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Marginalia on 'Grensliteratuur':

Or how/why is terror culturally constructed in Northern Namibia?

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There are many humorous things in the world; among them the white man's notion that he is less savage than other savages. (Mark Twain).

How does it happen that civilized and Christian men, when brought, (as settlers in new countries), into direct contact with savage races, seem invariably to lay aside not merely the tender mercies of Christianity, but the sentiments of chivalrous magnanimity and become at times little less fierce, vindictive and bloodthirsty than their barbaric neighbours? (Cape of Good Hope Literary Magazine 2 January, 1849:139)

In 1985 a feisty little South African magazine appropriately named *Frontline* published a story, 'Ends of the Rifle', which dealt with the border experiences of a young white South African national serviceman. In explaining its decision to publish the story the

magazine observed that 'There may be puzzlement as to why this story should be published... The answer is: because it is in South Africa's interests for South Africans to be informed... It's time to distinguish between what is polite for parlour talk and what is necessary for us to come to grips with. (The author) is an honest person with no axe to grind and is telling an honest tale of the truth as he sees it in the light of his beliefs and experiences'.

The tenor of the story is clear from its rhetoric:

When I was up there I felt nothing... You look at terrs as a stupid. He doesn't know what he's doing. He doesn't know what's right and wrong,... You don't think of him as a human being... They go to extremes. That's stupid. You can't see them as people.... There was a lot of rape. We had some low guys with us. Some of those guys you couldn't understand... Also, when you're there you're sommer fighting, you aren't thinking about what you're fighting about... Mainly the ous don't bother about prisoners. If you take a prisoner you have to go through a whole procedure, filling in forms and that. So you say he was shot in contact. Maybe you don't say anything. (*Frontline* 1985:54)

This story is typical of an increasingly popular genre of South African writing known as 'Border literature' (or 'Grensliteratuur' as its Afrikaans variant is called). Wilhelm Liebenberg (1988) regards this genre as one of the most meaningful developments in Afrikaans literature because it confronts the reader with violence even within the sanctity of the sitting room. Indeed, almost everything written in Afrikaans today is said to be an intimation of violence and death. In one form, according to Brink & Coetzee, it 'emerges as a series of relentless explorations of war, conscription, border skirmishes, incursions into neighboring territories, (and) the invasion of privacy....' (Brink & Coetzee 1986:13). Academics regard this genre as excitingly avant garde. What they do not appear to realize is that it shows a rather striking kinship with articles published in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, and its cheaper South African versions like *Scope* and *Grenswagter* and that indeed, ironically represents the latest manifestation of a long tradition of *white* South African writing and is part of an even larger tradition of colonialist writing.

My initial interest in this genre was simply to try to find out what was happening in northern Namibia. Given South Africa's notorious battery of press restrictions, could some of these accounts been labelled as fictional literature in order to circumvent the censor's scissors? In addition, some anthropologists argue that the

only way to represent the fieldwork experience adequately is not through ethnographies but in poetry and novels. Lastly there was the issue of credibility: This literary genre, like all colonial reminiscences, is by nature confessional, and what we say against ourselves is typically taken as reasonable evidence for the truthfulness of the account (Hepworth & Turner 1982:85).

But 'making sense' of this literature eluded me until I attended a funeral in Keetmanshoop, a southern Namibian town, when I suddenly became aware of how white cemeteries are located in the geographical space which separates the white township from the black 'location'. A regular complaint voiced in white municipal circles was that it was an area vandalized by drunks and other hoodlums. In short, cemeteries call forth different behavior. This ambiguous grey area, this zone of death was a ubiquitous, indeed intrinsic feature of *Apartheid*. As a metaphor it allowed me to start ordering scattered but worrying observations I had made about the 'war-situation' in northern Namibia.

While the generals might talk in grand theory (e.g. Viljoen 1982; Lloyd nd.) about the need to win the hearts and minds and to motivate their troops, 'on the ground' things are apparently quite different. Local interpretations via Border literature are quite at variance with the image propounded by the strategists and generals. How much plausibility are we to attach to these often contradictory accounts?

What is the world represented in this literature? What structures of feeling emerge from this symbolically constructed world? And where are we to locate this literature, spatially, socially and culturally?

