NEGOTIATING A NEW CULTURAL SPACE: ASPECTS OF FANTASY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE, WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO *BECAUSE PULA MEANS RAIN* BY JENNY ROBSON

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ABSTRACT

This article will examine how contemporary South African authors are using fantasy in literature for adolescents as a site for postcolonial endeavour, with reference to *Because pula means rain* (2000) by Jenny Robson. Discussing how texts for adolescents can be used as "bibliotherapy", and how authors writing for adolescents must be aware of the dangers of the "top-down" power hierarchy inherent in any text written for a younger audience, this article examines how these texts have become interesting sites for postcolonial critique. In *Because pula means rain*, the narrative is woven around young Emmanuel's quest to belong in his local community. Emmanuel, a young boy with albinism, is ostracised from his black community because of the 'whiteness' of his skin. Emmanuel is thus an interesting site of double othering – he is neither black nor white, but is stuck in an 'in-between' liminal place of double negation. It is from this place of ostracism that he begins his journey, and through it Robson opens up a space for counter-hegemonic discourse. This article will examine how *Because pula means rain* successfully makes use of liminal fantasy as a subversive technique, to interrogate a new space for Emmanuel to investigate his own identity.

KEY WORDS

albinism, adolescent literature, double othering, fantasy, Jenny Robson, postcolonialism, third space

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Fantasy literature has, in years past, been looked down on as escapist, and has consequently often been dismissed in formal academic circles. Critics have said that the fantasy in literature and film is chiefly “a result of a society that yearns to embrace nostalgia and escape to a less complex world” (Ruddick 1992:1). This prejudice is perhaps a result of the legacy left by the modernists who, according to Ursula le Guin, had contempt for anything not “Realist” (2007:83). However, in recent years, there has been an explosion of renewed interest in fantasy literature and especially in fantasy literature for adolescents. This renewed interest is largely due to the fact that critics and theorists can no longer ignore fantasy in a world where JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books have sold over 400 million copies and have been translated into over 67 languages worldwide (Neal 2008:4). It seems, then, that fantasy literature has captured something of the *zeitgeist* of teenagers today.

How is this then possible for a genre whose critics have accused it of being nostalgic and “transcending reality, escaping the human condition and constructing superior, alternate secondary worlds through a nostalgic, humanist vision” (Jackson 1981:3)? I would like to argue that the creation of secondary worlds, rather than merely offering an escape mechanism, opens up a space that allows the author and the reader to reflect back on their own reality. According to Tolkien (1992:35), “fact becomes that which is manipulated by the fantasy writer to produce a keener perception of the primary world and a greater ability to survive in it”.

These secondary worlds, therefore, act as distancing mechanisms and are reliant on the successful creation of complete and coherent environments within the texts. The secondary world also relies on notions of ‘unreality’, and is free “from the domination of observed fact” (Tolkien 1992:44). Thus, the very nature of the fantastic is subversive of what the dominant society considers “real”. Fantasy is the realm of those who wish to question the validity of the social consensus of the ruling power in that society. A fantasy writer offers the reader an explicitly impossible narrative, and Brian Attebery states that the fantasy writer “deliberately and unambiguously deviates from what [we] call consensus reality” (1992:15). True fantasy, in its purest form, is rather a “confrontational impulse” (Ruddick 1992:2) that serves an oppositional, postcolonial function, due to its constant questioning of the “real” prescribed by the dominant society.

Adrienne Rich describes the postcolonial condition as a state of “unsatisfaction”, where locality and historical memory must be interrogated “in an attempt to open up an intervening space, a space of translation as transformation particularly apposite to the difficult, transnational world” (in Bhabha 2001:45). As the main aesthetic desire of fantasy is the “making or glimpsing of Other worlds” (Tolkien 1992:40), fantasy literature offers a unique opportunity for the subversion of dominant ideals and a realisation of this state of “unsatisfaction”. Jackson (1981:4) states that “the fantastic traces the unseen and the unsaid of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’ ... fantastic narrative tells of the impossible attempt to realise desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence”.

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South Africa represents a unique context for the expression of this "confrontational impulse" in fantasy literature. Few other countries in the world have experienced such dramatic changes in their socio-political environment as South Africa has done since the fall of apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994. As a country still "marked by the violence and ambivalence of colonialism" (Castle 2001:xv), South African critics and writers now need to decide what it means to be 'post-' the colonial moment in the South African context.

