



# Michiel Heyns's *Lost Ground*: The white man's sense of identity and place in a decolonised Africa and a democratic South Africa



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## Dates:

Received: 16 Aug. 2016

Accepted: 22 Nov. 2016

Published: 27 Mar. 2017

## How to cite this article:

Lenz, R., 2017, 'Michiel Heyns's *Lost Ground*: The white man's sense of identity and place in a decolonised Africa and a democratic South Africa', *Literator* 38(1), a1329. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v38i1.1329>

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In *Lost Ground*, Michiel Heyns portrays the former white settlers' position and experience in South Africa, Africa and Europe after the overturn of South Africa's apartheid regime. An analysis of the novel illustrates that the legacy of the colonisation of Africa and apartheid in South Africa still shapes the settler descendants' perception of self and the other and the formers' place in South Africa and Africa. After the electoral victory of the African National Congress, contemporary white South African men, as exemplified by the English-speaking male protagonist who features in the novel, tend to dissociate themselves from the country and the African continent as home. Although the original colonisers' experience of alienation and ambivalence about apartheid has been widely depicted, the significance of this experience in relation to white South African male identity has not been fully explored in a study of Heyns's *Lost Ground*, principally as regards the novel's detective narrative framework and the counter-discursive technique of intertextual referencing that implies other interpretative possibilities. *Lost Ground* will be critically analysed in terms of the central character's experience of space and place, and the influence of these paradigms on Peter Jacobs as he makes strides towards abandoning historical/racial restrictions and locating his identity in people.

**Michiel Heyns se *Lost Ground*: Die blanke man se sin vir identiteit en plek in 'n gedekoloniseerde Afrika en 'n demokratiese Suid-Afrika.** In *Lost Ground* (2011) beeld Michiel Heyns die posisie en ervaring van die voormalige blanke setlaars in Suid-Afrika, Afrika en Europa uit na die omverwerping van Suid-Afrika se apartheidsregering. 'n Ontleding van die roman illustreer dat die nalatenskap van die kolonisasie van Afrika en apartheid in Suid-Afrika steeds die setlaarafstammeling se begrip van self en die ander asook hul plek in Suid-Afrika en Afrika beïnvloed. Na die verkiesingsoorwinning van die African National Congress neig hedendaagse blanke Suid-Afrikaanse mans, soos vergestalt deur die Engelssprekende manlike hoofkarakter wat in die roman figureer, om hulself te dissosieer van die land en die Afrika-kontinent as tuiste. Alhoewel die oorspronklike koloniseerders se ervaring van vervreemding en ambivalensie oor apartheid wyd uitgebeeld word, is die betekenis van hierdie ervaring met verwysing na wit Suid-Afrikaanse manlike identiteit nog nie ten volle nagevors in 'n studie van Heyns se *Lost Ground* nie, hoofsaaklik met betrekking tot die roman se speurvertellingsraamwerk en die teen-diskursiewe tegniek van intertekstuele verwysings wat ander interpretatiewe moontlikhede impliseer. *Lost Ground* word krities ontleed ooreenkomstig die hoofkarakter se ervaring van ruimte en plek, en die invloed van hierdie paradigmas op Peter Jacobs terwyl hy poog om historiese/rassebeperkings te oorkom en sy identiteit te vind in mense.

## Introduction

Michiel Heyns's *Lost Ground* (2011) reflects on some of the major issues expressed in contemporary South African literature, namely the original white male colonisers' or settlers' sense of identity and perception of their standing in the 'new' South Africa, the African continent and Europe. It is argued that the misgivings articulated by the settlers regarding the consequences of colonisation and apartheid have become more pronounced during the postliberation dispensation. In the novel, which was written 17 years after the termination of the National Party's domination, the perpetrators of colonisation – white settlers and their descendants – contend with feelings of ambivalence and alienation as regards their position in the country as well as in Africa and Europe. Psychologically – and in extreme cases also physically – uprooted, they question long-held convictions in a mode of self-confrontation. Hence, inherent tensions have become more prominent since 1994.

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Before the repeal of a system of social and political inequality, white people constructed their place and identity within the country on the basis of the ownership of land and the subjugation of the other (McEwan 1996:2). Since control of the country has been surrendered to its black citizens, white South African men, as exemplified by Heyns's protagonist Peter Jacobs, for the most part, are no longer able to configure their subjectivity as master of the estate (estate denoting the country) and in opposition to others. Finding himself on the periphery of a post-colonial and post-apartheid society and recognising his contradictory non-African identity and minority status, Peter experiences feelings of disquiet and distress as well as a sense of isolation and loss regarding physical orientation and belonging. In an attempt to transcend his historical identity and discover permanence and meaning outside conventional parameters, he explores different spaces. Yet globality, intended to appease his need for interconnectedness, rather signposts homelessness. The central argument is the white male protagonist's abandonment of restrictions which may have influenced the formation of his identity and his making strides towards locating his identity in people.

Accordingly, the article will address pertinent aspects of identity formation in relation to the different other, in terms of the theories propounded by, in particular, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Key concepts in post-colonial studies* (1998). In addition, the article will focus on the post-colonial and postmodern person's<sup>1</sup> preoccupation with space, place, displacement and loss. These concerns are expressed by a first-person narrator who (unwillingly) examines himself pertaining to the role he played in the past of the country as well as his present relationships with others, specifically the black/African other. The author of *Lost Ground* extends textual boundaries and adds multiple layers to the novel by drawing on the detective genre and utilising the narratological device of intertextuality to recall and ironically reshape William Shakespeare's *Othello* in order to highlight the self's relation with the other. By inserting and absorbing a metanarrative into the original text and transforming it by rewriting it from an alternative point of view, Heyns shows all forms of past knowledge to be ideologically circumscribed and a process of interaction with varied political, social and cultural power structures.

