Plotting the South African colonial unconscious: Subaltern Studies and literary criticism

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Subaltern Studies historiography remains one of the most significant contributions to the project of colonial discourse analysis, which has been the focus of so much recent work in the humanities. Since its inauguration in the early 1980s, the historians involved have been primarily concerned with the attempt to write the 'histories of the margins' into a more central role than they customarily occupied in much colonial, national–bourgeois and contemporary western historiography alike. While its initial focus was India, Subaltern Studies has been adapted to a range of other colonized regions, including (southern) Africa (Cooper 1994; Moore 1998; Ranger 1990; Engels and Marks 1994). More specifically, Subaltern Studies has sought to recuperate evidence of the agency of subaltern constituencies within colonial society, particularly in so far as this expresses opposition to the dominant order. In the absence of any substantial corpus of surviving material which represents this resistance from the subaltern's own perspective, Subaltern Studies has instead been devoted to recovering the 'voice' of subaltern rebelliousness from within the interstices of official colonial archives. In 1983, Ranajit Guha, the principal inspiration behind the project, identified the essential problem facing his revisionist colleagues in attempting to reconstruct subjectivities which had been configured and assigned forms of identity and agency according to the interests, understandings and psychic investments of the dominant order:

How then are we to get in touch with the consciousness of insurgency when our access to it is barred thus by the discourse of counter-insurgency? The difficulty is perhaps less insurmountable than it seems at first sight. For [colonial] documents do not get their content from [the colonizer's will] alone, for the latter is predicated on another will – that of the insurgent. It should be possible therefore to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence.

(1983: 15–16)
Historians following in Guha's footsteps have elaborated a number of tactical manoeuvres in order to trace these 'insurgent' imprints on colonial discourse. For the purposes of this essay, two are particularly notable. First, Gyan Prakash (1994: 1479) has advocated what he calls the process of reading colonial textuality 'with an uncanny eye', in order to trace the conflicts and contradictions within colonial discourse which appear to register subaltern opposition to imperialism. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992: 6) has called for a parallel form of 'reading against the grain': 'As in the practice of the insurgent peasants of colonial India, the first step in [such] a critical effort must arise from a gesture of [interpretative] inversion of the logic and tropes of colonial representation. For example, Subaltern historians reinterpret the recurrent discourse of subaltern 'criminality' within colonial archives not, as the dominant order would have it, as a sign of the innate depravity of the subaltern, which by its very nature requires colonialism to manage or reform it, but as a symptom of a consistent will to political resistance.

While it has spread well beyond its home terrain of historical studies to influence a diverse range of other disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, women's studies, development studies and film studies, Subaltern Studies has had little impact on applied postcolonial literary criticism. This is strange for a number of reasons. First, the high theorists of postcolonial studies have all engaged with the project. Both Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have collaborated with the historians involved, and the work of Homi Bhabha (1994) has also been inflected by their work. Second, Subaltern Studies converges with certain major concerns in postcolonial studies. For example, in its own desire to deconstruct the authority of colonial discourse, postcolonialism echoes the insistence of Subaltern Studies that the representation of the colonized Other is to some degree constitutive of the colonial Self. Thus Said's Orientalism (1978: 3), the inaugural text in the new field, emphasizes at the outset how much Europe's self–image depended upon the presence of the Orient within western discourse as 'a sort of surrogate or even underground self'.

Equally, postcolonial studies has been just as preoccupied as Subaltern Studies with the elaboration of counter-discursive forms of critical hermeneutics, appropriate to the project of an oppositional re-reading of colonial textuality (although whereas Subaltern Studies has generally addressed the non-fictional archive, postcolonial studies has primarily focused on another branch of colonial textuality, the literature of empire). Postcolonial literary criticism (like postcolonial literature itself) can be understood in some measure as a set of reading practices which invert, subvert or hybridize the writing of colonialism. For instance, critics in the field have long been accustomed to recoding colonial stereotypes like 'the lazy native' or 'the wily Oriental', so that the traits these stereotypes supposedly embody are seen instead as signs of resistance.