Thus, fantasy literature, by its subversive nature, opens up the margins of not only reality, but of identity as well. The fantasy narrative offers "a tear or wound in the real, a perception that *opens* up the widest spaces" (Jackson 1981:22). The realm of fantasy opens up, as Homi K Bhabha (1994) calls it, a third space – a space between the colonial and the postcolonial, where true interrogation of identity and meaning can take place. For Bhabha, the postcolonial African identity is "fluid, relational and always in flux" (Kalua 2009:23). In a postcolonial African context, "we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity" (Bhabha 1994:2). Bhabha describes the third space as an 'in-between' space, which

> provides the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity. It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (Bhabha 1994:2).

The evocation of such a space is perhaps especially important in a text meant for adolescents. Critics and theorists maintain that in a modern, dehumanised world, in the absence of fixed rites of passage for contemporary youths, narratives can be used as "bibliotherapy" (Bettelheim 1976; Crawford 2002). The period of adolescence is a time when the individual is confronted with "the problem of self-definition" (Kroger 1989:1). During the *sturm und drang* (Erikson 1971), i.e. the upheaval of adolescence, the individual has to undergo a metamorphosis from child to adult, to be able to successfully function within that society. Janet Frame, the child psychologist, refers to adolescence as an "internal transformation of a sense of 'I'" (Frame in Kroger 1989:2). While narratives cannot replace fixed rites of passage, they can guide adolescents through the process of maturation – the process of finding their own identity. Bettelheim (in Crawford 2002:14) states that "fantasy helps adolescents develop, understand and commit to their outward reality". As a result, much adolescent literature is concerned with what we have come to call the 'coming-of-age' story.

As a point of departure, it is rather obvious that children are 'different' from adults and from each other, in more ways than just their age. Lynne Vallone argues that "simply put, without a powerful guiding belief in essential differences between adult and child, there would be no 'children's literature'. Awareness of 'differences' or acknowledgement of the presence of 'others' has been noted and explored in children's literature from its

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earliest inception" (Vallone in Grenby & Immel 2009:174). However, we rarely have children writing books for children, rather, we as adults write and tell children what to read and think. In the case of children's literature, children are thus the colonised subjects and we adults are the colonisers; children do not write the books they read; neither do they write commentary on them. The child's literary world is forced onto children who have no power to change the hierarchy. None of 'us' adults, writers or critics, can escape the role of the coloniser, just as we cannot escape our own "imperial tendencies" (McGillis 2000:xxviii). Thus, while narratives can perform a socialising function and be used as "bibliotherapy", teaching youths how to function in an adult world, writers of adolescent fiction must be careful not to be moralising – i.e. forcing the dominant society's idea of a moral citizen onto the adolescent reader. The authors of books for teenagers must not, therefore (albeit inadvertently) patronise the adolescent reader and force their own way of thinking onto readers.

An important aspect of children's literature – one which is often overlooked – is the fact that children's books are written *for* children (not adults). Children's books are unique in the world of books, as such books constitute the only genre defined directly by its audience (Hunt 1991:43; Kneen 2003:10). It is this reader of the text, the child, whom we so often misunderstand and into whose mind we cannot see, who is the ultimate interpreter of the text. Distanced by our age and our consequent socialisation we try, through numerous methods, to account for the process of 'making meaning' between the text and image in the child's mind. However, these conceptualisations of the meaning-making process remain but theories, as we cannot fully understand what happens in the mind of the child while he or she is reading the text. Peter Hunt (1991:35) maintains that "what children understand from texts is far from clear".

Nikolajeva, however, argues that since the turn of the century there has been a gradual increase in the complexity of books for children, evolving towards "a sophistication on all narrative levels" (2001:207). There is a move away from the standard, simple linear structure of narrative, towards a more ambivalent, open ending that allows more room for readers to incorporate their own meaning and interpretation into the text. Roland Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author' is perhaps useful here – authors writing for an adolescent or child audience must be aware and cautious of the inevitable "top-down" hierarchy present in any such text, and must attempt to avoid patronising their readers. As children's literature often performs a socialising function (Hunt 1991), postcolonial children's literature theorists argue that children have become colonised subjects, as they are *spoken for* by adults, just as indigenous people are *spoken for* by the coloniser (Nodelman in Bradford 2007:6).

