



# A “spirit” of home and exile: a re-evaluation of Breyten Breytenbach’s *Memory of snow and of dust*

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## Abstract

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*This article notes the emergence of a global consciousness that recognises the need to move beyond well-worn categories of interpretation. In exploring the concepts of home and exile in Breyten Breytenbach’s novel, “Memory of snow and of dust” (1989), the article examines how fresh perspectives in postcolonial studies – identified as a ‘spiritual turn’ – allow one to gain access to new insights into the exilic condition. The author captures and conveys the experience of exile, and envisages through the exile’s ‘double vision’ a more complicated notion of home. The distressing journey into a new awareness of what constitutes home is examined. Furthermore, the article considers the restless, yet regenerative condition of exile that – although characterised by mental anguish – makes possible a more fluid response to spatiality. The renewed interest in (and legitimisation of) the spiritual in postcolonial studies lends further insight into an alternative response to the search for a place/space to call home. This article concludes with an affirmation of the relevance of “Memory of snow and of dust”, as a novel that challenges one to cultivate an expanded awareness – that moves beyond the material – in times during which the overlapping boundaries of home and exile are becoming a global condition.*

## Opsomming

### 'n "Gees" van tuiste en ballingskap: 'n herevaluering van Breyten Breytenbach se *Memory of snow and of dust*

Hierdie artikel dui 'n globale bewussyn aan die behoefte erken om afgeslete kategorieë van interpretasie agter te laat. Die konsepte van tuiste en ballingskap in Breyten Breytenbach se roman "Memory of snow and of dust" (1989) word in hierdie artikel ondersoek asook die manier waarop vars perspektiewe in postkoloniale studies – beskryf as 'n "geestelike wending" – nuwe insigte bied in die toestand van ballingskap. Die skrywer beeld die ervaring van ballingskap uit en vertolk dit deur middel van die banneling se 'dubbele visie'. Sodoende skep hy 'n ingewikkelder begrip van 'n tuiste te skep. Die ontstellende reis na 'n nuwe bewussyn van 'tuiste' word ondersoek. Verder beskou die artikel die onrustige, maar vernuwende toestand van ballingskap wat – hoewel gekenmerk deur geestelike angs – 'n meer veranderlike reaksie op ruimtelikheid moontlik maak. Die hernude belangstelling in (en legitimering van) die geestelike in postkoloniale studie bied verdere insig in 'n alternatiewe antwoord op die soeke na 'n plek/ruimte om in tuis te voel. Ten slotte bevestig hierdie artikel die relevansie van "Memory of snow and of dust" as 'n roman. Dit daag die leser uit om 'n uitgebreide bewustheid te kweek – wat verby die grense van die materiële beweeg – in 'n tyd waarin die oorvleueling van die grense van tuiste en ballingskap 'n globale toestand word.

## 1. Introduction

We live in an age in which boundaries are dissolving and new global maps are emerging. In his eloquently titled *Cosmopolitanism: ethics in a world of strangers* (2006), Anthony Appiah discusses our responsibility as "global citizens"; a responsibility that involves entangled concepts of home and exile. One author whose writing embodies the condition of the cosmopolitan, whose critical and aesthetic stance is shaped by alertness to the exilic experience, is the South African Breyten Breytenbach. He is an Afrikaans poet and genre-crossing novelist/essayist, painter, political dissident, or social goad, and – less easily categorisable – spiritual voyager. The multifaceted Breytenbach is captured in the book *Memory of snow and of dust* (1989). This novel is also a poetic drama, and a metaphysical disquisition (exposition). When the book appeared, it was received in the context of opposition to apartheid. What is being argued here is that this novel has pertinence beyond its initial climate of reception. Its difficult passage of exploration through the double vision of

“home and exile”/“home in exile”/“exile at home” increasingly captures the temper of global times, migrancy, movement, malleable identities that characterise what has come to be called a “post”-condition, whether post-apartheid, or more broadly speaking, post-colonial. Furthermore, it is interesting to point out that what recently (in postcolonial studies) has been identified as a “spiritual turn”, for example by White (2006), Eagleton (2009), Brown (2009), Mathuray (2009), and Dimitriu (2010), is more than a tentative turn in the novel – a book that had filtered its “politics” through metaphysics. As such, this article will suggest that *Memory of snow and of dust* deserves republication in today’s global context, influenced as it is by the exilic condition and its double vision.

