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Abstract

Feminist and postcolonial critics have, for some two decades, been questioning the concept of 'home' and the ideological uses to which its preferred meanings have been put in contexts of nation- or community-building. Their questions are prompted by the increasing mobility of populations and the concomitant multicultural composition of societies. Considering the fictional versions of 'home' in world literatures in English, Rosemary Marangoly George has argued that 'home' 'immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection' (1) and that to meet this ideological requirement 'the notion of home is built on a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions.

M.J. DAYMOND

‘Home’ and the Loss of a Home in Hilda Bernstein’s *The World That Was Ours*

Feminist and postcolonial critics have, for some two decades, been questioning the concept of ‘home’ and the ideological uses to which its preferred meanings have been put in contexts of nation- or community-building. Their questions are prompted by the increasing mobility of populations and the concomitant multicultural composition of societies. Considering the fictional versions of ‘home’ in world literatures in English, Rosemary Marangoly George has argued that ‘home’ ‘immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection’ (1) and that to meet this ideological requirement ‘the notion of home is built on a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference. Homes and home-countries are exclusive’ (2). Belonging, a sense of being at home, is ‘maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control’ (9) and so, particularly in contexts of imperialism or nationalism, ‘[i]magine a home is as political an act as imagining a nation’ (6). In complementary debate, two articles by feminist critics discuss the reconsideration of ‘home’ undertaken by Minnie Bruce Pratt in her autobiographical essay ‘Identity: Skin Blood Heart’ (1984). In the earlier one, Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin, writing in the light of their very different personal histories and homes, point out that Pratt’s narrative challenges ‘the essential relation between blood, skin, heart, home and identity ... without dismissing the power and appeal of those connections’ (200) and, in the context of her southern white home in the 1950s, without exempting herself from its structures of privilege and oppression (204). In the other article, Caren Kaplan gives weight to the moment when Pratt ‘transgresses the boundaries of her culture’ (193) by declaring her lesbianism and, as a result, loses custody of her children and the support of her parents. Kaplan focuses on this moment because, as a result of her ‘rude awakening’ (193), Pratt chooses not to retreat into conformity but to deconstruct in her daily life the security and status offered by ‘home’ that she had once taken for granted.

In an argument which brings this re-thinking of ‘home’ to bear on South African stories of the transition to democracy and nationhood, Meg Samuelson has suggested that ‘[t]he metaphor of the nation as Home suggests a concomitant image of the national polity as family’ (199). She shows that a gendered ideology of home and nation has been reinforced in the creation of important women icons, such as Sarah Bartmann¹, but has also been questioned in several novels

written during the process of national re-building. Like George, she draws out the disturbing 'continuities and complicities between the colonial past and the national present' (93), and, in order to expose the implications of the family metaphor, she draws attention to the 'textual recognition of the uncanny — which renders the familial unit unfamiliar' (198). She locates the uncanny in Njabulo S. Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003), which, she argues, is built on an inner tension between two stories: 'One aims to free women from the burden of waiting in the home, and the other longs for a home that, it seems, only women can provide' (212).

Guided by this discussion, and particularly by the criticism that 'home' is likely to be constructed on 'difference' and to be a basis for a privileging ideology of selfhood, I will take matters back a few decades in South Africa to Hilda Bernstein's autobiographical account of the Rivonia Trial of 1963–64.² Taking the debate back in time allows exploration of an idea and practice of 'home' during a time when the concept had not yet, or at least not for all South Africans, solidified into an exclusionary idea of nationhood.

In the Rivonia Trial, Hilda Bernstein's husband, Rusty (Lionel), was among those accused of conspiring to overthrow the apartheid state by violent means, a charge which carried the death penalty. Published in 1989, some twenty-five years after the trial, his acquittal and their escape from South Africa, *The World that was Ours* states the trial's importance: for 'the first time since the State of Emergency of 1960 and the banning of the ANC, the whole story of black oppression and black struggle and aspirations was told through the testimony of Mandela and his fellow accused' (1989 ix). For the Bernstein family the trial was preceded by Rusty's house arrest, Hilda's banning and the constant presence of the secret police who invaded their private space at will. It was a time 'when it seemed as though the ground was no longer firm beneath our feet' (1989 vii). Bernstein's reason for telling her experience of state intimidation is so that 'people outside our country ... [may] understand the total situation through the impact of events on one family. It is therefore a personal and subjective story' (1989 viii).

