

“Race” and Nationhood in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika*

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Abstract

In Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s 1989 short story, *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* (The virus epidemic in South Africa), a virus affects all white people in South Africa and turns them into black people. Both racism and anti-racism are present in the story. The text humorously dismantles “race” classifications while at the same time demonstrating the tenacity of essentialist notions of “race” as well as conceptions of the nation which are exclusionary in nature. The text condemns Apartheid South Africa for its discriminatory policies, criticises Switzerland for its complicity in Apartheid, and suggests that racist responses to people with a different skin colour are very much alive in Europe.

Keywords: Dürrenmatt, nationhood, racism, South Africa, Switzerland

Introduction

In November 1989, the acclaimed Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt wrote a short story with the working title *Anti-Apartheid*. In this story, which has yet to be translated into English, a virus epidemic breaks out in Apartheid South Africa. All white people are infected with a virus that turns them into black people. Eventually the epidemic leads to the end of Apartheid. This “political parable” (as it is described by the editor of the 2006 version) revolves around issues of “race”,¹ identity and nationhood. Furthermore, the concepts of racism and anti-racism are both interrogated by the story and provide a critical lens for analysing it. As Dürrenmatt had a long tradition of engaging with his home country in his texts, particular attention is paid to the role Switzerland plays in the story.

Dürrenmatt died in December 1990. The story was published as *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* (The virus epidemic in South Africa) on 14 March 1994 in the Swiss daily *Tages-Anzeiger*, and on 23 April of the same year in the German national daily, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), with specific reference to the first democratic elections in South Africa which would take place a few days later. As a story dealing with the narrow specifics of Apartheid South Africa, the text appears to be anachronistic. It was written at a time when Apartheid was already being quietly demolished, mere months before the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990. Its publication just before the 1994 elections likewise seems out of step with the discourse at the time

¹ “Race” is placed in inverted commas throughout to indicate that it is a construct and a “relatively recent and absolutely modern invention” (Gilroy 2004:31). Adjectives referring to skin colour could similarly be placed in inverted commas since both “white”, “black”, etc. are also constructs. However, because this article quotes liberally from Dürrenmatt’s short story, further quotation marks would be confusing and the adjectives are consequently used as is.

of a new democracy and a government headed by the African National Congress (ANC). However, as a parable on the construction of “race” and the functioning of “race” in modern societies, the story had indeed lost none of its “parabolic power” and its “topicality” (Aktualität) since it was first written, as the introduction to the story in the *FAZ* (1994:28) claims, and it remains relevant almost three decades later.

Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika, together with a French translation by Etienne Barilier (L'épidémie virale en Afrique du Sud) was next published in 2006 as cahier no. 8 in the Centre Dürrenmatt Neuchâtel's publication series.² Due to its obscurity, it is unsurprising that the text has not drawn much public or scholarly attention. The Dürrenmatt expert, Rudolf Probst (2008:106; 161-162), only mentions the text in passing, when he groups it with Dürrenmatt's other political parables, “Das gemästete Kreuz” and “Auto- und Eisenbahnstaaten”, which form part of Dürrenmatt's autobiographical *Stoffe* complex. Frank Mathwig (2008:47) uses the parable as an icebreaker in an essay for the Swiss federal commission against racism, and concludes succinctly that Apartheid fails in the text as it is unmasked as nothing more than a simple “colour theory”. The former anti-Apartheid activist, Hans Fässler (2009) briefly quotes from the text in a speech on the occasion of the renaming of Krüger-Strasse in St. Gallen as Dürrenmatt-Strasse, oddly enough in order to underscore his (factually presented) statement that “the very same” prominent Swiss banks “that helped to cause the most serious economic and social crisis in a generation” had supported the Apartheid regime.

The Senegalese writer Bouabacar Boris Diop is the only commentator so far to engage with the content of the text in more depth. He does so in a short essay (2015) on Dürrenmatt's collaboration with Djibril Diop Mambéty, who adapted *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The Visit, 1956) to an African setting in his film *Hyènes* (1992). Diop points out that Dürrenmatt never travelled to the African continent and then goes on to ask whether *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* could be said to explicitly represent Dürrenmatt's thinking on Africa. He decides that it does not, as it was written so late in Dürrenmatt's life. He writes that although it is a simple sketch, it is a furious yet jubilant tirade against Apartheid (Diop 2015:58).