Perhaps the closest, most sustained and most notable approximation thus far to Subaltern Studies methodology in the study of literary works is Gayatri Spivak's celebrated essay of 1985, 'Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism' (in Gates 1986). As well as seeking to register the resistant
presence of the subaltern in a range of canonical western texts, it is also, of course, one of the earliest attempts to investigate the relations between western (proto-)feminism and (anti-)imperialism. Spivak does not acknowledge the example of the Subaltern Studies historians explicitly in this piece, and instead references her attempt to theorize and reinscribe 'the history of the margins' in relation to the work of western 'world historians' like Eric Wolf. None the less, the parallels between her techniques of reading for a subaltern presence within her chosen texts and the kind of tactics advocated by Prakash and Chakrabarty are striking – as one might expect from a critic whose 'Subaltern Studies: deconstructing historiography' (which in certain respects, however, dissents strongly from Guha and his colleagues) first appeared in the same year as 'Three women's texts'. The latter essay is perhaps at its most powerful in its 'gestures of inversion', especially notable amongst which is the allegorical reading of the figure of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Despite her objective identity as a member of the white plantocracy, Bertha is made to embody the subject–position of the subaltern woman in western (proto-)feminist discourse. The effect of Spivak’s ‘catachrestic’ interpretation is profound and complex, suggesting as it does the deep (because largely unconscious) complicity of western (proto-)feminism in the project of overseas hegemony from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Indeed, in Spivak’s account, the emergence and consolidation of the western (proto-)feminist woman are linked structurally and inextricably to the marginalization, even effacement, of ‘the woman from the colonies’ in the wider cultural discourses from which her chosen texts emerge.

In this essay, I want to extend Spivak’s focus from the metropolitan canon to the literature of empire ‘proper’ (Jean Rhys, the third of Spivak’s examples, is widely claimed as a postcolonial writer and therefore belongs only problematically to the tradition under consideration here), which can perhaps be aligned more exactly with ‘the colonial archive’ on which Guha and his colleagues focus their researches. In doing so, I will also try to demonstrate the usefulness of Subaltern Studies methodology more specifically for demarginalizing subaltern experience within such texts. I further hope to complicate Spivak’s arguments about the alleged complicity of western (proto-)feminism in imperialism in the nineteenth century. In pursuit of these three aims, I have chosen as my case study Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), one of the classics of the literature of empire, one of the first notable examples of the genre to be written by a woman and certainly the first which raises the issue of the relationship between western (proto-)feminism and (anti-)imperialism in an extensive and explicit way.3

Contemporary interpretations of Schreiner’s articulation in *The Story of an African Farm* of this relationship can be divided schematically into four main kinds. The first, which can be dated roughly from the late 1970s, sought to establish the novel as a major, if not the first, example of a distinctly modern feminist literature.4 While such efforts did much to recover what was hitherto a largely and unjustly neglected text, it is arguable that they had the unfortunate
effect, none the less, of corroborating Spivak’s strategic argument in ‘Three women’s texts’. This is because the celebration of *The Story of an African Farm* as an early classic of the western women’s movement was accompanied by a general unwillingness on the part of its advocates to address the racial politics of the novel in any detail, so that Lyndall’s struggles were often considered in relative isolation from other pressing issues entailed on them by the colonial context where these struggles take place.

By the end of the 1980s, by contrast, both feminist and other kinds of critic were often judging the novel’s representation of racial issues quite severely. This line of criticism is perhaps first broached in Nadine Gordimer’s ‘The prison-house of colonialism’ (1980), a review of Ruth First and Ann Scott’s biography of Schreiner, but was not taken up systematically until later in the decade. For example, in her second book (1989) on Schreiner, Berkman asserts that *The Story of an African Farm* endorses a doctrine of ‘species domination’ and concludes that Schreiner ‘could not free herself from Victorian tendencies to typologize, nor could she resolve her ambivalence toward interracial mating’. Joseph Bristow (1992: xxvii) endorsed Barash’s strictures on Schreiner’s shortcomings in his new edition of the novel (1992), asserting that ‘despite all its feminist strong-mindedness, it is hardly free from racial prejudice’. While such criticisms have certainly continued to be made, new critical paradigms began to emerge in the early 1990s. On the one hand, Dan Jacobson (1993) and Sally Ledger (1997) expressed scepticism not only about Schreiner’s racial politics, but her feminism as well, both in *The Story of an African Farm* and her subsequent work. By contrast, critics like Laura Chrisman (1993) and Anne McClintock (1995) sought to present Schreiner’s oeuvre as an essentially progressive, if not uncomplicated, inter-mingling of gender and racial politics. For both figures, however, this involved some degree of separation of *The Story of an African Farm* from the author’s subsequent writings. Each critic suggests that while there is an increasingly (if never fully) successful integration of Schreiner’s feminism and anti-imperialism after her return to South Africa from England in 1889, her first novel conforms to the dominant ideological vision in settler colonial societies of inter-racial relations. More recently, Carolyn Burdett has made similar claims:

*The Story of an African Farm* ... only hints at the direction in which Schreiner will go in seeking to imagine an ethical existence for women which will not repeat the violence of a culture which oppresses or exploits others. On her return to South Africa after nearly ten years in England and Europe, Schreiner was more and more insistent that (English) women take account of what their ‘progress’ means in relation to other countries and other continents. (2001: 36)

If such a judgement is right, one might infer that Schreiner’s first novel, at least, corroborates Spivak’s argument that western (proto-)feminism accommodated itself fairly unproblematically to imperial and racial ideology.