Many South African authors (such as Michael Williams, Jenny Robson and K Sello Duiker, to name but a few) seem to be "aware of the artificiality" (Attebery 1992:40) of their fantasy, and examine their narratives as sites of "ambivalence which def[y] hegemonic control" (Bhabha in Bradford 2007:20). Given the unique South African context in which post-apartheid society is grappling with new societal expectations,

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many works for adolescents emphasise transformation, hybridity and transculturation, and this imbues these texts with a positive optimism. Many contemporary authors are doing wonderful things in texts written especially for children and adolescents, as their focus is on the reader of the text. As Barthes maintains, the text's unity should lie *not* in its origin, but in its *destination* (Barthes in Hunt 1991:9; emphasis added).

The destination for such a text is ultimately the adolescent reader. In a postcolonial context such as the South African one, it is important that narratives for adolescents be seen as "writing that sets out, in one way or another, to resist colonialist perspectives" (Boehmer in McGillis 2000:xxiii). Thus, in order to do so, the third space provided by the subversive quality of fantasy literature opens up a place of counter-hegemonic resistance – a place where a re-examination of the identity of the Other can take place. The fantasy narrative is used as a distancing mechanism that allows the adolescent reader to re-evaluate his/her primary world. From the fresh perspective offered by the secondary world, the colonised subject can forge for him- or herself a new identity, in an attempt "to rethink, recuperate and reconstruct racial, ethnic, and cultural Others that have been repressed, misrepresented, omitted, stereotyped, and violated by the imperial West" (Xie 2000:1).

I will here attempt to show how Jenny Robson, like other South African authors (such as K Sello Duiker and Michael Williams) uses the fantastic in novels for adolescents to open up such a third space – a place in which postcolonial redress can take place, and in which young adults can begin to reconcile the conflicting messages presented to them by communities in postcolonial flux.

Jenny Robson (incidentally no relation to me) is a South African author who currently resides in Botswana. She has written many books for children, including such titles as *Mellow yellow* (1994), *Dark waters* (1995), *Don't panic mechanic* (1995), *One magic moment* (1996), *Savannah 2116 AD* (2004) and *Praise song* (2005). Her books have gradually and increasingly made use of fantasy, with *Savannah 2116 AD* being her first science-fiction text. I believe, however, that it is in her book, *Because pula means rain* (2000), that she has best used the fantastic as a site for postcolonial critique and discourse.

In *Because pula means rain* (2000) we meet Emmanuel, the protagonist, on a hot August day as he is walking home from the shop with the warm Spar bread he has bought for his grandmother tucked under his shirt. As the wind blows, we are introduced to the very real world in which Emmanuel lives. Emmanuel opens the narrative by saying:

> I always liked the August wind. It blows across the Village from the smart houses of Kedia Heights, down the single tar road where it flings litter up into the air, then on along the dry riverbed towards the huts of Ward Twelve, past Motsumi Bar where Masego's father drinks too much now. And it sighs round the curve of Cemetery Hill, skimming the dusty sand between the goats and the thorn trees towards Kotsi Corner (Robson 2000:1).

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When Emmanuel arrives home, there is a red car parked outside his grandmother's house. In it is Sindiso, a young man from his village. Sindiso has come to ask if Emanuel can travel with him to Gaborone. He is on his way to visit his girlfriend and his excuse for taking Emmanuel with him is that he wants company on the long drive. Emmanuel's grandmother is initially sceptical. She does not want them driving in the dark, especially not around Kotsi Corner – a treacherous corner on the road close to the village, where many people have died in car accidents – it is the curse of this small town. Emmanuel begs his grandmother to let him go.

At first, we do not understand Emmanuel's need to be allowed to go with Sindiso on his trip to Gaborone. However, as the text progresses, we realise that Emmanuel is a young Setswana boy with albinism (a *leswafe*, to use the Setswana word). In traditional African cultures across the continent there is much discrimination against people with albinism. Today we understand that albinism is a genetic condition that results in a lack of melanin in the skin, hair and eyes. However, many African cultures view albinism as a curse, or a sign of witchcraft in the family, and many albino babies are drowned at birth. The mother of the baby is often accused of sleeping around with white men, and her albino baby is seen as a punishment for her sins, while others say it is because the mother drank alcohol during her pregnancy (Nduru 2009). Emmanuel tells of some of the stories that are whispered about him behind his back – that albinos do not wash like normal people, but their skin flakes off like a snake's; and that albinos do not die, but simply go out into the desert and crumble into dust. Emmanuel is teased by his friends at school, who call him "white monkey" (p 19). Emmanuel says that "it is a name that makes [him] tremble with anger and shame" (p 19) and he "can feel the coldness rise up inside [his] chest, even on the hottest October day" (p 24).