This literary genre I suggest did more than provide fantastic reportage about the war and the maintenance of 'law and order' in northern Namibia. It also promoted the cultural elaboration of state-sponsored terror and to realize the effects of this terror, not so much on the indigenous populace as on the ruling segment of colonial society. In short, as literature it has a bifurcated audience one for the acts of terror itself and the other for 'border literature': While it is undoubtedly part of a long tradition of literature which challenges authority, it does so within ritually demarcated boundaries which in the final analysis rather than undermine the ungodly status quo of *Apartheid* arguably serves to sustain it.

Tripping the Light Fantastic.

The commonly held *weltanschauung* of the South African regime is typified by President P.W.Botha's statement that South Africa is engaged in a life and death struggle between 'the powers of chaos, Marxism, and destruction on the one hand and the powers of order, Christian civilisation, and the upliftment of people on the other' (Campbell 1987). The most prominent arena in which this 'life and death' drama plays itself out in, is in what is officially known as 'Operations Area No 11', that is, most of northern Namibia. This is the area where the South African regime has been fighting a low-intensity war against guerrillas of the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) who are seeking independence for Namibia, Africa's last colony. It is, from a White point of view, not only a cultural and a symbolic but a spatial perimeter area as well since it skirts the Namibian-Angolan frontier.

This then, to use Taussig's felicitous phrase, is the space of death which gives rise to the culture of terror. This space of death is a threshold which allows for illumination as well as extinction. It has a long and rich culture where the social imagination has populated it with metamorphosing images of evil and underworld. It is an area of transformation. The experience of coming close to death generates a more vivid sense of life with a growth of self-consciousness and also self fragmentation (Taussig 1987).

In this geographical expanse the normal rules of society do not apply. Both prominent politicians and lowly soldiers have publicly claimed that if they are attacked 'no rules apply at all if it comes to a question of our existence. We will use all means at our disposal, whatever they may be' (Connie Mulder as quoted by Campbell 1987). Generals agree. 'Terrorists' do not fight by conventional rules and thus, ergo, the state should engage in unconventional behavior in this arena (Viljoen 1982). So well established is this rationale, that it is now an accepted legal defence (*Weekly Mail*, Sept 2, 1988). Other aspects of life have also been infiltrated. In the South African Parliament, the Deputy Minister of Defence called upon the white right-wing opposition Conservative Party 'to keep out of the war zone' because they had disregarded the longstanding convention of parliament not to drag the Defence Force into politics! (*The Namibian* May 20, 1988).

In this zone a new lexicon comes into play. Terms such as 'Min Dae' (Few days left of military service); 'States' (South Africa); 'Body counts'; 'Culling'; 'Crackers' (Mental breakdown or land mines);

'Bossies' (Mental breakdown); 'PBs' or 'LPs' (Plaaslike bevolking or local population); 'The show has started'; 'being floored' and the ubiquitous 'terrs' (insurgents) take on a new or added connotation which is distinct from their ordinary significance.

This zone is populated by people who are the obverse of normal society: Recognizing SWAPO is easy says our *Frontline* troopie: 'If you see a big, healthy looking, male you know he's a Swapo. Only the Swapos eat well enough to look like that - apart from the Ministers ...and they're Swapos anyway... If he had soft feet that would prove it beyond doubt,... (*Frontline* 1985:54). Similarly, while white women are seen to be non-active combatants, loyal, upright, moral and supportive societal exemplars (see Unterhalter 1987), black women in the combat zone are the antithesis: The official Ethnology Manual of the SADF gives the following advice to young servicemen complete with underlining and capitalization:

Direct contact with Bantu women should be avoided, while *social contact should be absolutely forbidden and prevented*. The comings and going of the Bantu woman should, however, be closely observed for the following reasons: 1: She provides food and is the 'beast of burden'. It will most probably be her duty to provide the insurgent camp with food and beer...and she may even carry the heavier automatic weapons, as happened in Angola. 2: She incites the men to successful military action by arousing them sexually before a battle, taking part in the 'Washing of the Spear', a ceremony based on a party where sexual intercourse takes place. 3: Experience has shown that the Bantu will take advantage of the 'weakness' of the Whites not to treat women roughly...by pushing them to the front in political riots...(SADF 1977).