Diop is also the one, however, to note the chilling resonance of Dürrenmatt's story with historical events. Certain chemical warfare programmes of Wouter Basson (“Doctor Death”) were designed to affect only black people and Basson enjoyed a very close relationship with the Swiss intelligence service (Diop 2015:59). Dürrenmatt captures the “dark days” of the 1980s in South Africa, “when a mood of despair prevailed, and the possibility of civil war was a real threat” as Stobie (2012:370) writes in a different context.

The theme of a virus outbreak encourages a reading of *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* as speculative fiction. It contains elements of both dystopian fiction, alerting readers to “the potentially catastrophic consequences of continuing on a particular path of collective behaviour”, and utopian fiction, sketching “a better alternative society”

² The text, measured against its relative obscurity, is quite popular in the Francophone part of Switzerland. Barilier's translation was reprinted by the online, open access journal *ethnographiques.org* in June 2007 (issue 13), and the text has recently served as the basis for a one man show by Félix Mbayi (Betschart 2015:21).

(Baccolini and Moylan in Stobie 2012:368). The virus in the story is a “stealthy virus” (das heimtückische Virus) which cunningly thwarts human efforts to cling to “race” categories.

In this article, Dürrenmatt’s political commentary in his literary works is briefly discussed before placing the story in the context of other (Apartheid-era) parables about “race” which conjure up the link between “race” and nationhood. The intertextual relationship of *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* with Kafka and Conrad is explored, after which the story is analysed by critically focusing on the way in which “race” ideology is (possibly) dismantled in the story.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s Parables on Switzerland

Dürrenmatt, who first came to public attention as a dramatist during the 1950s with the macabre comedies *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (The Visit) and *Die Physiker* (The Physicists, 1962), devoted the last years of his life to a multi-volume “autobiographical” project, the *Stoffe*. The *Stoffe* are not, however, autobiographical in the common sense of the word in that he attempts in this project to chart the events of his life by means of his “*Stoffe*” (themes, material), especially his as yet unwritten or abandoned writings. Due to the nature of this endeavour, the *Stoffe* do not only encompass the two published volumes, *Labyrinth* and *Turmbau* and the posthumous addition *Gedankenfuge*, but also what Stumm (2003) calls “die anderen Stoffe”, which were initially intended to be part of *Turmbau* (Probst 2008:78). These include the novels *Justiz* and *Durcheinandertal*, the experimental prose piece *Der Auftrag* (a novella in 24 sentences), and *Midas oder Die schwarze Leinwand* (a screenplay for an as yet unproduced film which mostly dispenses with visuals).

As noted above, Probst groups *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* with two other political parables, “Das gemästete Kreuz” and “Auto- und Eisenbahnstaaten” as part of the *Stoffe* complex. Yet *Die Virusepidemie* differs from the other two parables in various respects. Firstly, unlike the other two, it was not published in *Turmbau*, and it remains to be seen whether it will be included in the planned, expanded text-genetic *Stoffe* edition (Weber 2012:86, n.15). Secondly, both other parables are explicitly parabolic. In “Das gemästete Kreuz” (Dürrenmatt 1998a) Switzerland is likened to a football club (to facilitate a discussion on patriotism); “Auto- und Eisenbahnstaaten” (Dürrenmatt 1998b) compares political systems built around either freedom or justice to highways and railways respectively, but concludes that freedom without justice is meaningless and vice versa.

Heinz Ludwig Arnold (1998) has traced Dürrenmatt’s relationship with Switzerland in his writings, which, he argues, are incontrovertibly Swiss, across the whole of his working life, and concludes that although Dürrenmatt’s relationship with the state in which he lived was constantly evolving, he criticised its condition whenever he felt this was necessary.³ For instance, he frequently used his acceptance speeches at literary award ceremonies to point out how the Swiss political model could be modernised (e.g.

³ This leads Arnold (1998:8) to describe Dürrenmatt as milder in his attitude towards Switzerland than his contemporary, Max Frisch, who frequently involved himself in the day-to-day politics of the country.

by allowing women to vote and joining the United Nations). Poignantly, he openly criticised the Swiss state three weeks before his death, in a speech dedicated to Václav Havel, by likening the country to a prison in which every inmate acted as his own guard, after it had come to light that the Swiss Intelligence Service had developed a file on him (in the so-called Fichen-Affäre).