1. Both postmodernism and postcolonialism dispute a previous authority: postmodernism that of the modern, the rational and the objective understanding of history, and postcolonialism the conviction that the divide-and-rule policy of colonialism is modern and rational and can be scientifically substantiated. Postmodernism sets itself in opposition to the Enlightenment metanarratives of modernism that posit the incontestability of scientifically verifiable or objective receptions of meaning, knowledge, truth, value and the notion of individual and social subjectivity (Smit-Marais, 2012:100). On the contrary, postcolonial literature, which emanates from or focuses on countries and cultures that were previously subjected to colonial rule, interpolates Western colonial discourse with its assumptions of entitlement and superiority (Steyn 2001:152). With its decidedly political agenda, the postcolonial paradigm decentres the established canon by revising and reconstructing master narratives through alternative reading practices (Ashcroft et al. 1998:189), using such strategies as subversion through intertextuality and irony. It also denounces post-Enlightenment's ideological hegemony and binary mismatched power relations. Barnard remarks that the Afrikaner minority perceived South Africa to be more postcolonial than the rest of the continent (2007:8). Britain relinquished the Natal and the Cape colonies more than a century ago (1910), and other parts of the country were under imperial rule for less than a decade. South Africa has been an independent republic since 1961. However, apartheid with its essentialising categories may be viewed a variant of colonialism. Only after the abolition of apartheid, South Africa has made strides towards attaining true postcolonial status.

## Contextualisation

*Lost Ground* (2011) presents a realistic image of post-apartheid South Africa. The novel begins on 19 January 2010 and the events span 11 days in the life of Peter Jacobs, the dramatised narrator of the novel. After writing his matriculation examination in 1988, Peter left the country to avoid military conscription. After studying at the University of Sussex, he becomes a freelance journalist for a British newspaper. Seeing the opportunity for a story in the murder of his cousin, Desirée Williams, who has presumably been killed by her husband of mixed race, Hector, but also to overcome his condition of dislocation and disconnection and discover his true roots, Peter chooses to return to Alfredville, the town where he was raised. In the state of the nation feature article he intends to write for *The Independent*, Peter will expound on racial and communal attitudes in contemporary South Africa. In Peter's mind, the circumstances surrounding Desirée's death bear similarities to Shakespeare's *Othello*. In line with the *Othello* premise, Hector Williams, an African National Congress (ANC) struggle veteran bludgeoned his spouse to death in a jealous fit of rage.

After Peter's investigations exonerate Hector, the protagonist suspects Desirée's two suitors of the crime. One of these men is Peter's childhood friend, Bennie Nienaber, who has always carried a torch for Peter and hopes that Peter had come back to reanimate their relationship. Moreover, Bennie has always thought that Peter believed in him, and the betrayal of trust results in Bennie shooting himself. After Bennie's death, Peter finds that he can no longer write the article for the newspaper. Even though he set out to be only an observer and a reporter of events, he has become an active participant. When Peter has some sort of mental breakdown, he finds solace by holding onto the hand of another struggle veteran, Nonyameko Mhlabeni, whom he has befriended in Alfredville and who seems to be the only person who understands him.

## Critical reception

*Lost Ground*, Heyns's fifth novel, was published in April 2011 and was awarded the Herman Charles Bosman Award for English Fiction and the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize for 2012. It met with positive acclaim. Jane Rosenthal describes the novel as 'unpretentious' and 'familiar' while, at the same time, 'remarkable' and 'mysteriously alluring'. She regards its author as 'part magician, part juggler and fine linguist' (2011). Karin Schimke makes mention of 'the multi-faceted, diamond-like quality of this wonderful work of fiction' and applauds Heyns's style – 'his dry, funny scrutiny of his characters, his narrator's self-effacing and slightly self-mocking personal insights, his ability to convey the grainy texture of even the simplest emotion' (2012). Both Matthew Blackman (2013) and Charlene Rolls (2011) judge the book to rank above several of its coeval. As Rolls comments: *Lost Ground* has

all the hallmarks of a great novel: murder, sexual tension, racial conflict and the existential angst of a South African grappling with returning to the country of his birth after a long time living abroad. (2011)



## Narrative frame: The detective novel

The detective story acts as a frame narrative to enhance the meaning and interpretation of *Lost Ground*. Heyns implements the detective narrative genre because the detective's pursuit of a murderer corresponds to the main character's search for clues to individual and social parameters of subjectivity. While the classical detective (Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot) is an individual of exceptional acuity and accomplishment, and does not doubt himself or his place in the world, the modern-day sleuth wrestles with personal flaws, such as emotional immaturity and ineptness, social isolation, alcohol abuse and drug dependency. This person's position as outsider, on the outskirts of society, bears similarities to the protagonist of Heyns's novel as it does to the original settlers in Africa who navigated 'interstices, or liminal spaces, between cultural systems' (Jacobs's phrase [2013:2]) to forge a new identity for themselves that will conform to their surroundings. To complement the protagonist's quest for a coherent and connected self in the new South Africa, Heyns invokes different subgenres of crime fiction: the classical detective novel including the cosy whodunit, the hard-boiled crime thriller and the literary detective novel.

Sam Naidu notes that Heyns appears to follow the conventions of the classical detective novel: firstly, he presents a murder mystery involving a crime of passion, motivated by desire or jealousy (2013:737). Secondly, the offence occurs before the narrative action gets underway and its consequences constitute the rest of the story (Green, 1997:196). Thirdly, the crime occurs in a closed setting of a small town, to the casual observer a pure and wholesome place where people live by traditional values and customs. Heyns admits that he has selected Alfredville, a fictitious rural town in the Klein Karoo, because murder with racial connotations makes a greater impact in a little village than in the city. Fourthly, the material for the plot may feature on the front page of any daily newspaper: the murder of a white woman by a black man.

The detective of the British whodunit of the 1920s and the 1930s, such as Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, is a paragon of moral virtue, remains untouched by guilt and retains a clear conscience. The detective and his/her sidekick (if there is one), on whom the detective tests his/her theories, are actively involved in the case from the beginning. By way of surveillance and the logical analysis of facts, clues and the relationships between people, the detective unmasks the villain and so protects a privileged social class against individual perversion. The detective, rather than an inept and occasionally corrupt police force, prevents the overturning of a social class that has everything to lose by change (Green 1997:202) and restores order and certitude to this class by catching the perpetrator.

As South African crime stories with their gritty realism reverberate with American hard-boiled prose, the detective-hero finds himself drawn into a dangerous and diseased

dystopia. *Lost Ground*'s Alfredville is not the typical peaceful village of the British whodunit but a melting pot of racial friction and frustration. The novel foregrounds the anxiety and vulnerability that many people consider part of contemporary South African life. The detective, while investigating a murder, also delves into 'the condition of the nation' (Naidu 2013:728). In this manner, the novelist can analyse the challenges confronting a country with a past of inequality and oppression and a present exhibiting 'the peril of ... post-apartheid nation-building' (Graham 2003:180).

