or a 'woman'. Gender refers to the supposed perceptions, codes of conduct, morality and expectation a specific society has regarding biological sex and the acceptable or unacceptable ways in which individuals 'perform' their gender. Sexual desire (and sexuality) refers to individuals' proclivities concerning objects of their desire – same-sex attraction, bisexual tendencies or heterosexual preferences: what or who a person is physically attracted to.

This section primarily focuses on *Die 16de Koppie* and how the 'opacity' pertaining to Van Heerden's lesbianism is portrayed and negated. Butler (2005:11), in examining and reworking some of Nietzsche's theories, states that it is only in 'face of a "you" who asks me to give an account' that an 'I begin[s] [the story of the self]'. Le Roux (11 November 1959), editor of the *Sarie Marais* magazine in 1959, pleaded with Van Heerden in a letter to relate her life stories to Alba Bouwer, a journalist for the magazine at the time, so that 'an immeasurable treasure of human interest stories' would not be lost to future generations and that the involvement of women in the development of medicine in South Africa would not remain undocumented. Bouwer eventually wrote a series of articles

for the *Sarie Marais*. This request to account for herself possibly prompted Van Heerden to pen her life in the two memoirs.

Viljoen (2008:193) argues that Van Heerden's silence on the subject of her sexual identity, in part, might be linked to the 'inability of nationalism to name lesbianism' and that she 'dared' not speak or publically 'name' her sexual orientation. Lesbians were not given the same (il)legal status as homosexual men under South African law (Croucher 2002:317; Trembley, Paternotte & Johnson 2011:155). Thus, lesbians had no (il)legal sexual subjectivity and no clear discourse to internalise since lesbianism remained undefined by 'medicojuridical hegemonies' (Butler 1990:19) and other regulatory systems. The opacity in Van Heerden's self-narration then might be due to the inability of the 'you' to comprehend or name sexuality. Butler (2005:10), employing Nietzsche's theories, explains that punishment is 'the making of a memory' and a 'system of justice', be it the state, church, or a society that requires us to account for our actions and their effect, thereby forcing an account of 'cause and effect' from an 'I'. If the 'systems of justice' did not require, nor wanted, an account (in order to punish) from lesbians, how then did they 'make the memory' of their sexuality? I propose that in South Africa's nationalist Afrikaner society, where lesbianism could not be mentioned and women were perceived as, and required to be, *volksmoeders*, Van Heerden stood in danger of being branded and persecuted as 'deviant' or 'wayward' if she publically voiced her sexuality. The South African Medical Services, a branch of the military, in the latter part of the 1960s did in fact start to treat the homosexual 'disease' with shock therapy in specialised psychiatric units (Cock 2003:40). One understands why this threat of 'treatment' would in part prohibit Van Heerden from discussing her sexual orientation and hampered, or limited, her self-expression. Authorial intent, as I argue, informs her decision not to discuss her 'mannish lesbianism' (Newton 1984:558); yet, she acts and slips suggestions to her sexuality in the text. Below, I examine Van Heerden's textual slippages regarding the women she lived with; then move on to the performance of her gender, through embodiment – thus the (in)visibility of the body in the text; and conclude with a section discussing Van Heerden's sexuality.

There are some instances in *Die 16de Koppie* where Van Heerden mentions (or omits to mention) women she lived with as well as the nature of their relationships. The writing strategy she employs thus disguises, but also suggests, her relationship with these women. She mentions (her lovers) Gladys and Freddie, but does not explicitly expound on the intimacies. Gladys, as suggested in Van Heerden's memoirs, was the first woman to permanently live with her (1965: 81–115), and was followed by Irene Heseltine (called Freddie; 1965:115–159). The manner in which the author narrates her associations with these two (and other) women suggests her romantic relationships with them. Firstly, the primary text is analysed, and then turns to secondary readings that confirm what is hinted at, albeit sparingly, in the memoir.