In this scorpion dance the chief protagonists are not of this world. Our *Frontline* troopie claims: 'terrs are all on drugs - morphine and heroin (That's one way you can recognize a Swapo. You see the needle marks in his arms.)', but goes on to admit that 'some of us would get morphine from the medics, but most of us were just on dagga (marijuana)' (Anon, 1985:54). Even experienced pundits like the veteran terror expert, Al.J.Venter, attribute extra-human animal-like qualities to the enemy. As he explained: 'some of these terrorists are able to walk two or three kilometers at a stretch *on their toes* in order to confuse security forces. The imprint left in the sand is almost indistinguishable from animal tracks' (Venter 1983:51).

Nothing can be taken for granted in this theater not even the

audience. A South African officer commented to the editor of *Soldier of Fortune* that: 'The Ovambo tribesman is very stoic and fatalistic. Simple killing does not have the impact on tribal members as does, say, cutting off arms and legs or noses and ears and then forcing the victim's wife to fry and eat the flesh' (Brown 1986:53).

'Grensliteratuur' not only uses this lexicon but derives much of its impact by amplifying the ambiguity and liminality of the zone of death. As van Heerden puts it in his prize-winning story, *My Cuban*: 'You no longer know you are life, precious life. This is the magic power of the uniform, the tribal dance, the marching platoon, aircraft in formation' (van Heerden 1987:246). Alexander Strachan captures this well in the title of his much lauded novel *Wereld Sonder Grense* (World without Boundaries). He proceeds to paint a gruesome picture of how young troopies laughingly pissed into a dead SWAPO fighter's mouth and then has one of the main characters, appropriately named Jock, cut off the SWAPO fighter's penis and placed it in front of his own fly. It is not only the enemy who are feral. Sexual preferences are also ambiguous as shown by a common stress on homosexuality. A popular refrain in troopie folklore concerns the troopie who buggered a cow (see eg Prinsloo 1987; Whyte 1987).

The most recent 'grens' novel to have achieved critical acclaim is the young Namibian writer, Gawie Kellerman's *Wie de Hel het jou vertel?* (Who the hell told you?) also elaborates on the theme of the problematic nature of things, of the uncertainty and unexpected, of liminality and status ambiguity by most powerfully having a black infant wired up as a booby trap. He effectively plays up the humanimality theme with his images of military vehicles with animal names and approvingly quotes *Grensvegter* (border-fighter): 'You want to puke, but its nice' and describes the first person he killed thus: 'He was the first human I had to shoot... He looked so much like my father'.

Members of the supporting cast undergo a similar process of transmutation, most richly illustrated by the example of the Bushmen. The SADF is so proud of what it has done for (and to) Bushmen, that, as a matter of course, visiting foreign journalists are shown the Bushman base at Omega and these journalists have recorded a rich fund of characteristics which their white fellow-soldiers attribute to them: 'The Bushman's senses in the field are unbelievable. If a patrol has a Bushman with it, then it is unnecessary to post guards at night. The Bushman also goes to sleep. But when

the enemy is still far away he wakes up and raises the alarm' according to one senior officer (*Die Burger*, 1/6/1982), while another white soldier believes that: 'They have fantastic eyesight and they can navigate in the bush without a compass or map... With the Bushmen along, our chances of dying are very slight. They have incredible tenacity, patience and endurance. They've taught me to respect another race' (*Time* 2/3/1981). Even experienced battle-hardened mercenaries were impressed. As a recent *Soldier of Fortune* article exulted:

Troops of the Bushman Battalion are perhaps the best indigenous trackers in southern Africa today. Much of their skill comes from the Bushman's inherent tie with the land, their nomadic hunter-gatherer heritage which ensured that only those with the sharpest eyes, best hearing and most empathetic feel of the bush survived (Mill 1987:32-7).

Another writer was more technical:

Able to survive long periods on minimal food and water, the Bushman has an instinctive, highly developed sense of danger, and has proved to be an astoundingly good 'snap' shot... (but, his) (forte is tracking... If you've never seen a two-legged bloodhound at work, come to South West Africa and watch the Bushman. Actually, the Bushman puts the bloodhound to shame. (In addition, they are) good at estimating mortar projectile strike distances because of their age-old weapon - the bow and arrow (Norval 1984:74).

But clearly these superhuman qualities of Bushmen are grounded not in humanity but in animality. Their inability to retain cattle is attributed to their lack of self-restraint. Moreover, they are 'extremely emotional'. Their women-folk cannot do without the men-folk and this determines the length of patrol (*Pretoria News* 26 February 1981). *Time* magazine assures us that they are often distracted from a guerrilla track by honey while the sighting of a hyena will provoke uncontrollable laughter (*Time* 2 March 1981).