In their reflections on the nature of exile, Bhabha (2001), Said (2001) and Quayson (2000), among others, all refer to *double vision* as a heightened awareness of both a past and a present environment. Bhabha (2001:42) refers to a vision that is disorientating, being shared by the emerging border communities as “envisaged in a *marginality*”; to Quayson (2000:141, 143), double vision, or double consciousness occurs as a result of cross-cultural initiation. Said (2001:186) phrases it as the “awareness of simultaneous dimensions” that overdetermines the exile’s life.<sup>1</sup> As for Rushdie (1991: 19), his description of *double perspective* may apply equally to Breytenbach:

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground

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1 As has been amply elaborated on elsewhere (Jansen, 2010), Breytenbach’s novel *Memory of snow and of dust* is infused with views on exile. Jacobs (2004:151) for example, notes that it is Breytenbach’s continuous struggle with what it means to be – at the same time – an Afrikaner, an African, and a South African that constitutes the strength of his poetry and prose. The task of writing in Africa is also problematised as the novel is seen as an attempt

... by Breytenbach to ‘weave a map of words’ in order to bring both the continent of Africa and his native South Africa ‘to an intelligible surface of flesh and blood’ in relation to himself as writing and written subject (Jacobs, 2004:163).

Another postmodernist reading of Breytenbach’s novel has been offered by Reckwitz (1999:92, 94), who identifies “the memorising self” as neither coherent, nor reliable: a “schizophrenic identity”. Whereas Reckwitz’s study offers valuable insight into Breytenbach’s representation of the experience of exile and imprisonment from a postmodern perspective, this article suggests that a reading of the novel requires a more in-depth investigation of the themes of *home* and *exile* – considered as postcolonial concerns.

may be, it is not infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles. (Rushdie, 1991:15.)

The details of Breytenbach’s exile are well known. Initially influenced by the French *avant-garde*, he arrived in Paris at a relatively young age, together with other Afrikaans writers, dubbed “die Sestigers”. His politicisation took on a local directness: when he married a Vietnamese woman, he was declared *persona non grata* by the Afrikaner National Party government. So began his exile – partly enforced (his migrancy), partly voluntary (his cosmopolitanism). His early style – Modernist, experimental – increasingly absorbed an acerbic political comment. Trapped by the apartheid security police as he entered South Africa on a “political mission”, he was sentenced to prison under the Terrorism Act. His act of terrorism was referred to by the judge as being an act of treason to his Afrikaans inheritance. It was this inheritance that Breytenbach would disavow when he called himself a bastard with connections, not only to Afrikaners, but also to Cape Malays, and even the Khoi. If he disavowed the Afrikaans inheritance, however, it was its debased form and political ideology only, not the language’s potential of creative dissent. Elements of the fictionalised autobiographical trajectory form the plot line of *Memory of snow and of dust*, which is set in Europe, Africa and South Africa.

The novel depicts African and South African characters in Europe who, having left a previous home, are unable to belong in their new surroundings. The book consists of two parts. In part one, titled “Utéropia” – a mixture of “‘Europe’ and ‘Ethiopia’, ‘uterus’ and ‘utopia’” (Jacobs, 2004:167) – we are introduced to Meheret, an Ethiopian journalist and aspiring writer who lives in Paris. She becomes romantically involved with Mano, a coloured South African actor, who is recruited on an undercover mission back to South Africa, where he is arrested and sentenced to death. Part one consists mainly of Meheret’s recollections of the past, as she, now carrying Mano’s child, writes down the story of Mano and herself. This is interrupted by descriptions of her Ethiopian family, in an attempt to preserve these memories for their child. Barnum (Breytenbach’s alter ego), another exiled character, acts as a mentor to Meheret, instructing her in the writing process. Part two, titled “On the noble art of walking in No Man’s Land”, mostly comprises letters that Mano (identified as Anom) compiles while in Pollsmoor prison; letters, in which he reveals his insights into what “Home” means for him.