The trial itself occupies most of the narrative, but in the first few chapters and the last Bernstein's focus is also on the crucial context for their work: their home. While her narrative consciously states that 'home' provided the security and stability from which to oppose the apartheid regime and charts the relentless destruction of that 'home' by the regime, Bernstein also attends to the conflicted nature of 'home' in South Africa. Her account of her home thus has three components. The first is her picture of the home she has lost by the time of the opening events of the narrative, and which exists only as an ideal. Her picture includes the garden surrounding the house:

The house was living, all summer long it breathed and murmured with people and sound; all doors were open, its was a though there were no doors, just squares of light through which people passed from one activity to another. Summer lasted from the end

of one winter until the beginning of the next. Even in winter the front door was not locked, only closed on colder days. Sometimes we forgot to lock it at night. Frances practicing the piano, Patrick fiddling with his guitar, the radio, the record-player, the typewriter, the kitchen sounds, the drum of the washing machine; and most of all, people — people coming to swim, to talk, to borrow books; the children's friends at all ages and stages; people who never rang the bell or knocked, but called a greeting as they came in. (1989 14)

From this open, welcoming, fluid space her home has been changed by Rusty's house arrest and by the constant and deliberately intrusive presence of a police surveillance team, into a closed, defensive, exclusionary and vulnerable place. She writes an elegy for 'the beautiful and splendid world which at this time is not ours' (1989 99). Now

[o]ur pattern of living had become muted, played in a minor key. Strange Saturday nights, once the occasion for relaxation, Saturday nights, when friends came to our home, or we went to theirs.

Quiet house, quiet garden. Beyond the closed door the sound of the sprinkler turning round and round to water the flowers. In the room we played records. The music swells out beyond the walls, to drown the sound of police cars coming down the street.

Curiously quiet Sundays, the pool deserted except for the children. A blaze of summer heat, apricots torn off by torrential rain and hail, rotting in their hundreds under the trees where friends once filled their baskets with the fruit... [It was] a drying up of noise and life, as though under a great iron hand. (1989 41–42)

In the third component of her picture of 'home', the lost ideal and the new reality of 'home' both stand in contrast to the conditions under which the country's workers, among them her black friends and comrades, lived in the city's locations (as the townships were then called). With their uniform rows and rows of tiny brick buildings, they were, she says, 'a sort of fungus-growth... cancerous cells, spreading outwards in all directions, endlessly repeating themselves over the treeless slopes of the high veld' (1989 18–19). Once it had been possible for her to visit these townships at will, but now she and her family have to fight 'to hold on to even a single thread of contact between the suburb and the location, lest we too should become guilty of complicity in imposing the ghetto life of segregation on our fellow-men' (1989 19). Their effort was to prevent 'difference' and privilege from defining 'home'. Using another metaphor of light and water, Bernstein reflects that South Africa is like 'a mirror with two sides' and that the legally enforced segregation with its starkly contrasting conditions has created 'the dark pool into which you must peer constantly to realize the strange and changing scenes it reflects' (1989 19). She knows that besides the drab uniformity that they imposed, occupancy of these matchbox houses was precarious for black workers; ownership was out of the question, and the right to rent and live in them could be withdrawn at any moment by the government or city council — for example, if the occupants were considered politically dangerous. Theirs were homes of 'necessity' not of 'choice' (Ndebele 2003 72); even the degree of refuge that her

beleaguered house could offer Bernstein and her family had been made a white privilege that was denied to black people.³

Bernstein begins and ends her narrative on a strong note of domesticity. In the opening build-up to Rusty's arrest, she is in the kitchen watching the winter sun setting as she prepares supper and waits for her husband:

He had to be home by half-past six every evening. He had to be within confines of house and garden by six-thirty, not being permitted to leave again until six-thirty the next morning. There was even something of a secure feeling about this twelve-hour house arrest, because the children knew their father would always be home in the evening.