Readings grounded in empiricist methods of literary criticism, whether liberal or materialist, are particularly likely to support such an interpretation. For example, one could argue that Schreiner’s Africa is largely emptied of its...
indigenous population so that it can operate as a backdrop against which specifically, even narrowly, western existential and cultural dilemmas (especially western feminist ones) are played out. To this extent, *The Story of an African Farm* is liable to the kind of objection Chinua Achebe (1988: 12) famously made to *Heart of Darkness*, where, he argues, Conrad reduces Africa to the role of a prop 'for the break-up of one petty European mind'. As both J.M. Coetzee (1988) and Mary Louise Pratt (1986) have pointed out in their respective analyses of early travelogues about South Africa, this process of evacuating Africa of its native inhabitants is a long-established trope in colonial discourse about the region, which was designed primarily to legitimate European usurpation of 'unused' lands. Secondly, again applying the terms of Achebe’s critique of Conrad, one might suggest that in so far as Africans are present in Schreiner’s text, albeit in minor roles, they are consistently represented in demeaning and stereotypical terms. Not only does the novel insist repeatedly on their physical ugliness but they are characteristically idle, scheming, stupid, sexually incontinent, drunken and disloyal. Thus it is clearly a measure of Otto’s naivety that he persists in retaining a noble conception of the Africans on the farm, even after Tant Sannie’s maid has so maliciously turned against him.7

In turn, one can easily substantiate the argument that the novel presents no significant challenge to the legitimacy of imperialism in South Africa. On the one hand, in describing the African as ‘the son of Ham’ (p. 52), Schreiner appears to endorse the habit of finding biblical authority for the subjugation of the indigenous population, which was so characteristic of the particular colonial culture to which she belonged. Equally, she certainly seems to accept the logic of certain versions of the evolutionary theory, so that the African in *The Story of an African Farm* is consistently represented as an anterior, less developed species of humanity. African art, therefore, is represented as crude, primitive and unsophisticated, as if to reinforce the idea that the African’s claim to civilisation is only relative and partial. Imperialism is most explicitly legitimized by the text’s seemingly careful endorsement of the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, so that the displacement, or even extinction, of an ‘inferior’ race or culture by another, ‘superior’ one, is presented primarily as a natural process, rather than an historical one in which unequal relations of power are the crucial factor. Thus the (proto-)feminist heroine Lyndall meditates in the following terms on a black livestock-minder who intrudes into her pastoral idyll:

‘He is the most interesting and intelligent thing I can see just now, except, perhaps, Doss [Waldo’s dog]. Will his race melt away in the heat of a collision with a higher? Are the men of the future to see his bones only in museums – a vestige of one link that spanned between the dog and the white man?’

(pp. 228-9)

Finally, one might argue that the language deployed by the narrative voice in *The Story of an African Farm* clearly betrays Schreiner’s complicity in the racial supremacism of the culture to which she belonged. The last chapter of the novel begins with a description of Waldo making a table:
As the long curls gathered in heaps before his plane, he paused for an instant now and again to throw one down to a small naked nigger, who had crept from its mother, who stood churning in the sunshine, and had crawled into the waggon-house. From time to time the little animal lifted its fat hand as it expected a fresh shower of curls; till Doss, jealous of his master's noticing any other small creature but himself, would catch the curl in his mouth and roll the little Kaffir over in the saw-dust, much to that small animal's contentment. It was too lazy an afternoon to be really ill-natured, so Doss satisfied himself with snapping at the little nigger's fingers, and sitting on him till he laughed.

(p. 292)

The somewhat cloying sentimentality of this passage does not lessen the force of the use of the word 'animal' in relation to the black child who is also reified, of course, by the use of the neuter pronoun. The worrying significance of her persistent and gratuitous use of the word 'nigger' emerges more clearly when compared with the choices made by other contemporary writers, even those sympathetic to imperialism. For instance, there is the comment by Kipling's unnamed narrator about an intransigent British army officer in 'On the city wall', a story first published two years after The Story of an African Farm: 'He called all natives "niggers", which, beside being extreme bad form, shows gross ignorance' (1987: 231). Even in Schreiner's South Africa, such terminology was by no means incumbent upon pro-imperial writers. In Haggard's King Solomon's Mines (1885), for example, Allan Quartermain comments: 'I have had to do with niggers – no, I'll scratch that word "niggers" out, for I don't like it.'