## 2. Home and/as exile

For thousands of people in exile, home has become a contested site that is no longer exclusive, no longer one-dimensional, but refers to both the home that is left behind, and the new home that is established in a foreign land. Breytenbach's novel explores the difficulty that the characters experience in locating home, whether in *Africa* or in *Europe* – the terms representing more than physical places, but acting, generally, as points of reference in a metaphysical quest. The two protagonists, Mano and Meheret – both born in Africa and now living in Paris – are in search of belonging, which remains elusive in their foreign surroundings. The character Barnum considers the difficulty of exiles who attempt integration into Parisian culture.

[T]hey try and move in under the northern blanket, lying as quiet and prim as poor country cousins on the edge of the bed, with a back exposed to the cold draught, pretending not to hear the snide remarks about dirty feet, snoring and fleas. (p. 83.)<sup>2</sup>

The nature of the dislocation is poetically captured by Mano's observation that, "an exile lives abroad as a moon does in a lake" (p. 23). Although they attempt to become a part of their surroundings, exiles are unable to fully immerse themselves deeply enough in the foreign environment, and have to be content with a surface-belonging. Breytenbach likens this experience to being a "translation". He states that "you will be a translation ... a translated version of yourself" (Dimitriu, 1996:98), able to function in your surroundings, yet never fully at home.

The novel shows that while most characters do not belong in Europe, they are unable to recapture a sense of belonging in Africa either. The fact that one cannot – in reality – return home is a central theme in *Memory of snow and of dust*. Breytenbach emphasises this trope through his use of a recurring, rhetorical question: "Which Africa?" This anticipates the realisation that it is impossible to reconcile the Africa that exists in one's memory with the Africa that exists in reality, and which one no longer inhabits. Mano and Meheret have the following exchange:

'Let's return to Africa,' he whispered. 'Let's not stay in this land of selfish and superficial people,' ... I put a finger on his lips:

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2      References with only a page number refer to Breytenbach (1989).

'You know it's not possible. Africa? Which Africa? Yours or mine?' (p. 7.)

Meheret's response indicates an understanding that the two of them are unable to return home; that the home which Mano holds onto is an Africa that exists only in his mind. This type of situation is reflected on by Rushdie (1991:10) in relation to exiled Indian writers.

But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that which we have lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

The novel warns against the misinterpretation of memory as a fixed entity. Instead, memory is likened to particles of "snow and of dust" – as suggested by the title – that remain elusive. For Mano, nevertheless, it is not possible to reject the notion of Africa as home. Mano still believes that he can return to Africa and reclaim his homeland. However, as it turns out, upon his return he is arrested and sentenced to death. It is only at this late stage, and whilst in prison, that he realises that Africa – he begins to particularise, South Africa – is no longer his home. He is forced to ask himself, "Where is home?" (p. 280.)

Breytenbach has always reflected on home, homelessness and states-in-between; on various forms and aspects of liminality. Those who no longer have a place to call home could, according to Breytenbach, be classified as inhabitants of "the Middle World" – a mentally constructed reality. He declares himself a citizen of this alternative dimension, in which existence is characterised by rootlessness. Breytenbach (2009:143) explains that

[t]o be of the Middle World is to have broken away from the parochial, to have left 'home' for good (or for worse) while carrying all of it with you and to have arrived on foreign shores (at the outset you thought of it as 'destination', but not for long) feeling at ease there without ever being 'at home'. Sensing too, that you have now fatally lost the place you may have wanted to run back to. Have you also lost face, or is it the 'original face' now unveiled? Exile? Maybe. But exile is memory disease expressing itself in spastic and social behaviour: people find it a mysterious ailment and pity you greatly [...] Exile could be passage and you may well speak of 'passage people'. Yet, the Middle World is finality beyond exile.

This insight into the exile's awareness of an in-between identity exposes the pain that permeates the exilic condition, and which fortifies the search for a place that can momentarily provide a sense of unity and belonging.

