Prison Literature and Postcolonial Carceral Consciousness: A Reading of D. M. Zwelonke's *Robben Island*

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Abstract
Due to the extreme display of brute racial suppression of indigenous South African blacks (and their few activist white sympathisers) by white settler colonialists, South African literature may be argued to have produced Africa's most harrowing creative accounts of racist profiling of blacks and hegemonic erasure of the Other. This has eminently constructed a canon of writings critically distinguished for their representations of African racial "sub-humanity" in relation to the coloniser's performance of impalpable power. Despite this, there is a gap in scholarship to account for and theorise the signification of South African prison literature as a postcolonial site of black carceral consciousness which projects unequal racial power relations in which the activist black individual stubbornly asserts their marginalised but revolutionary agency. Redressing this gap through a postcolonial reading of D. M. Zwelonke's Robben Island, this paper proposes that South African prison literature not only reflects an intensity of black postcolonial carceral consciousness, especially during apartheid, but also signifies a unique activism in dealing with this. In this unfolding, the paper suggests that Zwelonke's Robben Island, though barely known within African(ist) critical circles, is one of South African prison literature's most resounding exemplar of the genre.

Keywords*: (South African) Prison Literature, Carceral Consciousness, Postcolonial(ism), D. M. Zwelonke, Robben Island.*

Introduction

Perhaps one phenomenal site that best projects Michel Foucault's identification of "Other Spaces" as material productions of (sub)cultural/structural deviance to normal(ised) notions of space,

architecture and the environment is the *prison*. As a very notable example of peripheral domains he assigned as "heterotopias" (22), the prison constitutes an atypical site of "habitation" characterised by the inhabitant's lack of choice or agency to determine whether to live there or not, thus producing a disciplinary complex of enforced dwelling (Franklin 1977; Gaucher 1999; Larson 2010; Roberts 2016; Mirpuri 2019). Hence, it is a characteristic venue of withdrawn opportunities of habitational freedom in which the inhabitant becomes a "panoptical object," lacking the privileges (by law or by the sheer oppression of the incarcerator) of performative subjectivity or human rights. Thus, the prison, as a building or a designated site of human exclusion, stands in oppositional or "crisis" relation to socio-culturally acknowledged paradigms of spatial/environmental expressions of "usual," "commonplace" architecture, making it eminently heterotopic. Recognising sites such as sacred places, boarding schools, the cemetery, libraries, museums, honeymoon hotels, the garden, hammam of the Moslems, brothels and colonies (24-27) as heterotopias, Foucault includes any other material construct of "unusualness" or "otherness" within this category (though in theoretically misty and contextually problematic terms, especially as the connotation of "unusualness" or "otherness" may vary from one society/culture/individual experience to another).[1] As Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter intone, "[b]ecause they inject alterity into the sameness, the commonplace, the topicality of everyday society, Foucault called these places 'hetero-topias' – literally 'other places' " (4).

The heterotopic and disciplinary apparatus of the prison arguably aligns most with Foucault's imaginary of "Other Spaces" because it characteristically and programmatically links the materiality and institutionalisation of architectural production with a peculiar human/class marginalisation, or in more realistic terms, existential erasure, which has remarkably informed a historic and enduring genre of literature that marks the barbarities, pathologies and traumatic inhumanities of its habitational grimness. This imaginative end-product foregrounds the underlying/apparent systemic grids that mobilise the prison as a subsuming site of otherness, projecting its inmate characters as objectified carriers of institutional trauma. As Andrew Sobanet intones, "prison is a distinct cultural modality that results in a distinct literary modality – the prison novel" (cited in Oswald, 1). Though other genres of writing such as the non-fictional memoir, biography, letters, the essay and poetry have been channels of reflecting on the harrowing circumstances of the prison, the novel (blending experienced or reported prison content

with imaginative experimentation/expansion of plot, characterisation, setting and dialogue) arguably inscribes the signification of this heterotopic space in a most contagious realism that projects the marginal and gruesome representation of the detained inmates. They become protagonists of the undersides of historic human penal contraptions and their modern phases enabled through networks of (arguable) state terrorism, repressive legal procedures and institutionalised non-egalitarian visions of ideal urbanity, ethics and citizenship. Commenting on his agonising experience in Robben Island, the maximum prison in which he was incarcerated for his political and activist radicalism against apartheid for more than two decades, Nelson Mandela asserted that "[p]rison not only robs you of your freedom, it attempts to take away your identity…. It is by definition a purely authoritarian state that tolerates no independence and individuality." (cited in Oswald, 5).