Unlike the classical detective, the modern-day sleuth – like Peter Jacobs – is no longer superior to the readers – and his character development is not secondary to the twists and turns the complex plot takes. The readers may feel a kinship with the investigator who forms relationships and whose personal shortcomings and professional misjudgements make him all the more human. In *Lost Ground*, Heyns lingers over the central character's temperament, describes his emotions and underscores the evolution of his personality as he struggles to negotiate his position in the world. At the outset of the text, Peter prides himself on his cynical detachment; at the end, he registers the absence of attachments in his life (Jacobs 2011:95) and the losses he has caused. The readers may identify with this detective since they share in his discoveries and pit their wits and skills of observation and intuitive logic against his with the aim of unravelling the mystery before he does. The participation of the readers in locating the culprit and unravelling the mystery diminishes the distance between speaker and audience and creates a feeling of intimacy.

The readers, together with the detective, suspect a number of individuals of the misdeed, who are then eliminated one by one. The physical evidence and the fact that the husband is usually the offender (according to many a true crime television programme) initially point to Hector Williams, the victim's husband. Not only Hector but also his wife's beaux, Cassie Carstens and Bennie Nienaber, have ample motive to commit a crime of passion. The evidence against these three men seems convincing, but – as is often the case in traditional detective fiction – the obvious suspects are innocent. As a makeshift detective, Peter tests his theories with his sidekick, Nonyameko, who questions his methods and assumptions. Peter subsequently infers that the superficially convincing evidence has only acted as decoy. As more clues surface, the suspense intensifies. The author waits as long as possible to divulge the wrongdoer's identity. Up until the point that the malefactor – who may be taken to be the other to the detective's self – owns up to the crime, the reader could hold on to the promise of disorder being dispelled and moral certitude restored.

However, Heyns deviates from the pattern of traditional detective fiction. Firstly, Alfredville is by no stretch of the imagination the idyllic village of the British whodunit but comes to represent a country that is 'a veritable hotbed of racial, political and sexual tensions' erupting in 'the violent act of murder' (Naidu 2013:736). The folks of this little Karoo





town in Africa are also not as trusting and naïve as the world traveller (Peter) may have thought. Secondly, the black man who has allegedly killed the white woman is her husband. Thirdly, the person investigating the murder can be labelled an anti-detective in that he has several shortcomings. Naidu rightly refers to Peter as 'misguided, displaced [and] emotionally naïve' with 'dubious motives' for researching his article and 'ad hoc detection methods' (2013:735). Peter lacks the classical detective's moral authority, perspective and confidence in himself and will thus be subjective in his interpretations. The protagonist openly acknowledges that he is neither a brave man nor a good man. He denies accountability for personal choices and for others: his father decided for his son that the latter would emigrate to England rather than going to the army. When Peter's friend Bennie reaches out emotionally, Peter gives him the cold shoulder. Because Peter will not traverse interpersonal spaces of separation, he also wishes to 'walk out of the sad story' (p. 239) of his cousin's murder. Moreover, Peter eschews an ethical stance in conjunction with an overt investigative position. Nevertheless, against his will, the speaking subject becomes entangled in an ethical and moral quandary from which he cannot extricate himself. The supposed representative of law and order loses his way (moral ground), with the result that he behaves dishonourably. He misinterprets the clues and bungles the investigation when he accuses his best friend of killing Desirée. Peter's detective exploits and errors culminate in tragedy, and the innocently accused and betrayed friend commits suicide. Even though everything in the plot prepares for the denouement, which is certainly startling, it is not the shrewd detective who explains the steps he has followed to arrive at the culprit's identity. In fact, Peter is sorely lacking in powers of astute observation, logical and rational analysis, inference and intuition. When he fails to pick up on Bennie's and Chrisna's insinuations as to the identity of the perpetrator, a frustrated Chrisna confesses. In the traditional detective novel, the guilty party never confesses voluntarily to the crime; the sleuth compels or tricks him/her into doing so. To add insult to injury, the detective in this novel wants to know from the murderer how to proceed, a notion that the murderer, with reason, finds preposterous. Although the readers are not robbed of the revelation towards which the novel works, the lawbreaker is not taken into custody. Peter's success in solving the crime may be attributed to luck rather than to the systematic gathering and analysis of evidence and perspicacious inference. Though the crime is solved, moral order is not restored. In a crime-infested country such as South Africa – an indirect slur on the South African police force because they are seen as incapable of maintaining law and order – neat, final resolutions do not present themselves. The detective, who is supposed to serve the interests of a specific social class (in this novel, the former settlers) who has everything to lose by change and idealises a world almost gone, rather contributes to the confusion. *Lost Ground*'s denouement may therefore be deemed unsatisfactory and a parody of the traditional denouement, a 'sorry tale of a stuff-up' (p. 294). Yet the true focus of this literary detective novel is not the solving of the whodunit but the narrating of the detective's efforts and the progress he makes as a person

as he negotiates his position in the new South Africa and discovers the truth about himself and others.

## Intertextuality

Heyns not only draws on the genre of the detective novel but also resorts to the self-reflexive strategy of intertextual referencing to foreground the notion of the confrontation of the self in relation to the other. The postmodern narratological technique of intertextuality denotes how literary compositions structure and are structured by other creations; all works recall and reshape other works (Smit-Maraais 2012:128). This technique, which rewrites the past from an alternate, often ironical or critical, vantage point so as to expose residual politics of a previous era, highlights the revisionist and reconfigurative nature of writing and invalidates the perception of any creation as an entirely original self-sufficient entity.