In spite of the rootlessness that is such an integral part of the exile's existence, a constant yearning for home remains. Mano's journey to South Africa can be seen as a journey of initiation towards a new state of awareness – a liminal space outside of social structures, a “No Man's Land”/“Middle-World”, symbolically speaking – in which an alternative construction of home is imagined. Similarly, his eventual death can be interpreted as the necessary sacrifice in a rite of passage that will allow him to move from one state of consciousness to another. As Barnum explains: “Sacrifice, we all know, gives second sight.” (p. 187.) In this awareness, a new level of consciousness is reached, in which home becomes rooted in the mind, rather than in any physical location. Rushdie (1991:280) explains that “[t]he migrant intellect roots itself in itself, in its own capacity for imagining and reimagining the world”. It is in prison that Mano becomes aware of his own capacity to reimagine the world, and it is this capacity that allows him to reconstruct an alternative vision of home.

### 3. Home and/in prison: “On the noble art of walking in No Man's land”

Upon his return to South Africa, Mano (renamed *Anom/anonymous*) is arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to death. These forms of separation from society are seen as a rite of passage, a veritable initiation into a new state of awareness. As Viljoen and Van der Merwe (2007:10-11) have said, “initiations are symbolically ... separated from their usual social life and status ... The old self dies so that a new self can be born”. While prison isolates Anom from the surrounding world, his new transitional state is determined by the prison environment. He recognises a new home in an alternative reality, outside of society, in a liminal space – a *No Man's Land*, a *Middle World* – and at the same time, a vision for the future. Ultimately, it is within the painful experience of separation that a new homeland is located: a “homeland of perpetual movement” (Breytenbach, 1996: 40-41), a movement of the mind.

To be able to function in a hostile space/environment – as suggested by the novel, and also by philosopher Bachelard (1969) – continual self-invention is necessary. However, as *Memory of snow and of dust* illustrates, the metamorphosis required to translate the

self for an unhomely environment is a laborious process, which demands the death of our old inflexible identities, a process akin to "the casting off of old skin" (p. 299). The metamorphosis of Mano's name into Anom Niemand (the identity he takes on when re-entering South Africa), is emblematic of the process of continual mental movement/adjustment that is necessary in order simply to walk on and survive in a hostile space. Furthermore, Anom's philosophical reflections in prison – contained in the memoir "On the noble art of walking in No Man's land" (p. 222) – illustrate the importance of thinking beyond the past. He notes that "[i]n my cell – now permanently shackled as is the case with all condemns – I quite forgot the art of walking, I became impervious to the outside world" (p. 268). When a chameleon is smuggled into his cell, Anom realises that it is the ability to "change colour" (p. 282) and to "adapt to life" (p. 281) that allows the chameleon to live, to move on.

Initially, then, it is in prison – a most unlikely space in which to break free of radical alienation – that the creation of an alternative home is accomplished. In spite of hardship and humiliation, home as psychological construct is constantly redefined through Mano-alias-Anom's experiences and insights. During his imprisonment, Mano learns that while the prison may confine the body, it cannot restrict the mind.

To survive from day to day, Mano constructs a web of inner dialogues through which he searches for explanations that help him navigate the alienation of imprisonment. Although he is utterly alone, his mind is filled with various imaginary characters/players of what he refers to as "the Game" – a game that is mentally constructed to resemble his life; the players of the Game being emanations of psychological states and coping mechanisms. In drafting his memoir, "On the noble art of walking in No Man's land" (p. 222), Mano/Anom shares with us his meditations on social structure and space. He also shares various insights into his prison experiences, as contained in letters that are written to Noma, his father. He represents not only a patriarchal father figure, but generically, various structures of (social/political) authority. The creation of various imaginary/alternative characters and realities enables Anom to control the prison space – in a psychological sense – while also helping him to deepen his understanding of the metaphysical implications underpinning the experience of imprisonment. In short, the prison space represents an acute form of exile and homelessness. However, it is possible to transcend alienation through the very nature of memory, which makes reconstruction possible.