This paper locates South African prison literature, especially of the apartheid era, as not just an imaginative transmission of the traumatic encounters that transpire in the prison, but as an inscription of postcolonial carceral consciousness in which the prison operates in two especial ways: as a heterotopic site of unequal power relations between the hegemonic colonialist and the Other, and as a venue in which the other assert their marginalised but revolutionary agency. By focusing on D.M. Zwelonke's *Robben Island* in this respect, the paper resumes the "unsettling" discussion of literary canonisation as not only a way of identifying "the best/exemplary texts or authors" of a literary movement, but as an often imprecise or biased politics of discursive fixation informed by several "stakeholder" interests: aesthetic preference, authorial branding, racial/class/gender politics and particular audience tastes (Karl 1972; Bloom 1994; Kuipers 2003; Damrosch 2006; Ping 2015; Olusegun-Joseph 2021). In this context, Zwelonke and his novel in focus, *Robben Island*, unfortunately occupy a marginal site in the intricate universe of South African literary canonising, especially with the presence of regularly recalled "intimidating names" such as Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, Alex la Guma, Bessie Head, Peter Abrahams, Oswald Mtshali, Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, J.M. Coetzee, Arthur Nortje, Can Themba, Don Mattera, Mongane Serote, Sipho Sepamla, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Breyten Breytenbach, to mention but a few. Against this grain, this study proposes that Zwelonke's *Robben Island*, though barely known within African(ist) critical circles, is one of South African prison literature's most resounding exemplar of the genre.

Prison Literature and Repressive Discursivities

Prison literature may be described as a timeless cultural activity that has had a unique universal circulation of carceral witnessing by (once) incarcerated authors testifying about the uncanny otherworldliness of the prison as a justice infrastructure which structurally and systemically dispenses present-continuous protocols of penal barbarities (Franklin 1977; Roberts 1985; Gaucher 1999; Freeman 2009; Larson 2010; Mirpuri 2019). Producing an oversupply of cultural origins and lived-individual experiences informing a significant production of the Bible; Judeo-Christian literature; much of Western and Eastern literary corpus with "authorial signatures" of previously incarcerated writers such as Socrates, Thomas More, John Bunyan, Vladmir Nabokov, John Donne, Voltaire, Daniel Defoe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Frantz Kafka, Bertrand Russel, Claude McKay, Martin Luther King Jnr., Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka; and a cream of literature of repression from the Global South, prison literature has temperamentally inscribed itself as a counter-discourse against normative (but repressive) frameworks of law, legality, and penal practices in World Literature. It is an expression of anguished otherness in which the writer-prisoner struggles within an imbalance of personalised trauma and a representation of that trauma as a metonym of group-inmate torture. This is regardless of whether the writer-prisoner is a religious, political, or common-criminal convict or not. It can also be regarded as a codified aspect of prison culture. As Bob Gaucher notes, "[p]rison culture is still characterized by an oral tradition of songs and ballads, storytelling and 'dead time' conversations" (14). In terms of its material/discursive depiction of penal brutality, Sheila Roberts suggests that "we perceive rightly… that prison literature has a greater homogeneity than most other classes" [or genres] (61). In constructing a poetics of prison literature quite along Roberts' line of thought above, Doran Larson asserts:

> Responding to the sovereignty of the punishment apparatus, prison writing is at once indexical of the precise conditions in which it is created, and susceptible to a global tropology, a prison poetics…a dissociative turn of voice that allows the "I" of the prison text -- even when not opened into an explicit "we" -- to represent communities larger than the prison author and other than those insisted upon by the prison; and the concomitant associative gesture whereby the prison writer names the contemporary communities among whom s/he numbers

> him- or herself, and/or names an ancestry in the history of prison writing (145)

In a similar perspective of a homogeneous landscape of structural and thematic prison writing espoused above, Breyten Breytenbach, the activist South African writer who had as well articulated his experiences of the prison through writing, avers that "[w]hen you are interested in prison accounts as a genre you will soon see that prisons are pretty much the same the world over. It is rather the peculiar relationship of power-repression which seems immutable, wherever you may hide" (cited in Gaucher, 18). While this opinion and the previously cited ones above no doubt stand to reason, this paper proposes that prison-writing accounts revolving around articulated group trauma as a response to colonialist apparatuses and performances of racial/cultural othering discursively signify what may be called *postcolonial carceral consciousness*. In difference to readings of the generally perceived individual sufferings of prisoners that often showcase personalised experiences which however project universal depictions of prisoners' sufferings (Franklin 1977; Roberts 1985; Gaucher 1999; Larson 2010), postcolonial carceral consciousness is a marginalised group's agony of systemic incarceration which was historically inaugurated through particular inhuman dimensions of hegemonic subordination, such as colonialism. In this context, the individual suffering of the prisoner (who is a racialised Other) is embodied as the existential suffering of the group which is psychologically, emotionally and imaginatively shared by the members. However, in the counter-hegemonic spirit of postcolonialism as a discursive vehicle of the Other's resistance of essentialist colonialist frameworks of hegemonic institutional control (Spivak 1988; Ashcroft et.al 1989; Boehmer 1993; Bhabha 1994; Quayson 2000), this carceral consciousness is fiercely opposed and redressed imaginatively, politically, radically, and if needs be, through martyrdom.