Heyns readily admits that he intended *Lost Ground* to be a reworking of *Othello* (Corrigall 2012:16). Shakespeare's canonical play serves as a matrix for the novel's rendition of South African race relations. Several allusions to *Othello* (1688) are inscribed throughout the novel, the power of which is called into question and dismantled. For instance, inverting the symbolic logic of Shakespeare's drama and making a stand against racial stereotyping, the theatre company for which Peter's Jamaican boyfriend works proposes that James should audition for the part of the (white) Iago instead of the leading role. Furthermore, with the exception of the Moor, the entire cast consists of black actors. The modernised play is set in Harlem, not Venice, and gangsters replace Shakespeare's warriors. In *Lost Ground*, one such warrior is the mixed race Hector Williams, a former member of the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (1961–1990). Hector, like Shakespeare's *Othello*, victoriously returns home as a hero, in this case of the Liberation Struggle. Hector enchants his Desdemona (Desirée) with tales of his years in exile spent in overseas cities such as Moscow and London. The transgression of racial boundaries between Blik van Blerk's rebellious daughter, Desirée, and Hector (the other) not many years after apartheid's 'boundaries that demarcate[d] differences' were lifted (Jacobs 2011:93)<sup>2</sup> puts the patriarch's white identity under pressure. Just as Brabantio blames Othello for corrupting Desdemona with 'spells and medicines bought of mountebanks' ([1688] 1993 I, ii), Desirée's prejudiced and judgemental father, who will not deconstruct his old self in favour of a new one that corresponds to changing times, charges Hector with putting a spell on his daughter. In an ironic twist, Blik tries to persuade Desirée and Hector to follow Othello's and Desdemona's example by eloping, but Desirée is no docile Desdemona and is not to be dissuaded from being wed in the Dutch Reformed Church, the bastion of white Afrikaner identity. Hector's dark complexion renders him an outsider among his spouse's family, her friends and his colleagues,

2. Four years after Peter's junior and having studied for 4 years in Stellenbosch, Desirée returns to Alfredville in 1996. Bennie divulges that he visited Desirée for 'fucking years' while she was married. An estimation would be that Desirée married Hector between 1996 and 2004, i.e. 2–10 years after the end of apartheid.



as it does Othello in Venetian society. Hector not only shares Othello's intrepidity and intelligence but also his less positive personal traits: Hector tends to act on instinct and is prone to 'the kind of insecurity that, even after he's achieved total success, would still undermine his self-image to the extent that he's driven to kill. As with Othello' (p. 108).

Heyns departs from *Othello* in certain ways. While the Moor has no reason to doubt Desdemona's loyalty, Desirée's behaviour discloses that sometimes wives do err and neglect some of their duties (IV, iii) (according to patriarchal norms). There is a suggestion that unlike the evil Iago's lies, Desirée actually could be 'making the beast with two backs' (Shakespeare [1688] 1993:I, i). When Hector presumably succumbs to the 'green-eyed monster' (III, iii, 165–167) and murders his wife, the 'hero' becomes a villain and is placed under house arrest. Ironically, Peter, the person who is convinced of Hector's culpability, proves Hector's innocence. The *Othello* theory holds no water and the journalist (Peter) can no longer present 'The Othello Murder' to an international readership.

From the above discussion it transpires that Heyns's *Lost Ground* brings into play the counter-discursive modalities within a postmodern and post-colonial paradigm of intertextual referencing and metafiction to simultaneously engage with and react to both a fictional and South Africa's historical past. By rewriting *Othello* from a post-apartheid viewpoint – so subverting its original significance – the author not only interrogates the authority of the metanarrative and the incontestability of the canon, but also re-imagines alternate possibilities of what could have been and what could be. This expressly applies to the historical context of a country that Johan Jacobs believes is known for its dualisms (2013:6).

## Themes

In *Lost Ground*, Heyns provides the readers with a narrative about loss, prejudice and betrayal. These are themes pertinent to the former settlers' condition in post-apartheid South Africa and impact on their search for subjectivity in a country that has undergone a comprehensive metamorphosis, yet continues to be haunted by, what Shane Graham calls, the ghosts of the past (2003:179). Related to these two themes is that of the past and its imprint on the present.

The epigraph to the novel (Proust's 'The true paradises are the paradises we have lost') calls attention to the themes of loss and the past's claim on the present. Though the protagonist does not want to consider himself an expatriate, he involuntarily asks himself if his purpose in coming back to Alfredville is 'to recover something of an easier time, of simple sensations and conversations' (p. 174) – in other words, the lost innocence of bygone days when his life had significance and he felt secure in himself. Peter is 'pleased to see that [their] old house's stoep is still open to the street' (p. 49) and that the only change at the school is the razor-wire fence that 'hideously' surrounds its grounds (p. 50).

The familiarity – 'in all these years almost nothing has changed' (p. 170) – appeals to him. Notwithstanding this, Peter resolves to resist the 'embrace of the past'; he will not be 'blackmailed into sentimentality' (p. 176) by 'sentimental claptrap' (p. 175) and deny the 'present in the name of an idealised past' (p. 176). However, just because he has turned his back on the past does not mean that the past and the people in it have forgotten him. As Bennie's wife, Chrisna, puts it: '... you sail through life not looking back at the people you've left behind in your wake. But the people you've left behind don't stop feeling just because you've forgotten them' (p. 288). In fact, those people have contributed to shaping Peter's subjectivity and perspective on life. As soon as the narrator arrives in Africa, he cannot but revisit the past, and the people he left behind reassert themselves and reclaim their place in the present. In England, the sceptical and suave speaking subject has pretended to be utterly impervious to the past – 'the nostalgia trap, SpiderWoman and vampire all in one' (p. 138), as his boyfriend, James, refers to former times – and thinks it absurd that he will find a clue to the past in this dusty little dead-end *dorp* (p. 274). Nonetheless, before long he appreciates that one cannot disown the past. While one is in a specific place, the past and the people there will not forget one. As Jacobs verbalises: 'the past lays claim to the present' (2011:108). Antonio Gramsci states that we are a précis of the past, and the past endows us with a sense of who we are today and tomorrow (1988:326). Ignoring the past means erasing one's history and identity. Be that as it may, the past is not recoverable once it is lost, and one cannot retrieve youth's 'unfettered exploration of life, the life of the senses, [and] the unexamined joy of daily companionship in that exploration' (p. 274) of identity and the meaning of existence. The true paradises are indeed the paradises 'we have lost'.