However, even at the level of manifest content, an empiricist literary-critical approach would reveal that the racial politics of Schreiner's text are less clear-cut than the preceding account might suggest. For instance, the disloyalty of Tant Sannie's maid to Otto is counterbalanced by the loyalty of the Mozambican maid to Lyndall during the latter's illness. Equally, Bonaparte and Tant Sannie reveal that blacks have no exclusive rights to being idle, scheming, stupid, sexually incontinent, drunken and disloyal (nor, one might add, any monopoly of physical ugliness). More importantly, there are limited but none the less significant and explicit signs of disquiet about the fate of the indigenous populations, most notably when Waldo responds sceptically to Lyndall's rhapsodic account of Napoleonic imperialism in Chapter 2, and later when the authorial voice complains that: 'There is no justice. The black man is shot like a dog, and it goes well with the shooter' (p. 149). There is, in fact, abundant evidence in the novel of Schreiner's conflicting treatment of the issue of race, supporting the contention of Berkman (1987: 88, 94), amongst others, that The Story of an African Farm is remarkable for its 'oscillating views' and 'contradictory statements'.

For Homi Bhabha (1994: 81–2), famously, colonial representation was forever liable to such instability by virtue of its psychic economy of 'projection and introjection ... displacement, over-determination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of "official" and phantasmic knowledges [which construct] the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse'. This has clear affinities with the argument of Guha and his colleagues that the traces of the pressure brought to bear on the colonizer by the resistance of the colonized can
be detected through attention to the unconscious psychic economy of the colonizer as this is embodied in the process of the colonizer’s self-representation. What I would argue, then, is that at a latent level Schreiner’s novel is haunted by a repressed but often sympathetic acknowledgement of subaltern resistance, albeit of a relatively weak form, which conflicts with the general thrust of the text at the manifest level (where it generally endorses dominant imperial verities). Moreover, I hope to show, the presence of this counter-knowledge goes some way to allowing the suggestion that in The Story of an African Farm Schreiner adumbrates the vision which critics like Chrisman, McClintock and Burdett see as being elaborated in her later work, which emphasizes the mutually enabling and reinforcing relationship between (proto-)feminism and (anti-)imperialism. If this can be shown to be the case, then in turn Spivak’s argument about the structural complicity of nineteenth-century feminism in the ‘axioms of imperialism’ will require at least some modification.

In elucidating this repressed counter-knowledge, the strategy and reading techniques of the Subaltern Studies group prove particularly productive. As indicated earlier, Gyan Prakash and Dipesh Chakrabarty interpret the reading practice which is entailed upon Guha’s prescriptions for a revisionist historiography of ‘the margins’ as ‘reading with an uncanny eye’ and employing the ‘gesture of inversion’. Interestingly, the invitation to read The Story of an African Farm in this kind of way is, in fact, made by Schreiner herself. The narrative persona entertains the legitimacy of such techniques of ‘reading against the grain’ quite explicitly: ‘Could a [critical] story be told in opposite ways and both ways be true?’ (p. 67; the italicization of the original indicates the importance that Schreiner attaches to this hint). And as the mysterious but obviously momentous Stranger puts it to Waldo:

> the attribute of all true art, the highest and the lowest, is this – that it says more than it says .... Men thinking to detract, say ‘People read more in this or that work of genius more than was ever written in it,’ not perceiving that they pay the highest compliment ... therefore fifty different true [critical] stories might be read from it.

(p. 169)

Perhaps the most effective way towards recovery of an ‘opposite’ (or oppositional) account of inter-racial relations in Schreiner’s novel is by means of a ‘catachrestic’ reading of Waldo, who is arguably, Lyndall aside, the chief protagonist of the novel. Following the precedent of Spivak’s allegorical interpretation of Bertha Mason, this would emphasize the many ways in which Waldo, despite his objective identity as a member of the colonizing formation, seems symbolically to occupy the subject-position of the colonized peoples of South Africa. One might begin this process of ‘inversion’ by attending to Waldo’s name; at one etymological level this signifies ‘a man from the wild or forest’ or, adapted to the South African context, ‘a man from the bush’, hence ‘Bushman’ (San), the miserable fate of whom is occasionally acknowledged in the text. Such connotations are reinforced by Schreiner’s descriptions of his physical appearance. The novel recurrently stresses that he has black eyes, brown hands and, most emphatically of all, black curls on his head (for example, pp. 36, 42,
Like the local Africans (according to Schreiner), he too is 'ugly' (p. 42). Equally notable is Waldo's identification with the culture of the colonized. At the outset of the novel we see him involved in a sacrificial religious ritual with strong 'pagan' overtones. Indeed, Waldo's syncretic, intuitive pantheism expresses as much what the negritudinists later claimed as a specifically African epistemology and ethics, one in which there is no binary division between the material and spiritual worlds, as it does Schreiner's interest in the American transcendentalists like Emerson, from whom Waldo is conventionally understood to derive his name.12 His open and engaged response to the 'Bushman' paintings in the cave on the kopje outside the farm-house contrasts strikingly with that of the two white girls, who remain with their backs indifferently turned until late in Waldo's commentary – in the course of which, most significantly, he constructs himself as the spokesman of the vanished 'Bushmen' (p. 50). Finally, the 'grotesque' carving which Waldo produces for the Stranger's inspection is emphatically African in terms of its medium, structure and thematics (it is strongly reminiscent of the makonde tradition of wood sculpture) and has clear formal affinities with the 'Bushman' paintings.13