African American and South African prison literatures probably project postcolonial carceral consciousness the most in World Literature. Commenting on the philosophy of the prison in African American prison writing, Bruce Franklin points out that,

> From the point of view of the Afro-American experience, imprisonment is first of all the loss of a *people's* freedom. The questions of individual freedom and of human freedom derive from that social imprisonment. From this point of view, American society as a whole constitutes the

> primary prison. The Afro-American experience started in chains in the prison of a slave ship (57)

This foundational statement of African American postcolonial carceral consciousness in prison literature is perhaps best emblematised in Claude McKay's seminal poem, "If We Must Die:"

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
> O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
> Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (984).

The poem above positionally summarises the fierce combative spirit of African American prison literature also pronounced in texts like Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, T.J. Reddy's "What Next," Eldridge Cleaver's "Soul on Ice," and Etheridge Knight's "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane."

South African prison literature demonstrates the African continent's most telling artistic depiction of penal inhumanity. It circulates timeless textual testimonials such as Herman Charles Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug*, Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Breyten Breytenbach's *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Dennis Brutus' *Letters to Martha*, D. M. Zwelonke's *Robben Island*, Jeremy Cronin's *Inside*, Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds* and Mosiuoa Patrick Lekota's *Prison Letters to a Daughter*. It is constituted by writings of both black and white prisoners either convicted of anti-state political activism or (trumped up) criminal charges. The content of this writing projects a common incident of horrid experiences of torture, trauma and grisly capital punishment (often by hanging) which impact profound memories of mortal horror. Depictions of these are pungent, for instance, in Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug* and

Zwelonke's *Robben Island*, which may be taken as representative anguished witnessing by white and black inmates respectively. However, while projections of the white inmate articulate personalised trauma signifying the commonality of all prisoners' experiences, the individual sufferings of the black inmates are transmitted as embodiments of peripheral-group dehumanisation approached with the Other's activist resistance. Comparing the attitudes of white and black prison inmates to brutal pre-hanging penal rites, Roberts notes the following, discursively corroborating the position of postcolonial carceral consciousness among the latter:

> One extremely moving aspect of the pre-hanging ritual in South Africa is the way the blacks in prison sing for their own. White "condemns" have to hire singers if they want singing the night before (according to Breytenbach), but for the black condemned prisoner, his fellow-prisoners sing unrehearsed through the night, their voices harmonizing from cell to cell. In his collection of poems *Inside,* Jeremy Cronin includes a poem "Death Row" part of which tries to convey the sound and repetition of the harmonizing. In this case the singing was in honour of three black saboteurs, Moise, Tsotsobe, and Shabangu (63).

In the following, this paper engages Zwelonke's *Robben Island* as an exemplary artistic site in which the harmony of race, history and postcolonial carceral consciousness projects group solidarity and resistance in oppressively determined racist prison landscapes. This will be done to reflect on the prison not only as a heterotopic territory of crisis, but also as a discursive venue of group-identity affirmation of difference.

Perspective in *Robben Island*

D. M. Zwelonke's *Robben Island* represents a grossly unacknowledged example of sterling South African prison writing. Though noting Zwelonke's realistic depictions of agonising "dreams" and "nightmares," Nadine Gordimer, arguably from a Eurocentric formalist point of view, suggests that "much of the writing is naïve and sometimes even nonsensical" (116). Eirwen Oswald chooses to ignore subjecting *Robben Island* to an engaging critical examination of memorable South African prison writing in her study on the subject because it is a "[f]ictionalized"

work not precisely about the author's prison experience which potentially obscures "clarity of focus" (14). One of the rather scant commendations of this novel is given by John Goldblatt who asserts that "[j]ust as kinetic art, musique concrete, and science fiction are new aesthetics of the twentieth century, so too is the literature of political imprisonment" (cited in Nkosi, 103). He makes this remark in acknowledging Zwelonke's sordid realistic imagination in his novel under examination. Claude Wauthier's reading of the novel stems from an attempt to examine the development of South African literature among writers forced into exile after the Sharpeville massacres of 1960, noting it as a remarkable narrative which "ends with the account of the death through torture of a detainee" (337). But perhaps the most enduring comment on the grim realism of this book comes from Lewis Nkosi, as instanced in the following:

> Zwelonke succeeds in creating for us a world we can only enter with a profound sense of discomfort; we do not belong here… our relation with the book is tense, painful and contaminating, requiring us to discriminate between the tragedy of political internment and the 'corrupting eloquence' which so often feeds on it… (103).