Gladys is suddenly introduced mid-way through the text without proper contextualisation. Van Heerden (p. 89) recalls: 'Once I went to Durban for a medical congress. Gladys came along [...]'. It gradually becomes apparent that Gladys is more than a friend or housekeeper when one pays close attention to other instances where Gladys surfaces as a casual feature in an anecdote. Readers learn that Gladys accompanied her when she was summoned to an accouchement (p. 108) and would even help administering the anaesthetics (p. 109). In another incident, Van Heerden received a duck as a gift. She became very fond of it. Gladys unfortunately had it slaughtered and served it for dinner – the narrator emphasises that 'to this day' (p. 110), she never forgave her for the indiscretion. What is relevant and textually evident is that Gladys lived with the author and cannot be excluded from parts of the narration. When Van Heerden planned to return to London, to become a clinical assistant from where she would move to the Netherlands to complete her gynaecology dissertation, she explains that: 'Gladys felt like studying to be a lawyer and *we* decided to go' (p. 111, [author's own emphasis]). This reciprocal consideration suggests an intimate relationship between the women. That they were lovers and not merely friends becomes clear when one considers other life writings and scholarly research.

In her discussion of the nature of the relationship between Gladys and Van Heerden, Viljoen (2008:192) refers to the correspondence between Tibbie Steyn (published in her biography) and Emily Hobhouse. Tibbie Steyn was Gladys's mother and the wife of M.T. Steyn, president of the Republic of the Orange Free State during the South African War. Gladys was also a principal of a girls' school in Bloemfontein before she left her post and became Van Heerden's housekeeper (2008:192). In the letter to Hobhouse, Steyn laments the fact that her daughter is 'in a way lost' and that she wonders why God allowed 'Nell to cross Gladdies path' (p. 192). She explains that she has reconciled herself with Gladys, who was 'a sweet girl', living with Van Heerden because she 'seems happy' (p. 192). Hobhouse (cited in Viljoen 2008) replied:

I understand now, also from what you say, that you feel regretful over Gladys' attachment to Nell v. Heerden. It always appeared to me very strange & somewhat unusual in S. African life. But you know in Europe it is an everyday matter this coupling up of young women who have struck out for themselves & do not marry. They find thus the companionship they need & one usually I notice, takes the more masculine, the other the more feminine role. Thus they secure nearly (not quite) the best of both types of life – having complete independence coupled with companionship which prevents the sinking into the old time 'Old-maidenism'. Nell is to all intents & purposes a man, or what is called a 'bachelor-woman'. (p. 192, 193)

Hobhouse's 'reading' of their relationship is enlightening since it 'sheds some light' (p. 192) on the ways in which Van Heerden's South African (and European) contemporaries would have 'viewed' a same-sex relationship. Since she looked like a man (masculine), acted like a man (independent and 'bachelor-woman') and had active desire (masculine –

since women were expected to be desireless), she became for 'all intents & purposes a man' in the eyes of Hobhouse. This is an example of where the heterosexual matrix is enforced by a societal lens and sexuality is 'read' as either masculine or feminine. Butler (1990:49 [emphasis in original]), discussing the work of Lacan, indicates that lesbians in the heterosexual matrix have a 'desexualized status' not as a result of their 'refusal of sexuality *per se* only because sexuality is presumed to be heterosexual, and the observer, here constructed as the heterosexual male, is clearly being refused'. Although the heterosexual matrix is enforced by society, it is not enforced by Van Heerden, and her feminist convictions challenge these imposed readings. From her self-representation and identification as woman, not man, the reading of 'man' by Hobhouse is questionable, although she was indeed more masculine than most other women as I discuss further on. The 'happiness' with Gladys was also not non-sexual. Van Heerden did not lack desire, but her desire did 'refuse' men. A critical reader would observe these signs in the textual slippages that suggest Van Heerden's lesbianism and desire, also evident in her references to Freddie.

In England, Van Heerden befriended Freddie, whose given name was Irene Heseltine (1965:115). She mentions that she would have met up with Gladys in Innsbruck but later refers to the fact that she and Freddie accidentally bumped into Gladys 'and her friend' (p. 116) in Cortina. What is suggested is that Gladys took a new lover, and Van Heerden and Freddie became lovers. Later, on her return to South Africa, Freddie accompanied Van Heerden while Gladys remained in Europe. That Freddie and Van Heerden moved in together is confirmed in Van Heerden's (p. 122) account that she travelled to Harrismith to retrieve her possessions while Freddie remained in Cape Town to search for a suitable house for the two of them. Another hint is contained in the comment that she was discouraged from opening a practice in Cape Town because the 'people were too conservative' (p. 122). Van Heerden regularly refers to Freddie in the final section of the memoir, confirming on the penultimate page that Freddie went to the 'farm' (p. 158) to live with her as, one can presume, her life partner.⁴ To support this analysis of Van Heerden's sexual relationship with Freddie, I refer to letters written to Van Heerden by some of her friends. Alba Bouwer and other correspondents (Audrey Blignaut, Dr Karel Bremer) either address their letters to Nell and Freddie, or they send their regards to Freddie:

Dearest Nan and most beloved Freddie. (Bouwer, 02 November 1959)

We miss you here. Greetings to Freddie. And for you lots of love, Audrey (Blignaut, 21 April 1969)

Tell Freddie I miss her a lot and she has to come for a visit (Bremer, n.d.)

