

**EUROCENTRISM IN HYBRIDITY: A CRITIQUE OF CHARLES VAN
ONSELEN'S *THE SEED IS MINE: THE LIFE OF KAS MAINE, A SOUTH
AFRICAN SHARECROPPER 1894-1985*¹**

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*ABSTRACT. For decades, contributors to the literary discourses of South Africa, writers, critics and commentators alike, worked to end apartheid. Now that apartheid is over, new discourses must evolve. For this reason, at this critical time of transition, all literary works coming out of South Africa are crucial to the continuity of South African literatures. Charles van Onselen's work would be a remarkable social history at any time but, coming as it does in the immediate post-apartheid period, it takes on a special relevance. This fictionalised social history which records the survival of a MaSotho peasant farmer in the western Transvaal during the pre-apartheid and apartheid periods gives a unique insight into an area of human existence that remains virtually unrecorded and only touched on in Sol T. Plaatje's *Native Life in South Africa*, written in 1910. This minutely-documented account of Kas Maine's story reflects the human condition of the Black population in rural South Africa as the screws of proxy European colonisation are tightened by South Africa's neo-colonialists. More significantly, van Onselen reconstructs the rural Black South African man whom apartheid not only degraded but also concealed from view. To what extent, however, is this reconstruction that of a White South African and what are his reasons for producing a model at this moment in South Africa's history?*

1. A shorter version of this article was presented as a paper at the African Literature Association Conference: "Multiculturalism and Hybridity," Austin, Texas, 25th.- 29th. March 1998.

Critical reviews of Charles van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1895-1985* (1996)² acknowledge the significance of this social history. Writing in the *Southern African Review of Books* Bill Nasson, Associate Professor of History at the University of Cape Town, predicted that "this monumental book bids fair to become in its own way a classic of South African historiography." (Nasson 1996: 3) *The Economist's* unnamed critic praised the work, saying, "[t]he recording of oral history does not get much better than this." (*Economist Review* 1997: 6) Moreover, this biography by the Director of the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of the Witwatersrand also attracted the attention of literary critics, among them Brian Willan, who wrote in *The Spectator* "here is a biography which in its subtle, evocative portrayal of the lives of black and white alike has more to say of South Africa's 20th.-century experience than anything I have read" (Willan 1997: 36), Christopher Hope, who wrote in *The New Statesman*, "Van Onselen has done South Africans a favour by addressing the essential question: how did we get to be like this?" (Hope 1997: 45), and David Anderson, who declared in the *Times Literary Supplement* that the work is "a remarkable, possibly unique historical record." (Anderson 1997: 27) Social historians and literary critics recognised at once that here was a work of great sociological and literary importance, especially because, as Bill Nasson goes on to say, "[i]ts stature is further enhanced by the timing of its appearance." (Nasson 1996: 3)

The appearance of van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* in 1996 came two years after Nelson Mandela took power in South Africa as its President, that is, at a time when the post-apartheid period was getting under way. By 1994 the time had come for all South Africans to re-invent themselves and their cultural base –their histories, their world-views, their mindsets, their morality, their perceptions. Universalised expectations of post-apartheid South Africa require that renewal to be multi-ethnic in essence and, for all White South Africans, part of the inter-racialisation process involves coming to terms with the past. This is the era of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created in part to help dissipate White angst. For the Commission, coming to terms with the past means talking about it; for creative writers, it means writing about it.

If we accept Jacques Derrida's contention that "[t]he point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word" (Derrida 1985: 292), then it must follow that apartheid existed thanks in part to its textualisation in the form of the Nationalist Party's apartheid legislation and discursive works by White South Africans, amongst others. Indeed, up to the time of the dismantling of institutionalised racism in South Africa, contributors to White South African literary discourse had been

2. All references to Van Onselen (1996) are to the James Currey paperback edition, 1997. References to this text will give year and page number(s) only.

partly responsible for textualising the apartheid construct. Some White South African writers continue the process even today, presumably inadvertently. Nadine Gordimer, for example, has written about the breakdown of White South African family life in *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and in *The House Gun* (1998), both works reinforcing underlying differences -the mutual Otherness- between members of different racial groups. Van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* is a contribution to the same discourse.

Although presented as what might be termed fictionalised social history or social orature, van Onselen's presentation of the story of Kas Maine has obvious literary resonances. David Anderson writes, "[i]t is in the sensitive portrayal of family life in Kas Maine's later years -'the swaying and lifting and sinking of human hearts,' in Du Bois's words- that the power and humanity of van Onselen's writing shines most brightly." (Anderson 1997: 27) What sets *The Seed is Mine* apart from other literary contributions, however, is the fact that this is a narrative written by an Afrikaner in praise of a Sotho man. Is van Onselen, then, laying the foundations for a new all-race discourse for the new South Africa? Is *The Seed is Mine* an early contribution to the textualisation of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, post-apartheid construct?