What seems clear about this novel, despite confused opinions about its alleged "indiscipline" of horrific prison presentation in a "naïve"/"nonsensical" framework is its realistic imagination informed by (narrative) *perspective*. This is a device employed by any writer to push their message in a persuasive and contagious way to the audience. This technique could be described as the angle private to the artist in evocatively communicating their message. Georg Lukács, emphasising the "overriding importance" of perspective, asserts that it "determines the course and content; it draws together the threads of the narration" of any work of art (485). He also suggests that the "direction in which characters develop is determined by perspective, only those features being described which are material to their development" (485). Despite Barthian poststructuralist insistence on the "Death of the Author" and Reader Response criticism's collaboration in emphasising the fluidity of textual meaning-making based on individual readers' diverse relationships with or attitudes to the text, it can be argued that perspective builds the foundational aesthetic/discursive networks that allow or assign the possibility of the "liberty" of fluid/multiple meaning-making in the first instance. Perspective in *Robben Island* is therefore the author's strategic

construction and representation of the horrors of apartheid from the point of view of a former black political prisoner (real or imagined) who reminisces the horrific events perpetrated in Robben Island and extends the revolutionary ideology that only a conscious, uncompromising confrontation by blacks, however violent, could resolve the apparent racial impasse in South Africa.

The novel begins with the occasion of the meeting of the delegate task-force, a group of black political activists including Danny (the narrator) and Bekimpi (the main character of the novel), who are agitating for the recovery of their "native land." This scene initiates the first level of conflict in the novel, for the subsequent scene exposes us to an eerie atmosphere of torture and beatings which involve Bekimpi and Danny. The source of the conflict, which is the participation of the victims in a political activity resisting the repression of blacks, is implied. In the torture room, Danny is asked if he knows Bekimpi who has already been disfigured, and at the end of his beating, he wonders "…whether Bekimpi was arrested too" (Zwelonke 8). The abrupt switch from the delegate-task-force-meeting scene to the harrowing scene of this human torture, and the later reflection of Danny on Bekimpi (who he could not recognise), comments on the several dehumanising encounters blacks experienced under apartheid.

Certain projections of postcolonial carceral consciousness are central to Zwelonke's realistic framing of the plot-structure of *Robben Island*. The initial cue, which occurs at the beginning of the novel, involves Danny and Bekimpi being arrested and beaten for their involvement in resistant political activity, as illustrated above. This introduces us to a series of events leading to an exploration of the uncanny realities of life on Robben Island. Our familiarisation with the weird existence on this prison-island takes a new turn at the occasion of Bekimpi's refusal to be a state witness when visited by an inspector, Van der Merwe. At this juncture, the atmosphere of Concentration-Camp life is unraveled in a picturesque but crude manner.

The extreme weather of the Antarctic cold and the biting intensity of the scorching sun are pitted against the background of the callous treatments of black inmates by white warders to depict a scenario of structured penal weirdness. We are launched into the spare-diet horrors of the *kulukudu*, the internal cell where a political prisoner is locked up without food for days, for any trivial offense. Danny recounts an occasion of his being locked in a *kulukudu* for joining a "span" of prisoners he had not been assigned to. He intimates that he suffered "three days of spare-

diet in the narrowness of that cell," and that hunger "tore my entrails" (17). The plot expands within the narrative to capture the tortuous ordeal of "stone-breaking" by the political prisoners at the quarry, a place of immense physical and psychological trauma. Danny recounts the impression he had on the first occasion of his being at the quarry in the following:

> It was an ominous sight. Ominous because of the preconceived notions that had wormed their way into our nervous systems, turning them yellow. Ominous because we had thought it daring to place a foot on an iced block and smile; because the island was no other place than the quarry, not the cells, not the ugly vegetation: the quarry had become symbolical, the graduation centre: torture and the island, suffering and the island…. (31)

Danny goes on to intimate us with the cyclical physical and psychological erosions experienced in pushing wheelbarrows loaded with quarry stones in this provocative way:

> Doing any piece of manual labour at human pace is good; but doing a mule's labour at a mule's pace is something else. The yells rained down harder: 'Come on, come on black bastards… Do you think this is a picnic? Do you think you are in a hotel? In your mother's home? Come on, kaffirs, come on, baboons… push, push, push…. (31).