Parables about “Race”

According to Bernd Aueroch's definition in *Metzler Lexikon Literatur* (2007:567), a parable is a short fictional story which prompts the reader by means of “transfer signals” (Transfersignale) not to take it at face value but to seek some kind of life-enriching meaning in it. *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika*, a story that is clearly not a realistic depiction of the end of Apartheid, is a parable that invites the reader to search for additional meaning in the text. The story can be further classified as a parable because it demonstrates the lack of characterisation or specificity of actors in a parable. Characters are only denoted by their functions: the state president, the minister of justice, a cabinet minister, etc. The story offers a strictly two-dimensional portrayal of South Africa: the entire population is described as belonging either to the whites or the blacks.⁴ This oversimplification, and consequent exploitation of the binary opposition black/white, is the very reason why the story is an effective commentary on “racial” logistics.

In his latest essay, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (2016), the American author Rogers Brubaker analyses the much-publicised case of Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who for many years presented herself as “African American” in the United States. Brubaker attempts to transcend the discourse about Dolezal in the public domain by seriously asking whether “race” is something that can be changed. As Brubaker contextualises the phenomenon of Dolezal, he quotes Michael Awkward who lists a number of “texts of transraciality”. These texts include *Black No More* (1931) by George Schuyler, a novel based on the premise that a medical procedure can turn black people white; *Black like Me* (1961)⁵ by John Howard Griffin, about a white man who disguised himself as a black man travelling through the American South; the film *Watermelon Man* (1970) in which a “casually racist suburban white man wakes up one morning to find himself transformed into a black man”; and the film *Soul Man* (1986) in which a man darkens his skin in order to attend Harvard Law School. In addition, Brubaker refers to the 2006 American reality television show where two families exchange “race”, titled *Black, White*, and the French show built on the same premise, *Dans le peau d'un noir* from 2007 (Brubaker 2016:178). In South Africa, the television comedy *The Coconuts* (which ran for two seasons from 2008 to 2009) portrays a white

⁴ It is currently seen as essentialist in English language scholarship to use “white” or “black” as nouns (as in, someone is a black, they are blacks). White and black are adjectives describing white or black people. In *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika*, Dürrenmatt chose to use “Weiss” (white) and “Schwarz” (black) as capitalised nouns, for instance, die Weissen. This was both standard practice in German at the time of writing and is particularly effective for the satirical effect of the story. Hence, in the analysis of the short story, “white” and “black” are often used as nouns. It should further be noted that the source text follows Swiss spelling conventions.

⁵ Diop (2015:58) points out similarities between *Black like Me* and Dürrenmatt's story.

family who inexplicably turn black overnight whereas their black domestic worker has turned white.

These books, films and TV programmes show that the theme of Dürrenmatt's text, and the satirical slant to his story, are broadly speaking not unique. Yet within the very specific context of South Africa under Apartheid, *Die Virusepidemie in Suidafrika* does stand out. It has no direct equivalent in South African literature, despite the occurrence of "political parables" and future-oriented prophetic tales penned by South African authors writing in English and Afrikaans during Apartheid.⁶

One parable on race written in Afrikaans is the short story "Droogte" by Jan Rabie,⁷ a member of the Sestiger movement, a loose grouping of authors who debuted in the 1960s who espoused anti-establishment sentiments and attempted to subvert the Afrikaner-Nationalist government in their writings. Published in his landmark anthology *21* (1956), "Droogte" describes a black man and a white man who are building a house. The white man insists that the black man stand outside in the sun. They are building the house "to keep out the sea" (though they are standing in a desert). The house has no doors or windows, and when the roof has been added, the white man is trapped inside the house, where he will die. The black man plaintively calls, "Come out, *Baas*. Come out to me." In addition to clearly suggesting that the very "race"-centred ideology of Apartheid will be the downfall of white Afrikaner Nationalists, the story invites a Structuralist reading in which white and black function as a pair. The white man attributes stereotypically "good" things to his whiteness (light, purity, beauty, strength) and stereotypically "evil" things to the black man's blackness (darkness, impurity, ugliness, weakness). The black man challenges this merciless dichotomy and asks whether they don't share the same red blood. However, the end of the story suggests that just as white is dependent on black to give it meaning (the white man must be inside the house *because* the black man – and the "black hordes" – are outside), black cannot stand alone. The black man needs the white *baas* (boss) to give him meaning and definition. Despite the cynical ending of Rabie's story, there are similarities with Dürrenmatt's story because in the latter whiteness is dependent on blackness to give it meaning, as we will show.