In the novel, Heyns provides evidence that South Africa's apartheid past still dictates the present. Apartheid might be officially abolished, but its presence makes itself felt in the persistence of racial and socio-economic schisms. At the beginning of *Lost Ground*, Peter displays traces of residual racism (and perhaps chauvinism as well), because it strikes him as odd that a black woman should be reading a novel by J.M. Coetzee (p. 25). It further seems plausible to Peter that Desirée's husband killed her, probably because – as another character submits – her husband is a black man (p. 230). Prejudice is overtly expressed. For example, in the Queen's Hotel a farmer tells a group of other farmers a racist joke in close proximity to two black businessmen. When Peter joins a black woman at her table, he suspects a racist slur in a comment one of the farmers makes (p. 26). The woman introduces herself as Nonyameko Mhlabeni and remarks that it was 'so much easier for white people when all black women were called Doris and Agnes' (p. 30). In fact, Nonyameko's mother's employer called Nonyameko's mother Gladys, although this was not her mother's real name, while 'Gladys' had to address the white woman as 'Madam' (p. 98). As for the hotel owner, Joachim Ferreira, he informs Peter that the patrons of the hotel and the townspeople were outraged when he allowed one of his



employees, a black man, to stay in a hotel bedroom rather than in the servants' quarters behind the hotel (p. 67). Joachim also divulges to Peter that there was 'a lot of talk' (p. 66) when Peter's cousin decided to marry a black man. While some people denounced Desirée, others wanted to run Hector out of town (p. 66). After all, 'they' do not 'really understand our ways' (p. 88), as Desirée's mother articulates. Oom Blik, Desirée's father, is more outspoken. Promulgating public discourse and ideology, he bluntly announces that 'they' belong in the jungle because 'they' do not possess the capacity for rational thought (p. 88). Both Blik and his wife, akin to the majority of the white population of Alfredville, will not re-evaluate past discourses of self and other and forge a new post-colonial cultural identity for themselves (Jacobs 2013:3). Instead, they base their identity on the ideological fixing of seemingly insurmountable Manichean polarities of coloniser and colonised, and uphold old prejudices and predispositions. Under such circumstances, an interracial marriage 'where an old black ram is tugging a white ewe', as Iago phrases it in *Othello* ([1688] 1993 I, i), cannot work. The white community of Alfredville therefore anticipates that the marriage will come to no good (p. 107). Cassie declares: '... bottom line is she married a hotnot and lived to regret it' (p. 164).

It seems that Desirée's father views his daughter's death at the hand of a black man as a setback for civilised values and white subjectivity. In his opinion, Desirée's fate foreshadows what is in store for the white settlers in Africa and an Africanised South Africa. Like the Van Blerk couple, the majority of Alfredville's white citizens do not swallow what Graham dubs 'the rhetoric of postliberation reconciliation and nation-building' (2003:180), and they mourn the demise of the previous order when they could openly establish their identity in essence and not in difference. Since a black-majority government has taken control of the country, white people no longer occupy a seat of privilege; what is more is that they have been relegated to a position low on the priority list. The wheel is turning full circle and the crimes of the past are being redressed in the present.<sup>3</sup> The white denizens of Alfredville foresee failure for a country of which the political structures no longer underwrite past discourses of whiteness and are fearful for their future in South Africa.

Signalling the theme of same-sex love and betrayal is the cock that crows three times the first morning after Peter's arrival at the Queen's Hotel. Peter's name recalls to mind the Biblical Peter who betrayed Jesus three times before the cock crowed. When Peter Jacobs leaves South Africa to dodge serving in the army, he follows in the footsteps of his mother who defected from *volk en vaderland* (the nation and the country) by marrying a British Jew – then judged to be an other to the Afrikaner self. Ironically, the protagonist criticises white South Africans for their politics, forgetting that he too has decamped rather than participated in creating

an egalitarian future. Leaving the country, Peter forsakes Bennie Nienaber, who is secretly in love with Peter and takes Peter's decision to leave as treachery. As a matter of fact, Bennie feels that life, for the most part, has also betrayed him by giving him 'one huge steaming mess of a family' (p. 134). Aside from making Bennie feel like a 'fuck-up' (p. 233), Bennie's alcoholic father beats his family; and out of fear of her husband's fists, Bennie's mother does nothing to protect her son against the verbal and physical abuse. When Peter comes back to Alfredville more than 20 years later, Bennie, who has, in Peter's absence, transferred his love to Peter's female doppelganger, Desirée van Blerk, believes that Peter has missed him, but Peter disillusiones Bennie a second time when he reveals that the real reason for his return is to write an article about the death of his cousin, the same Desirée. Moreover, Peter even suspects Bennie, Alfredville's acting police station commander, of having killed Desirée. Peter lets Bennie down a third time by not giving Bennie the opportunity to unburden himself and express his emotions: '... I'm not sure that I want to take responsibility' (p. 176). Because Peter disallows his self to exist in and depend on relations with others (Jacobs 2013:8), he will not allow Bennie to revisit their friendship; this makes him 'excruciatingly uncomfortable' (p. 234). After Peter's third betrayal, Bennie makes an end to his life in Peter's presence. Yet, if not for Bennie's committing suicide on account of his unfulfilled love for Peter, Bennie's widow, Chrisna, most likely would not later betray herself as Desirée's murderer. Chrisna does this when she accuses Peter of being disloyal to Bennie by abandoning him after school, and then, when Bennie no longer needs him, Peter returns to 'torment' him (p. 288) and take him away from his family – something Desirée has also unsuccessfully tried to do. Peter even admits to himself that he lacks a sense of loyalty: 'Loyalty seems not to be a virtue I've been blessed with, or an inconvenience I've been saddled with.' (p. 199) (This perhaps also elucidates why he has no qualms misleading people [Joy, Aunt Dolly and Oom Blik]) or lying to them as to why he has come back to Alfredville and makes inquiries into his cousin's life and death).

Desirée and the people closest to her commit their own share of betrayals. As a student, Desirée snubs the Klein Karoo village when she goes to Stellenbosch and picks up all sorts of outlandish ideas there (p. 67). When she comes home again, she more than ever despises the dusty village, and only works there to save enough money to go overseas. Desirée insists on conducting her English classes through the medium of English, whereas her predecessor used Afrikaans to teach English. With her 'outsider attitude' (p. 146), the young woman does not want to play tennis on the school courts with the other teachers but joins the town club where she meets Hector Williams. Desirée then commits the worst kind of treason against her conservative parents and the staunch white Afrikaner community when she weds the former ANC 'terrorist' (p. 68) – the other. Afterwards many of her friends and the community shun her. After her marriage, Desirée acquires two admirers whom she implores

3. In his book *The Truth Commission and Post-Apartheid Literature in South Africa* (2003), Graham discusses one instrument that dealt with the human rights violations committed between 1960 and 1994: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.





to take her away from her husband and Alfredville. One of these men, Bennie Nienaber, is married to her best friend, Chrisna. Although Bennie is aware of the other man's calling on Desirée and that she plays emotional games with him (Bennie) – 'very lovey-dovey the one day, very fuck-you the next' (p. 269) – he agrees to leave his family and get a transfer to Cape Town. Desirée does not treat her other admirer any better than she does Bennie. The last night of her life she ridicules Cassie's first name, Septimus ('Septic Septimus'), and his manhood.