Constructing the Terror.

Violence is not only an instrument of control but also a privilege of social rank. It is a conspicuous symbol of the privileges of awful majesty. Legitimacy, in such cases, as Fallers (1959) and Hyden (1981) have shown, is engineered by a system of 'pay-offs' in the spoils of war in a terroristic system (Fallers 1956; Hyden 1981). E.V. Walter (1969) has suggested that this strategy of 'forced choice' works to motivate those who neither resist nor co-operate voluntari-

ly, by transforming passivity into active co-operation. It does this by closing out alternatives so that people have to choose between the lesser of two evils.

The production of meaning which terrorizes does not simply emerge. It is the product of deliberate action. In this regard an important role model both for the South African Defence Force (SADF), and for our writers are the activities and legends which surround that band of adventurers and mercenaries who fought in Vietnam and more recently in Rhodesia. It is no accident that the culture of terror in northern Namibia underwent a major enhancement after the creation of Zimbabwe, when the SADF saw a major influx of experienced counter-insurgency 'dirty tricks' specialists (usually ex-Selous Scouts). These adventurers rather grandiosely claim authorship to several terroristic innovations. They deliberately cultivated an aura of mystery, deception and intrigue ranging from such mundane tactics as using enemy weapons since 'this adds an element of uncertainty to terrorists under fire' (Norval 1984a:49) to engaging in 'tackie patrols' with '(disguised) turned SWAPOs and pretend to be the real thing, obtaining evidence from villages on SWAPO and capturing and killing SWAPOs' (MacKenzie 1984:66-69).

Counter-insurgency instruction includes a 'dark phase' during which recruits 'live and train exactly like SWAPOs, learning their tactics, customs and habits - even singing SWAPO songs' and being rigorously interrogated in the best South African tradition to see if they would 'crack' (MacKenzie 1984:66-69).

The gap between terrorizer and terrorized becomes insignificant. It is perhaps more than coincidence that the major body counteracting SWAPO insurgents is now called SWAPOL - SWA Police. Indeed training is such that in the war zone the culturally elaborated ambiguity and insecurity can only be countered by the males proving their masculinity along lines laid down by military ideology.

As Sharon Macdonald points out, 'Although rape may be officially discouraged by military regulations, it nevertheless fulfills the military association of masculinity, aggression and depersonalisation, and it is for this reason that some feminists see warfare as inextricably bound up with violence against women' (Macdonald 1987:16).

Thus rape, a very frequent occurrence in the operational area serves to humanize the victim and brutalize the perpetrator.

Understanding the Terror: Meaning and Cause.

For any social explanation to be satisfactory, Max Weber long ago insisted, it must be adequate on both the levels of meaning and cause. What are the conditions which make these literary accounts credible?

The Zone of Death we have suggested, is an area of unpredictability. Nothing can be taken for granted. People and even symbols find their ambiguity amplified with attributions of animalesque powers and drug enhancements. Such a milieu provides a surface explanation and makes credible allegations of atrocities committed by the terrorizers. Analytically, the theoretical assemblage which immediately suggests itself is Victor Turner's notions of liminality and anti-structure. Liminality is a concept developed from van Gennep's classic analysis of rites of passage. During this period the ritual subject 'becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state' (Turner 1974:232). In a similar analysis Leach (1976;1977) has illustrated the situation with Euler diagrams in terms of situation A and situation not A. In the center is a grey area of ambiguity. People placed in this area are *in* but not *of* the world. They are different but alike. Despised yet held in awe. They have both animal and human qualities, and possess both secular and mystical power. It is not only the whites, and more recently, the young troopers in the South African Army who have attributed mystical qualities to both their opponents and their own supporting cast of Bushmen. On the contrary, such a discourse is intrinsic to the imperial process.