Die Virusepidemie in Suidafrika is a parable about "race", but also a parable about nationhood. The historical Apartheid government attempted to entrench the imagined superiority of whiteness by suppressing black people, even as white people were in a clear minority. The South African *nation* consisted of white people, with other cultural groups (black, Indian, "coloured") not being granted citizenship (Alexander 1986:77-78). In post-Apartheid South Africa, the definition of the nation remains a challenging question: "Who belongs or is excluded, and on what basis? [...] How in short, is nation

⁶ Examples include the Afrikaans short story "In die Hoëveld waar dit oop is" by PJ Haasbroek (from the anthology *Verby die vlakke* 1982), the novel by Karel Schoeman, *Na die geliefde land* (1972), published in English as *Promised Land* in 1978, and the English novels *July's People* (1981) by Nadine Gordimer and *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) by JM Coetzee.

⁷ Jan Rabie also wrote two novels of speculative fiction about interplanetary space travel, *Swart ster oor die Karoo* (1957) and *Die groen planeet* (1961).

to be imagined, let alone realized?" (Bundy 2007:79). Dürrenmatt's story demonstrates the close link between "race" and nationhood.

Becoming Black in *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika*

Diop avers that *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* transposes Gregor Samsa's experience in "Die Verwandlung" (The Metamorphosis, 1915) onto a whole country (2015:59). There are clear similarities between the first sentence, "The president of South Africa was ailing from sniffles and fever when he woke one morning [...]" (Der Regierungspräsident Südafrikas wurde von einem Schnupfen mit Fieber befallen und als er am Morgen erwachte [...]) and the first sentence of Kafka's text, "When Gregor Samsa woke one morning from restless dreams [...]" (Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte [...]) (Kafka 2006:96). Without suggesting that the two texts entail the same kind of "metamorphosis", there is something Kafkaesque in the anxiety experienced by white people in Dürrenmatt's story at their inexplicable change in appearance.

Apart from the clear parallels with Kafka's "Die Verwandlung", Dürrenmatt's short story also enters into an intertextual dialogue with the well-known novella by Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902).⁸ In Conrad's text, it is the character Kurtz who lies ill, surrounded by the "natives" with whom he has developed a close relationship. Kurtz represents "the horror" (Conrad 1994:100) of being subsumed by the "darkness" of Africa, of blackness. This is of course one possible interpretation of the novel and the one favoured by Chinua Achebe (1978:3 and elsewhere). The downward trajectory of Kurtz's career in the Congo suggests that "becoming black", for him, is involuntary and inevitable. Similarly, *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* depicts the change of skin colour to black as caused by illness, as completely involuntary, and as something to be lamented and feared. At the start of the story, the president only discovers that he has become black after his wife has fled the marital bed, shrieking, and he has been taken into custody by the police. He is thrown into a cell with his Minister of Justice who protests that it is "against Apartheid" to put him in a cell with a black man. Only then do the president and the minister recognise each other as whites whose skins have turned black. They are promptly released from prison when it is discovered that certain white prison guards are now also black.

The ways in which white people regard black people is central to Dürrenmatt's story. As a demonstration of the mechanisms of Apartheid, the story inevitably echoes *Heart of Darkness* in the way in which "the Europeans in *Heart of Darkness* gaze at Africans through a haze of incomprehension. Their bodies remain symbols of difference. The acknowledgement of physicality never gives way to a full comprehension of mutual vulnerability and equal humanity" (Upton 2016:181).

⁸ It is interesting to note that Dürrenmatt is not the only Swiss author in recent years to interact with *Heart of Darkness*. Manfred Durzak (2013) traces Urs Widmer's imaginative response to Conrad's portrayal of Africa in his novel *Im Kongo* (1996), which ends with the protagonist, Kuno, turning black with advantageous results. On Christian Kracht's intertextual nods to Conrad in *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008), see Lorenz (2014).