The point about van Onselen's biography is that it is a hybrid text. Based on years of research into oral histories carried out in the field by a team from the University of the Witwatersrand, *The Seed is Mine* is a report on their findings. At the same time, *The Seed is Mine* is a creative work, filled with characterisations, evocative descriptions of setting, moods and feelings. Moreover, like any other literary text, *The Seed is Mine* derives its dynamics from empowered constructs. Kas Maine, the central figure in the study, is empowered by the author who places his Black protagonist at the very centre of his broad narrational canvas. In turn, van Onselen, skilled field sociologist and Kas's creator, empowers himself by observing Kas's every move from a distance, controlling the reader's perception of his Black character down to the smallest detail of his behaviour.

The life history of Kas Maine, beginning in 1894 and ending in 1985, stretches from the Anglo-Boer war to almost the end of apartheid and parallels the grim history of White-on-Black racism in South Africa. But the story is of a man and his family who remained on the very edges of the vision of all other South Africans, out of sight, out of mind, and almost beyond the power of White domination. Kas Maine's entrepreneurial expertise and innate management skills enable him to position himself between the Black farm labourer and the White, Afrikaner land-owner. Van Onselen writes, "[t]he gods delighted in confining him [Kas Maine] to the middle ground -too skilled and too wealthy to be a mere subsistence farmer, and too black and too poor to become a capitalist- no one knew exactly where the boundaries lay." (1997: 459)

Ever imaginative, creative and resourceful, an arch-bricoleur with a strong gift for negotiating a deal, Kas Maine steers his household from property to property, first in the Bloemhof – Schweizer-Reneke – Wolmaransstad Triangle, then in the Klerksdorp district, later on Catherine Monnakgotla’s location at the western end of the Witwatersrand hills near Boons and finally further north at Ledig, a resettlement camp, on the plains skirting the southern rim of the Pilanesberg hills, next to Sun City, where he dies. Known as “*Ou Koop en Verkoop*” –Afrikaans for “Old Mr. Buy and Sell”– Kas buys and sells his way through life, always keeping something in reserve but always prepared to take risks whenever he feels it necessary or expedient. In his early and middle years he buys stock and draft animals for his ploughs; with the coming of motorised transport, he buys a car and a lorry and, to his wife’s despair, seemingly mesmerized by machinery, he buys his fifth tractor at the age of eighty-six, having taken a Mobil Oil course on tractor maintenance at the age of seventy-one, although he never learned to drive one!

Wily and irascible, Kas Maine lives on his wits. As he grows older, Kas looks on helplessly and disapprovingly as his children are drawn away from the family shack to jobs in the mines and in domestic service for White families. But unlike his children’s and grand-children’s destinies, Kas Maine’s own is not linked to the iniquities of White racist society. Kas is a man of Nature who lives out of reach of the vindictiveness and sadism of inhuman oppression and White control. As the narrator observes, Kas Maine “*knew* how to farm grain,”³ (1997: 506) and the author can scarcely conceal his unwavering admiration for Kas when he writes:

For anyone to have reaped such a large harvest on the depleted soils of a Pilanesberg labour reserve in the 1980s was an achievement. For an octogenarian with faltering eyesight and declining physical powers to have done so without the assistance of male offspring was extraordinary. (1997: 509)

In *The Seed is Mine*, authorial admiration is one facet of authorial power and one instrument of authorial control. Van Onselen’s power and control over his central character is absolute; he fetishises Kas Maine. Bill Nasson calls van Onselen’s Kas Maine “Old Kas [...] the prehistory of South Africa’s black working class.” (Nasson 1996: 4) Indeed, there is something primeval, eternal, stereotypical even, about the image van Onselen creates and leaves us with. Reminiscent of J.M. Coetzee’s futuristic Michael K,⁴ Kas Maine is at one with the South African world, a dot on the landscape, indistinguishable from the brownness of the soil he is tilling and dwarfed by the clouds

3. Van Onselen’s emphasis.

4. See J.M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983).

that billow above him. If one were to paint a portrait of Kas Maine, it would be of a man ploughing, drawn through the highveld breeze by a span of oxen, striding over the deep furrows of a vast field, with cumulus clouds, the bringers of life-giving rains, towering over the distant hills. In "Racism's Last Word", Jacques Derrida warns about such images. Writing for the catalogue of the *Art contre/against Apartheid* exhibition,⁵ Derrida observed ominously that,

Here the single work is multiple, it crosses all national, cultural, and political frontiers. It neither commemorates nor represents an event. Rather, it casts a continuous gaze (paintings are always gazing) at what I propose to name a continent. [...]