It could be argued that the incidents depicted above represent a routinised terror of penal grimness, translating in widening psychological, physical, emotional and spiritual proportions of racist objectification. Other events reflecting this abysmal situation include continuous savage beatings of blacks by white warders, as the fatal treatment of Oom Joe, the black prisoner forced to run through two lines of white warders raining blows of their batons on him until he finally dies, reveals (45). The denial of Muzi, another black prisoner, of medical attention for his acute appendicitis, is another case in point (44–45).

The insertion of comic scenes, such as the "enrolment" into the "Makana University" to learn and to experiment with dancing, judo, singing and other recreational activities, serves to deflate the already accumulating tension within the plot. It also serves as an ingenious

narrative element in reflecting white contempt for black culture and identity, since this only "favourable" gesture to blacks is channeled to inseminate a bit of non-black "civilisational decorum" so that the white warders could bask in the euphoria of satisfying their "superior" racist cultural imaginary.

A major incident of postcolonial carceral consciousness occurs when Bekimpi refuses to submit to the overtures of Van der Merwe to become a state witness. This would have been a betrayal of the black nationalist front against apartheid. This event, which occurs at the middle of the plot, is an exposition of various hoodwinking ploys utilised by whites under apartheid to frustrate unbending black reaction which Bekimpi symbolises. The result of Bekimpi's refusal to capitulate is his detention in solitary confinement. This informs a new dimension of the narrative because it weaves into events which occur in Bekimpi's imagination. These reflect his acute desire to be free from the brutalising confines of Robben Island as seen when he imagines himself to be Zweli, a political prisoner whose term of imprisonment on the island was over. They also mirror his intense emotional need for an ideal woman, as his ruminations on Thandi and Nompi, two ladies of his fancy, reveal. This aspect of the plot revolving around "Bekimpi's dreams" unpacks the psychical torment and spiritually alienating experiences forced on blacks by the oppressive apartheid machinery. The zenith of mental torture under the horror of apartheid is projected in Nompi's electrocution by the police over the allegation that she was often seen with Bekimpi. This event underwrites the integral inhumanity of the apartheid complex.

Another underwriting of postcolonial carceral consciousness is exhibited at the point when the political prisoners in Robben Island engage in a hunger-strike in reaction to continued oppression, this time, as regards the inadequate supply of food. This event occurs against the background of their physical plundering through hard labour, and their knowledge of their food being given to feed the head-warder's pigs. There is an accumulation of tension in the event of the strike, which is lowered when the authorities reach an agreement with the prisoners through dialogue, only to become complicated when ten of them, including Danny, are summoned to an office and whisked to the *kulukudu*. A tense occasion again occurs when Bekimpi refuses a second attempt by the apartheid authorities to make him a state witness. This leads to such unleashing of horror that eventually results in his death. Bekimpi's death highlights the climactic moment of racist penal abyss in the novel.

From the point of view of characterology, Zwelonke highlights the absurdities of apartheid through his adroit handling of casting. Bekimpi, the hero of the novel, is well drawn to reflect the processes by which resistant blacks are liquidated within the apartheid milieu. He is, thus, the instrument Zwelonke primarily uses to realise his postcolonial imaginative intention. Through flashback, we are intimated with his processes of metamorphosis in life, which informed his being a thug, and later, a hardened political activist directly resisting the apartheid administration. In the section "Bra Black," we come to appreciate his morphing from an innocent young school boy to a hardened personality through his arrest for not possessing a "Pass," a situation which leads him to jail and which informs his homosexual molestation by a hardened criminal, Bra Kit. This experience wells up an uncontrollable but transformative revulsion in him. His bid to protect himself from the recurrence of such experience influences his killing a criminal inmate who seeks to take advantage of him. Bekimpi is found guilty of culpable homicide, and after two years of detention, metamorphoses into a "toughy." He becomes a jail-frequenter.