Similar to the way that the story of Marlow's journey to the Congo is a story with a narrator-behind-a-narrator, Dürrenmatt's tale ends with the surprising interjection of a first-person narrator who informs the reader that the story of the virus epidemic had been told to him by "the Zurich banker" (der Zürcher Bankier) (Dürrenmatt 2006:12). The narrator concludes by stating that he is writing "the banker's story" (*seinen Bericht*) while "being suddenly overcome by sniffles and shaken by fever" (von einem plötzlichen Schnupfen befallen und vom Fieber geschüttelt). In other words, the narrator himself is on the verge of becoming black.

The trope of becoming black activates the much-debated concept of "transformation" in post-Apartheid South Africa. The white South African author Antjie Krog has written an entire non-fiction trilogy⁹ that revolves in part around the Deleuzian concept of "becoming minor", which, according to Krog, for white South Africans means "becoming black". Deleuze and Guattari define "minority" not as "smallness" but as the "expression of the process of becoming (rather than the fixity of being), and by the gap of its situation from the majority axiom or benchmark [...]. By the nondenumerable, qualitative process of becoming, it threatens to destroy the very concept of majority" (Robinson and Tormey 2010:23-24).

The title of the third book in Krog's trilogy, *Begging to Be Black*, provocatively exploits the fact that blackness is often seen as undesirable and that many people aspire to being white (cf. Diop 2015:59). In South Africa, despite black people being in a numerical majority, blackness still denotes minority in the Deleuzian sense. "Becoming minor" is a subversive exercise in which the "major" is undermined (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:105); for a philosopher and writer, it is a lifelong process of constant becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:109). We read Dürrenmatt's story as such an exercise in undermining the "major" status of whiteness.

Like "Droogte" above, *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* also rests on the age-old binary opposition of white and black. Historically, a "master narrative of whiteness" (Steyn 2001) became established in Europe which still exerts power today:

Within [a] sociocognitive perspective framed by Christianity, 'clean,' 'white,' 'fair,' 'light,' and 'good' were clustered together as the foundations of both esthetics (sic) and civilization [...] Trying to whitewash what was 'dark,' 'black,' 'dirty,' 'sinful,' and 'evil' became the definition of the impossible. Showing a complete disregard for accuracy or truth, such chains of signifiers, fixed in opposition to each other, served the ideological function of furthering imperialism (Steyn 2001:13).

Apartheid was the last vestige of colonialism in Africa, and as such it displayed all the mechanisms of colonialism to delineate "self" and "other" listed by Steyn above, including the fact that in a colonial society, "the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil" (Fanon 2001:32).

Part of the distress of white people turning black in the story revolves around the fact that not only their skins have turned black, but "they had become blacks with all the characteristics of blacks, and they could only be distinguished from them by their

⁹ The trilogy consists of the highly acclaimed *Country of My Skull* (1998), *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Begging to Be Black* (2009).

ugliness" (sondern Schwarzen mit allen Merkmalen der Schwarzen, von denen sie nur durch ihre Hässlichkeit abstachen). This sentence playfully subverts the racist notion that white people are more physically attractive than black people. The text continues: "But that they were now all in general the ugly blacks, the black whites could not concede" (Dürrenmatt 2006:9). This passage is the first hint that at the heart of Dürrenmatt's story are uneasy essentialist notions of "race", such as that black people all share the same "characteristics".

In Dürrenmatt's story, the already precarious position of whiteness in South Africa becomes even more threatened when whiteness starts to disappear. At first, there is shame at the loss of whiteness: whites who had turned black stay indoors and do not venture outdoors. A brief armed conflict (the much-feared civil war between whites and blacks?) ensues when policemen and army soldiers who are still white fire at policemen and soldiers who are black, believing that they have overpowered and taken the weapons of whites. Since the police and soldiers who have turned black cannot prove that they are white, they fire back. Thousands are killed because blacks intervene on behalf of the whites-turned-black, believing they are black. However, the number of whites continues to diminish because of the virus. Whites-turned-black cannot distinguish themselves from blacks, and vice versa (Dürrenmatt 2006:8).