We can start with the cultural values expressed in settler or official rhetoric on the task confronting them on their culturally constructed and imposed frontier, namely that of 'taming' the other, in this case SWAPO and its dark allies (most effectively caught in van Heerden's image of the Cuban on a leash. van Heerden 1986). Taming suggests a fundamental difference between those regarded as tame and wild; between 'civilized' and 'barbarians' between those who lived by the law and those who lived by ignoring the law, between humans and animals, as Levi-Strauss pointed out a long time ago. This thin and at times highly flexible, mental line obviously has the characteristics of a frontier. In Southern Africa the frontier concept has also played an important analytical and ideological role. A recent definition glosses frontiers as 'zones of interaction between

people either subject to different political authorities or engaged in different modes of production, or indeed recognizing no formal authority at all...' (Marks & Atmore 1981:8). Conventional academic usage thus clearly parallels the Leachian-Turner model, and this is further underwritten in recent literary efforts like Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

In the absence of capitalist social relations, *violence* became the only way by which extraction could take place. Violence in the frontier zone was not a result of the rugged individualism of the whites, but of fierce competition for resources (natural and social), for the factors of production (Foweraker 1981:174).

The Namibian landed class, is, I would suggest, akin to janus-faced Merchant Capital. In Namibia we had the chaining down of labor rather than the separation of labor from the means of production. The general effect has been the reinforcement of feudal-like relations rather than bourgeois social relations. It is precisely the lack of capitalist relations which led to the historical genocide of the Bushmen and the contemporary attempts to 'eradicate' SWAPO. Like our wanderers in the zone of death the economy was in but not of the capitalist world. Attempts to defend this archaic system have to bend to political and economic pressures of the world market:

They constituted a new class, paradoxically pre-bourgeois in their fundamental social relations, and post-bourgeois, as Marx brilliantly perceived, in that their class position depended wholly on the existence of a world market built on free labor elsewhere (Fox-Genovese & Genovese 1983:23).

In sum, these frontier-like socio-cultural conditions created a milieu in which stories of treachery and brutality in the war zone could feed on a colonially paranoid mythology. Reports of terrorist brutality 'fell on ears finely tuned by the style and imagination with which colonizing folklore had long depicted the forest' (Taussig 1987:128).

Conclusion and Confessional.

'Border literature' too, can be seen as part of the 'extractive industry' which works so well in areas the state and its landed classes define as 'frontier areas'. In most rites of transition the subjects move from State A to State B via liminality. In the Southern African case clearly White does not become Black. On the contrary, during liminality they are aborted and thrown back into white society in which their confessions are then made. The *communitas*

they experienced is not one of sociability but is rather a nightmare (in short, a 'bum trip').

Much has been made of the South African effort to win the hearts and minds of the populace in the frontier zone with its civic action program (see eg Gordon 1989). But this is more true on a rhetorical level. In terms of state budgetary allocations terror is clearly the instrument of choice. This terror model is a bourgeois creation, by which I mean that it is based on certain assumptions about human nature, namely that the most dreaded thing in a rational secularized world is powerlessness and especially unpredictability. I would argue that it does not work so well in societies where unpredictability and the cultural construction of powerlessness are not based on this secular rationality. In short, where the meaning of misfortune is attributed not to arbitrary randomness but to witchcraft or the work of spirits, such belief systems provides a cultural prophylactic against the exercise of state terror (see e.g. Riches 1986; Hiltunen 1986). Instead, such attempts at terrorism simply reduce the legitimacy of the entire state structure as even South African military scholars have observed (Cilliers 1985). Indeed, the case can be argued that 'terror' is unnecessary for state control of the frontier zone because of the effectiveness of the South African policy of 'forced choice' which is partially dependent upon but distinct from terror (Walter 1969:285). It is the indirect consequences of these 'forced choices' which are probably the most effective pacification mode but which the South Africans or their literati hardly ever mention, preferring the guts, gore and glory of 'atrocities' stories. Simple demographics tell a tale of startling proportions: Every household in northern Namibia has, statistically speaking, had at least one member killed in the war. There was approximately one soldier for every 14 Namibian adults and children. On the other hand, most of the group who would provide the hard-core opposition to government policy have left the country. Estimates of refugees from Namibia range from ratios of 1 in 10 to 1 in 14. In the original sense of the word, Namibia has been decimated. On the other hand, with a ratio of 1:28, Namibia has the highest ratio of *settled* (from Angola) refugees in the world. The next highest ratio, by comparison, is Australia with a scant 1:125! Refugees, or immigrants, as the South Africans call them, are renowned for their political docility and support of the host regime. Do they have much choice in this matter? And then there is the question of economic dependency. It is conservatively estimated that one in three wage

earners are dependent upon the state for their pay packet.