#### 4. A spiritual turn, a journey of initiation

The journey – the noble walk in *No Man's Land* – is essentially a spiritual journey: non-linear, and antistructural. It anticipates what has recently begun to be considered a new direction in postcolonial studies, namely, a turn that moves beyond the well-worn “post” categories of race, class and gender. As pointed out by the editors of the second edition of the landmark publication, *The post-colonial studies reader*, “[a]nalyzes of the sacred have been one of the most neglected, and maybe one of the most rapidly expanding areas of post-colonial study” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2006:8). In the last decade, or so, there has been a renewed emphasis on spiritual matters – or a “spiritual turn”, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. This emphasis helps broaden the scope of postcolonial studies by acknowledging the role that belief, both individual and collective, plays in contemporary society. The terms used are *spiritual* or *sacred*, not *religious*. The distinction is significant: the spiritual – used here as a portmanteau word (for an in-depth analysis, cf. Dimitriu, 2010), – refers to subjective expressions of faith-related identification and belief. While these do not necessarily exclude religion, such subjective expressions are not necessarily conflated with organised forms of faith, as encapsulated in dogma and doctrine.

As deployed in post-debate, a spiritual turn serves as antidote to materialist and secularist beliefs, as associated with forms of reductionist positivism – the latter being often linked to ontological crises in contemporary Western societies. Chakrabarty, for example, argues that while

... the historical and analytical legacy within the western [world] has prevailed over the more imaginative, responsive, intuitive engagements with the real, [...] an accommodation between the two is possible and necessary (Brown, 2009:11).

Such statements anticipate a more inclusive approach, which draws on Western as well as non-Western passages of thought, in an era in which “internationalisation is causing a syncretic, disjunctive world that demands new ways of doing and thinking” as Gaylard (2005:63) points out in relation to Africa. If the above appears to be a digression, it is, in fact, a necessary context for the dimension of the spiritual that has long been an associative feature of Breytenbach's thought and response to physical existence. It is a response that incorporates both Zen Buddhist, and by analogy, traditional (that is, non-Cartesian) aspects of what we may refer to as “African” processes of sense-making.

Breytenbach has always been fascinated by the aura of Zen Buddhist philosophy. A form of spirituality that originated in the Far East, Zen Buddhism illuminates the artificial separations that exist in dualistic models of thinking, for example mind/body, form/emptiness, self/other. According to the Zen worldview, riddled as it is with paradoxical thinking, all entities are interdependent: the whole is contained in each of its parts, and vice versa. To reach this higher state of consciousness, rigid mindsets need to be transcended, and the embedded sense of dualism (between part/individual and whole/mankind) needs to be overcome. Underlying and informing this new state of awareness is a deep-seated sense of impermanence; it is the journey/process through which new states of being are achieved that really matters, and not a specific goal or destination. With the emphasis on flux, movement and transformation, the fostering of a greater awareness of interdependence and impermanence – known as *satori* – may lead to the removal of ignorance. As Suzuki (1977: 96) puts it:

In Zen there must be *satori*; there must be a general mental upheaval which destroys the old accumulation of intellection and lays down the foundation for a new life; there must be the awakening of a new sense which will review the old things from a hitherto undreamed-of angle of observation.

Many traditional African beliefs resonate with the above-mentioned tenets of Zen Buddhism, especially with its emphasis on the interdependence between individual and community, mind and body, part and whole. It is a way of thinking that is alien to Cartesian models of individualism and their excessive emphasis on the cognitive, at the expense of emotional, experience. The latter has often been rejected, as Goduka (2000:63) points out: "indigenous ways of knowing have been in the past, and are currently, devalued and undermined within the academy" and beyond.

## **5. A spiritual home, or home-in-homelessness**

*Memory of snow and of dust* is inspired by both African and Zen beliefs. This becomes evident in various characters' (Anom's, for example) reflections on impermanence and interdependence. It is through the suggestively referred to "noble art of walking" – in fact, an internal loitering of the mind – that fixed mental concepts are discarded, allowing for new insights to take shape. In Anom's words: "I know that the path [of spiritual liberation] is a way of walking." (p. 294.) Walking is understood here as an external support of mindful awareness. Interestingly, the French philosopher, De Certeau,

although not subscribing to any particular faith or creed, offers a similar emphasis on walking as a vehicle for transcending conventional ways of thinking and belonging. Practising the art of walking, according to De Certeau (2000), enables one to challenge various mechanisms of authority that control space, and to redefine spatiality by constantly destabilising and reimagining its meaning. He advocates walking as a process that enables the inner transformation of reality, an act which allows one to “evade discipline, without thereby being outside its sphere” (De Certeau, 2000:105). Like Breytenbach, De Certeau’s writing illustrates how one’s intuitive response to external surroundings can lead to the creation of new mind-scapes.