Whatever I might be doing, however many times I was out, Dad would always be there now. He had been under the restrictions of house arrest for nine months. (1989 1)⁴

The penultimate sentence indicates that hers is not an imprisoning domesticity; she leads a life of considerable independence and now registers an ironic appreciation of Rusty's being compelled to be the figure of security for the children. On the other hand, Bernstein's choice of opening scene with its indication of shared family routines indicates that 'home' is the personal resource that she will pit against the state's aggression. For her and her comrades, 'home' needed to signify the primary locus of preferred identity and, for their visitors, to be a place where racial difference did not matter, a place of safety where thoughts and ideas could be freely exchanged and where a desired future for the country could be envisaged.⁵

Despite her attempts to live her ideal, however, a paradox of exclusion from a putatively inclusive home runs through Bernstein's narrative because all visitors would have been carefully screened before being admitted to their home. The Communist Party was banned in South Africa in 1950, thirteen years before Bernstein's narrative begins; membership was illegal and this prohibition was not lifted until 1990. When the ban was imposed, the Bernsteins were instrumental in reshaping the party as an underground organisation. People were now individually recruited, membership had to be a closely guarded secret, and members were not supposed to know the identity of anyone outside their small unit. Jean Middleton, for example, has recorded how troubling she found it to be unable to tell her colleagues and friends at the school where she taught why she had to refuse their invitations — usually because she had a cell meeting to attend (1998 12, 20). This is a matter to which Bernstein gives little specific utterance, partly because at the time she was writing she still had to avoid endangering her surviving comrades in South Africa, and partly because any admission of screening entry to her home would undermine its being metonymic of the open society for which she and her husband worked as political activists. Her omission means that Bernstein's language remains largely free of the ambiguities of inclusion and exclusion contained in 'home' to which George and other critics of the ideology point, but, try as she might, her narrative cannot fully hide the fact that the state's attack on her home compelled her family to adopt some of the precautionary secrecy that

would damage their ideal. In the psychotic world of apartheid the very exercise of openness pulls the home into the public realm, blurring from within, as well as from without, the ideal of openness that Bernstein needed to maintain.

The difference between an exclusive and an inclusive home is not absolute or rigid. Bernstein records that initially the family had coped with Rusty's house arrest by forming new routines around its terms, although they were 'muted' (41) in the face of a constant police presence. Other families in their situation also adapted: Gillian Slovo writes that regular police raids became 'part of our new normality' (Slovo 55). On the other hand, the large but well defined circle of friends who moved through the fluid pools of light in Bernstein's home used among themselves a code name: 'over the phone and in conversation, comrades began to refer to the party as 'The Family'... [It] was a way of misleading those who were listening in but also a recognition of how many of the members felt. The party was their home' (Frankel 58). Furthermore, Bernstein presents resistance to the state's clampdown as an entirely personal matter:

we were both under so many bans ... that for us all political activity had become illegal... to comply with such restrictions would have required us to abandon all active opposition to apartheid. We were incapable of such renunciation and never even considered it. (1989 2)

The pronouns refer only to husband and wife, not to the party. Again, this is presumably because at the time she was writing, she could not imply that the Party had survived in any form. All this indicates that an element of protective secrecy, the comrades' response to the state's aggression, actually played into the state's intentions. Their ideal of an open home had, paradoxically, to be abandoned in favour of a closed, exclusive practice, in order that they might maintain a trace of the open, unfettered relationships with black people in which they believed.

The ideal of openness which Bernstein celebrates in her images of light and liquid is jeopardised. The ambiguities of inclusion and exclusion are imposed from without when Rusty is put under house arrest, imprisoned in his home and having to be his own 'gaoler' (Joseph 123), and secrecy is evident when he did not tell his wife where he was going on the day of his arrest. As Bernstein says, 'it had become axiomatic that the less you knew the safer you were' (2). But once practised, secrecy could damage from within. It affected their relationships with children who were sometimes too young to understand its necessity. Slovo has written of her experience as a ten-year-old: 'As the stakes got higher, secrecy drifted over every section of our lives' (58), and Bernstein writes of her older son: 'How much he understood of what we were doing, how much he accepted, how much he resented or hated could not be judged. He had become incapable of communication and wrapped in his own world of groping and dissatisfaction' (1989 5). Frankel writes more specifically: 'the fact that Hilda had not told him [of his father's arrest] first, became another entry in [his] catalogue of grievances' (143). Thus, damage from within cannot be seen as an inadvertent or

unacknowledged irony; husband and wife must have felt the painful knowledge that their preferred meanings of 'home' were being overturned. Bernstein admits as much, but only implicitly, in her imagery for the pre-dawn hammering on the door that heralded a police raid or arrest, or both. At such moments, she says, 'The personal/domestic and the public/political, two facets of our lives that had existed side by side for so long, were now fused together, sand grains coalesced into a solid lump of glass' (1989 vii).