Bekimpi's metamorphosis discursively inscribes how the whole life of a black person could be grisly programmed through the eeriness of apartheid. They could be basically dehumanised, as the concomitant effect of his homosexual ordeal reveals, but with the rather positive purchase that the black individual comes to a healthy consciousness of his robbed identity and seeks its restoration through conscious resistance to the white colonial complex. Within the plot, Bekimpi develops from a hardened political activist to a resolute political prisoner; from a physically tortured person to a psychologically brutalised character who morphs in rebellious stature to resist the ploys of the government to be its witness to the point of martyrdom in his counter-hegemonic conviction. He is the character around whom the ideological conflicts between the white and black races in the novel collide, and the occasion of his death deepens the grim apprehension of apartheid. He is a foil to intimidated people like Chi, a flatly drawn character who had been a member of the delegate task-force but who capitulates to become a state witness due to unbearable pressures unleashed on him. Danny, an equally violated prison inmate as Bekimpi, succeeds in his role as narrator to interpret the horrors of individual and societal incarceration of blacks within the inhuman enclave of Robben Island.

Robben Island further thrives in the use of multiple characters who interact and create the picture of collective emotional patterns. There

are two major blocks of multiple characters who comment on racialised existence in South Africa in this novel. They are, on the one hand, the black prisoners who are conditioned to horrific physical and psychological assaults and who react in pain, anger and occasional rebellion, while others react traitorously to gain the favour of the authorities as seen in the activities of some of the convicts, like Chi. The other block of multiple characters are the white warders and sentries who unleash arbitrary horrors of punishment. The conflict of these two blocks reflects the societal rupture basically informed by racism in South Africa and entrenched through apartheid. This multiple characterisation apes the narrative strategy of the "social documentary novel" (Lodge 1972), which highlights the normative way of life of a particular social or working community. Thabo, a tuberculosis patient in the rank of the black political prisoners, is often used as the "voice of reason" who externalises the burdened torments of black inmates through monologue. The compromise of western international diplomacy on the apartheid status quo, symbolised in these two blocks of characterisation, is instanced in the dialogue between Zipho and Soli, in the section, "Soli." In an argument, Zipho points out that "international racialism rides on the horse of imperialism" (Zwelonke 53), foregrounding the view that the South African apartheid experience is a perpetuation informed by imperialist interests of the West.

Our encounter with Robben Island is strained, informed by the realistic depictions of its geographical and institutional features. In portraying these, Zwelonke employs aesthetic devices which range from poetic commentary to mellifluous/reportorial representation. An instance of such narrative nuance is seen in the following:

> When we trod the soil of Makana Island, lifting my head I could see Sea Point, and behind it, Table Mountain, rising up in beauty and majesty. The mountain had stood there through the ages, and every day fresh history was engraved on its memory. It saw the ships of the navigators, Vasco da Gama and the rest. It saw the landing of the three ships that brought Van Riebeeck and his settlers. Because of that landing, the indigenous people of this land have been accursed through history; because of it I found myself in this place, a prisoner. (11).

A more absorbing and extended dimension of the island's portrayal invokes an apt use of imagery to reflect the calamitous conditions of its black population:

> Perhaps the answer lies in its thick palpable mist, through which a bird cannot find its way, but knocks itself against the walls. The mist is a daily visitor to the island, every morning. When there are clouds, they are dark clouds, not bringing sudden storms but a patience-devouring drizzle that can wet a cat through to its skin, so that it cringes and groans from the biting, frozen air of the Antarctic. The ever banished sun time and again peeps through the blanket of black cloud to shoot its rays of hope to the benumbed prisoners. (41)

The passage above is laden with a density of poetic compactness inscribed within an economy of language use generating grim pathos. The "mist" connotes the tense physical environment of the island, represents the total subjugation of blacks, and symbolises their spiritual brutalisation. We identify with the enmeshed "bird" whose desperate efforts to escape from its captivity is aggravated by the "mist" which has assumed an invincible physical inhibition. The soaking of the "cat" through its skin by the continued drizzling of the Antarctic rain images the coldness and oppressiveness of the island. The "bird" and "cat" artistically dissolve into the political prisoner whose "ever-banished sun" (their morale and human essence) "peeps through the blanket of black cloud to shoot its rays of hope" to him. The "peeping" is done in trepidation. This passage thus palpably installs the total objectification and horrific marginalisation of blacks in South Africa. It also mobilises a realist portrayal of life in which the *sordid* and *startling* take pre-eminence on a plane of *intensity of style*.

The depiction of the island's otherworldly architectural features also comments on Zwelonke's artistic ingenuity in painting a pervasive picture of racialised terror. These include the four blocks on the island, each containing four cells. These blocks are described as "huge, magnificent buildings, with walls as thick as the pillars of bridges" (13); and the four cells in each "made the block look like a thick 'H', the joining line being a passage with doors leading to the cells" (12). The white warders who perpetuate horrors on the blacks are depicted as inhumanly weird. A case in point is seen in their handling of black prisoners at the quarry to work "at a mule's pace" with constant invectives inflicted on

them. The presence of the sentries with their rifles keeping vigil over the island further deepens its picturesque sordid realism. It could thus be argued that through the setting of the island, Zwelonke succeeds aesthetically to communicate the novel's overriding theme of institutional and penal white racism.