Emmanuel wants to go to the city with Sindiso to close the "circle of loneliness" (p 33) around him. He says that "maybe among all those people my circle of empty dead space would be squeezed to nothing" (p 6). This is the central conflict of the text: Emmanuel is a black Setswana with a white skin. As a result, he is ostracised by his local community because of his "whiteness". He is neither black nor white, and thus, from his colonised position of isolation, he interrogates different ways of dealing with his double negation.

European colonisation is represented by the figure of Mrs Turner, a British woman who comes to their village to open up a bookstore. Mrs Turner gives Emmanuel a small prayer plaque in an attempt to help him deal with his difference. "The words on this picture will help Emmanuel, I am sure," Mrs Turner tells Emmanuel's grandmother, "It will be hard for him as he grows bigger, you know. Children can be so cruel" (p 7). Emmanuel refers to the prayer plaque as "the 'God-grant' picture" and it becomes a central motif in the text. The prayer on the plaque is the well-known Christian prayer that reads: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

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We are first introduced to the God-grant picture when Emmanuel finds it smashed and lying under a blanket. Emmanuel and his grandmother had a fight the night before, and Emmanuel smashed the plaque when his grandmother forced him to read it. Emmanuel quickly puts the broken plaque back under the shelf – where it stays until the very end of the novel – because he says he "did not want to remember the one terrible, terrible moment when I longed to pick up a shard of glass and stab it into my flesh because my flesh was so wrong" (p 8). Emmanuel often thinks of the words of this prayer throughout the text, and he later uses the prayer as an incentive to try to change his skin. Emmanuel's gradual understanding of this prayer charts his character growth throughout the novel, but while it offers him some hope in dealing with his difference, it does not help him find his own identity.

Eventually, Emmanuel's grandmother relents and lets him go with Sindiso, so Emmanuel finds himself on his way to Gaborone for the first time. However, the trip is a disaster. When they get to Gaborone, Sindiso wants to buy a present for his girlfriend, Gracie. While he is doing this, Emmanuel enters a bookstore – a place where he feels comfortable due to the influence of Mrs Turner. In an attempt to close the "circle of loneliness" around him, Emmanuel sits on the floor next to a young white boy, and asks if he is enjoying the book he is reading. In a moment of intertextual genius, Robson makes the book in question the famous children's picture book, *Where the wild things are* (1963) by Maurice Sendak. Emmanuel describes it as "a book about strange monsters on a desert island, except in the pictures the monsters looked funny, not frightening. And I was feeling so good" (p 38). Emmanuel asks the boy: "No one can ever be scared of monsters like that, can they?" (p 38). The little boy, however, screams in fright at the sight of the albino Emmanuel, and Emmanuel runs from the bookstore terrified and deeply shaken. He begins to realise that he will always be different, no matter where he is – he is the "monster".

Emmanuel also starts to consider the value of material things in this lifetime. The title, *Because pula means rain,* is taken from the text. Sindiso is complaining about how expensive petrol is, and Emmanuel explains to the reader that the Botswana currency is called Pula, "because Pula means rain and rain is precious here. More precious than the diamonds they dig up at the Mine" (p 21). Emmanuel understands that, in his dry, desert context, water is a life-giving force, and it is much more valuable than diamonds or money.

When he and Sindiso arrive at Gracie's house, they find her with another man. Angered by this and feeling rejected, Sindiso immediately heads back to the village. He is angry and is driving recklessly, and Emmanuel tries to soothe Sindiso with the words of the God-grant picture; after all, Emmanuel understands rejection very well, but Sindiso can only think of how he is going to win Gracie back. As they approach the dangerous Kotsi Corner, Emmanuel becomes nervous. He remembers all the horrible accidents that have taken place there and recounts the day he watched his best friend, Masego, die in a car

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accident. As they round the corner there is a goat in the road, Sindiso loses control of the car and Emmanuel is flung from the vehicle.

It is as Emmanuel lies bleeding on the hill of Kotsi Corner that fantasy invades the narrative for the first time. Emmanuel sees the ghost of his friend, Masego – the only true friend he has ever had. While the reader is disturbed by the sudden intrusion of the fantastic into the text, Emmanuel does not seem at all shocked by the unexpected appearance of his friend – he is just happy to see her: "Still, another sound was reaching me now. A voice shrill and high through the moonlight. *More real* than the slope stretching towards the skyline. And so very familiar ... " (p 62; emphasis added). Emmanuel also says that "in that moment it seemed right and natural that Masego should be with me, breaking through the barriers of her spirit realm and into mine" (p 63).