Beyond a continent whose limits they point to, the limits surrounding it or crossing through it, the paintings gaze and call out in silence.

And their silence is just. A discourse would once again compel us to reckon with the present state of force and law. It would draw up contracts, dialecticize itself, let itself be reappropriated again.

This silence calls out unconditionally; it keeps watch on that which is not, on that which is not yet, and on the chance of still remembering some faithful day. (Derrida 1985: 299)

In post-apartheid South Africa today, there is just such a silence. The danger of such a silence, according to Derrida, is that it can be broken; that once the current distribution of power is assessed and quantified, a new discourse can be articulated and will fall under the domination of the previous articulators. The danger in van Onselen's creation is that it might herald a new White, European, neo-colonialist discourse. Derrida stated that "racism is a Western thing," (Derrida 1985: 293) and later, that "the name of apartheid has managed to become a sinister swelling on the body of the world only in that place where *homo politicus europaeus* first put his signature on its tattoo." (Derrida 1985: 294) The question today is: Is *homo politicus europaeus* now trying to put his signature on the post-apartheid tattoo?

Perceived with authorial magnanimity, presented with the expansiveness of a Tolstoyan prose landscape and paced by the seasons themselves, van Onselen's image of Kas Maine takes on the attributes of an icon. The problem with this is that the act of writing textualises constructs, providing them with their essence. Apartheid was a construct textualised by White South Africans to achieve White supremacy in South Africa. In his essay "White Racism and Black Consciousness", Steve Biko complained about White liberals and asked: "Since they are aware that the problem in this country

5. The *Art contre/against Apartheid* exhibition opened in Paris in November 1983.

is white racism, why do they not address themselves to a white world? Why do they insist on talking to Blacks?" (Biko 1979: 65) In his complaint, Biko sensed the power and pitfalls of textualising constructs; the apartheid construct was oxygenised through texts on racial segregation and integration, or even simply through narratives about relationships between members of different ethnic groups in South Africa. To what extent, then, is Charles van Onselen's textualisation of Kas Maine not only a well-documented and beautifully-narrated Black South African sharecropper's history but also a construct of racialism? To what extent is van Onselen's presentation of Kas Maine, Black South African sharecropper, a eurocentric act?

This is not to cast aspersions on van Onselen's intentions. However, the fact remains that written text has a power of its own and can work in realms beyond the domain of the author. Just as the texts of White liberal anti-apartheid writers like Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, J.M. Coetzee and Alan Paton, among many others, must bear some responsibility for the textualisation of apartheid, so it might be argued that *The Seed is Mine* perpetuates the textualisation of racial differentiation in post-apartheid South Africa. If we follow Biko, White South Africans would do well to restrict themselves to writing to White South Africans. However, according to the current dispensation, any new strategy should strive for a construct based on racial *integration*, not racial segregation. But in this there is an inherent contradiction, namely, how can multi-racialism or inter-racialism as discursive constructs in any "rainbow society" be contributed to by textualisations of topics which are not themselves multi-racial or inter-racial, that is, integrationist? An integrationist textualisation has already begun with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996: 3) which makes "Non-racialism and non-sexism" one of its Founding Provisions. What concerns us here is whether van Onselen's account of Kas Maine's story textualises segregation or integration.

It is significant that the Founding Provisions of the new South African Constitution place non-racialism and non-sexism side by side, on a par. The link between racialism and sexism, and by extension racial and sexual discrimination, is a fundamental one. In his *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, Ronald Hyam argues convincingly that "[s]ex is at the very heart of racism," (Hyam 1992: 203) that sexuality is the basis of the colonial impulse and of the White man's desire for supremacy in South Africa. By textualising inter-racial relationships in South Africa, contributions to the White South African literary discourse have given rise to race-differentiated sexualities. For this reason, any contribution to the White South African literary discourse, such as *The Seed is Mine*, is especially significant; an analysis of such texts will reveal whether the textualisation of the post-apartheid enhances racial and supremacist constructs in South Africa by revealing differences in White and Black sexualities. In short, does van Onselen control Kas Maine's sexuality?