Zwelonke is able to represent events occurring in Bekimpi's imagination by wittily converting his narrator from a first-person to a third-person omniscient narrator. This allows him access into the thoughts and emotions of individuals. This is possible since Danny (the narrator) is a partially-fictionalised stand-in persona of the author, and thus could 'stray' into private worlds. In this move, we enter into "Bekimpi's dreams" which include his longing for freedom, as seen when he imagines himself to be Zweli, a political prisoner who had just received his liberty to go home. Now Zweli, *incarnated* in Bekimpi, goes home where he unites with family and friends, and contemplates the idea of being ideally married. This leads us into his "dreams" about Thandi and Nompi, two young women who come into the purview of his marital fancy. As the plot progresses, Bekimpi finds his love in Nompi, and both agree to be wedded. However, his desire to be fulfilled in Nompi is dashed as a result of her electrocution by the police on the allegation that she was involved with Bekimpi.

Zwelonke also succeeds in the use of aural, sentient and visual imagery which amplify sordid contexts of the traumatised black inmate as in the following:

> The keys clanked and rattled as the iron bars swung open. The heavy paw on my shoulder jerked me into the cell. The privy-stink greeted my nostrils, the stink of fresh fart. The lights clinked on as a man rose from a little bucket, pulling his trousers up. A concentrated stink diffused from the bucket, filling the cell, now that the buttocks that had been its lid were removed (5).

The creative altitude of this passage, which revolves around an instance the prison warders came to pick Danny out of the cell, is haunting. An aural perception of subsuming prison setting is apparent from the author's use of onomatopoeic effect, reflected in the clauses "[t]he keys clanked and rattled" and "[t]he lights clicked on." We come into the experience of smelling the odour coming out of the "bucket" through the author's reliance on assonant and alliterative lexemes as seen in the sentence "The

privy-stink greeted my nostrils, the stink of fresh fart." The repetition of the assonant /i/ sound in the words "privy," "stink," "greeted," "nostrils," thrive in an aesthetic milieu worthy of note. The contrivance of Bekimpi's buttocks as an apt metaphor for the "lid" of the bucket gives not only a vivid imagery of *a seal* and its momentous *uncocking*, but also a numbing nausea of noxious torture.

Zwelonke's deployment of proverbs also affirms poetic anchorage and indigenous cultural ambience as in the following: "We have seen the mole and a curse has befallen us. There is a time-old legend that he who sees the mole shall hear of a friend's or a relative's death" (41–42). This proverbial citation aptly situates the novel as temperamentally Africanist and postcolonial. The employment of legend, as seen in Danny's opinion on the tragedy of apartheid as it affects the black man in the excerpt below, corroborates this view:

> Perhaps the answer is concealed in that legend of the chameleon and the lizard who were sent to earth from the dwelling-place of the Lord. The first bore a message telling the people that they must not die, but it walked too slowly. The second was to tell the people that they must suffer and die, and because it walked faster it reached the earth first. (13).

A remarkable case of nuanced narrativity in *Robben Island* is the cinematic relieving of certain events. This initiative, which helps considerably in the area of economy of language, juxtaposes two events occurring either simultaneously or at different times to elicit shock or contrast in order to sensitise the audience to the serious issue being foregrounded. Zwelonke enacts this when, early in the novel, he juxtaposes the event of the delegate task-force meeting with that of the tortuous beating of Danny and Bekimpi in an abrupt switch which has a momentous effect of benumbing speechlessness. One is also able to appreciate the disheartening contrast of Bekimpi's tortured psyche juxtaposed with his romantic inclinations on the idea of being free as seen when he imagines himself as the Zweli going home from prison, and his dreams revolving around Thandi and Nompi.

Lyricised reminiscences of events on the island also have significant artistic import. These occur in lucid, reportorial language akin to the traditional realistic practice of early eighteenth-century Europe (see Lodge 1972), greatly aided by the author's use of the first-person narrative

technique. The dominant use of sentences in the past tense serves as syntactic vehicles portraying history. The use of flashback serves to concretise the narrative-realism of the plot-structure and also helps to report past events that are germane to the development of Bekimpi, the hero of the novel, and reflective of the blacks' postcolonial carceral consciousness in South Africa, as a national territory of imprisonment, and Robben Island, as its erection of maximum prison. The occasional insertion of indigenous South African language helps to culturally mark blackness in difference to the hegemonic white installations of apartheid.