Masego tells Emmanuel that she cannot cross over into the light, and that she is caught between two worlds – the real world and the supernatural, spiritual realm of the ancestors. Masego is, thus, also stuck in an in-between, liminal space like Emmanuel. She tells Emmanuel: "When the other people come here, the Light opens up wide for them. But when I try to get in it closes up. And I have to stay in the darkness. All by myself" (p 66). Emmanuel tries to comfort the crying spirit of six-year-old Masego with the first line of the God-grant picture: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change" (p 67), but Masego only gets angry with him for speaking English to her. She says that he should know that she does not understand him when he speaks *Sekgowa*, "that English", to her. This shows the first "slippage" of the God-grant picture. As a Western motif in the local context of Emmanuel, the prayer is unable to offer Emmanuel the resolution he seeks. Masego tells him she has been chasing the goats into the road to cause accidents, as she is unable to pass into the light. Instead, she is stuck in a spiritual realm between two worlds, where a baby is relentlessly crying. She begs Emmanuel to help her find the baby and stop the crying. She says that the baby "cries and he cries. On and on. But when I look for him, I cannot find him. I want to pick him up and rock him so that he will stop. ... It is the baby who makes me chase the goats onto the road ... it is the only time he stops crying, for just a little while" (p 69).

Emmanuel is rescued, to Masego's despair, and he is taken to hospital with a broken leg. While he is at the hospital, he learns that his friend from school, Keshia, has also been hospitalised because she tried to commit suicide. Keshia has a German father and a Setswana mother. Before Keshia's father left to go back to Germany, he told her he would send for her one day, so that she could come and live with him in Germany – this is the hope Keshia has been clinging to all her life. Eventually Keshia receives a letter from her father's German wife, telling her that they already have a family and that she must not write to her father again. Thus, the Eurocentric, colonising world has once again failed the local community. Emmanuel tries to soothe Keshia with the second line of the God-grant picture: "God, grant me the courage to change the things I can ... " (p 81). Keshia gets angry with Emmanuel and tells him he does not understand, because he is nothing but a "freak" (p 81). Emmanuel, however, experiences a personal

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epiphany and realises he does not want the "serenity" offered by the prayer, but that he simply wishes to *not* be an albino anymore.

Emmanuel then attempts to focus on the second line of the God-grant picture: "Grant me the courage to change the things I can." When he returns to the village, he sets about trying to change his white skin. He first tries to go to Mama Jay, the local witch of the village, but she refuses to help him. Next, he attends an evangelical church service, where Brother John prays for him and he falls over under the power of the Spirit (p 92), but, to Emmanuel's disappointment, prayer does not work for him. The next day when he wakes up, he is still an albino. Lastly, he goes to the *ngaka*, the *sangoma* of his village. She gives him *muti* to smear on his skin before he goes to bed. This does not work either, but when Emmanuel wakes up the next day, his skin is burning. In his desperation and despair, he runs out into the rain and onto the hill by Kotsi Corner. Here, in his moment of deepest despair, he discovers the small skeleton of a little baby that the rain has exposed.

At this point, both Western Christianity and tribal ritual have failed Emmanuel. He is still caught in his place of double negation, and Emmanuel now starts to realise that neither the old, traditional ways of his people, nor the new ways of his devoutly Christian grandmother are going to heal his otherness. It is from this point onwards that Emmanuel starts to create a synthesis of the two belief systems to create his own unique "third space".

Ever since Emmanuel watched his best friend Masego die, he has been totally revolted by dead things. Yet, he still wishes to help the poor Masego, who cannot cross into the light, and he realises this skeleton is the baby that has been crying and tormenting his friend. Emmanuel has been told the history of his village by Rre Pitlo, one of the village elders, who has also been ostracised by the community because he had an aunt who went mad. Rre Pitlo tells him that his village was founded one night, when some of the villagers wished to escape their former chief and his ruthless son. They ran away during the night, and Rre Pitlo's aunt carried her baby with her. The chief's men came to kill the villagers who had tried to escape. The baby was fussing and, in an attempt to silence the child, Rre Pitlo's ancestor held the infant tightly to her bosom. Without realising it, she smothered her baby. Fearing the wrath of the baby's grandparents and family, the mother buried the baby's body under the rocks and fled.