After the bloody conflict, the country is paralysed. Then the president of South Africa addresses "white South Africans" (Weisse Südafrikaner) – i.e., the South African nation – and announces that despite turning black, they will remain white South Africans "who will fight to stay white, under all circumstances, even when they have turned black [...] Long live Apartheid!" (Dürrenmatt 2006:8). This illogical utterance demonstrates the importance in Apartheid ideology of upholding the rigorous dichotomy white–black. The most humorous part of the story follows, where "black whites" have to wear a white sign on which black letters state "white", while "black blacks" wear black signs with white lettering saying "black". Production of these signs is interrupted, however, because a committee decides to rather give "black whites" black signs with white lettering, and "black blacks" white signs with black lettering. However, the background of the signs is seen to be "suggestive". "Black whites" are often treated as "black blacks", and "black blacks" are granted the privileges of "black whites". The problem is solved by giving "black whites" white signs with gold lettering and "black blacks" black signs with red lettering.

The series of events concerning signs worn around the neck is reminiscent of the well-known signs denoting "Europeans only" and "non-Europeans only" facilities and areas during Apartheid, arguably some of the most searing daily reminders of the "race" hierarchy imposed by the Nationalist government. It also evokes the racial classifications recorded in identity documents during Apartheid – classifications that many managed to change successfully.¹⁰

Following the failure of the system of signs in the story, the president decrees that every "black white" must be able to produce a "black black" who can testify that the

¹⁰ The novels *Kroes* by Pat Stamatelos (2005) and *Playing in the Light* (2006) by Zoë Wicomb, and the memoir *Where Are You from? "Playing White" under Apartheid* by Ulla Dentlinger (2016) revolve around the reclassification of "coloured" people as "white".

“black white” had originally been white. Therefore, the “black whites” in the story remain dependent on “black blacks” to legitimise their inherent whiteness: “Behind every black white there was a black black [...]” (Hinter jedem schwarzen Weissen stand ein schwarzer Scharzwer) and in a true Derridaean chain-of-meaning there is an endless amount of blackness needed to give credence to whiteness.

Even as the story playfully shows the futility of trying to designate whiteness and blackness by formal means, whiteness does remain the norm. At the beginning of the story, when white police and military shoot at “black whites” and “black blacks”, there is a moment when “it looked like white was winning” (Die Weissen schienen zu siegen) – even if only because that was the expectation of the rapidly-dwindling white population. White supremacy is such an entrenched belief for many white people that they believe it can triumph against all odds. Further on in the story, the situation of “black blacks” testifying to the whiteness of their acquaintances becomes completely ludicrous because “black blacks” falsely pretend to be “black whites” on the testimony of a “black black”. Consequently these “black blacks” “infiltrate society” (infiltrierten diese immer mehr die Gesellschaft). These telling words suggest that “society” is white, even when its members have turned black, and this ideal of whiteness is being threatened because it is “infiltrated” by impostors. This is the beginning of the end of the dispensation, because the white children being born are clearly the result of formerly white people procreating with black people. Apartheid’s Immorality Act, which prohibited sexual intercourse between different “races”, is evoked here. Half the white children are immune to the “stealthy virus” (das heimtückische Virus) and the other half are not; they turn black. In a truly ironic twist, the presence of white children has become the incontrovertible proof of failure to keep whiteness pure and intact.

In a last-bid attempt to “save Apartheid”, the president radically reverses his former approach. He now addresses “South Africans”, that is, *all* South Africans. “We are black, irrespective of whether we are black whites or black blacks. Black is our colour. But there is now a new threat to the purity of the South African race: whites, who are not black whites like us, but white blacks” (Dürrenmatt 2006:12). Apartheid is being saved, because the president proposes “applying all the laws of Apartheid that had been applied to blacks [to the immune white children]. Long live black South Africa!” This speech “causes a revolution to break out” (Diese Rede löste eine Revolution aus). The entire population of South Africa rises up and the president is forced to flee to Angola,¹¹ because Namibia has also been infected by the virus (Dürrenmatt 2006:12). Clearly, in Dürrenmatt’s story, the “stealthy virus” is also furthering the end of white supremacy in Namibia.