This fusion of her metaphors of light and liquid into something 'solid' is the nearest Bernstein comes to an explicit exploration of what is happening to 'home', except for her recounting (but not exploring) a dream in which her home is rendered uncanny, the same and yet suddenly and terrifyingly unfamiliar:

I sleep one night, then I am awake, lying in bed in the intense darkness. It is so dark that not even a faint light seeps in from the street lamp beyond the hedge, between the drawn curtains. I turn for the reassurance of my bell-push light — it is not there, all darkness, the small glowing circle has gone. I stretch my hand to switch on the bedside light. I press the switch but no light comes, all darkness.

Then I feel panic and climb out of bed and press the light-switch next to the door. Darkness, no light. And then through the house, room by room, I turn on every switch and not one light goes on, none of them are working [...] Darkness that can never be penetrated, dark in my home, dark in the world outside, dark in my heart.

It is not fear I feel but awful sadness and somehow I crawl back and I am lying in bed and crying. My eyes are closed, my own tears forcing their way through closed lids seem to wake me. I open them with effort. The light-switch glows dimly and steadily. I try the bedlamp — it works. (1989 65–66)⁶

Against the terrible subversion of meaning and belief half admitted in this dream, she tries outwardly to sustain to the end of her narrative the non-contradictory lost ideal of 'home' as both a safe haven and an open, non-exclusionary locus of selfhood. She writes of her house as having been alive: 'the house had been the very centre and heartbeat of my daily existence, the shell surrounding that living organism, my family' (256–57), and, when Rusty is arrested at Lilliesleaf, she writes metonymically of the family's dismay: 'The house is in mourning' (60).⁷ As the state prepares fresh charges against her and she knows that her own arrest is imminent, she cannot bear to leave her home despite the advice of family and friends. Finally, the arrival of the police at the front door forces her to flee precipitously through the back, leaving the washing machine turning and the pressure cooker hissing. From that moment, she writes, 'I am wholly cut off from the very roots of my existence, my home, my children, my husband, my friends, my work' (263). She is emptied of her sense of self to the extent that, a few days later and still in hiding, when she risks climbing a hill overlooking her house and sees the signs of a family life that she dare not re-enter, she feels that she 'was like a ghost, invisible and lonely, but still drawn irresistibly to the world of life' (256).

The Bernsteins managed to escape South Africa and to work for their objectives from elsewhere, but not so most people. Once the majority of political opponents

had been forced into exile, it was not until the formation of the United Democratic Front in the 1980s (the time when Bernstein was writing) that a mass movement for change could again be energised. And it is at this point in history that nationhood really enters the ideology that encompasses 'home' in South Africa.

Although a negotiated settlement brought nominal freedom, justice and equality to South Africa in the 1990s, the destruction of 'home' and the resultant ambiguities that Bernstein's writing reveals continues to operate in the present, with terrible consequences. As Ndebele has written, it seems that: 'the fluid boundaries between state-induced behaviour and personal volition so destroyed the sense of both personal and public morality that there was nothing left in the end but self-perpetuating violence without transcendent goals' (Ndebele 1996 29). In his essay Ndebele asks how personal and public morality may be restored and suggests that the intimacies of home life (impossible under conditions of, for example, migratory labour which continue unchecked for most mine-workers in South Africa today) is what could 'sustain public life because ... they infuse into it the values of honour, integrity, compassion, intelligence, and creativity... This is the discovery of personal and social meaning through the pains and joys of belonging, participating, trusting and just feeling at home' (1996 29). But after this optimism for the future, the idea of achieving intimacy at home in the present is less hopefully presented in his novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*.⁸ Not one of his five women characters/personae who travel together on the roads of South Africa has known an effectively functioning married home, and so the creation or recovery of intimacy seems impossible in their lives. The novel concludes with the appearance of the faithful Penelope, and her apology for 'the burden of unconditional fidelity' (2003 120) that her example in legend has placed on women.