Van Onselen's presentation of Kas Maine's sexuality is important. To a certain extent, *The Seed is Mine* is a White South African male's presentation of a Black South African male's sexuality. Van Onselen presents Kas Maine as a traditionalist, who adheres strictly to and seeks to uphold his male rights as patriarch and *ngaka* (a traditional herbalist). Kas manipulates his daughters into marriage contracts in order to safeguard family unity. When his younger son Bodule marries Dikeledi Teeu without his approval, Kas is distraught because Bodule is using bridewealth before his eldest son has married. "How could a father dispose of bridewealth for a younger son when he had not yet secured a wife for his oldest?" (1997: 345) As Kas rides to the Teeu homestead at Vlakfontein, van Onselen reasons narrationally on Kas's behalf:

If Abner Teeu [Dikeledi's father] would accept eight cattle as half the amount due to him as bridewealth for Dikeledi, then Kas would offer him an additional sum of fifty pounds in cash as *bohadi* for the younger sister, Disebo, who could then marry Mmusetsi. Dikeledi must then return home for the birth of her child and be taken care of by her family until the Maines had the eight outstanding cattle. When Dikeledi was ready to rejoin her husband, Kas would make the final payment on the *bohadi* and both sisters could join the Maine homestead. (1997: 346)

In this way, van Onselen allows his authorial power to dominate his creation by taking over Kas's gender responsibilities and giving him 'thoughts' as an archetypal Black South African patriarch in the throes of managing the bride-price game. Such authorial control is evident again in the description of Kas's activities at his brother Phitise's funeral wake. Van Onselen describes in graphic terms how the eighty-nine-year-old Kas, as patriarch and *ngaka*, takes control of the proceedings:

On Sunday Kas was up long before the rest. Shortly after 6 a.m. he supervised the slaughtering of the beast. The heifer was slit open and the partially digested grass removed from the first of its stomachs and blended with the contents of the gall bladder and some herbs and water to produce a thick dark-green liquid, *moshwang*. At Kas's request, the animal's head was put to one side to be taken back to Ledig while the carcass was removed and butchered into more manageable portions. Shortly thereafter, a long wooden pole was produced, a few of the men commenced roasting selected cuts of meat, while others propped up the pole as a makeshift seat for those who were about to be 'washed'.

Kas, Sellwane and her son by a first marriage, Michael Abrams, stripped down to their undergarments, re-entered the yard, and took up positions on the pole. Two nephews, Kgofo and Hwai, both practising *ngakas*, appeared with bowls of *moshwang*, which they poured on the heads of the three on the pole and rubbed it into their hair; more *moshwang* was used to wash their feet. The *ngakas* then produced a bottle containing a mixture of animal fat and herbs, which they rubbed

into their torsos. The three family representatives were then taken aside and offered smoked liver; this completed the ritual and signalled everyone present to partake of the meat, sour porridge, samp, vegetables and sorghum beer that the women had prepared. (1997: 517-518)

However, at this point in the so-far objective description of the ritual in which Kas Maine expresses his masculine power as patriarch and *ngaka*, van Onselen reveals his own power over Kas's social obligations by providing him with thoughts for the reader to interpret:

On the way home, Kas thought approvingly about these rituals, which not only propitiated the ancestors and protected the children, but drew together those who followed, and heightened the family's kinship and solidarity in a world intent on dissolving their bonds. (1997: 518)

The distinction between factual narrative and fictionalised narrative is a fine one and a dangerous one in such texts where they become so closely interrelated as to be virtually indistinguishable.

In "Racism's Last Word", Derrida warns of the dangers inherent in such narratives. He perceives the belief that "[t]he white must not let itself be touched by black, be it even at the remove of language or symbol" as a mark of "the obsessiveness of (...) racism" and "the compulsive terror [of the racist] which (...) forbids contact." (Derrida 1985: 294) However, by intertwining factual and fictional narrative, van Onselen shows himself to be sufficiently enlightened to shrug off 'the compulsive terror which forbids all contact' and to allow himself to touch a black 'at the remove of language'. But the author also reveals himself to be incapable of suppressing his narrational dominance over his subject / creation, exceeding himself by hijacking Kas's gender and social roles. Yet this control manifests itself only at a cerebral level; van Onselen limits himself to getting inside Kas's head and reading his mind. Ironically and revealingly, the only time the author presents himself in potential physical contact with Kas is as he stands, like an angel, at Kas's graveside, when all contact is pointless. Without naming himself, van Onselen describes how,

A tall white man, one of Kas's friends, slipped into the back of the gathering, and he, too, spoke [...]