The novel's discursive carceral perspective also benefits from the artistic inclusion of dramatic dialogue. This helps to illuminate fluid intra-group relationships among the blacks, define the prevailing psychology of the whites towards them, and highlight events among characters. An occasion of this is seen in the conversation between two white warders as regards the black prisoners they are overseeing:

> 'Beasts… uncivilized barbarians…'
> 'I'll take their tickets, all of them.'
> 'Bloody Nkrumah, where's Nkrumah now?'
> 'Man, they don't want to sit on their toes. Hei, you, I mean you, don't look the other way, you, squat, man! You're not in your sitting room. I'm talking to you, look at me when I talk to you, Squat!
> 'Rotten communists. Yes, rotten stinking communists. They're communists, these things.'
> 'They're not communists, they're Poqos.'
> 'Man, stupid, what difference does it make?' (141)

From its artistic pedigree, perspective in *Robben Island* allows the proposition that the resolution of conflicts in South Africa can only be arrived at when blacks come to the consciousness of their racial victimhood and uncompromisingly resist white domination in all facets of life. This view is best embodied in Bekimpi; he is "stoic" under torture and suffers martyrdom because of his conviction that the African "can always rebel" and may not allow racial irrationality to cling on them "like an oyster on a rock" (47). This gaze projects brilliantly among the dominant population of black political prisoners who in themselves illuminate the text's construct of postcolonial carceral consciousness.

Conclusion

Prison literature, in the context of the South African exploration of the genre in relation to apartheid, inscribes a cultural memorial of racial victimhood extended to a penitentiary dimension in which a sizable population of black humanity becomes convicted of "legally" defined crimes and made to suffer modern human illegalities of the dispensation of law and order. The prison in apartheid South Africa constituted a heterotopic site in which the otherness of black inmates was naturalised, normalised and legally protected by extra-judicial measures inimical to the global enshrinement of fundamental human rights. Being racially condemned to otherness, the black inmates of the South African prison inhabited an architectural and institutional ratification of their social alterity in a racist contrivance which had already made their indigenous land a "home prison." Thus the prison, as a physical building or an institutional site of penal execution, provided an architectural venue of shared torture and inhumanity provoking the resistant response of postcolonial carceral consciousness which in literature signifies the Other's cultural/human **dissent** through racialised dehumanisation. This makes South African prison literature of the apartheid experience not a mere prisoner's existential documentation of penitentiary suffering, but a projected experience of collective group suffering in which the writer-prisoner acts as the group's "voice box." This marks the difference between Herman Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug* and Zwelonke's *Robben Island* as the difference between the personalised provocation of a white prison inmate and the collective projection of a black prisoner on behalf of his marginalised group respectively.

Robben Island, as demonstrated in this paper, not only makes a case for the textual and cultural leaning of postcolonial carceral consciousness in black South African prison literature, but also challenges reductive Eurocentric views of its alleged aesthetic "naivety" (as lamentably opined by Nadine Gordimer) through the textual contours of its perspective. Among other things, it persuasively achieves the sordid realistic depiction of such a heterotopic otherworld as Robben Island and also dispenses such thematic, cultural and aesthetic articulations that ably align with the imaginative nuance that makes its perspective a counter-discourse against apartheid white racism. In this, *Robben Island* potentially ranks within a class of canonical respectability of other acclaimed South African prison writings such as Dennis Brutus' *Letters to Martha* and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. As aptly captured by

Nkosi, "Zwelonke succeeds in creating for us a world we can only enter with a profound sense of discomfort; we do not belong here…" (103).

Notes

[1.] As Marco Cenzatti has usefully pointed out, "the short essay with which Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopia in social sciences is as famous as it is confusing" (76). Drawing insight from this essay, it is difficult to mark heterotopic spaces as "other" or "unusual" spatialities when imagined within the broad orbit of the "everyday" or when considered within broader venues of society or class. For instance, the street may be taken as being part of everyday urban spatiality, but when "converted" into a harrowing site of enforced residency, it may be said to have become heterotopic. Again, Foucault's imagination of "colonies" as heterotopic betrays an arguable colonialist orientation of reading "regular space" as a preserve of European/Western modernist production of architectural masterpiece. On this apparent critical flaw by Foucault, it has been suggested that "[t]o name *colonies*, (even in their urbanised city-forms) as heterotopic is to perpetuate the colonialist myth of the irredeemable 'void' of the Other in history and the impossibility of the Other to attain global-human recognition" (Olusegun-Joseph & Olanipekun, 209).

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