There are numerous possibilities as to why the president’s speech to all, now black, South Africans causes outrage. Perhaps parents cannot tolerate the thought that their children will be violently discriminated against. The white children are the shared result of this new South African nation and to discriminate against them would be counter to the transformation that has occurred in society. There is therefore outrage at the thought

¹¹ During the South African Border War, the South African Defence Force (SADF) formed an alliance with the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in order to counter the war for independence in Namibia being fought by the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN).

of Apartheid continuing even as it has been defeated. One could argue that the full absurdity of Apartheid and its “race” classifications has finally got through to all members of the population and that it is a revolution based in anti-racism. But there is also the possibility that people are protesting because white-looking people will be discriminated against, i.e. that the entire country, made up of formerly white and black people, now all black, are rising in defence of whiteness.

In the story, the “revolution” is “the end of Apartheid”. The virus epidemic has in some way brought about the end of the most lasting vestige of colonialism in Africa. It is unclear, however, whether Apartheid was ended by making formerly white people black, or by making whiteness vulnerable. The cynical interpretation would suggest that it is truly ironic that a system that was to uphold white supremacy, i.e. Apartheid, is toppled, but only to uphold white supremacy. A more generous interpretation would remind the present-day reader of the words spoken by Njabulo Ndebele in 2000:

We are all familiar with the global sanctity of the white body. Wherever the white body is violated in the world, retribution follows somehow for the perpetrators, if they are non-white, regardless of the social status of the white body. The white body is inviolable, and that inviolability is in direct proportion to the global vulnerability of the black body. This leads me to think that if South African whiteness is a beneficiary of the protectiveness assured by international whiteness, it has an opportunity to write a new chapter in world history. It will have to come out from under the umbrella and repudiate it. Putting itself at risk, it will have to declare that it is home now, sharing in the vulnerability of other compatriot bodies. South African whiteness will declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies. (Ndebele 2009:17)

By retroactively applying Ndebele’s argument to Dürrenmatt’s story, one could argue for the story’s prescience: it suggests the same as Ndebele, namely that the white body has to share the vulnerability of the black body, and that that could bring about the end of white supremacy and racial discrimination – a goal that has not been achieved despite the end of Apartheid shortly after Dürrenmatt wrote his short story.

The conclusion of the story further complicates the question of whether Dürrenmatt’s text is anti-racist or racist in its arguments. In the conclusion, the narrator-behind-the-narrator reveals that the story of virus epidemic had been told to him by one of the black Zurich bankers. At one point in the story, a delegation of Swiss bankers arrive in South Africa. They are surprised to be received by black bankers who make strange claims about really being white. As they see it, the black majority have overpowered and killed the white minority. They flee South Africa (courtesy of Swissair), sneezing and feverish, and when they land at Kloten (Zurich’s airport), they are all black. After their identities can finally be confirmed (after spending time first in a refugee camp and then in the Kantonsspital), they are from then on known as the Niggers of Zurich (before, as men of finance, they had been known as the Gnomes of Zurich) (Dürrenmatt 2006:9-10). The numerous references in this passage to specific Swiss brands and place names is noteworthy, as, by contrast, South Africa is only referred to as a vague locality throughout the text. The incident involving the Swiss delegation has consequences for South Africa, as the uncertain Swiss banks demand back the billions they have invested. This suggests that the Swiss financiers only trust other white people, even if these white people represent an immoral government.

The description of the banker at the end of the story is stereotypical and racist in content: the man is “pitch black” (tiefschwarz) and is wearing a “transistor radio” around his neck on which he is listening to jazz music while he dances (Dürrenmatt 2006:12). This description implies that skin colour is vitally linked to culture. Because the previously white Swiss banker’s skin has changed its colour to black, the man is now interested in jazz music, which was born of a syncretic mix of influences amongst “African Americans”. In Nazi propaganda, jazz was famously called “Nigger music” (Arndt 2011:655). The radio around his neck is also a stereotypical image of a black man on the streets of America in the 1980s, while he dances with the stereotypical abandon of a black person. This ties in with the new name that is given to the black Swiss bankers. They are still presumably financiers after their ordeal of non-recognition, but they can no longer be the “Gnomes of Zurich” as they had been known before. Instead of an appellation based on their profession, they are now defined by their appearance. “Neger” is a decidedly racist term in German (as is the N-word in English) which always implies discrimination (Arndt 2011:654). The black man in question’s attire, a white suit with a very colourful tie, probably makes him stand out amongst the white people of Zurich as much as his joyful attitude (Lebensfreude), which, according to the narrator, is never to be found in Zurich. Though this seems to be a positive and even envious description of the banker, it rests on the racist assumption that Africans possess a simple, grateful enjoyment of life.