It is through a change in attitude that an alternative space is created in prison, a space through which – as Breytenbach suggests – prisoners can transcend the painful restrictions of their existence, to experience a sense of home beyond the material.

As the prisoner is journeying towards a heightened state of awareness, a paradoxical sense of home-within-homelessness becomes possible: a new, unexpected homeland that is located in the mind. Anom reveals that, during a dream, he has become aware of an “alternative” landscape.

I became a monkey, I attempted to find my way out of the maze  
... and found myself at sea. Luckily, Kashyapa, my alter ego,  
smashed the chains of illusion by explaining to me that there is  
no way. He encouraged me to take the gap. It was like telling  
me to walk on! I saw a magical landscape opening up before  
me – so, becoming, like an instant, a batting of the eyelid, an  
insight, a slip-slit, a life at last. (p. 292.)

The above magical landscape refers to Anom’s new home, a liminal heaven, where Barnum (alias Breytenbach) is waiting to congratulate him: “At last! Please once more accept my apologies and my congratulations. Welcome to No Man’s Land!” (p. 294.) However, this vision of home is ephemeral; it is to be enjoyed as “a batting of the eyelid”, a momentary letting go of ordinary pursuits. As the Zen Buddhist master Chang-tzu states: “The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror. It grasps nothing; it refuses nothing. It receives, but does not keep.” (Sienaert, 2001:35.) Thus a sense of unity can be achieved, at last, within a construct of home that embraces the instability of the prisoner’s existence. Home reveals itself as no longer located within the geography of the material world. It can be found, instead, within moments of reflection and contemplation.

An understanding of a spiritual home (as a heightened state of mindful awareness) as described above, is not easily attained. As Breytenbach says: it can only be attained through a profound metamorphosis, a transformation of self into "a point of passage" (Sienaert, 2001:35). The character Lazarus, one of the players in Anom's mental game, explains during a session of internal conversation taking place among the players/characters in Anom's mind, that to learn the noble art of walking is "essentially the faculty of letting go of the so-called self" (p. 273). The idea of a fixed self/ego is repeatedly undermined in Breytenbach's *oeuvre*. He insists that "we are being metamorphosed into new beings all the time" (Dimitriu, 1997:74). The ego is abandoned, and what emerges is a more complex conception of the self, which now acts as a conduit, a "point of passage" between and among people. In a final letter to Meheret, Anom says:

The restrictions are gone; I'm marking my remaining moments with images, words, silences. This is what life is really like. And this is the true liberation ... I am a passage imperfectly aware of what passes through me and of the fact that I'm a passage. (p. 295.)

Such a worldview implies a perception of the self that is capable of fully embracing alterity – a worldview not unfamiliar to African spirituality – a worldview that requires a radical opening up of the self.

## **6. Writing the spiritual turn: rewriting memory**

It is the process of writing that helps transform one's self into a "point of passage". It is largely through the creative writing act that the imprisoned person is more able to recognise the constructed nature of reality, and thus go beyond rigid classifications of the self. Writing also expresses the art of walking and associated journeys into new areas of consciousness. In the novel, we are presented with various writings, and at different levels: Anom is mentally drafting a memoir, "On the noble art of walking in No Man's Land" (discussed above); he is writing imaginary letters to Noma, as well as several plays. In these imaginary plays, the so-called "players of the Game" are cast as characters who, through their actions and comments, lead Anom to greater insights:

In the inkscape – where steps matter – there is a coming and a going and a staying put [...], there is a mirroring, and so multiple insights. (p. 248.)

The various voices that emerge from Anom's writing fill his mind with conversations that expand his consciousness and broaden his understanding.

While the writer is able to point us in directions other than those recognised by social protocol, she/he is also able to access a different kind of memory. In a dream that offers meditations on movement, Anom establishes that, while walking is the individual method, it is also important to "trace a [collective] memory" (p. 215) – an invocation of what Breytenbach perceives as the archetype of memory in Africa. "'African' memory does not conjure up experience dualistically, as 'an insurmountable demarcation between *reality* and *illusion* and *magic*'" (p. 103). Rather, memory is perceived as cyclical, with overlapping intimations of self and other, part and whole. In contrast to most Western models of memory (linear, chronological), Breytenbach suggests a return to an African memory that is closer to the classical (Greek) model.