It is also important to note that Waldo shares the same low status in terms of work on the farm as the 'ill-looking' African cow-herd (p. 41). Unlike the other young white males, he is never seen mounted. He is clearly regarded by almost all the other whites in the novel as equivalent to an African. Bonaparte beats him because he is allegedly typical of his kind in being 'lazy' (p. 103); Tant Sannie associates him with the 'nigger' whom she got into trouble as a child (p. 133); and the Stranger, Gregory Rose and the Stranger's companion successively view him as being on a level with the Africans (pp. 158–9, 231 and 261). Moreover, the emphasis on Waldo's 'clumsy, hesitating mode of speech' (p. 185) resonates with J.M. Coetzee's (1988: 11ff) argument that the demeaning representation of the native's speech-forms functioned in South African travelogues and settler narratives as a means of placing the native in a subordinate position in evolutionary terms.14 By the time the Stranger arrives, Waldo already sees himself as 'only a servant' (p. 157; later he feels his status is too low to allow him to approach the Stranger in Grahamstown), and this is how Gregory Rose instinctively responds to him when he first arrives at the farm (p. 176). Waldo's occupation of the subject–position of the colonized is reinforced by Schreiner's subtle invocation of an earlier tradition of literary representation of non-western peoples. For example, the contrast between the refined and mysterious Stranger and the physically coarse and 'clownish' (p. 157), but undoubtedly sensitive and artistic Waldo perhaps inevitably evokes the contrast drawn between Ferdinand and Caliban in The Tempest (with Lyndall playing the role of a rebellious Miranda).15 And when Waldo kisses the ground that the mysterious Stranger has crossed after their first meeting, one is perhaps equally inevitably reminded of Friday's act of homage to his benefactor in Robinson Crusoe.

More importantly, Waldo's trajectory in the novel can in certain senses be seen as an allegory of the fate of some of the native peoples of South Africa.
While Otto is, indeed, the farm overseer, his attitude to the land is remarkably unpossessive (p. 94) and his treatment of the Africans on the farm is untypically sympathetic and accommodating for a man in his position.) Waldo is displaced from his inheritance by an aggressive opportunist (Bonaparte literally steals Otto’s remaining possessions after his death), named after one of the West’s most famous emperors, whose predatory intrusion is, of course, cloaked in the garb of religious idealism. What, in retrospect, comes to be seen as Otto’s naively open-hearted welcome of the interloper has tragic consequences with many parallels in colonial history. After Bonaparte hounds his benefactor to an early death, Waldo is first turned into a kind of domestic servant, being required to black Bonaparte’s boots for instance, then increasingly subject to petty victimization at Bonaparte’s whim, and finally brutally whipped in a scene which has inevitable connotations of slavery. Waldo finds temporary relief in the advent of the Stranger, who in some ways symbolizes the figure of the missionary, bringing enlightenment to the supposedly backward indigene. Not only does he consciously echo St Paul in his address to Waldo, but he sees the latter’s carving as akin to a ‘Mumboo-jumbow idol’ (p. 169). In due course, unable to bear the prospect of Gregory’s accession to joint control of the farm (and Gregory’s accommodation with Tant Sannie portends the alliance of Boer and British against the African in the period after that in which the novel is set), Waldo departs, his fate recalling that of countless native South Africans dispossessed of their land in the wake of colonial expansion. He, too, leaves for the new urban environments which are mushrooming as a consequence of the discovery of the diamond fields in 1867, to which the novel explicitly alludes (p. 268). Here he endures a series of experiences of exploitation at the hands of white employers and co-workers in a succession of petty and unrewarding jobs, before finally returning to die on the farm.