But not everybody left. The tall white man stayed behind and waited until the cemetery emptied. A slight breeze had sprung up; it was an October day. He reached down, picked up a handful of earth and walked across to the grave. With the wind gently spraying the grains of sand that trickled from his hand, he looked down, made a silent promise and then turned to leave. (1997: 532)

The promise made by Charles van Onselen to Kas Maine was no doubt that he would see to it that his story was told. The question arises, then, whether or not van Onselen's account of the Black South African sharecropper is what Jonathan Culler has termed a "critique of conscience"?⁶ By writing about a Black Sotho sharecropper, van Onselen allows himself to be 'touched by black at the remove of language', to paraphrase Derrida, a violation of deeply-held and preeminently moral principles of the former apartheid society, to paraphrase Culler. By presenting himself at Kas's graveside, is van Onselen confronting his own 'guilt' just as Mark Twain made Huckleberry Finn confront his by helping Jim to escape? In the case of *The Seed is Mine*, is authorial 'conscience' the focus of the 'critique'?

Jacques Derrida writes, "it is necessary to appeal unconditionally to the future of another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present." (Derrida 1985: 298) Derrida is right – 'another law and another force lying beyond the totality of this present' needs to be textualised to replace the textualisation of apartheid, but what should that construct be? Derrida also contends correctly that "there's no racism without a language." (Derrida 1985: 294) But one might add with the same reasoning that there can be no anti-racism or multi-culturalism 'without a language.' Yet, *The Seed is Mine*, characterised by overt authorial power manifested through total control over both narrative and characterisation, features of literary discourse firmly rooted in South Africa's past, does not, to my mind, contribute to any post-apartheid force.

What, then, does the textualisation of Kas Maine tell us, if anything, about the shifts in power in White South African discourse? Van Onselen is still textualising race differentiation; by writing about a Black sharecropper, he is underlining racial difference. Van Onselen writes about Kas Maine because he is a Black South African, not because he is a sharecropper – there are still millions of sharecroppers all over the world – and not because he is a victim of apartheid – again there are millions of apartheid victims all over the world. Van Onselen writes about Kas Maine because of his skin-colour. What is really worrisome, however, is the very brief epilogue to this 535-page text. Kas Maine died on 25th. September 1985. In the "Epilogue," van Onselen describes in moving terms the situation of the late patriarch's offspring in 1994, the year Mandela became President of South Africa:

Mosala Maine along with his wife and children lives in a tumble-down mud shack in Ledig on the stand his father bought for him, eking out a living from occasional construction work in and around the township. [...]

6. See Jonathan Culler, "The Authority of the Classics", Inaugural lecture, *Canon Literari: Ordre i Subversió*, University of Lleida, Catalunya, Spain, March 1996. Citing Huckleberry Finn's struggle to resist his society's racial assumptions and deeply-held, preeminently moral principles such as slave ownership, the violation of which Huck believes to be morally wrong, that is, his "conscience," Jonathan Culler refers to Huck's confrontation with his "guilt" at helping Jim to escape and labels it Mark Twain's "critique of conscience".

Of Kas and Leetwane Maine's tin shack on the conical hill at Ledig there is now no outward sign. The yard has long since been cleared of rusting ploughs, scraps of metal, bits of fencing and broken-down carts, and where the shack once stood, there is a modest two-roomed breeze-block cottage which Ntholeng –with Mosala's help– is gradually adding to on her occasional visits to Ledig. It is hard to open and shut the back door, its metal frame having been badly bent during careless building operations. At present the cottage lacks a ceiling and the roof, fashioned from the very corrugated-iron sheets that once framed Kas and Leetwane's home, has rusted through. As the sun pours in through scores of tiny holes, it leaves an irregular mottled pattern on the grey concrete floor. Shades amongst the shades. (1997: 534-535)

What is disturbing is not the strong *déjà-vu* feel of these images but the terrible realisation on the part of the reader that these images might contribute to the textualisation of a post-apartheid construct. The immense danger is that, as they did for apartheid, contributors to the new South Africa's literary discourse will help perpetuate a construct only slightly transformed from what Derrida has called "the most racist of racisms." (Derrida 1985: 291) Van Onselen's last sentence before the "Epilogue" gives Kas's creator away,

On the way back to the Witwatersrand he [the author himself] noticed the first heavy clouds of the new season rolling in from the south, and in a small field beside the Tlhabane road, there was a man planting beans. (1997: 532)

Van Onselen does not mention the skin-colour of the man planting beans, but there is no need –we know he is Black, one of Kas Maine's long line of Black South African descendants who need to go on planting beans into the future because the species has been textualised as such. In short, as a literary text, van Onselen's narration of Kas Maine's story prolongs the apartheid construct into the post-apartheid era. In this sense, as literature, *The Seed is Mine* is a devious text; indeed, South Africa's painful history, while not to be forgotten, must not be allowed to obfuscate new projections and obstruct strategies for their emplacement.

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