To regain a state of primordial memory, Breytenbach advocates a way of thinking that transcends the restrictive categories of home and exile: a *rewriting of alienation and existential nomadism* (nomadism in the sense of both carceral and exilic experience).

What is it that constitutes the anguished awareness of exile? ... Is it the fact of never fully becoming part of your new surroundings? Such will also be the case of many indigenous categories, both at 'home' and in 'exile', all the marginalised sectors of the population of any country. Is it simply because it is 'unnatural'? Is it still unnatural? Masses of people, in groups or as individuals, have been uprooted, deported, resettled during our century. And are we not nomads at heart? (p. 113-114.)

When Meheret, Mano's lover, asks: "are we not nomads at heart?" (p. 114), she is implicitly questioning a socially derived definition of home that implies a stable geographical location. Meheret's question suggests an African sense of belonging – even as a nomad – and refers to a historical time in which people wandered from place to place without attachment to a specific geographical location. To embrace an African concept of home is to return to a rhythm of life which lies "beyond the realm of dichotomy" (p. 159); an idealisation,

to a certain extent, as Breytenbach is aware, but an ideal of aspirational value.<sup>3</sup>

The deep desire to reconnect with ancient African rhythms is also evident in another form of creative writing: the poem written by Mano for his unborn child, "Lovesong to an unborn child" (p. 192-201):

How I longed for you ... You came forth from my loins *and yet you precede me* ... ancient one, countenance of flight, the hidden Africa of my bones (p. 200-201).

The poem can be interpreted as a longing for ancient African patterns of existence, including nomadism – a recurring theme in Breytenbach's work. Thus, the child's anticipated birth can also be seen as a longing for a spiritual homeland, which – if reclaimed – has the potential to facilitate an alternative sense of memory and belonging, an alternative awareness of home.

## 7. Conclusion

It has been argued here that in a world informed by border crossings and cultural diversity, rigid categories of home and exile need to be challenged. Marginals (whether exiles or prisoners) search for a new home as an expression of a new worldview. Such a new vision of home emerges in the novel – paradoxically – from a space that represents the unhomely, the unfamiliar, the "hostile" – the space of prison and exile.

The prisoner's mental suffering (an extreme embodiment of the exilic condition) acts, surprisingly, as a catalyst through which the protagonist gains insight into a new form of consciousness. A consciousness that acknowledges the interdependence of the material and the spiritual, past and present, self and other. It is a consciousness that seeks an amalgamation of ancient African and Zen Buddhist worldviews. Through the writing self's transcendence of the hostile space, "home-*and*-exile" becomes "home-*in*-exile", a site of inner liberation.

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3 Breytenbach realises that a romanticised version of Africa is not entirely accurate, given the horrors of both present and past history on the African continent. The nostalgia and idealistic views of Africa that permeate his earlier work, have been followed by a far more sceptical attitude towards the continent in later years. However, Breytenbach continues to make use of Africa as a romantic-symbolist opposition to the analytical Cartesian mindset.

In conclusion, the hope is that *Memory of snow and of dust* has been shown to be relevant beyond its original reception as a novel of political dissent. In 1989, at the time of first publication, the book would have suggested a challenging analogy: not social revolution, but mental-cognitive revolution beyond the rigidities of the apartheid system. What the book may suggest today, during post-apartheid, is a significance even closer to Breytenbach's original purpose: that even if living in a politically liberated state, the human mind remains unliberated. (The crudities of public discourse in South Africa at present are but one manifestation of closed minds.) As suggested at the outset, *Memory of snow and of dust*, in contrast, anticipated the recent spiritual turn in postcolonial studies. The challenge of the novel – undeservedly out of print – is to cultivate an expanded awareness, regardless of the places or spaces in which one lives.

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### **Key concepts:**

belonging  
exile  
home  
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spirituality

### **Kernbegrippe:**

bannelingskap  
geborgenheid  
Postkolonialisme  
spiritualiteit  
tuiste