In the twinning of Waldo’s death with Lyndall’s, each equally pathetic, one might argue that – allegorically at least – Schreiner represents patriarchal imperialism as being as destructive of the autonomy of the native peoples as it is of the proto-feminism which Lyndall’s awakening embodies. To this degree, the two groups of victims seem clearly aligned, even equal. A ‘catachrestic’ reading of Waldo does suggest, to this extent, that the relationship of western literary (proto-)feminism to the imperial project, even in the nineteenth century, may have been more nuanced and conflictual than Spivak’s ‘Three women’s texts’ leads one to believe. Indeed, it corroborates the argument of much recent feminist-inspired colonial discourse analysis and historiography alike, that colonial women’s texts often embody a vision of the inter-connections between gender and racial politics which challenges the tenets of the dominant imperial/patriarchal formation.16

However, corroboration for aspects of Spivak’s arguments can still be found within this ‘catachrestic’ reading. An attempted reconciliation between Schreiner’s feminism and anti-imperialism on the terrain of The Story of an African Farm, by means of a reading practice drawn from Subaltern Studies historiography, is by no means invulnerable, even granting the legitimacy of
interpreting Waldo in this way. Thus one might argue that the emergence of the 'new man' of whom Lyndall dreams, chiefly represented by the increasingly ‘feminized’ Gregory Rose, only happens at the expense of Waldo, whom Gregory identifies early on as a rival (for Em initially) who must be overcome. Waldo senses Gregory’s hostility very quickly, and it is the principal motive for his departure from the farm: ‘I shall not stay here when he is master’ (p. 197). Interestingly, it is Gregory who most specifically identifies Waldo with the Africans, for example in describing him as being like ‘an old Kaffir witch-doctor’ (p. 231). Gregory’s emergence as a fit mate for Lyndall at the expense of Waldo (too late as this comes for consummation) thus analogically supplements Spivak’s argument in ‘Three women’s texts’ that the feminist heroine emerges in western discourse at the expense of ‘the woman from the colonies’. In Schreiner’s text, by contrast, the ‘new man’ who emerges as the counterpart to the model of the ‘new woman’ represented by Lyndall can only flourish in the absence of the ‘native’ male. Indeed, when the cross-dressed Gregory usurps the role of the Mozambican nurse at Lyndall’s bedside (the maid is subsequently made to ‘disappear’ abruptly from the text in the manner that ‘Three women’s texts’ complains is the case with Christophine in Wide Sargasso Sea), it is not just the ‘man from the colonies’, but the ‘woman from the colonies’, once again, who suffers in this later articulation of the western (proto-)feminist project.

Nor does such a ‘catachrestic’ reading necessarily fully confirm the strategic aim of Subaltern Studies historiography, which is to establish the existence of a resistant subaltern within colonial textuality. Certainly, there is explicit evidence of Schreiner’s acknowledgement of such resistance, as in the description of the African farm-boys’ reaction to the overseer’s exhortations: they ‘winked at each other, and worked as slowly as they possibly could; but the German never saw it’ (p. 39). But this issue is more problematic in the case of Waldo. His central role may embody Schreiner’s unconscious recognition of the enduring presence and agency (at least until the end of the novel) of the native South African within the ‘evacuated’ land of conventional colonial political mythography. But for all his endurance, the essential passivity of Waldo in his allegorical role might be understood equally as an expression of the wish-fulfilment of white settler society in South Africa which, in the years Schreiner worked on The Story of an African Farm, had had rude reminders of the capacity of the indigenous peoples to violently resist its penetration. A letter of Schreiner’s in 1878 refers anxiously to one of the several Xhosa Wars which forced her employer, the Revd Martin, to leave his frontier farm for a safer place; another of 1880 refers to the Sotho rebellion, in which her cousin’s husband was killed.17 In this sense, the fatalism with which the allegorical Waldo accepts his dispossession might be seen as providing a form of psychic compensation for a settler audience for such episodes, as well as for the crushing defeat of the British army by Zulu impis at Islandhwana in 1879. Seen from this perspective, the text offers a comforting sense of the inalienable superiority of a ‘modernizing’ white culture which Waldo, in his capacity as
representative of the indigenous peoples, is finally unable to adapt to, let alone resist.