The description of the black banker implies that there is something essential about “race” and that all black people act the same and have the same interests and tastes (just as earlier in the text that the whites become black with all the characteristics of blacks). Dürrenmatt toys with the reader to the extent that he inserts a racist Swiss narrator-behind-the-narrator in order to comment even more thoroughly on racism. The original working title (“Anti-Apartheid”) extended the ambiguity of the story: It is both about the opposition to Apartheid (echoing the numerous Anti-Apartheid organisations, demonstrations, etc. in the 1980s) and about Apartheid legislation according to which it was “against Apartheid” for people of different “races” to interact.

Diop writes that Dürrenmatt chose South Africa as the setting for this text because the logic of “racial” segregation had reached its zenith there and the country was subject to universal moral censure. According to Diop, the story could easily have been set in the racist USA of the 1960s, in the Caribbean or anywhere else in the world where one’s social status depends largely on one’s “race”. He argues that on the other hand, Dürrenmatt’s idea is developed such that one could easily envisage its reversal, as many black people still desire to become white, despite the work of the Négritude movement and others to help develop positive black consciousness. He concludes that it is “the race question” (*die Rassenfrage*) itself that is the subject of *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* and not the issue of racism on a specific continent (Diop 2015:59).

An interpretation which takes into account Dürrenmatt’s entire oeuvre is that *Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika* purposefully indicts Switzerland for its complicity in Apartheid in the form of trade agreements and, if the virus is read as the text’s main parabolic transfer signal, would suggest that the country would be “infected” (morally or other-

wise) by a South African disease.¹² Dürrenmatt's liberal countrymen would have been publicly critical of Apartheid in the 1980s, but they were secretly benefiting from an unjust regime.¹³ The story unmasks the racism of Swiss society which is demonstrated by the treatment of the bankers who turn black; this shows that racism was by no means the exclusive specialisation of Afrikaner Nationalists in South Africa. Following on Diop's argument, Dürrenmatt's story can be applied to any context where "race" hierarchies are present, not just South Africa or Switzerland. At the same time, the story specifically seems to challenge the notion that European countries are culturally homogenous; it suggests that the Other has to be confronted in these countries. The very notion of black as "other" and "minor" is challenged by the story and it suggests that whiteness should become more vulnerable universally (cf. Ndebele 2009). This is however difficult for people who remain invested in European conceptions of who belongs to "the nation" and who is excluded.

Conclusion

Die Virusepidemie in Südafrika is an anti-racist condemnation of Apartheid's "race" policies, a playful "what if" fantasy that exploits the deep-seated fear of blackness held by many white people under Apartheid. It suggests that "race" is truly only skin-deep and that despite "racial" differences, people are all the same. It is comically impossible for the characters in the story to recognise anyone who had been white before when black and white share the same physical characteristics. The virus neatly manages to expose (Apartheid) racism for the fallacy it was.

Far from being a simplistic condemnation of Apartheid, the story simultaneously criticises and enacts essentialist notions of "race". The role played by Switzerland in the story suggests that Dürrenmatt's story is a universal critique on racism as well as a specific indictment of the racism present in European countries. Just as the South Africans in the story discover new conceptions of the nation, other countries also need to examine their definition of nationhood and the links between nationality and skin colour.

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¹² This interpretation would also have the story end in a manner typical of Dürrenmatt, namely with events having taken the worst possible turn ("die schlimmstmögliche Wendung") for Switzerland (cf. Dürrenmatt 2015:900) in that the country will possibly be engulfed by the "blackness" it fears.

¹³ Guex and Etemad (n.d.) note that from the 1960s onwards, Switzerland "morally condemned" Apartheid whilst refusing to institute economic sanctions against South Africa, even when the country became increasingly isolated in the mid-1980s. This position earned Switzerland much criticism at home and abroad.

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