Desirée, herself, gets as good as she gives. Hector misleads Desirée because he marries her not for love, but because she is a beautiful blonde woman, the mayor's daughter; she represents 'the spoils of war' (p. 147) to him. After the wedding, Hector resumes his relationship with Sarah Augustyn, a girl from the township, and conceives a child with her. Cassie, who professes to love Desirée, is unwilling to leave the farm he inherited to take her away. The last night of her life Cassie strikes her. After he leaves, Chrisna calls on Desirée to plead with her not to deprive Chrisna of a husband and Chrisna's children of a father. When Desirée declines, Chrisna kills Desirée. Hence, Desirée's best friend, like Brutus in *Julius Caesar* ([1599] 2005), commits the ultimate act of betrayal and becomes Desirée's murderer. After her death, Desirée is again betrayed – this time by her cousin who views her death as a story and money-making opportunity. Peter also betrays Desirée when he shows more sympathy for the murderer than the victim and decides not to report Chrisna to the police. Denouncing Chrisna would be 'far beyond the bounds of mercy' and 'a futile exercise in abstract justice' (p. 295). Peter will also no longer write Desirée's story for the international newspaper. In a sense, Desirée will never escape her surroundings. She is born and dies in Alfredville and her true story stays in Alfredville.

Not only individuals are guilty of duplicity. On the public level, the police also deceive the citizens of the country by claiming that crime statistics are on the decline, but, according to Peter's father, one can find more drug addicts per square mile in Knysna than anywhere in the world (p. 133). Peter feels the need to report to his boyfriend in London that he has 'survived [his] first day in Africa without getting mugged or raped' (p. 19). The police also fail to protect foreigners from African countries against xenophobic attacks. Other than being incompetent, the police are racist and corrupt. The people of the township speculate that resentful white policemen planted evidence to incriminate Hector in his wife's murder because the ANC cadre occupies a senior position in law enforcement. The police chief's rank, coupled with his dark complexion, has exposed him to stereotyping and professional envy from colleagues who are insecure about their own status in the new South Africa and deem the destruction of the other's distinctiveness as critical to the functioning of the self. (Graham would categorise this as 'a symptom of the collective, transgenerational trauma that continues to haunt South Africa's present' [2003:180]). It is taken for granted that Hector must be a criminal because he

is black. Hector's girlfriend, Sarah, remarks that the police do well for themselves in South Africa, to which Hector replies that the policemen who prosper are those who take bribes (p. 242). Joachim and his lover, Boris, agree that everyone in the police force steals – from the lowest-ranking officer to the Commissioner of Police (p. 251). In brief, as per Heyns's social commentary, it would seem that nobody trusts South African law enforcement services any longer.

The perfidy of the police force appears to parallel that of the government that does not deliver on the promise of 'a better life for all', with the result that many young South Africans seek opportunity and security in other countries (p. 35). By all accounts indolence and inefficiency, corruption and criminality characterise the consciousness of the newly-elected. Peter declares that 'overfed and probably overpaid government bigwig[s]' (p. 32) laze around in plush, air-conditioned offices and recite regulations without any practical knowledge of the conditions to which they apply (p. 93). While the rate of unemployment and crime increases and basic services are not rendered, '[f]unctionaries and their expensively-dressed wives [overspend] state money on the over-lavish trappings of office' (p. 224). As in Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness* (2000) and Damon Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2003), the new rulers are shown to care only about their own advancement and enrichment, and not about the 'small people, [the] nothing people' (Galgut 2003:112). In Heyns's narrative, many white people are under the impression that the ANC government has abandoned them. Bennie notes that '[y]ou can't have a white station commander' (p. 78), and Blik van Blerk recounts that he was voted out as mayor of Alfredville to be superseded by a black man. Oom Blik also blames the system for his daughter's death.

People may be deceived by other people, but they also delude themselves. As a teenager, Peter refuses to own up to his sexual orientation (he compares a girl who offers him sex to a snake mesmerising small rodents with its eyes [p. 42]) and the place that Bennie occupies in his life. Peter goes back to Alfredville in the pursuit of belonging, meaning and identity, but instead convinces himself that he is looking for a story ('... I'm here to write an article about Desirée's murder' [p. 25]). Peter imagines that he will be able to write the story without making it his, that is, without becoming involved. Yet, as Jacobs insists, narrative is a fundamental part of identity experience (2013:6). When Bennie reaches out emotionally and tries to remind Peter of their relationship, Peter denies his own feelings and rebuffs Bennie. After Bennie's death, the journalist pretends that 'nothing really matters over-much to the cultivated mind' (p. 238). He keeps 'the monsters of the mind' (p. 294) in abeyance by concentrating on the details of the story and narrating these in a lucid fashion. When Nonyameko insists that Peter, after everything that has happened, still does not know himself, this 'borderline engagement' (Jacobs 2013:3) with the other makes him assume accountability for his actions and accept that his interference in the investigation may have brought about Bennie's suicide.



## Space, place and identity

Individuals contend with issues of loss, prejudice and betrayal in diverse settings. The next section of the article focuses on different aspects of space as place in terms of physical and mental orientation and social engagement to illustrate the interaction between identity and location in the context of a country subject to socio-political tensions. This country is South Africa, to which the speaking subject returns in search of the time and self he has betrayed and lost by leaving.

The village of Alfredville symbolises South Africa on a small scale, and South Africa is, in the narrator's words, 'a small country on a backward continent' (p. 35). Being a microcosm of and metaphor for the national landscape and representative of its demographic make-up, Alfredville epitomises the enforced coexistence of different political and moral standpoints in the South African space [as Maria Cabarcos-Traseira notes concerning the room that the two doctors share in Galgut's *The Good Doctor* (2002:52)].