So where does this lead us? Does such a decimated social landscape need terror? Could it be that the audience for the spectacle of terror is not so much the indigenes as the settlers? When members of the dreaded 'Koevoet' (crowbar) counter-insurgency group go around wearing T-shirts proclaiming that 'Killing is our business and business is good' what audience are they trying to reach? Since government surveys show that very few of the indigenous war zone population speak English could it be that the message is intended for the white settler element?

Terroristic violence has both an instrumental and more importantly, an expressive dimension. In a milieu of silence, rumor and myth fostered by draconian press censorship, 'border literature', as a bourgeois creation is used not so much as to expose the technologies of control of indigenes as to regulate the settlers. As Tausig points out, the victimizer needs the victim in order to create truth:

In their human or humanlike form, the wild Indians could all the better reflect back to the colonists vast and baroque projections of *human* wildness. And it was only because the wild Indians were human that they were able to serve as labor - *and* as subjects of torture; for it is not the victim as animal that gratifies the torturer, but the fact that the victim is human, thus enabling the torturer to become the savage (Tausig 1987:83).

The need to tell others about oneself is perceived in Western society as a mechanism of individuation whereas, paradoxically, as Foucault observed, it is a mechanism of socialization and subordination. Confessions and similar literary productions, he would argue, do not mystify but rather establish authoritative 'regimes of truth'. Confessions and the 'border literature genre' create the space within which human types (the terrorist, the animal and bestial) can be located and treated and the rules of proper confessional discourse systematically preclude alternative classificatory schema (Hepworth & Turner 1982:89). Border literature, like confession, is a special type of self-stigmata in which the author distances himself from himself and highlights the contradictory aspects of settler and imperial culture being simultaneously a system of social exclusion and social inclusion. Building on Foucaultian insights, Hepworth & Turner (1982:55) argue persuasively that confessions are an instrument of social control in that they worked to police the behavior of subordinate (white) classes while legitimating actions and beliefs among

the emergent groups within the ruling (white) classes.

To conclude: I would argue that far from being a form of muck-racking journalism aimed at undermining the State or providing valuable insights into the nitty gritty operation of empire, this literary genre can best be seen as a form of confession. The apocalyptic vision embalmed in these works contains a vision, as Brink and Coetzee observe, not just of the death of the individual, 'but the destruction of the entire known world or a way of life' (Brink & Coetzee 1987:13). But it is not a liberatory confession or even one of atonement, on the contrary, this literature serves in the last analysis to fortify the state and the occupying power, for the destruction it is concerned with is not that of indigenes, of the Other, but of the Afrikaners or the whites, of the Self. That such literature should be conservative rather than radical should not surprise anthropologists or other ritual experts. van Gennep long ago argued that such rites of passage served to reinforce the major cleavages of society. That this is indeed the general case is shown not only by the structure of their enterprise but also by its content: While they may paint horrifying tales of macabre terror, with the recent exception of the End Conscription Campaign's *Forces Favorites*, the most frightening characteristic of this literary genre is its apolitical stance. Indeed, a large number of the Grensliterati have the leaders of the 'Terrorists', being not blacks but Cubans or East Germans (eg Kellerman) the implication being rather obvious and reinforcing of a basic myth of white superiority: Blacks are basically content with their lives until foreign agitators get hold of them and besides are too dumb to be in key leadership roles. Descriptions of the 'How', usually in the narcissistic mode, abound but very rarely is the 'Why' raised. And in all of Grensliteratuur, there is only one story which has as its plot a troopie joining the enemy, the forces of liberation. Significantly it is written by a feminist (Lettie Viljoen). No our troopies might complain, but when push comes to shove, they come down on the right side. Significantly black South African writers do not share their white compatriots near obsession with terror and apocalyptic visions.

What *Scope* and *Grenswagter* do for the white working classes, grensverhale make acceptable for the middle and upper classes.

Far from being simple bar-room tall tales, with literary embellishments this literary genre then, in Taussig's words: 'sustained a potent political force without which the work of conquest' and of supervising recalcitrant laborers could proceed (Taussig 1984:493).

Neither the theme or the topic is new. Both have long historical pedigrees. Nor for that matter is my critique new: Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* persuasively made the case that in colonial situations cultural elaborations of frontier violence were essential for the rise of the totalitarian state (Arendt 1967).

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