Van Heerden's friends acknowledge and seem supportive of Freddie as a person and her relationship with Van Heerden. Publically, this relationship is 'silent' in the memoir, but

⁴Van Niekirk (1998:358) also mentions that Freddie was named in Van Heerden's will: legal evidence of an intimate relationship.



privately, appears to be admitted. Of further interest is the issue of naming and what it suggests about the gender identities of Van Heerden and Irene Heseltine. Freddie adopted a masculine moniker; Irene became Freddie, and Petronella is called Nell or Nan. Both assume 'male' monikers, thus 'terming' themselves masculine in language and address. The performative act of 'naming' themselves as masculine, in Butler's term, therefore assigns both to a male 'sphere'. However, the male sphere I believe Van Heerden and Heseltine assigned themselves was more of a political statement of financial and social independence, an active pursuit of New Women, than a gender assignment of 'maleness'. Their claim to masculinity's political economy, as woman, through address and language, signals a form of challenge to discourses of female exclusion.

How does Van Heerden allow the reader a glimpse into her performance of masculinity and her sexual identity? Firstly, Van Heerden started wearing riding pants (for horse-riding) in Harrismith (the location of her first practice), before she acquired a motor vehicle to conduct house consultations on outlying farms in the district. She preferred men's clothing, attire not considered 'suitable female dress' (Wintle 2002:67) by 'viewers' of her socio-historical context. She explains:

I've had riding pants made and never again wore a dress in Harrismith. There was a bit of grumbling at first, but the people quickly became used to it. When one day I returned after a long absence, I encountered a man who previously had much to say about my pants-wearing. When he greeted, he said: 'Oh no man, well, you look so funny. Where are your pants then?' (Van Heerden 1965:80)

Her unconventional attire caused a few humorous as well as unfortunate incidents. In one anecdote, a patient (a farmer) elaborates in detail to her about his bladder problems. When he realises that she is a woman, he indignantly asks: 'Mister, man, why didn't you tell me that you're not a man?' (p. 81). What one can deduce from this incident is that her appearance was convincingly 'masculine' and her performance of a masculine gender is therefore informative. Her hair was also cut short like a 'man's', as can be seen in Figure 1. She validates her choice of wearing men's clothing by offering an explanation that it was for practical reasons – convenient to practice her profession. She asserts though that she 'never again wore a dress in Harrismith' (p. 80), which possibly indicates that the conscious choice was about more than mere convenience.

In *Kerssnuitsels*, Van Heerden (1962:15) introduces the narrative by relating that her first memory, at the age of three, was of a 'dark room' in which her mother was busy dressing her in a typical outfit for girls and 'pushed' her feet into shoes. She states that she was '[outraged and] bellowed' (Viljoen's translation, 1965:15). Viljoen (2008:189) states that in this passage 'the mother is associated with the restrictive girls' clothing that the daughter will reject in later life'. Her first memory of being dressed in girls' attire is 'ominous and confining' and outrages her (Viljoen 2008:189).

Her recollection of this memory indicates two important facts: she detested women's clothing and its association in gender discourse from her *first memory*, and the inclusion of this memory to introduce the narrative designates her authorial intent to critique gender restrictions and relations of her society. Although possible that this is a mere coincidence, in my reading of these images, in Figure 2 – wearing traditional female clothing – she appears discontented in comparison to Figure 1 (wearing masculine clothing with short hair) where Van Heerden's facial serenity is apparent. Regardless of whether the contradictory physicality (discontent-feminine/serenity-masculine) portrayed in the photographic images is coincidental, her textual discussion of feminine/masculine attire and appearance conveys this gender dichotomy. It is feasible to hypothesise that she subscribed and associated more with certain masculine performative acts than their feminine counterparts. Having already entered into what could be considered as a masculine terrain (medicine), Van Heerden associates herself furthermore by what she distinguishes and identifies as subversive, empowering and indicative of her dissident gender identity.