An argument could be made that the rural Karoo village may also be regarded as the farm in the pastoral farm novel. Surrounded by a desert-like landscape, Alfredville, similar to the farm, may be considered an in-between place. (By the same token, South Africa also fluctuates between an African and European identity.) Rita Barnard avers that the farm stands for 'goodness, simplicity, and permanence' (2007:27). The 'good' inhabitants of Alfredville, like those of the farm, mistrust those who come from the city, the supposed site of inequity where material wealth takes precedence over human relations. For instance, Joachim Ferreira terms Stellenbosch 'a nest of liberalism' (p. 68), while Bennie's mother-in-law brands London a place 'full of foreigners' (p. 68) where people live like battery chickens in flats with partners to whom they are not married. Even Peter refers to the 'purpose-obsessed world' (p. 62) of London as 'a city that bought its own baloney and is now bankrupt' and 'the flotsam of a civilisation sinking under the weight of its own pretensions ...' (p. 238). The local veterinarian warns Peter that he (Henk) would be labelled 'a traitor within the gates' for speaking to Peter, Alfredville's prodigal son, who 'sinned against heaven' (p. 145) by going in search of greener pastures in metropolitan cities.

Desirée, Bennie, Peter and other characters in the novel also compare Alfredville to cities (Cape Town and London), but to the town's detriment. Living in this 'aesthetically challenged' (p. 220), desolate little *dorp* with its windmills and farm animals bodes 'an eternity of tedium' (p. 162). These characters variously designate the reservation of antiquated Afrikaner values and apartheid myths as a 'godforsaken place' without interesting human company (James, p. 280), a 'dump' (Desirée, p. 193), and a 'pile of human garbage' (Elrina, p. 37) and 'vrot fish' (Bennie, p. 27). In email messages to his boyfriend in London, Peter caricatures the backwardness and parochialism of the townspeople. Using the city as his 'locus of aesthetic judgment' (Barnard 2007:163), he covertly sneers at the people's choice of literature, décor, clothes

and cuisine. Inclusive of Peter, all the major characters who were born in Alfredville leave for a while: Bennie to go to the army, Desirée to study and Nonyameko to join the ANC – yet all of them return. It would appear that the umbilical cord with the town and Africa cannot be severed.

Even though Peter initially turned his nose up at living in Alfredville, he grows as a character and begins to see a similarity between 'perpetuating [a] pointless existence' (p. 238) in the 'downmarket version' of London, Alfredville, and the metropolis itself. Living in the imperial centre may not be more desirable than living on the colonial periphery: in the country 'the farmer's bakkie stinks up the main street; in London the tube fouds the lungs of a million passengers a day' (p. 291). Peter also communicates to Bennie that success is not subject to where you spend your life: '[Y]ou can be a success in Alfredville and a failure in London' (p. 235). Peter also comes to recognise that, though the stony landscape makes few concessions to conventional ideas of beauty', there is:

a certain appeal in the very emptiness, something melancholy in its meagreness and yet comforting in its permanence. [Unlike London] [i]t's a landscape without clutter, without noise, without much emotion, neutral, perhaps even negative. It's not a landscape that conforms readily to a formula: it refuses to be reduced to a cliché or even a meaning. (p. 62)

At a later stage, the protagonist also delights in the mellow beauty of the village after the harsh glare of day has passed and contemplates that that the rural surroundings may render a 'tranquil refuge from a more purpose-obsessed world' (p. 62). For a moment Peter hankers after a rustic lifestyle. This setting, imbued with memories of his past, provides a point of orientation in the pursuit of belonging, meaning and identity. In this stable and safe place where one can live freely, transformation of the self can occur, as indeed happens to the speaking subject. Peter envisions returning to the 'stony comfort' (p. 62) of Alfredville's 'bright open spaces and dry radiant heat' (p. 45) which seem preferable to London's 'relentless drizzle' (p. 45) and 'pervasive gloom' (p. 199). Besides, Peter does not have a home in London.

In terms of the 'constitutive dialectic between person and place' (a phrase by John Weston that Barnard borrows (2007:43)), postmodern diasporic subjects can establish their home and realise their identity in diverse settings (Hall 1990:235), or as Alfredville's Congolese car guard, Vincent, puts it: '... our garden is everywhere' (p. 231). Pierre Bourdieu alludes to home or *habitus* as a set of social qualities and norms that governs how we think and act (1991:51). Another French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, believes that the houses we were born and brought up in make-up our first universe (1994:4). Enclosing memories of our past within their walls, homes are part of who we are. An extension of family life, homes represent attachment, belonging and intimacy. When Peter was at school, he enjoyed the security of a family home in Alfredville (pp. 54–55). In London, he is a border figure, always on the outskirts of James's circle of friends, emotionally adrift and lost. Peter, furthermore, lives





in a flat that belongs to his partner. Because the narrator does not have a home or own ground, the narrator does not have 'a nest for his body, padded to his measure' (to use Bachelard's image) where he can live 'in complete confidence' (1994:101, 103). Bennie's wife, Chrisna, equates staying in a flat to a life support system, not a life. 'It's like battery chickens who lay an egg every time they switch the lights on' (p. 291). Indeed, the flat in which Peter lives does not supply sanctuary from the loneliness and alienation of the external world, even more so in a foreign country. When interim accommodation, a flat ordinarily cannot anchor a person in his or her place of origin or support a stable and secure self. Uprooted and estranged from his point of origin, Peter persists in the uncertain position of the periphery where one participates without belonging and faces feelings of marginality and *Unheimlichkeit* (not-at-homeness). According to Melissa Steyn, home has become an alien place in a post-colonial era (2001:157), and the protagonist pronounces himself a 'foreigner in two countries' (p. 237).