Emmanuel realises what he must do. He takes the bones of the little baby and buries them under Rre Pitlo's chair, as it is Setswana tradition that a baby should be buried under the floor of the family home, so that he/she can still be with the family in the afterlife. When he has buried the baby's skeleton, he recites Psalm 23. Emmanuel fulfils his gruesome task at great personal sacrifice, realising that he has to free Masego so that she can pass into the light. Without realising it, Emmanuel has also broken the curse of Kotsi Corner. That Christmas and New Year, there are no more accidents on that stretch of road.

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Through his gradual understanding of both the Eurocentric God-grant picture and the local oral history of his village, Emmanuel is able to break the horrible curse of Kotsi Corner, which has terrorised his community. By creating a synthesis of two warring belief systems, Emmanuel opens up a third space of identity where he can come to terms with the whiteness of his albino skin. Through his burial of the baby's bones, Emmanuel manages to find value for himself, even if the rest of his village does not realise this. Jung (1940:32), in his discussion of the "process of individuation", states that "[f]or us, the integration of the personality waits upon the challenge which, willingly or unwillingly, we offer to ourselves". It is through Emmanuel's completion of his personal challenge – the burial of the baby's bones – that he 'comes of age' and finds his place within a society that has rejected him because of his otherness.

Because pula means rain (2000), by Jenny Robson, can be classified as a liminal fantasy. Mendlesohn (2008) suggests that in a liminal fantasy, the presence of the fantastic is unnerving to the reader, but the protagonist and the characters in the text are not at all surprised by the presence of the fantastic and remain blasé; the fantastic "barely raises an eyebrow" (Mendlesohn 2008:xxiii). Emmanuel is not at all surprised by the fact that he can see and talk to Masego's ghost, and he is also not surprised that she later visits him in his dreams. He also calmly accepts the rumours in his village that the *ngaka* can fly on a loaf of bread, and he tries to use the power of witchcraft to change his skin.

Liminal fantasy is the most subversive of all fantasies, as it is unnerving, and supposes "that magic, or at least the possibility of magic, is part of reality, part of our world" (Mendlesohn 2008:xxiii). Liminal fantasy casualises the fantastic within the experience of the protagonist, and is used to estrange the reader. It is our reaction, as readers, to oddness that is being exploited (Mendlesohn 2008:xxiv). The unnerving presence of the fantastic in the text aims to destabilise and question the social understanding of what is 'real'.

Because pula means rain is also a postmodern text, as it characteristically allows for a "blurring of distinction" (Attebery 1992:42), not only between what is real and what is unreal, but also between what is truth and what is not. Emmanuel experiences something like a "nervous condition" (Fanon 1965). He does not want to anger his very devout Christian grandmother by questioning her beliefs – indeed, Emmanuel himself believes in the power of the God-grant picture, and it is significant that even his name is from the Christian tradition: Emmanuel is the name given to Jesus by the angels, and means "God with us". However, Emmanuel also believes in the power of the oral tradition and the customs of his community and village – he consults the *sangoma* or witchdoctor of his village in an attempt to make his skin 'normal'. In addition, it is only by burying the baby under the floor of the family home as "the old ways demand" (p 50) that he frees the village from the curse of Kotsi Corner.

Significantly, though, neither the Christian worldview of his grandmother and Mrs Turner, nor the traditional customs and beliefs of Emmanuel's community offer him

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a space in which to "close the circle of emptiness" around him and end his ostracism. Robson also manages to circumvent the inherent "top-down" hierarchy in a text, written by an adult for an adolescent, by not taking sides in Emmanuel's personal struggle. Robson neither propounds traditional beliefs and customs, nor Christianity. What the story of Emmanuel does teach the adolescent reader, though, is acceptance and hybridity. It is only when Emmanuel consciously creates a synthesis of both the colonising hierarchies of power in his life, that he is able to find his niche within his community. It is only from the renegotiated third space that is made possible by the presence of the liminal fantasy in the text that Emmanuel is able to make peace with his white/black skin.

Emmanuel thus engages with his double-negation through the subversive qualities of liminal fantasy, in order to create a synthesis of the two belief systems. Emmanuel's quest is a personal, inward journey of discovery. Only when he has made peace with who he is and come to terms with the "whiteness" of his skin, is he able to find a niche for himself in his society. When Emmanuel's grandmother has heated debates with her friend across the river, Mma Zacharius, about the merits of Christianity versus the traditional beliefs of the Setswana people, Emmanuel's response is this: "But why can't it be that both these things are true? In such a wide and open land, spread out under such a wide and open sky, surely there is space enough for both versions?" (p 55).

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