As indicated in the previous section, she perceived most women as without authoritative voice (diametrically opposed to the 'worship' of her father). In a society where there is no lesbian discourse to internalise and perpetuate, her only options then are: mimicking masculinity in order to counter



Source: Lammes, F.B., 2013, 'Van Heerden: de Eerste Vrouwelijke Arts in Zuid-Afrika', *Nederlandse Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 157(1), p.2

FIGURE 1: Photo of Van Heerden as doctor in Harrismith (around 1920).



Source: Lammes, F.B., 2013, 'Van Heerden: de Eerste Vrouwelijke Arts in Zuid-Afrika', *Nederlandse Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 157(1), p.1

FIGURE 2: Young Petronella.

or subvert it, or becoming a victim (as she perceived 'normal' women). If she does not want to be 'feminine' and thus voiceless (as she perceives some women to be), she has to discard the dress (a symbol of femininity) and perform masculinity by donning the pants. In this way she performs 'this cross-gender figure [who] became the public symbol of the new social/sexual category "lesbian"' of the early 20th century (Newton 1984:560). Newton (p. 560) notes that certain 'feminist historians deplore the emergence' of the mannish lesbian (or butch lesbian) because this 'sexual category' enforces specific gender binaries rather than eschew or challenge hegemonic and heteronormative gender constructions. But, as a New Woman and feminist, wearing masculine accoutrements could also be read a political act of a woman simply defying the restrictions placed on the gender category, female, and should not necessarily be considered 'deplorable', but rather subversive and agentive.

Moving on from the exterior or attire to the subject's physical body, Van Niekerk (1998:355) explains in her research that Van Heerden had a double mastectomy and hysterectomy. These surgical procedures were performed as 'a precaution against cancer' although she was 'in a perfectly healthy condition' (p. 355). However, Van Heerden makes no mention of these operations in her memoirs. Mindful of the fact that

cancer and related surgery (as well as conditions such as pregnancy outside wedlock) were taboo topics at the time of publication (not to mention during the narrative contexts), she arguably chooses not to disclose these facts. However, Van Heerden (1965:93) discusses other taboo topics, such as the female patient who conceived a child out of wedlock and pleaded with Van Heerden to perform an abortion. I read the deliberate act – preventative surgery – as an embodiment of a rebellion against the confines of the biological sex, symbolically described by Van Heerden (1962:143) as a 'halter around [her] neck'. Viewed in relation to her comments about 'Mr. Right' (1962:143), this act signifies, in my opinion, what Butler (1990:26) describes as a 'counterstrategy to the reproductive construction of genitality' or an act to 'contest the construction of female subjectivity marked by women's supposedly distinctive reproductive function'. In this way she refuses biological confinement to the 'labour of reproduction' (Paxton 1992:392) associated with *volksmoeders* like her mother. Newton (1984:566) explains that traditionally, according to Victorian conventions, women were expected to be desireless beings. Experiencing and especially exhibiting physical desire was considered wayward (Newton 1984:566). Women were the silent 'sexless' receptors of masculine desire. Van Heerden's desire for Gladys and Freddie is 'slipped' through suggestion into her memoirs. Another example would be the 'joy' (Van Heerden 1965:82) she expresses when she discovers Milly Rattray in her house in the middle of the night.⁵

The medical profession, towards the latter part of the 19th century, 'gave scientific sanction' to homosexuality as a pathology and lesbians (or in medical terms the 'masculine female invert') were explained in terms of a masculine soul trapped in a female body that 'phallicized her and endowe[d] her with active lust' (Newton 1984:566). The masculine tendencies of some lesbians were viewed as a symptom of a trapped 'masculine soul', in essence neither woman nor man but a 'third sex' (p. 568), an 'alternative sexuality' (Butler 1990:28). As a doctor, Van Heerden must have been aware of these arguments regarding sexual pathology and what she perceived (or performed) as her gender. From what I can glean from her self-representation and other sources, she unquestionably viewed herself as a woman – not of a 'third sex', albeit with masculine mannerisms and proclivities – who desired other women. Her rather successful performance of a masculine identity could conceivably have been to the result of a political statement as much as a gender and sexual identity.