Martin Heidegger holds that who we are cannot be separated from our position in the world: we think and act only through 'being in the world', that is, being located in place. *Da-sein* (*being there*) occupies a place, and '[d]welling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth': to say that 'mortals are is to say that *in dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations' (1996:100, 97). Thus, spatial relations determine subjectivity and perspective. As Barnard puts it, our identity is attached to the places that define us (2007:63). Since Peter has emigrated from the place where his identity and sense of belonging were formed, he can no longer associate his consciousness with place. In other words, the relationship between identity and place is destabilised, and the essence of his being becomes disoriented. Without a nurturing location, the self is neither here nor there, neither one nor the other. For this reason, Peter prevaricates, rather than giving Nonyameko a straightforward answer to her questions of whether he sees himself a writer or a journalist, a British or South African citizen. Nonyameko Mhlabeni, whose business card boldly announces her identity, qualifications and occupation – BA (Fort Hare), MA (UCT), PhD (Boston), Director of the Institute of Women's Mental Health at the University of the Witwatersrand – may call him a freelance journalist if she insists on a label (p. 29). And he has *become* English, if she likes. Throughout the interchange, Peter refuses to state that he is a freelance journalist or English.

Nonyameko subsequently demands of Peter how other people classify him if he will not do so himself. Being relational beings, we derive our identity from the people around us. In Peter's opinion, the essence of our being depends on our national, social, sexual, professional and racial identities (pp. 96–97). Conceiving of himself as a postmodern subject, Peter resists a fixed, one-dimensional interpretation of identity but draws on multiple choices of self-definition. On the contrary, availing oneself of an assortment of identities that are always in flux, dynamic and shifting may be construed as another way Peter dodges self-awareness and self-definition.

Regardless of the above facts, the protagonist later acknowledges that he is indeed a British citizen. Steyn theorises that a contingent of South Africans of British descent tend to hold onto their European identities (2001:31). Europe, as the settlers' former home and the antithesis of Africa, remains these people's source of 'spatial and cultural meaning' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1998:91), and supplies them with a stable sense of self. Conversely, certain South Africans of Dutch descent would rather associate themselves with the African continent. Though Peter may claim that he is British, he points out that the 'Brits can spot a foreign accent fifty years on' (p. 96), and his boyfriend categorises him as 'the Saffer honky' (p. 69). He further makes known that his English persona seems unreal to him, 'part of somebody else's existence' (p. 199), somebody to whom it is difficult to ascribe a name and identity.

As the protagonist conceives of himself as a postmodern subject, he avails himself of multiple choices of self-definition that are always in flux, dynamic and shifting. Without a definite identity, his existence becomes insubstantial to him (p. 199). This insubstantiality arises from the character's so-called British consciousness that does not stem from a 'shared cultural remembering' (Rutherford 1990:223) of experiences, codes, rituals and myths. Neither has he sufficiently oriented himself in space to transform a transcultural location into his new home (1990:89). From the above discussion, the reader deduces that the traversal of the distance between South Africa and England has produced neither a harmonious intercontinental milieu nor an integrated selfhood. Peter's displacement has obscured the boundary between home and world. Being neither here nor there, his postmodern subjectivity comprises a condition of existential isolation and ostracism. Because the character has not succeeded in deconstructing and reconfiguring his identity in terms of the spaces in which he dwells, his perception of self fragments and he suffers an intrapersonal schism of subjectivity. Towards the end of the narrative, he confesses that he has 'no volition, no identity even' (p. 291).

Although the above argument raises questions about the protagonist's reliability as a narrator, the readers still identify with Peter Jacobs: his facing up to his faults proves that he has grown as a human being and acquired self-awareness while staying in Alfredville. For one, Peter realises that he has ignored crucial details about himself and other people. He, the cosmopolite, is just as much capable of murder as the uncomely, uneducated housewife who has never ventured beyond the limits of the rural town where she was born. Chrisna killed Peter's cousin and Peter indirectly took the life of Chrisna's husband when he spurned him. Peter feels compassion for this woman whose greatest achievement in life was marrying Bennie, just as Bennie's greatest achievement was befriending Peter. Peter also redeems himself when he assumes accountability for the misery he has caused: 'the blood on [his] hands' (p. 297). His 'time-hardened carapace' of irony – his 'defence against feeling too much and showing too much' (p. 297) – cracks, and the once supercilious and self-satisfied journalist and world traveller



admits his culpability and is reduced to an insecure infant, clinging to the hand of a black woman 'for all the world as if [he] could thus anchor [him]self to some saving vestige of identity' (p. 297). Nonyameko's assertion is validated: we are relational beings and we frame our personality and invent meaning in relation to others – those who are the same and those who are different.

Having crossed geographical boundaries and explored different spaces, Peter is able to transcend his historical identity and its limitations. Jacobs would refer to his identity as transitive (2011:97–98). The narrator renounces depreciating, preconceived notions about others. To quote from Barnard's *Apartheid and Beyond*, when the once 'unknown and repressed "other" of imperialism begin[s] to speak' (2007:47) (namely Nonyameko), the white man listens to her voice and enters into her life-world when he accompanies her to the township – a location which Barnard considers unpredictable and liminal (*ibid*:85). It is in this location that Peter is 'drawn out of his solipsistic state – and back into contemporary South African history' (Jacobs 2011:95). Having reneged on colonial values and apartheid prejudices and cultivated a syncretised, cross-cultural subjectivity within inclusive global structures, Peter Jacobs accepts Nonyameko Mhlabe's racial and sexual otherness on equal terms and establishes a dialogical relationship with her. In Shaun McEwan's estimation, relinquishing erroneous assumptions about what the self should be, and what others are, may 'provide the starting point for a reconception of white male identity, one based on inclusion rather than exclusion and therefore more suitable for an inclusive and egalitarian society' (1996:69). *Lost Ground* ends with the intimation of the speaking subject's developed self-awareness and salvation.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the white South African man as represented by the protagonist in Heyns's fifth novel does not know to which of two opposing worlds he belongs and conceives of himself as a foreigner on two separate continents. Hence, doubts conveyed by the literature about the exploits of the colonial exercise and its consequences have become more notable since the repeal of a policy of racial categorisation. In addition to the former settler's perception of self and other, Europe and Africa, the article has investigated this person's awareness of identity and the meaning of his existence in relation to the different other and the spaces in which he finds himself.

The protagonist-narrator, who returns to the country of his birth and his hometown to recover the time and self he has lost, reclaims some measure of 'lost ground' when he reassesses his identity in terms of the past and assumes accountability for the consequences of his actions. The narrative concludes with the character's redemption as well as a glimmer of hope for reconciliation between the races as Peter Jacobs crosses the boundary between self and other to

establish a relation with a black woman – the other. Accordingly, Heyns's white male protagonist relieves his identity of its restrictions and makes strides towards locating it: in people if not in places.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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