On the other hand, the conception of the colonial unconscious which emerges from my 'catachrestic' reading does not consort straightforwardly with the assumptions of Guha and his colleagues, inasmuch as they never suggest that the colonial unconscious could be the locus of 'progressive' drives. If the figure of Waldo represents an unconscious partial identification on Schreiner's part with the colonized, one might be able to extend to The Story of an African Farm Laura Chrisman's argument about Schreiner's later work, in which she discerns a conception of 'the unconscious as a seat of socially and individually emancipatory, progressive and pre- or non-racial drives' (1993: 34). One of the most interesting aspects of the novel, in fact, is its explicit and self-conscious recognition of the unconscious as a material force shaping human identity, motivation and representation. For example, the narrative voice comments that 'the busy waking life is followed and reflected by the life of dreams – waking dreams, sleeping dreams. Weird, misty, and distorted in the inverted image of a mirage, or a figure seen through a mountain mist, they are still the reflections of reality' (p. 285). Schreiner's inconsistent allegorical treatment of Waldo may embody precisely this process of 'distortion and inversion' to unconsciously 'emancipatory and progressive' ends.

Schreiner may, however, have been more aware of what she was doing with Waldo than this suggests. Anne McClintock cites the writer: 'All her writings are allegories: ''Except in my own language of parables I cannot express myself''' (1995: 279). Furthermore, it could be argued that Schreiner anticipates the Subaltern Studies project in uncanny ways. As has been seen, the author's invitation to read her novel in a 'catachrestic' fashion is unambiguous; and her description of the farm-boys' subversive response to Otto clearly recodes the myth of the 'lazy native' as a form of resistance. Indeed, Waldo himself portends the Subaltern Studies project. In Chapter 2, he attempts to 'read' the physical landscape, which was being rapidly transformed by new forms of colonial exploitation (the novel alludes to ostrich-farming as well as the emergent diamond industry), for signs of the increasingly occluded 'Bushman' histories inscribed within it. From 'the stones', he attempts to recover subaltern consciousness: ''I know that it is I who am thinking ... but it seems as though it were they who were talking''' (p. 50).

Perhaps, most intriguingly, Schreiner's perception of the way in which the colonized inscribe themselves within the identity of the colonizer clearly anticipates both Guha and Said. In 1909 she wrote: 'In the end the subjected people write their features on the face of the conquerors' (in Burdett 2001: 178). This is a highly important insight, not least because it suggests that the kind of reading I have proposed need not be seen only and necessarily as an alternative to those interpretations which construct Waldo as a paradigmatic western 'modern', whose primary aetiology is Emersonian/Spencerian. If Schreiner's insight is to be credited, these seemingly fundamentally opposed readings can be understood, in fact, as being two sides of the same coin, just as
the individual is made up of conscious and unconscious selves which may co-exist while being in conflict with each other. On one side is the stamp of Waldo as a member of settler society, the manifest expression of Schreiner's settler consciousness; on the other side, Waldo in his allegorical mode as the imprint on that consciousness of the presence of the subaltern.

As this ambivalence suggests, an allegorical reading of Waldo's subject-position cannot be sustained beyond a certain point. The reader is occasionally forcibly reminded of his affiliation to the dominant order; at one moment Waldo describes the 'Bushman' as 'ugly' (p. 49), and he is addressed as 'master' by the 'Bushman' waggoner at the end of the text (p. 257). Nor does a 'catachrestic' reading mitigate the other distasteful implications of Schreiner's construction of non-western peoples identified earlier. Indeed, in some ways it reinforces their unpalatability for the contemporary reader. For example (as is entirely consistent with his allegorical role), Waldo remains 'invisible' to Lyndall as a potential partner throughout the novel, despite his obvious merits and her later expressions of love for him. True, his vision of gender roles does not measure up to her conception of what these should, or might, be. But similar shortcomings do not inhibit the success of her mainstream settler suitors. Such evidence supports the argument that Schreiner was no more able than Haggard in King Solomon's Mines (where Foulata must die before Goode gets too serious) to challenge the established prescriptions of settler society against miscegenation and the racial hierarchies which under-wrote this prohibition.

As these caveats indicate, a reading method of the kind I have employed, drawing in a critical and revisionist fashion on the methodology of both Spivak and Subaltern Studies historiography, may only produce what Said has called, in relation to the latter project, 'a new knowledge, more precarious perhaps than its familiar competitors' (1988: viii). None the less, it may point to some sort of middle way between those who laud the (proto-)feminism of The Story of an African Farm and those who have deplored its apparent failure to endorse a clear anti-imperialist politics in the way that some of Schreiner's later work seems to. If this is the case, it may not be quite so necessary as Chrisman, McClintock and Burbett suggest to separate Schreiner's first novel from her later writings in order to claim her as a writer who (relatively) successfully merges (proto-)feminism with criticism of imperialism. Equally, it may help explain why those at the sharp end of South African settler colonialism have sometimes taken a more positive line on Schreiner's text than subsequent postcolonial and feminist critics. As Susan Horton reminds us, the novelist Ezekiel Mphahlele, writing in exile from South Africa in 1962, remarked that in her first novel Schreiner's 'warmth and compassion [for blacks] never escapes us' (1995: 144). Ruth First (and Ann Scott), equally, judged the novel's racial politics as essentially progressive (1989: 87). Such critics have had a sharper appreciation than some of their successors of the limiting historical realities within which Schreiner wrote. As Laura Chrisman argues: 'The material conditions [of South African settler society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century] that preclude colonial comprehension of African subjectivity also preclude for
Schreiner her own direct representation of anti-colonial political activity. These conditions necessarily preclude also the general possibility of interracial love' (1993: 140; my emphasis).