I propose that her silence (in public space) about matters pertaining to the body and desire are not silences, but issues Van Heerden skilfully signposts in seemingly mundane anecdotes and slippages. What readers learn about her

5. Van Heerden (1965:81) narrates that Milly was there 'before Gladys came'. Milly and Van Heerden went to the kitchen, at 12 at night, to make food. It seems unlikely that a woman she does not mention even once before in the memoir would be at her house in the middle of the night for no specific reason or any clarification. That there is a woman living with Van Heerden is not strange in itself, but it hints towards something more since she does not clarify or introduce the character, which is unlike the rest of the memoir. It seems somehow inappropriate to speculate about their relationship, but the obvious gaps regarding her relationships with these women in her narration leave room for speculation. Jean van der Poel, whom the narrator mentions towards the closing stages of *Die 16de Koppie*, remains equally 'undefined' and there are no 'hints as to the nature of their relationship' (Viljoen 2008:193).



through these hints is that she 'speaks' through her physical body about the 'self' and her performance of a masculine gender. Butler (2005:39) asserts there is 'a part of bodily experience as well' in giving an account of self that is not necessarily narratable. As Viljoen (2008:192) asserts, '[Van Heerden's] lesbianism is "shown" rather than "told"'. Van Heerden's narratives, given the context in which they were written and the date of publication, could also be read as empowering and that they give agency to the 'unspeakable' (Watson 1992:141) in her very 'refusal' (Halberstam 2011:129) to speak explicitly about her desire. Newton (1984) argues in her discussion of New Women and their sexuality in a male-dominated society where there were only 'male discourses [...] about female sexuality' that:

[to] become avowedly sexual, the New Woman had to enter the male world, either as a heterosexual on male terms (a flapper) or as – or with – a lesbian in a male body drag (a butch) (p. 573).

From Newton's argument it seems as though there was no clear option for women who did not fit into normative sexual categories and therefore one can argue that Van Heerden, entering into a male world and male-dominated professions as an independent woman, had no other option (or saw no other since there was no clear discourse to internalise) but to appropriate what was available. However, I think many aspects of Van Heerden's performance of masculinity (and sexual identity) are intertwined with her political convictions. I am also cautious to speculate further about her sexuality since she herself was 'silent' about the subject in her memoir. The aim here was to illustrate the writing strategies employed to 'show' rather than 'tell' (Viljoen 2008:192) her sexuality.

Authorial intent is important in this discussion since Van Heerden has to decide what qualifies as 'human interest stories' (Le Roux 11 November 1959) to the 'you' (the Afrikaner public) she is accounting to. Lesbianism, in a nationalist discourse that seems unable to name the phenomenon since it would destabilise its monolithic and patriarchal construction, would be counter-productive (and dangerous), especially since she is trying to impart something of interest to '*Boerekinders*' (Van Heerden 1962:62). Her version of 'mother' as *volksmoeder* seems to assume the form of a written legacy – imparting important knowledge and memories to the Afrikaner youth.

A queer reading of Van Heerden's *Die 16de Koppie* enables one to speculate about certain narrative choices she made. Van Heerden's opacity pertaining to her sexuality largely articulates her society's 'repress[ions]' (Foucault 1976:6) and not her own. Through 'hinting' or letting 'slip' her sexual preference, she does subversively transgress social norms of acceptability and traverses these silences. The opacity in her memoir, '[her failed account of self]' (Butler 2005:42), is arguably a result of authorial intent, her desire to impart 'specific information' to the Afrikaner youth and the Afrikaner nation's inability to acknowledge lesbianism. The conveyance of her lesbianism through skilful signposting or textual slippage is thus a unique achievement.

Conclusion

Petronella van Heerden was, in my opinion, a remarkable woman. Van Heerden, one of the first garrulous Afrikaans feminists, voices her adolescent disillusionment and consequent resistance *vis-à-vis* gender inequality with humour and nuance in her self-representative texts, and thereby creates a textual legacy to *Boerekinders*. Her subjectivity as renegade woman is established by her forthright, daring, blatant and transgressive critique of de/colonial Afrikaner society, most notably the gender inequality pervasive in South African history. The discriminatory and hegemonic discourses of her society in many ways produced this dissident subject who in the act of accounting for herself becomes a 'social theorist' critiquing the society that led to her 'emergence'. The paradoxical 'opacity' pertaining to her sexuality, given her loquacious feminist critique in *Kerssnuitsels*, is one aspect in her life she textually 'hushes' but skilfully conveys through seemingly nondescript signposts. This 'silence' in the texts however does not detract from her brave and counter normative individuality since she openly lived with these women (and physically embodied her gender/sexuality) in public. Her story is valuable for discussions regarding South African history and subjects whose lives and actions were contrary to dominant ideologies and discourses.

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