Bernstein's memoir shows that her home was one way of organising and sustaining equal and open human relationships for as long as its component factors could be held in balance both from within and without. When the balance was shifted, 'home' became unstable and the ambiguities of exclusion and inclusion came into play. Her 'home' was rendered vulnerable in a particular political context and is not a model for all times and contexts and does not suggest that 'home' is necessarily and always doomed from within. The state which defeated her 'home' in the 1960s has gone, although societal problems are severe so that, while Ndebele's novel cannot be, as it reflects on the past, hopeful about a restoration of the balance that was available at that time (founded on a gendered hierarchy as it usually was), what he hopes for the future in his essay — new intimacies of home life guiding citizens to a sense of public morality — has a muted presence in the novel. One of his women reflects that perhaps the significance of recent events is 'telling us to earn our freedom through the conscious embracing of uncertainty and contradiction' (2003 71), and Penelope departs saying that she will search out 'new ways of experiencing relationships wherever they emerge' (2003 120).

NOTES

- ¹ Sara (Sartjie) Baartman, a young Khoi woman, was taken to Europe in 1810 and put on display, in a cage, as 'The Hottentot Venus'. She was seen as an ethnological curiosity and after her death her body was preserved at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. For South Africans she came to symbolise the hostility of European thought to colonised women who were depicted as aberrantly sexual. Her remains were finally returned to South Africa in 2002.
- ² Hilda Bernstein was born in London in 1915. Her father immigrated to England from Odessa around 1900 and during the First World War changed his surname from Schwartz to Watts. 'Hilda Watts moved to Johannesburg in 1932, married Lionel [Rusty] Bernstein in 1941, and — besides bringing up four children — became active in radical politics. She was elected to the Johannesburg City Council in 1943, the only communist ever elected to public office on a whites-only vote in that city. Campaigning for the rights of black people and women, she was arrested on several occasions — for instance, in 1946 for assisting African mineworkers on strike.' (Simons 263). In *A Life of One's Own* (2002), Bernstein has published her father's letters written between 1925 and 1932 when he was again in Russia on official business and unable to return to England.
- ³ Bernstein's knowledge of the precariousness of black peoples' hold in the townships may be why she does not indicate whether she and her husband owned the house and land that meant so much to her. Neither she nor her colleague Helen Joseph in her autobiography, *Side by Side* (1986), suggest that 'home' and a sense of belonging was dependent on the ownership of private property.
- ⁴ The further restrictions were that Rusty Bernstein was confined to home over weekends and on public holidays; forbidden to have visitors at all or to communicate with any listed person (that is, one named by the state as dangerous) except his wife; forbidden to contribute in any way to a publication; barred from townships and factories; confined to Johannesburg. He had to report each day to the central Johannesburg police station in Marshall Square.
- ⁵ Clingman has written in similar terms about the Fischer household, and particularly the swimming pool where 'the scandal of varied skins immersed in the same lazy water would simply be forgotten. There ... a new kind of South Africa could be represented... It became its own kind of enchanted domain' (221). Such a swimming pool also plays an important part in the early sequences of *Burger's Daughter* (1980) by Nadine Gordimer.
- ⁶ Bernstein's nightmare matches the description of house arrest given by Helen Vlachos, a Greek newspaper owner and publisher during the Colonels' junta in the 1960s: 'one easily imagines prison ... [b]ut house arrest, in your own home ... brings to mind that special kind of nightmare ... [in which] you believe yourself awake, and you decide to perform a simple, familiar act, open a door, or lift the telephone receiver, and you find it impossible. An invisible force, a sort of woolly paralysis, is holding you back, and soon terror creeps in and you try to cry out and call for help but again you cannot make yourself heard: and eventually you wake up all wrapped up in a muffled agony' (15).
- ⁷ Lilliesleaf was the farm on the outskirts of Johannesburg used as headquarters by the newly formed armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. The others arrested there were Denis Goldberg, Bob Hepple, Ahmed Kathrada, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba and Walter Sisulu. Arthur and Hazel Goldreich were arrested when they returned to Lilliesleaf later that afternoon. Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni were arrested later, as was Jimmy Kantor. Nelson Mandela was brought from Robben Island to face charges

(Clingman 299). Only Rusty Bernstein was acquitted; the others were sentenced to life imprisonment (Bernstein 1989 233–42).

⁸ Discussed in detail by Samuelson (2007).

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