Notes

1. This article has had a long and sometimes painful gestation. The allegorical reading of Waldo that I have attempted has its origins in a conversation with Anita Raghunath in 1995. A preliminary version of this paper was given at the Oxford History Faculty in 1997 – thanks to Judith Brown for the invitation. Thanks also to Bill Schwarz, Helen Carr and Laura Chrisman for responding to later drafts. I'd like to dedicate the piece to the memory of Ruth First, who taught me at Durham University in 1975–6, shortly before she was murdered by the apartheid regime.


3. I have not been the first to use 'Three women's texts' as a paradigm for analysis of Schreiner's writing. See, for example, Laura Chrisman, 'Empire, "race" and feminism at the fin de siecle: the work of George Egerton and Olive Schreiner', in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (eds) Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siecle, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 22–44.


7. Schreiner's narrative voice echoes Tant Sannie's aspersions on the local Africans' disloyalty. See, for example, pp. 89–90 and 114. This should make one hesitate if tempted to argue that Schreiner is consciously 'recoding' the maid's response to Otto as 'resistant'.

8. It might be objected that Kipling is writing in a quite different context to Schreiner. However it was not uncommon for Indians to be described as 'blacks' by British India. See the opening lines of Kipling's 'Beyond the pale' (1888), for example.
9. In the 1987 Hutchinson edition of the novel, which seems to have been aimed specifically at the South African market, this passage has been heavily bowdlerized, with all references to animals and 'niggers' removed.

10. This is not to claim that other kinds of 'reading against the grain' are in themselves ineffective in analysing Schreiner's novel. None the less, application of a Subaltern Studies methodology, with its focus on elaborating the repressed presence of the subaltern in colonial discourse, enables me to take my 'catachrestic' reading of Waldo below a good deal further than other critics have been able to do, while allowing for apparently quite contrary readings to co-exist – as I shall argue below. My sense is that colleagues have hinted at the possibility of the allegory I elaborate but that it is far more extensive than their methods have led them to perceive. For example, Scott McCracken has argued that 'the experience of Africans is denied only to return in that of the white settlers'. See 'Stages of sand and blood: the performance of gendered subjects in Olive Schreiner’s colonial allegories', in Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (eds) Rereading Victorian Fiction, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, p. 147. Clayton argues that the novel's 'sensitive intellectuals' (Gregory and Lyndall) both 'displace and represent' the indigenous South Africans. See Olive Schreiner, p. 48. Burdett's reading of Waldo in Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism comes closest to mine. She argues in passing that Waldo is 'associated ... with black Africa' and that he is 'a kind of metonym for the African landscape'. See Burdett (2001), pp. 39, 41. But the insistence of both Clayton and Burdett that Waldo is first and foremost a western 'modern' indicates the distance between their interpretations and my own. See Clayton, Olive Schreiner, p. 45 and Burdett, Olive Schreiner, p. 18. Compare similar allegorical readings of the novel's white women characters. Levy argues that Tant Sannie occupies the position of the 'Other Woman'; see 'Other women', p. 173ff. By contrast, Gilbert and Gubar famously read Lyndall as occupying the subject-position of the colonized by equating imperialism with patriarchy. See No Man's Land, passim.


13. I would value Waldo's carving more positively than is implied by Clayton's description of it as 'an indigenous, primitive artwork'. See Clayton, Olive Schreiner, p. 50.


15. So far as I know, Doris Lessing was the first to make the connection between Waldo and Caliban, in the 1968 essay which later became the introduction to the Schocken edition of The Story of an African Farm, New York, 1976, p. 9. It was Lessing's hint which first prompted me to reread Schreiner's text in the way represented in the later part of my article, though for obvious reasons I have not been able to agree with Lessing that Waldo also plays a Prospero role.

16. See, for example, Vron Ware, Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History, London: Verso, 1992; Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds) Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance, Bloomington: University of


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